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The Process to Political Mobilization in Five College Capitalism: Forms of Antiracism, Personal Reflection and Community-Building

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The Process to Political Mobilization in Five College Capitalism:
Forms of Antiracism, Personal Reflection, and Community-Building

A Thesis Presented

by

CAITLIN B. HOMRICH

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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Forms of Antiracism, Personal Reflection, and Community-Building

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad, for your tremendous support and inspiration over the years.

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This work draws on the knowledge that I have due to the grace of many people in the Thumb of Michigan—my parents and extended family members, the second-families of my babysitter and my best childhood friends, teachers and their aides, employers and customers, farmers, cosmetologists, coaches, and many more. These people have a knowledge of the world that is critical and valuable, and I hope to give it a small moment of justice here.

I would not be able to thank my close loved ones and home as such without the help of my committee members, Amanda Walker Johnson, Jen Sandler, and Ventura Perez, who led me in the process of hearing myself more clearly when I didn't think there was reason to listen, and opened up opportunities for me to speak from my position when I didn't think there was space to do so. I will forever be grateful for their insight and leadership. I also want to thank them for continually pointing me towards the blurred boundaries between scholars, activists, and everyday people—my favorite contribution of anthropology to the world—as it has been most encouraging and delightful in my work and I hope to carry on this tradition in other spaces.

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ABSTRACT

THE PROCESS TO POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN FIVE-COLLEGE CAPITALISM: FORMS OF ANTIRACISM, PERSONAL REFLECTION, AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING

FEBRUARY 2017

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The town of Amherst, Massachusetts is home to the flagship campus of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College, and Hampshire College, institutions that have greatly influenced the town's prolific history of political activism as well as the high educational attainment and economic status of the majority of its residents. Often hailed as a liberal utopia, research on the political mobilization occurring in this town provides insight into the process and limitations of ally politics: when most of the residents of Amherst are White, how do they engage in racial justice activism? When most of the residents are wealthy and/or highly educated, how do they engage in challenges to capitalism's structural inequalities?

In this thesis, I approach these questions by examining the political mobilization process of myself and others in three organizations: Coming Together, Re-Evaluation Counseling (RC), and the student organization, UMass Alliance for Community Transformation (UACT). I explore how Coming Together focused on antiracism in a process of focused personal reflection about racial identity and personal antiracism practices, and how that process silenced the people of color in the organization, was

detrimental to my own mental health, and demobilized many potential-activists. In an effort to understand this organization better, I explore the practices of personal reflection and the vision of social change in RC, an organization which greatly influenced Coming Together. I argue that the more holistic and rigorous personal reflection in RC was more empowering, although taxing of energy. Finally, I contrast these experiences with the political mobilization I experienced in the UACT introductory course, Grassroots Community Organizing (GCO). I argue that the ongoing facilitation in critical personal reflection, relationship- and community-building, and practice in activism work in GCO was politically mobilizing and simultaneously produced a community culture of anti-oppression. Ultimately, this thesis argues that effective activism against racism requires activism against capitalism, and vice-versa, and that highly intentional anti-oppression community-building can denaturalize, and mobilize participants against, the capitalist ideologies of alienation and competition. In order to do this comparative work, I rely heavily on the methods of participation observation and, rooted in Black feminist anthropology, autoethnography.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND METHODS

This thesis project is the story of my own initial experience with political mobilization, which occurred in Western Massachusetts, where I moved to attend graduate school at UMass Amherst. I developed my thesis as an attempt to approximate racial justice activism in an organization that, though I didn't realize it at the time, was unintentionally stifling many possibilities for political action. And from failing in that experience, I moved my work into two other organizations—the second in order to better understand the failure of the first organization, and a third in order to practice and learn about grassroots community organizing. Each of these anti-oppression organizations dealt heavily in the practice of personal reflection, a process in which I had never been asked explicitly to engage for such sustained periods in my life. As such, one thing I learned was that certain types of personal reflection are more harmful to the self and to the group, or, alternatively, more liberating and anti-oppressive. Specifically, I will examine how personal reflection that was only focused on race and racism was harmful to me personally and how, when the space for discussion based on that reflection was opened equally to all group members (regardless of race) it allowed societal patterns of racism to take over the groups' discussions and political direction. Alternatively, I will argue that more holistic personal reflection is healthier and more liberating, and that highly controlling how personal reflection informs the group can make a more anti-oppressive group culture.

It may not be a surprise, but in addition to learning evaluative perspectives about types of personal reflection, I also learned a lot about myself that I had not anticipated at

the beginning of this thesis. I learned about my various identities and positionalities in Western Mass, U.S. society, and the world, and I how I experience them—embodied, emotionally, and mentally—as highly specific forms of privilege and oppression in different situations. I learned most thoroughly how the racism and internalized oppression of working-class White womanhood are and have been manifested in my repetitive ways of thinking and being, as well as how the systems of oppression of racism and patriarchy impact my interactions with people and how I perceive my life choices. I explore that self-learning in this thesis, in order to illuminate how that level of personal reflection can be a consciousness-raising practice of liberation and political mobilization.

In doing so much personal reflection, I also learned about how I struggle to feel like I fit in and to make friendships. I learned about how I have only experienced *community* in the form of family and close family friends, and that I feel alienated in social interactions and groups when I am away from my home in the Thumb of Michigan. I connected these experiences and feelings to my rural, working-class roots and the classism in other spaces. Finally, I examined how, through the processes of academia and politicization, I was distancing myself from my loved ones. In this thesis, I explore how unexamined capitalist ideologies of community and classism influenced the spaces of political education and mobilization of which I was a part, causing this alienation. I will also argue that the unexamined influence of capitalist ideologies in some spaces was one reason why they stifled potential political mobilization, ultimately informing my decision to leave them. Finally, I will examine the process of intentionally creating *community* in the Grassroots Community Organizing course, through which I was able to experience community as a threat to capitalism in that it deprioritized individualism, generated non-

capitalist motivations personally and in the group, and gave us practice in addressing interpersonal oppression. All of these insights—about myself and these organizations—were integral to my process of political mobilization. I foreground that knowledge as data in this thesis, though sometimes I veer into data from participant observation, interviews, and document analysis in order to make arguments about the organizations. In order for that self-knowledge to have adequate significance to making the arguments throughout this thesis, I need to introduce myself a little more fully. I should note that when I foray into self-knowledge in this thesis, my voice becomes much less academic and, sometimes, more poetic. Usually, it is emotionally difficult to write this knowledge in words, because of shame for various reasons, so it tends to be more of my voice, rather than my voice as a Master's student.

When I came to Amherst, Mass, there was something that I was chasing, something that I'd been chasing after as early as I can remember. I was chasing a dream of greatness, of being the best in my career, of being renowned. I would never admit that to anybody, but it was true. It was a result of how I grew up. I lived in between two worlds for most of my childhood—between the working class and the poor. My dad was solidly working class, while my mom was experiencing class mobility after having grown up in the sort of poverty that meant food scarcity. Growing up in-between meant a lot of things. It meant that I spent nearly every day at my babysitter's house for 10 years, and sometimes nights, since my parents worked such long hours to move us out of the trailer and into the house that my dad built. It meant that my working poor babysitter had her kids and I do chores every day, like cleaning the house and the pig pens; that we played unsupervised a lot; and that I learned a lot about sexuality and womanhood during my

early childhood from playing with Barbies and watching *Night at the Roxbury*, the *Days of Our Lives*, and *Passions*. It meant that a few of my aunts and some of my uncles were struggling to keep up with their rent, to keep a job, and, for one, to not fall into a cycle of mental illness, abuse in her relationship, and substance abuse. It meant that my mom taught me a fierce protectiveness of these loved ones, and to always stick up for the underdog, since she knew what it meant to be that person. Growing up in-between also meant that my parents' dream, which would become my dream, was that I would attend college with a free ride (tuition, room, and board paid for by scholarship). And so, I was pushed very hard from an early age to try my hardest at all times in school, just as in work, and to be outstanding at both. We're talking flashcards during bath time from the time I could sit up on my own, reading together every night, being chastised for getting B's on any homework, and, in time, being scolded when I didn't have enough jobs to have to be working each day of the summer. I had a vision of being the best.

When that scholarship dream came true, I found myself having a hard time fitting in in college, between how every other honors student had more sophisticated vocabularies along with AP credits, how I was afraid of my professors, and how my makeup and partying was either not preppy enough or too indicative of internalized oppression. It was a difficult time, and I sought acceptance through sex and the approval of men in very unhealthy ways. I also sought it, as always, through my schooling, where I was learning for the first time about inequality, racism, and U.S. imperialism. I was enthralled by this alternate perspective of our world and passionate about rectifying the injustices. I tried to feel like an expert on these matters when I taught my closest loved ones about what I was learning and our discussions became contentious. I began to feel

undeserving of the comfort and security I had, like my people had seized them and maintained them unjustly, and I began to take on responsibility for these problems. I decided to pursue a career fighting these injustices through anthropology. I learned to focus on the problems of other people in my classes, and I learned the role of the U.S. in contributing to many global problems. Parts of me were disposed to feeling responsible for all of these problems—my conviction to stick up for the underdog and my learned womanhood. Thus, when I came to UMass and Amherst, I was chasing a vision of being *the best* anthropologist of such-and-such issue, a career through which I could rectify injustices. It was a liberal dream—wanting class mobility by *righteously* profiting off fixing a broken system and helping others. I didn't realize that this sentiment was more serious than a tension; my intense pulls in both directions would become a conundrum as I moved through graduate school.

As I was inculcated in the radical Marxist-informed perspectives of dialogues in Amherst and graduate school at UMass, I learned fiercer arguments against capitalism and racism that I could support with more and more knowledge of history and social structures. And I'd see people with integrated world-views who accepted this perspective alongside environmentalism, locally-grown food, organic food, mindfulness, and healthy living. And then I'd go home, and I'd try to talk with my parents and other loved ones about the things I was learning, as always, and they couldn't and/or didn't want to grasp it. My mom works at a grain elevator that takes in more wheat (family-farmed, but mass-produced) than any other elevator in her multi-state company, and she is more economically secure than she ever dreamed with how well the farmers treat her. My dad couldn't understand why I thought he owed more money to welfare queens, when he

comes home every day sore from how he builds houses alone. I couldn't remember what I had known so well before about capitalism and systemic racism, other than that a book told me that the welfare queen is a myth, to have an effective rebuttal. My reading- and discussion-heavy education on social theories and history failed me when faced with their lived reality.

And so I threw myself into the antiracism work of the Coming Together organization, which involved personal reflection on race, some education about systemic racism, and discussions. I began to push other things to the side—trying to heal an STD, trying to maintain my relationships in Michigan, trying to feel confident aside from my appearance, trying to make friends in Western Mass, and more. Instead, as a White person, I needed a much better understanding of systemic racism, how I enact(ed) racism, and racial justice activism, if I was going to make a career out of rectifying injustices. And, maybe... just maybe I could find my niche in this work that would make me the best at something enough to grab job security. So that's what I focused on, but, quickly, learning about these things just became more and more frustrating and confusing, and I became more and more insecure about inserting myself into racial justice work that involved anything other than mastering how to talk to White people. I became increasingly insecure about how few friends of color I had, and I was unforgiving about the lack of racial diversity where I grew up.

I began to consider myself in different careers, as my vision of my future as a renowned anthropologist began to get holes in it. I threw myself into two internships—community organizing at the Pioneer Valley Project, and publishing at UMass Press. I didn't do so hot at the Press; my writing was too academic, but it couldn't be my own

voice, since that wasn't "pithy" enough. Whatever pithy means. And my work at the PVP was confusing. We spent a lot of time talking, just talking. Sometimes about campaign strategizing and outreach, but mostly about diets and men. I was bewildered and I didn't understand the work very well, as I grew up with an ethic of hard work and no dilly-dallying. One of my first bosses loves to tell the story about how during every too-long break from picking vegetables, I'd stand up and say, "Let's get to work!" just like my dad would when he built their barn. This work ethic was valued in every job I had, except for at the PVP. So, the pace and content of the work there was utterly strange and confusing to me. But every once in a while, I'd see a glimmer of something really cool. People being motivated to show up to meetings, people claiming rights and power in the face of elected officials, people creating relationships and working together across differences of class and race.

I went home for weddings that summer, and I saw how my family and friends felt a sense of worth in the work they do, and did not understand my work, the work graduate school. I heard my Papa not understand where I was living or why I was living there, and I watched two of my aunts who work as staff at the University of Michigan begin calling PhDs, "Post-Hole Diggers," people doing very little but staking their claim on territory. And then I'd return to Amherst, where people were doulas and drinking tinctures and had gardens in their back yard and spent their lives in this grungy aesthetic that masked their extreme financial security and freedom to pursue any good-for-no-money career without any anxiety at all. I became bitter about people I met there. Then I became frustrated about anthropology, how most of work I was hearing about and reading wasn't actually doing much in the world other than education about problems, and, if you could access

the prose, education about their causes. And then I became frustrated with how even engaged and activist anthropologists “leave the field” and have comfort and security. I decided that I would leave the graduate program. There was too much at home pulling me there, and so much in Western Mass repelling me.

For my Master’s degree, then, I needed a finished product. I decided to try to turn my Coming Together antiracism experience into something more like what I had experienced at the PVP, grassroots community organizing, although I didn’t really know what that meant or how to do it. I tried with a small group of 6 people in Amherst, who were all White except for one woman and her son, and that actually failed miserably. Searching for an answer as to why Coming Together was so ineffective, I decided to join an introductory class to Re-Evaluation counseling, which I had learned was very influential in Coming Together. Simultaneously, I was searching for answers to this puzzle of community organizing, something that was a great mystery to me but that I thought I loved, so I joined the Grassroots Community Organizing course. For the first time, I had multiple people asking me to think about myself holistically, I was confronted with my inability to fit in by feeling accepted in RC and realizing what it means to build relationships and community in GCO, and I had ongoing opportunities to engage in activism. It was a four-month period of monumental and magical growth. Since then, I’ve felt more whole, had more compassion for myself and others, and had more hope for my own future than I ever have. I have practices that maintain this, and I’m searching for ways to keep doing it in Detroit, where I now live and am much closer to home.

And so, this thesis tells my story of time in these organizations in a more academically-influenced way, with much more detail and with generalizing suppositions

and with terms from theory and take-away concepts that I hope to use in my future work. It's the story of how poorly-planned antiracism in Amherst was dehumanizing to a person who grew up with more class and gender oppression than most people born in Amherst (as it is a place with a history of women's and LGBTQ activism and liberation), and also how the class and race complicities of the participants (including me, in terms of class mobility and Whiteness) made it even less effective antiracism that silenced people of color in the organization and the activism of people of color in general. It's also a story of how intense personal reflection and a focus on community-building is radical anti-oppression work in the context of capitalism, something I could only learn through practice in RC and GCO. Finally, it's a story of how potential activists—people like me, who have that deep desire for making things right, but also so much tendency towards alienation and racialized class complicities that I am prone to demobilization or hijacking activism opportunities—can be mobilized for political action long-term through an integrated process of personal reflection, intentional relationship- and community-building, and engagement in organizing. This is a story in which I learn to weigh my oppressions equally with my privileges, to be politically mobilized by all of it.

A. Broader Contexts of my Political Mobilization

There were several narratives of place that I encountered while living, attending grad school, and/or participating in community organizations in Amherst over a span of two years. The dominant narrative is that Amherst is a progressive and liberal place that is known for its climate change activism, celebration of diversity, excellent public schools, and high degree of education and radical political consciousness. It was easy to believe this narrative when I first moved to Amherst, where I encountered cars loaded

with bumper stickers promoting liberal political perspectives and locally-grown food, a vehicle with “Nuke Wall Street” spray painted across its driver’s side, fliers for performances of artists with a range of marginalized identities, and conversations about U.S. imperialism and gender fluidity with my landlords and their neighbor friends. Soon, I noticed some discrepancies between this narrative and what I was seeing while exploring the town: plenty of local businesses but a gigantic Bank of America on the corner of Main Street and the town commons; mostly people of color sitting at the bus stops while White people walked and drove cars; and, frequently, being corrected or chastised when I didn’t bring organic and locally grown food to potlucks or when I pronounced a word wrong. I began to see that while some sorts of diversity were celebrated, others were discriminated against both interpersonally and at, what I presumed to be, structural levels. Additionally, some injustices and histories of activism were prioritized over others: environmentalism, peace activism, and LGBTQ rights seemed to be prevalent discourses, while economic and racial injustices were not mentioned as much.

With this suspicion, I joined the Coming Together community organization, where I would encounter more critical narratives about the place of Amherst and the Five College area. Coming Together was formed after a highly controversial problem of racism occurred in the high school of Amherst Pelham Regional Schools (APRS) during the 2013-2014 school year. This controversy centered on how Carolyn Gardner, a math teacher, was the target of a series of racist graffiti and harassments at the school, was diagnosed with PTSD due to these incidents, and, for the school’s response to these problems, was put on unpaid medical leave. After this lack of support from the school’s

administrators, Gardner sued the school, an action that caused huge backlash among the town's parents and other community members. The disagreement between Gardner's supporters in the community, and the others who were vocal about their disapproval of her decision, grew into a larger community disagreement over the extent of racism in Amherst and appropriate responses to racism.

In that summer of 2014, Coming Together was formed by a White former principal of an APRS elementary school and had a steering committee of 12 community members—largely people of color who are prominent community members affiliated with UMass Amherst, APRS, and interfaith coalitions. The organization website reads: “Coming Together: Understanding Racism, Working for Justice & Building Connections in the Amherst MA area,” and characterizes it as “a community multi-racial project for everyone.” The first event of Coming Together was a showing of *The Central Park Five* film on October 9th, 2014, and since then, the organization has held 28 public events. Usually, these events include a showing of a film or documentary about racism, but they occasionally involve more facilitated collective learning, discussion, or strategizing for activism. The events occurred bi-weekly for the first year of the organization, and were held monthly during the second year. I will describe these events more in detail in chapter two. During its first winter, the organization started a pilot small-group, a study/reflection group with an antiracism curriculum that was developed by the founder and approved by the steering committee. I was one of the 11 members of this pilot group, which met biweekly in the homes of its members and has continued to meet until recent months. I facilitated a second Coming Together study/reflection small group of 5-6 people during

the following 2015-2016 winter, which also met bi-weekly for about five months. I will examine the curriculum and discussions of these groups in chapters two and three.

As an antiracism organization of Amherst community members, many of the public events and small group meetings consisted of—in addition to education about the history and present of structural and cultural racism—grappling with the problem of racism in Amherst. Since the majority of attendees at the events and meetings were White or new to Amherst, this grappling consisted of attempting to understand exactly what racism in Amherst looked like, who were the main perpetrators, and how it could be addressed. It was in these discussions that I learned more narratives of the place of Amherst from long-term residents. Two narratives of the racism of Amherst were prevalent: a story of a powerful elite who thwarted antiracism efforts in order to protect their own power, and a story of benevolent racist people who would change their ways if they were lovingly educated about racism.

The first narrative argues that there is a fairly large portion of Amherst's population that is White, highly educated, very wealthy, very racist, very powerful in shaping the schools' town government's policies and practices, and—due to their desire to remain powerful and their belief that they, themselves, and Amherst are perfect and had resolved their problems with racism decades ago—very combative of attempts to address racism in the schools and town. In this narrative, these White racist elites turn customers of color away from their restaurants, refuse to hire people of color, have gone uncontested in their elected positions in governing the town and schools, and use their influence to quell antiracism initiatives and campaigns. I never had an experience in which I was obviously interacting with these people, but there was anecdotal evidence of

their existence that was discussed at Coming Together meetings, disclosed by regular and infrequent participants alike. One small group participant describes this population:

I have to say [doing antiracism work is] very hard in the community, because there's such a strong group of White—and I don't want to call them supremacists, because of what that conjures up, but they are, because they think they're superior to anybody of color, and anybody who's not a college faculty member, and anyone who has a disability. And I hear that in their voices, because I know a lot of people that work at the colleges. So, Amherst is a very hard place I think to do this work, because there's so much privilege at different levels, as opposed to you know, the average amount of privilege.

This narrative points to the wealthy elites—in this example, affiliated with the colleges—that control town politics and are protective of their dominance and privilege.

On the other hand, the narrative of Amherst as a place of benevolent racists that was also circulated by Coming Together participants, spins a less menacing story of well-intentioned residents who are unintentionally and unknowingly racist. In this narrative, the biggest cause of the problem of racism in Amherst is that there is a huge population of White people who are ignorant to the problem of racism in the town, yet who would be highly amenable to learning about it and changing their ways. Both of these narratives shaped the antiracist practices of the Coming Together participants, which I will examine throughout this paper, but these narratives were also shaped by these participants. What sort of place were they constructing?

More context about Amherst and its surrounding areas will help to shed light on the place of Amherst and the people constructing it. Two components of this context are integral to understanding my research and research findings: 1) the influence of UMass Amherst and the other four colleges on the dominant culture of Amherst and Hampshire County; and 2) the cities to the South of Amherst in Hampden County, specifically Springfield and Holyoke. The five colleges greatly impact the reality of Amherst and

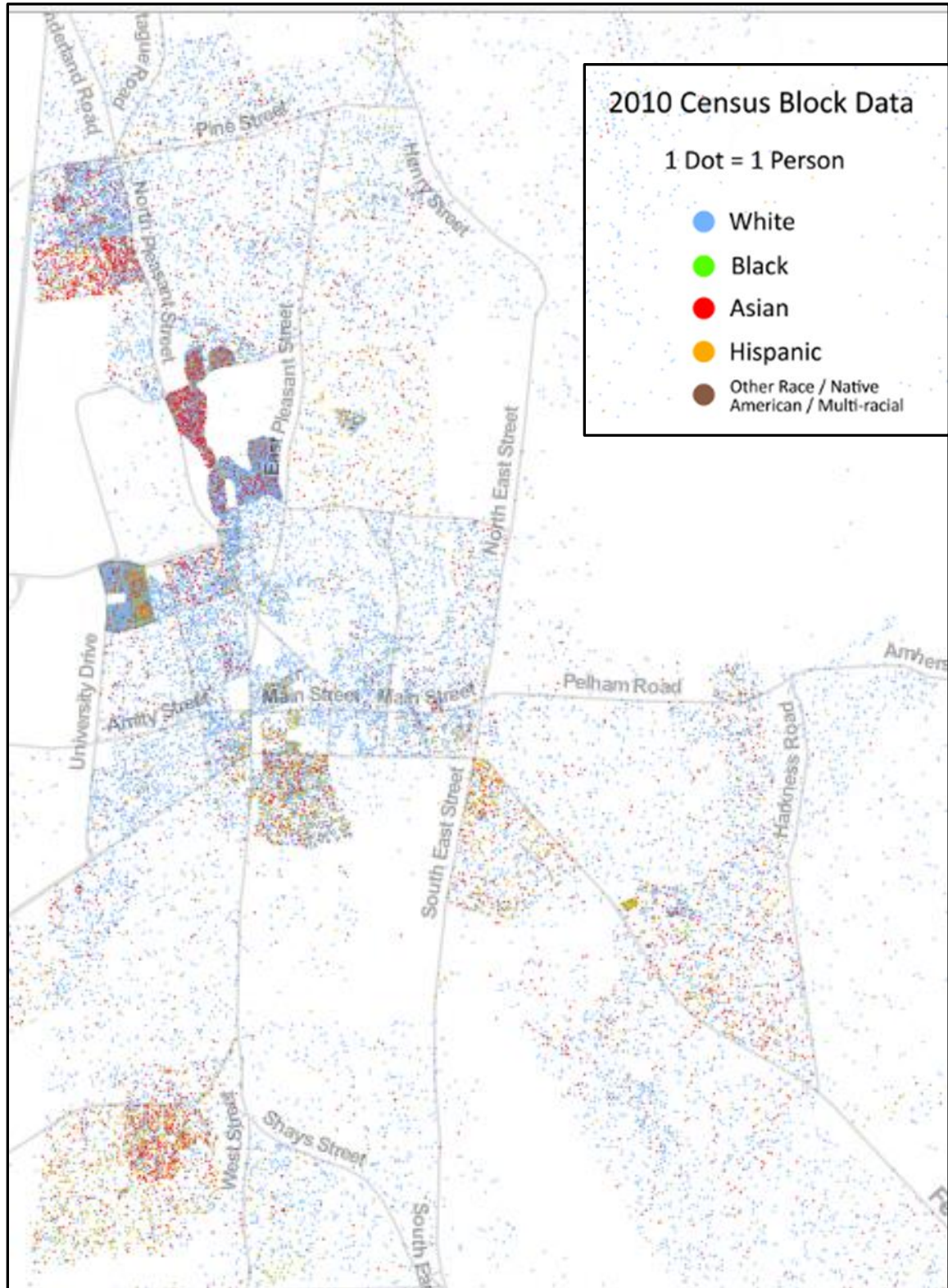
Hampshire County. The large population of students and professors and the professional and low-wage employment provided through UMass and the other colleges are integral to telling the story of the demographics and economy of the area. The town of Amherst examines this in their strategic plan: “The presence of higher education institutions has a profound impact on Amherst’s population composition. The population, with a median age of 21.8 years in 2000, was far younger than the county, the state, or the nation,” (ACP Visioning & Planning, LTD and Stantec 2007, 3.2). Specifically, in 2000, the age group of 15-19 year-olds consisted of 7,571 people and the 20-24-year-old age group consisted of 10,768 people, while the rest of the age groups all fell below 1,900 people (ACP Visioning & Planning, LTD and Stantec 2007, 3.8).

UMass and the colleges also impact the incomes, races, and languages present in Amherst. Regarding race and language in Amherst, the colleges make Amherst more diverse in how they attract international faculty and students, and faculty and students associated with academic programs regarding the history, culture, politics, and languages of various racial and ethnic populations and regions, such as the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at UMass and the Asian Languages & Civilizations Department at Amherst College. According to the Planning Amherst Together Existing Conditions and Trends Report:

“Amherst is a relatively and increasingly racially and ethnically diverse community. It is considerably more diverse than the county and the state. In 2000, just over 20 percent of Amherst’s population was non-White. Of its 7,209 minority residents, 44 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander and 25 percent were Black. Six percent were Hispanic/Latino. Between 1990 and 2000, the minority population increased 36 percent while the White population declined 7.6 percent. In comparison to other towns in Hampshire County, Amherst is markedly more diverse, accounting for nearly 53 percent of all minorities living in the county, and 60 percent of the county’s Black and Asian residents,” (ACP Visioning & Planning, LTD and Stantec 2007, 3.10).

Even though Amherst is racially diverse, as of 2010, the vast majority of its inhabitants, 75.6%, are White (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Additionally, the Racial Dot Map constructed by Cable at the University of Virginia indicates that the housing patterns of Amherst have noticeable racial patterns (2013). In Cable's 2013 Racial Dot Map, we see much higher concentrations of Asian, Hispanic, and Black residents in very specific neighborhoods, such as on UMass Amherst's and Amherst College's campuses, to the West of West Street, to the West of a Northern portion of North Pleasant Street, and in more dispersed areas between South East Street and Harkness Road (see Figure 1 below). These patterns correlate with both student housing as well as lower-income housing.

Figure 1: Racial Dot Map of Amherst



As the town's planning document notes: "The student population tends to lower income statistics, while other residents of the Town compare reasonably with others in the county and state," (ACP Visioning & Planning, LTD and Stantec 2007, 3.12). However, other indications of wealth in Amherst point to it being far wealthier than the U.S. average: in 2014, the median value of owner-occupied homes is nearly twice that of the median in the U.S. and the median cost of rent is 13.8% higher than the U.S. median (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). Additionally, Amherst's population is remarkably educated compared to U.S. averages. The educational achievement of its citizens—high school diplomas or higher, bachelor's degree or higher, and graduate or professional degrees—are listed in Table 1, which compares these statistics to other nearby cities, their counties, and the U.S. As seen in Table 1, Amherst has a rate of high school diplomas 11.6 points higher than the country, a rate of bachelor's degrees 2.39 times that of the country, and an astounding rate of graduate or professional degrees that is 455% that of the national rate. Undoubtedly the higher cost of living and high educational attainment are impacted by the colleges. The colleges offer careers in the professoriate (although increasingly adjunct and therefore less wealthy and secure), university administration, and student life. On the other hand, they also offer more blue-collar careers, such as maintenance, construction, food services, janitorial, etc.

While the role of elitism, classism, and upper and bourgeoisie classes was mentioned in the Coming Together participants' narratives of racism in Amherst (although understated), the Southern cities of the Pioneer Valley were markedly absent from their characterization of the town. The people of Amherst constructed their place as a geographically-decontextualized bubble. What are they excluding when they leave out

Amherst's relationship to Holyoke and Springfield? These cities are equally important in telling the story of Amherst, because of the stark contrast in the demographics and economy of the two areas. Hampden County is home to cities with much higher populations and greater diversity, and people with much lower socioeconomic status. Table 1 highlight the disparities between the demographics of Amherst and those of Springfield and Holyoke.

Table 1: U.S. Census Bureau Data on City Demographics 2010

Population categories	Amherst	U.S.	Springfield	Holyoke
<i>Children under 18 Years</i>	5.3%	24%	27%	26.4%
<i>White Non-Latino</i>	75.6%	63.7%	36.7%	46.8%
<i>Black</i>	5.5%	12.6%	22.3%	4.7%
<i>Asian</i>	9.5%	4.8%	2.4%	1.1%
<i>Latino</i>	6.6%	16.3%	38.8%	48.4%
<i>Owner-Occupied Houses with Median Value</i>	38.8% \$332,600	64.4% \$175,700	47.8% \$146,500	40.2% \$186,100
<i>Median Rent</i>	\$1,068	\$920	\$813	\$697
<i>Language Other than English at Home</i>	9.8%	20.9%	39.1%	43.7%
<i>H.S. Degree</i>	97.9%	86.3%	75.8%	76.8%
<i>B.A. Degree</i>	70.2%	29.3%	17.9%	23.2%
<i>Grad. or Prof. Degree (2014)</i>	50.1%	11%	6.7%	8.8%

Springfield and Holyoke also have a substantial young population, but for different reasons than Amherst. While Amherst is young due to the regular influx of undergraduate and graduate students, it's percentage of children under the age of 18 is only 5.3%. On the other hand, the young population in Springfield is explained in the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission's 2000 Demographic and Economic Analysis:

“More than a quarter of Springfield's population is under the age of 18, making the city much younger than Massachusetts as a whole. This youthful age distribution in part reflects the shift between 1990 and 2000 to a population base that is a majority persons of color, and the Hispanic and African American populations of Springfield have very young age distributions (nearly 40 percent of the city's Hispanic population is under 18),” (Foster, Paul N. et al. 2006, 3).

Springfield is significantly more diverse than Amherst, and its diversity is increasing. It is has 400% the proportion of Black citizens, nearly 600% the proportion of Latino citizens, and less than half the proportion of White citizens. On the other hand, Holyoke is almost half Latino and half White, making it less racially diverse, yet significantly less White than Amherst as well. Both of these cities have four times the proportion of residents who speak a language other than English at home. This enormous discrepancy in racial diversity was largely ignored by the Coming Together participants engaging in racial justice work.

This erasure was accompanied by the marked absence of acknowledgement of wealth inequalities between these cities as well. The lower-than-average rate of owner-occupied housing in Amherst reflects the highly transient student population, whereas the comparable rates in Springfield and Holyoke are not explained by huge student populations. Additionally, the median rent costs are \$250-\$370 less than that of Amherst. Furthermore, APRS' rate of free and reduced lunches for 2014-2015 school year were 44%, while those in Springfield and Holyoke were 94% and 100%, respectively (Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center). These statistics indicate significantly less wealth and/or economic stability in these cities. Additionally, whereas Amherst has rates college educational achievement rates that are two and four times that of the country, the educational achievement rates of Springfield and Holyoke are markedly lower than the rate in the U.S. Their populations' rates of High School diplomas are about 10 points lower than the U.S., and 20 points lower than Amherst. Likewise, Springfield's rate of undergraduate degrees is about one-quarter that of Amherst, and Holyoke's is one-third. The discrepancy in graduate and professional degrees is even higher, and the rates of

these degrees in Springfield and Holyoke are two-to-4.3 points lower than those in the U.S. The marked difference in socioeconomic status between these cities and Amherst was left out of almost every narrative of the place of Amherst that I heard among long-term residents of Amherst not affiliated with UMass or the colleges and among Coming Together participants.

The absence of including Holyoke and Springfield in constructing the place of Amherst is strange, as they are the nearest large cities. As stated in by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, these cities impact each other:

“Springfield’s assets, in its institutions, employers, and low costs, are assets for the entire Pioneer Valley, but the threats facing Springfield are generally confronted by the city and its residents alone. Furthermore, the region has played its part in allowing particular threats to emerge and remain unchecked in Springfield. Numerous communities throughout the Pioneer Valley benefit tremendously from their proximity to the employment centers and infrastructure based in Springfield. Property values and property tax revenues soar in suburban and rural communities as they become home to the high-wage, professional workforce that arrives in Springfield each morning and leaves each evening. Retail and service establishments spring up in previously rural communities to serve the needs of this commuting workforce, causing similar establishments in Springfield to close. In Springfield a population is left that is a majority people who serve in the region’s lowest-skill jobs, receiving low wages and left without the means of affording either the housing or transportation necessary to live elsewhere. Without doubt the challenges identified in this report have numerous and complex causes, but they are as much regional as local and if the region will continue to benefit from Springfield’s assets, the region will have to participate in addressing Springfield’s struggles,” (Foster, Paul N. et al. 2007, 8).

The absence of acknowledging Springfield and Holyoke in constructing the place of Amherst—despite how these cities’ economies impact each other and the extraordinary discrepancy in wealth, education, and racial diversity—was a salient component of the limitations of Coming Together’s racial justice activism.

1. Re-Evaluation Counseling and UMass Alliance for Community Transformation

As I would learn after a year of being involved in Coming Together, the organization's vision and practices were heavily influenced by an informal counseling program called Re-Evaluation Counseling (RC), or Co-Counseling. RC was developed in the 1950s and -60s by counselors who perceived their professional skills as very basic and humanizing skills all humans have, but maybe don't use because of how society has taught us to behave. The basic premise of this program is that we all have very early hurts and traumas that were, over time, associated with more and more experiences of hurts and traumas, ultimately creating a very emotionally unintelligent state of mind. It is taught in RC that if you follow your mind and emotions and re-evaluate those memories—verbally or physically—that you will experience “emotional discharge” in the form of tears, shakes, yawns, laughter, etc. This emotional discharge helps to un-muddy the emotional intelligence of the mind and sort out those memories, making it easier to cope with new forms of hurt, and the mechanism of this process is being listened to attentively and, occasionally, redirected towards those experiences or reminded of your humanity. The structure of the organization for beginners consists of an introductory class, to which I was recommended by two Coming Together participants, separately. Once in a class, you meet with other people in the class, one-on-one, for a counseling session once per week in which one of you starts out as the “client” who talks, moves, remembers emotions, and discharges for a half hour while the other one “counsels,” and then you switch roles. Once the introductory class has been completed, co-counselors can join focused support groups, maintain their practice with other co-counselors, enroll in other classes, and attend focused workshops at the regional, national, and global scales. There is a substantial network of people doing RC in Amherst and the rest of Hampshire

County, as there are many focus groups and regular workshops. The majority of the people in my class were White and in their 20s or 30s, although there are enough people of color in the organization to necessitate groups whose focus is the re-evaluation of racism. The process of personal reflection, emotional discharge, and healing is explicitly connected by co-counselors in Amherst with antiracism, as they believe that all forms of oppression are based in young peoples' oppression and, due to that emotional and social development, not acting with emotional intelligence in our society. That is:

“The oppression of young people, and the installation of patterns of oppression through the oppression of young people, is the foundation that allows other oppressions to be installed... The oppressor, the person who functions as an oppressor, has always first been oppressed and then manipulated into the other end of the oppression pattern.” (Jackins 2012, 47).

This was the extent of theorization about society that was present in my introductory class. It was emphasized that, by healing ourselves, RC intends to create lasting social change. I will examine the beliefs and practices of RC more in Chapter Four.

The third organization I joined in an effort to understand and participate in political mobilization was UMass Alliance for Community Transformation (UACT), which I had limited involvement in until the spring semester of 2016, when I took the class that it runs, Grassroots Community Organizing (GCO). UACT is housed in the Anthropology department at UMass Amherst, and it is governed and run collectively by undergraduate student leaders and the faculty director, Jen Sandler. Each year, seasoned UACT student leaders and Sandler rigorously train new student leaders to facilitate the GCO course, which usually has three sections. Two-to-three students facilitate each section, which, with all of the lesson planning, student evaluation, and training, requires a commitment of about 30 hours a week. Students from all of the Five Colleges can apply

to enroll in GCO, although the students are most often from UMass, Hampshire College, and Smith College. The application process requires answering to a series of essay questions about the student's background and experiences in and visions for social justice work. That year's facilitators, who undergo rigorous multi-credit training that includes individualized personal development and practice in facilitation, education, and community building throughout the year, select the students that will form the GCO sections. The majority of UACT student leaders are people of color and/or gender queer. GCO's curriculum consists of weekly readings and written reflections, weekly student-facilitated 3-hour class meetings, and two significant opportunities to engage in activism. One opportunity is during the Spring Break trip to one of UACT's partner community organizing groups in the Eastern U.S., with which UACT maintains a relationship of reciprocity throughout the year. During this trip, the GCO students engage in community organizing work and learn from the people in the organization. The second opportunity is the semester final project, which usually consists of working with a student organizing group for a period of three weeks. The driving vision of UACT, as stated on their website, is:

“Through our educational projects and our community partnerships, UACT aims to play a role in shifting the way people relate to one another and to structures and policies that affect them. We work, alongside our community organizing partners, to develop people (students, scholars, popular educators, and activists) and groups who know how to work both as members of and in solidarity with diverse communities that are building a more just and compassionate world,” (UACT website).

As such, UACT situates its work within a radical political ideology of social justice in the world, which draws on policy change as well as changes to relationships and

interpersonal interaction. I will examine how this ideology and vision plays out in the practices of UACT through the GCO course in depth in Chapter Four.

Each of these three organizations—Coming Together, RC, and UACT—were situated within Amherst, Mass during the majority of my research, although RC is a global organization and UACT has short excursions to other cities. They provide different lenses into what it means to live in Amherst: undergraduate students at private colleges versus UMass, people of color, White, immigrants, LGB, gender non-conforming and transgender, professional careers, economically stable, affiliated with the university or with the grade schools, etc. Still, each of these organizations worked towards some sort of vision of common good and social change. Another common trait running across the people I worked with in each of these groups was that they were somehow affiliated with universities in a way that signaled class privilege or class mobility—either they or their parents (and sometimes grandparents) had at least an undergraduate degree or were in the process of attaining one, and many people in Coming Together had graduate or professional degrees. This common trait meant that interactions in these groups were almost always influenced by highly educated ways of speaking and vocabulary, by academic patterns of thought, and frequent intellectualization of the situation at hand. The prevalence of this intellectual/middle-to-upper class way of being meant that I experienced these groups fluidly with my education in the Department of Anthropology, to the extent that I was often confused about what part of my project was data, and what part was “research.” A dominant strand of argument in this thesis is that the prevalence of this class complicity, when unexamined and uncontrolled, would compromise attempts at enacting social justice. I will examine

this argument more fully throughout the paper. For now, a third common trait amongst the people I worked with would be their immersion in social justice through the platform of social media.

2. Antiracism in Social Media

The context of my involvement in racial justice work also stretched far beyond the Pioneer Valley. Social media, and specifically Facebook, greatly impacted my experience of racial justice, as well as those of the people I encountered in social change organizations, but especially those in Coming Together since activism was a goal, but there was little other examples of activism to inform our understandings of it. The circulation and amplification of descriptions or videos of racist injustices as well as commentary on racial justice activism through Facebook was integral to our experiences of racial justice. At each Coming Together meeting, participants would incorporate what they saw or learned through social media, as well as their discussions or arguments with Facebook “friends” and strangers that consisted of posts and comments, into the group discussion. Regarding the media shared, liked, and digested, we would bring up videos of police brutality, a video of people of color explaining what racism feels like, arguments against racism supported with facts and logic, or more intellectual articles that examine aspects of racial justice work in academic and critical ways. The images, narratives, and focuses of this social media would shape our context of antiracism education and racial justice work. Prominent components of this context included:

- Immediate access to knowledge about incidents of police brutality and other acts of violence or oppression, their interpretations as being racist or not racist, as well as the public commentary on these incidents—cool and logical discussions or heated arguments and emotional proclamations of anger, grief, exhaustion, impatience, strength, hope, solidarity, and motivation among supporters of racial

justice *or* annoyance, disbelief, anger, and support for #BlueLivesMatter among people who deny the existence of racism.

- Immediate access to knowledge about #BlackLivesMatter protests and actions, the effects of marches in their cities such as uncontrolled and violent escalation of residents, and the political and militarized responses of the government to these protests. Commentary on these incidents circulated as well, but along with this was instructions for supporting the people participating in these protests in articles.
- Pseudo-academic or public-access articles about the implications of racism and of activism, the types of racism, and how-to articles for being an ally. These articles would delineate actions, opinions, and phrases that are supportive or unsupportive of racial justice work. Examples of these articles' headlines, imagery, and content can be seen in Figures 2-7, below:

Figure 2: Are You Racist? Article



Figure 3: Got Privilege? Article



Figure 4: Defensiveness when Talking About Racism Flowchart Article



Figure 5: “Ferguson Effect” Evaluation Article



Figure 6: Intersectionality Article

Intersectionality (an incredibly BRIEF review)

The term “intersectionality” was coined by scholarship powerhouse [Kimberlé W. Crenshaw](#), who sought to document the complications women of color face in institutions of power, and to push for action to diversify the women’s movement. She continues work as a Professor at UCLA Law, and co founded a think tank for [African American policy reform](#). Another scholar powerhouse is [Patricia Hill Collins](#), whose infamous book, *Black Feminist Thought*, lays a solid foundation for Black feminist studies. Her recent book, *Intersectionality*, is a must read if you want to know the basics of the concept.

What does this mean?

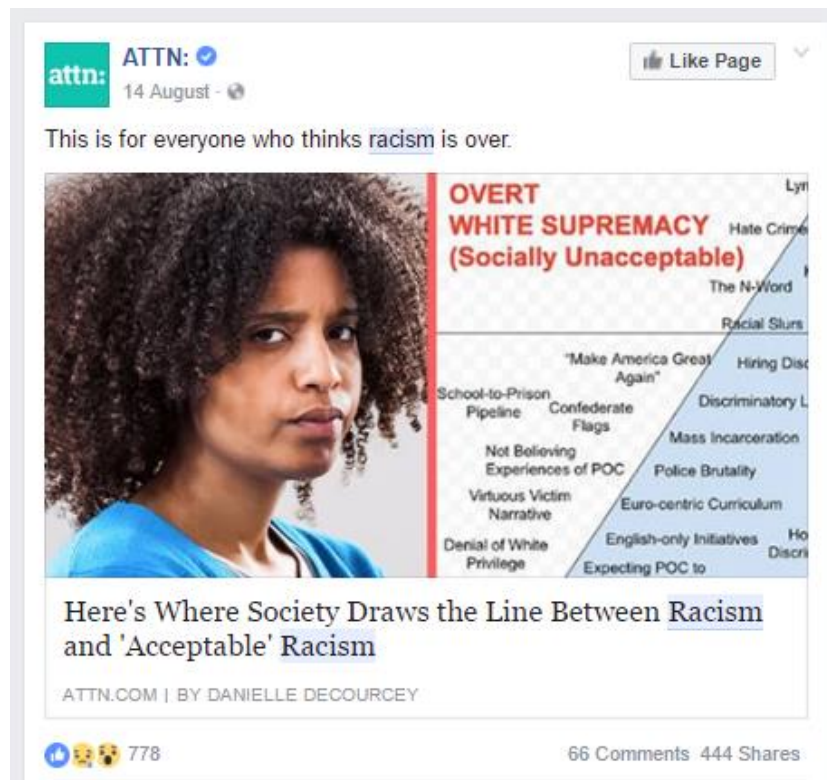
An example of intersectionality IS:

“Black women have compounded barriers of race, gender, and class. This is incredibly hard for them to navigate. Let’s talk about intersectionality here!”

An example of intersectionality IS NOT:

“I know I’m white, but I’m also a woman. So there’s privilege, yes, but other are other things, too. Let’s talk about intersectionality here!”

Figure 7: Acceptable and Unacceptable Racism Article



These articles and the narratives circulated with them became very influential in the narratives of activism in Coming Together. The perspectives they communicated, along with certain phrases that communicated them, would become very prevalent in the social circles of Coming Together in short periods of time: “it’s not the responsibility of people of color to educate White people,” “own your racism,” “owning your privilege,” “calling people in instead of calling them out,” “everybody in this society is racist,” and the list goes on. Sometimes participants would acknowledge that they learned this perspective from social media, telling the story of how it impacted their thinking, and sometimes they would just state a phrase as a way of acknowledging the perspective they are taking into account. These social media narratives would influence the collective

knowledge produced by the Coming Together participants and their visions for their role in activism.

B. Research Questions and Arguments

It is with this preface of the research that I can articulate the questions I answer in this thesis. I have two overarching questions. One seeks to delineate some processes and practices of political mobilization, as they occur in the formerly-discussed context of Amherst, Mass as well as for people like me—working class people engaging in class mobility through higher education and desiring to have a positive impact in the world. What is the role of personal reflection in political mobilization, and what are the effects of its different forms? How does practice in and ample opportunities for activism impact the process of politicization? How is relationship- and community-building central to political mobilization against capitalism? I will argue that all of these processes—consciousness-raising education, personal reflection, relationship-building, community-building, and practice in activism are all necessary to the process of political mobilization in the context of U.S. capitalism, and that community-building was especially important in the context of Amherst, Mass.

The second question seeks to understand how the inextricability of systemic racism and capitalism impacts the practices, ideologies, and effects of anti-oppression and social change organizations. What happens to the participants and the activism when both of these systems of oppression are not foregrounded? How can participants in such organizations work across differences of privilege and oppression? What are practices of balancing the focus on these oppressions that maintain an anti-oppressive group culture as well as political mobilization? I will argue, like many have before me, that creating

anti-oppression realities requires a vision that integrates the fight against capitalist and racist oppression—as well as the many other forms of oppression! I will also argue that effective and sustainable political mobilization in a diverse group requires addressing each of their lived experiences of oppression, and that some should more often be the focus of activism than others. Finally, I will argue that it takes a critical allocation of focus on these different experiences of privilege and oppression in order to prevent societal patterns of power manipulation from taking over the group practices and focus.

After a literature review, in which I give these arguments more depth in academic literature and theory on the intersections of racism, capitalism, and structural violence as well as theorization of anti-oppression activism, I will examine these arguments in three chapters that focus on 1) how Coming Together functioned to silence people of color, 2) how Coming Together demobilized potential activists, and 3) how Grassroots Community Organizing and Re-Evaluation Counseling taught me more effective and sustainable practices of racial justice work. I will conclude by summarizing the arguments set out in each chapter and, finally, looking to how this work is impacting my life and work in Detroit today. Ultimately, my research only speaks to the transferability of these arguments as far as my own experience and the moments of connection I find within the participant observation, which reflect my experience of group dynamics and situations, and the interview transcripts. Nonetheless, the most clear and, possibly, transferable finding in this thesis is that doing anti-oppression activism in the U.S. requires intensive processes of community building as well as personal reflection about and activism against capitalism and racism, simultaneously. Furthermore, by drawing on the self-knowledge I gained and the process of building community in GCO, this thesis

gives detailed data regarding the shape this intensive and intentional community building and personal reflection can take. Regardless of the transferability of this finding across activist circles, this thesis is worthwhile in that it has and will greatly impact the work I do and the relationships and community I build in the world.

C. Literature Review

In this literature review, I will draw on critical race theory, violence theory, Black feminist anthropology, and intersectionality to contextualize this research within historical and contemporary racism and racial justice activism in the U.S. as well as within the intellectual lineages of critical feminist scholars who are often also queer women of color. I will examine: 1) the intersections of racism, capitalism, and violence; 2) the vindicationist and democratization project of Black feminist anthropologists; and, 3) intersectionality theorists' attention to self-reflection and coalitional activism. Through these literatures, I elaborate on the influence of capitalist power-grabbing in forming racism, on how White identity is situated in the violences of racism, and how theorists have conceptualized coalitional activism across differences of power, privilege, and oppression, with a special focus on critiques of the involvement of White feminists in antiracism. This literature review will function to situate the work of *Coming Together* in a field of potential political trajectories and interactions, and in the next chapters I'll show how it fell short of the expectations of these theorists and activists. It is my hope that the few lessons I learned from the failed activism *Coming Together* as well as the more sustainable forms of mobilization I learned from GCO and RC will contribute to this literature about the forms of racism and components of sustainable anti-oppression

activism. As such, I will introduce the theoretical construct of *critical personal reflection*, which I develop more thoroughly throughout the thesis.

1. Racism, Capitalism, and Violence

In this thesis, I conceptualize race, racism, and antiracism as socially constructed, complex, contingent, and malleable forms. This idea is captured by the theorizing of Omi and Winant, who describe *racial formation* as “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed,” (2014, 109). Rana has advanced this definition of racial identities by specifying that they can be based on physical and cultural characteristics, or a *racial phenomenology*: “bodies that appear in the visual register as characteristics of race and as performances of characteristics that are read as racial,” (2011, 26). Within these definitions of racial formation and phenomenology, people have space to intentionally work to transform racial formations, what Omi and Winant call a *racial project*: the “crossroads” where “racial meanings are translated into social structures,” (2014, 109). Robinson (1983) develops a European history of racial capitalism, in which racial meanings were translated into capitalist economic structures. He demonstrates how foreigners were labeled “barbarians” and/or Othered in order to be put to degrading and exploitative work at various historical moments: the Mediterranean slave trade, colonial development, and the war economy (10, 16, 22). He argues that these process in Europe’s Middle Ages were precursors to, or rehearsals of, the Atlantic Slave Trade, meaning that the slavery of Africans and their diaspora to the New World was not an anomaly, but an accepted cultural practice of domination. He posits that this social process of racialization was integral to the

development of capitalist exploitation and domination as well as to the development of huge wealth and power in states of slavery.

These capitalist economic structures produce a structural violence, which is explored by the contributors to *Global Health in Times of Violence* (Rylko-Bauer, Whiteford, and Farmer, eds. 2009). This book examines the multiple ways capitalism produces unequal distributions of violence and disenfranchisement, constrains options for sustainable and healthy work and living, and ultimately causes health problems that can be seen on the body. Furthermore, in *Economies of Violence*, Suchland (2015) argues that violences that appear to be aberrations of the capitalist and democratic systems (e.g. sex trafficking) are actually caused by global capitalism and the structural precarity it causes. These authors demonstrate how direct interpersonal violence as well as structural violence are produced by a globalized capitalist economy with policies that value corporations and profits over people, ultimately producing very harmful living conditions for certain populations (e.g. Inner-city Hartford, CT, poor Russian women, homeless Angolans, women in refugee camps, etc.) according to specific socioeconomic markers (e.g. race) and broader structuring institutions.

Du Bois examines the intersection of capitalism, structural violence, racism in the U.S. in *Black Reconstruction* (1935). He demonstrates how race was used by various groups as a tactic for securing economic and political stability, and how White, middle-upper class economic and political dominance was ultimately only ensured by dividing working class Whites and Blacks with racism. By purporting that Blacks were intellectually incapable, violent, and stealing jobs from the White working poor, the Southern White property owners divided the working poor along race lines and

discredited the Black Freedmen in the minds of the Northern White lawmakers and capitalists (616). The economic motivations for the racism included both how Southern White property owners were able to prevent the redistribution of their land to the working poor (both Black and White) and maintain a pool of workers for their plantations (591) as well as how the working and lower class Whites received a *psychological wage of Whiteness* in the form of elevated social status above the Freedmen, which made them feel more secure in the face of economic precarity: losing jobs and savings, having to change their plans for children's upward class mobility, and hunger (695, 700). Political motivations for promoting this racism included how the Northern White lawmakers wanted to maintain their political dominance, which was challenged by the success of the Black Freedmen in schooling, business, and politics during the reconstruction (599). Through this history, Du Bois demonstrates how racism was developed as a mechanism for creating alienation between groups with shared experiences, an alienation motivated by the capitalist desire to maintain and grab power.

Regarding the intersection of colonization, capitalism, and racism, Jung (2011) theorizes the U.S. as a White supremacist empire-state that engaged in ongoing and historically-contingent colonization and racialization through legal codification and interpretation. His critical legal analysis demonstrates that "the abiding colonial logic was to wrest land away from indigenous sovereignty and control," which was justified by a racist conception of the indigenous groups (4). This practice occurred through the usurpation of continental U.S. lands that expanded further and further West, but it also occurred in the processes of incorporating territories like Hawai'i and occupying unincorporated territories like Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. Jung shows how

these groups of people, and their racializations, were constantly negotiated in relation to each other. Furthermore, the racial domination of non-colonized people of color, such as African slaves and then Black Freedmen, Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese people, occurred through a comparable ongoing process of comparison, differentiation, and ranking (Jung 2011; Takaki 2008). Whether certain territories were incorporated and certain people were granted citizenship was decided through such racialized debates in Supreme Court cases, which would result in codified law. With this review, we see how wealth, power, and/or the political order were built on the domination, exploitation, marginalization, and alienation of subjugated and racialized groups or their territories, as well as how these racial formations were created, negotiated, and mutable.

2. Black Feminist Anthropology: A Politics of Vindication and Democratization

Black feminist anthropologists situate their work within this history of racism, capitalism, and violence, as well as within the present manifestations of these structural inequalities. They ground their work in the lived experiences of people of the African Diaspora as well as explicitly political motivations of combatting these inequalities. As explained by Irma McClaurin in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, Black feminist anthropological research gains a “fuller understanding of how Black women’s lives (including our own) are constituted by structural forces” by foregrounding “the multiplicity of coping strategies and forms of resistance that Black women adopt globally to contend with the structural and psychocultural dimensions of racism, sexism, and the other myriad forms that social inequality can assume in people’s lives,” (15). In searching for a deeper understanding of structural inequalities and forms of resistance, Black feminist anthropology is politically motivated. Bolles explains how

Black women ancestors were drawn to anthropology, because they perceived it as “a tool to locate the sources of inequality, and in some instances, as a place where one could participate in finding the ‘cure,’” (2001, 28). The scholars featured in *Black Feminist Anthropology* prioritize the political aims and implications of their research, so that Black women’s experiences become the “basis of a ‘pragmatic activism’ directed at combating those social and personal, individual and structural, and local and global forces that pose harm to Black (in the widest geopolitical sense) women’s well-being,” (McClaurin 2001, 63). Politics in this tradition, in its broadest sense, is discovering the root of lived inequalities and combatting them through amplifying the pragmatic activism of Black women. Two forms of scholarship contribute to this politics: vindicationist work that discredits racism, and work that practices the democratization of power and knowledge.

Attempting to discredit racist scholarship and structures through exposing racism has its roots in the vindicationist tradition of African American anthropology (Harrison & Harrison 1999). Bolles categorizes the vindicationist tradition as “racial uplifting, analysis of the social and material conditions of race, and locating sites of inequality,” (2001, 30). Early and great works in this tradition include the research of St. Clair Drake and W.E.B. Du Bois, who were later followed by Caroline Bond Day, whose scholarship on the intelligence of mixed-race Americans argued against eugenics, and Allison Davis, whose scholarship demonstrated how education was influenced by social inequality. The Black feminist vindicationist effort distinguishes itself within this tradition, according to Bolles, by incorporating a “gendered approach,” so that “the differing realities of women and men surface” even when “racism was the primary enemy, not sexism,” (2001, 40-42). In *Black Feminist Anthropology*, many of the writers connect their findings on

racism and sexism with global capitalism. Karla Slocum writes about how St. Lucian women navigate the structural inequalities of economic globalization and sexism, and Angela M. Gilliam examines how capitalism, enlightenment values, and patriarchy created expectations for the role of Black women as one of servitude and sexualization, making survival and the maintenance of dignity a struggle (2001).

In examining these Black feminist anthropologists scholarship on racism in the U.S., both Faye V. Harrison and Leith Mullings examine how racism has become “concealed.” Mullings explains: “Perhaps the most significant new feature is the transformation of practices and ideologies of racism to a configuration that flourishes without official support of legal and civic institutions,” (2005, 677). She is referencing the persistence of racism in spite of the policy transitions achieved through the Civil Rights Movement that made explicit racism illegal. Likewise, Harrison explains how her research agenda of dismantling racism has become more complex with the rise of “unmarked racisms” that are not explicitly anti-Black, but are instead:

“the often subtle mechanisms through which racial hegemony and privilege can be either perpetuated or broken down in discursive practices, education... labor market dynamics, mortgage lending, public health policy, criminal justice enforcement, patterns of economic development, and many other spheres in which “race” is continuously being made and remade,” (1998, 612).

These characterizations point to how racism is still structural, but instead of being legitimized by explicitly race-based policies, it manifests in new ideological forms. Harrison describes one of these ideological forms, “culture,” that is being implicitly racialized so that certain cultural patterns are associated with Blackness and others, with Whiteness. She roots this racism in “an ‘underlying cultural logic,’ intensely resistant to change, that implicates a deeply sedimented stigma assigned to Blackness,” (1998, 612).

This racism avoids explicit biologized racism due to its illegality, but maps the same Black-White dualism onto “culture.”

In order to study these unmarked manifestations of structural racism, Harrison explains that scholars should be attuned to processes of “racialization, racial stratification, and racial identity formation,” (1998, 613). For instance, she studies how the “culture” ideology racializes certain economic and social practices and policies, so that “‘deserving individuals’ are pitted against undeserving ‘special interest groups’; and White people’s experience of ‘class’ is seen as a fairer criterion for policy-mediated benefits than race or gender,” (2000, 54). Similarly, Mullings characterizes “colorblind” racism as emphasizing “cultural and individual explanations for inequality” so as to “delegitimize antiracist activities,” (2005, 678-679). Both Harrison and Mullings examine how this ideology manifests in neoliberal economic policies that emphasize personal responsibility and the removal of social programs, arguing that the policies themselves are racialized and that their function is ultimately racial stratification. They further this analysis to include the War on Drugs, police brutality, and mass incarceration (Harrison 1998, 2000; Mullings 2003, 2005, 2015). In their studies of racism in the U.S., these scholars pay attention to both the process of racialization as well as structural racism, how the structural violence of capitalism implicates itself in the project of racial stratification. In their vindicationist research and writing, they discredit these forms of racism.

Along with discrediting these forms of racism through vindicationist scholarship, Black feminist anthropologists also participate in creating anti-oppressive realities, specifically through the democratization of power and knowledge. Democratizing the

voices that have the power to constitute reality, history, and knowledge is a primary theme in Black feminist anthropological politics and envisioning of the future. Faye V. Harrison argues that anthropologists should “develop methodologies for teaching people how to un-learn old lifeways in order to learn—and collaboratively create—a new culture for multiracial democracy,” (1998, 612). One aspect of this multiracial democracy involves democratizing whose voices have the power to structure reality, and Harstock calls for making Black women’s perspectives “primary and constitutive of a different world,” rather than “subjugated or disruptive knowledges,” (cited in McClaurin 2001, 56). Similarly, Mullings argues that reclaiming “social memories of survival, resistance, and struggle,” through the creation of history by African Americans can disrupt hegemonic portrayals of history and support political activism (Mullings 2015, 11). She pursues this democratization of the production of knowledge and history through the African Burial Ground archaeology project in New York City, which utilizes research methods that incorporate local community members into the research process, to the extent that they shape the research questions and participate in collecting and interpreting data (2015). Black feminist anthropologists also engage in the democratization of power and knowledge through the research method of autoethnography, through which they both denaturalize the authority of the researcher and give more power to their own subjugated voices as Black women to describe and interpret their own situations. I will explore autoethnography further in the subsequent section on methods.

A final form of democratization of power sought by some Black feminist anthropologists is the practice of reparations, or the reorganization and redistribution of “resources along racial lines,” (Mullings 2005, 682). This scholar-activism addresses

structural inequalities while discrediting historical and contemporary structural racism and capitalist accumulation. Mulling's argues that this form of racial project decenters "the naturalness of Whiteness by underscoring the relational and dialectical aspects of racism—reminding us that all dispossession is inextricably connected to accumulation," (2005, 680). All three of these forms of democratization—amplifying the voices of marginalized populations in the creation of knowledge, complexifying the voice of the researcher as embedded in these structural inequalities, and democratizing ownership of resources—are all political projects and racial projects that alter whose voices are heard and realities are honored in the structuring of a reality of racial justice. This is the primary concern of some Black feminist anthropologists when considering the scholarship on Whiteness and White allies. Whose voices are being heard? How are they being contextualized within greater structures of racism, patriarchy, and dispossession and accumulation?

3. Whiteness: Violence, Erasure, and Emotional Education

I will base my description of Whiteness, which is very informed by my own experience, in the violence theory scholarship on legitimacy, discursivity, and desocialization. I attempt to connect Whiteness and White identity to legitimations of structural violence, in an effort to honor Mullings' critique of scholarship that does not foreground how Whiteness is inextricably linked to economic privilege through the ongoing racial history of appropriation and dispossession (2005, 680). I will argue that Whiteness is an identity based in the erasure of violences against people of color, the power to judge the legitimacy of claims about that violence, and the discursive amplification of violence through racism within interpersonal interactions as well as

justifications for structural violence. Finally, I will describe a politicizing and educative project about the reality of violence as an example for how White people might engage become aware of the violences in which they are complicit.

Krohn-Hansen theorizes that “violence” is contextually defined as well as a question—a question about the legitimacy of an act which is evaluated by witnesses (e.g. direct witnesses, “society,” etc.) (1994, 370). That is, people define violence through evaluating which violent acts are illegitimate—and therefore “senseless” violence—and which are justified, credible, and legitimate—and therefore not violence at all, but a meaningful act (Krohn-Hansen 1994, 378). Rabasa (2000) further theorizes the legitimizing of violence as a discursive process with the concept of writing violence, which Rabasa explains as the ways writing, particularly in the form of laws, that can legitimize or structure violence through how they “define styles of recording information, enable aesthetic representations of violence, and delimit the moralization of gratuitous acts of terror,” (25). His description of Spanish colonial texts that ordered “peaceful colonization” for the sake of saving the souls of the Indians was an example of such insidious violence, which he called *love speech*, or speech that sounds like it communicates love when it really structures and legitimizes violence. In this theorization, violence becomes something that is legitimized, structured, and invisibilized by written or spoken discourse. Furthermore, Whitehead describes how violent practices can be discursively “amplified” through *poetics*, the creative process of re-deploying new meanings and iterations (2004, 10). He explains that poetics is “the way in which cultural actors can manipulate and change” the “social and cultural order constituted by

violence,” through using signs and symbols (72, 68). Thus, violence can be reiterated, reformulated, and altered by people through creative discourse.

This description of violence describes the racism in my experience of Whiteness. Present and past racial exploitation, oppression, and violence is judged for legitimacy in the discourses of White people in the U.S.: “Was the slavery of African Americans truly violence if White people were enslaved too? Look at the Irish! Everyone went through it!” “Well, that cop wasn’t racist, they were protecting themselves!” Likewise, the cultural racism and love speech that legitimize austerity programs are structuring racialized economic violence: “welfare queens” and “instilling values of hard work and independence” in people “for their own good.” These discourses in which the structural and cultural violence of racism is defined and negotiated are constantly redeployed with new meanings and referents, amplifying their violence, in the White communities of which I’ve been a part. However, Whiteness is not only defined by how violence is hidden in love speech and coded in racist discourses. It is also defined by the erasure of violence—or how people are *desocialized* from the violence in their identity. Farmer argues that the erasure of historical political relations is “perhaps the most common explanatory sleight-of-hand relied upon by the architects of structural violence. Erasure or distortion of history is part of the process of desocialization necessary for the emergence of hegemonic accounts of what happened and why,” (2004, 308). As an example, Farmer demonstrates how France and Haiti’s early founding relationship of slavery, the subsequent “reparations” that Haiti was forced to pay France for their loss of “property,” and decades of U.S. military occupation, economic embargo, and political oppression, is occluded in French texts as well as U.S. policy discourses (312-314). The

erasure of this history in the U.S. is an example of desocialization, and it structures the way people in the U.S., and the policies they condone, relate to Haiti—an imaginary benevolent force that may someday disburse an anticipated health loan to the country, to go along with the many people who go to Haiti to “serve” in missions and voluntourism trips. This is an identity based in the erasure of violences, similarly to how Whiteness today is based in the erasure of the history of Native American genocide, Lynch Law, and numerous other violences that created Whiteness.

In attempting to *resocialize* people to the violences that constitute their privileged reality, Waterston and Kukaj (2007) explore the concept of bystander mentality and what roles it plays in an undergraduate course they teach about social violence. Many of the U.S.-born students are naïve to the many violences that occur each day and have occurred throughout history, as well as the role of the U.S. in those violences. They introduce the students to the U.S.’s and U.N.’s complicity with various genocides through a comic strip, then they read an account of the colonization of the Americas that describes the violences of Christopher Columbus, and finally they visit the statue of Columbus near their school. This series of lessons and readings, preceded and followed by more studies of global violence, pushes the students to question the erasure and normalization of violence that they experience in U.S. society (514). In order to make these violences real for the students, they engage in a critical pedagogy that draws on the students’ own experiences of violence. Finally, they introduce the students to forms of activism that address structural violence. The emotions and intimacy of violence evoked by these units create a powerful learning process for the students, sometimes energizing and motivating them to engage in activism outside of the course. This education works to resocialize the

students who have grown up in a society desocialized from the structural and direct violence it creates, and to do so, it educates them about the violences in which they are complicit by politicizing previously invisibilized violences, engaging the privileged in practicing empathy through drawing on their identities and emotions, and giving them opportunities to practice activism. This emotional work of the privileged becomes salient and contentious in regards to coalitional activism, as explored in the next section. When are these voices important to focus on and include? For how long should they be foregrounded?

Answering the question of whose voices and experiences are foregrounded when constituting activist visions and instantiating anti-oppressive realities is more complex than the oppressor-privileged, or Black-White, binary, however. As Black feminist anthropologists brought the questions of patriarchy and global capitalist exploitation and structural violence into the vindicationist project of African American anthropologists, so too do people from other marginalized positionalities bring new insights into what an anti-oppressive reality should entail.

4. Intersectionality and Coalitional Activism

Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality posits that there are differences of identity and experience within identity groups that are often elided in identity politics because they cannot be captured by either/or dimensions, and that these elisions "relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling," (1991, 1242).

Additionally, Hancock explains that a central contribution of intersectionality to conceptualizations of identity is that it allows us to see how identities are not severable, that a given experience can be shaped simultaneously by race, class, and gender in an

inseverable and unique way (2016, 100). Thus, intersectionality recognizes the complex structural positions and experiences of people with multiple marginalized identities as well as how these positions are not captured by simplistic divisions of populations by race, gender, or class alone. This theorization complicates the theory of *racial formation* of Omi and Winant. Kandaswamy (2012) advances a critique of racial formation that points to the erasures of gendered and sexualized forms of racial formation. She locates historical gender construction and regulation within racial projects, such as the Welfare reforms in the Reconstruction Era and in the 1990s. These policies demanded “impossible mandates” of Black women, such as working full-time both inside and outside of the home, which demonstrates the state’s “contradictory investments” in Black women as both racialized and gendered bodies to be governed (Kandaswamy 2012, 33, 36). Crenshaw (1991) examines how, in social structures like those described by Kandaswamy as well as activist politics, the elision of how race and gender intersect to create a unique experience for women of color enacts and/or maintains violences against women of color. She explains, “The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women” (1252).

Yet, according to Crenshaw, these differences within labeled identity groups (e.g. women, people of color, etc.) can also be utilized for forming activist coalitions (1991, 1299). June Jordan (1982) describes how people can find common experiences across disparate identities, in order to support each other and fight oppression and domination, which I interpret here as a form of coalition. In exploring her own positionality and

experiences as a Black woman and college professor, Jordan interrogates herself in how she exists in antagonistic relationship (of class and nationality) to the cleaning lady of the Caribbean hotel at which she is vacationing, and she finds that Black womanhood breaks down as a unifying category in that case. In contrast, she tells the story of how a White Irish woman and a Black South African woman found common cause in their experiences with loved ones who are alcoholics. In this coalition model, people can work together, across various differences of identity, to do antiracist work if they find they share some experiences and political goals.

Intersectional feminist theorists demonstrate the necessity of ongoing and intense self-reflection and relationship-building to doing activism generally and coalitional work in particular. Audre Lorde (1984) calls for activists to do the self-work necessary to be in the world in the non-oppressive ways that we hope to create. She explains, “For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,” (123). This exploration and transformation of the “oppressor within” into a more liberated form of being can occur in relation to others, forming a relationship on which to build collective coalitional power. To elaborate, Patricia Hill Collins (1993) describes how working in coalition requires developing empathy across difference through listening with deep-interest to one another’s stories of struggle. Additionally, bell hooks (1994) emphasizes the role of building trust through being vulnerable in this process of building community. Similarly, feminist critiques of community organizing activism have pushed organizers to focus “on the process of building nurturing and

compassionate relationships among participants,” (Sen 2003, liv). This leads some organizers to say that “the most important victory is the group itself,” (Beckwith & Lopez 1997, 17). These are descriptions of a radical collectivism, rather than individualism, which will become important in framing my experience of *community* in GCO in chapter four.

I pull out the challenges of complicities, contortions, and energy as challenges to coalitional work from this literature. June Jordan’s discussion of how her own class-based complicity is an example of one complicity that creates a barrier between people and prevents coalition—she supposes that she could be one of the “monsters” of her cleaning lady’s life. Similarly, Deborah Miranda (2003) examines her own complicity and oppression as a Native American graduate student in a course discussion of Native American identity politics. When a privileged student critiqued Native American identity politics in a way that built on invisibilized centuries of oppression, she responded by using “the rules of behavior long ago laid out by White men;” that is, she relieved the tension by laughing, and gave him, her classmates, and herself “the easy way out,” (342). Miranda labels this experience as a contortion, a maneuver or negotiation that restores the situation to the comfort zone of everyone involved, a comfort zone that, for her, means complicity with racism and colonization. Another complication of working in coalition across racial difference includes the amount of energy it takes. Audre Lorde (1984) discusses daily activities, activist practices, and oppression in terms of energy. She argues that recognizing difference builds energy and power, whereas acting within the systems of oppression to negate or occlude that difference robs energy from us. As such, working in coalition requires intentional navigation of differences, contortions, and complicities.

On the other hand, Gloria Anzaldua argues for a more separatist form of activism. She both cautions Third World Women from sharing their stories with potential oppressors as well as encourages them to engage in writing, or “the act of making soul,” in order to gain power from their positionalities and unique host of oppressions (1981, 169, 171). She argues that some experiences or perspectives of women of color, and queer women in particular, are ultimately unique, difficult, and vulnerable enough that they need to be shielded from more privileged people who might tokenize or compromise them. Mullings also critically examines coalitional work that includes White people. Specifically, she is critical of racial justice policy initiatives that don’t include structural and policy interventions. Mullings draws on the work of Sarita Srivastava to question the value of antiracism education aside from structural interventions. Srivastava’s (2005) research demonstrates that antiracism education can become a politically “stagnant” situation, because White feminists tend to focus on their individual purity as nonracists, resorting to emotional displays to communicate their morality and innocence (which requires not being racist). In doing so, they shift the focus towards their personhood, precluding a focus on organizational issues such as racially-stratified labor or on organizing for broader structural changes. She roots this obsession with innocence in historical constructions of White womanhood and problematizes the liberal ideology that social problems are located within, and can be dispelled from, the individual: “Because racist is described as a personal trait rather than as a practice or relation of power, the possibility for change is also located within the individual,” (2005, 46). This racialized power dynamic in antiracism education shifts the focus away from structural inequalities to the antiracist morality of the White women, a tendency that inhibits meaningful

activism against racist social structures. Thus, White people being included in antiracism education, racial justice coalitions, and introspective identity reflection is critiqued by Srivastava and Mullings inasmuch as they derail challenges to racist social structures. Srivastava argues that White peoples' knowledge of personal racial biases is important to the extent that they can identify practices that impede structural change, but that it is unproductive to dwell in "individual preoccupations with morality," (2005, 57). Thus, the extent of participation of White people in coalitional and, specifically, racial justice work can be detrimental to anti-oppression work if not handled carefully. These critiques suggest that the self-reflection of White participants, while necessary in order to identify their complicities and contortions of power, should be limited in emphasis so that structural change and policy interventions are still the priority of the work. I call this intentional navigation of differences, in which all participants engage in intensive personal reflection yet the allocation of "mic time" (or who gets to speak about their self-knowledge in the group at what times) is critically allocated based on the goals of the organization, *critical personal reflection*.

In moving from intersectionality, self-reflection, and relationship-building to anti-oppression policy demands and movements, activists use their own experiences, self-reflection, and self-interrogation to identify problems at the structural, interpersonal, and personal levels. From identifying problems in one's own life, they develop political goals to work on individually and in coalition with others. Gilmore describes this process of making personal experience into a critical knowledge that can be mobilized against power (2007, 183, 200). She discusses how the Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC) organization members share their stories, methods, and resources of

radical self-help in fighting their children's unjust legal battles in the War on Drugs, ultimately creating a collective knowledge of the racist prison industrial complex and developing a politics of prison abolitionism. In this way, the politics of self-reflection, self-interrogation, and relationship-building connects the personal with the cultural and structural, and the local with the global. Hancock describes this perspective as a *holographic epistemology*, which takes into account the simultaneity of "the objective physical world; the inside subjective world; and the quantum world of intersections" without privileging one or establishing them linearly (2016, 120). The material reality of inequalities and violence, the subjective experience of privilege and oppression, and the intersectionality of peoples' identities interact to create a complex, multilayered space to inhabit and engage in resistance. The critical knowledge of lived experience gained from personal reflection, along with the critical allocation of whose realities of disenfranchisement and oppression are prioritized for constructing the group's activist agenda and anti-oppression vision is *critical personal reflection*.

The process of *critical personal reflection* is ongoing and mutable. The various critical knowledges and subjectivities in coalitional groups can be used to mobilize against the state in different ways at different times, based on the group's priorities. Sandoval (1991) describes differential consciousness as a form of oppositional consciousness in which activists can shift between subjectivities according to the needs of the resistance or movement. These different forms of oppositional subjectivity include: the separatist, in which the activist protects and nurtures differences; the supremacist, in which the activist claims a higher ethical and moral vision; the revolutionary, in which the activist tries to function beyond the system of domination-subordination; and the

equal rights form, in which activists argue that humans are created equally (Sandoval 1991, 55-56). Utilizing the differential consciousness can be useful in coalitional work in that one can strategically move between these different tactical oppositional subjectivities in order to find the “truth of connection” between different forms of oppression, mobilizing against oppressors across differences of experience and perspective (Sandoval 1991, 58-59).

This differential consciousness can be a tool in mobilizing against the state. Omi and Winant (1994) caution against a political resistance’s absorption into the state, whereby the demands of the movement are contained and limited through slight alterations in policy and implementation, ultimately insulating the state. Kandaswamy (2012) explains that the separation of race, gender, and sexuality within social movements provides the ground for state absorption and insulation against more radical claims by preventing “a deeper critique of structural violence against women,” (32). If movements “carve out space” for the differences of gender, race, class, etc., intentionally build coalitions across those various forms of oppression, and hold those differences in their policy demand choices, they might resist this incorporation (Walker Johnson 2016). This possibility is enacted through *critical personal reflection* in that all group members engage in the development of their self-knowledge of their experiences of oppression and privilege, and, while some experiences may not be the focus of the activist agenda of the group, all of these experiences of oppression are honored in proposed policy changes. This sort of mobilization challenges the cultural and political frameworks that naturalize an uncritical identity politics that privilege one identity at all times without acknowledging that systems of oppression interact and that the alienation between

identity groups is a mechanism for entrenching inequalities. Mobilizations that work with that understanding of intersectional identities and systems of oppression can develop activist agendas that challenge the inequalities created and sanctioned by wealthy and politically powerful elites.

D. Research Methods

The data collection methods for this project were chosen with triangulation in mind (Glesne 2006, 36). They consisted of ethnographic participant observation, autoethnography, and interviews. The interview participants were members of the Coming Together small groups as well as students from the UACT organization, and they were selected based on their long-term involvement in these organizations. The participant observation was informed by Glesne's elucidation of descriptive and analytic fieldnotes (2006, 56), and the majority of the participant observation was conducted at Coming Together public events and small group meetings, the Coming Together website, Spring 2016 Grassroots Community Organizing class meetings, Re-Evaluation Counseling introduction class meetings, and a few instances of participant observation occurred at public events in the town of Amherst (e.g. school board meetings). The autoethnography consisted of regular journaling about my thoughts and experiences in these social circles, including my experience on social media. The interview protocol was semi-structured and the open ended questions were developed with Glesne's recommendation to "make words fly," (2006, 79). The participant observation was used to develop a general understanding of the experience of these organizations, while the interviews and autoethnography were used to look at a few experiences in depth. The data was collected and pooled between December 2014 and June 2016.

To shape my process of analyzing the data, I drew on Glesne's description of qualitative research as a "spiral," in which data collection is enriched by and focused through analysis throughout the research process (2006, 47). After my participant observation began to point towards the failure of activism in Coming Together, I began to engage in participant observation in other organizations as a means of seeing the experiences more clearly in contrast with each other and of learning about potential routes of activist mobilization from my own positionality. This reciprocal research and analysis process strengthened and focused my data collection and analysis during the last six months of research. Once I had an understanding of the types of activist mobilization happening in my context, and their effects on my understanding of activism, racism, and racial justice, I did interviews with participants. Then, I looked back through the interview, participant observation, and autoethnographic data, looking specifically for how the data was different or similar for the three organizations and their participants and for how identity groups across the organizations might resemble "interpretive communities," or groups of people who share similar views and practices regarding racism, racial justice, and activism (Yanow 2000, 30).

I coded the data using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, creating a codebook that included open codes based on participant observation, autoethnography, and research questions through a process informed by Ryan and Bernard's (2003) discussion of how to identify themes. It was through this NVivo project that I ran queries of the data regarding Whiteness, the silencing of people of color, the racialization of participants, and the stunting or structuring of personal reflection, relationships, community, and activism in these organizations. With that data, I was able to draw out

and develop what Ryan and Bernard characterize as the repetitive themes in the data and the themes of what was missing from the data (2003, 92).

Before delineating the research questions, findings, and interpretations, I would like to situate my usage of autoethnography within Black feminist theorizing of this method. In wanting to do research “at home,” or of my own social location, I turned to how Black feminist anthropologists developed this method for creating knowledge even closer to approximating the complexity and intangibility of lived experience (McClaurin 2001). However, using this method as a White woman and staying true to how it was originally intended doesn’t come without challenges. In the following section, I explore the intentions of this method and my reconciliation of using it as a White woman.

1. Autoethnography

While there are many methods used by Black anthropologists to study racism and resistance, autoethnography was integral to the Black feminist anthropologists’ construction of their praxis, as demonstrated in Irma McClaurin’s (2001) edited volume. McClaurin theorized autoethnography as a praxis, or “a theoretical lens through which we can interpret how we do what we do... for a transformative ethnographic knowledge production,” (2001, 64). I interpret her description of autoethnographic praxis as how it brings together ethnographic practice and reflection so that they mutually-inform one another, producing a dynamic and powerful anthropological knowledge. McClaurin further examines the praxis of autoethnography as a form of cultural mediation. She explained how autoethnography engages in cultural mediation in two ways: “it represents the speaker/writer’s subjective discourse, but in the language of the colonizer,” (2001, 65); and it also represents experiences of a culture as they are mediated through the self.

This latter form of cultural mediation is the interplay between the personal and the social: “authors rely on their ‘native’ ethnographic knowledge to assemble a portrait that is a combination of personal memories (autobiographical) and general cultural descriptions (ethnography),” (2001, 66). McClaurin’s conceptualization of autoethnography highlights how it engages in multiple dialogical relationships: thought and practice, autobiography and ethnography, and studied groups and academics. An additional form of cultural mediation that autoethnography entails is described by Paula A. Ebron. Ebron’s work on performance of the Self and Other is informed by autoethnography. She says that this method:

“must track back and forth between a personal sense of the way things were, the memory of events, on the one hand, and on the other, the institutional markers, texts, and features of public culture that provide guideposts and social referents of that experience,” (2001, 212).

Ebron’s insight is that the autobiographical sense of a reality is made richer by taking into account its material counterpart. Now, I will examine how the authors in McClaurin’s book characterize autoethnography through emphasizing subjective experience, subjugated knowledges, and cultural mediation between the researcher, participants, and the university.

One of the first innovators of this method was Zora Neale Hurston (Bolles 2001). Bolles describes Hurston’s scholarship as integrating ethnography, the art of storytelling, and a vindicationist and gendered approach. She did ethnography of folktales both “at home” and in the Caribbean, collecting countless stories of people of the African Diaspora, “believing that the wisdom held by the common Black man and woman was valuable,” (2001, 39). The art of storytelling, however was not limited to her research participants. A distinctive feature of Hurston’s research included incorporating self and

memory into her ethnographic representation, creating “self-reflexive, community-masking, and genre-bending” qualities that are characteristic of autoethnography (Bolles 2001, 39).

Like Hurston, the authors in McClaurin’s (2001) volume either perceive themselves as “natives” or as studying “at home,” positionalities they contrast with the colonial history of anthropology and social sciences. They are cultural mediators with access to both academic (colonial) representations and the subjugated knowledges of people of the African Diaspora. Their political motivation for choosing this methodology was to bring more power to the subjugated knowledges. One example of this process of emphasizing the researcher’s subjective experience to engage in cultural mediation and activism was how Carolyn Martin Shaw describes her experience with subjugated knowledge and her later utilization of it in anthropological research:

“At some level, I was obsessed by what it means to be female and on another I did not take up the issue. There was a disjuncture between my knowledge as a woman and my learning to foreground that knowledge. This unbidden knowledge can be thought of as subjugated knowledge,” (2001, 117).

By foregrounding that subjugated knowledge of womanhood in the U.S. and abroad, she was able to identify racist and sexist ideologies and materialities that were formative of her embodied identity during her youth in the segregated South of the 1950s and extending into her adulthood.

Cheryl Rodriguez’s example of subjugated knowledges and autoethnography dealt more with the commonalities and differences between her own knowledge and those of the people she studies “at home.” Her research with Black women activists in Tampa, Florida causes her to notice the differences between her “homegirl” knowledge from her youth in that city, the activists’ knowledge about the history of African

American activism in the city, and her knowledge as an anthropologist. She argues that autoethnography is a tool for “bridging the gap” between the anthropologist and “the politics of home,” since both she and the Black women activists she studied engage in “theorizing about issues of identity, self-definition, power, difference, and privilege in Black women’s lives,” (2001, 249). Rodriguez’s profound insight was that the “politics of home” entail people’s everyday efforts to give more power and validity to their own subjugated knowledges, a political motivation that parallels the Black feminist anthropological goals of democratizing knowledge and power. The political salience of this sort of research is articulated by Hartsock:

“The critical steps are, first, using what we know about our lives as a basis for critique of the dominant culture and, second, creating alternatives... develop an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of a different world,” (1990, cited in McClaurin 2001, 56).

This political motivation (revisited) entails the democratization of voices with the power to constitute reality through the privileging of subjugated knowledges, and, in particular, subjugated knowledges about the dominant culture’s forms of oppression. For a method of achieving these goals, McClaurin, Rodriguez, and Shaw have demonstrated the capacity of autoethnography to privilege subjugated knowledges (of the researcher and the researched) and to develop an explicit knowledge of both the dominant culture’s structural and ideological oppressions, and the everyday agencies people develop to resist them. This mediation between the experiences, knowledges, and practices of “natives” and the cultural and structural forms of racism and sexism is a powerful methodology developed in the tradition of Black feminist anthropology.

These lessons prompt me to consider my capacity, as an autoethnographer studying the racial justice activism attempts of mostly White people, to privilege subjugated knowledges as well as to mediate an ethnographic understanding of the dominant culture through my lived experience. As a White woman and among White participants, my experience of racism is not one of subjugation, and my/our knowledge as a highly-educated city and organization are not subjugated either. My knowledge and experience of racism is one of living in and travelling through segregated spaces, of everyday privilege, of intergenerational dominance, of exposure to cultural racism, and, now, of the journey of participating in racial justice activism. Instead of privileging subjugated knowledge, I am able 1) to see what subjugated knowledges (in these contexts) that I do have personal access to become salient in this research and 2) to use autoethnography to track back and forth between the subjective and material experiences of these organizations. In working on this project, I resolved to use my embodied knowledge of racism in the research experiences to expose the material and ideological forms racism takes, even in attempting racial justice activism. Likewise, I decided to explore how knowledge and power were undemocratic in these experiences and to attempt, as an active participant, to promote their democratization and create more effective racial justice projects and practices that would address structural problems. This resolution, I felt, would allow me to stay as true to the political motivations of Black feminist anthropology as I was capable. It is with this resolution that I examine in the next chapter the failure of Coming Together to democratize whose voices constituted the group meetings, curriculum, and activist focus, as well as to prioritize the voices of

people and activists of color, resulting in the silencing of women of color in the groups and the history of people-of-color-led racial justice activism in general.

CHAPTER II

WHITENESS AND THE SILENCING OF PEOPLE OF COLOR

In this chapter, I examine the failure of Coming Together to foreground the experiences of people of color. While the organization is not a complete failure in that it does effectively elucidate the history and present of structural and cultural racism for some participants, it is not effective antiracism in that it doesn't fully interrupt racist power dynamics of interaction within the group, let alone within a broader community or society. I argue that the poor facilitation of public events along with the focus on White antiracism in the small groups' curriculum and dialogues works to silence and invisibilize people of color, to erase their experience in some instances, and to tokenize them in others. The two Coming Together study/reflection groups and the organization's public events all functioned to silence and invisibilize people of color in the room. Between the White-centric curriculum and the discussions that flowed from the majority-White groups, people of color felt erased, unable to speak up, and fed up. Specifically, the public events were facilitated in a way that allowed the power dynamics of racism to shape their content and structure, a pattern that went unaddressed. For the small groups, the curriculum's most significant focus was the feelings of White people, and the discussions tended to focus on White antiracism. When White people were not the focus of the meetings, people of color were called to speak in tokenizing ways, and their experiences were made into spectacles for the consumption of White people. Ultimately, the White-centric curriculum and the free reign given to White people for analyzing and opinionating about racism and antiracism silenced the voices of people of color in the struggle against racism and opened up space within that struggle for White people to

occupy space, time, and energy in ways that did not promote racial justice. In the following chapter, I explore how this dynamic was also harmful to myself as a White participant, along with how Coming Together failed to mobilize potential and willing activists.

A. Public Events

One public event in particular, “Planning Local Action Steps Against Racism,” demonstrates how Coming Together functioned to silence people of color. The event was originally to be hosted in late October, 2015, by three organizations: Coming Together, the NAACP Amherst Area Branch, and Amherst Racial Equity/Undoing Racism Organizing Collective (affiliated with the national People’s Institute). In the few days leading up to the event, it was also co-sponsored by Citizens for Racial Amity Now Amherst branch (affiliated with the Baha’i faith) and the ACLU of Massachusetts. The support for this event from multiple multiracial organizations in the Valley caused the event to be well-attended by a multiracial audience, and it also meant that more people of color had leadership roles than the typical Coming Together event. This public event, it turns out, would be a disastrous occasion.

I arrived at the conference room in the basement of the Jones Library, and it was buzzing with a frazzled set-up process. People were asking about the structure of the night, setting up food, looking for direction from the organizer, Ray. He was visibly flustered, not knowing how the chairs should be set up. I was given the job of setting up the calendar sheets. As attendees arrived, I recognized many people from other Coming Together events and the two small groups, but I didn’t recognize the majority of people, which totaled around 50-60. As people began taking seats, it already felt weird. A lot of White people sat in the now formally set up rows of chairs that face the front of the room, while the people of color sat in kind of messily-oriented chairs at the back of the room. The two lead organizers of the event, Ray and Ruby (both White and in their 70s), stood at the front, while the other leaders (multiracial) sat along the right side of the room in chairs facing the group. The introduction to the meeting began: three organization

leaders explained who they are and how they are eager to initiate activist working groups that will address problems of racism in Amherst.

After this introduction, Ray begins the facilitation of the meeting with a listening exchange, which is used in every Coming Together small group meeting and public event. He says that we'll partner with someone we don't know, and then each person will get three minutes to respond to the prompt. Ray explains that the important part of the exchange is that the other person cannot respond while the other is talking. It is three minutes of listening without nodding or agreeing or interrupting, because it is really important to feel listened to, and without this rule, "then we get interrupted and nobody likes that." He tells us the prompt: to think about how our race or racial group has been supported in our community, how it hasn't been supported, and what we would like to see change in regards to support for different racial groups. When Ray starts the timer, I turn to the elderly White man on my right, and we agree to be partners. Rather than answering the prompt, both Stew and I introduce ourselves and talk a bit about our life stories via race and racism.

When the timer goes off, the group is asked to share our responses to "how our racial group is supported in our community."

We are all quiet. I think about how the majority of the room is White, and how it'd be awkward to say, "Well, my group of White people is supported through this and that example." We all know that! We wouldn't be here if we didn't know that. I feel a little annoyed that Ray and Ruby are facilitating and that they aren't asking the right questions, or that they aren't framing them very well. It feels false, or that they are leading us without telling us where we're going, like a trick. When nobody answers, Ray and Ruby call up, or actually kind of pull up this woman of color up to facilitate with them, and she looks completely uncomfortable. It almost looks like Ruby was keeping her from running away, the way she was gripping her arm.

The first two people to speak are elderly White men, and they discuss their experiences in desegregated infantries and how wonderful that experience was. Ray and Ruby don't respond to their comments, and Ruby directs us to think more about the community that we're in now. The third person to speak is another older White man, who talks about how White people are unsupported in the community, because they aren't integrated with people of color and therefore miss out on the experience of rich diversity. The woman of color facilitator sits back down.

The next three people to speak are all women of color. Two of them talk about how they feel unsupported in the Amherst schools they work in, and another

discusses how she's sick of these conversations, how she craves getting down to the heart of the matter of what is causing racism across the world and really talking about the root causes and how to solve those.

Then more White people start to chime in, asking how many teachers there are in the schools are White or Black or Latina or what. One Black woman administrator of the schools and member of a Coming Together small group, Margaret, cites a percentage, and a person of color asks if that is "people pushing brooms or people teaching" in an annoyed tone. People begin to argue, and then one person says, "There are no Black people here—Well there aren't very many people of color here!" I hear a sheet of calendar paper loudly fall off the wall to the ground. Then, another person, when talking about the schools, claims, "There are not people of color in the schools!" Flabbergasted that this person would erase the people in the room, I count that there were at least 4 women of color in the room who work with the schools. Ray breaks in and says, "I think we need to pause and acknowledge that we have two of the school district's administrators here tonight who are women of color, and thank them for coming!" Another person heatedly asks how many students and teachers were minorities in the schools.

At this point, I make eye contact with one of my best friends from a Coming Together small group, Melanie (a mixed-race woman, African American and White). She shakes her head and mouths "not good."

The facilitators move us on to the core of the meeting, which consists of us looking at a sheet of possible action steps and writing down which ones we'd be interested in attending or leading. Some people suggested alternative action steps, which are written down on a flip. Then someone suggests that we get together into small groups of people interested in the same things to talk and exchange contact information. This began the arduous task of Ray calling out each possible action step, and people raising their hand if they are interested. I looked back, two of the women of color who worked in the schools had left, along with a number of the people of color. Melanie stands by the door, looking completely freaked out and like she was ready to run for it. It takes about 35 minutes to get through the list, and even then the steps that were suggested by the participants are excluded. Once completed, about 20 people gather in small groups with the people who shared similar interests and they exchange information for five minutes. People collectively stack the chairs and say goodbye. After this meeting, however, none of these groups meet again.

This was a unique event for Coming Together. Conflicts bubbled to the surface and became shouting matches, there was no sense of people sharing similar values or

understandings of racism in Amherst (let alone a sense of being able to take action steps together), and people left feeling either unsettled or horrified. Typical Coming Together events are relatively calm, people feel a lot of unity in their rage against racism, and they leave feeling gratified. What caused this difference? To be frank, it was that people of color showed up to the meeting. Typical Coming Together events are attended by an almost entirely White audience, with the possibility of one or two people of color attending. The facilitators were not prepared to run a conversation that took into account the diversity of perspectives and experiences of racism in the room. Their facilitation addressed the whole audience in the same way, which opened up space for the societal power relations of silencing and erasing people of color—and their experiences—to play out on a micro-scale. Here is a short list of how the facilitation paved the way for the event to enact racism:

- The room was set up for a lecture format, in which two White people stood at the front, White people had chairs set up for the event, and people of color sat at the back of the room in extra chairs.
- During the listening exchange and discussion portions of the meeting, people were left to speak freely and with no consideration for who should be talking and what could be said:
 - Old White men spoke first, steering the conversation to a topic they felt comfortable with, one that portrayed them positively. Their responses were not addressed.
 - Women of color who spoke were attacked by White people and other people of color who are critical of their work in the schools.
 - White people began shouting microaggression after microaggression, erasing and silencing the people of color in the room, their experiences, as well as other people of color who work in the schools.
- To address the problem of facilitation, a person of color was desperately and tokenizingly pulled to the front of the room to join facilitating, something with which she was apparently very uncomfortable.

- White leaders delivered the sheet of possible local action steps towards racial justice to the multiracial group, disregarding the knowledge of the people in the room.
- About a third of the people of color left the meeting before we even got to talking about action steps. Their disapproval and/or discomfort went unacknowledged.

However, the fact that this event was attended by many people of color and that conflict bubbled up did not make this event altogether different from other events in terms of their effects. At the other public events, people of color are still silenced. In fact, I would argue that other public events are more silencing of people of color, since the majority-White attendees are able to walk away feeling comfortable and content with their experience. Field notes from one event, the viewing and discussion of *Fruitvale Station*, demonstrates their usual structure and content:

As people enter the basement conference room of the Jones Library, some of the elderly White “regulars” introduce the friends they brought, who are also elderly and White, to Ray. Ray instructs the few other people to set the chairs up in two columns with 4 chairs in each row. After this, I am asked to pass out fliers that invite people to purchase a Black Lives Marker yard sign. It has common questions about why “Black Lives Marker” and answers that Ray spent all day working on. I compliment them, and he explains that some people might be nervous to get those questions from neighbors and that this would prepare them, or that they might wonder about the questions themselves. I busy myself talking to people I recognize from events last winter, informing them of the small group that I am trying to form. As people finish taking seats, I note that most of the attendees are White, aside from one Asian-looking woman. At the start of the event, Ray asks me to introduce the small group and invite people to sign up.

I walk to the front of the room, in front of the projector’s screen, and briefly introduce myself and explain how I started getting involved with Coming Together a year ago by participating in a pilot small group, called a study/reflection group. I list a few of the curriculum topics, such as structural forms of racism, internalized oppression, and implicit bias. I say that we did a lot of relationship building, a lot of talking about our own experiences, and a lot of trying to do anti-racist work and talking through it with the group. I explain how the first group is multiracial, but that this one might not necessarily be so. Finally, I pass around a sign-up sheet if people would like to be invited to an

informational meeting to discuss the small group more and potentially join. Later, I looked at the sheet, and 10 people had signed up out of the 16 in attendance.

Ray then introduces the film as a part of the Coming Together community event series, which started last year. He says the film is about a real-life story of police violence in California a few years ago. One of the elderly women asks about the extent of violence in the film and if she should prepare herself to watch it. Ray says that it has been a few years since he saw the film, so he doesn't remember exactly, but that he thinks the violence is limited to the short bit of police brutality, but that it is pretty extreme violence then. Ray then started the film, Fruitvale Station.

It was about a young Black man who was struggling to find economic security without selling drugs, for the sake of his Latina girlfriend and their young child. The majority of the movie was about his daily struggle and all of the love and happiness in his life, and it really gave me a feeling of what a beautiful person he was and how he felt so tense most of the time when he was alone. Then, during New Year's Eve, a man who he had previously had issues with in jail started a fight with him on the subway, and the cops came and only pulled out the Black men (without knowing who was fighting), which were him and his friends. He was trying to stay calm and to calm his friends down, as they all felt it was unjust that the cops were keeping them outside of the train. He kept saying "we good," and motioning his hands to calm his friends and keep them seated. But the cops were rude and inciting their anger until the cops eventually had the Black men pinned down on the ground. An inexperienced White cop shot him in the back on accident, and the movie cut to the scene of his girlfriend trying to get back into the train station, screaming. He died in the hospital with all of his friends and family there. I cried from the moment he was shot until the end. I couldn't stop. It was horrifying and sad.

Ray stands up in front of the room and says very slowly and softly, "Well, now that we have all watched this story, how about we take a few minutes to talk with someone near you about what you thought of the film. Each person can take about 3 minutes, and I will let you know when to switch."

The woman in front of me turns around and we both nodded to each other as I say, "Want to be partners?" She asks if I would like to talk first, so I say just how emotionally overwhelming, horrifying, and heartbreaking the film was. I don't want to say too much of my thoughts, which were a bit more analytical than I had let on, because I don't want to preclude what she would say. She then says that she agreed, but that if she "must say," she thinks that the young Black men's resistant or defiant behavior was asking to be arrested and inciting the police's brutality, and that the gunshot was an honest mistake, which you could tell from

the look of fear on that cop's face. I counter her argument by admitting that I felt that during the film too, but that I reminded myself that the fact that they were even being held in custody was an unjust act of racism, and that they were angry about it, and that the cops were inciting their anger as well. She nods and says, "yeahhh," in a way that communicates to me that she understood that too, but that it was less prevalent than the Black men's disobedience. She says something along the lines of, "if they just would have been more obedient, I think this could have been avoided." I bring up how I think the police's profiling of the Black men was uncalled for and could have prevented the situation, and that the White shooter officer shouldn't have been a police officer in those situations with insufficient training. She nods and says yeah. Uncomfortable with our disagreement and her perspective, I change the topic to focus on how my heart just broke for that man, and how I really appreciate how the film portrayed him and his life.

Ray then asks the group to share, "Well, what did you think?" My partner answers, saying that we both talked about how the men's disobedient behavior and the fear of the White police officer left us feeling conflicted. I'm attempting to communicate with my face that I did not say that. Other people in the room speak up to talk about the injustice of the profiling and the police's uncalled for taunting. They move the conversation in a way that moved the blame from the Black men to the White officers.

Another person talks about how they liked how the film showed the day-to-day life of the Black man. They say they could feel the tension he had inside him whenever he wasn't with his family, and they interpreted it as a result of living in a racist society and facing racism every day, as well as being in a tough position financially. I nodded in agreement. That person adds that it looked like that tension left, and he was happiest, whenever he was with his family. I continue to nod, excitedly.

The conversation moves into the idea that police need antiracism training, and someone asks if that is happening now. Ray answers, saying that some police departments have watched this movie and are making efforts to do anti-racism training, but that he isn't as up-to-date on those developments as he'd like to be.

Ray, who had been standing in the front of the room this whole discussion, then talks about how it looked like the senior police officer who was also White was being so rude to the Black men and saying derogatory things, and then after the gunshot that he looked like he had so much remorse and asked his fellow cop, "what happened?" And he looked like he realized the impact of his actions and felt sorry. At recalling this, Ray starts crying a little bit, his eyes well up and his voice and body quiver, and a couple tears start, which he wipes away. He sobs. I

watch him with slight surprise that he would find that part of the story the most moving, and I wonder if it could have to do with his own experience as a White man, the way he knows a lot of people in the room, the way he likes to facilitate and model emotional healing, or just his journey in antiracism and watching people grow and experience enlightenment to their own racism.

Shortly after that, Ray says that we had to leave the room so that the library could close. We all stack chairs together, put them back in the closets, and more people sign the study/reflection group sign-up sheet. As we left, Ray and I hugged goodbye.

This was a very typical public event for Coming Together, as they usually consist of 1) watching a documentary about systemic racism or a movie in which racism is heavily integral to the plot line, 2) a listening exchange, and 3) a group dialogue about the film and the problem of racism. Almost always, it ends up being White people either reciting the extent and severity of racism and wondering aloud what they can do (or what is being done) to end it, or White people attempting to educate each other about the extent and severity of racism when someone makes a comment that blames people of color for the discrimination they experience. Often, people become very emotional when they watch the films or participate in discussion. Then, everyone leaves, feeling content that they have participated in racial justice and sometimes motivated to take additional steps, such as attending the informational meeting about the small group.

In hindsight, this event features a jarring lack of voices of people of color responding to the film, interpreting it, analyzing racism, or discussing racial justice work, and, in their place, a proliferation of White voices analyzing the racism, the film, and racial justice work. As such, I would argue that this event, while significantly smoother, is as silencing of people of color as the “Planning Local Action Steps” meeting, if not more. Furthermore, the fact that White people could leave these sorts of events feeling content and comfortable, despite the absence of people who are most hurt by racism,

underlines just how complicit these events are with their unacknowledged racial biases. When confronted with actually listening to a person of color talk about racism and racial justice work, such as in the “Action Steps” event, White attendees could clearly not hear them, see them, or recognize the extent of the problem of racism in the room enough to address it. The fact that these people—including me, at the time—felt like this was racial justice work is utterly silencing of the people of color who do that work. This is one example of how, in Coming Together, free reign is given to White people for analyzing and opinionating about racism and antiracism, a process that silences the voices of people of color in the struggle against racism and opens up space within that struggle for White people to occupy space, time, and energy and, ultimately, to impede in that liberation.

B. Small Groups

The two small groups of Coming Together have different dynamics from the public events, because the same people meet semi-regularly, have more opportunities to share their own experiences with and struggles against race and racism, and have to work through conflicts with each other. Still, within each group, one woman of color ended up experiencing marginalization in the forms of erasure and silencing. I argue that, although it was only one person in each case, the curriculum and structure of the Coming Together small groups function to erase and silence the people of color in the groups. It is through the White racial majority in the groups, the curricular focus on Whiteness, the discussion, and facilitation of the groups that both people of color who are participants, as well as the racial justice work of people of color in general, get erased and silenced.

1. Curriculum

The curriculum was written by like a White man, it was very like White-centric and White perspective, and like White people being able to talk about White people things. – Melanie

The curriculum of the Coming Together small groups has three main focuses: the feelings of people who experience racism (as perpetrators or targets), the history of structural racism that created the inequalities of today, and developing a practice of personal reflection and talking about racism that can heal the traumas of racism. These focuses are distributed across a curriculum of 6 meetings, and the general procession of the topics is: a definition of racism and introduction to personal reflection; addressing myths about racism; the history and present of systemic racism; feelings and hurts surrounding racism; microaggressions; and being an ally.

The format of each meeting advances the focus on personal reflection, healing, and feelings, but they are also educative. Each meeting begins with a review of the homework through a go-around, in which each participant describes how their attempt to do the homework went. The homework assignments include variations on speaking to someone who has the same or a different “race” than you about racism. If unable to do the homework, a participant can talk about how they’ve been engaging in, or merely thinking about, antiracism lately. Then, the facilitator briefly introduces the relevance of the readings for that week. After this, the group breaks apart into one-on-one “listening exchanges,” which consist of each person having three minutes to respond, uninterrupted, to a prompt. Once the group reconvenes, each person can share what they spoke about and/or collectively reflect on their experiences, feelings, and learning. This collective reflection can merge into a discussion, which might be focused on the readings, current events, personal struggles with antiracism, or analysis of racism and antiracism. Usually,

after the group discussion, there is another “listening exchange” with a different prompt. To end the meeting, the facilitator reveals a main point for that week’s meeting, shares a “key fact” about racism, tells the group a short biography about an antiracist activist of the past, and assigns the homework for the next meeting.

In the following analysis, I will present a typology of the readings, facts, and listening exchange prompts. I will demonstrate how, while the curriculum is geared towards any person who has little understanding of racism, its unintended imagined audience is, specifically, White people.

The curriculum consists of 11 readings on race and racism. Of the 11 readings, two were directed specifically towards White people, and the nine other readings had a general audience. In my reading of the curriculum, I identified 75 different arguments. Table 2, below, breaks down the focuses of these arguments into five categories: structural racism (historical and present); cultural racism (historical and present); feelings produced by racism (for people of color and White people); taking action; and interpersonal racism..

Table 2: Points Made in the Coming Together Curriculum Readings

Structural	Cultural	Feelings	Action	Interpersonal
17 – (8 historical & 9 present day)	12 – (2 historical & 8 present day)	19 – (7 People of Color and 12 White)	1 reading – 20 Steps for White People	1 reading – 7 types of Microaggressions

I found that, within these readings, the main focus was the feelings produced by racism, with the most attention being paid to the feelings of White people (12 of 19 arguments). This focus is justified explicitly on the Coming Together website: “The position of supremacy is inherently dehumanizing to individuals in the dominant group,

in addition to the terrible costs to the subordinated group. Our full humanity can only be realized in full community with other human beings - in situations of reciprocity, equity, fairness, and mutuality.” The focus on feelings was brought out more through some of the listening exchange prompts, which included: feelings about talking about race, storytelling about one’s history with race, and memories of cross-racial relations or racism. One listening exchange prompt was directed specifically at the feelings of White people: what are your feelings regarding being in the “dominant role?” With both the focus in the readings and the listening exchange prompts, the primary focus of the curriculum was the feelings of White people in regards to experiences of racism.

The second largest category of arguments in the readings regarded structural racism. The curriculum’s attention to structural racism was broad, drawing connections between racism and colonization, capitalism, climate change, and—regarding the most frequent focus on structural racism in the present day—the criminal justice system. This focus on the criminal justice system was buttressed by one of the “key facts” in the curriculum, which focused on the War Against Drugs: “Despite equal rates drug use across ‘races’, Blacks are incarcerated at 10 times the rate of Whites, and Latinos are incarcerated at almost as great of levels.” The next most common forms of structural violence discussed were 1) climate change and its disproportionate effects on people of color and 2) the legacies of wealth for White people and entrenched poverty for Black people created by the New Deal and housing policies. Of the facts presented at each meeting, two dealt with the unequal legacies of wealth: “From 1934 to 1962, the Federal Government backed \$120 billion in home loans, of which more than 98% went to Whites;” and, “The average White family wealth is 20x that of the average Black family

wealth (Pew Trust Report).” The focus on structural racism, then, attempted to show the history of structural racism and its complexities today.

Points made regarding cultural racism were mostly explanations of how cultural racism began, examples of thoughts people may have, and examples of how cultural racism infuses the media. There was a large emphasis on how cultural racism is “like smog in the air” that all of us breathe, making it so that even people of color can hold anti-Black prejudices. This point was supported by one of the facts from the meeting, which reported the findings of Harvard’s Implicit Associations Test—which has found that 70% of U.S. people, including people of color, have an implicit bias in favor of White people. Another fact dealt with a connection between cultural and structural racism: “Whites with criminal records get more job callbacks than Blacks without criminal records.”

The only reading that discussed doing racial justice work was geared towards White people. It focused on 1) the feelings of White people, 2) creating a support system to maintain antiracist work, and 3) how to step out of one’s comfort zone in order to build cross-racial relationships. Finally, there was one reading that addressed interpersonal racism through categorizing types of racist microaggressions.

Given the main ideas and intended audiences of these readings, the main focus of the curriculum was White people—their feelings about racism, their learning about structural and cultural racism and racist microaggressions, and their ability to participate in racial justice work. While the portions of the curriculum about the feelings of people of color and structural and cultural racism could be useful for participants of color, the curriculum appears to have been constructed without regard for the potential learning

goals, prior knowledge, or responses (or lack thereof) to listening exchange prompts that a potential participant of color may have. Instead, the potential learning and prior knowledge of prospective White participants was the basis for forming the curriculum, and it was their learning and feelings that were prioritized for the goals of the curriculum.

As the only person of color who was committed to showing up to almost every single meeting of the first small group, Melanie was very frustrated with the curriculum. She recognized that the curriculum and discussion was not meant to support her or her growth:

The curriculum? Um, yeah I didn't really so much get a whole bunch out of that. It was like very clear that the curriculum was like for White people. Like, you don't need to define "microaggression" for me! So like I very much knew that like it was really for White people to get it [i.e. racism], but I was there so that we could say like "we're not just meeting with White people," which I think is probably a totally New England liberal thing, probably. There were a lot of times that I felt like, and even voiced once, "Y'all probably just should have done like a White person curriculum group. Like, that's okay. Like, it's okay! What do you want me to tell you about how to be a White antiracist? What the fuck do I know about that? Nothing! But like really?!"

Similarly, Natalya felt that the curriculum erased her experience. Natalya was the only person of color in the second Coming Together small group, which began in October 2015. An immigrant from provincial Russia, where she was an ethnic minority, Natalya came with her son to Pioneer Valley in order to attend graduate school. Personally, she recognizes that she is often categorized as some sort of Asian in the U.S., but feels like that categorization isn't representative of her experiences. She was frustrated with how the Coming Together curriculum invisibilized her racialization and migration experiences:

Some of the readings were, you know, not quite, not quite tailored to these kind of groups. Because I was, you know, especially the readings from my last couple of

readings were, you know, assuming that we're addressing to the audience that is White. And it was like why? And it was only talking about the relationship between or the issues from the perspective of the White people and talking only about the issues of, you know, African American people. So there was no place for me. I felt like I'm invisible there. No, I'm not White, and I'm not African American. So that was kind of like "Ok, I'm assuming I'm White, and I'm going to read, continue reading this from the perspective of a non-African American person, but then it still doesn't match what I am, so that was kind of frustrating that the readings were not, you know, quite tailored. They were not addressing the diversity of students.

So while Melanie points out that the curriculum was geared towards educating White people, or people who wouldn't know what a microaggression is from their own experience, Natalya also argues that the curriculum only regarded White and Black people in the U.S., which also erases her experience as someone who doesn't fit neatly into the categories of U.S. racialization, let alone a Black-White binary. Not only was the curriculum constructed with an imagined White audience, it cut off opportunities to speak for the people of color in the groups who already had critical self-knowledge about how racism impacts their lives.

Two examples add complexity to how I have described the curriculum as being intended, however unintentionally, for White people. Kayla, a woman who identifies as both White and Native American who participated in the first small group, expressed appreciation for the curriculum. By having grown up culturally White and White-passing, Kayla sought out the group in order to learn more about racism and microaggressions, since she had little-to-no knowledge about it before. Likewise, Margaret appreciated how the curriculum denaturalized some of the microaggressions and violences she had come to uncritically expect as an African American woman. These experiences suggest that the curriculum, while based on the needs of White people, could also be suitable for people of color who are White passing, are unfamiliar with the problem racism, and/or don't

realize the extent to which racism how it impacts their day-to-day lives. Thus, the curriculum assumes that people of color would have no prior learning about historical and systemic racism, about how racism impacts their interactions with White people, or about racial justice activism, and, as I show in the next section, it precludes them from changing the focus of the group to draw on that knowledge.

2. Discussion: White Antiracism

While the curriculum was suitable towards people with little knowledge of racism, regardless of race, the discussions in the small groups were geared towards White people. Due to the free-for-all facilitation and the fact that the groups were majority White, the groups' conversations centered on the experiences/feelings of White people, White peoples' analyses of racism, and how to practice antiracism as a White person. This contributed to the silencing of the people of color in the groups who would have more knowledge to contribute about racism based on their critical consciousness, as well as the erasure of racial justice activism of people of color.

a. Experiences and Feelings of White People

While all people in the groups were asked to focus on their feelings in the listening exchange prompts and group discussions, White participants talked about their feelings, and demonstrated them, most readily. In doing so, they shaped conversation and the focus of the groups. Some of the emotions they expressed included rage and urgency against racism, nervousness to do antiracism, and guilt for the racism they have practiced. In an ethics of care and love for people of color in general, they expressed anger at racism and the urgency of racial justice work. In doing so, they focused on their own anger and sadness in relation to the violence experienced by people of color. This emotion, and the

practice of displaying it with urgent and impassioned speaking, was exemplified in the public event showing of *Fruitvale Station*, and another example from an interview with Sheila demonstrates it:

I have to see some action, especially since, with this thing called racism, we're so behind. People say "oh, we— we are doing better." No, we're NOT doing better, we're really behind! And you know we know so much, and so little is happening, kids keep getting shot in the back. And so you know I'm impatient and I think that there are people, especially a lot of young people of color, who are very impatient, because they see their lives slipping away. And so as much as I understand the sort of, you know, "it takes time, it takes time." Well, I've been doing this for 30 years, and so I'm at the point now where I want things to change. And so, I want action.

This disavowal for the violences experienced by people of color, and the urgency and immediacy of the need for resisting racism, are reiterated at all Coming Together public events as well as at most small group meetings.

While White people vocalized the urgency of the situation, they also expressed their uncertainty or insecurity in navigating racism and antiracism, which caused them to stumble in their navigation of antiracism. This uncertainty was expressed in nervousness and guilt. One White person, April, who left the group after her first meeting, describes a moment when she experienced nervousness:

Yeah, like just the other day I was in Whole Foods at the meat counter, and I was waiting there, and then all of the sudden this man—and he was a Black man—walks up, (April snaps her finger), and gets the attention of the worker and asks for something! And I didn't say anything, because I thought it might just be another microaggression. But if he weren't Black, I would have definitely said something! I probably would have said, like 'Excuse me. I was waiting here, and I think I'm next in line!' But I didn't because I thought maybe it would be a microaggression, and I felt so conflicted over that later.

As April explains, she became insecure about how to treat a Black man in a situation she usually would have interrupted, because she was nervous to enact a microaggression.

This sentiment was very common among White participants. Another emotion that White people talked about was guilt. An excerpt from my notes on my own contribution to this sort of feelings-talk demonstrates how a White person can express guilt:

I sat on a large pillow on the living room floor, and I disclosed how I had struggled all year to understand a peer when she speaks. I explained that she has an accent, but that usually accents are no problem for me. Then I explained that she is Black, and I began to cry. I said that I had read the sociolinguistics literature on accents: you hear them when you expect to hear them, and you hear them stronger the darker the person is. I said that I knew that my inability to hear her was probably rooted in racism, and I really started to cry. The facilitator left the couch and sat next to me, put his hand over mine, and made some noises like, “oh yeah, yeah, mmhmm.” He was smiling and he looked strangely excited. I explained that this peer has wonderful ideas and ways of communicating, but that I was pretty resistant to it at first. But now that I know her better, I appreciate her perspective and really want to be friends. I cried a few seconds more, and began to slowly stop. He patted my hand, “oh yeah.. yeah.,” and still looked abnormally excited.

This performance of emotional guilt was also rooted in my insecurity about how I enact microaggressions. In the Coming Together meetings (small group and public events), when someone would display these emotions of anger and guilt or nervousness, they would sometimes be repeated in different ways, with different contexts, by different White people, spiraling into a confession of White emotions. This discussion focus was encouraged in Coming Together, as the influence of Re-Evaluation Counseling on the organization made the processing of emotions and emotional displays a priority.

b. Thoughts of White People – How to Do Antiracism

However, the focus on the emotions of White people would come under scrutiny by people familiar with the university-influenced intellectualism of the Valley. This intellectual and critical practice of scrutiny was not only critique for the purpose of inspiring more efficacious activism, but was more-so shaped by a capitalist-influenced

culture of elitism. In the context of the progressive Valley during a moment of national attention to racism, elitism worked into the White antiracism of Coming Together (as well as into the GCO community, as examined in Chapter Four). Participants attempted to be *the* White person who practices antiracism most efficaciously and most effectively. While maintaining a commitment to affecting racism is certainly not a bad thing, the elitism impacted these commitments by causing White people to regularly try to develop an informal typology of acceptable and unacceptable practices and emotions for White people, which took a lot of time and energy in the group meetings. Thus, we developed an intolerance for the guilt of White people, we enumerated on how to be a bad White ally, and we collectively described best practices for antiracism as a White person. For example, in one introductory meeting to the small groups, Jamie and I constructed an intolerance for White guilt in the group:

Jamie said, “Yeah, and I am kind of over the whole White persons’ guilt thing, I’m kind of anti-guilt, because I don’t want to hear how upset White people are that they are privileged. I was going to those race and class meetings, and that’s what it was like, and I just had to stop going.” I responded to him, “Yeah, I also find White guilt to be completely unproductive, like it is natural to feel a bit of guilt when you first realize everything about structural racism and privilege, but it’s not good to dwell in, it’s better to think of how you can change things.”

Along with this intolerance, the first small group was very preoccupied with delineating the ways in which to be a bad White ally. Bad White people practices included: going to antiracism events or meetings in order to feel good about oneself without actually ever challenging racism; ignorantly enacting microaggressions; talking too much about White guilt; and judging the behavior of people of color.

Along with this identification of unacceptable practices, we also spent a great deal of time and energy describing the practices of good White allies. In every single small

group meeting, we discussed one or more of these practices, sometimes at length. We included: being supportive of your friends of color; knowing about and avoiding potential microaggressions; reflecting on racialized power dynamics in our experiences; interrupting oppressive racialized power dynamics; and, finally, talking with other White people about racism in order to sway them in favor of racial justice. These practices were all identified through many hours of talk in the group, in which group members with less experience in antiracism would express their nervousness about one of the practices, and members with more experience in antiracism would explain their practices with many very detailed examples, giving them an opportunity to increase their standing in the White ally hierarchy. Obviously, these conversations were dominated by the White people in the group.

In my own experience, the most salient practice that was discussed was talking with other White people about racism, in order to convince them 1) that racism is a real problem that exists today and 2) to resist it like we were in Coming Together. In Coming Together, we sat and deliberated how best to convince our White peers: how to “call them in” instead of “call them out” so that they would be more prone to this evangelization; how to claim the moral high ground; how to balance the use of facts with the use of emotional appeal; how to corner them into admitting that their perspective is racist; how to draw the line on which White people we should be focusing on or not; and the list goes on. The hours that we spent talking about our attempts—which were prompted by the Coming Together curriculum’s homework assignments, mind you—led me to focus more and more on this form of ally-ship until that was my main practice in the fight for racial justice. It became an all-consuming practice.

Since I joined Coming Together in November 2014, I began sharing things on Facebook about race and racism in the U.S. I felt like it was my duty to share these perspectives in order to give people in my social circles back home in rural Michigan exposure to them. In a quick quantitative analysis of my Facebook feed in April, 2016, I had personally posted 13 updates regarding racism—mostly links to articles with little descriptions about why the problem of racism is urgent. That is an average of about one post every month and a half. However, that does not cover the extent of this social media activity:

Marvin and I sat in our tiny attic apartment, refreshing our Facebook pages repeatedly. We've been doing this for the past hour, furiously responding to comments both from relatives and distant acquaintances regarding the Darren Wilson trial. People from back home were sharing things left and right, about how the trial itself was pointless, either because the outcome—no indictment—shouldn't have even been contested, or, that justice was served with the bullets. Marvin and I read our comments and responses to each other, carefully word-smithing them to be just “calling-in” enough while still claiming the moral high ground. We were aiming to transform their hearts and minds, to reason with them with various political, moral, and social arguments. It lasted for a few hours. It was a horrible experience. We were almost brought to tears a couple times. It felt like I was isolating myself even more from my family and friends back home. We were exhausted for two days, because it was so socially and emotionally taxing. But it felt like a righteous service—we were advancing the fight against racism by attempting to bring everyone along in support of it. We were at the frontlines of rural White racism. After that first night, whenever we would challenge someone's Facebook post or comment, we would agree to wait until an opportune time and we'd set limits on how long we'd participate. We did that sort of Facebook antiracism evangelization for a bit less than a year, a time when I started to question the effectiveness and goals of that politics.

Our emotional and mental determination, effort, and exhaustion from this practice was extraordinary. It consumed our whole practice of antiracism for months, and occasionally it flares back up when close family members post something online related to the presidential race. We would come back to small group meetings and explain what

happened, as would other White participants in both small groups. Then, we would troubleshoot how best to address the racist narratives in our White social circles.

Like the talk about White emotions, our stories and problem-solving of these attempts at antiracism evangelization would build off one another's until it spiraled into hours of conversation about the how-to of talking to White people. As Vivian recounts:

I don't think the group would have to be sort of about Whiteness and dealing with it, but it is. The curriculum is, and the group that we happened to have—like there was only one person of color interested—it's more been a group about that question. But I think that that's valuable. And I think that some of the thinking and processing around it isn't like something that you should be doing with people of color, but something that White people should be doing with other White people. So I think that that's been valuable for me to do for myself, but also as a way to think about how I'm talking with other White people about these issues, because I do think that that's been a big change: about how much I talk about these issues with other people who maybe aren't thinking about them as much as I am. And so having other people in a group, even just like you know, a couple hours, you know it's not like a huge time commitment, but it, I think it has an effect to have the time commitment. In terms of like keeping it in my mind, and then keeping it in my other conversations.

While Vivian found this elaboration on how to talk to White people useful and deemed it a more positive practice of antiracism than none at all, she also describes how we engaged in it without regard for the experiences of the one person of color in the group. We never asked if she engages in these social media or in-person conversations-for-conversion, nor why she chooses to do so or not. Yet, we filled the space of conversation in these meetings with our own trials and tribulations about it.

One of the stumbling blocks we fell upon in our proliferation of antiracism was the issue of trusting the perspectives of people of color. Often in these conversations, our interlocutors would not accept the testimonies or perspectives of people of color about racism, saying that they were using race a crutch (i.e. “the race card”) in order to either

not take responsibility for their own actions (e.g. not being respectful to police officers), the actions of their racial population (e.g. “Black-on-Black crime” or looting surrounding peaceful protests), or their duties as productive members of society (i.e. affirmative action or welfare as an undue and unearned benefits people of color would use “the race card” to attain). In all of these ways, our White interlocutors evaded trusting people of color and denied the reality of racism.

In order to address this problem, the White people in Coming Together public events and in the small groups developed a practice of avoiding having an opinion on certain topics. This nonjudgment was one of the practices for being a good White ally that we developed in conversation, but that was more often practiced when attempting to convince each other not to blame people of color for the violence they experience. The most common rhetorical appeal centered on the idea that “it is not the place of White people to have an opinion.” We were trying to communicate that since we haven’t experienced racism, we cannot judge the positionalities of people of color or their responses to their experiences. Most commonly, this strategy was employed with the responses of people of color to police agitation, whether it be direct violence with a police officer, resisting arrest, looting, etc. This nonjudgement occurred at the public event of Fruitvale Station, as described earlier, and it also occurred in the second small group, when one of the members who wasn’t as susceptible to the White antiracism elitism challenged this strategy:

Two of the prominent White antiracist participants were discussing how they have no right to judge the behaviors of people of color in relation to cops, especially Black people, since they can’t imagine being so heavily policed. When the 80-year-old White woman of the group, M, spoke up, she said that she thought that that was a silly idea, “Why shouldn’t I have an opinion? ... HA!” She laughed a

laugh that came from her belly. Nobody said anything. I made a sound that seemed like the start to a nervous laugh.

As Mable points out, what this strategy requires is a blind trust of and deference to people of color in regards to knowledge of their experiences, particularly those with police. Ultimately, the allies' aversion to opinionating on the qualities of racism and racial justice work was limited to situations in which people of color acted in morally questionable ways, according to the perspective of the White participants. Aside from those points of discomfort, the White participants felt comfortable occupying most, if not all, of the time and mental space in our conversations, furthering the focus of the small groups on both White peoples' emotions and their deliberations on the best practices of White allies.

However, this blind trust which White people would use to fill their silence on issues of police brutality had its counterpart in a blind trust that singled out people of color to speak in tokenizing ways. While White participants engaging in this tokenization was limited to Mable, the facilitator of the first small group, Ray, would regularly call for the opinions of the three people of color in our group. In one of the first meetings, Ray explained that he liked to open space for people of color to share their opinions, a practice which he thought would counteract the silencing they experience by racist default. In order to open that space, Ray often invited specific people to share their perspectives, either immediately after asking a question or if a person of color hadn't spoken in a long time. The onus of this task mostly fell on Melanie, since she was the only regularly-attending person of color.

3. Critique of White Antiracism

The critiques of these White-centric discussions and practices that came from the people of color in the groups centered around being tokenized and silenced or made invisible. On the other hand, the critique that came from mostly White participants centered on how the groups should be doing more action than the meetings and discussions were engaging in.

a. Being Tokenized and Silenced

Being tokenized and silenced or erased was very frustrating for both Melanie and Natalya. While Ray did clarify that he didn't think Melanie's perspective whatsoever represented people of color, Melanie sometimes tried to carry that weight, by pointing out where the White people "got it wrong." She disliked her role of providing the real-life personal material on racism that the group would digest:

It's a completely different experience to sit around the table with a mixed group and talk about experiences shared through literature, which is vulnerable, right? But not in the same way as like if I have to be the person of color in the room sharing my experiences, so that we can talk, right? It's other experiences, but put down for the point of reading, for the point of talking, and then us being able to talk about those, and then I choose if I want to share the ways in which I relate or I simply, you know, in a removed way say what I'm getting out of it based on the literature. Like there's some safety in that, and there's some more ability to talk about things that I feel like you can't talk about if the perspective isn't there. And this perspective wasn't there earlier if I wasn't the one for offering it. And there wasn't really that much of a space in the curriculum to do those sorts of things anyway. So even if I had wanted to offer it more, there wasn't a space.

This tokenization meant that Melanie, and occasionally the other two people of color, would be put in a position of pressure to disclose their experiences or their opinions in our conversations on White emotions and White antiracism. When they were uncomfortable with this dynamic, it lead to many awkward silences or transitions.

Melanie describes how that dynamic lead her to question her trust in the group, and in Ray in particular:

Like there always is like that space where like if you come together with a group of White people who like desperately, and I would say the people—umm, some of the people in our group like desperately do want to like understand this—and you are the person of color, or a person of color, like you do sort of have to wonder, like, their willingness to build relationships—is it or is it not based on the fact that they need to have relationships with people of color to feel like they can do this? And I think that there are some people in our book group where that's true. You know that I think that about Ray. He thinks the Sun shines out my rear, and I think it has more to do with the fact that I'm a person of color, rather than like actually who I am. So that's been rocky in a little... in a few ways.

Melanie often resorted to not speaking during our meetings (unless called upon), since we focused so much on White antiracism. She expresses how those conversations weren't meant for her participation or learning:

But like what!? Seriously, what the actual fuck am I going to tell you about being a White antiracist? So it was just like, I actually don't need to sit through an entire 8-person group of White people being like, "This is what we need to do!" Like, is it?! Great. What am I— Like, right? Luckily, I feel like there were places where I could add, but not much that I could take away. Which, I'm happy to add. But six months is a little long to do that. So I am glad that it eventually like turned into a book group, like centered around like actual conversations that I could both participate and learn from, and not just that I could like add the person color perspective in the room to. Which is more what I felt like I was doing with the curriculum.

While Melanie felt like she could occasionally contribute her perspectives to our discussions of White antiracism, she was very frustrated by them. In the second small group, Natalya was largely silent, even though I would attempt to ask questions that she might have a perspective on, such as how the readings were mostly geared towards White people or how our discussions might be frustrating. She would never speak up when I posed these questions, and when I asked her why in an interview, she explained:

Right, I didn't. Probably I, you know, decided to go with the flow, and, I don't know, just—probably I was a minority, and then there was majority of people. And why should I do that? Just, you know, listen, and, you know, maybe it was not my, you know, you didn't— you know, I didn't have maybe an opportunity to say that.

This power dynamic in which the overwhelming Whiteness of the group made her feel like she couldn't offer her own critiques was similar to Melanie's silence in the first group's discussions. Ultimately, this facilitation style, where everyone is allotted the same chances to respond to the same prompts (unless tokenizingly called on) and where, once conversation has started, minimal facilitation actually occurs, allowed for societal power dynamics of privilege and oppression to shape the group's conversations so that the same people—people of color—were silenced and their experiences were erased.

b. Less Talk, More Action

Despite the White participants emotional displays of anger about racism, Melanie points out how the curricular and conversational focus on White people and White antiracism indicates that the White participants might not understand the urgency of racism:

Yeah, like I don't know that there are enough-- there are enough well-meaning White people, but I don't know that there are enough White people who really understand the importance that it is to like change it right now. Like targeting like 900 different spaces--the school board, and the teachers, and yeah—

Like she calls for enacting change right now, many of the White participants were also frustrated with the small groups for failing to focus on taking action. As Sheila describes:

Probably the thing that I get the most out of the group is a like-minded community, other people that really want racism to go away and really want to address it. And of course the only, the only problem with that talk, is that I also am a very impatient person, and I have attention deficit pretty—I would say it's not moderate, it's not severe. But I'm one of those people that want to start doing something, and what is it we're going to do? Are we going to write letters, are we

going to go to this movie together, are we going to do this? And I think it speaks again, because of time, we don't always do that. And I'm like that, but I'm like that with everything. I give most groups six months, and if I don't see that something tangible happening, I will often quit. And it's not because I'm mad at the group, but because I just can't sit there anymore, I have to see some action... And so, I want action. And I think our group has taken action in some ways, just being together has been action. But I would like to see more of that.

Likewise, Vivian also explains how she is frustrated about her lack of activism, and the limitations she experiences in taking action:

And I think one of the things with the group has been like some part of me chose the group as a way to start to get more engaged with [antiracism]. But is just a dialogue group engaged enough? So like I think that my sense of that has increased with thinking more about it with the group. And not necessarily that it's not good engagement, but it's not enough engagement. Is there something that's more "doing the work" that I could be doing? But it's also like hard to throw your entire life at any issue if it's not what you're doing professionally, because you also have like work and partners and friends and sleeping... We talked about this a little bit at the group last week. I got sick when I was 12, so I think that has been true my whole life. Or my whole adult life has been not having as much capacity to do things as I feel like other people around me have, or as I desire to have. So I think it's very easy for me especially, just based on that being a lot to experience for me to feel that way about any given thing.

As such, the White participants were conscious of how their conversations about White antiracism were not necessarily working towards racial justice. Yet, they participated in them without challenging them. Most of the White participants would even express (one-on-one) discomfort with how the people of color were silenced or tokenized in the small group meetings. Yet, nobody brought up that racialized dynamics of erasure and tokenization to the fore in group discussion. I situate how these tensions were evaded in the small groups in a broader argument in the next chapter.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Coming Together functioned to silence the participants of color through free-for-all facilitation and structuring the curriculum for White people and people of color who don't have a critical race consciousness. Instead of

foregrounding the voices and activism of people of color, it allowed White participants to dominate discussions with their analyses of racism, storytelling, emotions, and delineation of a hierarchy of White allyship, which was permeated by an intellectual elitism rooted in the capitalist culture of competition. This work utterly fails to meet the charges demanded Black feminist anthropologists, and it reiterated the focus on White feelings in antiracism spaces that derails racial justice activism, the process critiqued by Srivastava. Ultimately, the silencing, erasure, and tokenization of the people of color in Coming Together was caused by broader problems in the organization, problems of dehumanization and a lack of relationship- and community-building. I explore how these problems caused more detrimental effects, and ultimately stunted the mobilization of potential activists, in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

DEMOBILIZATION THROUGH DEHUMANIZATION AND THE UNADDRESSED COMPLICITIES OF POWER AND PRIVILEGE

In the Coming Together small groups, many people with motivations for participating in racial justice activism were meeting regularly. However, their potential activism never came to fruition. I argue here that potential activism was stunted in Coming Together through three mechanisms: the facilitated structure and content of the small groups that dehumanized participants, the unexamined complicities and manipulations of power of participants, and the lack of intentional conflict resolution. Ultimately, the story I tell in this chapter attempts to explain my own experience of how I got confused, caught up, and frustrated in my attempt to become a “White ally” in the struggle for racial justice. Here, I problematize the simplicity of categorizing myself and my potential justice work in that way by naming and describing how that is a dehumanizing perspective of the self. I explore in the first section how the dehumanization of participants in the organization consisted of both limiting the ability for participants to build relationships with each other and participants learning to see and treat each other and ourselves in Black-and-White terms (e.g. White ally). In the next section, I explore how, due to the multiple differences of identity and experiences among group members, the groups were filled with conflicts of perspective and power, which, while some did bubble up to the surface when less privileged members confronted the more privileged members about their manipulation of power, were never addressed adequately. Ultimately, the complicities of class privilege held by nearly all of the group

members contributed to these tensions as well as their inability to prioritize racial justice work, resulting in the disintegration of the Coming Together small groups.

A. Dehumanization through Stunted Relationships and Racialization

The dehumanization of participants consisted of both limiting the ability for participants to build relationships with each other *and* participants learning to see and treat each other and ourselves in Black-and-White terms. While participants had opportunities to listen to one another's stories and have conversations, these interactions were strictly limited to discussing race, racism, and White privilege, and one-on-one conversations were limited to 5-10 minute sessions. This limited how participants could learn about, interact with, and relate to one another, so that they could only discover how they might be compatible or enjoy each other's company through discussions about race, an experience that was often awkward, contentious, and impacted by other power dynamics. This facilitation also lead the participants to focus personally on solely their racial identity, which shaped how they see themselves in dehumanizing ways. Ultimately, these forms of dehumanization led to weak relationships among members in the small groups (weaker than they could have been, as one case study shows), as well as a racialization that dehumanizes both people of color and White people and confuses their focus on activism, ultimately stunted the potential activism of the groups.

1. The Focus on Race and Meeting Structure

As previously described, the small group meetings consisted of one or two listening exchanges between two participants as well as a longer whole-group discussion. With meeting every two weeks for two hours of discussion, there was definitely potential to build relationships in the small groups. I argue that the growth of relationships was

stunted by how our discussions were limited to the topic of race, but not facilitated to have participants focus on the group dynamics of racialization, and by how there was no structured time in which the participants could just get to know each other and develop friendships. In order to demonstrate how relationships were stunted by the focus on race, I demonstrate how my relationship with Melanie—a participant in the first small group as well as my housemate at the time—was made more difficult by our experiences in the Coming Together meetings and flourished aside from those meetings. I then examine how participants in the second small group felt that there was no opportunity to form friendships.

a. I'm White and You're Black

In the small groups, the prompts for these listening exchanges and discussions ubiquitously focused on race, racism, and antiracism. This focus caused the friendship that Melanie and I were developing as housemates to stutter and stumble. There were numerous ways in which we were compatible for friendship: we had both just moved to the Valley from the rural Midwest, we both loved learning Spanish and travelling in Latin America, we both had tension in our relationships with our families, we had both just moved in with boyfriends for the first time, etc. However, at these meetings, all of that common ground was pushed aside so that we could think about each other in Black-and-White terms: how she experiences racism and how I perpetrate it, as a mixed race African American and a White person (respectively), without respect to how race actually plays out in our relationship or how we interact with each other aside from listening exchanges and discussions about race.

In the meetings, which were often in the living room of her part of the house, we were asked to focus on our experiences of racism (being a target and being an oppressor) and tell them to each other in 3 minutes, without any chance to explain, elaborate, or respond. We were asked to share with the group how these experiences made us feel, then and now. This process felt awkward and unproductive, but I participated. Our experiences and feelings were then left unaddressed and unacknowledged. When Melanie and I had the exchanges together, or when we both spoke up in the debrief of the listening exchange in the whole group, it felt like our relationship to each other suddenly had a stark contrast, an insurmountable barrier of difference of experience. The group would then move into a whole group discussion about a variety of more intellectualized topics, such as how to talk to family members about racism, what the various microaggressions could be, and the history and present of structural racism. After these meetings, I found myself nervous to talk with Melanie for a week or two, constantly evaluating if the content and tone of what I was about to say could be a microaggression or could display ignorance.

I am not arguing that, as friends, we should not have talked about race. Instead, I argue that we should have engaged in conversations about race when they became pertinent to our relationship and in the context of our relationship. The positive development of our relationship aside from Coming Together demonstrates this process. When I asked Melanie to officiate my and my husband's wedding in rural Michigan, I had to bring up the fact that there would be relatively few people of color at the wedding, due to the Whiteness of our networks of family and childhood friends, and that there was a possibility that she would not encounter any people of color at all while in the tri-

county area. I hesitated as I was about to bring this up, nervous about how she would perceive me and my request. But, in order to respect her right to decide the terms of her own participation, safety, and happiness, I had to bring this up. I explained that I understood that these circumstances might make officiating the wedding scary and uncomfortable for her, and that I would understand if she did not want to do it. At the end of this portion of the conversation, Melanie laughed and said, “Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” I felt a flood of relief wash over me.

After this, an abundance of more potential points of concern came out of my mouth. I brought up that our families would not be used to a non-Christian wedding, a woman officiating a wedding, nor a Black woman speaking to them from a position of leadership. These points came to me easier, since she knew about my experiences with gender, religion, and family from our winter snow days on the couch. I also think they were easier for me to discuss since they hadn’t been made into an insurmountable barrier like race was in *Coming Together*. Finally, I explained all of the reasons my fiancé and I had discussed for why she would be the perfect officiant for our wedding. Then, she was able to tell me what she thought and felt about the idea, and we were able to talk about how it would be for her until we decided that she would mull it over.

This discussion about racism was based in both of our experiences, perspectives, and feelings, as well as our relationship with each other. While it was challenging, it was rooted in and contributed to the growth of our relationship, rather than stunting our relationship like the impersonal discussions about race in *Coming Together*. Since this conversation was not limited to race, but incorporated it as one of the many concerns we both had about the wedding—gender, religion, race—we were able to speak from our

own positionalities and find common ground and something to laugh about, as well as differences of perspective and mutual respect. Still, it is important that race was brought up explicitly in our relationship, as Melanie notes:

I think that any time you put things like this out on the table, especially because like we are a mixed group, like I am a person of color, and we can't ignore that in like our close relationship of four people, like any time you're willing to talk about those things, like I just feel closer to people who are open to that, and so I feel like it has also made our relationship stronger that we've been willing to do that.

This example of how our relationship grew out of spending free time together, addressing points of tension in our relationship, and finding common ground, differences, and respect along the way is starkly different from the (lack of) relationship-building in Coming Together.

b. “No Opportunity to Even Talk”

In the small group meetings, the prompts for the listening exchanges usually asked us to reflect on our personal experiences and emotions, but, really, participants were able to bring up anything they desired in their unmonitored one-on-one conversations. Then, once whole-group discussion was prompted (again, usually to focus on our experiences, emotions, or learning from the readings), Ray no longer steered it in any particular direction or posed challenging questions. It was a free-for-all or free-reign form of discussion, where people could contribute from whichever epistemological perspective they were thinking through, could change the conversation's topic by simply speaking up with a completely unrelated argument or line of thought, and could speak as much or as little as they desired. The content of our discussions was rarely ever explicitly talked about, so any reflection on our dialogues was individual or in private conversations outside of meetings. Still, as one member in the second group said, “there was no

opportunity to even talk.” Why did she feel this way? How is this seemingly ample opportunity to speak not an opportunity to “talk”? I argue that both the groups’ tendencies towards more intellectualism in their race-focused discussions as well as the lack of time for getting to know each other aside from these discussions lead to her perception that there were no opportunities to talk, as well as stunted relationship building.

The conversations in both groups tended towards being more academic, opinion-based, and ideological than they were personal, experiential, and relational. Even when we were discussing one topic for an extended period of time, such as systemic racism in Amherst Pelham Regional Schools, we would speak with different epistemological points of reference. For instance, Bruce usually spoke academically about the philosophical nature of racism, Natalya usually spoke about the news of racism she has seen on social media, Kayla usually talked about race in relation to the antiracism strategies she uses with her students and classroom, and I usually spoke about racism in regards to my experiences with loved ones. In no way were we focused on relating to one another by finding common ground or differences in our experiences—we were merely talking about an issue and contributing different points or arguments.

When I was a facilitator, on the other hand, I regularly attempted to steer conversation back towards the personal experiences of the participants. Still, in a group of mostly White people, the first personal experiences to be discussed usually meant remembering short, 30-second-long racialized moments and expressing the feelings of guilt, tension, and confusion during those moments. I did not have the knowledge of racial justice activism nor facilitation necessary to move that conversation into other

experiences or to move it from this reflection into discussion that would connect these experiences to broader patterns of racism and chances for activism. Since I didn't know how to use these experiences or ask for others, I would usually let these conversations end and move on to more intellectual analysis again. Since, in these discussions, group members were merely trying to speak about racism, rather than relate to one another, their ability to connect on a personal level was limited.

Furthermore, structured-in free time together in order to hang out, get to know each other aside from conversations about race, and build relationships based in common ground, was not a part of the structure of Coming Together. If Melanie, Bruce, Marvin, and I hadn't lived together, relationship-building outside of the small groups would be almost entirely absent. One participant in each small group recognized that absence as limiting for building relationships in the groups. While Natalya acknowledged that "there was no opportunity to even talk," Sheila expressed her desire to have structured time for relationship-building:

Well I haven't gotten very close to anybody in the group, because there hasn't been a chance to do that. I think that we're digging in deep enough that it's more of a facilitation thing. I think it might be very beneficial if we had, like, a day together to develop those relationships further. Because I think we'd get deeper into material if we did that. But again it'd have to be well facilitated, because just talking is not necessarily moving forward.

Thus, we would get together and opionate about race, occasionally sharing very personal experienced that would go unacknowledged, and then we would part ways. This is a highly impersonal and cold way of getting to know each other, as it ignores the many aspects of our identities aside from race and it doesn't allow us to spend time together aside from having to organize it outside of the group (something that many members wouldn't do due to their busy schedules). This structure contributed to the

dehumanization of Coming Together participants through denying opportunities for group members to make relationships. In the next section, I explore how this facilitation of personal reflection and listening fostered a dehumanizing way of perceiving oneself and others only in relation to racial identity. This dehumanization of racialization weakened relationships in the group, as my anecdote with Melanie demonstrates, but it also impacted how participants saw themselves and related to racial justice activism.

2. The Dehumanization of Racialization, from the Perspective of a Used-to-Be “White Antiracist Ally”

In Coming Together, we were asked to focus on our racialized experiences and the emotions from those experiences, and we were presented a history of racism that drew connections with colonization, capitalism, and government policy. We were asked to consider ourselves within this framework, and this framework alone. I argue that, even while Coming Together acknowledges that race is a social construct, this facilitation functioned to essentialize our racial identities in unhealthy ways. This essentializing was then compounded by the groups’ discussions in which “White people” were treated as a uniform population, so that each White person was responsible for causing and ending the legacy of racism, and had to abide by certain recommendations for avoiding racist ideologies and microaggressions and for being a supportive ally to people of color. That is, “White people” became a homogenized population whose entire history and current practices of racism each one of us White people was responsible for dismantling, rather than people who have unique experiences with race and racism and different positionalities and contexts in which we can perpetuate racism or interrupt it. Similarly, “people of color” ended up becoming a homogenized population that is a part of a

spectacle to watch, comment on, and develop a more and more sophisticated opinion of, rather than people in the room who you need to see, hear, interact with, and be challenged by. In this section, I examine how I was affected by the White group members' practice of perceiving ourselves within this narrow self-definition of Whiteness, this lens of interpersonal interaction and historical positionality, and these measurements of antiracist efficacy.

This very complicated and detailed framework that I was delving into, in a very committed effort to become less oppressive and to work towards racial justice, was all-consuming. I spent hours every day, and numerous hours per week, doing a variety of activities to try to solve the problem of how horrible it felt to be, unwaveringly, on the side of the oppressor. I read pop-academic articles that were circulated on social media about how White people should and shouldn't act, talk, feel, etc. I reflected on and felt ashamed about recent and long-passed interactions in which I may have participated in racialization and racism. I talk to my close loved ones about racism in ways that disregarded our personal relationship histories and other aspects of their identities that I had previously known about and supported them through. I tried to figure out how White people could possibly participate in racial justice in a purely supportive way, other than ceasing to reproduce (it didn't help that one of the pop-academic articles featured a Columbia University professor who made just that decision) or ceasing to take up space in racial justice work. I felt small and prone to mistakes, as my relationship with Melanie demonstrated. I was nervous in my interactions with just about anyone, though, if it was a mixed-race interaction or if race was a topic of conversation (implicitly or explicitly). It was a horrible period of time. Sometimes I still get into this mindset, but those instances

have been becoming fewer and further between since I acknowledged how it was a practice of self-dehumanization.

I imagine that this feeling and habit might not be entirely different from how it feels to be a person of color attempting to abide by all of rules and expectations imposed on them by our society. Certainly, it's not the same nor to the same magnitude or extent. I am not claiming to have experienced racism. Instead, I'm claiming that being treated and treating oneself as an essentialized identity—be it a racial identity or any other; in this case, it was “White”—that comes with a host of expectations and rules, is a dehumanizing experience. I began to treat myself and other White people in this way, and my mental health and relationships suffered for it. On the other hand, I also began to treat the people of color in my life in this race-essentializing way as well, and still with very caring intentions. When perceiving them and our interactions, I began considering only their experiences with racism and only how race was playing into our interactions. In attempting to be a White antiracist ally, I was dehumanizing the people of color in my life. Ultimately, this feature of the White antiracism occurring in Coming Together was demobilizing for my own activism in that it was mentally and socially paralyzing. I could not move past the conundrums of how to remedy being the oppressor, and I could not be myself in racially-sensitive situations. Instead, my thought and interactions had come to a halt, a pause in which I was assessing my every thought, move, and utterance in relation to the behaviors of White racists and White allies. I couldn't build relationships with people, let alone join an organization in which we were going to do racial justice activism together.

Finally, I had to learn that there is so much more to me, to the people of color in my life, to my close loved ones, and to any person I encounter than my/their experiences with race and racism—although that may color their many other identities and experiences (as explored in Chapter Four). It is an important and distinct finding of my work that White antiracism was prone to obscuring the humanity of everyone involved.

Once I had learned to be more humanizing to myself, I could see other people struggle with how this form of antiracism moved them to perceive themselves and others in this race-essentializing, dehumanizing way. It was always subtle. For instance, Bill, towards the end of the second small group, would often begin to express how he wanted to be in a multi-racial organization and then cut himself off and look puzzled for a little while. He argues against this desire in his interview:

I started doing [antiracism groups] thinking like "I'm going to go to these groups, and I'm going to be somehow cleansed." You know? "Of racism." (Laughing.) And, you know, to be perfected, and I'm going to be this person who, you know, I imagine that like I have like lots of friends from all over the world and like I totally listen to them and like blah blah blah. It's really horrible and corny and like extremely racist when I look at my fantasy of where I was going to end up. And it's all about making me a better me, you know, I think. And also I was like I really wanted to be in a group with people of like visible difference, like people of color and blah blah blah.

Then Bill expresses how he has moved away from that vision, by realizing how diverse everyone can be and how everyone has struggles. He concludes by saying how it's always good for him to go to antiracism groups, regardless of who is in it, since it's good for him to be brought back to the topic of race.

B's negotiation of how he is dehumanizing people based on their essentialized racial identity, and, within that, fetishizing people of color, was regularly confusing for him during our meetings and conversations, to the extent that it would silence him.

Ultimately, his focus on this issue moved him to stop attempting to be a part of a multiracial organization, as he felt content just talking about race like what occurs in *Coming Together*. This is a significant demobilization from on his original desire to engage in multiracial racial justice work at the beginning of the small group. Rather than be demobilized out of fear of his dehumanizing feelings/thoughts about people of color, he could have been pushed to relate to people of color in other ways than across racial difference.

Vivian, on the other hand, began to dehumanize herself as a result of her experience in the second *Coming Together* small group. In Vivian's situation, she felt frustrated with herself for not being able to meet the expectations she began to develop for White antiracist allies:

Is there something that's more "doing the work" that I could be doing? ...And I think a thing that's been—we talked about this a little bit at the group last week—I got sick when I was 12, so I think that has been true my whole life. Or my whole adult life has been not having as much capacity to do things as I feel like other people around me have or as I desire to have. So I think it's very easy for me especially, just based on that being a lot to experience for me to feel that way about any given thing. So in some ways, I think by increasing my engagement with thinking about the issues, I've also increased my frustration with my personal engagement or activism with it.

As Vivian alludes to in this quote, she talked in our final small group meeting about how chronic illness limits her ability to participate in physical activism (such as marches or sit-ins) and occasionally group meetings, and how frustrating that became for her during the time that the second small group was meeting. She began to stop taking into account her own feelings, health, and limitations when thinking about herself as a White antiracist activist, and became angry when her illness limited her ability to practice that lifestyle.

Thus, many of the Coming Together struggled emotionally with self-acceptance and our relationships with people of color due to how we were continually focused on our Whiteness to the exclusion of the rest of our identities and experiences. While the extent to which this dehumanization was demobilizing for the other people in Coming Together is obviously contingent on a case-by-case basis, I can observe that no activism came out of either group, and one of the many reasons for that was because we kept engaging in the dialogue of this dehumanization, delineating the behaviors and thoughts of good and bad White allies, to the extent that our preoccupation with engaging in racial justice *correctly* prevented our participation at all.

B. Underlying Tensions of Privilege and Oppression

One reason why relationship-building and activism were stunted in the Coming Together small groups was that the groups met frequently and long enough that tensions began to form within them, and these tensions were never addressed explicitly. Due to the multiple differences of identity and experiences among group members, our interpersonal interactions were impacted by racism, sexism, ageism, linguistic discrimination, classism, and ableism. These tensions of identity and power relations persisted under the surface of conversation most of the time, and the majority of them lingered unacknowledged at the group level. There was never a facilitated or group-led effort to assess how we speak to each other, listen to each other, or relate to each other through dynamics of privilege and oppression. In this section, I explore some of the tensions that were in each small group, aside from the tensions of the White-centric (or too Black-and-White) curriculum and the tokenizing of Melanie in the first group, which were explored in the Chapter Two.

Melanie was very perceptive of how conflicts of gender, race, and age effected interactions and relationships in the first small group:

Truthfully, like I've come to love Gerald, though that was really hard for me in the beginning. I think that the older White men in the group give me the most pause. They just have so many years of not recognizing their own privilege and their own effect on people. But those are the hardest relationships to build, but perhaps the most important in the group in my mind. And I don't—like I've never had conversations with them about how they feel like they've grown, but I've seen it. Like I've seen both Ray and Gerald like be in a different place. Maybe not where we all want them to be, but they have moved in some directions. And I'm not sure that that would have happened without like our group, and not just me, but like the presence of younger people and the strong voices, primarily the strong women voices that we have in our group. Like I don't think that we would have moved them in quite the same way if it wasn't for all of us, and all of those components.

In these examples, Melanie is able to accept the oppression she experiences at the hand of Gerald and Ray's older White male dominance and still appreciate them, because of how she has seen their behavior change in response to the strong voices of women and youth in the group. This unacknowledged negotiation of power added tension to her (and my!) relationships with these men, and while these relationships may have improved, the tension was never acknowledged or resolved at the group level.

The first small group also had some tensions between people who held power in the public schools and people who had children in the schools. Specifically, Ray held sway in the schools as a former principal, and Margaret, a Black woman working on her PhD, held an administrative position that addressed diversity in the district. On the other hand, Sheila, a White woman whose academic research focuses on the overrepresentation of children of color in special education programs, had two White daughters in the schools, and Lily, a White immigrant from Eastern Europe, had two sons of color in the schools. This tension between these group members would sometimes lead to blatant

disagreements and raised voices, and other times they would lead to evasive maneuvers by the administrators. The reasons for this tension centered on the controversies over systemic racism in the schools. While there are ongoing issues of racism in the schools according to some parents in Coming Together, in the past three years, specific issues have been highly mediatized: a Black teacher's resignation and lawsuit against the school due to receiving no support from the school after receiving anonymous racist death threats for months, the school board and superintendent's attempts to address these problems of racism through solely creating a fixed-term position in the district, and the split in the community regarding their opinions of these issues. How, and how urgently, to address these problems and the more ongoing problems in the schools, and the differing opinions between administrators and parents in the group, was the source of the tension in the group.

Margaret, the administrator assigned with the task of addressing diversity issues long-term in the district, explains how she joined our Coming Together small group partially in order to strengthen her work in the schools:

So I first decided I wanted to come to the group, because, you know, Ray was the leader of this initiative and I know when I was a principal at Fort River, he was the previous principal and I have heard about the equity work that he was doing there. So when this group surfaced, it's like ok, this is a good opportunity for someone who's been in the school district but also in the community for years to be able to figure out how can we make the schools a better place... And to do equity work, and for one, I was trying to figure out what the equity work would look like in this district... [Because] even though we had all those people [who had participated in antiracism professional development in the 1990s] and those people are still here in the district, we're still having equity issues... Black and brown children are still being suspended at a higher rate than White children, than Asian children. That has not changed. We might have less suspensions now, but the disparities are still there. Students at the high school, they do have a voice. They have an African-American studies literature study course that's in place, and they have organizations to be a part of, affinity groups and those things, but you

know still kids are still reporting that their color of their skin is determining how they are being treated by staff. And so, it's still the same outcome even though the conditions have changed, even though we've made some improvements.

And if we only do the work internally, we'll never get the work done. Equity work is something that has to be done within the community, it has to be a community approach where it's the school and the community working together. And not just the school saying "okay change this, this, and this." We have to listen to everyone: families, social groups, activists, in order to make change. So that's like part of the reason why I joined the group, because I'm looking for help. I can't do it alone. But I found that relationships are key to the work, and if I don't build relationships, the work will never move forward. It's also a two-way conversation, because we can say, "Well, they're racist, they're racist, they're racist," but unless you sit down and have a conversation with them, in time, you might be like "mmm maybe not, so let's figure out what the issues are." And I always, I don't like to jump to racism, because oftentimes it's bias, it's prejudice, it's ignorance, and then when you really think about—from my perspective, if your racism or racism, you have money and power. So most of us do not have the money and the power, and you know, regardless of what color we are. So I think we have to flip the narrative. I often feel like there's this small group of folks that—of rich folks that are running the country... So but I still want to know why people feel so strongly about the racism that is in our schools...

So while Margaret acknowledged that bias and prejudice impact the experiences of students of color in the schools, she took a more conservative view of this situation and considers it to not be a problem of racism. Yet, she understood that in order to solve the problems, she needs to make a concerted effort between the schools and the community members. It is with this perspective that she joined our small group.

With Margaret's administrative position and hesitancy to claim that there is racism in the schools, Sheila felt that her knowledge of more ongoing problems of racism in the schools was threatened, especially her knowledge regarding unrepresentative disciplinary and special education practices. Whenever the group's discussion would move toward the schools in Amherst, Sheila would persistently challenge Margaret to take more urgent action against racism. This interaction was complex, as Sheila was

White, had a PhD, was a college professor, and, yet, held less power in the schools than Margaret, who was African American, was working on her PhD online, and held more power in the schools. Ray, who was more focused on the power dynamics of racism, would often take Margaret's side, explaining that she had more thorough knowledge of what is happening in the schools since she works there and that we should trust her opinions. And Margaret defended herself by explaining that as a Black woman, she only has so much sway in the schools, and as a Black mother, she needs to protect her livelihood. Sheila was highly irritated by their evasion of her pressure. She saw the situation as administrators manipulating their power:

I also learned a lot from the conflict around education in our group, because there are a couple of people that are very concerned with the politics of what possible. They're both administrators or former administrators. And I hear that line, you know, "we just can't do anything," or "you don't understand all the depth of this," and "I think so-and-so is doing a good job." And it's like I've always pushed back against administrators that didn't say, "Well, huh, I never looked at it like that." Usually administrators that I work with are defensive. And there's a little bit of that in the group.

After one particularly tense discussion, in which Sheila raised her voice at Margaret before she stopped herself from pursuing the issue any further and apologized, Sheila decided to stop bringing up the issue:

I learned a little bit about letting that go, and not making it part of the group, because it's so contentious. Does that make sense? And I think that we could—if everyone in the group would be together every month for time, and if we actually brought some educational issues of antiracism to the group, that would be great! We never really have time to get into that, just that. So I think that that contentiousness can turn into even more learning if we could follow through with it.

As such, this tension never surfaced in the group again. As Sheila explains, the participants did not prioritize the group, or its potential racial justice work, enough to

delve into and address this issue more explicitly and intentionally. Doing so would require delving into these messy tensions of power and privilege between group members in addition to administrators sharing more power with parents in the group in order to confront racism in the schools, something that could be very risky for their livelihoods. After we all saw this clearly, however implicitly, Sheila realized that for the group to continue meeting, she needed to let this conflict pass without being addressed.

The second small group had different underlying tensions that centered mostly on discrimination against the one person of color in the group, Natalya, for various reasons. She experienced both linguistic discrimination and a combination of classism and sexism. Regarding language, initially, the other group members took a very long time to learn her and her son's names. She was asked to spell them, to write them out, and to repeat them by Mable, the host. Then, Mable told Natalya quite blatantly that she couldn't understand her, as Natalya explains:

The oldest... I was no longer try to be kind of friendly, but she was quite, kind of like very, very far away from the real world. I remember she once—you called me and you emailed me and said call her, because she was, you know, and then I called her and even I left a message, and then she called me back and left a message that said “I didn't understand what you said.” My English was not good enough for her to understand! So it's kind of like she is not used even to different accents! (Laughing) You know?

Natalya also experienced simultaneous and ongoing classism and sexism when her parenting styles were continually questioned by different group members. Because she was a single mother on a secretary's budget, Natalya needed to bring her son to our meetings. She also *desired* to bring her son, because she intended for him, as a child of color in the U.S. system of racialization, to learn about racism and to see discussions

about racism normalized aside from their relationship and at school. She grapples with how her decisions were critiqued:

It's, you know, to go to a group setting, you have to understand that this is the environment where children were not even, you know, invited, to begin with. In our first meeting, which I felt like very, you know, the hostess was very I don't know... hostile. Yes, hostile and then very protective— or even all of the sudden she was expressing so many concerns about the child and that he's left on his own, so just kind of not very friendly. But then when we got together at Mable's house, it was nice. But then again, Mable has her own ideas of how the child should behave and what should he should be doing. And I saw that she tried to actually accommodate, and she, you know, brought some activities for him. But again, he's a bigger child who has outgrown these activities and so on. So just kind of like different language. Yeah, maybe if there were a different environment where there were maybe more children or that. But otherwise, I think he felt—you know, it was good for him to be present there, because he, you know, he was listening that we were talking about these issues and, you know, this is what they talk about at school also, so there is a connection. So there is not like—I remember the first [White] hostess was saying that 'You know, I don't even want to talk about this issue with present my 20 year old son.' Which is, you know—COME ON! I want my child to be aware of these issues, because he is a child of color, and, you know, he needs to be—he's aware, that means he's ready, that means that means he's, you know, more... advanced. I mean, not only from the perspective of himself being a person of color, but also aware of different issues and struggles that's, you know, historically African-American's experience in this country. He lives in this country, he needs to understand all this, all, take it... I think. But, you know... It didn't work.

Eventually, the critiques of Natalya's parenting, along with how the curriculum erased her experiences as a person of color and immigrant from provincial Russia, became too much. She decided to stop coming to the group. The fact that these tensions were never explicitly addressed in her presence (as you'll read about in the next section on confronting conflict) meant that the group was unwelcoming to her and her son, and she decided to stop prioritizing it and trying to make it work. Thus, in both small groups, people with intentions to engage in racial justice work had to decrease or end their engagement due to the tensions in the groups. Additionally, these tensions kept

relationships in the groups from growing. In the next section, I explore how this second small group attempted to address this conflict as well as how the first group attempted to address the conflict of the White-centric curriculum and discussions.

C. Confronting Conflict and Power

One conflict of power and oppression bubbled up to the surface and was addressed explicitly in each small group, and both resulted in people with more privilege and power being confronted with their manipulation of that power. In the second small group, the tension of how Natalya was being treated, and how that conflict was confronted, would ultimately cause the group to disintegrate. In the first small group, Melanie would confront the group about how its curriculum and discussions were White-centric. This meeting would change the course of the group, making it into a book group. However, it would also dissolve in time. I argue that the method by which these conflicts were finally addressed were not sufficient for moving the groups towards more sustainable practices of addressing conflict and creating goals for their racial justice work, ultimately leading to the groups' disintegration and lost opportunities for activism.

The tension of discrimination against Natalya's parenting practices in the second small group was explicitly addressed in one meeting when Natalya and her son couldn't attend. Mable asked if we could talk about the situation, because she was extremely bothered by Natalya's son's presence and needed a solution in order to continue the group. She explained that she has some early childhood trauma regarding poor parenting and limits not being set between her and her twin sister. She explained that she was extremely affected by the lack of limits imposed on Natalya's son, who would often either chime in with his perspective on the group's discussion when we thought he was

otherwise occupied or interrupt his mother's participation in the group because he was bored. In this discussion, we all expressed our desire that Natalya and her son keep attending (except for the host, who would rather her son not attend). I was very adamant that I fully supported her decision to bring her son and to allow him to participate or just listen from afar as he liked, and I expressed my acceptance of parenting styles that are different from ones that I am used to in order to be welcoming. I also explained that it is common for groups to alienate the people who need activism the most—single mothers, working class, etc.—due to not allowing children to attend meetings. However, Mable was adamant that she could not participate if Natalya's son was going to interrupt and chime in. Since Mable had the only viable meeting place in the group, this put us in a bind.

Vivian developed the compromise: we would bring activities for Natalya's son that would keep him better occupied during the meetings and take a break mid-way through the meetings and intentionally include him in discussion or physical activities. Feeling optimistic, we all agreed to bring a little game or toy for the next meeting. It would be a surprise gesture of welcoming him and them in the group. Unfortunately, the next meeting was postponed due to a snow storm, and when we finally did have a meeting, I was the only one who remembered to bring a small game, and Natalya's son wasn't very talkative during the break. While the game kept Natalya's son occupied for only a very short time, his interruptions were significantly reduced during that meeting. At the next meeting, however, nobody brought an activity and we forgot to take a break from our discussion. When Natalya's son interrupted her, Mable confronted the situation explicitly again, saying that we agreed he wouldn't interrupt. I stated that I never agreed

to that, and that, instead, I still respected Natalya's right to parent how she wished and it merely seemed like our compromise didn't work. Natalya, completely unknowing about our discussion at the meeting when she was absent, where we all expressed that we wanted her in the group, was put in a situation where she felt extremely unwelcome. After a moment's pause, we continued our conversation about racism, until the meeting ended.

An hour before the next meeting, I ran into Natalya and her son in a restaurant and asked if she was intending to come to the meeting. She said that she wouldn't be attending, since her son was ill. I expressed my regret for how her parenting was attacked at the meetings and my support for her decisions and her son's presence. I told her about the group's attempt to resolve the conflict. She was shocked by my support, and grateful. Yet, she still decided to not attend the group. I suggested that I could talk to the other small group about incorporating her and her son instead, since Margaret sometimes brought her son. She was excited about the prospect of joining the other group, and we parted ways. Shortly after, when I went to the meeting, I learned that Bill would also not be attending the meeting, making it a meeting with Mable, Vivian, and me. I described how the group wasn't working for Natalya anymore, and how I was becoming increasingly frustrated with it—our inability to accommodate her son, our focus on White antiracism, and our lack of activism. Then, Vivian also expressed her disappointment with the group, and Mable expressed how she was rather happy with it. We decided to postpone the group's meetings unless circumstances changed.

The way we addressed the conflicts of different perspectives and power relations in the group had a few shortcomings that would result in us not being able to resolve the

conflict, and the subsequent dissolving of the group. Our attempt to address the tension was not inclusive of the members most oppressed by the group, Natalya and her son, so they felt blindsided and unwelcomed by our behavior. It also didn't involve any process of the group members collectively defining the purpose of the group: we didn't express why we wanted to be in a group doing racial justice work, or be in a group with each other, so, ultimately, we had no direction or common ground holding us together. I had previously attempted to have the group collectively develop goals, but the members were not interested in doing so, an issue of complicity with privilege that I will address in the next section. First, I will explore how conflict was confronted in the first small group.

Once the first small group had finished the Coming Together curriculum, we spent one or two meetings just getting together and engaging in discussion, which consisted of our usual definitions of White antiracism and some suggestions for what the group could focus on next. At the next meeting, which we had decided was the meeting in which we would decide on our future directions, Melanie was the only person of color, yet again, and she decided to confront the group about its White-centric discussions. She recalls her intentional deliberation on whether or not she would confront the group:

Well I've been in enough spaces where like I do push back on, but I understand the validity in, having people of color around the table, and I don't like— It is sort of one of those like you're caught between a rock and a hard place. While I was not taking anything away, like if that experience wasn't meant for me to do that, like there is a bigger picture there. Right? I was not the only one in the room, and it wasn't my turn maybe to take something away. So as long as I still felt like there was a space, or rather that I was going to create this place to be like "well, actually," and like to insert those things that, if it was just a bunch of White people around the table, like you could get wrong or like I, as a person of color, wouldn't want you walking away [with], like, it was not harming me to do that. Like I very closely gauge like where am I at personally and emotionally like with continuing to do this, without there being more. And so, when I got to the point where I was finally willing to speak up after about six months, maybe five

months, about "you know, I'm just feeling like, you know, maybe no more for me. And if you all want to keep—" like that was the point at which I realized "no, like no there isn't really like— it isn't that way for me anymore. Like I can't just keep being the voice in places where you all get it wrong. Like I need a little bit more buy-in for that." And so that was the point at which like I knew I had to draw a boundary, but up until that point, I wasn't feeling that way. I felt like "well if I can contribute in this way, and if it means I'm not taking anything away, then for this amount of time it means, like I'm not taking anything away, and I can support you and Marvin, and I can support Bruce, and I can support, you know, Ray and what he's trying to do, because he doesn't want an entirely White group. Like I felt like I could support in those ways without it being damaging to me in any way. And I was still, at that point, okay with what my role was, and my role was not actually as an active learning participant at that point.

When Melanie decided that she was done playing a solely supportive role in our discussions of White antiracism, she explicitly acknowledged the group's constant focus on Whiteness and how to be White allies, she talked about how she doesn't get anything out of that focus, and she said that we would either change directions by bringing more voices of color into the group discussions or she would have to leave the group. Faced with the idea of her leaving the group, having our focus named White antiracism, and hearing how she felt that it was not beneficial to her (which was, in my mind at the time, a failure of racial justice work), we talked about alternatives for the group that would bring in more voices of color for almost the entire meeting. We decided that we would become a book group, that we would prioritize books written by people of color, and that we would invite more people of color that we know to join the group.

When Melanie confronted the group, she moved us to engage in real relationship-building by humanizing herself, showing the implications of our practices on her, and talking explicitly about our relationships to each other. She pointed to how we, as people with White privilege and power, were manipulating that power in our discussions by focusing them mostly on White antiracism. It was an emotionally exhausting meeting.

When Melanie, Bruce, Marvin, and I discussed the meeting afterwards, we felt very grounded, positive, and hopeful that the group would change its practices.

The newly-formed book group picked up in participation (by both people of color and White people) after Melanie's confrontation. We decided to read *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and the group members began to enjoy each other's company more during meetings, which were now held, more frequently, around a dinner table. We would spend the first hour or so just getting to know one another and catching up, and then we would dive into discussions about the book. These conversations, however, were often very awkward still. When Melanie was the only person of color to attend, there were often long silences in which the White people didn't know what to say. Many simply said, "This is really sad," or "I can't imagine feeling this." Then, as the 2015-2016 school year fell into full-swing, participation dropped dramatically. We would reschedule meetings two or three times each month, putting them off until we were hardly meeting at all. Some of the most dedicated participants, including Marvin and I, stopped attending. As the fall of 2016 is underway, the group meetings have come to an almost complete halt. After such a positive revival in which real relationship building had begun to happen and the voices of people of color were being amplified over those of the White participants, what happened? Why weren't people prioritizing the group any longer?

D. Class Complicities

In this section, I explore a final argument regarding the failure of Coming Together to motivate activism. In telling how the groups disintegrated, I examine how the participants' class complicities weaved into our book groups' practices and visions for

racial justice. The privileged economic class of almost all of the participants became a complicity with the status quo that would limit our practice of social change and allow our involvement to wane until we stopped engaging in a concerted effort to be a part of a group working towards racial justice. The great comfort and security the participants experience in their day-to-day lives as members of the middle and bourgeoisie classes, or their ambitions for class mobility, prevented them from prioritizing racial justice work. This complicity went unaddressed throughout the duration of both small groups, even though the curriculum addressed the collusion of capitalism and racism, and even though both groups attempted to explicitly address some of the tensions within them, a process which should have drawn attention to the classism in our groups. Ultimately, class complicity was not the only factor leading to both how the groups failed to motivated activism and how they disintegrated. Their failures on both accounts were also due to the way these groups functioned to silence people of color, dehumanize participants by racializing them and inhibiting the growth of relationships, and leave tensions of power, privilege, and oppression unaddressed. However, just as people of color were silenced in the groups, so were the voices of people who experience economic hardship, and the class complicity of that erasure would greatly affect the groups' practices and visions.

One reason Coming Together failed to motivate activism was that, rather than engaging the participants eager to do activism in collective racial justice work, it reduced the possibilities of activism to finding how we could work racial justice into our preexisting jobs and day-to-day lives. The Coming Together groups were less about participating in racial justice work together and more about each participant being emotionally supported in the racial justice work they were participating in as individuals:

teaching in diverse classrooms around the valley, facilitating migrant education programs in the Valley, teaching college students, talking to loved ones who are White, doing local campaign work for elected officials in Amherst, being supportive to family members of color, etc. When the class complicities of our jobs and our day-to-day were left unexamined, we didn't have to fully consider the implications of our "racial justice work," or our lives, in systemic racism. We didn't have to examine how our jobs in APRS, in Charter schools, in the Universities, in Massachusetts migrant education, etc. were complicit in racist projects, and we were allowed to consider the work we were doing as racial justice work without being pushed to interrogate that work.

This was especially problematic since every single member of the groups was either already a part of the upper-middle class, had professional careers in the universities or the administration of public schools, and/or was engaging in class mobility through attaining a Master's or Doctorate's degree. These class positionalities were not confronted in the curriculum nor in our discussions. While, in the curriculum, there were connections drawn between racism and capitalism that could have applied to our members—specifically the history of home ownership, White legacies of wealth, and the labor of prisoners that produce our goods—we were never asked to interrogate our own experiences of capitalism and our class positionalities. We never reflected on what we are aiming to achieve in our careers and the degrees we are attaining. We never examined our realities of economic security and stability, or our visions for our future. We never considered how our careers, our economic realities and visions, relate to the racism in capitalism and in our societal institutions (education, family, property, etc.). We never acknowledged the difference between racial injustices occurring in Amherst and in

Holyoke, Springfield, or other cities in the Southern part of the Valley. These questions of class are integral to our experiences of racism, but those questions require more reflection on holistic personal positionalities within structural racism.

This complicity with our class positionalities also led to very limited visions for collective racial justice work: getting people of color into positions of power in Amherst, mandating antiracism training for people working in the criminal justice system and schools in the Valley, and convincing White people in our lives to disavow racism like we had. When more substantive racial justice activism was suggested, it included legislative changes such as reparations, de-incentivizing mass incarceration, and holding police officers more accountable. Even within this potential work, we did not examine the class relations they would remain complicit in: such as what could be achieved and who is left out by the local politics of Amherst, by antiracism work in APRS, by engaging Amherst police in antiracism training and holding them accountable for their actions. We didn't ask ourselves why we thought policing was necessary, why we thought our work should happen in Amherst rather than in more marginalized communities, how administrators controlling an antiracism program in schools still leaves parents out of the picture.

Our limited ability to reflect on the power relations we were complicit in in our personal lives and our jobs, and even in our activist visions, meant that our understanding of social change was complicit in capitalism. In these groups, we were aiming for representative racial proportions within societal classes, not the transformation of social classes. Thus, the change we sought would only mean a change in the skin colors we see in various lenses: school faculty, janitors, prison populations, criminals in the news,

people begging for money on the streets, politicians, etc. While some of us may have been motivated to address economic power relations and poverty in our society, that motivation was not a discussion in the group. So, this wasn't a group about eliminating suffering, abuse, and discrimination. It was about reducing those experiences for people of color to an acceptable level in capitalism. This vision for social change was rooted in our inadequate understanding of the problem of racism. There was a disconnect between the reality of people who experience great disenfranchisement in our society—mostly people of color—and our own experiences, and this was not acknowledged in the groups.

The second argument for how Coming Together allowed class complicities to deescalate activism is that, because of our inadequate understanding of the problem of racism, we did not fully understand the urgency of activism, so we did not prioritize that work, and we did not hold each other accountable to prioritizing it. Our drive to participate in Coming Together and racial justice work was flimsy. We would articulate, “I *really* care about this, because it *must* be horrible to be afraid to go out of the house,” instead of pushing each other to identify our actual relationship to these systems of oppression. We would have had to identify and reconcile our complicities in the social structure with why we want to participate in racial justice work, a process that would have threatened our comfort in our class statuses. Our limited perspective of our own personal investment, then, would allow us to become “too busy” to come to a meeting when our school year schedules became hectic. We would tell that to ourselves and each other, and that excuse went unchallenged. We simply rescheduled the meetings until they became 2-3 months apart. And when people had to stop coming to group meetings because of new jobs as professors and administrators in charter schools, the group

members sent emails of congratulations, rather than engaging each other in discussions about how their new work relates to racism and racial justice. And with these changes, the first small group ended. Since we didn't have the voices of people who experience the worst of structural racism in the group (in person or in literature), we didn't have to grapple with how our life choices for more class mobility were antithetical to working towards racial justice. We were too privileged, comfortable and secure, in our current societal positions—and the ones we were aiming for—to want social change beyond proportional racial representation. Engaging in that sort of work would require us to give up that comfort and security, at least to an extent. It would require us to reconceive of our jobs and the impacts of our work—could we live with the implications of the work we do? It would require to give up more evenings at home.

So even though people were motivated to engage in activism, when our class complicities weren't interrogated in the groups, it was okay that we just did a book group, it was okay that we didn't actually engage in activism, it was okay that we didn't reflect on the impacts of our individual work, and it was okay when we became “too busy” to attend a meeting on racism at all. We didn't see the urgency of the problem.

Furthermore, when tensions were confronted in the groups, tensions that were related to the participants' class backgrounds were not included in the issues addressed. For instance, class and classism impacted each group in that: they were so academically oriented; some participants with higher class backgrounds felt much more comfortable speaking, opinionating, and disagreeing than the other participants; the meetings were held in the comfort of our homes from 6pm-9pm (two hours within that time block); and, in the book group, we had potlucks in which plenty of organic and locally-produced food

was expected. Had we addressed the discrepancies in mic time across class and how conversation moved towards creating an elitist hierarchy of White allies, we might have delved into how our meetings might not actually be participating in any sort of social change work.

And the Whiteness of most of the participants colluded with this class complicity. The only person whose racialized experience really motivated their participation was Melanie, who couldn't find fulfillment in the group.

Like White people don't need to have this book group, they don't—they don't need to have the effects of it, and so there's a lack of prioritization with it, which became frustrating to me, because I—a little bit feel like we're going to do it, or we're not. And if you're not, that's fine, but I need to find something else that we are going to do. So are we gonna do this or are we not? And so that's sort of how I've been feeling, which I used to have a bit of a problem with, because I was prioritizing it, and I felt like I was building these relationships, and an ability—with the ability like for us to grow. And I was feeling like the response that I was getting was 'this wasn't important. Like I don't need for this to be important.' And I feel like, 'yep, probably as White people, you don't need it to be important! But I do! Like I need a space in White-ass Amherst, in White Northampton, where someone prioritizes that you all don't have your shit together!' Like, White New England does not have their shit together, and I need somebody to—I need a group of people that like recognize that! Beyond like international students at the five freaking colleges! ... And then the other side is that it doesn't bother me as much now, because I now have that group with my students who like... I don't need to convince them to prioritize it, because that's life for these kids. Like they need someone to prioritize it, and I'm willing to be that person. Now, if you all don't prioritize it, I'm like "your loss!" I will continue to for people who are like ready to do this and want to do this. so that's sort of where I moved in to with our book group, and I'm a lot more patient with the fact that we have to change it all the time, because we're not prioritizing it.

E. Conclusion

The story of Coming Together is bleak in this thesis. Not only did the antiracism organization demobilize and cause mental health challenges for potential activists, it silenced people of color and their racial justice activism in the process. The causes were

many: the dehumanizing racialization of the organization's personal reflection, the structure of the small groups that impeded in relationship-building, and the way the organization didn't challenge all forms of oppression within the groups, especially the class privilege of the participants, all contributed to how participants were demobilized to the point of the groups' disintegration. This work is starkly contrasted with the coalitional and intersectional activism fostered by the authors of intersectionality and radical community-building literature. Additionally, the free-for-all form of facilitation allowed racist power dynamics to map over the groups' dialogues.

CHAPTER IV

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION PRACTICES

In this chapter, I explore some of my holistic personal reflection in GCO and RC in-depth in order to demonstrate how that process of discovering very specific self-knowledge of oppression and privilege was politically motivating and mobilizing. I examine how the GCO facilitators carefully controlled my personal reflection and always pushed me to connect my self-knowledge to the group's collective knowledge of systems of oppression as well as to apply that knowledge to organizing campaigns and community-building. Then I argue that RC's model of personal reflection, while personally empowering, is limited in its ability to motivate activism and create anti-oppressive communities due to its focus on the individual. I conclude the section on personal reflection by analyzing how the GCO facilitators taught me to engage in *critical personal reflection* by structuring my personal reflection and my contributions of self-knowledge to the group implicitly and explicitly. On the other hand, RC's model of controlling how personal reflection occurs is based in its priority of healing individuals, leading it to separate the collective knowledge-building of groups based on oppressed identities in a way that inhibits diverse anti-oppressive community building.

The *critical personal reflection* in GCO is only one component of the intentional anti-oppression community building of GCO, which I will examine in the next section on intentional relationship- and community-building. Through collectively defining ground rules of the community and developing shared values and political goals, we were able to create a group culture and community in GCO that prioritized political mobilization and anti-oppression community-building. This community-building and maintenance is

exemplified in how we engaged in conflict-resolution during the GCO semester, which I examine in two instances. Overall, the critical personal reflection, relationships, community-building, *and* the ample opportunities to engage in activism that occurred GCO all informed one another and functioned together so that we could create this anti-oppression community and continued mobilization of activism.

A. Holistic and Critical Personal Reflection

In both Re-Evaluation Counseling (RC) and in the college course, Grassroots Community Organizing (GCO) and its student organization (UACT), there is a more rigorous, directed, and holistic process of personal reflection than that of Coming Together. Going through these programs taught me different things about myself, listening to others, and creating an anti-oppressive organizational culture. We engaged in holistic personal reflection, which helped me to more thoroughly identify my own experiences of privilege and oppression. While I learned a lot about myself in the personal reflection processes of both GCO and RC, our personal reflection in GCO built a collective knowledge of systems of oppression and anti-oppressive community-building, and it was always a part of a process of political mobilization. The constraints on personal reflection in GCO were intentional and sometimes an explicit part of the curriculum, as I learned much more about how to situate my personal knowledge of privilege and oppression within the goals of an anti-oppression organization. This distinct orientation towards personal reflection, what I call *critical personal reflection*, gave me practice in and motivation for utilizing my self-knowledge effectively in long-term collective, intersectional, anti-oppression activism. On the other hand, my personal reflection on oppression in RC was more thorough and it felt more empowering at the

time. However, while this more thorough knowledge of how I experience oppression was very empowering, it was not connected to any form of political mobilization and it was only connected to anti-oppressive community building in theory. RC's model of community and social change, which inform its practices of personal reflection and anti-oppressive community-building, ultimately prioritizes individualism over community and is politically demobilizing in the context of capitalism.

In GCO, we were regularly asked to reflect on our experiences of and feelings in relation to specific social problems and systems of oppression, interactions with different people, and the work of community organizing. This reflection happened through a number of different formats: weekly written reflections on course readings, in which we were encouraged to draw on our own experiences and knowledge; in-class free writes about our experiences and feelings; and more substantial activities in which we wrote, drew, or told our life stories. Some of the personal experiences and feelings I explored included: my experiences with gender, sexuality, and patriarchal violence; my class background and experiences with work; and how I experience specific privileges due to being U.S.-born, White, and college educated; among other issues.

One example of this personal reflection was in a weekly written reflection that we did in preparation for the Spring Break trip, during which we'd be working with the organization, Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE), in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston. In this reflection, we were asked to both respond to readings about working in a community that is not your own as well as share some of our feelings about working in Roxbury. The readings consisted of various perspectives: connecting with people across differences through shared experiences; defining community as a

process of making demands on each other and sharing resources; a critique of U.S. voluntourism; and a meditation on paying attention to the present, leaning in to our fears, and prioritizing compassion. In responding to these readings and reflecting on how I feel about working in Roxbury, I explained how I used to (and sometimes still do) feel fear in urban settings due to 1) growing up in a remote rural area and being unfamiliar with urban life (transportation, courtesy, etc.), and 2) racist stereotypes about violence, crime, and inner-city areas that I grew up with. I also explained how I had overcome these fears in the recent past by doing community organizing work (and just being) in Springfield for extended periods of time and seeing those stereotypes debunked. I also reflected on my distaste for my experiences of voluntourism and tried to imagine how our efforts at intentionally constructing community across geographical distance with people in Roxbury through connecting with the people there and sharing resources with them differs with that voluntourism. I imagined myself connecting with people in Roxbury and at ACE and I wrote about the feelings that gave me, such as hope and nervousness.

In class, we also collectively tried to identify how we, through UACT, were sharing resources with ACE, and we developed a list that included things like UMass-funded internships for GCO students at ACE, sharing knowledge and experiences of community organizing in ways that energize us as well as the members of ACE, and how we'd be participating in their campaigns in ways that they needed us to do (flyering, outreach, protests for organizations they are in coalition with, etc.). In this example, I engaged in very pointed personal reflection about my experiences and feelings in regards to working in Roxbury, which dredged up a lot of feelings about my fear of being ignorant in cities, the racist stereotypes I grew up having, and the horrible experiences

I've had volunteering abroad. Rather than delving into these experiences and feelings deeper, I was asked to think about how my work in Roxbury might actually occur very differently than that reflection indicates. Finally, drawing on those thoughts and feelings, I experienced significant mobilization—motivation and preparation—to engage in the community organizing work with ACE.

Another example of the personal reflection I did in GCO was the Political Autobiography assignment (a.k.a.: Poly-Oh), which was due at the overnight retreat during the first half of the semester. In this rendition of my Poly-Oh, which I had written two different times and read aloud at UACT retreats in August 2014 and 2015, I decided to explore an aspect of myself that I hadn't ever talked about out loud with anyone other than the person I would marry: my experiences of gender and sexual violence. Alongside my usual Poly-Oh exploration of my class background and my White knowledge of racism, I wrote about how I developed a need to be desired by men from a very, very young age—as early as four years old, which is as far back as I can remember—and how that manifested differently throughout my life, ultimately culminating in years of self-dehumanization that took the form of regularly putting myself in situations where the line of consent was blurred, as well as sexual violence, self-denial, and realized risks to my health. After writing explicitly about my thoughts and feelings when I was at my lowest point of this self-dehumanization—that, in order to be real, I needed a man to tell me, and that I could only earn that through sexuality—I wrote about how I began to re-learn that I had inherent value through a romantic relationship, how that history of sexual violence still has an impact on me, and how much I hate that I used to believe that about myself. I wrote this into my political autobiography in order to be able to engage in intense

activism with my GCO group later on in the semester, which would require developing trust, solidarity, and understanding of one another. I didn't feel like I could do that without showing them how I am very much so still in the process of healing and learning how to be empowered.

Listening to each other's stories, all 5-10 minutes in length, helped us to know why we are each choosing to be activists and it also helped us to know in what ways we need to respect and support each other if we are going to share our time and energy engaging in collective activism. After each story, in which we were mostly very vulnerable, we were allowed to ask the storyteller clarifying questions and to comment on how we appreciated certain aspects of their Poly-Oh. Unfortunately, sometimes group members didn't follow this instruction in ways that were difficult to control, such as very quickly-uttered phrases, which could, and did at least in my case, cause the storyteller to feel misunderstood and/or insecure. Along with this, some classmates explained why they weren't going to be vulnerable in in their Poly-Oh, due to how they didn't trust that setting or due to not wanting to "take up space with their privilege." These situations undermined the activity as well as trust in the group. Still, this deep personal reflection was a moment in which most of us drew connections between our holistic personal experiences and the politics in which we want to engage, a process that was very motivating for me. It was a part of our imperfect, but still valuable, collective knowledge-building about systems of oppression and creating an anti-oppressive community.

In these ways and in shorter in-class writings, the GCO facilitators regularly encouraged to focus on our whole selves: various aspects of our identities in relation to systems of oppression, our feelings and thoughts in different situations, what aspects of

our lives motivate us to engage in activism, how we have participated in oppression, etc. This personal reflection produced a knowledge about my experiences that I was then always pushed to apply to community building and community organizing work, along with the collective knowledge we were producing. Given my experiences of gender and sexuality, how do they relate to the experiences of LGB people and of non-binary and/or transgender people in the group, and how can we build solidarity? Based on the knowledge I have about working-class jobs in capitalism, how would I engage in conversation with an immigrant about their work experiences and workers' rights? How will my process of deriving security and strength from my family relationships impact my accessibility for and commitment to organizing work? How is my positionality and my (future) practices of housing related to gentrification? We were almost always expected to relate our personal knowledge to the collective knowledge in the group, and then to apply this knowledge to building an understanding of inequality and community organizing work. Thus, personal reflection was always used to inform politicization and community building as well as motivate activism.

The way personal reflection is facilitated in GCO is much different from the methods of Re-Evaluation counseling, yet both prompted me to reflect in holistic and focused ways. During the RC introduction class, we were asked to engage in personal reflection, aloud and while being counseled, for durations ranging from 3 minutes to 10 minutes, during which our peers would listen to us in various formations—one-on-one, two-on-one, small-group listening, and whole-group listening. Our weekly out-of-class homework consisted of meeting with one other classmate for a “session,” and taking turns doing the personal reflection—talking then listening, being counseled then

counseling—for 25-30 minutes each, but sometimes as long as 45 minutes. At the beginning of the course, when it was our turn to be counseled, we were prompted to “tell our life story,” with the understanding that it is different each time and that we can’t possibly include everything. After this initial focus, which lasted for about two-to-three weeks, our personal reflection was largely unprompted. However, we engaged in this reflection within the overarching context of learning about informal counseling and healing work, which was focused by a curriculum of readings and informal lectures that focused on the significance of early traumas and how they inform subsequent traumas throughout our lives, as well as things that, in general, cause us to feel hurt to the extent of having an emotional reaction. This curriculum, in identifying the cause of these traumas and hurts, pointed to the significance of our relationships with others as well as systems of oppression. Thus, the things we stumbled upon during our life stories that would bring about emotional reaction—tears, trembling, avoidance, etc.—were the things that we were guided to focus on while being counseled throughout the course, and they often revolved around our relationships and how we have been oppressed or perpetrate oppression.

In my experiences of being counseled, I focused most on my experiences of sexism, my relationships with my parents and my close (family) friends, and my working class anxieties. In reflecting aloud for 25 minutes each week, I was able to do very extensive reflection about my experiences of gender oppression and sexual violence, such as noticing my embodied feelings and thoughts in a range of spaces and how they are influenced by oppression. It was remarkably empowering. This is exemplified by one of my participant observation notes after a session:

Leila and I were sitting in the meeting room of the house of the regional coordinator for Re-Evaluation Counseling. The room was bright with big windows and cream-colored walls. The two couches had been pulled together so that they faced each other with only a few inches in between them, and I supposed someone wanted to do a really cozy counseling session. I had already been the “counselor” and she, the “client” for the past half hour or so. It was my turn to be the client, in which I would talk for a half hour, with minimal-to-no interruptions except further prompts. I started the timer.

After explaining multiple situations in which I had recently been feeling incompetent and unprepared—teaching in ways that honored my few Black students in the last two years, answering an interview question about multi-racial friendships and community-building, answering another interview question about community organizing experience—Leila asked how it felt when I was on the phone during the interview, and how it feels now remembering it. I described the adrenaline, the intensity, my hands running through my hair, my pacing, my increasingly shrill voice, my bit of defiance. I talked about when they described and asked if I would be okay with the hierarchical structure of the organization (we would all be in constant contact, but ultimately I would answer to someone, and the lead director would be the final decision-maker). When I responded, I said that it’d be pretty normal for me given how I’ve worked my whole life in restaurants and bars and picking vegetables. Inside, I felt a pang. I’d miss this GCO way of being: consensual decision making, nonhierarchical community building. This feminine way of being. I told Leila that I thought that if I worked there, the chapter that I’d gather in Flint would be different. I would organize mothers, women, gender non-conforming and trans people, and youth, and we would build a community based on love and care, and we would have the power of love, and if Michigan United didn’t like it, we’d quit and start our own organization with the people we had. So I felt defiant, and a little scrappy (I motioned like I was crawling/dragging myself up out of a hole in the ground), in a good way. I said that it felt like they were putting me in boxes, and that I was defying them.

She asked what boxes. I said Whiteness, which is true about me. Middle or upper-middle class, not totally true to my experience. Naïve, kind of true, but more just unknowing of certain realities, very earnestly trying to learn about them and being very good at that. A woman, which is kind of true, I mean. I am, but maybe not in the way they think... or, maybe not in the way they relate to it. Yeah, that’s more accurate. I began to explain by talking about how competitive I can be. She noticed that I liked being competitive, and asked why.

I felt conflicted, and began talking about how I only really ever experience racist feelings now when I am experiencing job competition. One of the best examples of my learning how racism and capitalism are connected this semester was when I acknowledged that I mostly only have racist thoughts now when I am faced with job insecurity. I explained that as a person with working class roots, I

had the fear of joblessness hammered into me from a very young age. I have been terrified for years that I wasted my undergraduate scholarship by studying anthropology, a field that does not lead to any particularly booming job markets. When I'd see a call for applications for a job that I'd like, I'd first think that maybe a person of color would be better at the job, and then I'd have such a gross flare of anger and self-righteousness. I realized through learning organizing in GCO that that racism is produced by capitalism's shrinking middle class, values/policies that produce job insecurity, and little-to-no "demand" for community work. Instead of being terrified of that "job market," I learned this semester that perhaps I should find ways to work to subvert that system, and that it's okay if it's not always a full time, benefitted, long-term position. I can find work and ways to sustain myself and my family, especially since I have a degree of economic security with my partner's teaching career and my parents' economic stability. I learned how to do the really exhausting, uncompensated work of organizing, like the Divest sit-in work, based on a commitment to myself, my loved ones, and my communities in Western Mass and in Michigan. I began to see how my work with Divest contributes to one win in the longer fight to end environmental injustices—like how the Flint residents' lives were valued less than the bottom line, and how their concerns were not listened to, and how the extremely high rates of cancer in my home community is not being connected to the industrial agriculture and chemical runoff into our water wells. Anyway, so now, sometimes my competitiveness feels really bad, since it's usually racist and self-righteous.

But then I talked about how I felt in track in middle and high school, and how competitive track can be. I talked about how it's just you in your lane and other people in their lanes, and you give the race everything you've got for about 11 seconds, 27 seconds, 14 seconds, and it's amazing, because you're giving so much that you might be drooling or screaming or making such intense athlete faces, but you don't care that people are watching you. You don't even think about them, you just think about the other lanes and where peoples' feet are in them, in relation to yours. I was talking so excitedly.

After a pause, my mind kept thinking about two boys that I grew up with, Sam and Jordan. They were two of the boys most impactful in my life growing up, from when we were 9, until we were 20. It felt very natural to be thinking about them in that moment when I was reminiscing of how it felt to run track and hurdles.

I started talking about how track felt so good in school, because everyone was White, and I would win all of the time. I would win so much—every sport, basketball, volleyball, track, and academics—I would win everything I tried, and it felt amazing. It wasn't me being racist, it was me being a woman and being powerful. It felt like I was competing against the guys in my life. And it felt so important to be winning, to be gaining on them or to be better than them in different things. This feeling of being behind partially drove my competitiveness.

But even though I won so much, they were still the ones who were the better athletes. I don't know why, but that's just how it felt. But I won in academics. And that was important.

I felt then in that room the way I felt in the hallway walking past them. Vulnerable, insecure, curious, scrappy.

I talked about how our team was always teased for caring so much about what we looked like, and that other teams would call us "the princesses." We'd spend an hour before any sports event (except track, since nobody came to those meets), doing our hair and putting makeup on. They would tease us. The makeup and hairspray helped, but I would still feel so insecure, like people were watching me, when we first got on the court. I was so conscious of how people were watching me, but as soon as the game started, I didn't think about them at all, and that felt great. Not until the next day or so, when my picture would be in the paper, and one of the boys would have brought it to school to tease me about whatever intense face I was making. I would feel anger and intense insecurity. I would try to be cool and laugh it off, "oh my gosh, nooo, put that away!!!!" But I really hated them for doing that. I would stare at myself in the mirror as I did physical activity and try to not make those faces. They made me feel vulnerable, insecure, weak, and little. It felt competitive and strong to win at sports and be better at them in school. It felt defiant, like I was gaining strength against them. It made me feel better. I kept trying ever harder.

I sat in that room, and I felt how I felt in the hallway walking past those guys. I felt that feeling for a few moments. My eyes started to well up. I didn't notice that until I did, and it was a little surprise. I said sorry. I felt that feeling of feeling like they were watching, evaluating me based on my looks and behavior and my gait. I felt—for only a short, short moment—that feeling of only being worth what they thought and what they touched. And I recognized that feeling again so purely for the first time in a long time. I really started crying. I said that I was sorry, that I hadn't been there in such a long time. I got a tissue and wiped under my mascara.

I said that those were the same boys that I let hurt me. I tried to describe what I'd just been feeling. At a loss for words. Images flooded my mind. Images and the feeling of gaining worth. I said something about how I let boys be sexual with me, and sometimes in violent ways. Because I was trying to match up, or be worth what they were, or something. At the same time that I was competing against them, winning, trying to be worth more than what they were, I was extremely insecure and was trying to find that worth by getting their approval through sex. I cried.

And so it felt scrappy, in the good way, when I was on the interview conference call with those three men, to think about what I would do more powerfully than them, even though one of them was Black. It felt like that good

scrappiness (I made the motion of crawling myself up out of a hole in the ground), of being worth more as a woman.

I was silent for a moment, and thinking I had more time and being curious about my brain and why it connected these things... my working-class job insecurity rooted in capitalism and how racism works its way into it in the form of competitiveness/jealousy/indignation, my competitiveness in sports, my oppressed feelings in regards to the men in my life, and how I fought back and also allowed them to hurt me, but now how I am just fighting back. I began to think about how the one boy always grabs my arm and shakes me playfully, yet somehow forcefully and sexually, whenever we run into each other in public, and how last winter at the town's bar he did it again and I shook him off and set my jaw hard, glaring at him.

And then the timer went off. She asked if there was more, I said no. I reached for and squeezed her hand. She asked if I wanted a hug. No. She gave me two random and creative questions to get my mind off things.

I felt so inspired about the visual I had of myself—scrappy, pulling myself up out of the boxes and holes and beds and cars that men were burying me in, drawing on the power created by that knowledge and experience of the world. I was drawing on the power of the love that knowledge of struggle creates, to transform the world. I felt scrappy, like a working class White girl who's got an axe to grind, and a vision of hope and love. I saw myself in Flint, with armies of people, all of us down below, crawling our way up out of the holes in the ground and standing there as a force, our being a force of resistance itself, our faces contorted, yelling chants about how we demand the power and the right to determine our lives and to be whole humans. Scrappy. I wanted to create art for the first time. I thought about how we would find shared experiences and different experiences, and how they were all connected, as we stood together demanding self-determination. We'd be holding hands.

...

I went to the Black Sheep for lunch soon after. I thought about how I can sit at a coffee shop table outside and eat by myself with no laptop or book here. I thought about the many times in Huron County and Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, where I've tried to eat at restaurants alone. And where I've felt like all people's eyes were on me, since I couldn't do that there, even with a book in hand... I wondered if that rule is real, or if it's the difference between sit-down restaurants and coffee shops.

In this session and others, I began to identify how I felt and what I thought while walking down the hallway in middle and high school, participating in competitive sports, sitting at

restaurants alone in different states, being in a classroom, interviewing with three men, feeling job insecurity, etc. I was able to explore the long-term impacts of gendered interactions with various important people in my life on my understanding of myself, my prospective way of being in the world, and my self-worth. I processed situations and feelings that I have specifically because of my working-class, White, cisgender womanhood, and I began to see how I have learned to fight for my own security in capitalism by using racist oppression, something that I had learned about by reading theory but hadn't previously recognized in myself. I was also able to remind myself that that job competitiveness isn't actually necessary in community work, and that I could subvert that capitalism and racism by doing community organizing.

Throughout the introductory course to RC, this process of personal reflection was taxing, but rewarding mentally, emotionally, and politically. I became increasingly aware of the gendered interactions and oppressed feelings in my day-to-day life that I had never noticed before. I would put up my defense once a man said or did something sexist to me, instead of feeling comforted by the interaction (before, these interactions felt familiar and desirous). I became hyper aware of these interactions with faculty in my department at UMass, in my friendships, in my close family relationships. It was the first time I realized that I was dehumanizing myself by expecting that everyday sexist treatment, and by thinking about myself in ways that aligned with that treatment. For the first time, I felt rage about sexism, rather than just shame and hate for my past behavior and mental state. This awareness helped me to politicize my gender and sexuality experience like I hadn't before, and feel extremely motivated to engage in anti-oppression activism. Likewise, I realized how racism manifests in my specific life choices and perspectives, points of

tension that I can now handle with caution and with deep respect, meaning that am more intentional, reflective, and slow to make a decision. This is the real individual work of antiracism, seeing more clearly how racism manifests in my own life and working against it, rather than trying not to enact microaggressions to the extent that you can't interact with people of color. I began to see how my experiences of gender, sexuality, and class can work in coalition with antiracist activism. I now claim that I want to do anti-oppression work, instead of only antiracism work, since I intend to only do work that honors my knowledge of the world. This process has been wonderful.

It is the RC philosophy that our brains are inherently intelligent, and that our thinking will intelligently approximate topics closer and closer to the traumas in our lives that have caused us much pain, confusion, and subsequent trauma (Jackins 1994). Thus, very little direction is needed in this form of personal reflection. Yet, we were trained to enact certain interventions in each other's personal reflection, the first of which being "delighted attention," which is an intervention in how, in most of our interactions, we are not fully heard, listened to, or loved (Jackins 2012). This delighted attention, however, may not be enough to counteract our more painful traumas. Thus, if someone seemed hung up on a certain issue in a way that was due more to confusion than emotions, we were taught to perform as a counselor. This process occurred in four steps: 1) hear what they are saying about themselves very clearly, which was possible because of how attentively we have been listening; 2) ask a question to learn more about what they are thinking; 3) notice how their thinking is informed by dehumanization, and 4) perform a "contradiction" that would validate their value and humanity in the specific way that would contradict their self-dehumanization. These contradictions could be as light-

hearted or as heavy-hearted as the topic, but they were always simple: listening to someone attentively if they are talking about how they are always interrupted; making a sarcastic joke about how their life must be the most terrible in the world if they are merely listing all of the bad things happening in their life; telling them that they are deserving of love if they are talking about how they were abandoned; etc.. Sometimes, when a person felt anger and a loss of control, the contradiction would be pushing the hand of their counselor, or even wrestling them. These contradictions would push the talker into emotional discharge, which was a part of the healing process. We were expected to either push ourselves or be pushed to emotional discharge during our sessions, sometimes visiting the same topic repeatedly and in different ways, until our forms of emotional discharge became less and less dramatic, signaling we have healed that trauma (Jackins 2012).

As a counselor, I found that most people in our class just really needed to be listened to, asked questions, to be told that they didn't deserve to be treated in such-and-such a way, sometimes told that their problems aren't as bad as they are making them out to be, and sometimes told that they are handling their problems in brave ways. Occasionally, certain classmates going through difficult times would spend their entire session crying, sobbing, and shaking. The contradictions that usually pushed me to emotional reactions included being told that I didn't deserve certain poor treatment, and when somebody would say that, I would realize that it's true in that specific context for the first time and immediately cry. Each time that I realized how I was dehumanizing myself, it was incredibly emotional. I would limit my crying (which we weren't supposed to do), and sometimes avoid these heavy topics, because I learned that these sorts of

sessions left me in shock and unable to focus on other things for the rest of the day and sometimes into the next morning. I couldn't do that deep of reflection that regularly, as I had other responsibilities that required mental agility, such as grad school. Plus, I was skeptical about the worth of that much emotional discharge and RC's goal of healing.

It is also RC philosophy that all oppression that we enact is based in our own preexisting traumas and that, in healing ourselves, we are able to think smarter and more logically and act in ways that are not oppressive to others (Jackins 1994). Thus, RC envisions social justice occurring, most permanently, through healed individuals who see people in very humanizing ways and spread their humanizing behaviors as they go through the world. As one RC and Coming Together participant described this vision:

It's real hard to affect positive change in the world without having worked on the things that get in the way of you doing that effectively and with integrity. And everybody gets hurt by racism, whether you can tell how or not. So the opportunity to heal from the ways that you've been affected is a necessary part of being able to help other people who have been similarly affected. Because like policy change and whatever the heck, it's not really sustainable. The next person elected or the next whatever like that can change back. What you actually have to do is help people figure how to actually heal from the historical impact of these oppressions, and that's where I see RC's role, which is helping people to have the tools to permanently heal like generations of oppression. You know, you can go like get a law passed and changed, and that's really important, but if you're not, at the same time, helping the people involved to deal with the effects of genocide and slavery, you're just going to have more and more laws to fight forever and ever.

As Kayla indicates, the RC conception of society is one composed of individuals that can only become anti-oppressive through each individual healing themselves and being healed. While I agree that healing is important to creating an anti-oppressive world, RC's extreme focus on the individual and individual healing means that it doesn't actually make connections between personal reflections and political mobilization in which participants can engage. Likewise, its ability to build collective community knowledge of

systems of oppression is limited due to its rule that counselors are not allowed to mention things people bring up in their session and due to how most personal reflection occurs one-on-one. Thus, the personal reflection of RC participants is not directly tied to the creation of an anti-oppressive community or political mobilization in any way other than theoretically. In fact, it is a rule that co-counselors do not become friends with each other, since that can compromise the counseling relationship. This focus on and prioritization the self and self-healing impedes any focus on building community, collective knowledge, and social change.

1. Critical Personal Reflection

Along with the holistic and thorough personal reflection described above, *critical personal reflection* also requires that people situate their self-knowledge in relation to that of their peers and within systems of oppression *so that* they are conscious of and act with respect to the effects of their participation in community-building. That is, they mentally situate their self-knowledge in systems of relational power as well as physically situate it within the community-building practices of the group in anti-oppressive ways. This goal lead the personal reflection in GCO to be facilitated in highly structured and limiting ways. The majority of our personal reflection occurred through answering specific prompts in weekly written reflections, in which we were required to both answer the question and utilize the course readings in meaningful ways, *and* which only the facilitators would read. Personal reflection was more highly controlled in class. While we were encouraged to contribute to group discussions by talking based on our own experiences (rather than according to theoretical knowledge), we were also encouraged to “step up and step back,” based on both if we’ve been talking too much or not at all. As

the semester progressed, we were occasionally asked to think about how the facilitators' questions might be intentionally asking about specific experiences in the room or knowledge attained in specific ways, which we might not have, and how we should "step back" to make space for the people who've had those experiences to speak up. Plus, if people were contributing to discussion in ways that were leading it away from answering the question, facilitators would quickly redirect the group back towards the question at hand. Thus, the group discussions were not a free-for-all in which any one of us could choose the focus of the discussion or contribute as much as we liked, but carefully constructed dialogues in which certain people's voices could be heard talking about different issues. As for our need for personal reflection in order to engage in these dialogues, we were given frequent opportunities to do personal reflection in writing rather than allowing anyone to engage in too-deep of reflection aloud in whole-group discussions. This critical approach to personal reflection—who should share the knowledge attained from personal reflection with the group and when or where—was an intentional learning goal of the course.

This critical personal reflection—reflecting on what knowledge we have individually, how we attained it, what knowledge we have collectively because other people in the room have different knowledge, and how our knowledges and experiences relate in systems of privilege and oppression—was an explicit component of the curriculum. In the weekly written reflections and in class activities, we were sometimes asked to reflect on our own strengths and the strengths of the class, the different knowledges we each have that speak to racism, patriarchy, economic inequality, and other forms of oppression, and how those knowledges could be used at different times.

Furthermore, we were pushed to apply this reflection to considering how we should enter spaces of activism. For example, in the last weekly written reflection, we were asked to consider where our knowledge about racism comes from and what our experience of racism is. Through this exercise, I was able to identify both my White privileges as well as the process that I had to go through to develop a commitment to racial justice: seeing inequalities in the world, having an academic framework for understanding structural racism, learning about the history of racism, and listening to people of color talk about why they do activism. This was a useful exercise in that it helped me to identify and situate my knowledge about racism, understand what sorts of questions about racism I can speak to personally, and understand how I might educate other White people about racism. I did this learning in a personal reflection that only the facilitators might read, rather than in front of the group, which meant that my personal reflection on Whiteness wouldn't hijack the group's conversation.

When it came time to discuss racism and our personal roles in racial justice activism during class, the facilitators put us into predetermined small groups of who they thought should be paired together, based on what they know about our identities and current processing of racism. Before talking, we were asked to do a free-write responding to the prompt, "Where am I in this fight? What struck me in the video of the Black Lives Matter founders' panel at Hampshire College? What emotions did it bring up?" I wrote about how listening to the founders' intense and heart-wrenching stories of why they founded #BLM helped me to realize that I just need to be a good listener and friend sometimes, rather than making antiracism into this scary thing that I should be hyper-cautious about. After this free-write, we talked as a group about our answers to the

prompt. I was in a mixed race group of students who were White, Black, or both. Some of my Black or mixed-race peers talked about their thoughts and feelings, and their thoughts weren't already-formulated methods of activism, like I had come to expect in Coming Together and through social media commentary. This prompt didn't open up space for critiques or pinned down demands for how other people should be acting in racial justice work; it was just about where they are at, personally, mentally, and emotionally, in doing that work. It was very humanizing to hear them talk, not about how things should be or how *I* should be, but about little everyday things, like how internalized oppression manifests in their discontent with their hair... things that I could relate to!

This contributed to forming my understanding that sometimes being “a good White ally” means listening and being a friend, rather than meeting certain very limiting expectations for White people. After the small group discussion ended, the facilitators asked us to do a free-write. I wrote about how I learned that I have a role in racial justice work, but not a central role nor a role that would foreground my identity, and that it's okay to not be the focus of the activism you are doing, especially if you are doing with and for loved ones who experience racism. I also wrote about how racial justice work would be a necessary part of any intersectional “poor people power” organizing, which I hope to do. This highly controlled sequence of personal reflection and collective learning carefully managed how we might contribute to the group discussion, but it still gave me insight into how I might contribute to racial justice activism and practice for how I might behave in those spaces in the future. Furthermore, the concluding free-write's look towards my future in racial justice work was very mobilizing.

Aside from this example of critical personal reflection, there were other times in which reflection on how White privilege functions in my life, and disclosing an insight to the group became necessary for building the group's collective knowledge. While working on a campaign against gentrification in Roxbury, we were asked how we are implicated in that issue by an organizer. One person in the group talked about how gentrification was happening in her neighborhood in NYC, but then the group was silent. After a while of silence, I said that it is likely that I will be looking for low-to-medium income housing in a city in the next year or two, and that I could probably afford the slightly higher rents of gentrification, which would participate in pushing people out of their neighborhoods. I said that I still didn't know how to grapple with that, or what choice to make. While this wasn't hugely important knowledge for the group, it did start our process of understanding that many of us are in that similar position and that we need to focus any campaign against gentrification on the part of gentrification that happens before rents are hiked up and people are evicted.

In the many examples from GCO, I practiced engaging in personal reflection from a positionalities of privilege as well as oppression, and then disclosing my knowledge at moments when I thought it would be useful to creating the collective knowledge of the group. Yet, I did so with discretion, or reasonable caution against abusing my more privileged identities, which required intentionally reflecting on which questions are meant for who as well as practicing choosing which knowledge is important to developing a campaign or an anti-oppressive community. This was not something that came naturally for me, but was highly structured by the GCO facilitators and sometimes explicitly asked for by them until more and more people in the group began to practice it

intentionally. In learning all of this through practice, in which I shared my different experiences of privilege and oppression at different times, I was able to start to develop trust that our group's work and dynamics would honor my experience. This critical yet holistic personal reflection is much more effective at mobilizing activists and creating anti-oppressive communities than the personal reflection on Whiteness in Coming Together, which rampantly overtook group discussions, my understanding of racism and activism, and our group's potential for activism.

Controlling personal reflection takes a vastly different form in RC—where reflection isn't connected to any tangible activism opportunities or community-building. Rather than mobilizing that knowledge, like in the examples above, RC's critical eye on personal reflection takes the shape of minimizing, across the board, the harm to oppressed people done by others' personal reflection about their privilege. Here, the priority becomes opening and closing space for certain people to talk in the form of separate support groups. That is, after an introductory class to RC, which anyone can participate in, participants have the chance to join support groups pertaining to various marginalized identities—working class, “people of the global majority” (people of color), women, LGBTQ, mothers, youth, etc. Thus, healing from the hurts of various identities can happen in spaces where people won't be confronted with “their oppressors” and won't experience the form of trauma that they are attempting to heal. Aside from these support groups, it is generally recommended that participants do not talk about the dehumanization they have experienced by being an oppressor to a counselor of the oppressed identity. This model of separation removes the possibilities of building collective knowledge about systems of oppression, trust, and community across

difference in RC. Separating people based on various identities, or avoiding certain topics when you have different experiences, suggests that discussing problems of privilege and oppression shouldn't happen across difference. Instead, RC's model of controlling personal reflection encourages that people learn how to humanize each other but process our moments of discrimination separate from one another, rather than giving people practice in building relationships across difference and honoring those people and relationships by working through times when you hurt each other. This is another example of how RC's focus on completely healing individuals limits its capacity for anti-oppressive community-building and political mobilization.

B. Intentionally Building Relationships and Community

Whereas relationship-building and community-building were both stunted in Coming Together due to how we were almost solely focused on discussing racism, how dynamics of power and oppression shaped discussions, and how group members didn't spend time together aside from these discussions, GCO engaged students in very intentional relationship- and community-building. GCO created opportunities for relationship-building through structuring free time into the group's schedule. These relationships were integral to creating and sustaining the community we created in GCO. This *community*, which I define here as a group of people with a shared culture (though this culture doesn't encapsulate the whole of their identity or experiences of culture and belonging) who explicitly work to maintain the group and its values, was intentionally developed in GCO. Here I define *culture* as loosely-shared practices, dispositions, and values. Through developing shared values, goals, ground rules for the group culture, GCO intentionally structured community-building.

Relationship-building occurred in GCO mainly through structuring free time into our weekly class meetings, retreat, and spring break trip. During each 3-hour class, we were given a 10-15 minute break to snack on the food people had brought, talk with each other, and/or play a game. This opportunity was amplified at the retreat and during Spring Break. We had plenty of free time throughout each of these required excursions, during which we—all together and in small groups—talked, played games, sang, explored the buildings we were in, got ready, and had to cook and clean. During this time, we shared parts of ourselves and learned about each other, found common ground and learned about common interests/hobbies, discovered differences, and developed relationships based in fun, respect, and care. These relationships would be tested as we made mistakes in doing the anti-oppression community-building and community organizing that we were expected to do. Most of us wanted to avoid each other or these conflicts when they came up; however, we were stuck with each other and had to resolve them in order to continue working together. Sharing space and free time in this way gave us time to build and repair these relationships. Even while some relationships were stronger and others became more and more strained as the semester continued, our community wouldn't have been able to survive the moments of conflict and continue prioritizing the work of community organizing without the relationships we built. Overall, these relationships and how we had to maintain them through conflict contributed to our community culture the values of having fun, learning about each other, respecting difference, holding each other accountable, valuing each other, and treating each other with love and care.

The intentional construction of community culture in GCO began with the ground rules, which the facilitators had written on a large piece of colorful paper before the first

class meeting and, after that, would tape to the wall every week. Table 3 lists and describes those ground rules:

Table 3: Ground Rules in GCO Class

Ground Rule	Explanation
Step up, Step Back, Move Sideways	Be conscious of how we and others are contributing to our collective knowledge, and make sure that all voices are heard by changing our own participation.
Use “I” Statements	Avoid sweeping assumptions and silencing others by narrowing your contributions to representing your unique positionality.
Define “We”	Avoid generalizations by defining “we” when you use it.
Embrace Silence	This allows time for people to process their thoughts and sit with emotions.
Active and Compassionate Listening	Make sure you listen deeply and show engagement, instead of thinking of what your response will be. This helps us feel certain we will be heard when we speak.
Assume Good Will	This helps us to be compassionate with one another, assuming that peoples’ contributions come from a good place allows us to address hurtful comments in constructive ways.
Impact over Intention	Think about how your contributions will be perceived, focus on the impact of your statement, rather than your intentions.
Be Aware of Your Assumptions	Avoid assuming things about others, since that can hurt them or silence them.
Approach Conflict with Curiosity	Conflict is a necessary tool for creating community and solidarity, as it leads to a lot of growth and learning when we challenge each other. One way to do this is ask clarifying questions.
Lean in to Discomfort	Allowing silence, pushing yourself to explore, sharing difficult concepts and pieces of our identities, and asking difficult questions allows us to learn more about ourselves and our positionalities.
Respect Where Everyone is in the Learning Process	We are all at different places and coming in with different knowledge backgrounds, and we need to grow together instead of exclude anybody unintentionally.
This Space is Confidential	This space is safe and sacred, so what we share should stay amongst our community so that we can share parts of ourselves with confidence.
Gossip Undermines Community	Gossip breaks trust and not doing it is crucial to building community.

During the first class meeting, the facilitators explained what they meant by each ground rule, and we discussed as a group what each of these rules meant to us and why they

might be important. The ground rules helped us to create a collective goal for how we interact with each other and for our time together. As my notes show, at one point one of the facilitators said, “The goal is creating *opportunities* for being whole, listening, reflecting, and building solidarity.” This set a tone of deep respect, growth, and political mobilization for our dialogues and interactions throughout the semester. We would often refer to these ground rules—explicitly or in our own thoughts—when discussion had gotten away from our collective learning, when we were trying to resolve a conflict, and when we were trying to understand how we might go about contributing to discussion of certain topics or not.

Another form of intentional community building that we engaged in was developing collective values, a process that was prompted by readings that contextualized the work we were doing together and prioritized creating anti-oppressive realities. For example, we did readings on radical education by bell hooks (1994), contrasting dialogue with discussion, intentional storytelling, intersectionality, the different types of social change work, and highly-valued examples of community organizing. These readings examined the differences of oppressive/status-quo and liberating forms of education, dialogue, storytelling, and social change work, and they contextualized the decisions we were making in the GCO classroom and on trips about how to engage with these practices in a way that made the group’s values more explicit. For instance, instead of trying to engage in discussion about a topic, someone would tell a story about their related experience, and others would express their appreciation for how that person shared their story, rather than try to one-up it or uncritically share a similar story. These readings also examined effective ways to honor peoples’ different experiences, work with

people across difference, and engage in community organizing that challenged systems of oppression. An example of how we applied this was when ACE asked us to post flyers and do outreach regarding their transportation justice campaign. Instead of telling people what is wrong with transportation in Boston, we knew that they had more experience with the transportation than we did, so we asked them about it. This respect for other peoples' knowledge was a small example, but we applied this value continuously throughout the semester. With the readings' contextualization of our options in doing social change work and community-building, we were able to explicitly and collectively make decisions to interact in certain ways and to work towards certain goals, and, after we had developed this praxis, evaluate our group's dynamics and priorities.

The most salient examples of when these processes occurred are when we resolved conflict. Our experiences with conflict-resolution were messy, incongruent, and sometimes strenuous. However, individually and collectively, we utilized the ground rules and our shared values to address conflicts as much as we could. While not all of our relationships were always mended nor our ideals met through this conflict resolution, we were ultimately always able to resolve these conflicts as a whole in order to prioritize maintaining our community, our values, and taking action against structural violence. I will examine two instances of conflict in order to demonstrate how resolving them was both informed by and an integral part of developing our intentional community. I will speak most explicitly about how the ground rules were used when I, myself, was referring to them to inform my actions. While there are examples in which other group members acted in ways that were aligned with the ground rules, this was most often not

accompanied by vocal recognition. As such, I will also note when their actions aligned with the ground rules from my own perspective.

During the Spring Break trip in Roxbury, Boston, tensions ran high when ACE had us do the “Color Lines” activity. Usually, ACE does this activity with grade school youth who are new to organizing, rather than college students who have already been developing understandings of inequalities and anti-oppressive community building. So, when ACE had us line up according to skin color, close our eyes, and point to “the front of the line” (according to our initial impulse), they expected us to point towards the White end of the line. They would then teach us about internalized oppression and bias, which is usually very moving for the participants. When almost three-quarters of the group, instead, pointed to the Black end of the line, they were surprised. Additionally, the students of color felt very disrespected—as though the White students hadn’t acknowledged the reality of racism and their own internal biases. The rest of the day was somewhat tense, and for that day’s debrief (which occurred each night just before bed), the facilitators split us up into two caucus groups, White people and people of color. In the White group, much of the time spent in our group consisted of awkward silence and tension. When we did have conversations, we talked about why we pointed where we did, how we weren’t bringing our whole selves to the group in ways that were hurtful to the group members of color (not acknowledging our biases, trying to be “perfect activists” instead of be real, not fully acknowledging their critiques, etc.), and how we could be more supportive of their experiences in the future. Afterwards, we felt positive and almost goofy, like normal, as we walked back to converge with the other group again.

When we were allowed in the room, the people of color had written out, individually, what they need from us in order to work together, and they took turns reading to us. They were angry, frustrated, hurt, and brought up how multiple of our group’s dynamics are influenced by racism. It was shocking and powerful. Their statements concluded our debrief, and we all, for the most part, went to bed without talking. A few of us wrote in journals quietly, some White people approached people of color and they spoke in hushed tones, and a few people talked or goofed around for hours before going to bed. Still, that night and the next day, the feeling of our space and interactions was extremely awkward. When I attempted to tell one person of color that I appreciate what they said and that I’d definitely be thinking about it, they snapped, “I’d hope so,” and left the room. After that, I felt so nervous, and I didn’t know what to say to the people of color in the group in order to break the ice. After talking with a few White peers, I found out that a lot of them didn’t know either, and felt equally nervous. That day was awkward again, as two or three White people mingled freely with the people of color and the rest of us felt too insecure to try to join in. Still, we did the work that ACE asked of us and tried to figure out how to bridge the divide during times in-between work.

That night, the faculty director of UACT came to facilitate the discussion of the White group. This debrief was even more awkward, as some of the students felt more nervous than the night before. Furthermore, the White students who felt more confident in handling the situation had taken to telling the more insecure others that they had fallen short of being good friends and allies. This divergence split along class lines—in which the people feeling most confident were wealthier and attending private colleges, and the people feeling most insecure were the people who grew up poor and working class and who attend the public university—a dynamic that went unacknowledged at the group level (also a dynamic I didn't notice until two people—a facilitator and the director—told me about it after Spring Break). In that space, I was so frustrated and confused, and I asked one of the more confident students how they were able to bridge that divide, since they seemed to be so good at it and confident about it, and they said I made them feel uncomfortable. I immediately apologized and felt horrified at how rude I had been. I sat there mortified, unable to hear what other people were saying. The frustration of this group finally ended when the financially poorest group member said that she didn't care what she's "supposed" to do, because all she can do and knows how to do is be herself. So she said she was just going to do that, be herself, and hope that it was enough. With that, many of the insecure people in the group had visible looks of relief, and the conversation ended.

Once the groups converged again, our group dynamic improved, with more people interacting, playing, and having fun. For me, personally, I felt better about interacting in the group. However, I soon developed discomfort around the wealthier group members. When I explained this to the faculty director and a facilitator, they acknowledged how classism had impacted that White caucus, including my interaction with the one student, something I hadn't even noticed or realized was happening. I felt so angry, and I wished that I had more time to deeply reflect on how class impacts my daily interactions, so that I could notice those things in real-time.

In this example of conflict resolution, the facilitators played a heavy role in structuring how we confronted the initial conflict. In the White caucus, they tried to ask us how we were feeling and what we thought we should do, but the White group members' inability to actually say how they were feeling and think about how they would repair their specific relationships with the people of color in the group led the first debrief to be unsuccessful. Our elaborations in the two caucuses and on the second day of what we "should" do—be more respectful in how we answer questions, bring our whole selves to the group (not just the best parts), and be more considerate about not enacting

microaggressions—was influenced by the intellectual, social-media infused culture that homogenized White people and their relationships with people of color. It wasn't grounded in our own experiences and relationships, and the one group member acknowledged that when she stated that she was just going to be herself, an insight that was the goal of the second White caucus. After that, we were able to repair our relationships during our free time. Overall, while this process of conflict resolution was difficult, the White group members learned to be more sensitive to how racism was impacting the group dynamics and to listen better to the voices of the racially and/or economically oppressed group members. We were able to maintain our values and our community, which required the emotional and social labor of being in dialogue with and trying to respect people who we didn't want to be around. We were also able to still prioritize the activism that ACE was asking us to engage in, not allowing the conflict to demobilize us. Once this conflict became grounded in our own selves and experiences, rather than an abstracted case of racism, in our discussions, we were able to just be ourselves and reestablish our relationships through having fun with each other and having meaningful conversations—both facilitated and in our free time. This recreation reestablished our community as much as the conflict resolution.

Another example of conflict resolution occurred during our group's final project, in which we were assigned with working as a group independently from the facilitators to assist the Divest student organization in their crucial moments of escalating pressure against the UMass administration and the UMass Foundation, which handles the university's investments, to divest the university from fossil fuels. During the three weeks of the assignment, Divest students would be holding meetings to educate potential

members (and us!) about their campaign, holding a non-violent direct action training, dropping a huge banner in the center of campus that calls out the university administration for their passivity and complicity in climate change, and holding a multi-day sit-in in the administrative building on campus. They charged our class with helping them with outreach for these various events as well as participating in the events like members of their organization.

Immediately after being assigned the homework, certain classmates began talking very loudly over everyone else and each other about the group's first meeting, and decided that it would be at Smith College on Saturday morning even though not everyone could attend. This undemocratic process of deciding the meeting rubbed many group members the wrong way, including me. Someone asked, "Can we not do this at the meeting?" One of the first talkers asked, "Why?" and she replied, "Did you not see what just happened?" The group felt silent and had to part ways due to time constraints. I decided to still attend the meeting, even though I was angry at these students. I resolved to stay positive, but to also make sure we were not making decisions without the absent peoples' voices. At the meeting, after much deliberation of what we could do without everyone there, we attempted to develop a collective calendar of events of the Divest escalation and our potential responsibilities, and we took detailed notes. During this process, it was decided by a few people there that there was no chance of the whole group being able to meet together, and that we'd have to move on from this approach soon.

We held a catch-up meeting the following Monday, which almost all of the people who had missed Saturday's meeting could attend, plus two people from Saturday's meeting. At this informal meeting, we worked to include in the groups' planning the voices of people who couldn't be there on Saturday and to make the project seem more manageable to everyone. Additionally, we set up systems of checking in with each other and creating whole-group discussions online, where we could log our involvement, update each other, air worries or critiques that we have, ask questions, and set up plans for working together. I tried to bring up the possibility of meeting all together, but it was shot down again. We sent out a poll of potential times to meet, to which only three-quarters of the group responded.

When this online community forum failed to be used, I began to reach out through Facebook messages to group members who I hadn't seen at Divest events or group meetings, to check in with them about how they were feeling and what was up in their lives aside from our project, even though I was frustrated with them. Some people responded, others didn't. Once it was less than a week before

the sit-in, I began to hear that group members that I hadn't seen or talked to had found a way to participate in the group's task even with their limitations of not having adequate transportation and of the mental/emotional toll it took on them to be not living up to group expectations of participation and communication. I began to appreciate that we could have different forms and amounts of participation according to our strengths, resources, and ability.

That Friday night, one group member called the whole group together for a come-and-go-as-you-are-able sort of meeting night at her house, which lasted from about 5pm to 2am! Every single group member made it to this meeting, and we each contributed to establishing a positive group dynamic of assuming good intentions and leaning into discomfort, as well as advancing our outreach plan for the sit-in. We created a collective piece of paper on which we mapped out what each of us were doing for the project and how we were feeling. Even though I couldn't make it for the whole meeting, from my experience and based on what I heard from people who were there later in the night, we had restored our trust in each other, our respect for the strengths and limitations we each bring, and our motivation to bring all that we could to outreach for Divest. When it came time for the sit-in, multiple group members participated all day for every day of the sit-in, some were arrested for their nonviolent direct action, and all members participated in outreach through social media. Our participation in outreach contributed significantly to the success of the sit-in! And we kept each other updated throughout the process, giving each other support and checking in regularly.

In this example of conflict resolution, which was not facilitated, the conflict started when various group members began to act in ways that didn't respect our collective ground rules. Some were making decisions that excluded or silenced people, while others were expecting the same high amount of participation from everyone, and we all responded to the negative feelings this caused by not communicating with each other very well. After a while, individuals reflected on how they were failing to live up to our shared values of community and organizing, and we each modified our behavior. We began prioritizing the group over our own egos, contributing more to the work however we could, respecting each other's limitations, and checking in with each other. Then, we made sure that everyone's voice was heard and respected in the process of re-establishing our community by all meeting together, creating collective documents, and restoring our

relationships and communication. We maintained that dynamic by prioritizing respect for each other's limitations, support for each other's work, and checking in with each other and giving each other updates during the sit-in. This required that we continually utilize the group's ground rules in small, but meaningful ways: assuming good will, active and compassionate listening, considering our impact instead of our intentions, acknowledging our assumptions, and leaning into the discomfort of our conflict. Finally, we prioritized Divest's activism and goals for creating anti-oppressive realities by participating fully in the sit-in, ultimately helping Divest's demands be met by the university administration. While this process was messy, contentious, and the conflicts between some members were not resolved, we intentionally set aside our anger in order to prioritize the community we had created and participate in the sort of work our community values.

C. Conclusion

Overall, the critical personal reflection, relationships, and community-building of GCO all informed one another and functioned together so that we could create this anti-oppressive community and maintained activist mobilization. In each example, either relationships structured our critical personal reflection, our personal reflection informed our political mobilization, or our relationships were integral to maintaining our community and activism. This complex whole of learning goals and practices lead us to create a very strong organizing community across differences, a process that required tremendous personal growth in the forms of situating our self-knowledge within the group as well as leaning into the discomfort of conflict resolution. While the personal reflection that occurred in RC was more beneficial for me in terms of personal healing, it did not teach me how to utilize the resultant knowledge in ways that developed collective

knowledge or political mobilization, and it didn't give me practice in working with people across differences.

My own experience suggests that I need more time and attention to personal reflection aside from groups who have similar structures to GCO, in addition to the critical personal reflection I experienced there. For instance, it would have been wonderful had I realized how much class was impacting our community's dynamics in the moment. I would have been able to name more explicitly how group members weren't honoring my experience or our goals, and we could have adjusted. But, I didn't even begin to develop that everyday consciousness until the last few weeks of the semester, and that consciousness was weaker than the gender consciousness I developed in RC, because I didn't discover it through the same process of remembering and re-experiencing various contexts, but, instead, was told how my experiences were shaped by class. Had the group continued to work together past the semester, and had I developed a stronger and more specific class consciousness, I'm certain I would have been addressed this in the group, making our work more anti-oppressive at the community and campaign levels.

A final substantial difference between GCO, and RC and Coming Together, was that there were mandatory opportunities for activism built into GCO throughout the semester. Both substantial activities—spring break at ACE and the Divest escalation—were full of opportunities for engaging in various aspects of community organizing: outreach, actions, community building, political education, strategizing, etc. This was accompanied by a host of readings that outlined the work and roles in community organizing and gave multiple examples of organizations engaging in that work. So while

we read about and discussed finding commonalities across difference, we also had to do that with each other *as well as* with the members of the organizations who were hosting us. We participated in this same dynamic of praxis with regards to personal reflection, dialogue, storytelling, and other ways of being and being together. Thus, while a dominant shared community value was creating anti-oppressive realities, we couldn't merely give lip service to that value, but we were forced to practice it for long durations of time over a period of several days. These key differences between Coming Together and GCO (and Re-Evaluation Counseling when relevant) produced much different experiences for me, dynamics amongst the participants, and impacts in the world.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this conclusion, I will give a brief summary of the information I included in each chapter in order to draw out strands of arguments that will make these chapters work together more cohesively. I will also revisit and reinforce my focuses on community-building, critical personal reflection, and antiracism. I will argue that anti-oppressive community-building is a challenge to the specific form of capitalist alienation in Amherst and the Five College area. I will re-examine the importance of critical personal reflection to political mobilization and creating anti-oppressive realities. And I will explain how antiracism can be an important effect of anti-oppression organizing and community-building, but that foregrounding it to the exclusion of other forms of anti-oppression work dehumanizes participants through essentializing race.

In Chapter One, the introduction, I gave a brief description of my personal background, which included a lot of detail about being working class in rural Michigan and having many working poor loved ones, as well as some detail about my experiences with White cisgender womanhood and sexuality in that setting. This personal reflection contextualized my entry into the Pioneer Valley and the work of Coming Together, RC, and GCO, and it developed my self-knowledge of class privilege in Amherst and the Five-Colleges. I explored this context further by pointing to the gaping hole in the town's and Coming Together's self-perceptions that erase complicity in race and class privilege through ignoring their proximity to the cities of Springfield and Holyoke. This unexamined complicity foreshadows how complicities of race and class would limit the social change capacity of Coming Together.

In the second half of the introduction, I developed an understanding of the intersections of racism, capitalism, and structural violence as well as a conceptualization of coalitional activism that prioritized the practice-based knowledge and theorization of Black feminist anthropologists and queer people of color intersectionality theorists. I drew out the way capitalism utilizes racism and power-grabbing to create alienation and competition between people with common interests, and I also explored the practices of personal reflection, radical relationships across difference, and prioritizing challenges to structural inequalities in coalitional activism. I also outlined some of the obstacles for White people in participating in coalitional work, such as how White identity is rooted in the violence of erasure of racial violence as well as the tendency for White feminists to focus on their own emotions in ways that demobilize activism. Finally, I described my methods and described the Black feminist anthropologist tradition of autoethnography and its conception as activist scholarship that challenges the power of the removed researcher and foregrounds Black women's experiences. I worked to reconcile my use of this method, which would foreground my White person knowledge, by making a commitment to utilizing this method in order to contribute to activist scholarship that challenges structural inequalities.

In Chapter Two, I explored how Coming Together did not foreground the voices of people of color in the group or in the history of racial justice activism, instead silencing them through multiple mechanisms, the primary of which being facilitation that allows interpersonal dynamics of White supremacy to infiltrate conversation. This facilitation's silencing of people of color was buttressed by the curriculum's focus on White emotions as well as how it didn't engage with the prior knowledge of people of

color who already had a critical race consciousness. This formatting lead the majority White groups to engage in discussions that dissected White emotions and experiences, as well as created and delineated a hierarchy of White antiracist ally practices.

In Chapter Three, I interrogated how the practices of Coming Together not only silenced people of color, but demobilized the potential activism of participants through dehumanizing them and through letting their complicities of privilege go unexamined. I described how the process of dehumanization through racialization was painful for me, personally, in that it got me caught up in my racial identity at the expense of my holistic identity. I connected this dehumanizing racialization to how Coming Together inhibited friendships in the small groups through essentializing race and making it into an insurmountable barrier. This dehumanization lead participants to be demobilized in that it continually focused them on reflecting on racialized identities and interpersonal interactions, rather than on creating community and engaging in politics. In the second part of this chapter, I explored the various complicities of the group members and how it lead to conflicts in either small group. I argued that, ultimately, the way these conflicts were addressed never fully acknowledged the class complicities of the group members, permitting them to deprioritize racial justice work. Thus, the participants in Coming Together were demobilized through being facilitated to focus too much on their racial identity and not enough on their other complicities with structural violence in capitalism.

In Chapter Four, I gave examples of more holistic and critical forms of personal reflection in RC and GCO, describing the detailed and situated self-knowledge I produced and how it was politically motivating for me. Then I delineated how I was always pushed further in GCO to connect that critical personal reflection to the group's

collective knowledge, my positionality within the group and systems of oppression, and the work of community organizing campaigns. This process was mobilizing in that it continually pointed me towards political campaigns and the creation of anti-oppressive community. In the second half of the chapter, I described in detail the intentional anti-oppressive community-building in GCO and how it relied on intentional relationship-building, intentional construction of community culture and values, and intentional conflict resolution. This strong community building allowed us to create more anti-oppressive realities within the group as well as through organizing campaigns, since we were able to work through our conflicts of privilege and oppression and always prioritize our political activism work.

This intentional anti-oppressive community-building is distinct to GCO among the three organizations. It is especially necessary in the context of the Amherst and the Five College area, in that it is a challenge to this area's specific form of capitalist alienation, which emphasizes individualism and removed intellectual critique. People from all over the U.S. and the world leave their countries, their states, towns, homes, and loved ones to come live in this area and pursue critical academic studies. Their participation in the economy of the university and colleges not only creates a lot of wealth for them and these towns, but it is participation in a capitalist institution of climbing the ladder, which is individualistic, competitive, and power-grabbing. The people in these institutions make their mark and grab their power through contributing to critical theory, which infiltrated the dominant culture of these towns in a way that normalizes critiques that dehumanize large groups of people, the people we live by and work with, and ourselves. This is exemplified in how the racially homogenizing informal-

academic critique articles were so prevalent throughout my experience in these social spaces, and especially in Coming Together. Amherst and the Five College area has a culture of capitalism that is highly influenced by academia, so that the competitive hierarchy-building takes the shape of critique, dehumanization, and self-righteousness, such as the White antiracist ally hierarchy. Intentionally creating community, which prioritizes the maintenance of the community and promotes values of acting with consideration for others in the community along with the self, is a direct assault to this capitalistic critique, dehumanization, and competition. In order to be in community, GCO students had to move their sights away from attempting to be *the* best scholar about such-and-such a topic, a trajectory that would lead to class complicity and self-righteousness in university economies, and, instead, towards having to assess their own complicities, modify their behavior to respect others, and prioritize the community value of challenging structural inequalities through activism. I am not arguing that all professors are necessarily complicit in the structures that privilege them and competitive and self-righteous in their scholarship, but merely that that the line between scholar-activism and complicity in the university economy is a difficult and blurry line to walk, especially with the pressure of the increasing adjunctification of the profession, something you know too well!

To conclude, I will re-emphasize how creating this anti-oppressive community required critical personal reflection and I will explore how it necessitated a situated form of antiracism. Working with the other GCO students across our differences for sustained periods of activism and cohabitation required that we treat each other with respect, honor each other in our work, and trust each other. Furthermore, our campaigns were

strengthened by our collective intersectional knowledge of systems of oppression. Both of these process of creating anti-oppressive realities—community-building and political activism—required rigorous and critical personal reflection. This entailed the development of our self-knowledge through personal reflection, to the point that it was detailed, highly situated and highly specific self-knowledge of our experiences in systems of oppression. From this “data” we were able to make demands on our community in order to make it anti-oppressive for ourselves, as well as demands on political institutions, which we could work to transform through campaigns.

In order to create our anti-oppressive community, not only did we need to share our self-knowledge and make demands for respect from each other, we needed to mobilize that self-knowledge with discretion. We needed to learn to consider when our self-knowledge might be pertinent to developing our anti-oppressive community and our collective knowledge about systems of oppression, and when the knowledge of others’ in the community might be more important. We practiced sitting in silence, stepping back, and asking questions in our dialogues in order to foreground the knowledge of other members. In this way, we began to situate our own experiences within the experiences of people in the group, to situate our knowledge in systems of oppression, and to critically assess when our self-knowledge is useful to creating anti-oppression realities. Even if it was not always foregrounded in the group’s collective knowledge, our self-knowledge, as well as our commitment to each other, constituted our personal motivation for participating in the political mobilization of the group.

It was through this critical personal reflection that the GCO group was able to practice a form of antiracism that was not foregrounded in the group at all times. We

prioritized activism that foregrounded attacks to structural violence and had a layer of significance of structural racism, rather than trying to “dismantle” racism as an entity in itself. In our community-building, we foregrounded the fact that we were each complex wholes of intersectional identities, rather than privileging one identity category (i.e. race) over any other. When White group members began acting in a way that manipulated their power in racist ways, racism was addressed in the group, just as classism would have been addressed had the semester continued longer. This foregrounding was based in our experiences with race and with each other, and we addressed it in order to restore anti-oppressive dynamics in our community as well as to continue to prioritize the activism against structural inequalities. Overall, it was a much more humanizing and politically mobilizing experience for me, especially in how we had to work through our conflicts and perspective of race-essentializing dehumanization in order to restore our relationships and trust, when compared to my experience in Coming Together.

And that is how my time in the Pioneer Valley came to a close. After finishing the semester, I proceed to interview various people I had worked with in these three organizations in addition to spending time working with the Pioneer Valley Project on their current community organizing event. I felt more grounded in my own experiences than I ever had before, more confident in my activism work and relationships-across-difference, and more motivated to engage in political mobilization in the future. My critical self-knowledge, while still imperfect and not wholly critically conscious, was pulling me back to Michigan in order to be with family and to engage in activism work with people and in a place that I know and care about. It was also pushing me away from the university, where class complicities and university economy came into conflict too

deeply with my values and my home. I was also liberated from the academy and anthropology a little by the knowledge that I could make opportunities and draw on familial security while searching for a job in community work, or that I could find more stable and secure work (even if it didn't utilize my anthropology degree or my higher education degrees whatsoever) and do community organizing for fun. That feeling of confidence and security in my academic trajectory and my work options is one of the greatest gifts of the critical personal reflection in which I engaged for this thesis. I will conclude with an example of how this is only one of the ways this thesis will influence me and the people I build relationships with.

Over Sweetest Day weekend in October 2016, my parents visited my partner and me, staying for two nights in our apartment in Midtown, Detroit. We had chosen Midtown since it was already gentrified; we wouldn't be invading spaces that are still almost ubiquitously low-income but being eyed for major developments. This would allow us to live in a walkable neighborhood with restaurants until we got our bearings in this city, something that would comfort my mom, who has only been inside the city limits one or two times in her life. Detroit was a big Black box of a city to the people where she and I grew up, including us. We had stereotype-influenced perceptions of Detroit as a city of immense violence and danger and racism-influenced perceptions of African Americans, who are the vast majority in this city. We had no knowledge of the city, other than that it had the state's sports stadiums and the Masonic Temple, where we once saw the Broadway production of *The Lion King*. And this is where I invited her and my dad to stay for a weekend, hinting that we were intending to stay there for at least a few years if not decades since we loved it so much. My mom got out of the car, eager to get into our

apartment a half a block away, with eyes big with fear and urgency. She began to look surprised as she saw students walking down the street, people sitting at the open-air bar, and people of many racial and ethnic backgrounds milling about our block. She loved that our apartment was one of the last lower-income holdouts in Midtown, and that two of the 7 tenants have lived here for ten-to-fifteen years, just like the retired art teacher who lived two houses down and had been inviting us to her community meetings. But she'd been there for forty. She began to feel comfortable and like Detroit was a livable place, and my dad, on the other hand, was extremely excited to say that his daughter had moved back to Detroit, where his parents had fled 45 years before.

We spent the entire trip driving around different neighborhoods with minimal-to-no blight, exploring the cultural center of Midtown (e.g. the Detroit Public Library's main building!), and eating at restaurants. We began their learning about gentrification and structural racism by eating at various restaurants in Midtown—some where all of the patrons were African American, some where they were nearly all White, some where they were mixed and had a lot of students. My mom and dad felt entirely out of place at Starters, the restaurant in which we were the only people who weren't African American. My dad asked me if we were invading on territory we shouldn't be, my mom had wide eyes of concern, and they both settled into their seats and began to understand that the people around them—the restaurant was packed—weren't dangerous, but were just people enjoying a Friday night. My dad, as a couple drinks passed, began joking about how he would say, "Hey! I'm pretty fly for a White guy!" if someone did confront us. Not knowing that this restaurant had a mostly African American customer base, my partner and I thought that being confronted about gentrification would be completely

possible! We've been hearing people say, "to live in Detroit is to talk about race and racial politics," and when we went to a community meeting on local ballot proposals, the mention of gentrification got many whoops, hollers, and claps. We told my parents that people might say something, but that it would be okay. We had a great dinner, had fun interactions with the wait staff, and we walked home.

My mom couldn't stop reiterating how great she felt about being pushed outside of her comfort zone, and that she's starting to understand this antiracism stuff that we talk about so much. The next day, my parents began to tire of the "hipster food" at the other restaurants in Midtown, which cater to a mostly White, gentrifying, and student customer base. Marvin and I began talking about how these restaurants weren't built for people like them or for people like those at Starters, and then we began talking about how our landlords are looking to sell our apartment building, a process that would undoubtedly include renovation and hiked-up rental rates. We talked about how we might have to leave Midtown, pointing to shabby but beautiful and quirky turn-of-the-century brick houses on the market for \$500,000. My parents began to see what gentrification was, and even argued against it. Throughout the rest of the day, they repeated their mantra, "We just want real food!" whenever they thought about the gentrification and restaurants in Midtown. They felt confident and grounded in their class-based experience of food in a place that was dominated by a gentrifying White upper-middle class population.

Just before they left on Sunday morning, my partner found an article about a community service organization that would be providing money to low-income families in Midtown to cover their rent hikes, and he brought it up to all of us. He and I began tossing around the critiques of feasibility of that project long term, the need for mixed-

income housing development, and organizing for stable rent policies. My parents, new to all of these ideas, just listened with interest, until my dad said, “Yeah!” about stabilizing rent and mixed-income housing. These small moments, while not doing much in the way of activism, are my first experiences with attempting to facilitate community-building across difference. In doing so, I’m honoring my relationships with my parents and what I know about them, pushing them to lean into some discomfort, and politicizing their lived experience. It’s small, but these practices of mine will grow as I find people who are also doing intersectional coalitional work combatting structural violence and racism in this city.

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