CRITICAL IDENTITY CLASSROOMS AS TURBULENT SPACES:
EXPLORING STUDENT AND INSTRUCTOR EXPERIENCES
WITH IDENTITIES, PRIVILEGE, AND POWER

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study focuses on students and instructors who study, teach, and learn critical concepts of identity, such as gender, race, and dis/ability. The participants’ reflections on these university classroom experiences are examined in order to explore the ways they understand their encounters with privilege and power. In classes that take up discussions of identity – critical identity classrooms – the intention is often to teach, study, and learn how (our) identity or identities manifest in social life, how these manifestations can be problematized, and how these explorations can lead to social change. Often, these courses centre on discussing identity in terms of oppression, rather than investigating the intersections of privilege and oppression. A major contention of this study is that a lack of discussion about privilege in the academy enables the pervasive invisibility of many unearned social advantages to remain under-theorized and ‘invisible.’

This study questions how it is that we come to understand concepts of identity to be one-dimensional, rather than understanding privilege as dynamic and situated. Using in-depth interviews with 22 undergraduate students and 8 instructors from 2 contrasting universities, this study explores 3 main questions: (1) How do students in higher education who are engaged in critical identity studies interpret privilege, both for others and themselves? (2) How do the participants understand their experiences inside and outside the classroom to be related to notions of privilege and oppression that often arise in critical identity classrooms? (3) How does using a multi-site approach to study critical
identity classroom experiences extend the ways in which students’ understandings of privilege can be explored? Using these research questions, the intersections of space/location, power, and identities as they inform notions of privilege and oppression are demonstrated. The participants’ reflections expose how questions of belonging, safety, and ‘place’ contribute to the silences around the study of privilege. The study suggests that understanding privilege and oppression as located within the same network of relations, rather than as binary opposites, will aid in making privilege more accessible as a topic of study in critical identity classrooms.
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CHAPTER 1

A PRIVILEGED TERRAIN? ENCOUNTERS WITH THE STUDY OF IDENTITY

Because I study identity, I critically dissect it now so much that it’s driving me crazy. I don’t try to say that my identities are ruining my life... but it’s just always around me – religion, my race, my gender, and my culture. It’s just, like, a hot mess. Sometimes I just wish I can get it out of my head and think about other things, but it is what it is. (Bushra)

I can read about diversity or hear about racism, but to begin to understand that it actually happened to one of your peers or classmates enables something...because while I can say that I see it, I haven’t actually lived it. (Anna)

Introduction

Through our studying, teaching, and learning do we experience identity in transformative ways? In the above epigraph, Bushra, a senior undergraduate student, expresses that through her studies she has come to see her identities as “always around her” and she sees this ever-presence as “a hot mess.” “Hot mess” is defined in the Urban Dictionary as “[w]hen one’s thoughts or appearance are in a state of disarray but they maintain an undeniable attractiveness or beauty” (Pounce 2010). This definition perfectly suits a description of identity. Identities, such as gender, ability, race, sexuality, class, age, and so on are at once performed, fragile, un/real, enticing, painful, and always already with us.¹ In recent years, the critical study of identities has undergone, forgive the pun, an identity crisis. Critiques of essentialism, largely in relation to the problems of identity politics (McNay 2010), have rendered the exploration of identities passé. But, as I said above, identities are always already with us. We use identities, however problematically, in order to become thinkable to one another; our identities matter, according to Judith Butler (1993), because they give our bodies meaning.

To speak within these classical contexts of *bodies that matter* is not an idle pun, for to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what ‘matters’ about the body, its very intelligibility. In this sense, to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where ‘to matter’ means at once ‘to materialize’ and ‘to mean.’ (Butler 1993, 32)

The ability to come to “know the significance” of bodies, of identities, and how they relate to privilege and power is, in my opinion, best explored through the ways in which they have been taken up in the academy. Spaces – classrooms, dialogues, literatures – within the university can offer the possibility of interrogating how privilege and oppression manifest in social life; these spaces can also encourage “the development of a critical awareness of one’s social condition and society in general: that is, the development of a critical cultural literacy, the ability to critically analyze one’s social and political world on multiple levels as a prelude to and integral component of action” (Kreisberg 1992, 19).

My study engages with students and instructors\(^2\) from two Ontario universities in an effort to explore the ways in which their experiences with the study of identity have impacted on how they understand their encounters with privilege, power, and Other\(^3\) identities. In general, experience can be understood as the process of creating one’s social reality through engagements with social and historical relations (de Lauretis 1984). My emphasis on experience is key here: I do not aim to investigate the explicit ways in which identity is studied in higher education, but rather I am interested in how processes of learning and teaching are reflected upon. As Magda Lewis claims,

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2 In this study, I use the term instructor to mean those who are hired to teach in the university; this definition includes professors, sessional instructors, and course directors. While these positions differ in other respects, this study is primarily focusing on instructors as teachers in classrooms.

3 ‘Others’ are those individuals and collectivities that are viewed as external to the self; through relational processes of identification, this externalization is often a result of social oppression that casts the Other in the role of ‘outsider’ (Jenkins 1997).
“[u]niversities are both the site where reactionary and repressive ideologies and practices are entrenched and, at the same time, the site where progressive, transformative possibilities are born” (1993, 145). Interrogating social hierarchies has become well-established within the academy, yet there are significant areas of contention regarding how information about identities – particularly with regard to the ways in which privilege can be understood – is disseminated through teaching and learning in what I call the critical identity classroom.

I define these critical identity classrooms as the spaces where the intention of a course is to engage with the critical exploration of how an identity or identities manifest in social life, how these manifestations can be interrogated and problematized, and how these explorations can lead to social change. Critical identity classrooms are spaces that are open to interpretation – what is or is not included cannot be easily defined here as it depends upon the combination of the aims of the instructors, the aims of the students, the atmosphere created by the course participants (which can often be liberatory and/or painful), the location of the classroom and its effect on who may or may not enter into the space, and so on. Critical education can “incur feelings of anger, grief, disappointment, and resistance, but the process also offers students new windows on the world: to develop the capacity for critical inquiry regarding the production and construction of differences gives people a tool that will be useful over their lifetime” (Boler and Zembylas 2003, 111). It is not my intention to create a boundary that limits the possibilities of what can or will occur within a critical identity classroom, but, for the purposes of clarity, these classrooms are where pedagogical intention often begins from the space of identity, particularly with the aim of exploring and promoting anti-oppressive/social justice education in order to theorize and deconstruct social

4 To be critical, in its most straightforward understanding, “involves first discovering the who, what, when, where, and how of things...and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables you to determine what matters most” (hooks 2010, 9). Adopting a critical stance means to engage with the underlying assumptions and definitions that are being put forth in order to advance knowledge about a particular concept or issue (Kamler and Thomson 2007).
relations of power. These studies can include Women and Gender Studies, Critical Race Studies, Sociology of the Body, Critical Disability Studies, and Queer Theory.

The study of privilege is quite contentious in that privilege is implicated in much of what we do as academics and its presence is often uncomfortable to acknowledge. Privilege, with regard to discussion of identities, is currently theorized by feminist and other critical theorists as a category through which to demarcate certain bodies, subjects, and classes who possess unearned advantages that are systemically created and culturally reinforced (Bailey 2003; McIntosh 1990; McWhorter 2005). This understanding of privilege, however, does not speak to the ways that privilege and oppression intersect; identities are commonly seen to be positioned as privileged or oppressed, rather than as relational to both privilege and oppression, a viewpoint which limits our understandings of self and how our embodiments move through various positionalities throughout our lives. To move the conversation of privilege to where it is seen to intersect with oppression will expose the ways in which privilege, like oppression, has a teachable and learnable place in the critical identity classroom. These intersectional\(^5\) discussions take up “...the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories gender/race/class visible...by employing methodologies compatible with the poststructuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmaking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory workings of power” (Davis 2008, 74).

Teaching about notions of privilege is in no way entrenched within critical identity classes. When it is present, most often the upper-class, white, male able body is positioned as ‘the subject’ of social power and prestige and all identities and bodies that are outside of that categorization are seen as Other. As an introduction to the study of privilege, this positioning of ‘the subject’ can be fruitful, but as the totality of addressing social privilege this image is oversimplified and under-theorized. In

\(^5\) “‘Intersectionality’ refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis 2008, 68).
studying identities, however, it has become quite obvious to me that ‘oppressed’ identities are somehow considered less singular, more fluid, more visible, more performative, and more important to the study of identity and equity than ‘privileged’ identities. Teaching identity primarily in terms of oppression needs to be troubled, as this limited focus can negate the understanding of the ways our privileges also influence our relationships to ourselves and each other.

The presence of privilege within social life is overwhelmingly obvious to some, yet unseen and unacknowledged by others. The colloquial language of privilege, with reference to advantage, luck, wealth, freedom, and/or rights, silences the many other ways in which the conditions of privilege function. Privileged identities, body types, social ascriptions and spaces are often made visible only through extreme examples of wealth and prestige, but these examples overshadow the daily expressions of privilege that can be found in every facet of social life. Critical scholars often critique addressing the dailyness of privilege because of the ways in which these complexities are often considered to be problematic, insofar as they (potentially) re-centre on normative and often oppressive positions. Yet, foreclosures on discussions of privilege in educational spaces enable the invisibility of many identity privileges to remain unchallenged, unexposed, and unseen. As privilege itself is often conceptualized as invisible and normative, such as ‘normal’ versus disabled bodies, a study that centres on privilege as inseparable from ‘identity’ will expose the ways in which these binary oppositions are limiting while also pointing to the importance of speaking privilege as personally and socially transformative. The following sections in this chapter further introduce the key aspects of my project, including my personal inspiration for its inception, its research questions, theoretical underpinnings, and major concepts that frame the ways it can be understood.

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6 See the section in this chapter entitled “The Ethics of Speaking Dominance” for a discussion of ethical considerations regarding recentring dominant identities.
‘Never-Not’ and Fluid? Questioning Identity

My experiences in higher education have taught me that identities are fluid, are in constant motion, interpretable, and relational. This makes perfect sense to me. The identities of some people that I love are in constant motion – queer and mixed race identities fit with descriptions of movement and fluidity. I, however, am white. In fact, I am very white. My skin so pale that, at times, it is translucent. I cover my skin to protect it so that it will not be burned by any alteration to its undeniable whiteness. I am never-not white. I am also sometimes nothing. In spaces of seemingly all-white people – like the town that I grew up in where race is a far-off thought to most who live there – I (now) know (and sometimes I feel like the only one who does) that I am never-not white.

Of course, I could go through a list of the identities that I see myself within. Many feel like they are also never-nots. I recognize this singularity because of my identities that are read as fluid. My gender and sexuality have been called into question on a number of occasions via the extraordinariness of my height. My tall body often harkens questions of transgender embodiments. These moments of performance (Butler 1999) and interpretability further solidify my other identities that are never called into question, never read as anything other than what they ‘are’ and what they will continue to ‘be.’

I study and espouse the beliefs in fluidity, movement, and subjective experiences that shape who we are in one moment so that we can become and continue to become in the next. Yet, I hesitate when I use those words to describe myself regarding the identities that captivate my scholarly interest. I am never-not white. As Ladelle McWhorter claims in relation to her own “fundamental” and “unchanging” queer subjectivity, “…my being queer is not natural; it is an historical social accomplishment. And it is not my accomplishment alone” (1999, 4). Similarly, this ‘fundamental’ and ‘unchanging’ state of my whiteness implies permanence and solidity. Of course, it is possible
that what white has come to mean may change from the privileged positionality it has held over the course of my lifetime, but it has yet to do so.

I recognize that a focus on identity is no longer seen as progressive in many scholarly circles. Using identities as starting points for conversation is often frowned upon as these conversations can render identities as essential to the body, as unchanging, as strictly coherent – clearly, this is not my aim. I am, however, conflicted. I feel as though I am never-not white largely because I have never been asked anything about my racial ancestry regardless of where I have been in the world, but I also know that identities are fluid: “...the subject arrives again and again to her own becoming through a series of transitions – across time and space, communities and contexts – throughout the course of her life” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 27). How can I never-not appear as something and yet always be in the process of becoming something else? How can I attempt to make this conflict productive for those of us who study and teach identities? It is not my intention to use this project to resolve this conflict; rather, I see this conflict as part of my inspiration to further dwell with questions of identity.

The concept of becoming emerges through relational understandings of identity: “The politics of relation are spatially and temporally bound: where we place our bodies, how we spend time, the mundane and significant events that give texture to our lives all give rise to our becoming” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 34). A politics of relation allows us to see beyond simplistic binaries to a space where, as Aimee Carrillo Rowe contends, “feminists are joined (or divided) over politics and, by extension, through shared (or segregated) experience” (2008, 9-10). Our situations, our places, our understandings of ourselves are of interest to me because they speak to the dynamics involved in mediating what we ‘know’ and what we ‘feel,’ the meanings of our educational practices, the difficulties of reflection, and the place(s) identities hold in the construction of our lives.
Bodies as Project(ion)s

My research explores understandings of privilege among senior undergraduate students and instructors in higher education – itself a privileged space – and the enmeshments of privilege, location, and classroom encounters. In order to study privilege as a series of enactments that are in the process of becoming and are performed through bodily and spatial processes, the analysis in this work emerges from interviews that I conducted with 30 respondents (29 of whom identify as women, 1 who identifies as male; 22 students, 8 instructors) who are engaged in the higher education spaces where privilege is not only enacted, but explicitly confronted – critical identity classrooms.

Privilege is socially created and reinforced in order to support (often unearned) advantages. Thus it can be enacted through many complex and fluctuating expressions of identities. This study questions how it is that we come to understand concepts of identity to be one-dimensional, such as privilege being commonly associated with white and/or male and/or the upper-class, rather than understanding privilege as dynamic and situated. I examine how participants understand and engage with privilege – through their reflections on higher education classroom encounters/experiences via, for example, their notions of performance (Butler 1999), resistance (Ignatiev 2004), and/or desire (Seshadri-Crooks 2000). It has been my working assumption that privilege “leaks into and becomes integral to everyday life in the academy” (Ng 1997, 46) and thus my aim for this project is to bring the discussion of privilege to the fore as a critical and useful component of exploration within critical and anti-oppressive theorizing.

Theorizing the body necessarily requires thinking through the spaces in which bodies are found and how those spaces reflect the fluidity of how identities are understood. A focus on the academy as a site that can encourage a critical understanding of privileged embodiment must necessarily consider the inter-subjective power dynamics that occur within the institution and how
subject formation actively occurs there. With regard to my study, I am using a multi-site approach – interviewing students and instructors from two Ontario universities – in an effort to explore my belief that space/location is fundamental to how individuals understand themselves and their society. These two universities, which I call Southern University (SU) and Northern University (NU), are located in cities which vary dramatically by socio-cultural and socio-economic factors, and they were specifically chosen in order to further explore the ways in which identities are similarly and disparately taught, understood, and conveyed in spaces that differ significantly by race and class.

As a main focus of many socially progressive classrooms is to confront the complexities of identity, these classroom engagements undoubtedly cause tension and it is in those uncomfortable moments where I feel we learn the most. I believe that those tensions, while related to pedagogy, are most often created by the varying dynamics of power situated in the identities of students, instructors, and the questioning of social hierarchies. These tensions within the academy are further complicated by the fact that the academy is a privileged and exclusionary space.

This work is not a study of pedagogy or classrooms per se, but rather I aim to theorize classrooms as a site where identities have been/are complicated through conceptions of power for both students and instructors. My interests primarily lie with how students conceptualize themselves once they leave the critical identity classroom, as it is outside of the classroom space that they have the ability to reflect on the ways in which identities have been interrogated and/or problematized in their classrooms. A secondary aspect of this project was to interview instructors engaged with anti-oppressive work to explore how their notions of power, privilege, and identity are related to understandings conveyed by the students. In the hopes of enriching the ways in which privilege can be conveyed and reflected upon, the final component of my research entails asking interested respondents to participate in a reflection journal regarding our interview.
A key element of my study is to engage with what I consider to be ‘visible privilege’: that is, the privilege that is granted to identities that are seen to be culturally dominant – in general, white/light-skinned, male, young, upper-class, heteronormative, and/or nondisabled. The focus on appearance is crucial here as “our ‘visible’ and acknowledged identities affects our relations in the world, which in turn affects our interior life, that is, our lived experience or subjectivity” (Alcoff 2006, 92). Appearance comes to matter within spaces, particularly through notions of who appears; for example, within NU critical identity classrooms, racialized bodies ‘appear’ amongst the seeming homogeneity of white people, whereas within SU critical identity classrooms white bodies are the minority. These dynamics of appearance in the classroom affect the interactions, readings (of literature and bodies), and understandings of the topics under discussion.

The effects of this research extend well beyond the scope of this study, as the development of critical anti-oppressive consciousness can lead to more than mere social tolerance of differences, but rather to the actual acceptance and embracing of diverse experiences which should be fundamental to every society. As a white, nondisabled feminist student and researcher, I have come to recognize that it is my responsibility to be engaged with my own privileges and, in turn, excavate, research, and teach the possibilities, complexities, and limitations of identities and anti-oppressive praxis. I firmly believe that this study will contribute to the Canadian and international literature concerning the theorizing of anti-oppressive studies and practices, especially as they relate to the spaces we inhabit, conceptual and practical understandings of privilege, and the importance of feminist and equity programs in higher education.

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7 As the concept of ‘race’ is a social construction, it “is best understood in terms of social and political processes of racialization, or race-making” (Baum 2006, 10). Bruce Baum argues that, “[r]acialized identities have notable cultural dimensions, but they are primarily a manifestation of unequal power groups...as racism involves exclusionary practices that establish and perpetuate unequal distributions of social status, opportunity, income, wealth, and power among racialized groups” (2006, 11).
Research Questions

To examine the ways in which students and instructors have come to understand and reflect upon their experiences of the critical identity classroom, this study is framed by several distinct but interrelated questions:

(1) How do students in higher education who are engaged in critical identity studies interpret privilege, both for others and themselves?

(2) How do the participants understand their experiences inside and outside the classroom to be related to notions of privilege and oppression that often arise in critical identity classrooms?

(3) How does using a multi-site approach to study critical identity classroom experiences extend the ways in which students’ understandings of privilege can be explored?

I contend that critical identity classrooms are spaces that can provide the opportunity for critical dialogue; these classrooms may inspire students and instructors to go beyond an engagement with the practicalities of education – lectures, essays, exams, etc. – and to foster meaning-making that impacts the understandings that we have of ourselves. Through my research questions, I was able to develop an open-ended framework for the interviews that helped to tap into participants’ recollections and understandings of the impact that classroom encounters have on their sense of self and the meanings that they ascribe to their educational experiences. These questions underlie each chapter of this dissertation and they will be returned to in the concluding chapter.

While investigating the ways in which students and instructors make meaning out of the topics that they study – gender, race, class, sexuality, and, to a far lesser extent, disability – as well as other demarcations of identity – age, space/location, im/migration, media representations – our conversations did not begin with the topic of privilege. Rather, they began with a far more familiar
topic: oppression. The discussion of oppression primarily led to the participants’ discussions of physical appearance, the presence or absence of certain bodies in the classroom, their own experiences as ir/relevant, and what matters regarding the study of identity. While these topics and many others will be developed in the analysis chapters of this dissertation, it is crucial to understand the terrain of the interviews here. A major focus on the body, its identities, and how those identities function through appearance as it relates to power often dominated our conversations of identity. In order to study these areas, I deploy the use of feminist poststructuralism, which is where my discussion will now turn.

**Theoretical Underpinnings – Feminist Poststructuralism**

My research specifically focuses on the study of the body, power, subjectivity, and discourse, which are all subjects of feminist poststructuralism. Poststructuralism, in its most basic sense, “questions the idea that meaning is a transparent reflection of the world” (Weedon 2000, 397). Feminist poststructuralism breaks down limiting dualisms, such as privileged/oppressed and subject/object, as “it is crucial that we see how the terms interrelate, how they have been historically constructed as opposites, and how they have been used to justify and naturalize power relations” (Orner 1992). As Michael A. Peters and Nicholas C. Burbules write, “[p]olitically speaking, poststructuralism aims to expose structures of domination by diagnosing ‘power/knowledge’ relations and their manifestations in our classifications, examinations, practices, and institutions” (2004, 5). Feminist poststructuralism exposes the power relations underlying the complexity of identities as they manifest in social practices and institutions, and in doing so enable the development of active strategies for change.
Discussions of identity are fraught with conflict, as the understandings of gender, race, disability, class, sexuality, and so on are unable to posit a unitary understanding of the individual. This conflict, however, is embraced by feminist poststructuralists, as it reflects how we inhabit a range of positions in relation to the ways we experience identities in the myriad social spaces that each individual occupies. Chris Weedon claims that “[f]or a theoretical perspective to be politically useful to feminists, it should be able to recognize the importance of the subjective in constituting the meaning of women’s lived reality” (1987, 8). It is through language and discursive practice that an individual’s experience becomes meaningful, and by deconstructing social mechanisms of power/knowledge we can begin to see the ways in which structures of domination impose and redefine boundaries for what is seen as possible for each person. This is not to say, however, that there are not commonalities between the ways in which we each ascribe meanings to experiences based on identity, and it is within these commonalities/groupings where social powers (or a lack thereof) are made most visible.

With regard to the study of education, feminist poststructuralism is useful because it “tends to emphasize anti-essentialism and historicize questions of who we are and what we are studying when we study ourselves; it questions the humanism underlying traditional accounts of the unified, autonomous, and transparent self” (Peters and Burbules 2004, 4-5). Further, it prioritizes the voice of individuals in order to emphasize the ways in which social transformation begins at the local level, as each individual is neither wholly powerful nor powerless. However, “[t]o say that patriarchal relations are structural is to suggest that they exist in the institutions and social practices of our society and cannot be explained by the intentions, good or bad, of individual women or men” (Weedon 1987, 3). It is through critical examination of discursive practices, such as the ways in
which patriarchal relations inform notions of masculine privilege, that we are able to contextualize experiences and analyse social power.

Feminist poststructuralism is not without its critics, however, as it “is seen as denying the authenticity of individual experience by decentring the rational unitary, autonomous subject of liberal humanism, or the essential female nature at the centre of much radical feminism, rendering it socially constituted within discourse” (Weedon 1987, 125). A cohesive answer to these charges would need more space than can be allocated here; however, I argue that this theory enables a deep exploration into the ways in which we internalize hegemonic relations and develop notions of what is normal and Other. It encourages a questioning of understandings of what is natural and inherent, while offering possibilities to re-imagine oneself, specifically in terms of the ways our identities are and can be understood by ourselves and those around us.

I have entitled this section “Theoretical Underpinnings” rather than using a more traditional heading such as “Theoretical Framework” so as to provide a distinction between those two understandings. The theoretical frame of my project is based on critical understandings of the body; however, the underpinnings – that which has led me to this interdisciplinary research focus and influenced the ways in which I understand concepts of the body and identity – is informed by feminist poststructuralism.

Exploring Key Terms

The terms presented below will be explored in an ongoing fashion throughout this dissertation, but the purpose of this section is to attempt to clarify some fundamental understandings of the key concepts that I will be using throughout my discussion and analysis – power, privilege, identity, and space.
Power

Power is a concept that, while important on its own, fundamentally informs my perspectives on privilege, identity, and space. While there are numerous theorists who have defined power, such as Max Weber (1958) who identifies power in terms of economic relations and social honour, my usage of power in this study is largely derived from Foucauldian notions of the relational aspects of power. For Michel Foucault, power infuses everything we do and everything we are: “The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces” (Foucault 1980, 74). Foucault sees power as omnipresent, “not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1990, 93).

Foucault also sees power as productive, which deviates from more common conceptions of power which positions it in terms of domination: “Foucault does not speak of power as a cause whose effect is some state of affairs or set of relations external to it. There is no outside to power. Rather, power is – occurs as – the events that are sets of relations. Power does not hold us in its grip; rather, we emerge historically within repeating circuits of events. We are events of power” (McWhorter 1999, 77). Seth Kriesberg argues that, despite these assertions, the dominant discourse of power, which he calls power over, prevails and is reflected in popular culture, politics, and the education systems of the West. He believes that this concept of power reflects a “relationship of domination” (Kreisberg 1992, 36). Kreisberg states, “...the predominant images and interpretations of power in our culture embody a conception of power as the ability to impose one’s will on others as the means toward fulfilling one’s desired goals. It is the ability to direct and control and to
manipulate and coerce if need be, sometimes for the good of all, most often for the good of the few” (1992, 45). Kreisberg, echoing Foucault, sees power over as coercive, while he argues that power with allows us to see relations as co-implicated and outside of the confines of dominant versus dominated. Power with transforms the common understanding of power: “Power with is not a zero-sum proposition where one person gains the capacity to achieve his or her desires at the expense of others. Rather, power with is a developing capacity of people to act and do together” (Kreisberg 1992, 71). The difficulty with discussing power is that the dominant discourse becomes trapped within the confines of the language of power, which requires vigilance when espousing the belief that “...power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault 1990, 93).

Privilege

As I previously stated, privilege is currently theorized by feminist and other critical theorists as a category through which to demarcate certain bodies and classes of unearned advantages that are systemically created and culturally reinforced. I feel that it is necessary to repeat my understanding of privilege, as it is the lens through which I conduct my analysis. With that in mind, I also understand that this conceptualization of privilege is a critical construction, one that only those interested in problematizing privilege will likely utilize, as more everyday engagements with the term tend to foster unquestioned conceptions of advantage, wealth, etc.  

As I will outline in the literature review chapter of this dissertation, privilege has been theorized in much critical identity literature in terms of stability and constancy, while marginalized identities are constructed as malleable, transitory, performative, and fluid. For anti-oppressive

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8 As I will address in more detail in Chapter 2, privilege is often discussed in terms of social class; of particular interest to the field of education are the ways in which elite education reproduces and sustains notions of meritocracy (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Howard and Gaztambide-Fernández 2010; Kingston and Lewis 1990).
education to continue to challenge hierarchical structures of oppression, it is essential that what privilege can mean across space, discipline, etc. is acknowledged in classroom environments as a construct that is as fluid and shifting as oppression. The relationship of privilege and power is one that also needs to be unpacked here. As I discussed in the previous section, power is often associated with domination; as associations with privilege and domination are also common, these two concepts – privilege and power – regularly become conflated. While power informs privilege, the exercise of power does not necessarily confer privilege.

Currently, privilege is primarily theorized by critical scholars as largely synonymous with whiteness (Alcoff 2000; Bonnett 1996; Dyer 1997; Harris 1993; Nakayama and Krizek 1999). The connections to whiteness are crucial, as whiteness is understood as something beyond skin colour; notions of whiteness as something are applied by these theorists to Western language, cultural practice, and social norms. These determinations are produced through what Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek deem the “rhetoric of whiteness”: “Whatever ‘whiteness’ really means is only constituted through the rhetoric of whiteness. There is no ‘true essence’ to ‘whiteness’; there is only the historically contingent constructions of that social location” (Nakayama and Krizek 1999, 90). This rhetoric, they claim, allows for the conceptualizing of white privilege in terms of understanding that whiteness “makes itself visible and invisible, eluding analysis yet exerting influence over everyday life” (Nakayama and Krizek 1999, 91). Whiteness, then, is a ‘figure in dominance,’ whose domination is secured, in part, by remaining unnamed and unremarkable.

There is a vast array of previous studies that engage with the understanding that whiteness is a main component of privilege (Bailey 2000; Freitas and McAuley 2008; McIntosh 1990; Rodriguez and Villaverde 2000; Rothenberg 2005). However, it is my contention that there is much more to the study of privilege than racialized linkages. I explore privilege primarily in relation to the three main
areas of identity that structure appearance in the West – race, gender, and ability. These identities are often deemed somehow ‘natural’ to the body rather than as social constructions of identity, and it is within this notion of ‘naturalness’ that real effects are often produced. Furthermore, I also engage with understandings of appearance as they relate to heteronormativity and social class. While these identities do not necessarily have as many visual cues as other aspects of identity, they are often implied through recognized stylizations of the body. My focus is a departure from all of the academic work which isolates one form of privilege from others, for example by concentrating on whiteness while not noting ability or gender.

Identity

Generally speaking, identity is a relational process through which we understand ourselves/others/groups at any given time, in any given place. Lewis claims that identities are “all converging/intersecting as well as diverging/contradictory social realities” (1993, 13). Stuart Hall furthers this assertion as he states that identity refers to a “meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpolate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’” (1996, 5-6). However, identity can also be understood as an entry point through which political motivation can bring an individual to a collective position (via identity politics) (Dean 2005); an often-misused analytical category (Brubaker and Cooper 2000); a fictitious operation used to limit and essentialize the self (Fuss 1989); or a psychosocial construction (Ashmore and Jussim 1997). The myriad forms through which identity is argued and conveyed cause any sort of cohesive understanding of identity to be limited and partial. In Mimi Orner’s discussion of identity, she states,
We are constantly called upon to locate those aspects of ourselves that are unique, different (but not too different) that make us who we are. But as conscious and unconscious subjects, we can never really know ourselves or others in any definitive way. There is always the possibility (and actuality) of a gap, of misinterpretation, of misrecognition when we try to make sense of our relation to others. We can never be certain of the meaning of others’ responses. We can never be certain of the meaning of our own responses. (Orner 1992, 84)

Taking into consideration all of the above assertions about the possibilities for what ‘identity’ has come to mean, I propose to understand identity as a relational organizing principle through which aspects of ourselves are inconsistently categorized, yet placed within thinkable terms.

As Butler (1992) argues, regardless of the intent of an individual, the ways in which bodies and performances are ‘read’ are always external to the individual, as our performativity exceeds us. Butler’s argument is that performativity consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s will or choice. Butler contends, “… the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making” (2005, 20). Identities such as whiteness, masculinity, and disability are seen to be representations of intrinsic ‘truths’: signifiers that become assumed through processes of social construction in order to express something essential about each person and how they experience the world. These “truths” are relied upon in order for us to become “thinkable” to one another (Kristeva 1982). In critical identity studies, spaces of marginality are explored in an effort to disrupt how these ‘truths’ serve to marginalize certain people in the process of privileging others. It is through critical identity studies that we have been directed “…to relate the oppression of women to other forms of oppression, thus making feminists’ concerns and the agenda for social change broader than sexism alone” (Hoodfar 1997, 212). To focus on
‘privilege as integral’ (versus ‘privilege as detrimental,’ problematic, entirely oppressive) to the process of how identities are understood, formed, performed, dismissed and resisted further clarifies the ways in which identities can be considered and deconstructed.

Space

Sherene Razack (2002) notes that geographers have expressed concern regarding non-geographers who are keen to embrace the notion of ‘space.’ Some geographers have expressed worry that scholars outside of their discipline may put forth “a seemingly unproblematic, common sense notion of space as a container, a field, a simple emptiness in which all things are ‘situated’ or ‘located’” (Gibson-Graham, 307 as quoted in Razack 2002, 7). In response to this charge, Razack (2002) and theorists from the ‘field’ of critical/feminist geography, such as Robyn Longhurst (2002; Longhurst and Johnston 2004; Berg and Longhurst 2003), Minelle Mahtani (2002a, 2006), Linda McDowell (1999), Nirmal Puwar (2004), and Gill Valentine (2001, 2007), among others, have used their analyses to encourage us to see identities as intertwining, interlocking, and/or inextricable with the spaces in which they are located. For example, Valentine argues that space, time, and identities are “co-implicated” (2007), as space must be considered an influence on which identities emerge as predominant or relevant. Raka Shome argues that the “multiple and shifting locations that we inhabit enable specific modes of knowing, reading, and experiencing the dominant” (1999, 110). Puwar furthers Shome’s assertion by claiming, “[s]ome bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically and conceptually), circumscribed as being ‘out of place’” (2004, 8). It is not only that some bodies are considered to be ‘out of place,’ as though there is an appropriate place for everybody, but rather that bodies constitute and are constituted by spaces (Puwar 2004).
The critical identity classroom is a particularly fruitful site for this study because of its potential to be personally, pedagogically, and socially transformative. I use the term ‘potential’ here to imply that these classrooms cannot be considered unified wholes – as though they will all necessarily produce the same effects based on the social justice aims implied in the course descriptions. Clearly, the dialogue and resulting action that occurs within and outside of these spaces is dependent upon the particular aims of each individual that chooses to enter into these classrooms. Interestingly, many of these spaces, such as women and gender studies, are considered to be ‘safe spaces’: “...a discursive arena that enables women to talk about issues that are too dangerous to discuss in other contexts” (Kozol 1999, 10). hooks (1994) argues that these classrooms could be created through the power of the instructor to place the utmost importance on valuing and recognizing the student voice. Instead of positioning the critical identity classroom as a ‘safe space,’ I understand the critical identity classroom to represent a space of turbulence. Some classrooms may fit Wendy Kozol’s above description, but other classrooms may actually feel oppressive based on a problematic instructor or student who speaks their offensive beliefs, for example. As Orner argues, “[h]ow power relations in the classroom are manifest is crucial. How do the subject positions inhabited by one student connect with the subject positions of everyone else in the room? How do these multiple identities and positions inform who speaks and who listens? Who is comfortable in the room and who is not?” (1992, 81). It must be acknowledged that not every critical identity instructor has a transformative or critical dimension within their pedagogy, but many of these courses do challenge the colloquial assumptions of identity and ask students (and instructors) to question the beliefs (oppressive or otherwise) that they have. Within this questioning, the turbulent nature of this pedagogical work emerges and evokes a disruption of the taken-for-granted beliefs that are a mainstay of social life and govern our notions of privilege and oppression.
While I will specifically discuss literature based on the sociology of higher education in Chapter 2, discussions of anti-oppression in higher education cannot be separated from the nature of the space itself as a representation of privilege – privileged knowledge, exclusivity via social class-based learning environments, etc. Theorists such as Jennifer G. Kelly (2002), Julia R. Johnson and Archana J. Bhatt (2003), Linda M. Alcoff (2000), and Donna LeCourt (2004) not only clarify the ways in which the classroom is a contentious (and transitory) space where identities ‘play out,’ but also describe how classrooms impact the ways in which identities are shaped, understood, and seen once outside of the classroom. Attending to the realities of the space itself as privileged is integral to the discussion of how the space of a critical identity classroom manifests in multiple and often conflicting ways, as well as the implications of those manifestations in terms of the identities that are engaging within those spaces.

**Furthering My Personal Engagement**

I thoroughly enjoy Jill Dolan’s romanticized notion of education, where she states that “[t]he classroom is an intimate place... Classrooms are places of longing and loss, in which embodied emotions roil to prompt the pursuit of intellectual fulfillment, a state that can only be attained for a moment. This is the stuff of desire” (2002, 147). My interest and desire for the messiness of studying identity, as well as my own conflicts with understanding my identities, is why I feel compelled to engage with what I consider to be a fascinatingly uncomfortable subject: privilege.

Ten years ago, I began to question gender discrimination and how judgments about my intelligence, body, career-prospects, etc. were often gender-based. I knew that I wanted to do something to challenge gender inequality, but I had no idea what that would entail. I left the space where the privilege of my embodiment had been shielded from me – a ‘white,’ working and middle-
class Northern Ontario community – and headed to York University to study Sociology and Women’s Studies in the hopes of finding my path to social justice and gendered equality(!). This ‘shielding’ meant that, of course, I had never considered that I was privileged.

For me, coming to consciousness about my privilege had as much to do with the courses I was taking as it did the socio-culturally diverse location (Toronto, Ontario) in which I was taking them. My body – my white, middle-class, hetero, able, thin, tall, femme, grrrl body – emerged and continues to emerge to me through my years of study in these diverse and contentious spaces. As Sarita Srivastava argues, there are “extended and predictable stages many white feminists move through as they learn about antiracism” (2005, 51). As she describes these stages, I see my journey reflected within them: “First, being color-blind, being unaware of color and race; second, becoming aware that racism is a problem and being committed to your own nonracism; third, becoming aware of your own racism and feeling terrible about it; and finally, being able to accept and live with the fact that you might be racist rather than fearing it” (Srivastava 2005, 51).

My interest in privilege was further developed during the interviewing that I did for my master’s research (Kannen 2006; Kannen and Acker 2008). My research focused on interviewing kindergarten teachers in a predominantly white community regarding anti-racist and feminist pedagogy. Through this process, I began to understand that I was using my privilege to gain access to these participants and it was my privilege that actually enabled the potentially subversive conversations to occur. I also began to see the ways in which the teachers, all of whom identified as white, discussed issues of identity (predominantly racial) as ‘us’ (white) versus ‘them’ (Other). Once I realized this was happening, I tried to use my ‘insider’ status to (mainly unsuccessfully) disrupt some of the teachers’ notions of identity, but these encounters sparked my interest in the ways in which privilege functions. In beginning to research the topic of ‘privilege,’ the prevalence of
privilege as racial is overwhelmingly clear in the literature (Ahmed 2007; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Razack 2001; Rodriguez and Villaverde 2000; Rothenberg 2005; Seshadri-Crooks 2000). Yet, I do not believe that it was strictly my whiteness that garnered my insider status; it was also my language, regional familiarity, gender, education, and visibly nondisabled body that encouraged the conversations to be conducted in the ways in which they were.

The Ethics of Speaking Dominance

As I previously mentioned, discussions of privilege can be considered problematic insofar as they (potentially) re-centre on a normative and often oppressive position. By this statement I mean that to study those in a position of social dominance, such as white, heteronormative, and/or nondisabled people, can shift the focus away from the importance of issues pertaining to those identities that are socially oppressed. These are issues of power. As Roxana Ng states, “[t]he social structure of inequality on the basis of class, gender, race, ability, and so on, which leaks into and becomes integral to everyday life in the academy, means that [members of the university community] do not participate in the academy as equals” (1997, 46).

In discussing the ways in which identities of privilege and oppression can and do exist simultaneously for each person, Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack address what they call a “race to innocence,” which is when those with privilege who are “challenged about their domination respond by calling attention to their own subordination” (1998, 339). Fellows and Razack argue that it is not surprising that we, as women, cling to our own subordination rather than point to our experiences of dominance because “our own claim for justice is likely to be undermined if we acknowledge the claims of Others – competing claims that would position us as dominant” (1998, 340). The limited dialogue surrounding the systems of domination within which we exist clouds the
ways in which we are able to see what these systems entail. Merely focusing our attention on our own subordination without acknowledgement of the privileges that we also experience leads to further silence on issues of power and privilege, which, in turn, undermines the aims of social justice.

As the concept of power is integral to my research project, the varying dynamics of power and privilege will be accounted for in diverse forms throughout my analysis. This point is made with the acknowledgement, however, that I believe I will not be successful in accounting for all of the ways in which my privileged identities are at work. I know that privilege is always with me. I believe that the performance of my privilege exceeds me (Butler 1992) and functions in ways that are so deeply ingrained within my daily life that I may only be able to account for some of them through reflection and after the influence of my privilege has potentially already taken effect. This process of reflection, however, is crucial to anti-oppressive education and must not be dismissed as irrelevant or ‘too late’ as some critics may imply. As I have argued elsewhere, because privilege (and oppression, as well) often functions through the ways in which we appear to one another, it is not possible to shed or distance oneself – as many allies claim – from the privilege ascribed to them through an act of ‘pure will’ or agency (Kannen 2008). However, recentring the dominant through critical interrogation can be shown to expose and break down the seemingly unreachable or unattainable space that privilege is afforded when it is under-theorized.

Summary and Dissertation Overview

This chapter has outlined the basic foundations of my project in order to situate the ways in which the study of identity is significant to the ways in which students and instructors can construct meanings and embodiments of privilege and oppression in their own lives. In Chapter 2, I review literature that focuses on the ways in which identity has come to be understood as relational. This
notion of relationality is first grounded in a discussion of understandings of the body and its connections to location/space and social power. It is from these understandings of the body that appearance and identities can then be theorized via notions of privilege. How appearances function is directly tied to the spaces in which they are found, and thus the literature regarding classroom environments and the interactions of bodies/identities found within them will then be addressed.

In Chapter 3, I explore the methodological processes of my research study. Within this chapter, I situate my research method within a feminist reflexive methodology. Following this discussion, I explore the rationale and processes of data collection, which include both interviews and participant journals. Lastly, I address the ways in which the methodology was impacted by conversations surrounding my pregnant and non-pregnant (mother) embodiments and other significant relations of power.

As the first of four analytical chapters of my dissertation, Chapter 4 – Initiating a Dialogue: Two Questions That Inspire Many More – emphasizes the student participants. This chapter engages with the nuances of dialogue as I address the ways each of our interviews began – discussing the spaces that the students consider home and how they begin to discuss the multiplicities of their identities. Here I also begin to think through the kinds of conceptualizations that the students offer regarding their own identities (as processes of normation, liberal-individualism, and critical self-reflection) so as to offer a more accessible reading (although not complete) of the ways that identities were being discussed.

Chapter 5 is entitled Studying Identity, Complicating Ourselves, as it exposes the ways in which privilege intersects with students’ educational experiences in order to further complicate their many understandings of identity. I begin this chapter with a student narrative regarding how she understands her identities and the ways in which her education informs much of this understanding.
Bushra’s narrative functions as a placeholder for the rest of the chapter on concepts of identity discovery. By discovery, I mean that I use the ways in which the participants address their relationship to the politicization of identities and how those critical engagements lead to further questions of belonging.

Chapter 6 – Embodying Power: The Instructors – is an introduction to the instructors. Here, I focus specifically on the power dynamics that infuse the concept of ‘instructor’ in the critical identity classroom. These bodies are demonstrated to embody power, create space, and, while politicizing identity, experience resistance by the students. In Chapter 7, I continue engaging with the instructors, but here their responses are joined by those of the students so as to have a more explicit discussion of privilege and the ways in which it manifests in the participants’ experiences as (un)teachable and (un)learnable and what the consequences for these various understandings are for critical identity classrooms; as such, this chapter is entitled Encouraging Turbulence: Speaking Privilege.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I reflect on the findings and contributions of this study. I begin by discussing the project itself and return to my major research questions. I also speak to the limitations of the study and how I perceive some of these ‘limitations’ to be functional contributions. I conclude the study by addressing possible directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2
FROM THE BODY TO THE CLASSROOM: EXPLORING KEY AREAS

I just find myself taking what I’ve learned and provoking discussions with others...and questioning why it is they think it’s okay to call women ‘bitches’ or ‘sluts.’ I find myself calling out racism all the time. When I watch TV or movies, I find that I am really critical about things like that now and I never was... [Thinking critically] kinda seeps into you. I do it and I don’t even realize it anymore...it’s now a part of who I am. (Jackie)

Scope of the Review

The critical identity classroom can be inspiring, clarifying, and dynamic, but it can also be a space of pain, confusion, and silence. These extremes emerge through the various identities that coalesce to create a space infused with power and knowledge. As students and instructors come together in a class where they are expecting (often difficult) discussions to surround identities, it is often impossible not to consider our own identities in relation to the conversations that are being carried out. We are all implicated when gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability are being interrogated, classified, and questioned. As my research explores the ways in which these classroom encounters are considered and reflected upon, my interests primarily focus on how the participants understand themselves and those with whom they share the critical identity classroom – how do the identities of classmates and instructors impact the ways in which we understand ourselves?

Before I can present a detailed engagement with the study itself, the thesis requires a review of literatures – primarily theoretical, but also empirical – that inform how it is that the body comes to mean something (Sociology of the Body; Feminist Engagements with the Body), why identities matter (Identity: The Body Appears), how these are connected through notions of privilege and spatiality (Identity Privilege), and the significance of the higher educational classroom as a site (Critical Engagements in Higher Education). This review may seem non-traditional in that it focuses more on reviewing theoretical concepts, rather than speaking primarily to similar studies or fields of
research. This diversion from the norm is due to the fact that my research does not ‘fit’ with the usual understandings of an academic field; rather, it is grounded in the experiences of the participants via their understandings of encounters they have had with theoretical themes. The most empirical aspect of this review relates to the main site within which each of the participants engage – the critical identity classroom. As with any review of literature, difficult choices must be made regarding what areas are given more time and attention than others, but these aforementioned categories structure the ways that I approached gathering my data and so they are the organizing principles governing this chapter.

This review begins with a case study. In order to frame the highly theoretical aspects of my work that will follow, I want to start by exploring a study conducted by Julia R. Johnson and Archana J. Bhatt. Their article, “Gendered and racialized identities and alliances in the classroom: Formations in/of resistive space” (Johnson and Bhatt 2003), is an accessible and honest take on the complexities of teaching and learning in critical environments. There is a significant absence of literature that attends to the complexities of learning about identity, as the majority of work focuses on the complexities of teaching identity. An aim of my work is to help fill this gap in the literature and offer the opportunity for students to voice their opinions on the study of identity. While Johnson and Bhatt’s (2003) work once again positions the study of identity from the point of view of those who teach it, their piece helps to strengthen the relevance and importance of each subsequent section of this chapter, so as to provide a reminder of the complexities and difficulties involved in engaging with identities in the classroom. Following this review, my focus turns to the theoretical grounding of my work – the body. I begin the theoretical discussion here because of the overwhelming emphasis that the interviewees place on those around them using primarily bodily descriptors – “That brown girl...”; “Students physically arrange themselves by...”; “My white body...”; “Disabled folk are...”
While I will analyze these forms of language-use in the analysis chapters, for the purposes of the literature review I begin with the framework that the participants also begin with – bodies foreground how it is that we can make sense of one another. Each subsequent section of this review builds upon the critical literature on the body, in terms of identity, appearance, and privilege, and then returning to the major site of my analysis that combines all of these aforementioned components, critical identity classrooms.

**Thinking Through Critical Spaces – A Case Study**

Johnson and Bhatt (2003) understand their alliance inside and outside the classroom as reflected through their embodied teaching experiences. Both authors address the complexities of and differences between their identities – Johnson, a white lesbian, and Bhatt, a straight woman of colour of Indian descent. In so doing, the authors emphasize how they use their embodiments as pedagogical tools so as to lead their students (and each other) into excavating notions of race, sexuality, gender, and space/place. This article speaks to Johnson and Bhatt’s insistence of the importance and difficulties of teaching and participating in discussions of privilege and oppression. While many other critical theorists emphasize the importance of disrupting notions of privilege through pedagogy, the social and personal dilemmas that go along with such pedagogical intentions are often unacknowledged. In contrast, Johnson and Bhatt discuss how they found themselves reinscribing essentialism in the same moments that they were attempting to disrupt it. For example, in a compelling discussion of Johnson’s attempt to conduct a subversive lecture on gender and sex, she explains how she came to the realization that some of the students may have believed that she was transgendered: “Yet as a person born biologically a woman who identifies as a lesbian and who was not readily seen…as a lesbian, I wanted to correct the student and out myself ‘appropriately.’ In
short, I found myself grappling with the same essentialist questions I was asking the students to reconsider” (Johnson and Bhatt 2003, 237). For Johnson to acknowledge the moments of her struggle to teach *and* embody transgression conveys how anti-oppressive work is rarely easy.

Importantly, Johnson and Bhatt discuss their decades-long academic and personal alliance as an on-going process of disrupting theoretical investments in ‘knowing’ the space and embodiments of the Other: “We engage each other’s differences because we know these differences as our own (as much as one can know another’s experience): We have *worked* to feel through experiencing the oppression the other has lived” (Johnson and Bhatt 2003, 233). This sense of ‘knowing’ is a contentious claim to make, as many critical theorists would argue that attempting to ‘feel’ the experience of the Other is an appropriative quest that negates the lived realities of privilege and oppression. For example, Homa Hoodfar argues that “a peril of critical teaching lies in its underlying assumption that the experiences and knowledge of different social groups *can* be captured, defined, understood, and shared by others, thereby overlooking the gap between living an experience and learning about it” (1997, 213). However, Johnson and Bhatt contend that the work they have done, through extensive cooperation with one another, has enabled them to know (with the disclaimer “as much as one can know”⁹ the experience of another) the experience of one another, not all Others.

Johnson and Bhatt argue, “[i]n order to form alliances that lead to social change, we must collaboratively create resistive spaces in/through which we can examine the dynamics of power that bind and divide us” (2003, 231). This idea of resistive space is not uncommon, but the manners through which resistances are achieved and defined is often unclear. Johnson and Bhatt’s approach to co-teaching seems highly effective, especially in the instances where their embodiments become their pedagogy: “Our work together made visible how entrenched we were in essentialism and the

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⁹ The authors explicitly discuss the difficulties and problematic elements of making claims to ‘know’ the embodiment of the Other, while attending to the discomfort and pain they had to go through to come to such an awareness.
discourses of oppression we were teaching against” (Johnson and Bhatt 2003, 236). Although it is compelling to read how the authors use their identifications as moments of disruption and affirmation in order to engage the students with discussions of their own identities, it is crucial to read how the students responded both positively (i.e. “you challenged us to step outside our comfort zone”) and negatively (i.e. “students who did not hold a ‘minority status’ were considered racist and/or unimportant”) to such an approach (Johnson and Bhatt 2003, 239-40). Students with visible privilege often experience a disruption to their sense of self in such an environment, where their notion of entitlement becomes dissolved through critiquing that which was ‘unseen,’ yet ever-present outside of the anti-oppressive space (such as whiteness, heterosexuality, maleness, etc.). Furthermore, such spaces provide empowerment to those with marginalized identities, yet this empowerment may be limited to the confines of the equity classroom. In other words, marginalized bodies can be resistive agents in these spaces and yet remain targets of normalizing, ableist, hetero-patriarchal power that is simultaneously occurring within the larger social space of society – and which may be the exact opposite experience of those with visible privilege.

To Johnson and Bhatt, the visibility of their identities is what is most salient in the space of their classrooms. Bhatt states, “[t]o me, who I am and what my students see is central to how they learn the material presented in the course. It is also obvious to me that my identity shapes and informs my research” (2003, 234). Similarly, Johnson states, “[m]y whiteness is obvious to my students of color, and visible through continual verbal marking to my White students. I appear to be a woman – by voice and body shape – and somewhere on the periphery of femininity/masculinity” (2003, 235). The ways they appear, understand that appearance, and engage with their students speak to the complex nature of classroom encounters and the boundaried understandings of identity and power in social space.
Sociology of the Body

To study privilege and its connection to relations of the body, my theoretical grounding begins with how the body is conceptualized in sociological literature. Predominantly, contemporary discussions surrounding the sociology of the body begin by acknowledging the significant absence of the body in much of the ‘classical’ sociological canon. As Bryan S. Turner argues, “[a]t the individual level, my body is an environment that is experienced as a limit, but my consciousness also involves embodiment. I both have and am a body” (1984, 58). It is only within the last few decades that the body has been ‘read’ into and onto sociology. By this I mean that much of the work on the body attempts to ‘read’ the body into the work of classical sociologists, while also positing new directions where ‘theorizing the body’ needs to be taken. Chris Shilling claims,

Instead of being neglected completely, the body has historically been something of an absent presence in sociology. The body has been absent from classical sociology in the sense that the discipline has rarely focused on the body as an area of investigation in its own right...however, [the sociological] concern with the structure and functioning of societies, and the nature of human action, has inevitably led it to deal with aspects of human embodiment. (Shilling 1993, 9)

This shift to understanding the body as investigatable by sociologists can be credited to various sources. Pierre Bourdieu (1984a), Erving Goffman (1959), Foucault (1975, 1988, 1990) and Turner (1984) are cited as key thinkers regarding the ways in which the body has been located and made locatable within sociological literature. While these four theorists may all stem from varying areas of inquiry – philosophy, symbolic interactionism, poststructuralism, and sociology – the connections emphasized among them often focus on how they each claim an interrelationship between processes of social ordering via notions of hierarchization, stigmatization, and social power.
Bourdieu – Hierarchized Bodies

While Bourdieu is most commonly associated with his notions of cultural capital and the social power that one has based on the amount of status, knowledge, economic capital, and so on that they acquire, what is of particular interest to me at this point are his discussions of bodies and social space. Bourdieu claims that bodies occupy a place, meaning that bodies/individuals are constituted within, and in relation to, social space (1999). However, that social space is also defined by its position relative to other sites. He states, “[t]here is no space in a hierarchized society that is not itself hierarchized and that does not express hierarchies and social distances, in a form that is more or less distorted and, above all, disguised by the naturalization effect produced by the long-term inscription of social realities in the natural world” (Bourdieu 1999, 124). The hierarchization of places and bodies is made to seem natural and normal through the power of social capital. According to Bourdieu, our access to language and education depends upon our social class and, thus, “capital makes it possible to keep undesirable persons and things at a distance at the same time that it brings closer desirable persons and things” (1999, 127). Bourdieu is implying that there is a vested interest in determining the proximity of bodies and that there are social controls involved in maintaining a distance between normal and Other bodies.

In Distinction: A Social Critique on the Judgement of Taste (1984), Bourdieu argues that the division of social classes creates dominant and dominated groups, and these divisions lead to embodied realities that mentally and physically separate these groups from one another: “Objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration are opportunities to experience or assert one’s position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept” (Bourdieu 1984a, 57). The practices of the dominant are made through social action, as “the different fractions of the dominant class distinguish themselves precisely through that
which makes them members of the class as a whole, namely the type of capital which is the source of their privilege and the different manners of asserting their distinction which are linked to it” (Bourdieu 1984a, 258). While Bourdieu positions class as the most important defining feature of identity, he importantly defines ‘dominant’ and ‘dominated’ as constructed categories that are inseparable from other aspects of one’s identity as well.

The discussion of social categorizations as constructed is crucial to the ways in which identities can be conceptualized as non-homogenous and fluid. This point is further emphasized by Bourdieu when he addresses how the legitimacy of social positions becomes justified: “The members of the different social classes differ not so much in the extent to which they acknowledge culture as in the extent to which they know it” (Bourdieu 1984a, 319). The implication here is that education, both formal and social, leads us towards the social allocations that we come to understand as appropriate based on our cultural capital. Distinctions are made in education – rehearsed, negotiated, recognized, reorganized, and rejected. As such, academia and academic qualifications are a main focal point of much of Bourdieu’s theorizing, as the relations of the classes are predicated on a system which rewards those who pass through an educational institution with the qualifications (i.e. cultural capital) to access social prestige and power in such a way as to keep Others dominated and distanced.

Goffman – Encounters with (Other) Bodies

Through Goffman’s work, it is made clear that bodies are inseparable from the meanings and readings that are thrust upon them, whether regarding one’s self or a stigmatized Other. Goffman claims that “[s]ociety establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories. Social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there” (1963, 2). Goffman conveys that the Other’s

10 Goffman places the reader in the frame of the normative body, which is also how I structure my discussion of his work.
appearance enables us to classify those bodies in relation to ourselves in terms of how they ‘don’t fit’ with the space that we share, and place them as inferior in relation to our own normal body (1963). To further this point, elsewhere Goffman asserts that “[f]or the individual, then, normal appearances mean that it is safe and sound to continue on with the activity at hand with only peripheral attention given to checking up on the stability of the environment” (1971, 239). It is through this notion of being visible to one another that is the most crucial aspect of how we come to understand and hierarchize one another – via the reiterations of appearance.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman does not only allude to this notion of reiterating or performing ourselves in order to maintain normalcy, but he states quite clearly that “[t]he unthinking ease with which performers consistently carry off such standard-maintaining routines does not deny that a performance has occurred, merely that the participants have been aware of it” (1959, 75). These social encounters must be understood through practices of mutual identification – we understand ourselves and behave in accordance to how we believe others perceive us. An acknowledgement of the visibility of our embodiments becomes internalized in order to force us to maintain as much normalcy as possible – in order to avoid suspicion: “So what the individual in part must come to be for himself is someone whose appearances are ones his others can see as normal” (Goffman 1971, 279). While acknowledging that recognition is context-based (*his* others), the positioning of an Othered body, or an Othered identity, reflects how the social order is maintained and how it is that we come to be. The individual that is Other...

may have to play the stigmatized role in almost all of his social situations, making it natural to refer to him, as I have done, as a stigmatized person whose life-situation places him in opposition to normals. However, his particular stigmatizing attributes do not determine the nature of the two roles, normal and stigmatized, merely the frequency of his playing a
particular one of them. And since interaction roles are involved, not concrete individuals, it
should come as no surprise that in many cases he who is stigmatized in one regard nicely
exhibits all the normal prejudices held toward those who are stigmatized in another regard.
(Goffman 1963, 138)

The latter point Goffman makes here is key – one identity of an individual does not supersede all
others and it is these contexts of recognition, location, and power that affect how bodies are
understood and where/when it is that these understandings matter.

Foucault – The Body and Power

Foucault’s contributions to the study of institutions, power relations, and their constitutive
relation to discourse will infuse much of the analysis that my dissertation offers; specifically, his
engagements with the body and its relation to power is what I aim to address here. Foucault
encourages the understanding that the ‘lived body’ is both a biological unit and a social actor. Bodies
have physiological potential and limitations, yet they can surpass their corporeality through their
social embodiment; in other words, the social aspects of who we are (or how we appear to one
another) garners meanings in ways that mere physiology is incapable of explaining. Foucault claims
that the body, in its presentation, exemplifies how notions of authenticity are constructed and
reproduced in an attempt to obscure the conflict and impossibility of achieving the intended
expressions: “The body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires,
failings, and errors. These elements may join in a body where they achieve a sudden expression, but
as often, their encounter is an engagement in which they efface each other, where the body becomes
the pretext of their insurmountable conflict” (Foucault 1984, 83). This body, then, is not a cohesive
unity, but rather a collection of expressions that can only attempt to convey a ‘real’ or authentic self.
For Foucault, the body is a subject of power; by this I mean that the body is both found within, and is an expression of, discourses and practices of power. As I introduced in Chapter 1, power is – at all times – inextricable from every facet of society. Power “is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault 1990, 94). Implying both a hierarchy of social relations and the transitory nature of those relations, Foucault insists that each individual has power; power enables and constrains and, thus, it can be enacted and resisted. While this seems like a positive connotation to individualized power, it must also be acknowledged that this power is never in exteriority to various collective powers, which are more likely to subjugate and marginalize those individuals that do not conform to the ideals of the more powerful collective.

Power is theorized by many scholars as a means to explain social inequality, but Foucault’s contribution is particularly notable with regard to his concept of bio-power. As a political strategy, bio-power refers to exercising power over Other bodies, as it is an “explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1990, 140). This concept helps to explain the ways in which bodies come to be regulated and separated via practices of individualization and normalization; it is not merely that some bodies are normal and some are abnormal, rather it is the very existence of the norm that encourages the disciplining of bodies into a binary of those who are able or unable to conform to that norm (Foucault 2007).

Turner – The Body as Sociological

In the early 1980s, Turner, who is currently one of the leading researchers in the field of the sociology of religion, made significant contributions to the sociology of the body in that he focused
upon placing the body as central to sociological analysis. Turner argues, “[i]n attempting to write about the body, it is impossible to avoid its contradictory character...We have bodies, but are also, in a specific sense, bodies; our embodiment is a necessary requirement of our social identification so that it would be ludicrous to say ‘I have arrived and I have brought my body with me’” (1984, 7).

Turner’s adaptations of some of Foucault’s ideas in relation to agency are also significant to my work in that he refers to the ways that the body is an environment unto itself that is affected by social controls and structures:

We can exercise agency, but we do so in the context of massive structural resistance. We are individuals, but our individuality is socially produced. Human beings as organic systems are part of nature, but their natural environment is also the product of historical practices.

‘Nature’ is also a product of culture. We are conscious beings, but that consciousness can only be realized through embodiment. The importance of the sociology of the body is that it lies at the axis of these theoretical tensions and it is thus a necessary component of any genuine sociology. The difficulty of providing a coherent account of what we mean by ‘the body’ is an effect of these theoretic problems. (Turner 1984, 248-9)

While poststructuralists would argue the body as incoherent is a theoretical necessity, rather than a theoretical problem, it is clear that Turner’s claims of the multiplicities of the body are crucial to its current theoretical resonance. In keeping with his tenuous applications of Foucault’s work, Turner argues that the body should be viewed from the perspective of society as a “problem of government” as he argues that it is through medical regimens of the body, such as diet and exercise, where the breeding of social anxieties about the body come to justify a “rationalization” of culture in industrial capitalism (Turner 1984). Further, it is from these early contentions that Turner’s more contemporary work positions ours as a “somatic society” in that political concerns and individual anxieties about
society tend to manifest within and through the body as “disrupted and disturbed images of the body” (Turner 2006, 224). This is most clearly evidenced in the prevalence of discourses of social ‘ills,’ such as eating disorders, sexually-transmitted diseases, famine, and so on (Turner 2006).

Turner claims, “...any sociology of the body involves a discussion of social control and any discussion of social control must consider the control of women’s bodies by men under a system of patriarchy” (1984, 3). Here, Turner is articulating the ways in which the historically unchallenged discourses of patriarchy – which undergird much of social existence – have impacted our understandings of bodies and their social significances. Turner harkens the work of feminist theorists as he implies that the study of the body in society must be found within the analysis of female subordination in different forms of patriarchal regimes. Feminist scholars have explored many of these ideas in greater detail regarding the more practical applications of bodies as they intersect with theories of identity, which will be demonstrated in the following section.

Feminist Engagements with the Body/Embodiment and Identities

Significant contributions to the study of the social body have been offered by feminist theorists. In *The Lived Body*, Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow argue,

Reasons for this upsurge in interest [in theorizing the body], as we have seen, include feminist critiques of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, the dilemmas of masculinity, the rise of the (postmodern) body in consumer culture, shifting demographic trends, and finally, the so-called ‘crisis of meaning’ surrounding the body in an increasingly technological, digitalised age. (Williams and Bendelow 1998, 23-4)

The importance of studying the body is reinforced by Susan Bordo, as she argues that the body is the “surface upon which culture is symbolically written” and, further, “the body stands as a text or
Bordo, along with other feminist thinkers such as Butler (1992, 1993) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997, 2009), effectively argue\textsuperscript{11} the ways in which bodies are written upon with social scripts (of normalcy, marginalization, extraordinariness among others) and these scripts then lead to the complex and fluid ways with which identities can be understood.

Through the work of these critical feminist scholars it has been made fundamentally explicit that identities cannot be conceived as being outside of understandings of the body. As Butler argues, “the sources of personal and political agency comes not from within the individual, but in and through the complex cultural exchanges among bodies in which identity itself is ever-shifting, indeed, where identity itself is constructed, disintegrated, and recirculated only within the context of a dynamic field of cultural relations” (1997a, 162-3). Bordo similarly contends that it is through everyday practices of the body that we come to understand what is appropriate for the particular identities of gender, race, and class that we inhabit: “Through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is ‘inner’ and what is ‘outer,’ which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body may be claimed, and so on” (Bordo 1993, 16). The body can be understood as a “powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (Bordo 1993, 165). These assertions are important, but it is within the discussions of gendered dynamics where the complexity of the body and identities becomes explicit.

Feminist theorizations of the body are not new; in fact, much of the scholarship regarding the body was introduced by second-wave feminists in their discussions of personhood. Bordo (1993) claims that these feminists inspired theorizations of the body \textit{as} a political entity that is embedded in

\textsuperscript{11} Unlike the previous section, I am weaving the voices of these theorists together in order to emphasize the significance of feminist dialogue.
history and cultural practice. Bordo continues, “for women, associated with the body and largely
confined to a life centered on the body (both the beautification of one’s own body and the
reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others), culture’s grip on the body is a constant,
intimate fact of everyday life” (1993, 17). These theorizations of the body have been useful for
feminist critique, as they enable a focus on the interconnections between the body, categorizations of
identity, and social powers. Butler argues, “[f]eminist critique ought also to understand how the
category of ‘women,’ the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of
power through which emancipation is sought” (1997a, 5). The female body is rife with cultural
meanings that embody the hierarchization of social life:

The normative female – the figure of the beautiful woman – is the narrowly prescribed
opposite of the ideal male. If he is to be strong, active, large, hirsute, hard, then she must be
weak, passive, small, hairless, soft. The normative female body, then, occupies a dual and
paradoxical cultural role: it is the negative term opposing the male body, but it is also
simultaneously the privileged term opposing the abnormalized female body. (Garland-
Thomson 1997, 28)

The complexities of gender often become immediately evident in discussions surrounding female
bodies in that these discussions rarely remain outside of notions of privilege – in that certain female
bodies, via identity classifications, can be seen as normative (i.e. privileged), abnormal, or a
combination of both.

Through the evolution of the feminist movement, it has become clear that relying on a
seemingly homogenized notion of ‘woman’ in the quest for social justice is outdated and politically
incoherent, as the promise of gendered unity across races, sexualities, nations and the like is not
possible. While many past feminists successfully invoked the term ‘woman’ as a political strategy, in
contemporary feminist uses it more often invokes notions of exclusion and essentialism (Tong 2009). The impossibility of social equity premised on a homogenous notion of woman comes across in much of the literature as ambivalent – as useful as it is useless: “If ‘women’ within political discourse can never fully describe that which it names, that is because the term marks a dense intersection of social relations that cannot be summarized through the terms of identity” (Butler 1993, 218). The complexity of studying and mobilizing identity categories, such as gender, is more useful when placed within a frame of relationality, as I have previously discussed. Relational understandings of identity categories are relevant both in terms of the topics addressed in critical identity classrooms and the ways in which bodies appear to one another in those spaces, and it is on theories of appearance that this review will now focus.

Identity: The Body Appears

Discussions of the body are fundamental to the study of identities, as identities are what make bodies readable, understandable, and relatable. While I have briefly introduced the concept of gender as a construct that is intrinsically bound to the study of the body, it is important to also delve into the reading of privilege as a social engagement before further exploring identity categories. By social engagement, I mean that the bodies and identities of individuals can appear and/or remain somehow invisible, and it is these dis-appearances that lead to the development of hierarchies based on social differences. Puwar claims, “[w]hen a body is emptied of its gender or race, this is a mark of how its position is the privileged norm. Its power emanates from its ability to be seen as just normal, to be without corporeality. Its own gender or race remains invisible; a non-issue” (2004, 57). This social constituting of identities is primarily reliant upon visual interpretations of historicized appearances – how we appear to one another is in direct relation to what we believe we know about the Other. In
other words, we use appearance in order to assess how to relate to one another because what we look like, rather than internal aspects of who we are, often determines the response we receive when first encountering someone. However, Foucault claims that, “[n]othing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men” (1984, 86-7). This means, then, that it is because of social discourses of identity surrounding the body that we are able to read it, that it appears to us, and, importantly, allow us to make sense of how bodies are socially hierarchized. As such, I aim to use this section of the review to introduce the ways in which appearances are theorized, how it is that being normal, privileged, and ‘not quite’ are often dependent on appearance, and the social engagements these appearances elicit.

Making Some Sense of Appearances

Foucault’s notion of subject formation, or subjectivation, refers to the process by which different kinds of subjects arise under different regimes of knowledge and power:

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscious self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (Foucault 1982, 212)

Subjectivation, then, is a process through which individuals are subjected to a power and an interdependence or, as Butler claims, a “radical dependency” is formed between the subject and power: “‘The subject’ is sometimes bandied about as if it were interchangeable with ‘the person’ or ‘the individual.’ The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the
subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation” (Butler 1997b, 10). As some poststructuralists would argue, it is through language that the individual appears and becomes thinkable for others.

The process of subjectivation can also be understood as a process of exclusions; as Butler claims, “[t]his exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (1993, 3). Thinking through privilege and oppression as a matrix of exclusions is a crucial aspect of subjectivation, as it enables the understanding of how it is that some bodies/identities come to appear and matter as privileged, while some Others do not and create the “outside.”

Phenomenological thinkers Hannah Arendt (1978) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) articulate how it is that oppressions and privileges can appear on the surface of our bodies. A phenomenological framework, in its most basic sense, posits that experience and corporeality, in and of themselves, demonstrate the ways in which embodiment gives rise to concepts of ‘knowing’ (Larrabee 2002). Arendt asks, “[h]ow does it happen that something or somebody, including myself, appears at all and what makes it appear in this form and shape rather than in any other?” (1978, 25)

In implicitly addressing the above discussion of the relationship of the world and subjects within it, Arendt states,

To appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of the spectators. In other words, every appearing thing acquires, by virtue of its appearingness, a kind of disguise that may indeed – but does not have to – hide or disfigure it. Seeming corresponds to the fact that every appearance, its identity notwithstanding, is perceived by a plurality of spectators. (Arendt 1978, 21)
Arendt identifies how interpretation via individual experience mutates and transforms each appearance in order for it to conform to individual expectation, understanding, and histories that become ascribed to each identity being ‘read.’ Furthering this idea and yet also transforming it, Merleau-Ponty states, “[i]t is at the same time true that the world is what we see and that, nonetheless, we must learn to see it – first in the sense that we must match this vision with knowledge, take possession of it, say what we and what seeing are, act therefore as if we knew nothing about it, as if here we still had everything to learn” (1968, 4). Thus, the power imposed upon us to become social subjects also governs the discourses by which we can understand, transform, and perform our appearance.

The second area which I find useful for the interpretation of appearance is feminist disability studies. Scholars in feminist disability studies often explore the ways in which bodies labelled as abnormal appear in social space, in order to deconstruct the ways in which bodies are constructed to represent social ills or deviance. As social beings, “[w]e relish looking, produce endless images, and root our understanding of the world in observation. Indeed, most information comes to us through sight in this intensely technological world saturated with advertising and crowded with computer, television, and video screens” (Garland-Thomson 2009, 25). Similarly, Tanya Titchkosky claims that the process of appearing is an active and engaged process: “People enact appearance and thereby make something appear, not as just sheer arbitrary stuff, but as meaningful stuff. We can, and often must, act as if something ‘has’ meaning in itself” (Titchkosky 2007, 23). In relation to disabled bodies, Garland-Thomson contends that ‘abnormal’ bodies are stare-able because they contradict the normalcy that we have come to expect from everybody: “The site of an unexpected body – that is

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12 I have decided not to employ people-first language (such as ‘people with disabilities’) as I subscribe to the belief that this positions disability as an individualized issue that happens to ‘normal’ people to make them Other. As Titchkosky claims, “[t]he consequence is that disability is conceived and programamatically treated as an individual trouble and not a public issue...it separates the individual from the disability and...circumscribes disability as some-thing (bad) that is only understood in relation to its attachment to individuals” (2001, 135).
to say, a body that does not conform to our expectations for an ordinary body – is compelling because it disorders expectations. Such disorder is at once novel and disturbing” (Garland-Thomson 2009, 37). We stare for many reasons – to engage, understand, critique, mock, abhor, excite, etc. – and thinking through relations of looking is crucial to understanding how we hierarchize identities based primarily on appearances. From infancy, bodies are disciplined in attempts to achieve normalcy through our appearance and behaviours, and failing to do so has social consequences.

The Normal Human Ideal

Within critical discussions of privilege, a common term that is used to denote privileged bodies is ‘human.’ In these contexts, being human is equated with supreme normalcy as well as the ultimate ideal. Dyer states, “[l]ooking, with such passion and single-mindedness, at non-dominant groups has had the effect of reproducing the sense of oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm. Meanwhile the norm has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human” (1993, 141). This sense of humanity is created by way of the continual rejection of Other bodies, so that what is normal at any given cultural moment is human. “Indeed the construction of gender operates through exclusionary means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation” (Butler 1993, 8). As Butler explains, to be slotted into the subject position of the normal human, and in her example the masculine, is one of extreme power in that the focus of dominant social institutions and socializing practice becomes interrelated with reinforcing what is ideal – the normal human.

Achieving a state of ordinariness is a privilege because of what Garland-Thomson deems the subject position of the normate: “Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield
the power it grants them” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 8). She goes on to claim that “[n]aming the figure of the normate is one conceptual strategy that will allow us to press our analyses beyond the simple dichotomies of male/female, white/black, straight/gay, or able-bodied/disabled so that we can examine the subtle interrelations among social identities that are anchored to physical differences” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 8). The representation of the normate is one that is particularly helpful to the study of privilege, for it reminds us that it is not as simple as claiming that nondisabled, white men that are the problem, but the oppressive signifiers for ability/normal bodies, whiteness, and masculinity that are anchored to how bodies come to appear.

This sense of privileged humanity is most commonly conveyed in terms of race, as “[f]or those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it… the equation of being white with being human secures a position of power” (Dyer 1997, 9). Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks agrees with Richard Dyer, stating “race organizes difference and elicits investment in its subjects because it promises access to being itself….being more human” (2000, 7). Once again, the function of racialized identities is explained as a way in which the discourse of whiteness attempts to convey supreme normalcy – an ideal, yet seemingly ‘regular’ position.

This comparison of the privileged norm as equated with the normal human is further articulated through discussions of what is not quite human. For example, Elizabeth Grosz discusses how the ‘freak’ body stands in opposition to that of the ideal human, as freaks are “considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening” (1996, 55). Grosz goes on to argue that “[f]reaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities, interconnections, and reciprocal classifications, outside of or beyond the human” (1996, 56). Because freak bodies function through appearance, through the hypervisibility of the ‘stare,’ those bodies who
do not elicit such reaction or curiosity are rendered privileged and human. These ‘normal’ bodies are achieved and become unremarkable/unstareable through processes of perpetual repetition: “What cannot be admitted, what is, in other words, repressed but always feared, is the permeability of the boundaries, the fact that they are never securely in place and have to be made and remade until the difference between the self and the subordinate Other appears natural and thus fixed” (Fellows and Razack 1998, 343). Any attempts to force privilege to become visible emphasizes how privilege is not natural or inevitable, as it is then exposed as a social construction; it serves to oppress Others through the ways in which it is conceived as ‘earned’ or even natural. As Puwar states, “[t]he task of making whiteness visible is an extremely difficult one. It means training the eye to see the racial nature of that which has been defined as outside race, to be unmarked by race, as just normal” (2004, 135).

*Theorizing ‘Being Privileged’*

Words that describe being privileged often signify a sense of being – emptiness, wholeness, purity, nothingness, and lacking or having content. According to Hall, “[e]very identity has at its ‘margin’, an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it ‘lacks’” (1996, 5). Notions of wholeness and emptiness are inherent in Hall’s statement, as margins and boundaries are that which is beyond identity and, yet, intrinsic to it. These boundaries serve to partition understandings of gender, race, ability, etc. so that we can impose thinkable limits onto what we understand these identities to signify.
Whiteness is the key focus for studies on privilege. Whiteness is defined in terms of privilege in many varying ways. McWhorter provides contextualization for the development of whiteness as a privileged social position in the late 19th and early 20th century United States:

Within discourses and practices of normalization, race became a special kind of abnormality. It is here, in this transformation of race from morphological to developmental category, that we see the rise of whiteness as the norm of health and functionality, with red, black, yellow, and brown peoples construed as less well developed or evolved, nearer to nature and savagery. (McWhorter 2005, 543)

The actual colour of white and its relation to whiteness as a racial/identity construct, in the collective consciousness of the West, materializes in specific forms so as to secure the relationship of purity to privilege. In her comprehensive genealogy of racism, McWhorter notes that the term white was coined in Virginia by 1723: “...by that date it was recognized in law and was in use in attempts to establish political and economic solidarity across differences that would themselves have been understood as racial divides in times past – differences of language, religious conviction, and national origin” (2009, 63). Throughout the rest of her detailed account of the history of racism in the United States leading up to the present day, McWhorter’s emphasis reflects the very little attention that was paid to white bodies; social emphasis, whether it be through divisive legal definitions, eugenic practices, and/or sexologists, was placed on those bodies that were deemed inferior to render them unworthy and impure. Furthering this, Bridget Heneghan’s discussion of the “whitewashing” of America after the American Civil War speaks to some of the meanings imbued with ‘white things’ in the contemporary cultural imagination: “If whiteness and white robes represented moral purity, filth was aligned with their opposite, blackness and black things” (2003, 134). Heneghan goes on to discuss how understandings of racial, spiritual, and social purity all reflected these constructions of
cleanliness, “unmarked” bodies, and the purity of white (2003). Of course, not all white bodies perform or embody whiteness in the same way, but, according to these theorists, discursive constructions become entwined with vague visual assumptions of ‘white,’ and so the power of whiteness has more to do with social ascriptions to whiteness than white-ness itself.

In Dyer’s *White*, he claims, “[a] person is deemed visibly white because of a quite complicated interaction of elements, of which flesh tones within the pink to beige range are only one: the shape of the nose, eyes and lips, the colour and set of hair, even body shape may all be mobilized to determine someone’s ‘colour’” (1997, 42). The ways in which white identities come to be constructed exposes how embodiments are performed as though they are ‘real’ expressions of an inner truth, and it is in those seemingly authentic expressions where the rhetoric of whiteness reinforces social power and the marginalization of Others.

Referring back to how Dyer and Seshadri-Crooks argue that whiteness is equated with normalcy, Seshadri-Crooks goes on to claim that the white race “offers the prestige of being better and superior; it is the promise of being more human, more full, less lacking” (2000, 7). To be “more full” and “less lacking” suggests that “the visible bodily marks of race serve to guarantee Whiteness as something more than its discursive construction. Whiteness, I argue, attempts to signify being, but this audacious attempt is impossible because of the simple fact that Whiteness is only a cultural invention” (Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 59). While Seshadri-Crooks may contend that it is ‘impossible’ for whiteness to successfully signify being (similar to all racial categories), whiteness nevertheless impacts and determines social engagements and it is those real effects that matter most to the study of privilege. Whiteness, as a racialized embodiment, significantly differs from Other racializations in terms of appearance: “Whites see the ‘colour’ in others in the same manner as they are seen as ‘white.’ Most White people do not, however, recognize themselves as a racial category and their self-
identification rarely includes the description ‘white’” (Henry and Tator 2009, 25). The situating of whiteness as ‘something more’ is important here, as it signifies the ability to achieve something akin to wholeness or purity. Dyer’s work conveys how this wholeness or purity of whiteness comes to be conveyed as the ultimate in social significance: “In the quest for purity, whites win either way: either they are a distinct pure race, superior to all others, or else they are the purest expression of the human race itself” (Dyer 1997, 22).

Purity is not something new to the study of privileged bodies, especially in terms of whiteness as a social marker. This notion of purity as colourlessness is taken one step further by Dyer, who claims that white bodies are deemed as “having no content” (1997, 9). This lack of presence is argued by Dyer in his claim that whiteness reflects so much neutrality that it signifies a space of nothing: “Whiteness as an ideal can never be attained, not only because white skin can never be hue white, but because ideally white is absence: to be really absolutely white is to be nothing” (Dyer 1997, 78). Thinking through privilege in terms of whiteness demonstrates how privileged bodies escape notice by appearing to be morally, spiritually, culturally, and bodily neutral, which positions the privileged body as ever-present and yet absent.

**Theorizing ‘Being In-Between’**

In “La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness,” Gloria Anzaldúa describes the “cultural collision” of bodies and identities that occurs through transnationality: “The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un choque, a cultural collision” (Anzaldúa 2001, 766). This idea of a collision of cultures can be easily applied to the collision of bodies, of identities. Those who identify in the spaces between – multiracial people, visibly non-disabled, bi/trans/queer people – confirm the very idea that privileged identities, such as whiteness and masculinity, are not fixed or absolute. The privileges that accompany these identities
are also dependent upon space and interpretability, which can shift depending upon the space a body is occupying/sharing. For example, in discussing how privilege and oppression manifest in society, Anne Bishop states that “[t]he vast majority of us… belong somewhere in between; we are oppressors in some parts of our identity and oppressed in others” (2002, 78). At times, one can use their agency to choose which identities to convey, while for others ‘passing as’ is entirely based on how we discipline one another. This passing, then, can lead to internal negotiations regarding how to perform our own privilege and oppression (Renfrow 2004). However, the simultaneity of privilege and oppression is often overshadowed by the obvious negative impacts that oppression inflicts upon one’s life. Conversely, the social advantages people experience from privileges often go unproblematised and this duality is an absence in the literature that will be further explored in this dissertation.

Garland-Thomson also addresses the embodiment of the in-between, by stating, “[a]ll persons with physical disabilities thus embody the ‘illegitimate fusion’ of the cultural categories ‘normal,’ which qualifies people for human status, and ‘abnormal,’ which disqualifies them. Within this liminal space, the disabled person must constitute something akin to identity” (1997, 114). This implies that some identities are ‘not quite’ achievable, which is a discussion that is found in much of the work on performativity, as I have previously addressed. As Mahtani states in her discussion of embodying a multiethnic identity, “not all multiethnic women have the freedom to identify as multiethnic. Strict rules about the politics of categorisation often makes this impossible” (2001, 184-5). While it may be that identities are always partial, or ‘not quite’ what they appear, these in-between moments are often ignored in order for us to make easy judgements about one another. In their discussion of multiracial identities, David Parker and Miri Song express, “falling in-between these socially constructed norms leaves one open to statements which doubt corporeal integrity: ‘You
don’t *look* Chinese...’ on a par with ‘You don’t look quite *right*’” (2001, 14). This sense of ‘looking right’ is something that will be returned to in later chapters as issues of authenticity and acceptance are themes that emerged through the interviews with the participants.

**Identity Privilege**

Discussions of social privilege and its connection to education predominantly emerged through analysis of the reproduction of ‘social elites’ via private schooling and intra-class marriage (eg. Delamont 1989; Keller 1963; Kingston and Lewis 1990). The work on social elites points to the ways in which certain members of society are seen to be extraordinary. Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) argues that elite students come to understand themselves as extraordinary because of the “discourses of distinction” that elite educational ideologies, spaces, and rituals foster to assert privilege. Through problematizing the belief that elitism is exclusive to a small social group, the study of common elitism and systemic social advantages has emerged. Following these understandings of elites, a handful of texts (eg. Brody et al. 2000; Johnson 2006) and edited collections (eg. Kimmel and Ferber 2004; Rodriguez and Villaverde 2000; Wildman 1996) are now devoted to the ways in which privilege is visible, invisible, white, male, heterosexual, and/or upper-middle class, etc. While these texts are helpful in order to introduce concepts of privilege regarding descriptions of power, social class, and acknowledging social advantages, their broad and introductory nature cannot fully attend to the complexities of privilege.

How bodies are recognized or spoken of renders them, at the very least, seen and seeable. Yet, in these acts of appearance, privileged identities often go unnoticed – even in those spaces intending to make the complexities of identity explicit. The above authors are all attempting to convey the ways in which privilege functions to limit the social power of Others and to reproduce its
own power. As these authors often do not agree with each other, these debates reinforce how privileged and oppressed identities are context-based and dependent upon space. To specifically address the ways in which identities garner privilege helps to further expose its complexities. To reiterate a point that I made earlier, it is not nondisabled, white men that are the sole problem of social injustice, but rather it is the oppressive signifiers of normalcy/ability, masculinity, and whiteness that are inextricably linked to how bodies come to, and should, appear.

*Dis/Ability*

Theorizing from a space of disability to attend to notions of privilege is important for many reasons, the primary reason being that there is little or no critical work (yet) on ability as a privileged embodiment. As W.J.T. Mitchell asks: “What is it to be ‘able’? What is ‘-ability’”? (2001, 396) My inclusion of disability as conceptualized alongside whiteness and masculinity is out-of-synch with what would logically flow with a study of privileged identities. My focus *should* be on ability; however, the literature on ability is limited and only addressed via notions of talent (such as ‘giftedness’) (Barab and Plucker 2002; Oakes et al. 1997) or in highly theorized terms as a relation to disability. Thus, my focus on ability will be primarily conveyed through disability theory.

Simi Linton states, “[t]he field of disability studies is now at a critical juncture; scholars and activists have demonstrated that disability is socially constructed to serve certain ends, but now it behooves us to demonstrate how knowledge about disability is socially produced to uphold existing practices” (1998, 4). As critical disability studies is still a fairly new field in academia, the focus has been (and rightly so) on theorizing disability as a socially constructed identity: “Disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance – not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 6). For the purposes of this study,
ability will be understood within the same parameters that I use to consider disability – as a representation, a cultural interpretation of bodily difference, and a comparison of bodies that structures social relations and institutions.

The emphasis placed on social constructionism in the critical identity literature makes known how ability is a signifier for normalcy – whatever normalcy is in a particular cultural moment, space, or time defines what ability is. Garland-Thomson succinctly attends to the ways in which disability functions as a relational identity via the visual cues of appearance: “…the disabled figure operates as a code for insufficiency, contingency, and abjection – for deviant particularity – thus establishing the contours of a canonical body that garners the prerogatives and privileges of a supposedly stable, universalized normalcy” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 136). As disabilities are not always conveyed through visual cues, notions of disappearances of the body, or ‘passing’ as abled, positions a non-visible disability as both a potential individual privilege and a form of betrayal to the disability community. The emphasis on the visual aspects of privilege is what most often comes to matter about the body, which is a point that I further extrapolate upon in discussing masculinities and, later, whiteness.

**Masculinities**

As Sally Robinson claims in her discussion of masculinity studies, “[a]ny discussion of masculinity that begins from the premise that men enjoy unearned privileges in society or that male subjectivity emerges from within a position of dominance, is a discussion of the masculinity constructed by feminism” (2002, 147). She argues that it is because of the women’s movement that masculinity can be studied at all, for without the critical evaluations that feminist thought has brought forward to identity, conceptualizing masculinity as a visible privilege would not be possible (Robinson 2002). Important to note, however, is Robinson’s position regarding masculinity studies

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13 I have developed this definition of ability based on Garland-Thomson’s descriptions of disability (1997).
as an emerging discipline: “The problem with lumping masculinity studies in with women’s studies or ethnic studies is that masculinity – unlike femininity or blackness – already equates with power, so the empowerment model of women’s or ethnic studies is almost embarrassingly inappropriate” (Robinson 2002, 142).

In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam claims, “[m]asculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and uneven distributions of wealth” (1998, 2). Importantly, however, Halberstam argues that if there is a relation of maleness and power, then it is important to study how it is that masculinity becomes ‘readable’ outside of men or white men in particular. As Garland-Thomson’s notion of the normate is not a study on bodies themselves but rather the signifiers through which we come to understand bodies, so too, Halberstam argues, must we study masculinities as existing outside of and beyond men.

In exploring the connection between bodies and gender, R.W. Connell states, “[t]rue masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body” (1995, 45). This social conception of a truth to gender is a very common understanding of corporeality insofar as gender is used as the primary distinguisher and social organizer of human beings. Connell goes on to claim, “[t]he number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern [of masculinity] in its entirety may be quite small. Yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (1995, 79). Here, Connell is arguing that men are conferred privilege whether they reflect or perform hegemonic masculinity or not, as masculinity becomes equated with hegemonic maleness and an association with ‘normal humanity.’ Critical identity studies would be impossible – as would my entire research focus – without the work
of feminist and anti-racist scholars who unrelentingly question how identities come to be seen as marginal and explore the socially constructed bases through which that marginality is reproduced.

Whiteness

The emerging field of whiteness studies has led to the development of new, and often contentious, approaches in the study of privilege. As I demonstrated at length in a previous section, the majority of the work on privilege is tied almost exclusively to notions of whiteness/race and is American in context (see Alcoff 2000; Cooks and Simpson 2007; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Leonardo 2009), which often creates binary positioning between whiteness and blackness. As such, this limited scope is a major inadequacy for theorizing Canadian multi-racial, multi-ethnic contexts.

Whiteness studies follows a similar trajectory to that of masculinity studies, as its focus “has emerged in the wake of the political and intellectual challenges offered by anti-racism (in Britain and Canada) and radical versions of multiculturalism (in the United States)” (Bonnett 1996, 146-7). As a relatively new field of inquiry, whiteness studies emerged as a minor field of study within the academy, primarily in the United States and the UK in the early 1990s (McWhorter 2005). There are two significant streams in Whiteness Studies that attend to privilege as a social organizing function – the theoretical approaches of class-based legal theory and feminist analyses of whiteness.

Limits of Class-Based Approaches to Whiteness

Significant contributions to whiteness studies have emerged from frameworks of American social class-based inequality, which is conceptualized as a governing force of social relations between white and racialized (read: “black”) people. David Roediger provides a detailed analysis of the history of the labour movement and its relation to the development of white subjectivity, but his notion of white subjectivity does not extend beyond the relationship of class and race. Throughout Roediger’s analysis, the emphasis only remains at the level of connecting whiteness to notions of
class and economic relations of work; he ignores the relationship of whiteness to issues of gender, sexuality, space, or any of the other contributions of identity intrinsic to nation-building.\textsuperscript{14}

The lack of intersectionality conveyed in class-based analyses of whiteness are critiqued by Alastair Bonnett, who argues that, “[t]he challenge for this particular group of writers, I would submit, is either to broaden their analysis without losing its clarity or to reflexively acknowledge and monitor the fact that they are engaged in abstracting particular factors from a much more complex set of social processes” (1996, 150). In a similar vein of critique, McWhorter claims that,

Perhaps the biggest problem with the concept of white privilege is the tendency it has to lead to depictions of racism as a matter of poor or unequal distribution of social goods rather than as a vast institutionalized system of social control and, as a result, to drive those who use it to propose not transformation of social systems but various strategies of divesture. Anti-racist work becomes, for whites, a project of ridding oneself of ‘unearned assets’ rather than of disrupting and realigning networks of power. (McWhorter 2005, 547)

I understand Bonnett and McWhorter’s claims as speaking to how these class-based approaches often rely on essentialist notions of the self – privileging one identity over others in the quest for social justice. However, this form of identity politics does not account for how constructed socio-cultural categorizations such as gender, race, class, sexuality, dis/ability, and so on, interact, and in so doing produce different kinds of societal inequalities and unjust social relations that must also be accounted for.

\textsuperscript{14} Even though the version that I have cited is a revised edition, Roediger’s addition to this text is an epilogue where he still does not attend to the intersection of whiteness and identities beyond economic production. While he thoroughly attends to conceptions of war and the economy in this new epilogue, his analysis is devoid of any discussion of the hetero-patriarchal realities intrinsic to historical and contemporary notions of war and manifestations of whiteness.
Feminist Approaches to Whiteness

Ruth Frankenberg and Peggy McIntosh are often credited as creators of a body of feminist theory that has sought to form an ongoing account of the social, political, and cultural advantages afforded to white people in Western society. In particular, Frankenberg’s study of white women is crucial to the development of Whiteness Studies in the frame of feminist thought, as her conceptualizations enable thinking through whiteness as a site for both the reproduction of racism and for challenges to it. She also claims that “‘white’ is a concept learned simultaneously with a negative connotation of privilege” (Frankenberg 1993, 65). Frankenberg contends that whiteness must be understood as a position of racialization similar to how masculinity is gendered – these aspects of identity are socially constructed and yet have real privileged effects that must be seen as “interconnected” with other aspects of identity (1993).

Similarly, in McIntosh’s (in)famous piece “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” she argues that “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal” (1990, 32-3). She infers that white people receive social advantages that are conveyed through these notions of neutrality and this neutrality renders the advantages invisible to most white people, but visible to marginalized others. McIntosh’s take on notions of privilege is highly influenced by the class-based analyses of whiteness that preceded it; her discussion centres around privilege as an accumulation of cultural capital that one holds in their possession. Her language-use remains tied to notions of earning, wealth, advantage, etc. which links her notions of the power of whiteness within a function of the social economy. McIntosh also provides the pedagogical tool of a conditions list, which exposes the effects of whiteness that can be taken-for-granted in the dailyness of a white life. This strategy has been cited repeatedly (see Bishop 2002; Leonardo 2004; McWhorter 2005) as an accessible anti-oppressive tool which brings to the forefront
how privilege is an aspect of dailyness, rather than some sort of disembodied power structure. In saying this, however, she also provides a thoughtful warning: “Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same” (McIntosh 1990, 35). Much like expansions on McIntosh’s work, Frankenberg’s articulations of ‘interconnectedness’ have been adapted and expanded upon by most feminist theorists to inspire a more concise reading of identities as interlocking relations of power.

**Critical Engagements in Higher Education**

As the sociology of education has a very broad scope, my area of interest attends specifically to the interface of power, bodies, and identities in higher education. In Elizabeth Ellsworth’s review of critical pedagogy literature, she concluded that “the goal of critical pedagogy was a critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, and social change – a revitalized public sphere characterized by citizens capable of confronting public issues critically through ongoing forms of public debate and social action” (1989, 300). These abstractions, she critiques, address very few avenues for social change and instead leave relations of domination unaffected. For example, “[s]trategies such as student empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact” (Ellsworth 1989, 306). Critical identity classrooms provide an excellent site for considerations of how privilege comes to mean and the forms through which it materializes within ‘critical’ environments.

**Women and Gender Studies**

As the majority of the participants in my study come from women and gender studies, I feel that it must be addressed in a distinct capacity as an academic field/space. However, there is no comprehensive way to attend to all of the ways that women and gender studies has impacted the
study of identity. Since its inception in the 1960s, the aims of feminist-inspired teaching have taken
dramatic shifts – from beginning with women-oriented scholarship to now providing a myriad of foci
that attempt to challenge social power and structures of domination (Boxer 2000). As Biddy Martin
claims, “[w]omen’s studies has succeeded in defining and delimiting objects of knowledge,
authorizing new critical practices, significantly affecting scholarship in a number of disciplines,
defining important political issues, and establishing itself as a legitimate academic and administrative
unit on hundreds of college and university campuses” (2008, 169). The history of the
institutionalization of women and gender studies is a discussion for a different study, but what I wish
to briefly introduce here are the ways in which the field is made meaningful in the literature with
regard to understandings of the persona or embodiments that it is seen to take on.

There is a wealth of literature that claims the current incarnation of women and gender
studies is “slippery” (Coate 2006), “institutionally fragile” (Allen 1997), or not actualizing its
original promise (Crossley 2009). These discussions generally surround whether the field is still
revolutionary or transformative: “...women’s studies scholarship and curricula have come over time
to replicate rather than challenge entrenched wars between the disciplines, with the consequence that
neither feminist scholarship not women’s studies programs are in a particularly good position to take
the lead in completing transformations they helped begin” (Martin 2008, 172). This positioning of
apathy could be due to how, as hooks argues, “[o]ur students are no longer necessarily already
committed to or interested in feminist politics (which means we are not just sharing the ‘good news’
with the converted)” (1994, 111). This apathy stems from the common belief that sexism (which is
seen to be the mainstay of women and gender studies) is no longer an issue – the women’s
movement was ‘successful’ in gaining equality and so feminism is now a study of historical injustice.
hooks addresses how this apathy has also seeped into the pedagogies of many of those who teach
feminist work: “Nowadays, most women’s studies professors are not as committed to exploring new pedagogical strategies. Despite this shift, many students still seek to enter feminist classrooms because they continue to believe that there, more than in any other place in the academy, they will have an opportunity to experience education as a practice of freedom” (hooks 1994, 15). The hopefulness in hooks’ statement is shared by many, despite what the above discussion may imply.

Nina Lykke (2010) refers to women and gender studies, or rather, what she calls feminist studies, as a postdisciplinary discipline. By postdisciplinary discipline, Lykke implies that feminist studies has superseded what ‘discipline’ can mean in that its use of intersectionality as a starting point for knowledge has forever altered the ways in which more traditional disciplines in the humanities and social sciences approach how knowledge and history can be conceived of and questioned. It is through the constant reimagination and transformation of theory, method, ethics, and practice that feminist studies “can pass and claim authority as an academic field in its own right, while at the same time pointing towards alternative – trans- and postdisciplinary – modes of working and organizing knowledge production” (Lykke 2010, 19). Whether women and gender studies can be classified in this way is not the issue of interest here, yet what are notable are the claims to postdisciplinarity which signal the transformative nature of the field. “Education, especially social justice education, is about change. The hope is to transform or broaden attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours” (Goodman 2001, 37). The impact that women and gender studies has had on academia and its persistent draw to students and instructors implies its necessity and the need to continually question the social practices that govern our lives.

Student Experiences

Empirical studies on how students experience higher education classrooms are quite rare as the majority of work on classroom experience originates from the perspective of the
teacher/instructor (e.g. Freedman and Holmes 2003; Grant 1997; Johnson and Bhatt 2003; Smith and Yost 2009). From the few that I could find, however, student identities are read in strict relation to the identities of their instructors. Barbara Grant’s (1997) Foucauldian analysis of students as disciplinary subjects is compelling for the ways in which she articulates how the power structures of the university influence the ways that students are able to understand their sense of self: “When students interact with lecturers, mostly they are not positioned as ‘equal’ adults – as the liberal humanist discourse suggests – but come from a position of relative weakness: as child, subordinate, supplicant, initiate, rebel, or devotee” (Grant 1997, 103). From this quotation, it seems that there is little agency that students have in relation to the top-down power structures that exist, but she claims this is not the case. For example, students use their bodies in a lecture hall to resist professorial control by chatting, doodling, and I would add, use of the internet and texting. As Grant states “[w]hile the dominant discourse requires that the students sit quietly, listen and take notes, students resist in many ways. Yet at the same time, by being present and taking notes, they are accommodating to the discourse” (1997, 111). While Grant’s methodology is ill-defined, as there is only a brief mention of having a discussion with 30+ students during a teaching evaluation session yet letters from the students are quoted, her theoretical ascriptions to the students’ responses are quite helpful towards thinking through how it is that students understand the power structures of the university.

In Tara E. Smith and Megan R. Yost’s study, “‘Like, get over it!’: On ‘getting’ and ‘getting over’ sexuality in the classroom” (2009), students were interviewed regarding their interpretations of Smith and Yost’s identities as queer instructors of gender and psychology courses. While the authors do present interesting analyses of student responses, such as acknowledging how

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15 The authors did not interview their own students. Rather Smith interviewed Yost’s students and Yost did the reverse. As many of the students knew that the authors are in a personal relationship, it is arguably problematic that this potential conflict for the students was not noted in their work.
heterosexual students emphasized that having knowledge of their professors’ sexual orientations “personalized issues that were otherwise political abstractions” (Smith and Yost 2009, 203), the overall aim of the paper seems to be to reinforce their own beliefs about their teaching practices. For example, the authors discuss one of Yost’s pedagogical strategies:

A striking example involved a lecture Megan gave in her Human Sexuality course, in which she supplemented the text’s meagre coverage of lesbian sexual practices by including material on strap-on dildos and fisting. The heterosexual students were shocked, while an openly lesbian student grinned at Megan and clearly enjoyed surveying the looks of disbelief on her classmates’ faces. Including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer material in our courses is a choice we make because holding a marginalized sexual identity has helped us to see the importance of visibility and representation. (Smith and Yost 2009, 202)

Following the description of this provocative scenario there is no student response presented beyond what the authors determined based on the facial expressions of the students at the time. Incorporations of the voices of the students regarding situations such as these would have greatly amplified what the authors were attempting to ‘prove,’ yet they seemed to rely on the convention of prioritizing the voice of the teachers – themselves.

In a different vein, Ann Neville Miller and Tina M. Harris explore how “[w]hite students engaged over a semester-long university interracial communication course as they grappled with dilemmas related to their own racial identity” (2005, 224). This study is far more focused on prioritizing the student voice, which enables a deeper exploration into the complex feelings and experiences that students have when engaging with issues of identity in the classroom. For example, their sample largely consisted of in-class observation and focus groups with students who were at the beginning of understanding themselves as white and their relationship with their own racisms,
silences, and identity formations. These experiences ran alongside the students of colour in the course who expressed their frustrations and complex engagements with oppression from those with visible privilege in the classroom. While this study may not add much that is new to the literature on whiteness, as their overall conclusion rests with how communication in the classroom on issues of race will bring forth change, Miller and Harris (2005) do emphasize the importance of hearing from students regarding their experiences of studying identity.

*Embodying Privilege in Critical Identity Classrooms*

Studies on privilege and oppression at the level of higher education have recently focused on whiteness as endemic to oppression as it is experienced by students and faculty in higher education (see Haviland 2008; Leonardo 2004; Mitchell and Rosiek 2006; Rebollo-Gil and Moras 2006). These studies attempt to point at the ways in which whiteness/race functions in an array of fields, such as psychology, teacher education, and media studies, to silence, limit and impose power over certain bodies in educational spaces. It is the aim of the majority of these studies to uncover the ways in which privilege (especially whiteness) can be addressed and possibly subverted.

The notion of reading the body has become prevalent in the educational literature regarding instructors’ identities and the relation to pedagogy. For example, Kelly (2002) discusses her experience as a “white Canadian feminist, graduate student and novice anti-racist” (148) teaching Aboriginal literature to a predominantly white university class. Kelly grapples with questions of the appropriateness/appropriativeness of her teaching such a class, but she also importantly outlines how emotional the process of teaching critical identity can be due to uncertainty, innocence/guilt, fear, and defensiveness. As evident from the above assertions, many of the studies on the appearance of privileged identities in the classroom begin from the perspective of the instructor (see Fine 1993; Johnson 2006; Lucal 1996), rather than the student.
Valentine contends that “by working out from an empirical case study of an individual...it is possible to move beyond theorizing about the intersection of categories to an understanding of how identifications and disidentifications are simultaneously experienced by subjects in specific spatial and temporal moments through the course of their everyday lives” (2007, 18). However, as I have discussed earlier, ‘appearing’ in the space of the critical identity classroom is highly contextual. As Hoodfar argues, “[p]ut simply, what works for a white female teacher may not work for a black female teacher, regardless of a shared commitment to be critical” (1997, 211). She argues that her position as a woman of colour teaching critical anthropology limited the forms through which her pedagogy was acknowledged by her students: “I realized that they were not troubled by the substance of the criticisms of the discipline of anthropology as much as by me, a non-Western female, as their professor who ventured to raise such issues” (Hoodfar 1997, 217). The functions of appearance are complicated further in Diane Gillespie, Leslie Ashbaugh, and JoAnn DeFiore’s study on white women teaching white privilege at a predominantly white campus, where they come to “the realization that in an almost all-white campus we rely on white skin privilege, to some degree, to gain credibility with some of our white students. The more students can identify with us in a way that is non-threatening to them, the more likely they are to take our invitation to explore their own complicity in a racist system” (2002, 245). Here, Gillespie, Ashbaugh and DeFiore are not necessarily seeking to undercut whiteness, but instead they use their whiteness as a pedagogical tool in order to subvert the expectations of their students. In so doing, they disrupt the students’ conceptions of sameness, of non-racialization, and it results in the authors causing their privilege and the privileges of their students to become visible.

In discussing the ways in which identities are taken up by students, LeCourt argues, “my white body encodes a variety of assumptions about what I’ve experienced, how I think, and my
position of power in culture. Even if I try to exceed those presumptions when I speak, my ‘body’ is read in ways that counter such attempts. In a contact zone, my body speaks as loudly as does my rhetoric” (2004, 19). This dynamic is further complicated by Srivastava’s contention that in spaces like critical identity classrooms “…women of colour are entreated to share their experiences of racism, [yet] it is white women who are most likely to openly express their emotions of fear, anger, despair, and are supported in doing so by a strong tradition of feminist theories of emotion, and feminist practices and rituals of emotional expression and sharing” (2006, 68). Srivastava speaks to the ways in which working through our racist beliefs is commonly used as an end to help us all to “feel better” about oppression. She problematizes this notion of using a critical space/conversation in order to “feel better” as she states, “[b]y remaining focused on the self rather than on organizational practice, these individualized discourses of therapy and moral progression make a broader antiracist analysis difficult” (Srivastava 2005, 54). Thus, while the performance and appearance of bodies in the classroom and the ways in which they come to matter outside of the classroom are due, in part, to the uniqueness of the critical identity classroom space itself, our analysis in these spaces must extend beyond our individualized responses to privilege and to consider the transformative possibilities that these spaces and dialogues hold.

Attempting to work with (and against) what it means to be privileged in the classroom, Alison Jones (1999) questions the benefits of cross-racial dialogue for students of color. Based in New Zealand, Jones, a white Pakeha woman, and her Maori colleague decide to contentiously separate their class along racial/ethnic lines with white Pakeha students and Maori/Pacific Islander students meeting for the course separately. In journal responses to the course, Pakeha students “seemed unusually passive and resentful, while the Maori and Pacific Islands students’ classes were

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16 This decision was borne out of several years of co-teaching a similar course but, despite their best efforts to enable the voices of all students to be heard, they received feedback from some of the “…Maori students who said that the words, assumptions, and interests of the Pakeha students and lecturer continued to dominate” (Jones 1999, 300).
energetic and positive” (Jones 1999, 301). Jones explains that these racially separate spaces became a rare opportunity for racialized students to inquire into their own culture, identify issues of importance within their community, and indulge in sustained engagement, for “[w]ithout the slowing presence of those who cannot ‘hear,’ the quality of classroom dialogue is alert, electric, and powerfully seductive” (1999, 310). The white students, however, conveyed resentment for being denied access to the insights of ‘the Other.’ Clearly, there are significant problems with this strategy – from the authoritarian decisions of the instructors who used their classroom power in separating students to the misplacing of students who could not ‘fit’ – as such, this controversial study exposes how what can be interpreted as anti-racist practice may in fact reify racism and further silence racialized students.

The Critical Identity Classroom as a Heterotopic Space

In Kevin Hetherington’s (1998) book, *Expressions of identity: Space, performance, politics*, he argues that “[a]cts of transgression are fundamentally spatial in nature. They are not a rupture of society and the overthrow of social order but involve an interplay between challenging society and ordering new social practices” (149). Throughout Hetherington’s work, he harkens back to Foucault’s notion of heterotopic spaces: “Meaning literally ‘other places’, heterotopias are sites established through incongruous spatial relations that challenge the spaces of representation and their mode of representation within society” (Hetherington 1998, 131). In order to convey how unique critical identity classrooms are for discussions of identity, I employ Foucault’s notion of the ‘heterotopia’ to emphasize how these spaces are crucial for a comprehensive analysis of how identities are studied, conveyed, and expressed:

… in every civilization, real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the
same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable. Because they are utterly different from all the emplacements that they reflect or refer to, I shall call these places ‘heterotopias.’ (Foucault 1988, 178)

I argue that critical identity classrooms are versions of heterotopias in that they are spaces where the everyday is problematized, excavated, and exposed. The discussions that occur in these spaces are outside of, and yet integral to, the people and places that they refer to. It is in these heterotopic spaces that there is an ability to “juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves” (Foucault 1988, 181). The complexities, contradictions and disidentifications that are often rendered incompatible beyond the boundaries of social justice work are juxtaposed and confronted in critical identity classrooms. This space is the primary site where these complexities of identities and how they are taken up can be hashed out, remoulded, and sent back to the ‘real world.’

Foucault further argues that “each heterotopia has a precise and specific operation within the society, and the same heterotopia can have one operation or another depending on the synchrony of the culture in which it is found” (1988, 180). Foucault claims that space and location are intrinsic to how a heterotopia can be understood, which is very obvious in the case of critical identity classrooms, as some societies/cultures/cities/universities are more socially progressive than others. In Srivastava’s use of the heterotopic space in the alternative social movement community, she extends Hetherington’s analysis by discussing the heterotopic space as being equated with a “good place” (2005, 34). This “good place” is characterized by an underlying morality based on the predilection of “shared commitments, values, or experiences” (Srivastava 2005, 34). The purpose of the critical identity classroom to be a “good place” is to create a space for improvement through awareness, not
only for the larger society, but also for the individual within it. While difficult to translate these ideals to actual classroom practice, given the understanding that the critical work that is happening in these spaces will in no way be identical, using the concept of a heterotopia allows for the uniqueness of the critical identity classroom to begin to emerge.

The connections that these spaces have with the rest of society are important, as “they have a function in relation to the remaining space” (Foucault 1988, 184). While I have already mentioned that these sites are privileged spaces, Foucault insists that “[h]eterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time” (1988, 183). As critical identity classrooms are seen as somewhat isolated from the rest of society, they continue to function due to the influx of new people moving in and out of them; that is, by the addition of people who bring with them a wealth of ideas, experiences, and identities that challenge and subvert how the space can be understood and its interaction with the ‘outside’ social world. It can be argued that these heterotopic spaces, “facilitate acts of resistance and transgression in that they generate spaces where there is no clearly defined order of how things should occur; they are like battle sites, full of smoke and confusion. They do not remain in a condition of disorder, however, but allow new modes of ordering to emerge” (Hetherington 1998, 132).

This heterotopic concept of ‘new modes of ordering’ can be exemplified by some of the processes that occur in anti-oppressive spaces, as Johnson and Bhatt note. They state, “[p]rivileged students… feel vulnerable to express their beliefs in class, albeit differently than students who have been traditionally silenced” (Johnson and Bhatt 2003, 240). Students with visible privilege often experience a disruption to their sense of self in such an environment, where their notion of entitlement becomes dissolved through critiquing that which was previously ‘unseen’ by them, yet

17 Interestingly, this notion of critical identity classrooms being privileged can be connected to Foucault’s argument that access is only granted through earned permission: “One can enter only with a certain permission and after a certain number of gestures have been performed” (Foucault 1988, 183).
ever-present to Others. Furthermore, while such spaces can provide empowerment to those with marginalized identities, this empowerment may be limited to the confines of the equity classroom. In other words, marginalized bodies can be resistive agents in these spaces and yet remain targets of normalizing, ableist, hetero-patriarchal power that is simultaneously occurring within the larger social space of society.

**Summary**

This chapter has explored my epistemological reading of literature that engages with questions and theories of the body and embodiment(s). Through theory it can become clear that, “not only is ‘experience’ that through which our subjectivity is constituted, but it is also the substance of theory – that on which we hand the meanings we make of the world” (Lewis 1993, 10). Numerous contributors mentioned in this chapter have enabled an exploration into the relations between bodies, identities, privilege, and critical identity classrooms. Throughout this chapter, privilege, Othering, and systems of domination have been exposed as social constructions that serve to legitimate hierarchies of inequality and render invisible how domination is maintained. The ways in which I have used the above authors to identify and challenge systems of domination and unequal power relations has demonstrated that space is intrinsic to how bodies and identities can appear, be ‘read,’ and produce ‘real’ effects in social encounters. Critical identity classrooms, then, force to the surface the ways in which certain bodies, identities, people can be rendered – in terms of privilege and oppression – and often implicate those who enter into the space as the subjects of critique and discussion.

In Chapter 3, I present the methodological composition of my research study. Within this chapter, I begin by situating my research method within a feminist reflexive methodology. Next, I
discuss the rationale and processes of data collection, which include both interviews and participant journals. Following this section, I address the ways in which the methodology was impacted by understandings of embodiment and relations of power.
CHAPTER 3
ENCOUNTERING METHODOLOGY

You know what I find interesting? That I’ve never been asked these kinds of questions before. Like, in class I am expected to spew out facts in really nice essays, but no one ever asks about who you are and how you see yourself within the world around you. (Chloe)

Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodologies and methods that I make use of, beginning with an introduction into how feminist reflexive methodologies inform my research process. It is my belief that this form of inquiry “...can illuminate social, political, ethical, and moral dimensions of life and experience that other research approaches cannot” (Henry and Tator 2009, 37). In this chapter, I also provide a detailed description of the study itself in terms of design, research sites, recruitment practices, participant characteristics, interview process, a brief overview of the student journals, and coding procedures. Following this description, I explore the embodied encounters that most explicitly affected the interviewing process. As such, I employ a critical reflexive practice – an analysis of my body as the researcher. I look at my pregnant body, my non-pregnant (mother) body, and the ways in which power dynamics – based largely on perceptions of academic hierarchies – influenced the interactions and conversations that I had with the participants.

Feminist Reflexive Methodology

My methodology is framed by the feminist imperative to form connections between personal accounts and theoretical discourse. A feminist methodological approach is borne out of the belief that female experience is fundamental to understanding the functioning of social interactions, behaviours, and institutions. As Lewis claims, “[w]hat distinguishes feminism as a method and a practice is the
way in which it insists on making explicit our historical and social place as a concretely lived reality that touches us, like the wind, imperceptibly and yet unmistakably” (1993, 54). The underlying focus of feminist methodology is to underscore the complexity of the intersections of social power and inequality, specifically as they relate to the production of knowledge (Jaggar 2008). An important characteristic of these methodologies is that there can be no absolute separation of an individual’s social identities; for example, while I am a researcher, I am also all of my other identities simultaneously – even when one role may be prioritized in a particular context. An objective position, the implication that a researcher can take an unbiased position while conducting research, is not possible or desirable for feminist qualitative methodologies (Burt and Code 1995; DeVault 1999; Jaggar 2008; Stanley and Wise 1993; Weedon 1987).

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise have written extensively on the subject of feminist approaches to research and they “believe that a feminist social science should begin with the recognition that ‘the personal’, direct experience, underlies all behaviours and actions. We need to find out what it is that we know and what it is that we experience” (1993, 164). Stanley and Wise’s reliance on the use of the aforementioned concepts of ‘knowing’ and ‘experience’ can be problematized, as they allude to a sense of absolute understanding on behalf of both the participant and the researcher; as though what one says can reflect an unchanging belief of what it is that they know. Stanley and Wise address this potential criticism in a later chapter of their work by claiming, “[p]eople experience their ‘selves’ neither as complete social constructions nor as essential and ‘uncultured’ sites of unchanging difference. Rather, ‘the self’ is the production of interaction and social construction and is irrevocably social and cultural in its basis” (1993, 194). What a participant may ‘know’ in a particular moment can, and perhaps will, change if they are questioned on that ‘knowing’ again, which is a definite challenge to the study of experience and identity.
In specific relation to my usage, a feminist poststructural approach to methodology understands that “[w]hile the ‘biological’ and ‘anatomical’ body is a way of referring to corporeality, biology and anatomy are already discursive regimes that constitute the body in culturally inflected ways” (Somerville 2004, 48). Similarly, Weedon contends that “[n]either the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases” (1987, 108). It can be argued that feminist methodologies enable an understanding of the ways in which what we say, how we understand ourselves, and where we are help define what the social world can mean. The use of this strategy is an active process of articulation where the subject or participant is not passively answering questions through the research process, because, “[a]lthough the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices” (Weedon 1987, 125). Feminist methodologies encourage a process of critical reflection on our lives and have had a significant influence on the ways in which I have developed my methodological practices.

Reflexive methodology is a qualitative strategy most explicitly addressed within the fields of social work (D’Cruz, Gillingham, and Melendez 2007; Finlay 2002; Pease and Fook 1999) and feminist geography (England 1994; Kobayashi 2003; McDowell 1992; Rose 1993, 1997). This approach, of course, is not limited to these fields as higher education scholars Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba argue,

Reflexivity...demands that we interrogate each of our selves regarding the ways in which research efforts are shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that
form our own lives. We must question our selves, too, regarding how those binaries and paradoxes shape not only the identities called forth in the field and later in the discovery process of writing, but also our interactions with respondents, in who we become to them in the process of becoming to ourselves. (Lincoln and Guba 2000, 183-4)

For my purposes, a major contribution of reflexive methodology is its emphasis on the active engagement of the researcher within the context of researching. Engaging in reflection often involves the ability to process and synthesize what it is that we know, yet the concept of reflexivity can be viewed as an active, systematic, and deconstructive process of discovery (O'Connor 2007). Reflection is what is asked of participants, whereas reflexivity is what should be expected of researchers, according to Kate Eliza O’Connor (2007). This methodological distinction between reflection and reflexivity is important because it speaks to the inherent power relations involved in the research process, as thinking reflexively compels researchers to recognize those dynamics.

Accounting for oneself “requires researchers to both examine how their responses to participants have influenced the data gathered and to deconstruct the roles they played in the data gathering process” (O'Connor 2007, 261).

Reflexivity expects the researcher to assume the responsibility for how personal reactions and interpretations influence the process of research, while also considering how the locations of our social and cultural background influence our assumptions of Others (Fook 1999). I believe that any “researcher in qualitative research is an integral part of both the research process and research results, not simply a conduit through which findings flow” (Acker and Feuerverger 2003, 50); however, there is a difference in power between the researcher and the research participant, and this is usually a top-down understanding of power – the researcher has more, the participant less (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Karnieli-Miller, Stier, and Pessach 2009; Kvale 1996). While this scenario holds true
in many encounters, I feel that power is – and should be – more fluid than what the researcher-participant dynamic often implies. “[F]eminists have suggested ways of sharing power with participants through, for example, applying less structured interview methods and allowing participants to take part in interpreting their own accounts” (Del Busso 2007, 309-10).

As I will outline shortly, I have used feminist/politicized perspectives to deconstruct power in the research process through use of the qualitative practices of open-ended questioning and through critical reflection by the participants. In taking this idea of sharing power further, I feel that for a methodology to be reflexive it must also account for the ways in which the bodies of those engaged in the interviewing are implicated in the process itself. As Maree Burns argues, “from a post-structuralist perspective, another important consideration for feminist research methodology is reflexivity that takes into account much more than an acknowledgement of the ways in which we ‘affect’ the data collected and how our own subject positions are implicated in the analyses produced” (2003, 230). She goes on to state that research interactions and results “are the product of ‘physical’ exchanges that occur in a reciprocal manner between the researcher and the participant and that have implications at the ‘physical level’” (Burns 2003, 230). As a result, I understand a feminist reflexive methodology to account for the ways in which power and privilege must continually be rendered visible and active within qualitative inquiry.

The bodies of those involved in a study are crucial to the ways in which the study manifests, even when bodies are not explicitly present, such as in survey methods. Bodies and identities define the practices of methodology, as being – varying abilities, exchanging words, pausing, preoccupation with life outside the interview, misunderstandings based on differing experiences – informs what is possible. This methodological frame makes explicit that the position of the researcher is also an

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18 This chapter focuses specifically on methodology and the ways in which the methods were influenced by the interaction of power and my embodiment as a researcher. The bodies of the participants will be thoroughly addressed in upcoming chapters.
active participatory role; the priorities, viewpoints, and body of the researcher must also be considered and examined.

Feminist reflexive methodology, much like the concept of identity, is messy. As Audrey Kobayashi states,

I have struggled with a mounting dis-ease over the reflexive turn in human geography, and with a mounting conviction that much of what passes for anti-racist scholarship, by including a reflexive acknowledgement of the writer’s ‘positionality’ with respect to her subjects, is actually a privileged and self-indulgent focus on the self that provides anything but an anti-racist lens and ends up distancing the writer – by virtue of her power to name (even if she is only naming herself) and to situate – from the very people whose conditions she might hope to change. (Kobayashi 2003, 347-8)

This critique is an important one as it forces us to consider that just because we may reflect upon our privileged positionalities these reflections do not necessarily incite action: “...reflexivity has no meaning if it is not connected to a larger agenda – which for most of us is avowedly both political and personal – meant to change the world” (Kobayashi 2003, 348). In Gillian Rose’s analysis of the complexity of reflexivity, she crucially states “reflexivity may be less a process of self-discovery than of self-construction. If the process of reflexivity changes what is being reflected upon, then there is no ‘transparent’ self waiting to be revealed” (1997, 313). For those of us involved in this study, our journeys to critical awareness are in no way identical; the majority of the participants are coming to these critical ideas for the first time, while others have been engaging with feminist activism for decades. These dynamics add richness to what can be gained by engaging in reflexivity as a methodological tool of inquiry as it demonstrates that reflexivity, like education, is a lifelong process.
The Study

In this section, I describe how I approached the study in terms of the research design, sites, recruitment of participants, a discussion of the participants themselves, the process of interviewing, journals, and coding. I have chosen to keep these sections primarily descriptive so that my reflections and reflective practice can be attended to more specifically in the latter half of the chapter.

Research Design

As indicated in the framework that I introduced in Chapter 1, my research explores understandings of privilege among senior undergraduate students and instructors in higher education and the enmeshments of privilege, location, and classroom encounters. In order to explore privilege as it emerges through reflections on educational experiences, I have employed the qualitative strategy of interviewing participants who are engaged in the higher education spaces where identities are not only enacted, but explicitly confronted – critical identity classrooms.

Theorizing identity necessarily requires thinking through the spaces in which bodies are found and how those spaces reflect the fluidity of how identities are understood. I began the project under the working assumption that using a multi-site approach to the study of identity would enable me to expose the ways in which privilege and identities are contextual and fluid. As location is fundamental to how students understand themselves and their society, recruiting students from communities that significantly vary by race, class, etc. was a crucial aspect of this work.

Specifically, I have used two forms of qualitative methods to acquire my data. The primary practice involves using semi-structured audio-recorded interviews, as the use of interviews allow me to explore the participants’ perceptions in a manner that can most effectively illustrate how students and instructors self-identify and address their roles as producers, resistors, conveyors and receivers of knowledge. As higher education is itself a privileged space, the intersections of identity, privilege,
and anti-oppressive engagement creates a unique site from which this research emerges. I recruited 30 respondents in total, a number that I felt was manageable for me to interview, code, and analyze.

The second aspect of my methodology is the use of journaling as a reflective strategy. I asked interested student interviewees to follow-up their interview by further reflecting on our discussion and the overall experience of being interviewed. While participating in the journal was in no way a condition of participating in the interview, I believe that adding a dimension of personal reflection and representation to my dissertation allows for an interesting balance between “rigour and creativity,” so that combining various forms of the personal and theoretical demonstrates the multiple ways through which data can be collected (Ewing and Smith 2004). This strategy was also used to explore the limitations of interviewing, in that posing similar questions to the participants for a second time is likely to generate answers that are not identical or necessarily similar to their original answers. These ‘discrepancies’ should not be considered failures of qualitative methodologies, rather these practices of data collection can exist in dialogue with one another to expose how it is that – similar to our identities – understandings of experience are subjective and contingent. Furthermore, journaling can encourage the expression of careful consideration, as the participants have a more lengthy, and perhaps creative, engagement with their thoughts than they may have had in our initial encounter (Boud 2001). Of the 22 student participants, 12 agreed to work on a journal and 10 of the journals were returned to me.

Sites

To consider space in terms of geographical distance, the sites where the universities are located – South City, a diverse densely-populated urban city in Southern Ontario, and North City, a smaller, more homogenous, rurally-located city in Northern Ontario – offer very different population samples with which to explore the effects of space on understandings of privilege. I have chosen
these two locations because of their very different populations, their physical proximity (400km)\textsuperscript{19}, and the similar types of critical identity departments they offer; i.e. both institutions’ curriculum include a major in women and gender studies\textsuperscript{20}. Specifically, North City provides fascinating demographics for investigating space as relational to understandings of privilege, since most North American academic research on social justice education is conducted in urban spaces that are populated by the highest percentage of diverse populations. While my analysis is in no way dependent on a constant comparison of these two sites, I chose to use these sites to gain insight into how classroom composition, movement to, from, and within the cities, and the descriptions the cities and universities evoke for the students seem to impact their reflections on their educational experience. Providing the comparison between the two locations adds significant depth to the ways in which the complexities of identity can be articulated and understood.

According to the most recent census – \textit{2006 Census of Canada} – North City residents differ significantly from the provincial population averages regarding race, language, socio-economic status, and religion. For example, in North City 6\%\textsuperscript{21} of the population is Aboriginal, while less than 0.5\% of South City’s population is Aboriginal (the provincial average is 2\%) (Statistics Canada 2010). Conversely, 2\% of North City’s population is categorized as ‘Visible Minority,’ yet the Visible Minority population of South City is 47\% (Statistics Canada 2010). Clearly, these spaces vary in terms of population distribution, but what is significant to my study are the ways in which the populations of the cities impact how identity is understood and conveyed in the university classroom. As I emphasized earlier, these spaces are not a great distance from each other geographically

\textsuperscript{19} This proximity enabled me to carry out my research without considerable financial support, as I was easily able to travel between the two locations.
\textsuperscript{20} While not all classes in women and gender studies are feminist or anti-oppressive, I have used this example as a way to show commonalities in the types of departments at both schools, not to infer that all critical identity classes are feminist or limited to women and gender studies departments.
\textsuperscript{21} These numbers are rounded to the closest approximation.
(approximately 400km, yet connected by a major highway), thus it is important to explore how the locations of the universities, student composition in the classroom, variations in pedagogy, etc. impact the participants’ perceptions of privilege.

These sites are also significant for me as they reflect spaces similar to those that I have experienced in my life – growing up in a ‘sleepy’ rural city and now living in a major urban centre. Specifically, as someone who hails from a rural Northern Ontario community, hearing from the experiences of those outside of a densely-populated Canadian city is important to me, as barriers to access often render rural voices rare in much qualitative research. On the surface, these voices speak to the ways in which cities like North City can offer a rural educational experience for students – such as small classes and closer proximity to nature (in fact, these reasons were noted by some of the students I interviewed, who had moved to North City from communities further South). While these can be attractive qualities to students, another reality emerging out of NU is that many students from North City are unable to afford to leave to attend a “better,” more prestigious school that can be found in more densely-populated spaces.

Recruitment

I was able to gain access to participants in both expected and unanticipated ways. My original plan was to use snowball sampling with department heads and administrators in each institution. The purpose for this choice was twofold, as I intended to use this method to gain access to faculty engaged in critical identity studies who may be interested in participating in my study and to obtain approval by said faculty to speak to their classes about student participation. On occasion, I would contact an instructor who would fit my criteria for participation and while they were not able to be

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22 As Shelly stated, “Ok, I did want to go here, but I also didn’t think I would get into a better school because my grades weren’t that high.”

23 In qualitative research, snowball sampling is a technique for developing a research sample where existing study subjects recruit future subjects via asking others they feel would be appropriate for the study (Mason 2002). Ideally, the sample group builds until there is enough data gathered.
interviewed, due to time constraints for example, they did offer to have me come to their class to introduce my project and recruit students. In other circumstances, students referred me to friends of theirs who they thought might be interested in participating as well\(^{24}\).

After gaining approval from the instructors, I spoke to undergraduate students in relevant upper-year lectures. The basis for choosing upper-year undergraduate students engaged in critical identity studies was due to my desire to discuss identity and privilege with those who had been exposed\(^{25}\) to some teaching and literatures on the subject, as the interested students acknowledged that they have engaged in some depth with notions of privilege and/or oppression throughout their academic experience. The courses that I visited for recruitment purposes were Young Feminisms; The Social Making of Gender; Women and International Development; Exploring Identity in Popular Culture; Race and Space; and, Race, Class, Gender and Ethnicities\(^{26}\). Once entering into the classes, I was able to inform the group of my research interests (verbally and via a distributed description of the project\(^{27}\)) and request their participation through a sign-up form\(^{28}\). The recruitment letter provided a brief description of who I am, what the project concerns, the anonymity offered to those who participate, and the contact information of myself and my supervisor. The sign-up form required minimal information, in that it indicated a willingness to be contacted for the project and providing basic information about potential participants, including their name, email and/or phone number, and year of study.

\(^{24}\) In these instances, I reminded the students that anything that they said to me would remain anonymous; however, I made it clear to them that I could not account for the insider knowledge they may have of one another. I informed them that this knowledge may identify them to their peers when what they divulge to me has been addressed in the dissertation.

\(^{25}\) While having a shared understanding of concepts could not be guaranteed, I wanted to ensure that students had some exposure to critical language on identity, privilege, and oppression so as to provide a general grounding for our conversation.

\(^{26}\) These names have been slightly altered to protect anonymity, yet they still accurately represent the aims of each course.

\(^{27}\) See Appendix A.

\(^{28}\) See Appendix B.
As I received more volunteers for the project than I was able to interview, the sample was selected based on year-level (fourth year was preferable) and mutual availability rather than selective sampling based on specific identifications or other personal characterizations\(^{29}\).

\textit{Participants}

My methods of recruitment resulted in the completion of 30 interviews (16 participants at SU, 14 at NU). Between October and November 2008, 19 of the interviews were completed while the remaining interviews were conducted in February and March 2009\(^{30}\). Each participant was given a letter of informed consent\(^{31}\). The letter explained my background, the purpose of the study, approximately how long the interview would take, and what will be done with the information provided by the participant. The letter also indicated that the participant had the opportunity to withdraw from the study within one month following the completion of the interview. The letter stated that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained, as my analysis will not use information that will identify the participants. The form also indicated that I would personally transcribe all of the interviews, so that no source outside of my thesis committee will be exposed to the material. Furthermore, the participants were aware that pseudonyms for the participants, universities, and cities would be assigned to all data included in my study; the majority of the pseudonyms were chosen by the participants, but for those that did not choose their own name I assigned them a name based on the ethnic or cultural origins of their actual names.

As I stated earlier, feminist methodologies bring attention to the fact that neutrality cannot be guaranteed in qualitative inquiry, and the notion of ‘objectivity’ must not be relied upon as the means

\(^{29}\) It must be noted that participants who volunteer for studies of this kind have an interest in speaking to a researcher, but these participants do not reflect the opinions of those who do not have an interest in being interviewed. The reasons why some students (and instructors) do not volunteer could be many – political or otherwise – and what is not said, in qualitative research, is sometimes as important as what is.

\(^{30}\) The reason for this break in interviews is due to the birth of my daughter, which will be discussed in an upcoming section in terms of the dynamics created by my pregnant and non-pregnant body during the interviewing process.

\(^{31}\) See Appendix C.
through which research is valued. I have taken every possible precaution in order to protect the participants through anonymity and confidentiality. The consent letter explains my background, the purpose of the study, approximately how long the interview would take and what will be done with the information provided by the participant. A space was provided for the participant to acknowledge receipt of the letter through their signature and date. Furthermore, each student participant was asked if they would be willing to continue with the project in terms of the journaling component. The details of the journaling component (being provided with materials; how the length, breadth, and scope of any contributions to the journal are made at the discretion of the participant; that the journal need not be worked on for more than 1 week following the interview) was outlined in a separate document, which was given to the participants once they established their interest in continuing with the project. 32 I provided the contact information of both my supervisor and myself, so that we could be reached in case the participants had any questions regarding the project. The participants were informed, both through the consent form and verbally before the interview began, that they were in no way obligated to discuss issues that they did not feel comfortable or appropriate discussing.

The participants brought a wealth of experiences and diverse engagements to the study of identity and their relationships to their educational paths. Of the 30 participants interviewed, 8 were instructors (4 from each institution), while the other 22 were students (12 from SU, 10 from NU). Of the participants, 29 were self-identified women, with 1 self-identified man. Racializations, classes, abilities, sexual orientations, ages, and religious backgrounds varied among the participants. The brief descriptors of the students that I provide below are primarily constructed from the aspects of themselves that they particularly emphasized, most frequently in relation to their identity, educational

32 See Appendix D.
career, and social life. These descriptions predominantly speak to a non-normative identity that the students emphasized. For example, all of the SU students identify themselves in relation to race – 10 students identify as women of colour, while 2 identify as white. Alexia, a mixed race woman, is the only NU student to discuss her identity in terms of racialization. As notions of whiteness emerged through our interviews, many of the white NU students started to use the concept of whiteness to relate to themselves, but ‘white’ was not a term that they initially used and so many of their descriptions below reflect a racialized absence. However, NU students also often prioritized aspects of themselves that are similarly non-normative, such as Natasha discussing her dis/abilities and Holly – the only ‘out’ student that I interviewed – discussing her queer sexuality as a main component of her identity. As many of our discussions were memorable for me for a variety of reasons, I hope that these descriptions can convey some aspect of their personalities that I was privileged to be exposed to in our interview. Of course, I must protect their anonymity and thus some ‘telling’ details have been omitted.

Southern University Students

Aisha

At the time of our interview, Aisha was 20 years old. She described herself in stating “[m]y culture being Guyanese, I understand different cultures. Me, alone, I’m Portuguese, I’m Black, I’m Indian, and I’m British, so all of that, I have grandmothers and aunts on every side and aspect.” She was in her third year of university at Southern University, majoring in women and gender studies and sociology. She was inspired to engage in the social sciences because she “took a course in sociology

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33 I do not describe the instructors in this manner as there are too few of them and any of their descriptors would be unlikely to protect their anonymity. The ways in which I address the instructors can be found in Chapter 6.

34 As ethnicity was not a concept that I prioritized in my interviewing, I did not specifically ask the students any questions that focused on ethnicity. Many of the SU students introduced the concept of ethnicity in relation to themselves, which we then discussed; however, ethnicity was not an identity that any of the white students from NU discussed.
at [SU] while I was still in high school and it totally changed my life...it gave me a kind of vision of how I could see the world differently. [laughs]. I seem to be losing that vision now.” Aisha lived with her parents, while working two jobs at the university and volunteering for various community organizations for racialized youth.

Amanda

When I interviewed Amanda, she had recently turned 21. She referred to herself as “a beautifully complex West Indian.” She was excited to be graduating soon with her degree in political science and sociology. Interestingly, Amanda expressed that she “absolutely loves women’s studies,” but decided not to major in it as “my parents have a hard enough time accepting sociology! They would never allow me to graduate with a degree in feminism!” She “still like[s] Power Rangers” and to dye her “hair different colours.” Amanda stated, “[a] few months ago I had purple in my hair and people in my life just say I’m weird and they make comments like – “Brown people don’t do that” – and I’m like – “What is that supposed to mean?” I think they are dumb.”

Bushra

In her third year of a degree in geography and women and gender studies, Bushra was 20 at the time of our interview. She was a busy student as she was a mentor for new undergraduate students, while also working to create career resources for students at Southern University’s career centre. Bushra identified herself in many ways throughout our interview, but the one she admittedly “rehearses” is “Canadian-born, Pakistani-Muslim female.” Bushra had much to say on the subject of identity and its relation to women and gender studies. Perhaps it was because she felt she “can relate to it a lot of it. When I can bring in my own experiences into class, I feel more of a connection with the concepts and the understanding of it.... So, it’s kinda personal, but it’s not. It’s just so real. I don’t like learning
about theories, I don’t care about Karl Marx – no offence to sociology or whatever – but, like I don’t care about these old men, they did what they had to do, good for them!” [laughs].

Chloe
In her third year, Chloe said “I’m doing an English specialist. All English all the time. I take a lot of electives – mostly women’s studies. I plan on going to grad school and then into journalism.” In her early twenties, Chloe lived with her parents and could not wait to “travel the world.” She spoke of her parents quite often in our interview, as they had inspired much of her interest in studying race and gender: “They are pretty assimilated, but they are very traditional in terms of how education is really important and they grew up in Guyana, but they love the UK for some reason. If they could marry the UK, they would...even though that is the place that colonized their people and took their ancestors as slaves, they love it.”

Fatima
During our interview, Fatima was in her fourth year of a sociology degree with a “deep interest in social inequality.” Fatima was preparing to graduate and applied to a faculty of education so that she could “teach about multiculturalism and difference.” Much of our discussion centred on concepts of race, as her racialized identity was something that Fatima “thinks about constantly”: “I am Canadian, but nevertheless it is part of my identity....not United Emirates, but Pakistan, my parents’ home country because I was brought up with those cultural – the food, the language, all those beliefs and everything, so that makes up who I am, because of them, but other aspects come from Canada.”
Jackie

In her third year as a double-major in psychology and women’s studies, 21 year-old Jackie envisioned her “perfect future” to involve a career as a clinical neuro-psychologist. She grew up in a family full of women – a single mom and many sisters. Her whole life has been all “women-y.” She lives “down the street” from Southern University, but calls her home the “über-white” Northern Ontario city she was raised in. As she described herself in our interview, she is “half-black, half-Aboriginal.” Although she, like every other participant that I interviewed, is a full-time student, Jackie worked as a waitress “20-30 hours a week” even though she was hired under the assumption that she was only to work 16. She talked about her exhaustion, but claimed it was “just a part of life.”

Kelly

When I interviewed Kelly, she had recently turned 21. She felt that being 21 was the “start of something new” for her. A fourth year geography and women and gender studies student, Kelly repeatedly discussed how her “Korean-ness” was something that “preoccupied” a lot of her “head-space.” For Kelly, her movement from the west coast of Canada to South City reflected a lot of transition in her life that she was “really grappling with.” It was difficult for her to put into words how she saw this recent move as impacting her, but she kept returning to it as “significant.” With a keen interest in film, Kelly also ruminated on how she could combine her degrees to do something that she “loves” rather than what she feels she “should be doing.”

Lenore

In her third year of a geography and sociology degree, 21 year-old Lenore repeatedly emphasized how much she “hates school.” Lenore claims, “I am not 100% dedicated to school at all. I could put
more effort into school, I just choose not to.” Upon graduation, Lenore was planning on getting her real estate license. Lenore conveyed that she felt disconnected from her courses at Southern University because she thinks, as a white woman, she departs from most of her peers in her belief “that equality is just as hard for white women as it is for people of other races. I think racism is sort of, not made up, but I think it’s made out to be more than it really is.” Lenore expressed frustration at living in South City as she wished she “could move somewhere else.”

Maham

Engaging in a newfound interest in the connections between colonialism, privilege, and the classroom, Maham and I had much to talk about. In her fourth year as a history and women and gender studies major, Maham was also quite interested in the possibilities of balancing a child and going to graduate school (two things we talked about at length). At 21, Maham was commuting to Southern University three hours each way, while also working two part-time jobs. She regretted that she has “no time to be an activist,” but hopes that through her future teaching she can “impact the lives of many.” Maham believes that “using my racialized identity will hopefully disrupt stereotypes in the classroom while opening up possibilities for new conversations.”

Rebecca

As a fourth year psychology student, Rebecca felt that she was privileged in that she “doesn’t have to work.” Living with her boyfriend and her mother, Rebecca repeatedly addressed how she uses women and gender courses as her electives because she feels it is her “responsibility” to her future profession as a social worker to understand the “plight of women.” As “usually the only white woman in the room” at Southern University, Rebecca spoke of how she “enjoys being exposed to
diversity,” as she lived in a community outside of South City where it is “mostly all-white people.”

Rebecca also spoke of her passion to draw and how she wished that more of her scholarly work could have included arts-based analysis, but that her psychology courses were mostly focused “on drugs and the brain” so there is “not much room for artsy fun in there.”

Roya

During our interview, Roya was in her third year of a sociology and women and gender studies degree. Roya was particularly engaged with notions of culture and nationality: “I wasn’t born here, I was born in Iran, but I wouldn’t say that I culturally identify as Iranian because I consider myself Canadian.” She was working full-time at a law firm, while also going to school full-time. For 20 year-old Roya, this proved to be a conflict: “It’s really difficult. So, what I’m doing right now is a lot of my courses fall at night, so three of my courses fall at night. So, the ones that are during the day, my best friend is in them, so I just use her notes.” She emphasized that her boyfriend was a great support to her as most “guys think what I do is a joke, but not my boyfriend. He is really supportive – even though I barely see him!”

Terry

At the time of our interview, Terry was preparing to graduate from her fifth year with a political science and equity studies degree. At 22 years-old, Terry expressed that her only regret with regard to her education was that she did not major in women and gender studies: “I only took one course in it, but it totally changed my life.” Do to her newfound interest in international development and gendered policies, Terry was planning on applying to a graduate department where she could explore this focus. As a black woman, she discussed how she found it “funny” that it wasn’t until a white woman pointed to issues of race in the classroom that she felt classrooms could be transformative
spaces: “I always thought, big deal if someone interrupts you, big deal if this person is talking more than I do, big deal if I don’t feel like my thoughts are being listened to, I was just assuming that this always happens and this isn’t stuff that we can actually take up. Taking that course was amazing for me.”

Northern University Students
Alexia
Alexia was 20 years-old during our interview. She was in her third year of an English degree with plans to go into teaching. Alexia decided to take a women and gender studies course on Young Feminisms, even after having a “brutal” experience in an introductory women and gender studies course because she “had to take something” and so she ensured “it wasn’t the same prof.” For Alexia, growing up in two predominantly white communities – one being North City – has been a “struggle” as she looks “white” but is “actually half-black...well, a quarter-black.” Much of our conversation surrounded how she her boyfriend and his friends feel that her racialization is a “joke” and that her course on women and gender studies has given her the tools “to tell them they are wrong, even when I think their jokes are funny too.”

Anna
Anna was 20 years-old and in her third year of a social work and psychology degree when I interviewed her. She planned to do a master’s degree in child development with an interest in “testing children for learning disabilities” as she was interested in “statistics and disability.” She repeatedly emphasized that she is “shy” and “hard-working.” Being from a community that is North of North City, Anna often commented on how “big” and “diverse” North City and Northern University are:
“I’m from a really small town. Well, it’s growing now, I guess. It has close to 11,000 people!

But...fun, it’s fun there.” As Anna has Cerebral Palsy, she seemed to grapple with its ‘place’ in her life: “I was born with CP [Cerebral Palsy], so I want to say that it was hard for me, which it was. I’ve had a lot of troubles going to school and stuff and it really bothered me, but coming here, my parents...are paying for my entire university, got me a car so I don’t have to stand on the bus, they pay for my insurance and all I do is pay for my gas. So they pretty much have everything covered. In that sense, I feel really privileged. I could have been born to a different family who didn’t want me, but I also feel underprivileged because if I wanted to be a nurse, I wouldn’t be able to stand for long periods of time, so it goes both ways.”

Carmen

As the only mature student that I interviewed, Carmen (in her mid-forties) felt that her age created a disconnect between herself and her classroom peers: “I’m in my third-year and yet, critical discussions aren’t happening. And so the links, how do you make the links? Even when the prof tries to, the kids... I mean, my classmates don’t get it. I am able to make the links on my own because I have a wonderful background as a feminist activist to help me make those links, but I just don’t get them.” Carmen emphasized that she gravitates towards the instructor of the course as “we are more similar in age.” Another key aspect of our discussion was how Carmen’s Metis background was a particular area of contention for her and her interest in social work: “I’m conflicted... I acknowledge both backgrounds with knowing that I’ve been privileged in my life experience because of my family. I’ve been brought up in a white middle-class society, you know? Whereas, I wasn’t on a reserve. I wasn’t living with all these other oppressions that seem to face First Nations communities, but that is where I want my work to go.”
Devra

At 22 years-old, Devra was happy to be graduating from her degree in sociology as she “feels like it’s been going on forever!” Since she loved working with children, she planned to enrol in a faculty of education in order to be able to teach kindergarten. A volunteer at a daycare centre, Devra emphasized her interest in educating youth: “Kids are so amazing! I enjoy their honesty and openness. High-school intimidates me.” Devra moved to North City to attend university and she feels that her small community shielded her from “experiencing diversity”: “I had no idea about identity at all before coming here. I had no clue there was so much gender inequality.” Further, Devra expressed that through her education, she realized that she was also racialized: “You just, you read this stuff and you’re like “I’m white, eh?” It’s weird.”

Holly

When I interviewed Holly she was 21 years-old and in her third year of a sociology degree. Holly is a waitress who works full-time in addition to going to school full-time, which she finds affects her ability to focus on school-work: “It’s a little stressful, but I mean I am paying for school as I go. Like this morning I just gave another $1700 and I kinda just have to wait until my paychecks come in to pay it. I’m glad I still live with my family though. That helps.” Holly says that she is primarily interested in sociology because she wants to “explore gender and sexuality as much as possible.” As a member of the Pride committee on campus, Holly claims that her interests in studying identity came about because of her queer identity: “I’ve already done a lot of self-discovery. I think that especially when you are gay or you are transgendered, when you first start to realize it you kind of have to go through a whole new self-discovery phase where you have to focus on yourself in a way where maybe straight people wouldn’t…and now I am using my education to further those interests.”
Julian

Julian, the only male student that I interviewed, was in his fourth year of a sociology and teaching degree. He was quite interested in discussing his undergraduate thesis project, which he described as “studying the education system from the perspective that it sucks and needs to be fixed.” Julian said “the goal of my thesis is to establish that, in general, hierarchies are limiting people’s ability to learn.” Originally from a small-town near South City, Julian moved to North City because he “didn’t want to be a number”: “I wanted a place where I could interact with my profs on a much more meaningful level.” As Julian identifies as asexual, his interest on the power of performance was a discussion he kept returning to in our conversation: “I like to use my privilege. My going-between is really beneficial in that people see me as a young male and so I can betray that sort of hierarchy in order to disrupt it, while at the same time I can regress to the other side – female – which isn’t seen as a hierarchy at all. I can have open conversations with women and make them feel comfortable about things they are concerned about. I am a very good listener as a result of it.”

Natasha

24 year-old Natasha was a fourth year sociology major who moved to North City from South City in the hopes of having a “more simple existence.” Her position as a crisis intervention worker for various mental health associations, as it relates to her personal experience with disability, led her to apply for a Master’s degree in social work: “Because of my learning disabilities, I was told in high-school that I wouldn’t be smart enough to go to university.... As a result I’ve learned to advocate for myself, which also has translated or has followed through to my job as a crisis worker because I would also argue that mental health, for a large part, is an invisible disability.” Natasha expressed that she loves what she studies, but “[i]t’s almost as if it’s okay to analyze [inequality] in the
classroom setting and reproduce anti-oppressive beliefs for papers or presentations, but then you get out into the real world and then it’s all thrown aside because it’s a cut-throat world for who has the best funding, who has the best job etc. I find that really disheartening.”

René

René was 21 at the time of our interview and in the fourth year of her psychology degree. She had recently been accepted to a Master’s program and was quite exhausted when we spoke: “I have three jobs. Most of them involve working with kids with disabilities, which is great, but I’ve been at all three jobs today, plus I have class later!” She expressed that her busy schedule keeps her “completely socially isolated” and that she “doesn’t even see my boyfriend.” As René lived on her own, she felt that academic work was isolating, yet “worth it.” The critical identity course that she was taking was an elective and “totally outside of anything I had ever heard of,” but she “really likes it”: “There is so much stuff I didn’t know before and there are so many different opinions even though the class has about eight people in it. It’s really an activist course, so I like it. I never thought I would have taken women’s studies... The professor is great too, and that makes a big difference.”

Shelly

Shelly, 21 years-old, was in the fourth year of her labour studies and sociology degree during our interview. She moved from South City to North City because she “didn’t want to be in a class with a thousand people with a prof who didn’t know my name. I’d rather be in a class with 10 people.” She also discussed how much she gains from being around nature as the “smells” and “quiet” that you can find in North City “is a gift.” Shelly explains that her experiences of growing up in South City greatly impact how she views North City: “It’s almost like, it’s not like a culture shock, but it’s
different to see... At home, I guess you could almost say, white people like me are more of a minority than anyone else...like all my friends are a different race than me, almost. So here, it is totally different. It’s weird to have all white people like me.”

Vanessa

At the time of our interview, Vanessa was 21 years-old, in her third year of a psychology, sociology, and education degree. She was eager to discuss her interests in teaching elementary school as she aimed to include aspects of “social justice and anti-oppression” into her teaching. Her interest in schooling and social justice was borne out of a course that she says “changed everything” for her: “I took one class about social inequalities within the education system and it focused on, like, education and gender, sexual identity, race, age and class. So everything was oriented around education but it was still about the inequalities that are in the world. I just thought it was so amazing to be able to combine all of those things and I really want to do that for my career.” Vanessa, like most of the students, wished that she “could have more of a social life,” but she did say that – on occasion – “I feel rebellious and I go to a movie with some girlfriends! Shocking, aren’t I?”

*The Process of Interviewing*

I discussed with each participant when and where they would feel most comfortable being interviewed: “Participants who are given a choice about where they will be interviewed may feel more empowered in their interaction with the researcher, and the researcher has an opportunity to examine participants’ choices for clues about the social geographies of the places where research is being carried out” (Elwood and Martin 2000, 656). The majority of student interviews (16) were conducted in coffee shops, while the other 4 were in student spaces such as an LGBT office, private library study space, and public common areas. Two of the student interviews were conducted over
the phone (Carmen and Kelly). The interviews with the instructors largely took place in their offices on campus; however, two of the instructor interviews were in less formal spaces – one in a coffee shop, the other in the instructor’s home. The interviews with the senior instructors were in their office space, while some of the others were in shared offices. “We suggest that the interview site itself produces ‘micro-geographies’ of spatial relations and meaning, where multiple scales of social relations intersect in the research interview” (Elwood and Martin 2000, 649). Of course, the more private spaces provided fewer distractions within the interviews due to less background noise, yet the interviews conducted in public space seemed to become more informal (which often translated into having more ease of discussion) far quicker. Similarly, the phone interviews provided excellent discussion as there were no disruptions during either of them.  

My strategy of interviewing is standardized (in terms of preparing a general guide of questions that I would ask) but I also kept the questions as open-ended as possible so that the trajectory of the interview was not overly determined by me. I felt that this would allow for a more informal discussion that enabled the participants to help decide what was important to cover and yet allowed me to direct them towards the topics that were most relevant to the study. My strategy then was for the interview not to be “rigidly constrained by an interview schedule” but rather that the interview has “a clear agenda and the interviewer retains some control over the interaction. This makes it different from a conversation, although its informal style makes it similar to a conversation in many ways” (Wincup 1998, 108).

In an effort to create a dynamic discussion, I began the interviewing process by asking each participant to describe their educational background and scholarly interests. Following this initial

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35 The phone interviews were taped using a telephone line monitor that connected the digital voice recorder to the telephone jack.

36 See Appendix F for a general interview guide. The questions and topics listed functioned as a general guide only, as I encouraged the participants to lead the majority of the discussion.
entry point, we discussed more personal aspects of their life: where do they consider home? How do they balance the various roles in their life – school, work, etc? As most of these introductory questions were quite general, they applied to both students and instructors. The main discussion of each interview revolved around the participant’s encounters and their subsequent feelings regarding what they have experienced in the critical identity classroom. Here I asked questions such as, “Does what you study seem relevant in other aspects of your life?” and “What do you think of when you hear the word ‘privilege’?” While the questions for instructors differed in terms of the scope of the questions, the topics remained the same throughout the course of all of the interviewing for both groups – background, schooling, identity, power, space, and privilege/oppression. I organized the questions in terms of a progression, as the initial questions were far more general, so that I could get a feel for the interest and level of knowledge each participant had regarding the topics being introduced, which allowed me to gain a sense of what was of most interest to them.

Interviewing the students proved to be a much different process than interviewing the instructors. The largest difference between the two groups was that I had far more questions for the students, as the emphasis of the study was on the students, and I also expected the instructors to provide lengthier answers (which they did); however, the majority of the questions had the same focus and were just reframed for a teaching context rather than a learning context. For example, I would ask the students “How do you understand the concept of power? Do you ever think about yourself in relation to power while you are in class?”, whereas I may ask the instructors “Has there ever been an in-class scenario where you felt that you had too much or too little power?”

The length of each interview was relatively consistent. Each interview lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. The participants were informed when I began and ended recording the interview,

37 In Chapter 8, I further reflect on limitations inherent to the process of interviewing: Expectations and Recollections within Interviews.
assuring them that I would shut off the recorder whenever they wished. I shut off the recorder during 3 of the interviews, because of a cell phone call or the need to use the washroom. I also informed the participants that I would be taking notes during the interview. To my surprise and pleasure, some of the students had arrived to the interview with notepads themselves as they were interested in asking me about graduate studies. Immediately preceding and following the interviews, I made notes on discussions that occurred after the recording stopped and additional notes on the overall experience itself.

_Journals_

As I previously stated, I received 10 journals from the 12 students who agreed to participate in the journaling component. In order to assist the students in engaging with reflection, I provided them with an addressed (to return to me) stamped envelope, a paper notebook, and a description of what is possible for their journal. In this description, I included an outline of possible topics, such as reflecting on the interview by asking if they wished they had answered something differently, while also trying to provoke further responses by asking them to think through some of the topics of the interview: “Reflect on the discussion that we had during the interview and add anything you feel like adding” and “Where do you experience privilege(s) in your life? Where do you experience oppression(s)?” I also included a $10 gift card in each of the envelopes as a thank-you to those who agreed to participate in this additional component.

While my analysis of the content of the journals will take place in later chapters alongside my analysis of the interviews, I will use this space to briefly describe my interpretations of the types of responses that I received from the students. In the journal package that they received, I gave them an

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38 See Appendix E.
39 I specifically did not tell the participants about the gift card before they agreed to the journaling aspect so as to not imply that they should feel compelled to partake because of an added incentive.
outline for the kinds of follow-up responses that they could submit. I stated “[t]he purpose of this journal is for you to reflect on the interview that you participated in. These reflections can take the form of writing, images, ‘doodles’, or anything else that you wish to include.” It was my hope that they would use the journaling exercise to reflect on their experience of the interview and have a space where they could feel free to express any thoughts they may have had following the conclusion of our interview. As “[i]t is the investigator who starts the game and sets up its rules, and is usually the one who, unilaterally and without any preliminary negotiations, assigns the interview its objectives and uses” (Bourdieu 1999, 609), it was my hope that offering an added component for self-expression may have aided in the students feeling a form of empowerment.

The majority of the responses in the journals were fashioned in relation to the questions that I provided in the journal package. For the most part, the students would reiterate their original answers, contradict themselves, expand upon the ideas they claimed in the interview, or try to work through why it is that they may have originally responded in a certain way since that is not how they ‘really’ feel. All of these responses provide me with intriguing data for analysis, but in terms of method the parts of the journaling exercise that are most surprising are the instances of journal transformation.

There are three clear examples where the intentions of the journal were transformed by students into a form of ‘homework’ and, thus, these responses reflected how these women were embodying ‘the good student.’ Classifying the students’ responses in this way enables a nuanced understanding of the practices of regulation that are at work within academic encounters. While many argue that what comprises a ‘good student’ is inherently known to students and need not be defined (Thompson 2010), some of the main characteristics of ‘the good student’ are to show interest, ambition, enjoyment, willingness and perseverance in what they do (Llamas 2006). These ‘qualities’ arguably originate from Foucault’s notions of surveillance and technologies of the body.

See Appendix E.
address the role that discipline has had on bodies within institutions to produce results based on hierarchical power relations (1975, 1980). There has been much development on the embodiment of ‘the good student’ as a privileged body in educational spaces (Grant 1997; Pearce, Down, and Moore 2008; Thompson 2010). For my brief discussion here I emphasize how embedded these practices are, while also pointing to the ways in which a student’s agency can allow for consciously using her identity as ‘the good student’ to aid in her/his academic journey.

While it could be said that volunteering for a project of this nature points to how all of the participants may be ‘good students,’ ‘the good students’ amongst the participants are Devra, Rebecca, and Bushra. Devra responded to each of the questions that I posed in the outline by answering them in sequential order, copied the headings that I gave on the outline, and would answer each question even if this meant that she would repeat the answers she had already provided. Furthermore, while I had clearly stated that I would be the only one reading the journals, Devra consistently addressed the journal as if it were ‘to be handed in’ to my superior or supervisor. For example, Devra wrote, “[t]he interview was definitely what I expected in terms of what Victoria was researching. Although I had more fun than I expected, probably because I feel Victoria was very easy to talk with and I felt comfortable explaining things that I may have felt uncomfortable with in other situations.” I argue that these responses reflect how Devra wanted to both satisfy her need to be a ‘good student’ and that she wanted my supervisor to see that I, too, am a ‘good student.’

Rebecca embodies ‘the good student’ through a hand-drawing that she provided in her journal. The drawing is on the first page of the journaling notebook, so that it functions as the title page of her journal. In my experience of schooling, a colourful title page was the key to framing and alluding to the quality of the work found in the notebook. The drawing that Rebecca provided includes two white female hands (nails polished) holding the Earth with the words ‘power,’
‘privilege,’ ‘oppression,’ ‘race,’ ‘sexual orientation,’ ‘disability,’ ‘gender,’ ‘sex,’ and ‘class’ cascaded over the image.

Bushra informed me that she used the process of the interview as inspiration to write a paper for a women and gender studies course that she was enrolled in. The focus of her essay was on exploring the intersections of her identities and the social inequalities she has experienced in the spaces she inhabits. Three weeks after our interview, she asked if I would be okay with her essay to act as her journal because she felt that it captured her engagement with our discussion in a very appropriate way. In her email to me, she added “[t]he paper was an A+, so it will be better than any journal I could do!” Bushra’s assumption that an excellent grade would be more meaningful for me than informal reflection points to the ways in which she has been taught to value certain forms of academic expression as ‘better.’

While the content of their work is quite engaging, I have introduced these forms of expression to allude to the complexities that lie within student identities. The ways in which these journals were constructed are for more complex than mere discussions of good or bad responses; rather, they provide a glimpse as to how students understand themselves and the expectations thrust upon them within academic engagements.

Coding

Once I completed the transcription of the interviews and read the journals, I began to code, organize, and analyze the information. I divided each interview into codes in order to make explicit how the participants described themselves, made meaning of their educational experiences, and connected these concepts to notions of space/location. This process can be referred to as ‘open coding’ (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), where I attempted to generate as many codes as possible before narrowing it down. Through the coding process, I analyzed each transcript line-by-line to
search for key words or concepts that were discussed by each participant. I identified and noted each code word that appeared meaningful in a separate document, referencing the name of the interviewee and the page number of the transcript in which the code word appeared. As I began recognizing patterns, I examined each interview for similar convergences through a process of ‘selective open coding’ (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995); for example, I would note if a student used a phrase such as “Before studying identity, I didn’t know I was...” or mentioned feeling fear or discomfort in the classroom environment due to the topic being discussed. I then documented the name of the participant and page number of these occurrences and located them under headings, such as ‘discovery in the classroom’ or ‘fear.’ Lastly, I used the technique of ‘focused coding’ (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) by re-reading the transcripts a third time and beginning to identify codes that appeared consistently within the majority of the interviews. Patterns that were only found in a minority of the interviews are not noted in the analysis; rather, I prioritized the reoccurring overlaps from which I am able to draw a significant discussion.

The general categories identified through the process of coding were: Complicating Identities, Placing Ourselves within Educational Practices, Embodied Locations, and Implications of Methodology. While the experiences that each participant had with these broad themes are varied, these four basic categories can be located throughout each narrative. Following the identification of these categories, I returned to the data in order to clarify each area further. These categories are (1) Complicating Identities: description of self and identities; feminism?; seeing themselves as privileged and/or oppressed; in-between identities; passing; ‘mistaken’ identities; and resistance. (2) Placing Ourselves within Educational Practices: levels of comfort/fear in the classroom; feeling “out of place;” safety in the classroom; power; pretending; personal discovery; silences; discussions of privilege; ‘outsiders;’ and studying feminism. (3) Embodied Locations: physical selves in the
classroom; academic comparisons; race across space; university as privileged environment; social groups; spatial influences on identities; and safety. Lastly, (4) Implications of Methodology: reflexive dialogue/practice; contradictions; journal admissions; low voices; role of interviewer; problematic language; and, limitations. These categories have helped define and organize the ways in which the analytical portions of the dissertation will unfold. For example, Chapter 4 explores the complexity of studying identity, Chapter 5 exposes the ways in which privilege and educational practices can be seen to intersect, while Chapter 6 provides analysis of our embodied locations and how these locations relate to how we understand ourselves. Lastly, Chapter 7 explores the ways in which the concept of privilege was made explicit in our interviews and the varied understandings of it that the participants expressed. Furthermore, the upcoming section of this chapter analyzes the implications of my methodology insofar as addressing the ways in which my body in my role as interviewer, my reflexive practice, and power relations combine to inform how the interviews transpired.

The Researcher’s Body

When the interviewing process began, I wondered how my embodiment – that of a white, young, tall, 7-month pregnant woman – would be made meaningful within my research. I could never have imagined the ways in which my pregnancy, as it combined with other aspects of my identity, specifically my age and academic position, would add such a compelling dimension to my research. As Burns claims, “[w]hile acknowledging at the same time that I am sometimes constituted and regulated by the discourses that I am critical of, interrogating my embodiment provides further possibilities for analysis because my reactions illustrate the operations of power at the level of my own body” (2003, 234). Relations of power are embedded within the research process and it is in this section that I hope to explicate the ways in which the body of the researcher and methodological
practices are intertwined with what is possible in an interviewing environment. Here, I explore the ways in which a pregnant researcher, a non-pregnant (mother) researcher, and power are variously situated within my study.

A Pregnant Researcher

I begin this aspect of reflexive analysis by providing some theoretical background into how pregnant bodies are conceptualized in the literature. As many feminists have argued, the potential for reproduction contained within the body of a woman is frequently seen as a grotesque curiosity, one which often invites suspicion. The body of the woman “is a body deemed dangerous and defiled, the myth of the monstrous feminine made flesh, yet also a body which provokes adoration and desire, enthralment with the mysteries within” (Ussher 2006, 1). In discussing her own experience of embodying a pregnant academic, Robyn Longhurst states, “...pregnancy is a biological process – but a biological process that always exists within social, cultural, economic and political realms. Pregnant bodies are also always temporally and spatially located” (1999, 89). There are expectations placed on the pregnant body, such as knowing its impermanence, its transience, and its (potential) vulnerability, which dramatically alter how the pregnant woman is received in social space. “The very physical experience of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood powerfully and irreversibly reshapes her identity. Contrary to the expectations of many academic and other professional women accustomed to a large measure of control over their bodies, their daily activities, and their time, pregnancy does not just happen to women” (Allison 2007, 30). Juliann Emmons Allison is implying that pregnancy becomes a mediating lens through which the (academic) pregnant woman is understood in social space, particularly when the pregnant belly manifests as a visible embodiment.

In my circumstance, my pregnant body was often selectively visible; even though I was seven months pregnant when I began conducting the interviews, my pregnant embodiment was
limited to a swollen belly and thus could be accentuated or almost entirely hidden depending on what I was wearing. When the interviewing began, I had not thoughtfully considered how my pregnant body would be present within the project: “As a result of her changing body shape, the [pregnant] subject’s previously taken-for-granted sense of her boundaries becomes increasingly unreliable” (Davidson 2001, 287). Considering my work, I had pondered at-length how my more conventional identities would be read by the participants and how they would ‘appear’ within the interviews, but my pregnant identity was not very present to the public at that time and so seemed a more private experience. The significance of my pregnant embodiment is based on the ways in which I began to see my pregnancy as a researcher’s conflict. Questions began to swirl in my mind regarding how I should ‘play’ my pregnant role: ‘During my recruitment speech, should I tell them I am pregnant? Will it affect whether they agree to be interviewed? Will it make the process too much about me?’ These questions began to take shape when conversations regarding scheduling of interviews and timeframes were brought up during the recruitment process and I divulged on various occasions that my timeframes were restricted to certain months, as I would be taking off some time for the birth of my child. Once I made the pregnancy known, it became clear that during pregnancy “what the mother does with her body – what she eats, where she goes, how and when – is open to public scrutiny” (Pillow 1997, 351). This scrutiny can come in many subtle forms, as it did during some of my interviews. For example, there were questions from some of the students regarding how I plan to manage having a child with continuing my graduate work, which was important to me as that demonstrated the reflexivity I was attempting to foster, in that I asked them early-on in the interview how they manage to balance their school, work and personal lives.

However, the scrutiny of my pregnant body did not remain in the realm of interest into what is possible for graduate students interested in having a family. For example, as I was interviewing
Holly, the baby suddenly and forcefully kicked me, while her cell phone began to ring. Surprised by the sudden interruptions,

Victoria: Whoa, your phone is ringing and my baby is asserting itself.

(Ignoring her phone) Holly: I wasn’t going to ask, but how far along are you?

Victoria: Seven months.

Holly: Really? You are pretty small.

Victoria: Yeah, I think that is because there is a lot of room, because I am so tall.

Holly: Oh, so it looks smaller? There is nothing wrong?

I say nothing. The phone rings again and she excuses herself to answer it.

This common assumption of an appearance being something ‘wrong’ can be analyzed from a critical perspective on power. From a disability studies perspective, the power to name and identify ‘wrong’ exemplifies how “[t]he standard model of human form and function that has come to be called normal shapes our actual bodies and the way we imagine them. The measure of the good, true, and healthy, normal also determines the status and value of people in the modern world” (Garland-Thomson 2009, 30-1). While I believe that Holly was attempting to express a genuine concern for the well-being of my child, this concern was infused with discourses of ableism in that my pregnant belly had been passing as something normal (for me) until it was read by Holly as doing/being something abnormal. “Almost all analyses of passing are dependent upon the assumption that the passer’s marginal identity is best understood as an instance of deviance” (Titchkosky 2003, 69). This incident undoubtedly complicated the power dynamics within our exchange, as my lack of response to her inquiry combined with the continued ringing of her phone created a break in our dialogue.

Within this interview, I became preoccupied with thoughts of how my pregnancy was impacting the ways in which I was being read as a researcher, as a woman, and as a (potential) mother. These
moments, while troubling for me at the time, point to the ways in which our bodies are never not involved in what we do, where we are, and how we interact with others, which is especially important in those instances where we get lost in the researching roles of Researcher=Asker and Participant=Answerer. Neither of us returned to the discussion of my pregnancy except at the conclusion of our interview, when I wished her good luck with her studies and she said that she “hope[s] everything goes well with the baby” and then hugged me good-bye.

Of the interviews that were conducted before the birth of my daughter, each student participant hugged me, with the exception of the male interviewee and the phone interviewees. Most asked if it was okay to hug me, but others just seemed to expect that it would be the natural conclusion of our interview. Pregnancy “effectively disrupts the ordinarily stable, and largely taken-for-granted, boundary between inside and outside, person and place” (Davidson 2001, 283). While many of the interviews with students had a congenial feel due to our mutual interests and casual conversations, the amount of touching and warmth that was conveyed at the conclusion of the interviews was initially unexpected by me. As Joyce Davidson argues, “[p]regnant women’s ‘condition’ ostensibly confers rights on ‘the public’ to take an active and open interest in their bodies, not only by looking, but also by commenting on and even touching – behaviour that would not, ordinarily, be socially sanctioned” (2001, 290).

This level of personal interaction was beyond just physical closeness, as there were also some concluding questions from the male participant regarding how my ideological beliefs can combine with the normalizing practice of child-rearing.

Julian – How are you going to handle raising the child on the basis that you are transgressive?

Won’t it be a normal type-person?
Victoria – I assume through socialization of being with me and my partner, it doesn’t have much hope to be that “normal.” With two academics in the house, I think any child should turn out a bit interesting.

Julian – It won’t have much choice! There will be no normal present. (laughs) That is good though. The norm is very boring….whatever that is.

Somewhat similar to Lilliana Del Busso, “[w]hat I failed to consider, however, was that the embodied interaction of interviewing may put my own embodied self in a vulnerable position and generate a number of difficult and personal questions in relation to my embodied practices” (2007, 312). While, for the most part, the interactions with students seemed more theoretically significant with regard to my pregnant embodiment than I had anticipated, I did not feel vulnerable with them. Conversely, I felt as though my strategy of reflexive interviewing was successful in these moments, as the students felt able to engage with me on a more personal level that, perhaps, enabled them to feel more empowered in our interaction.

A Non-Pregnant (Mother) Researcher

Entering into the position of a non-pregnant (mother) researcher was more challenging than I had imagined. Of course, there was the obvious busy-ness that accompanies having a newborn child, but as Susan E. Frohlick contends the “dominant ideal type of fieldwork in which ‘legitimate’ fieldwork is carried out [is] by solo, childless men or women who leave their families and home communities for long periods of time to live and conduct research” (2002, 50). While Frohlick is specifically referring to her international fieldwork, her contention is that research is assumed as “…or ought to be, a disembodied practice” (2002, 50). I felt that there was a noticeable contrast between the interviews that I conducted while pregnant and the ones that had been completed following my daughter’s birth. Most significantly, there were no more concluding embraces. Oddly
enough, I had come to expect that, at the end of an interview, there would be a hug and an exchange of well-wishes between myself and the participant; even discussions about future plans seemed far less expected. There was very little discussion of my personal life at all, except within an interview with an instructor from SU.

The interview that I had with this SU instructor had to be postponed due to our inability to align our schedules before the birth of my baby. Thus, our interview took place six weeks after I gave birth. Ten minutes into the interview, the following exchange occurred,

SU Instructor – So, what did you have?
Victoria – A girl, Penelope.
SU Instructor – Where is she?
Victoria – (A slight pause). At home.
SU Instructor – (A slight pause). Interesting.

As it is impossible for me to know the intentions behind the question that the SU instructor had when she asked me about my daughter, all I can know is how I felt when she asked me. According to Longhurst (1999), pregnant women describe feeling subjected to the surveilling behaviour of others, as though where her body is located at any given time affects what kind of mother she will be. Although I was no longer pregnant when the above encounter occurred, I interpreted her question as a desire to shame me for being away from my newborn child. As Frohlick ponders,

Since when are our children and spouses and friends not a part of our field sites in some manner, if only to complicate how we negotiate our research time and place? Perhaps this is much more of a concern for graduate students and new researchers than it is for established scholars. Yet, it still strikes me as somewhat taboo to acknowledge the presence of our families, in other words to blur and even violate the boundaries of our field sites with visible
traces of our personal lives and relationships, however important these relationships and biographies are in enabling us to understand the phenomenon we are studying. (Frohlick 2002, 52)

As this instructor stared at me, with her arms crossed, I felt judged. As Lewis claims, “I know by my own experience that for feminist intellectual workers – whether they be students or teachers – the academy is, for the most part, an uncomfortable and unwelcoming home” (1993, 52). Although, for the most part, my experiences in the academy have been professionally rewarding and personally fulfilling, those experiences must not negate the moments where the academy can also function as an “unwelcoming home.” In my journal immediately following this interview, I wrote “I wonder how much more comfortable I could have been if she never knew anything about me beyond what she could see? That felt terrible. I had never expected to be made to feel that way by a feminist activist. Whatever happened to sisterhood? Ha.” I remember dreading the transcription of this interview as I wondered if I would feel the same way once I was re-living this tense moment. During the transcription, I felt just as uncomfortable.

As Rose claims, “the authority of the researcher can be problematized by rendering her agency as a performative effect of her relations with her researched others. She is situated, not by what she knows, but by what she uncertainly performs” (1997, 316). My analysis of the above interaction is fuelled by my insecurities regarding the new identity with which I was engaging – mother researcher. While I may have had authority as the researcher in the room, the SU instructor was considerably older than me, more academically experienced, and was echoing the question that I was consistently asked at that time: “You are going back to work already?” While I could pontificate at length regarding my interpretations of this question, which vary from placing the emphasis on the word ‘you’ (You are going back to work already?) to the word ‘already’ (You are going back to work
already?), I feel what is most significant to consider is how my position as researcher changed. When I was pregnant, there were many instances of congratulatory statements, warm embraces, and an immediate bond of familiarity, but once I was no longer pregnant I began to feel less like a researcher on the verge of immense personal and professional accomplishments and more like I was positioned as the ‘objective researcher.’

Interestingly, my body began in the interviewing phase as inextricable from the process of each interview; however, once my body shifted back into the stereotypical role of the seemingly ‘objective researcher,’ some of the participants seemed to forget that my body was even there. For example, Aisha and I were discussing how she understands her own privilege. In discussing her preconceived notions of the intelligence of a certain type of person,

Aisha: I was watching this show, and you know how we have this stereotype of a blond, blue-eyed person? I found myself stereotyping where it’s like, she said something and I thought “That’s such a blond thing to say”, but then I’m like “that is the media’s influence on me”, but what’s good about that is now we can catch yourself and intercept in the moment.

As someone who has been called a blond, blue-eyed woman, I felt that this was an interesting and unself-conscious moment. In some circumstances, a person may have caught themselves as perhaps insulting me by propagating a stereotype, but Aisha did not seem to realize that she could be describing me. As Sandra Acker and Grace Feuerverger note in their discussion of interviews regarding faculty members’ experiences in the academy,

One of the features of many of the interviews that may have interfered with researcher empathy was the lack of interest participants showed in the interviewer. This situation was, of course, to be expected, as the focus of interest was on the participant’s experiences. The interviews resembled normal conversation except for that lack of reciprocity. When
duplicated daily for a week or so, this experience tended to leave the researcher feeling rather
unimportant and marginalized after having her own needs and emotions largely ignored in so
many interactions. (Acker and Feuerverger 2003, 53)

Perhaps my attention to this detail has less to do with Aisha’s (non)reading of my body, and more to
do with the ways in which my body was changing throughout the process of interviewing and how
conscious I became of the embodied ways I was experiencing the interviewing process. I point to
these moments because I see them as significant, not only to my learning and experience as I move
forward in my career as an academic, but also because we must never become complacent in our
expectations, interpretations, and feelings during the interviewing process, as they can impact the
resulting research as much, if not more, than some of the interviews themselves.

Situating Power Dynamics

As the above discussion of my (non)pregnant embodiment during the interviewing process
indicates, social interactions – even highly structured and organized ones – are never independent of
shifts in power. These shifts in power were present throughout the interviews, some of which were
evident to me but also, it must be assumed, in more implicit forms as well. Here, informed by my
process of feminist reflexive methodology, I aim to analyze the ways in which my position as
researcher was variously engaged with by those I was interviewing so as to expose how subject
positions help shape what is possible in an interview.

One of the ways that I approach understanding how power relations are manifest within the
relationship of an interview relates to Butler’s claims of how our identities come to be recognized. As
Butler states, “[t]he norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not fully mine. They are
not born with me; the temporality of their emergence does not coincide with the temporality of my
own life” (2005, 35). Butler’s framing of identities within terms of recognition renders them not as a
trait that an individual possesses, but rather as contextually produced by way of the particular kinds of acts individuals perform. Butler’s argument is that performativity consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s will or choice. Butler contends, “...the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making” (2005, 20). Rather, these imitative actions escape notice that they are entirely contingent and socially constructed and, thus, they become naturalized as expressions of a fundamental truth to identity. These concepts will be consistently returned to throughout this dissertation, but for my purposes here these understandings of recognition and ‘truth of identity’ serve to expose some of the ways my embodiment was ‘read’ within the interviewing dynamics.

The difficulty with attempting to analyze the ways in which I believe my body was being received and subsequently functioned to influence the interview is that my engagement with it is primarily my own and therefore partial. Many factors undoubtedly influenced the ways in which we engaged with each other – my race, my gender, my ‘Canadian-ness,’ etc. – but the aspects that seemed most explicitly influential (beyond the presence of my pregnancy) were the combination of my age and educational level. As Bourdieu claims, “[t]he structure of the university field reflects the structure of the field of power, while its own activity of selection and indoctrination contributes to the reproduction of that structure. Indeed, it is in and through its functioning as a space of differences between positions...[that] the field of power is effected” (1984b, 40-1). The similarities and differences between my academic position and those of the interviewees were made most explicit within my interactions with sessional instructors/new faculty.  

Sessional instructors/new faculty are

\[ I \text{ have categorized this group as “sessional instructors/new faculty” so as to represent their levels of experience within the university hierarchy. While the sessional instructors work on a contract basis and all have their PhDs or are very close to receiving their degrees, the new faculty are tenure-track which implies permanency. However, both of the instructors} \]
often in positions of insecurity within the academy as their jobs are not cemented within the tenure hierarchy and, thus, are often vulnerable to student evaluations, especially in Humanities or Social Science based programs like women and gender studies (Gottschalk and McEachern 2010; Puplampu 2004; Rajagopal 2002). As the majority of the instructors that I interviewed (6 of 8) fall into this category, I will only address the most explicit examples of the collegial way in which they engaged with me and how these encounters were in stark contrast to some of the others that occurred.

A young (early 30s) white instructor who was recently hired in a tenure-track position confided in me that she had had an uncomfortable situation arise in one of her courses regarding the gender of a student coming into question in front of the entire class. She acknowledged that she was unsure of the gender of the student; the student had a highly recognizable female name, yet appeared to her as male. The instructor attempted to keep things entirely neutral when engaging with the student until one moment where she identified the student as “she” and another student interjected and said “You mean he?” In discussing this story, the instructor was expressing uncertainty and said that she ignored the student who interjected for fear of what might happen. As the instructor was telling me this story, our interview switched trajectories as she asked me to help her workshop what she could or should have done in that situation, what I would have done, and what kinds of practices or theories I may know to help her avoid similar engagements in the future.

I interpret this shift in the interview as an expression of some of the tensions that are inherent within the interviewing process. Specifically regarding tensions surrounding the researcher’s embodiments in the context of an interview, I can identify with how an “oscillation of roles may not be from a complete left or right, but more like straddling in-between, signifying both being hesitant

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42 The reason for this high number of sessional instructors/new faculty in my sample is not necessarily generalizable to the situation of academia as a whole; however, departments that house critical identity studies often have a tenuous role in the university which can lead to fluctuating institutional support and fewer tenured positions (Webber 2008).
or embracing of the roles that participants might have allocated for [the researcher]. These roles do overlap one another and conjure up a multiplicity of selves during the research process” (Tang 2006, 14). These tensions are often articulated in the literature as relating to an insider or outsider position. As Acker argues, there are various positions of ‘knowing’ or familiarity that researchers have when approaching a project; most straddle the border between not being fully intimate with the research topic, but being close enough to it that its terms and scope are relatable and understandable to the researcher (2000). In this instance, the instructor considered me to have ‘insider’ knowledge and (a comparable lack of?) experience so as to be able to handle a similar situation and conveyed that she felt comfortable to ask for my help.

In contrast, the interviews that I had with the two senior instructors43 (who have each taught for more than 25 years) were framed as teacher-student interactions. One senior instructor asked questions about my intentions for the research in terms of “What do you think can come of this?” and quizzed my knowledge on certain theories “You read bell hooks? What theories will you be using in your dissertation?” These questions can be considered consistent with what Stanley and Wise claim is a somewhat natural occurrence of the interviewing process: “However much we might be able to prevent our own feelings from showing (if not from occurring), we cannot control those of other people. ‘The researched’ will have feelings about us as much as we will about them, and also feelings (and theories) about the research itself” (Stanley and Wise 1993, 160). The other senior instructor explicitly referenced our age differences as though it were a boundary to mutual understanding (positioning me as ‘outside’ of her experience). This distancing was also conveyed by her expressing an uncomfortable disconnect that she feels developing between her and her students, as she believes that her frames of reference in the women’s movement are far too removed from contemporary society for her students to be able to relate.

43 One woman has tenure and is a full professor. The other is a full-time faculty member.
Conversely, my interviews with the students were predominantly framed as a relation of a teacher, a sister, or a friend. It was evident in the majority of these interviews that “[o]ur bodies provided a place and space from which we talked, shared experiences, and gained confidences” (Pillow 1997, 350). Implications of a closer relationship with me were often, again, explicitly referenced near the end of the interviews when the students expressed relief that I was not intimidating or scary to them (as many had expected from a structured interview-interviewee relationship) and that they felt they had learned something within the context of the interview. For example,

Vanessa: I feel iffy about this topic sometimes, I don’t know when to use gay, lesbian, bi, even straight or just use the general term of homosexuality. Do you think you could help me understand it better?

Anna: I find that in certain classes my prof will be like “I think this and this is what the research says”, but a good prof will be like “Well, this is what I found out, but it doesn’t mean that everyone has to agree on it.” You really remind me of her. I feel like I could ask you anything and you wouldn’t judge me.

Devra: Some of my profs have been older, and I know it sounds rude, but I feel like they don’t get what I am experiencing. TA’s are better, more like you, I can say things and they know what I mean. You’d be an awesome TA!

While I understand these expressions as compliments, I feel that there is too much admiration from them towards me and too much ‘looking up to me’ for there to be an equitable power dynamic. As the NU prof implied above, the students seem to align themselves with me within a power relation
perhaps based on my age and lower academic rank. The students see me as an insider with them, while I see myself as an outsider to them.

The variations amongst my experiences with the sessional/new faculty, senior faculty, and students exemplifies how, as Foucault says, “[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1990, 93). In my pregnant body and my non-pregnant body, I am being read. These readings are only able to function through the power dynamics inherent in social positions, which seem exacerbated by the formal pathways through which all of us involved in academia (as well as this project) are connected.

**Summary**

This chapter focused on how I employed feminist reflexive methodology for use in this study. While I explored the ways in which I developed the study, recruited the participants, and conducted the various stages of data analysis, I also used this chapter to outline the relevant literature informing my methodology so as to highlight the complexity of a study of this nature. While I will explore what I call *Limitations and Limitations as Contributions* in Chapter 8, I have used this chapter to make explicit the complexity of studying identity, even at the level of the researcher. It is my hope that this study will provide some essential insights, or at the very least, provoking thoughts on the power dynamics inherent in qualitative methodologies.

In the next chapter, I embark on the major analytical component of the study. I begin with an introduction to the students via the ways in which we began our interviews – exploring where they consider home and how they understand their identities. These discussions illustrate the various ways that privilege manifests in surrounding the topic of identity, while also exposing the contradictions, silences, and dilemmas that are often inherent to these reflections.
CHAPTER 4

INITIATING A DIALOGUE: TWO QUESTIONS THAT INSPIRE MANY MORE

I’m glad you asked me that. I have a lot to say... (Maham)

Introduction

Prioritizing the student voice is of critical importance to my work. I aim to use this chapter to explore how the students conveyed understandings of themselves prior to our discussions of higher education. This chapter, and those that will follow, insist that we read the production of narratives as social actions embedded in social worlds, where both interviewee and interviewer contribute to the discussion for, as Ken Plummer argues, “[s]tories can be seen as joint actions” (1995, 20). Kari Dehli furthers this point by claiming, “[a]ny account of experience, whether it be in the first, second, or third person, is a mediation, an interpretation employing narrative strategies and forms of theory in its telling. Moreover, there are many and shifting truths about women’s experience, although it’s not at all arbitrary which of these truths comes to be seen as the truth that counts...” (1991, 51).

As I think and write in linear ways, this chapter and the subsequent three chapters will reflect that linear thinking; by this I mean that I begin here with conversations about identity that occurred at the beginning of each interview. I do this for two reasons, the first being that I want to take a snapshot of the ways in which students understand themselves before there is much ‘researcher interference’ from me in terms of my research interests and direction in the interviewing process. The second purpose for this ordering is that I want to demonstrate the ways in which the students’ understandings of themselves are contextual and fluid and how they base these understandings as explicitly emerging to them through their engagements in critical identity classrooms. Exploring the ways in which the students discuss their identities in terms of their personal relationships, public encounters, and home life indicate a marked difference from the discussion of identity that appears in
Chapter 5 regarding their engagements in higher education. The trajectories of our conversations took on a new direction once their educational backgrounds are introduced, which is why these early conversations are so significant.

Our interviews illustrate the various ways that privilege manifests in discussions of identity, while also illuminating the contradictions, silences, and dilemmas that reflections on identifications foster. The themes of this chapter are entirely derived from two questions that I asked the participants – 1) Where do you consider home? and 2) How do you understand your identities? Emerging from these questions are key themes regarding identity and social positioning; these themes include two major understandings of home – the family and the university. Following the discussion of ‘homes,’ I explore the initial understandings of identity conveyed by the students regarding gender, race and disability, which are divided (for clarity) using three overlapping categorizations – normation, liberal individualism, and critical self-reflection. As this chapter is the first which discusses the students at length, I have included a table in order to help clarify to which institution the students belong.

Table 1: Student Participants Divided by University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northern University (NU)</th>
<th>Southern University (SU)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexia</td>
<td>Aisha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Bushra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devra</td>
<td>Chloe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Fatima</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>Jackie</td>
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<td>Natasha</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
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<tr>
<td>René</td>
<td>Lenore</td>
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<td>Shelly</td>
<td>Maham</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Rebecca</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Roya</td>
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<td>Terry</td>
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In order to create a space of comfort in the interviewing process, I began by asking the participants to describe themselves in terms of their educational level, area of interest, and some personal aspects of themselves, with specific focus on employment and where they consider home to be. I found this strategy helpful in that every student had some relationship to these questions and it successfully encouraged the students to speak openly without having to ponder their answers for too long. As many of the students divulged at the beginning of our interview that they “hoped they would be able to contribute something” as they were “unsure” why their opinions on education “mattered,” I began with topics that they seemed to feel more comfortable discussing – the aspects of their lives that were not strictly focused on education. What became particularly notable in these initial discussions were the explicit and implicit identifications that the students made with notions of home.

As I stated above, in the initial moments of our interview, I wanted the students to feel as comfortable as possible, so I began with questions that focused on where they place themselves, seemingly apolitically. For example, we discussed their age, year of study, major(s), when they plan to graduate, and the spaces they call home. When I posed the question of “Where do you consider home?,” I specifically did not define what I meant by “home” for the participants, as my intention was to explore how they understood fairly complex concepts, which can often be mistaken for ‘obvious’: “Home is an important place—a critical locale for both developing and maintaining place identity—as it possesses emotional significance and provides some degree of stability within peoples’ lives, serving as a reference for past action and experience; a locus of memories and meaning” (Chow and Healey 2008, 371). Home was taken up by the participants to mean a variety of things (many at the same time): school/university, their parents/family, the city they were born in or currently live in, an unanswerable question, and/or a partnered relationship. While these assertions
may not all relate to notions of identity in an explicitly critical sense, the discussions that we had
surroundings these conceptions of home begin to illuminate the ways in which the students position
themselves in multiple ways. As Jeanne Moore argues, the concept of home is “an abstract signifier
of a wide set of associations and meanings” (2000, 208). These meanings can reflect many aspects of
social life, including a physical structure, a territory, a self/identity, a spiritual embodiment, and a
social/cultural unit (Moore 2000).

While an in-depth study of the participants’ understandings of home and their attachments to
it would be fascinating, what is of critical importance for my work is their descriptions of home as a
place of identity formation (Dehli 1991). Studies of home are often linked to psychological notions
of place attachment (Altman and Low 1992; Chow and Healey 2008; Milligan 1998), while feminist
theorists have taken a more critical stance on notions of home, in terms of domestic violence (Daniels
1997; O'Toole, Schiffman, and Edwards 2007), domesticity (Gillis and Hollows 2009; Heynen and
Baydar 2005; Johnson and Lloyd 2004), and the diaspora (Assayag and Bénéï 2003; Grewal 1996).
The initial stages of our interviews, as with many interviews, remained at a largely apolitical level;
however, this lack of politicization does not imply that there is a limit to the critical engagement that
can be had with individualistic notions of home. On the contrary, the ways in which the students
convey ‘home’ illuminated key themes that introduce the relationality and spatiality of identity.

Two contrasting themes arose regarding discussion of home – ‘family as home’ and
‘university as home.’ The main area of responses regarding notions of ‘home’ related to a city where
the participants grew up and the space which they share(d) with their parent(s) – ‘parents as home.’
This area developed out of two key topics that the students ascribed to the interaction that they have
with their parents, the first being tension they experience while remaining in their parental home as
they enter into adulthood, and the second area revolving around how the students position their
parents as a source for their class-based identity. In contrast, other student participants moved away from their city of origin and now live in the university dormitory or residence, and therefore, they consider the university to be their home; however, the sense of ‘university as home’ was not only conveyed by those participants who physically live on campus, as many of the students discussed the general space of the university to be home-like for them. As well, they expressed the same ambivalent feelings with which they described their parents – comfort, resistance, and/or dis/like.

While the students who no longer live with their parents provided a more nuanced answer to the question – as they have more than one understanding of home – the responses in the vein of ‘parents as home’ related more closely to the rest of the discussions of identity found in this chapter and allow for the beginnings of a critical analysis of the students’ understandings of identity to emerge.

*Parents as Home*

Introducing the concept of ‘home’ to the participants was intended to inspire an easily-flowing conversation, yet I had not taken much time to consider how diverse and dynamic their responses to my question would be. All of the student participants, except for one student who identified herself as ‘mature,’ positioned themselves as between the ages of 20 and 24. These ages reflect a time of transition for the students who still live with their parents; many of them reflected on the eventuality of the ‘move away’ from home or lamented the fact they have yet to ‘move away.’

Chloe: I live, like, 20 minutes away from here by bus. But it’s okay... I live with my parents, unfortunately. [laughs]. We have ideological differences, so it’s interesting. It’s okay though. It’s convenient to live with them, but I can’t wait to move away.
Roya: I don’t really have a choice about [where I call home]. No, I do, but I wouldn’t move out. It’s just expected that when you get married, then you move out...unless you are going to school in a different country, but then you don’t apply! [laughs].

Aisha: I live with my parents. It’s really nice and convenient. I wanted to move away and seek my own independence, but that didn’t work out too well. So I ended up choosing SU because I don’t live anywhere near it, so it feels like I am away. My parents wanted me to go to a different university and, literally, my apartment building is located on [its] campus. I said ‘No!’ I was 17 when I got in and they are very, very Caribbean, so they are like ‘No, I’m not sending my girl-child away.’

For these women, the question of “Where do you consider home?” unsurprisingly conjured a relational identity to their parents. While home and its relation to family is not necessarily a space of comfort for everyone, many of the students, including Chloe, Roya, and Aisha, do rely quite heavily on their families even when their families can introduce much stress and tension into their lives. One potential reason for this, as Jackie Patiniotis and Clare Holdsworth (2005) argue in their study of students who remain living with their parents once entering into higher education, is that students from non-dominant backgrounds may understand their entrance into higher education as an “identity risk.” This risk may emerge, as in the case of Chloe, Roya, and Aisha, because their parents did not all enter into higher education, and so being more educated than one’s parents could lead to a disjuncture between their class-based experiences and those of their parents. As such, the sentiments that Patiniotis and Holdsworth express above are aligned with the ways in which Bushra addresses her experience of ‘family as home.’
Bushra: I can’t talk to them about anything. They are...I can’t say they are dumb, but I see them as dumb. I’m not on the same page as my parents. They know that I’m an unhappy person. I’ve been unhappy since I was born. That’s just how I’ve been. It’s very unfortunate and really sad, and I look forward to overcoming it. My parents, though, are always harassing me by saying that I am so ungrateful or “You always have a problem.” But it’s like “You are my problem, just shut up. I hate your voice.” I actually said that to my mom a couple of weeks ago...

The tensions that Bushra is expressing may speak to the ways in which higher education exacerbates the boundaries that she sees existing between herself and her parents: “What is missing from the ‘house as haven’ thesis is a recognition of the polar tensions surrounding the use of domestic space, tensions which become a part of the boundaries which some people have difficulty in resolving” (Sibley 1995, 94). There are boundaries created in families based on the varying levels of education that will often lead to conflicts of entitlement due to the varying degrees of power that are now involved – Bushra’s intellectual capacity (seemingly) versus her parents’ experience and authority.

In terms of a critical engagement with these notions of family as a place, it must be noted that when parents functioned as a signifier for home, this association was most commonly related to a social class-based identity. While class was a concept that I knew would arise at some point during our conversations on identity, I did not expect it to come out so quickly in the interviewing process. Class has received less of a focus in recent years within approaches to identity since, as bell hooks claims, it is an “uncool subject” (2000, vii). hooks argues that class is a topic that causes social nervousness, because, as an identity, it can be fluid and changing, which unsettles notions of reliability and constancy in our lives. Furthermore, the recent feminist and critical engagements with identity rely far more heavily on the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and
class in an effort to form a more holistic picture of systemic discrimination. This emphasis on varying identities, however, has often meant that class analyses, particularly in academia (an often class-privileged environment), have tended to be overshadowed.

Interestingly, 4 (Devra, Natasha, Shelly, and Rebecca) of the 11 participants who cited ‘family as home’ formed a connection of this sense of home to a class-based identity.

Devra: I see home and privilege based on social class, especially family, your parents, based on that somebody could be extremely powerful and strong whether you’re a man or woman... it doesn’t matter based on, like, how much money your parents have, really.

Here, Devra is conveying that class supersedes other identifications, such as gender, in terms of a hierarchy of privilege. Bourdieu claims, “the different fractions of the dominant class distinguish themselves precisely through that which makes them members of the class as a whole, namely the type of capital which is the source of their privilege and the different manners of asserting their distinction which are linked to it” (1984a, 258). Similarly, Devra goes on to claim that socio-economic status is actually the deciding factor into whether someone experiences privilege or not. I ask Devra how she sees herself in relation to socio-economic status:

Devra: I wouldn’t see myself, or my parents as upper-class whatsoever. Middle, working-class parents. I mean, we had money; we went on trips to Disney World and Mexico, but we were average. So, when I do see people, um, I guess, of upper-class status I would say, “They have it easier than me.”

In the above quotation, Devra relies on a sense of averageness to construct her class identity so as to remain outside of the realm of privilege as she conveys how her family struggled to achieve normalcy. As Garland-Thomson contends, “[w]e are obliged to act, feel, look, and be normal – at almost any cost. The exacting requirement to achieve the norm – from clothes and cars to faces and
bodies – creates enormous commercial markets that fuel consumer capitalism” (2009, 31). As all four of the participants who reflected on their parent’s socio-economic status are white, it is important to also note the emphasis that these women place on understanding themselves and their parents as ‘normal.’

Similar to Devra, Shelly constructs her class identity in relation to her ‘parents as home,’ but Shelly is more explicitly resistant to assumptions from others that she is privileged.

Shelly: My mom is still a huge part of my life, but I kinda think that maybe people think that what I have I didn’t really work for...as hard as maybe someone else might have had to work for what they have. I wonder if sometimes people think of me differently than if, like, a black person [lowers voice] was in my same position. Did they have to work harder to get what they have? Or was it just handed to me by my parents?

Victoria: How does that make you feel?

Shelly: I don’t want people to think that I am a snotty brat because I get everything. I mean, I work for everything that I have. I pay for school and I just don’t want people to think that I’ve been handed things – like I am super-privileged or something.

Shelly’s reference to “super-privilege” is particularly notable here as she, like Devra, does not acknowledge the privilege that she does experience. Rather, she focuses on how she is not privileged. As Diane Reay, et al., argue “[i]n a class-ridden, racist society, to embody both whiteness and middle classness is to be a person of value. It is also to be a person who makes value judgments that carry symbolic power; a valuer of others” (2007, 1042). This sense of entitlement that Reay et al. are conveying is expressed by many of the white students throughout the interviewing process, a point which will be discussed more thoroughly in the latter half of this chapter and the following chapters as well.
Natasha’s discussion of her family and home reflects a more critical take on her relation to class than the sentiments expressed by the women I have discussed so far. After her initial descriptions of her home-life with her parents, she went on to make linkages between notions of home and privilege, as she recalled my interest in privilege from the recruitment session in her classroom.

Natasha: You are interested in privilege, right? Because of my own work and because of my disability and being aware of when I’m not privileged, I’m far more aware of when it does happen. As opposed to being “I feel so sorry for that person,” I’m okay with making eye contact or talking to the homeless person on the street. I’m okay with trying to find a way to equal out that privilege or finding a way to make a human connection so that I can convey that I get it. That “we are in a hierarchy of power and because of my family and the fact that I’m middle-class, I know that you are underneath me, and I don’t want that to be there.”

Reay et al. (2007) argue that privilege passes itself off as embodied in the normative rather than the superior. Natasha critically self-reflects to underscore her knowledge of the idea that privilege is found in shunning one’s social superiority as she acknowledges her dominant position, while also demonstrating how entrenched class-beliefs can be.

University as Home

Thinking through the ways in which the students conveyed the theme of ‘university as home’ was as ambivalent a process for me to analyse as it seemed for them to say. As full-time students, the vast majority of their/our lives are spent within the walls of academic institutions. There are many relationships forged between our embodied identities and classroom interactions, but here I am focusing on the ways in which the students discussed the physical space of the university itself as

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44 This concept is discussed at length in a section of this chapter entitled Critical Self-Reflection.
providing or denying them a home in order to illustrate the importance of the university as a placeholder within their lives.

As I have been a full-time student in higher education for more than a decade, approaching this topic analytically generated a sense of empathy for the students who feel trapped within the institution and have a strong desire to flee its walls. However, having lived in a university residence for three years, being ‘on campus’ to study, teach, have meetings, and general ‘hanging out,’ I also identify with those who see the university as a familiar and comforting space – a home (Dehli 1991; Quinn 2003). Furthermore, many students who do not live on campus often spend more time on campus grounds than the address where they formally dwell. When the university functions as both a work space and a social space it has a clear effect on one’s life. As Melissa Butcher (2010) contends, a place is more like home when it has an affective dimension; for example, if the landscape and built environment within which a place is embedded is considered friendly or comfortable, as opposed to a context that generates uncertainty and threat, we are far more likely to consider it a home.

Fatima: Sometimes I sleep at campus. I keep a toothbrush in my bag in case I want to just stay in the library overnight. It’s homey there. I am comfortable and it is easy being there. We are all in this together, you know? It’s no different than home...well, except that I don’t have a bed!

Bushra: I’m on campus constantly. Sometimes 12 hours a day. Is this where I live? [laughs]. Yikes.

Fatima and Bushra relate to the university as a home-like space. This relation to an institution points to the importance that they place on the significance of the role that higher education plays within
their lives – not only due to the amount of time that they have to spend there, but also because of the extra time that they choose to spend at the school itself. Bushra’s playful questioning of whether she lives there and Fatima’s ‘sleep-overs’ demonstrate the level of comfort they experience while they are there. As Jocey Quinn contends, the university can become a ‘protected space’: “The students make close connections between studying and selfhood, and the notion of protected space is integral to these accounts... the university is revealed not as a transparently understandable space, but a space constructed from their own desires. However, this is also a space with material limits and always under threat from the encroachments of others” (Quinn 2003, 450). When discussing the university as home, the students make clear the belonging that they are attempting to foster with/in the university and how those relations of belonging impact their sense of self.

Understanding yourself as having various ‘homes’ reflects the idea that home has come to be theorized as a fluid space, one that is “in process” (Ahmed et al. 2003) which can be fuelled by “tension, ambiguities, contestation, ambivalence, contradictory feelings, and internal debates” when there are attempts to define it (Butcher 2010, 23). Kelly and Amanda express how the complexity of defining a home-space is more complex than seeing home as existing in more than one place, as they understand the ‘university as home’ to also relate to life ‘on the outside.’

Kelly: I’m not from here. I’m from a city on the West coast. I came here because I wanted to get outside. I feel like living in [the dorm] is a rite of passage...it can suck, but it can also be awesome.

Amanda: I live with my mom right now. I was going to go and live in residence, but it’s cheaper to stay at home.

Victoria: How far away do you live?
Amanda: It’s not far at all. 15 minutes. So I thought that I might as well stay home. I had wanted to experience life outside and live on my own for a bit, but I decided I would do that when I am older.

As I stated in Chapter 2, critical identity classrooms (and here I am specifically referring to the university space itself) reflect a heterotopic space in that these spaces are outside of, and yet integral to, the people and places that they refer to. The notion of the university as ‘outside’ – as external to one’s real life – is a sentiment that is often expressed as a critique of academia via the notion of the elitism of the ‘ivory tower’ (Bok 1982; Keahey and Schnitzer 2003; Martinez and Stuart 2003; Quinn 2003). For Kelly and Amanda to desire to leave their ‘inside’ (their parental homes, community) and venture ‘outside’ points to how the academy reflects a place, a goal, an environment that would seemingly replace or stand-in for the parental home that the students are leaving. Here, the university as isolated inclusion speaks again to the notion of it functioning as a heterotopia in that “[h]eterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time” (Foucault 1988, 183). The function of the university to admit certain bodies who are accepted makes it a home that is seemingly both outside of ‘real’ life (with the implied assumption that ‘real = family’) and creates a sense of isolation from the family via inclusion in the university.

The connections that the students are making between their families, university, home, and class demonstrate the foundations of how their sense of identity, privilege, education, and embodiment are intertwined, complex, and in a process of becoming. The following section further demonstrates the intriguing nature of our conversations on identity and how these conversations illuminate the power that privilege and oppression have on one’s ability to convey a sense of self.
Identity?

In Chapter 1, I defined identity as a relational organizing principle through which aspects of ourselves are inconsistently categorized yet placed within thinkable terms. I say ‘inconsistently categorized’ because of the contentiousness inherent in classifications of identity and even the term ‘identity’ itself. As I learned from my experiences interviewing for my Master’s thesis (Kannen 2006), the terms or categories that individuals use may not hold the same meaning for one another, and so being conscious of the potential disparities in our understandings of terms such as ‘identity’ was an important component for me to consider during the interviewing process for this study. This is similar to Alcoff’s position, as she states, “[t]he various positions people take on identity depend heavily on the account one gives of identity’s relation to the self, that is, the relationship between ascribed social categories and the lived experience of consciousness” (2006, 86).

The variety of ways that the students approached the term ‘identity’ in the initial stages of our interview indicates how interpretable the concept is. Here, I am focusing on the ways in which they initially described themselves so as to argue that, through the ever-expanding answers provided in many of the interviews, it became clear how “social identities are relational, contextual, and fundamental to the self” (Alcoff 2006, 90). To be contextual and fundamental illustrates the contradictions that are inherent in identifying aspects of ourselves as ‘true’ when they may change. Inspired by my previous discussion of some of the students’ discussion (and lack thereof) of their class identity as an individual achievement, a dominant position, or something to be resisted, I have developed three categories that thematically aid in organizing the ways in which identities are conveyed within the interviews. These categories are: 1) normation, 2) liberal individualist, and 3) critical self-reflection. These categorizations will be used throughout the subsequent sections of the chapter so as to provide a guide for the types of responses the students most commonly give, while
also illustrating the ways in which they can be aligned with more than one of these categorizations as well.

*Normation*

I began every student interview by asking the participant to describe their educational background and their future plans (as most were set to graduate the following year). These introductory questions sparked detailed conversations surrounding the types of classes the students were taking and the kinds of topics they seemed most drawn to. I waited until we had established some mutual understandings of critical language before I asked them to describe their identities. For example, once a student explained to me that she was interested in studying racialization or gender because she had experienced oppression based on those identities, I would then ask her how she sees herself within those categories. I had not expected this question to cause much confusion, or even panic, from the participants; however, many of the students expressed trepidation at the thought of answering how they would identify themselves. For some, the question sparked further questions,

Devra: Um, that is a tough one. Like personality-wise? Or...

René: I’m not sure how I should answer. What do you mean?

Anna: I don’t really know myself. I feel bad saying that, but I don’t.

I felt that these responses were particularly notable because in all three interviews, these women had already used the term ‘identity’ and categorizations of it (such as gender or race) in much of what they were discussing about their critical identity classes and interests. In answering their questions, I reiterated and lengthened my original question, but still kept it quite neutral.

Victoria: I’m wondering how you consider your identities.
This subtle rewording led Devra and René to further explore the question; however, they both remained uncertain as to how to answer until further dialoguing with me. This uncertainty resulted in René essentially giving up on an attempt to reflect on her identities in this moment,

René: I guess I thought I knew myself, but I realize now that I don’t.

These three participants employ what I consider to be an act of normation. In Chapter 2, I introduced Garland-Thomson’s notion of the normate: “Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 8). As a verb, normation can imply the use of one’s dominant position to convey silence or absence on an issue or an identity: “Due to the primacy of the norm in relation to the normal, to the fact that disciplinary normalization goes from the norm to the final division between the normal and the abnormal, I would rather say that what is involved in disciplinary techniques is a normation rather than normalization” (Foucault 2007, 57). In the above examples, the silence that the students offer surrounding their own embodiments when they have already addressed the identities of Others can signal the privilege of invisibility that they have. This notion of privilege must go beyond simplistic dichotomies of have/have not, power/no-power, as the position of the normate is one that is desired, yet, rarely reached/sustained. Whether these students are choosing to refuse or ignore their identities is unclear, but what is clear are the ways that these students do not make contact with their own identities, yet they can name and make present the identities of Others.

This sense of an absent identity or normation that the students are conveying speaks directly to the ways in which they can be seen to embody privilege in these moments. As I also stated in Chapter 2, when privilege is theorized in the literature it is most often discussed in terms of in/visibility. For example, Dyer claims “[w]hiteness as an ideal can never be attained... ideally white
is absence: to be really absolutely white is to be nothing” (1997, 78). Devra, René, and Anna are white, living in Northern Ontario and all refer to themselves as shy. Reflecting upon the question of ‘identity,’ Anna wrote in her journal that “I am still thinking about what to say to ‘How would you identify yourself?’ I came up with a few answers: quiet, soft spoken, open to ideas, easygoing...” While all embodiments intersect with notions of oppression and privilege, these students are not being critical of their privilege, even though they engage in critique of identities within higher education. Furthermore, the attention that they call to a gendered understanding of ‘being’ in the world, in terms of shyness, positions them as being uncritical of the ways in which they are received as gendered and racialized subjects. Puwar claims, “[w]hen a body is emptied of its gender or race, this is a mark of how its position is the privileged norm. Its power emanates from its ability to be seen as just normal, to be without corporeality. Its own gender or race remains invisible; a non-issue” (2004, 57). While being a woman may conjure up notions of oppression, these students did not announce that identity as significant in this moment and so rendered themselves, as Puwar states, ‘just normal’ or, even more problematically, implied that they have no identity.

**Liberal Individualism**

Anna’s journal reflection was aligned with some very common responses to my question, which leads to the second theme of responses that I have labelled as liberal individualist. Anna, as well as Rebecca, Vanessa, and Roya, provide good examples of the ways in which some participants understood a question of identity to refer to aspects of themselves that are in excess of, or transcend, identity categories in a way that gives the impression of being apolitical. These women seemed to rely on the ways in which their individual approaches to life, education, and personality defined their identity rather than aspects of identity that we had already discussed, such as gender, race, or sexuality.
Rebecca: I guess that I would say I’m 21. I got to [Southern University]. Psychology Specialist. I guess that’s it, but if you look at me you can tell that I’m middle-class probably.

Vanessa: I wouldn’t mention any of my education because I don’t like saying that I am doing 3 degrees at once because I don’t like the way it makes me look, um, I’d also say that I want to be a teacher... Then I would get into how I play sports, I’m a goalie for soccer.

Roya: I would describe myself as very approachable, I love to talk, I love to explore new things. I think I am very open-minded, um, I can be a good listener, but I think I am a better talker.

Classifying these responses as inspired by liberal individualism is based on my belief that the students are attempting to resist and transcend the definitions imposed via ‘group’ identities by focusing primarily on the aspects that make them ‘unique’ as individuals. As Victor Jeleniewski Seidler argues, within liberalist ideologies, “identity becomes a matter of will, so that you can resist the collective identities that might otherwise claim you” (2010, 15). It seems as though these students have distanced themselves from the categorizations of identities that we had mutually established within the interviews in order to maintain the self and position the Other as on the outside.

Critical Self-Reflection

Some of the participants, in contrast to the aforementioned students, were outwardly political in their characterization of their identities. These students, unsurprisingly, strongly identified with a marginalized identity, such as their gender, race, and/or sexuality.

Aisha: My cultural background, me being a woman... I am a minority in both aspects. As a woman, I’m not represented properly or adequately in the media and I’m not represented
based on my race in culture adequately, in my perspective, now so, yeah we’re getting there. There’s this quote, I like quotes, and it says something like “When I was born, I was born with two strikes against me, one being that I’m a woman and the other being that I’m black.”

Chloe: I think, especially with the courses that I’ve taken, it’s more important to me now to establish that I’m of a visible minority and that I’m a woman. I don’t know why, but I feel that is a more a part of how I identify myself now.

Discourses circulating in their critical identity classes offer these students a position that is attractive for them to explore and embrace. When asked about their identities, Aisha and Chloe reflect upon their experiences of marginalization. As Alcoff argues, “[r]ace and gender are forms of social identity that share at least two features: they are fundamental rather than peripheral to the self – unlike, for example, one’s identity as a Celtics fan or a Democrat – and they operate through visual markers on the body. In our excessively materialist society, only what is visible can generally achieve the status of accepted truth” (2006, 6). For them, gender and race seem to reflect the most salient aspects of their identity as indicated by the historicization of experience that they convey in their responses.

Holly: Well, yeah. I’m out, obviously [motions to the Pride office we are in], but I haven’t specifically outed myself...the topic hasn’t come up, but if it does come up I wouldn’t have a problem. Especially in that class [on identity] because, I mean, we deal with it, so it’s not like it’s new for everybody in that class. I mean, I’m out at home and here, I don’t really have any problem being out in the classroom.

While all three of the above students speak of their identities in ways that imply or specifically point to marginalization, Holly’s experience of critical engagement relates more strongly
to nuanced notions of appearance and passing. The above quotations serve to demonstrate the ways in which experiences of marginalization led these women to critically self-reflect on their identities and the ways in which they manifest in social space. In order to avoid an oversimplified version of self-reflection or an uncontestable invocation of “experience,” it is important to consider how some of the participants are engaged in a process of “becoming” (Boler 1999). As Megan Boler claims, this process “may be understood as an undertaking that is both (1) collective: ‘who we feel ourselves to be,’ how we see ourselves and want to see ourselves, is inextricably intertwined with others” and “(2) flexible: leading to a willingness to reconsider and undergo possible transformation of our self-identity in relation to others and to history” (1999, 178-9). As one of the main objectives of critical identity classrooms is to foster critical thinking, the above students’ assertions begin to demonstrate how experiences in higher education can influence the ways in which you understand yourself in relation to others, as well as how you place yourself within notions of privilege and oppression.

**Digging Deeper: Questioning the Self, Relating to Others**

Each student interview began in a similar fashion. As I have already noted, I started with introductory questions regarding their current educational status, the kinds of courses they were taking/had taken, what kind of jobs they had in addition to their schooling, and where they consider home. Following these questions, I then introduced the topic of their identity by asking, “How do you understand your identities?” Once our conversations began, we dialogued about their notions of identity in their personal lives, rather than delving too quickly into how they reflect upon their academic experiences. I felt that this strategy would shed light on the ways in which they understand themselves (somewhat) irrespective of what they may have interpreted I was ‘looking for’ if I began with questioning what they have learned based on their experience in critical identity classrooms. Of

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45 Passing will be discussed at length in Chapter 5.
course, how they conceptualize their identities combines with what they have learned through their education in ways that cannot be as easily separated – as it appears I am attempting to do here – but I want to use this space to explore the ways they reflected on themselves prior to their specific discussions of identity and education, as these reflections form a foundation for the development of the rest of my analysis.

As each interview varied in terms of its scope and trajectory, what is particularly interesting to compare are the ways in which the students began to elaborate on their experiences with identities. The categorizations that I introduced earlier – normation, liberal individualism, and critical self-reflection – are evident in the majority of student responses to my question, but there are also many instances where their assertions encompass more than one category. As the reflections that follow were stated early on in each interview, it is crucial to note how the students consider the term ‘identity’ as carrying a primarily oppressive connotation at this point in our conversation. For the majority of the students, their discussion of their gender, race, and dis/abilities were framed as an experience of oppression or, if they do address privilege, it reflects the ways in which they feel confused regarding inequities and/or unjustified in being judged as privileged.

“I Feel Less” – Gender

The students who thought to express their identity in terms of gender address the oppression they experienced in both expected and unexpected ways. As Bronwyn Davies claims, “[w]hen I talk about the experience of being a ‘woman,’ I refer to the experience of being assigned to the category female, of being discursively, interactively, and structurally positioned as such, and of taking up as one’s own those discourses through which one is constituted as female” (1992, 54). This idea of being positioned, rather than positioning oneself is crucial – which is still appropriate, regardless of how Davies made this assertion almost two decades ago – not only for women, but also for men who
may not ‘fit’ with traditional notions of masculinity. Julian, the only male participant in my study, explains how his understandings of his gender identity do not reflect what is socially expected of him, and how he is positioned by his father because of his non-traditional gendering.

    Julian: I consider myself a flow between, essentially. I understand guys and I understand girls and often I’ll get comments, like my dad used to tell me “You shoulda been born a woman.” I’m very indecisive and compassionate which are more female-considered traits versus the male – take charge and be a leader type thing and that’s just not something I need to do all the time.

While Julian is not necessarily subversive in his understandings of gender roles (assigning traits to male or female), he has come to understand his masculinity and femininity in a more dynamic way than any of the other participants. Using critical self-reflection, he engages with the formation of his gender identity, what it means for others (as he indicated by his reflection on his father), and what it means for him.

    Interpersonal social relations are consistently negotiated within the trajectory of one’s life and are therefore fundamental to our experience of and navigation throughout the social world (Alcoff 2006). The notion of social relations as variable but fundamentally tied to how we experience the world was quite evident in Rebecca and Vanessa’s reflections on how their boyfriends impact their own gendered selves.

    Rebecca: When my boyfriend and his friends are over and they’ll be playing football video games and I’ll want to play, they’ll say “No, you can’t play because you’re a girl, blah, blah, blah. Boys go first on video games.” But I’ll really want to play and yet I can’t...
Vanessa: I think my boyfriend is sexist. It makes me feel that my being a woman isn’t good enough, even though I know that isn’t true. I feel it. I feel less.

While an underlying notion that a hierarchization of power informs the ways in which Rebecca and Vanessa engage with discussions of identity, it can be clearly linked to my previous ascription of a liberal individualist focus. For example, Liz focuses on a specific encounter as oppressive rather than looking to the larger systems in place that encourage that encounter. Furthermore, as the relationships that most of the participants have with feminism is tenuous at best, the engagements with sexism in these personal encounters indicates that they are familiar with the language of oppression, but this awareness does not necessarily lead them to resist oppression or disempowerment in their personal relationships with a partner or boyfriend.

Similarly, when interviewing Lenore I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by “the world is often unfair to women, I guess.” In her response, Lenore discusses what I would consider to be an experience of gender oppression by describing a scenario where a salesman in a real estate firm where she worked was “sexually harassing” her, which subsequently resulted in his being fired. She wanted to make explicit, however, that this was not sexism, but rather,

Lenore: I just know that he’s a jerk and so I won’t talk to him, that kind of thing. I don’t see that as sexism. I look at the individual case. I know how to handle it better, maybe than someone who would get intimidated. I don’t get intimidated easily by that kind of thing.

Lenore feels that everyone is equal and so she also claims,

Lenore: It is hard for me to see where women can be oppressed because I don’t have that background experience. Even my grandparents were very equal. Like my grandma worked her entire life, I think that’s where it came from. My grandma is very dominating and I think most people don’t see that.

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46 A detailed discussion of feminism and education can be found in Chapter 5.
Again, there is a strong focus on relationality, but also a theme of oppression ‘blindness’ or what I call wilful ignorance, which is particularly evident through Lenore’s assertions.

This wilful ignorance points to the confusion that privilege often inspires for those engaged in critical reflection. Clearly, Lenore’s conveyance of her so-called non-experience with sexism can be identified as an act of normation. Lenore experiences many privileges – her whiteness, education, class background, ability – but these privileges also exist alongside her experience of gender oppression. The sentiments of ‘everyone is equal’ or ‘boyfriends can be sexist,’ expressed as though they are facts rather than socially constructed and oppressive realities, are especially confusing for women who are deeply engaged in critical identity studies.

“I’m Not That” – Race

Butler claims that, “[t]he terms of identity have in recent years appeared to promise, and to promise in different ways, a full recognition” (1993, 188). To be recognized and to recognize others is crucial to how we come to understand ourselves and the meanings that we ascribe to our identities. The belief that we can ‘know’ something about each other based on the ways in which we identify is one of the main reasons that we identify ourselves at all.

To speak of identifications in terms of race is oftentimes a far more complex discussion than one of gender due to the variations of racial understandings based on culture, nation, ethnicity, etc. “[M]ost social scientists describe ‘race’ as a social construction with potentially pernicious effects, while recognising that racialised identities can be an important mobilising force for those struggling against discrimination and disadvantage” (Parker and Song 2001, 5). While many of the racialized participants identify race as a mobilizing force for them in terms of education, activism, and their social identity, those assertions often came much later in each interview. As a white interviewer, I was not surprised that discussions of race and racialization were approached with
caution by the racialized participants as my embodiments of privilege infused our discussion in explicit and implicit ways. What did surprise me was that early discussions of racialization were often conveyed as a dis-identification, which had, interestingly, been generated through a process of critical self-reflection.

Bushra: I don’t really like to identify as Pakistani, like because those people, well not those people, it’s not an us and them kind of thing, but Paki-girls don’t always have the best representation because of stereotypes. I can’t say they are all like this, but they are all little heffers, so [laughs] sorry, but whatever, I’m not like that. I like to differentiate myself from that identity, but I’m still down with the culture, in terms of language, food, clothes... but the mentality is what I have problems with so I don’t like to fully associate with it.

Jackie: I’ve always grown up in small white communities, where we are the only family of colour. When, honestly, when I define myself I’m like a white person in a black person’s body because people, my half brother, he’s very, um, for lack of a better term, black. I’m just not and he will tell me that I’m so white and I’ll say “I know! It’s not my fault” I’m not going to be all ghetto in North Bay, right? I don’t know, it’s just because of where we grew up and how we grew up. I’m all white on the inside.

Through analysis of our discussion, I understand these participants to be engaging with critical self-reflection to think through the ways in which they identify, yet they also seem to be partaking in normation so as to dis-identify (Medina 2003; Muñoz 1999) with aspects of themselves they want to refuse. “This tendency to disconnect from community and history may well be a symptom of the whiteness problem, or the desire of whites to escape their identity” (Alcoff 2006, 207). The ‘whiteness problem’ rests with the belief that, specifically in North America, there is a pervasive
disconnection regarding the historicization of racialized identities. While Alcoff is specifically referring to the ways in which white people often engage in nihilistic practices in order to disassociate themselves from a racist legacy, I feel that this the desire to ‘escape’ certain aspects of identities that we do not align ourselves with does not strictly relate to only white bodies. It is clear within Bushra and Jackie’s statements that they also wish to distance themselves from the stereotypes and historical identities that they feel do not reflect who they are. Here, what may be most critical to know about Bushra and Jackie’s identities is not how they identify, but how they don’t.

The visibility of Bushra and Jackie’s identities cannot be overlooked. It is through the ways in which they are recognized that they have come to understand themselves as something and not something else. The visibility of race and gender exposes how oppressed people “are marked, managed, observed, and perceived by the dominant group, as well as how the dominant body remains unmarked” (Nelson 2008, 17-8). To reiterate, much of the early discussions that I had with the students pointed to the ways in which they understood themselves primarily through interactions with others. While this relationality must be expected when discussing identity in general, my question to them at this point was specifically about how they identify themselves.

Alexia: Well my best friend is black and then I have a friend, a girl like me, who is half-black. Well [sighs] for me, I’m not really half-black, I’m like a quarter black, so she is half black, so she is more black than I am. Anyways, so when I hang out with them, they are like “Yeah, we’re all black, most people won’t notice she’s black”...in that sense I feel like I am not enough black.

Alexia expresses how she feels that the privilege of her lighter skin creates a boundary from her ability to access what it means to be “enough black.” Parker and Song argue that, “[u]nderlying the advocacy of ‘mixed race’ is the claim that ‘mixed race’ people experience most acutely how
multiplicity is the modality of contemporary identity formation. Their complex genealogies of multiple ancestry draw on far more diverse ‘sources of self’ compared to the modern quest for unity, authenticity and security...” (2001, 8). Throughout our interview, Alexia expresses some confusion over how she should interpret her racial and ethnic identities based on who she is with and where she is, for as Mahtani argues, “[t]he popular discourse is made up of a series of myths which pronounce the multiethnic individual as ‘out of place’ or having ‘no place to call home’” (2001, 175). Referring to the mutual understandings that identity impossibly demands, Hall claims, “[i]n common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (1996, 2).

Alexia’s identity as a multi-racial person and her ambivalent feelings about that embodiment will be discussed in significant depth in Chapter 5, but her vocalization of being “not enough black” is a sentiment that she repeatedly expressed. Immediately following her quote above, Alexia stated,

Alexia: When I am with my boyfriend and his friends, who are all white, it’s not like I feel the opposite...as though I am not white enough. I don’t care. I like the way I am around them and I would never say “Oh, I’m not white enough” because I like sticking up for it. My sister is black, she is completely black, [laughs] because we had a different dad, so I’ve been around name-calling my entire life, so whenever I am with white people I just don’t have to have that discussion...since I look white.

Alexia’s passing as white in certain spaces, while being read as (not enough) black in others reflects how readings of her body are unstable and constantly changing (Mahtani 2002b). As Mahtani claims, “[r]acial performance relies upon an understanding that informants often actively respond – as opposed to accept passively – the ways their racialized selves are perceived by others” (2002b, 429).
While Alexia does not seem intent to subvert or challenge the reception of her performance, she is critically reflecting upon the ways in which she perceives that her racialized performance is read and how those readings change depending on where she is and who she is with.

In response to my question of regarding how she understands her identities, Natasha also had many critical answers regarding her embodiment as a woman with a disability, but it is her discussion of racialization that is particularly notable here.

Natasha: I’ve had experience being a female, being stereotyped because of my gender or sexist comments or received comments about my disability because my capacity is different, but I haven’t had experience with being a person of colour. And I would argue that the world and the perspective, standpoint that it’s from is from a white male-dominant ideology. I would never define you as that white person over there. But when I was a teenager, I would totally say that black person over there. But why was I defining him by his colour and not you? So everything is always white and then there is non-white.

Clearly, Natasha critically self-reflects as she expresses her experiences with oppression via disability, the ways in which others perceive her, and her understandings of her racial biases. Interesting to note, however, is the lack of identification she makes regarding her own whiteness. In the first stages of our interaction, she implicitly identifies me as white “I would never define you...,” she defines the unknown Other in the past tense “that black person over there” as a person of colour, and she also defines herself as not that “I haven’t had experience with being a person of colour.”

Yet, Natasha does not identify herself as white. This lack of identification could very well have to do with her assumption that I know she is white by virtue of her appearance, but it could also be that, as Dyer noted above, that the power of whiteness resides in the non-corporeal and, perhaps, Natasha is
using her own privilege to remain complicit in her discussion of whiteness as an embodied abstraction.

Underlying all of the (non)identifications of racialization made throughout this section is the notion that whiteness has the power to impact what the students wish to refuse about their identities. Bushra does not identify with her Pakistani heritage, Jackie feels she does not fit with her understandings of blackness, Alexia is not black enough, and Natasha posits her embodiment as not racialized. While some of the students did not reference whiteness directly, it is the internalization of the power of privilege and dominance that influences how we think about ourselves via what we think others are thinking.

“I’m Different, But I’m Not Different” – Dis/Abilities

The students, with few exceptions, did not form substantive connections with dis/abilities in discussion of their identities, unless they identified themselves as having a disability. The exceptions to this were one instance of ableism (Devra) and a more complex relationship one student had with her disability that slowly emerged throughout our interview (Anna). The focus on disability as difference was particularly notable in these initial moments of discussing identity. As Titchkosky notes, “[d]isabled people, as the marginal figures of everyday life, academic research, and bodily experience, are positioned betwixt and between contrasting values, conflicting assumptions, painful conceptions, and infuriating and ordinary expectations; and, yet, they are not actually reducible to any of these” (2003, 229). Disabilities emerge for the students in competing ways, as motivating, shameful, normal, frustrating, and/or undesirable.

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47 Instances of ableism can be found throughout the interviews, but this was the only instance where it explicitly occurred at the beginning of the interview. In general, ableism can be defined as “the idea that a person’s abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group are inferior to nondisabled people” (Linton 1998, 9).
Natasha and Chloe identify themselves as having learning disabilities, and they each reflect on the frustrations they have experienced because of social ignorance surrounding appearance/visibility and dis/abilities.

Natasha: Ability is in the list of identities for me, but that’s because I am so involved. I almost feel like I have to justify myself sometimes with clarifying that aspect of me. All of my friends that I hang out with, go to school with, know that I have a disability and usually if I am struggling with something people will look at me and trying to figure out if it is a part of my dyslexia and so, I’ll be treated as if I am not fitting...also, my auditory processing, I don’t hear things the way that you are supposed to so it takes me longer to work with those things. I find that people don’t get it and it takes just having patience. If someone was in a wheelchair and they have difficulty getting into a room, you’d have the patience just to wait for them to come in. But, they don’t and instead I get:”Why aren’t you getting this?”

Chloe: I think that there is a stigma where people believe that you can’t be really functional and have a learning disability. They assume that you are going to appear to have an obvious disability. I’m different, but I’m not different. They don’t think that you can look and talk and act normal and have problems with your, whatever, testing, learning, etc.

Natasha and Chloe both use critical self-reflection as they refer to their disabilities as positioning them as different from the norm, but they also make clear that their difference is not something that should hinder them. Stigmas attached to seemingly appropriate behaviour and/or unexpected appearances place social limitations on what can be understood about dis/abilities. As Garland-Thomson states, “[i]t is not that disability itself creates unease, but rather people’s inability to read such cues disrupts the expected, routine nature of social relations” (2009, 38). Importantly, Garland-
Thomson states elsewhere that “[d]isability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance – not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (1997, 6). These rules are entrenched in the ways in which we come to understand what is ‘normal’ or expected of bodies and social interactions.

The deep-rooted beliefs that differing notions of ability are wholly undesirable are demonstrated by Devra’s reflection on her identity. To revisit the beginning of this chapter, Devra employs normation as she did not know how to answer the question initially, after we had already established a mutual understanding of identities. Following some of my further re-wording of the question, yet still keeping it neutral, she subsequently discussed identity in terms of dis/abilities.

Victoria: I’m wondering how you consider your identities.

Devra: But identity in terms of physical abilities? I’m good, there is nothing wrong with me. Learning? I’d say I have to work harder than the average university student, I guess. I’m happy that I don’t have a learning disability.

Here Devra is expressing a sense of being grateful for being as close to the centre/norm as possible. She positions disabilities as abnormal and wholly undesirable. As Simi Linton argues,

Despite the instability and the relational nature of the designations normal and abnormal, they are used as absolute categories... They affect individuals’ most private deliberations about their worth and acceptability, and they determine social position and society response to behaviour. The relationship between abnormality and disability accords to the nondisabled the legitimacy and potency denied to disabled people. (Linton 1998, 24)

By claiming that she is “good” and that there is “nothing wrong” with her, Devra is creating a distance between her identity and the identity of Others in order to further define her status as the seemingly neutral normate.
Anna has a far more complex engagement with dis/abilities than any of the previous students that I have discussed. During the recruitment for this project, I met Anna in one of her classes and she briefly chatted with me about being interested in the project. At that time, I noticed that Anna uses two canes when she walks. Before our interview, I wrote in my notebook that I wondered if our interview would have a focus on dis/ability – as very few interviews I had conducted at that point discussed dis/abilities at all. I became immediately intrigued once our interview started, as I could not have been more wrong. When I asked Anna how she identifies herself, she was one of the students who, as I stated earlier, was perplexed by the question and was not sure how to answer except to say – apologetically – that she does not “really know herself.” I was surprised by this, as I expected someone who would have undoubtedly experienced oppression based on her embodiment of disability and who studies identity would have critically self-reflect on her position in social space. Clearly, I was, as Garland-Thomson writes, using appearance as a clue to who Anna is and how to relate to her: “What you look like, rather than who you are, often determines how people respond to you” (Garland-Thomson 2009, 34). I remember being preoccupied during this interview, wondering if I was being ableist in my assumptions, wondering why she had no interest in discussing her disability when she seemed to be searching to find important aspects of her identity, and wondering what was going on with our interaction. It was not until much later in our interview that we discussed disability, when I asked if there were times when she recognized that she was experiencing privilege. Anna answered, “All the time!” When I asked her to explain she began by saying,

Anna: I didn’t want to mention it and I don’t want to feel like I’m bragging, but I was born with CP [Cerebral Palsy].

Anna’s critical self-reflection of her experience with cerebral palsy following this framing of disability as privilege was enlightening and will be discussed at length in Chapter 5 as it primarily
relates to higher education, but I wanted to use part of her narrative here to demonstrate the ways in which privilege and oppression are far more complex than the simplistic binaries they are often placed within. Anna participates in normation when specifically asked about her identities and, yet, considers an identity of disability that most, including myself, would interpret as an oppressed embodiment as privilege in her life.

Summary

This chapter explored the ways in which two questions, regarding home and identity, could provide a wealth of answers and interesting possibilities for the rest of our conversations on higher education and the students’ identities. I chose to categorize some of the responses by grouping them into spatial themes, such as reflecting on how the university and parents functioned as home. Further, I organized the ways that the students began to identify (or not identify) themselves through the categories of normation, liberal individualism, and critical self-reflection. While these categories are helpful to explore how the students convey notions of themselves, particularly before we discussed their educational experiences, the combinations of these categories also speak to the transitory and fluid nature of identity. This fluid nature, while crucial to understanding the complexities of studying privilege and oppression, is often confusing and frustrating to study because it is almost impossible to make claims about an individual’s identity when these identities are reliant upon context and fluctuating understandings or appearances. This is not to say, however, that studying identity does not provide excellent data, but that the understanding of how these data is significant is far more complex than ‘proving,’ for example, that those who are seen as privileged do not have to reflect on their privilege versus those who are seen as oppressed and are forced to live that oppression every
day. In Chapter 5, I explore how the students relate the relationship between their experiences within critical identity studies to their own identity discoveries.
CHAPTER 5

STUDYING IDENTITY, COMPLICATING OURSELVES

It’s not like I chose to have this privilege. It just happened because I was born who I am and...it’s really awkward, because I am sitting there in class and it is totally out of my control how I look and who I am. (Rebecca)

There are a lot of stereotypes in my culture. I am expected to act a certain way and people are surprised when I don’t act a certain way because I’m West Indian, so some people have a certain image of my culture as, well whatever. When I tell them I’m not like that and I am my own person, I’m not limited to my culture, I get surprise from them. (Amanda)

Introduction

As I began to delve more deeply into my discussions with the student interviewees, I decided to begin this chapter with Bushra’s narrative. Bushra is an exceptionally engaged student at SU who thoughtfully grapples with the majority of the concepts of identity addressed in our interview. Bushra, like all of the participants in my study, must be read as a subject “in-process” (Lloyd 2005). I have chosen her responses to introduce this chapter as a way to provide a more detailed glimpse of the kind of engagements that emerged from my study. As Lewis points out, “[t]elling our stories is not a simple act abstracted and objectified from the social/political contexts within which they are lived. The theoretical forms presented by the ‘stories’ we tell are embodied in individual and concrete lives, lives lived close to the bone at the level of everyday and lived in the interstices between the public and the private” (1993, 7). It is because these experiences of education are often intimately tied to the ways that we understand ourselves that there are risks – risks to disrupt our sense of self and risks of emotion that these discoveries bring forth. As Boler claims,

In higher education and scholarship, to address emotions is risky business – especially for feminists and others already marginalized within the hierarchy of the academy. The privileging of reason and truth prevails and is manifest in differential funding status and
reputations. In this hierarchy, emotions are culturally associated with femininity, ‘soft’
scholarship, pollution of truth, and bias. (Boler 1999, 109)

Obviously, emotions undergird each discussion expressed in this study, but I want to emphasize here
that these expressions of experience must be acknowledged as a privilege to witness. As these
theorists contend, telling one’s story is always already a risky business.

Following Bushra’s narrative, I use the topics that we addressed together to introduce the key
areas that frame the rest of the chapter – discovering identities in the classroom, ‘mistaken’ identities,
and being in and out of place. As I established in Chapter 4, I am prioritizing the student voices and
so in this chapter I aim to further explore how the students understand themselves. Here I explore
how the students relate the relationship between their university courses in critical identity studies to
their own identity discovery. By discovery, I mean that I use the ways in which the participants
address their relationship to feminism (Feminism? Not Quite), coming to consciousness about one’s
identities (“I Didn’t Know I Was...” – Realizing Identities), and being uncomfortable with
discussions of Other identities (Worry and Discomfort in the Classroom) as a means to establish the
effect that critical identity studies can play in the identifications that the students develop. Next, I
examine the students’ reported experiences with social interactions surrounding identity, specifically
in terms of how they feel that their identities are often ‘mistaken’ for something else. The notion of
‘mistaken identities’ is analyzed in two key ways – the real (That’s Not the ‘Real’ Me) and the unreal
(Passing). The last section of this chapter examines the ways in which the students expressed notions
of belonging in the classroom and how these experiences of belonging were framed in terms of being
in and out of place (“Should I Be Here?”; “Where Are You From?”; “I Know I Belong Here, But I
Also Know That I Don’t”).
Bushra

In the context of being a student, Bushra introduces herself as a third year geography/city studies and women and gender studies student at SU. When she speaks of her identities, though, she claims she “walks the hyphen” in that she is a “21-year-old, Canadian-born, Pakistani-Muslim female.” Her engagements with her identities are complex in that she resists boundaries being imposed upon her (“I’m more than just a Muslim female. I’m more than just a girl who wears a hijab”), while exploring the contradictory ways that she engages with her identities (“I’m a big blur at the end of it all, so I try not to break [my identities] down”). Our conversation was full of these engrossing moments of critical reflection, which often directly related back to Bushra’s relationship to higher education.

There is a strong sense of ambivalence when Bushra, and many of the other students, discuss their educational and social encounters in critical identity classrooms, but more specifically, there is much ambivalence expressed regarding their study of identity. Notions of discovery (“I didn’t know I was...”), ‘realness,’ but also desires to pass and pretend were areas that many of the students described as feeling because of their experiences in critical identity classrooms. Students believed that it was within the classroom and in personal interactions that they learned the most about themselves. Bushra conveys ambivalence: while grateful for her advanced understanding of the world around her and how she variously inhabits it, she feels overwhelmed by what she has learned and the emotional and intellectual weight of the knowledge she now has.

Bushra: It’s a very interesting topic to study, identity I mean, but at the same time it’s like a headache. There is so much to cover and so much to go through...sometimes I feel like I am drowning.
Bushra often finds similarities between pain and learning, which is a theme that will be returned to later, and this connection resonated throughout our interview.

Bushra: I think it’s actually, it’s kinda bad though. At first, I was really like “Oh, I can understand myself more and my background and where I’m coming from and how I can see myself and blah, blah,” but then it annoys me because it’s a process of critical thinking. I can’t talk about identity politics with just anyone, not everybody understands it. Not that it’s so complicated, but, I guess that comes with university – the critical thinking – that’s not what we do regularly, in regular places.

In accordance with traditional sociological notions of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Plummer 1991; Reynolds and Herman-Kinney 2003), Bushra frequently discusses understandings of herself based on interpretations of the ways in which others have engaged with her or through her expectations of how they might view her. Understandings of ourselves gathered through assumptions of what others think about us is both a normalized, everyday occurrence and also a dynamic, difficult process (Winkle-Wagner 2009). Yet, this process is one in which every participant engaged.

Bushra: Before coming to meet you this girl in my class asked “Oh, where are you from?”

Because people always want to know where I am from, I don’t know why, [but] people think I’m very exotic looking. People have said that “Oh, you’re so exotic,” like I’m from some jungle or something. [Laughs.] I never know what they mean, but I guess my features and I wear my hijab usually like a bun, so, because that’s not the traditional way of wearing it...

People will just get a little... they won’t look me in my eyes when I am wearing it like this because they think I look very conservative or fundamentalist, or something else.

Thinking about racialized identities as relational is also a strong theme that emerged for the students of colour.
This notion of relationality was also evident when the students discussed themselves in terms of privilege. Bushra’s notions of privilege are related to experiences that she has had in classrooms where she realized her own privilege through identification of someone else’s oppression. For example, Bushra discusses how she had never considered her “lack of an accent” to be a privilege until someone with a “thick accent” discussed the oppression she has experienced in Canada. Similarly, Bushra recalls a story told in class regarding a crisis situation where a student in a wheelchair was trapped on an inaccessible floor on campus during a fire. Bushra explains, “if the elevator wasn’t working, I would go down the stairs, but other people don’t have those options.” Throughout our interview, Bushra critically reflects on how these instances demonstrate the ways in which privileges can also be fleeting as she once was temporarily disabled or when she travelled to the United States and she felt that her hijab became far more visible than when she is in urban Canada.

These recollections are only a glimpse at what Bushra has taken away from her experiences in critical identity classrooms; however, they help to paint a picture of the dynamic and engaged response the participants had when I asked them to reflect on their experiences in the classroom. The remainder of the chapter explore in detail the topics introduced by Bushra and reflected upon by the other participants beginning with a discussion of discovery in the classroom.

**Discovery in the Classroom**

The critical identity classroom, like most classrooms, can be a space of discovery – discovering new knowledges and new ways to envision the world. What is unique about the critical identity classroom is its potential to foster new understandings of ourselves via the recognition of (our) identities and histories that were once unknown to us, and it is through these discoveries that
these classrooms become particularly engaging and poignant. The interdisciplinarity inherent within critical identity studies “can disrupt that sometimes deceptive smoothness and fluency of the disciplines, questioning their status as conveyors of disinterested knowledge by pointing to the problematic nature of all claims to scientific objectivity and neutrality” (Moran 2002, 184). As the majority of the students that I interviewed were enrolled in women and gender studies, a discussion of feminism and the students’ complex relations to it became quite salient in our discussions.

_Feminism? Not Quite_  

As many studies have shown, the ways in which contemporary young women identify themselves in relation to feminism often rests on the statement “I’m not a feminist, but...” (Buschman and Lenart 1996; Crossley 2009; Zucker 2004) or they see no relationship between feminism and their lives at all, as if this is a post-feminist generation and feminism was only necessary for (white) women in the past (Allen 1997; Patai and Koertge 2003). For some of the students in this study, feminism was not only present but fundamental to how they understand themselves; these women, however, were in the minority. As Alison Dahl Crossley asserts in her study of the fluidity of identifying as feminist for female international students studying in London, “[a] great deal is at stake in understanding young women’s identification with feminism, including the continuation of the women’s movement and the acknowledgement of the ongoing reality of gender inequality” (2009, 132). Carrillo Rowe argues that “the subject of feminism is an affectively produced subject – a subject of experience, identification, and belonging” (2008, 170). For Carrillo Rowe, this represents the uneven lines of power that exist within feminism between white women and women of colour as she states, “the webs of power we weave and into which we are woven renders visible the affective labor we invest into the lives of others, and how that labor is constitutive of the selves we are becoming” (2008, 177). The complexity of the relationship with feminism for those white women
and women of colour in my study who claimed they were not feminists, however, was far more nuanced than would be expected upon hearing a total disavowal with the term. These women are critical and political, yet they see feminism as something external to their progressive equity politics.

I broached the topic of feminism well into each interview so that our dialogue had progressed to a place where the students (hopefully) felt comfortable with professing their own opinion on feminism, rather than stating what they thought I wanted to hear. It was especially important to me to be careful here, as many of them knew that I had been a teaching assistant in women and gender studies, and so I hoped that they felt they could be as true to their own opinions as possible.

As only 4 of the 22 students identified themselves as feminist, I feel that their openness towards discussing their ambivalences or refutations of feminist thought demonstrated that they were comfortable in discussing their relations to feminism with me. This small number of the students positioned themselves as feminists without any prompting from me. Carmen, for example, has been a feminist activist for more than 20 years, so her assertion of her feminist politics was not unexpected. While the other three students who identified as feminist did not have the vast experience that Carmen had, Aisha (while only 20 years old) is quite active in her political beliefs as a community organizer for racialized youth, Vanessa uses gender as a “lens to understand the world,” and Holly “can’t imagine why you wouldn’t be a feminist.” Other student responses to the question “Would you consider yourself a feminist?” are more ambivalent:

Jackie: I don’t think so, only because, like I’m not, this is going to sound bad, but I’m not even sure what a feminist is. Are they like feminist activists who fights for woman-power? I don’t know. I guess it depends how it’s defined. I’m all for women’s rights and when someone says something ignorant or offensive, I’ll say something if I know about it. Or if they say something sexist or whatever, I’ll be the first one to say “Well, that’s not fair,” so
maybe I am? I don’t know. It is hard to answer. Like if you asked a guy if I’m a feminist, he’d say no, because I’m not scary, you know? I guess it depends how it’s defined. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Chloe: I don’t know what it is, but feminist studies? Like, I like to learn about women, but the word feminist makes me kinda cringe. I don’t know why [laughs], it’s just one of those base reactions where I’m like “Oh god, why are we going there?”

Victoria: So what does feminist studies mean?

Chloe: I don’t know. I just think of angry women, maybe I’m misogynist or something. But I only think of angry women who are against everything. It’s weird too because I am all about the women, but it’s just that word. It’s a trigger word for me.

Jackie and Chloe are both critically self-reflective and political in their thinking and their academic choices, and so their resistance to committing to a feminist politic is interesting and important. The stereotype of ‘the feminist’ overshadows what it means to align themselves with feminism, and yet their choices of majoring in women and gender studies would seemingly speak to their commitment to that politic. Unspoken in their above statements is that included in the stereotype of the feminist is usually the image of a white woman (Carrillo Rowe 2008; Mohanty 2003; Srivastava 2006). Whether the students felt this was an aspect of ‘the feminist’ stereotype was not discussed by any of them in their dis-association from feminism. Moreover, while some may argue that Jackie and Chloe represent a post-feminist generation, I do not believe that to be true, as their politics are clearly feminist but the label and its connotations trouble them.

Crossley interviewed a woman who had similar critical politics to Jackie and Chloe and was also intent on distancing herself from the feminist label: “When directly asked about her relationship
to feminism, her answer was expressed in terms of mythical bra burning and man hating, and concluded with a resounding distancing from sexual politics” (Crossley 2009, 125). This bra-burning and man-hating that Crossley addresses was also expressed by Roya, Holly, Vanessa, Bushra, Lenore, and others as a deterrent for identifying as feminist. As all of these women were currently enrolled in women and gender studies courses, I asked them “Have you ever met those type of feminists in your women’s studies courses? Have you encountered people who fit that stereotype?” All of the above students responded “No.” Unfortunately, the deterring stereotype of the man-hating ‘radical feminist’ has come to overshadow the significance of feminist equity politics and, therefore, the term ‘feminism’ is not congruous with equality for these students. While this discussion of politics and identity will be addressed in more depth in relation to the instructors in Chapter 6, it is important to begin to position the ways in which feminism does not manifest for many of the students that I interviewed, whereas inequality in a general sense does. The concern then, perhaps, should focus less on the absence of “feminism” in the lives of these women and gender studies students, but rather on the ways in which they recognize that inequality still exists and they do not recognize feminisms as theoretical and practical tools that are appropriate to fight it.

“I Didn’t Know I Was...” – Realizing Identities

Students’ accounts of the discovery of identities via conversations in the critical identity classroom, in every instance in my research, related specifically to the disruption of privilege. Privileged identities, as I have already asserted, function as invisible so that they remain entrenched and unchallenged within our collective consciousness. A function of the critical identity classroom is often to bring these privileged identities into the realm of the visible so as to position them as something knowable, tangible and real. Naming whiteness in the classroom, often through the introduction of McIntosh’s “White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack” (1990), is one of the

48 See Chapter 6 for a discussion of how the instructors address the presence of feminism within their classrooms.
most common ways in which to make privilege known. For some of the white students, particularly SU students Rebecca and Lenore, their identity as white emerged to them because of the courses that they have taken as combined with the fact that students who appear white are a minority at SU.

Victoria: So can I ask if you considered yourself white before coming to [SU]?

Rebecca: No! No! Not at all! Not at all. I just thought I was normal. [laughs].

Lenore: Me being white, I don’t even care. It’s annoying that it’s an issue at all, but here [at SU] it always is.

Clearly, Rebecca and Lenore’s take on their whiteness is markedly different from other white students, presumably via their realization that when at SU they no longer embody the majority. Rebecca discusses at length her engagement with coming to terms with her whiteness versus her position as ‘normal.’ She also addresses the guilt that she often feels (“I’m not sure how to not want to not be white”) and the ways in which she tries to disrupt that guilt as she knows, because of her reading material from texts like Anne Bishop’s (2002) *Becoming an ally: Breaking the cycle of oppression in people*, it is not productive for social change (“I don’t want to be trapped into complacency”). Gary L. Lemons speaks to Rebecca’s ‘discovery’ and argues that “[w]hen white students begin to speak about themselves in terms of their relationship to white skin privilege, whiteness, and its relation to white supremacy, they will begin a process of self-recognition that is about self-transformation...” (2008, 127-8).

Lenore, on the other hand, is extremely resistant to acknowledging her privilege as she discusses whiteness as an “annoying” “issue” and seems unaware of the problematic/confusing language which she is using to discuss race.
Victoria: So you find that in your classes the focus is mostly on race, but have you ever learned about whiteness?

Lenore: Um, I basically feel that it is just white people that are making Aboriginal people Others. [White people] have to change what they are doing in order to include everybody else.

Victoria: So when you say Aboriginal, you mean like...Canadian Aboriginal people?

Lenore: Yeah, I guess. I think I am basically just looking at the profs as they aren’t white and everyone that is there learning and what they’ve taught us.

Victoria: So, you are referring to non-white people?

Lenore: Yeah, that is what [Southern University] is all about.

Given that Lenore is a fourth year student, who has a major in women and gender studies, it surprised me to hear her confuse terminology on race, as well as her explicit disregard for thinking inclusively, as she consistently positioned herself (and me as well) as ‘us’ and people of colour as ‘them.’ This function, as Linton argues, serves as “an assumed agreement between speaker and audience of what is normal that sets up an aura of empathy and ‘us-ness’” (1998, 23). Regarding her confusion, it is also important to note that Lenore did not just confuse random terminology in her discussion of race, but rather she confused the word Aboriginal as connoting all non-white people. In essence, Lenore is claiming that Aboriginal people, Aboriginal studies, and so on is “what SU is all about.” While this is, of course, not the case, the study of Aboriginal peoples, histories, etc. does occur at SU, as well as NU and, so, perhaps Lenore’s confusion speaks to the ways in which the “[p]sychic and social identifications of white Canadians continue to depend on the abject presence of Aboriginal peoples” (Schick 2000, 90). The dominant discourses that surround Aboriginal peoples, as Emma LaRocque argues, create a “comfortable...cultural portraiture” (2002, 215) and it is not until
students engage with critical education and become aware of the colonialism inscribed within Canadian historical and cultural accounts that they must begin to radically (re)envision who they are in relation to where they are. While Lenore may have learned about whiteness and racialization in the critical identity classroom, this discovery did not lead her to a critical awareness of what identities can mean and why they matter; however, she was in the minority among the students that I interviewed.

Chloe is particularly insightful when she discusses her coming to consciousness about her privilege as a straight woman:

Chloe: The things that I am interested about in people relate really directly to what I have learned in most of the stuff that I learn about identity... Like, I’m not gay, but I have a lot of gay friends and so when I am around my straight friends I am now far more aware of how people who aren’t gay often talk. Like when people say things, like use homophobic language in everyday speech. Or when I listen to music or watch TV, I consciously make an effort to stay away from stuff that I find to be hate language. Or when people say things like “That’s so gay!” I don’t even understand anymore what that is supposed to mean. It really angers me because now I am more aware of it because of my friends and because of what I study. I always think that if I was gay, that would be so hurtful to me, so the fact that I’m not shouldn’t be any different. It’s still hate language.

For Chloe, her sexuality was not something that was unknown to her, but its salience in her life as a specific privilege was revealed through the study of Adrienne Rich’s (1980) theory of compulsory heterosexuality in one of her critical identity courses. This revelation is similar to Amanda and Bushra’s experience of realizing they were able-bodied through reading Adrienne Asch’s (2001) article “Critical race theory, feminism, and disability: Reflections on social justice and personal
identity.” As Garland-Thomson claims, “[t]o project positive impressions, our performances tend to exemplify the prescribed values of the society we live in, usually more so than do our actual behaviours or private facts about ourselves. Our bodies are the props that deliver this performance. As long as they are compliant they remain largely invisible, even to us” (2009, 35). Visibly able bodies can be rendered invisible through the privilege of their normalcy and it is often only when that normalcy is disrupted – in a physical or emotional sense – that our bodies can no longer be ignored.

In the critical identity classroom, these disruptions of normalcy can emerge through pedagogy and classroom discussion, as it did for Amanda:

Amanda: I now consider myself able-bodied, but I have never thought about it before in terms of advantages or discrimination, I just have always thought of myself in terms of race and colour. I had never thought about disability. It made me think more about how disabled people, whether they are deaf, they are blind...they are put at more of a disadvantage and they are discriminated against. I had never thought about it before, really.

Bushra’s experience of discovering her able-body was also through the classroom, but more specifically a journaling exercise where she had to discuss how she was experiencing her body in that moment:

Bushra: I had never reflected on my body before. When you see the barriers that people with disabilities have to work with, or whatever, it’s very hard....In that sense, I know I am very fortunate that I am able to do what they can’t do – like walk up the stairs or sit in the chair I was sitting in to write the journal. I had always taken that access for granted before.

While Amanda and Bushra may not have taken their awareness of their able-bodies to a profoundly critical place, in that they seem to continue to position their abilities as superior to those who are disabled, their newfound awareness of their bodies must not be dismissed. While I agree with Linton
when she states, “ableism also includes the idea that a person’s abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group are inferior to nondisabled people” (1998, 9), it must also be understood that coming to consciousness is a continual process of discovery that is always ongoing.

Worry and Discomfort in the Classroom

While the vast majority of student experiences that I explore throughout this study are spoken of in positive terms, the discovery and exploration of identities in the classroom are also conveyed to be experiences that are simultaneously fraught with negativity. As hooks states, “there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches” (1994, 43). To become aware of one’s privilege, one’s dominance, is difficult to some degree for all of the students that I interviewed. Regardless of whether they primarily identified as having oppressed identities or described themselves using the strategies of normation that I developed in Chapter 4, thinking through the presence and experience of Others often caused worry and discomfort that many of the students handled by silencing themselves.

The students who identified (and felt that they were identified by Others) as white were most uncomfortable in the classroom when critical discussions of race would occur. The students from NU felt that the presence of the few racialized students that were in their classes fostered this discomfort; whereas, at SU, the two white students often referred to themselves as uncomfortable being in a “white minority.” In particular, NU students Holly, Anna, and Shelly talked about the fear and nervousness that they have in class when we began to discuss topics that could be potentially uncomfortable for them in the classroom.

Holly: It does bother me if there is one person of colour sitting beside me and then you know that the entire class is thinking about their experience because they are the only person of
colour in this room. So, I feel bad for that person because they probably feel that way. It makes me...I dunno, nervous. Just like if we are talking about sexuality and sometimes I feel that way but it’s not noticeable because I’m not as noticeable as the only coloured person in the room, right? We are still...we go in complete opposite directions where we try too hard to not be, not try too hard to not be, I dunno, you know, racist? [lowers voice] It’s just weird how I will go in the complete opposite direction of pointing out someone’s colour: “No, don’t refer to him as the black guy; refer to him as the guy with glasses.”

Anna: Some things are kind of touchy. Well, not, per se. I feel like, I always want to say that people are mean and that they shouldn’t be mean like that, you know...watch a movie about it and try to understand it. Like I’ve said though, I’ve done research on pretty much everything to do with it.

Victoria: ‘It’ being race?

Anna: Um, yeah, I guess... yes.

Interestingly, both Holly and Anna express some discomfort with the topic of race being introduced in their predominantly white classes, but they do so while distancing themselves from any oppressive behaviours that may be occurring in the class. Holly, while acknowledging her ability to pass as straight, uses critical self-reflection to question how and why she uses a colour-blind approach to understanding race in the classroom, while Anna seems to adopt the position of ‘knower’ (Banks 1996; Freire 2007). By ‘knower,’ I am implying that Anna seems to distance herself from being involved in discussions of race as much as possible by claiming that she has researched “pretty much everything” on race and thus she is seemingly absolved from critical reflection on her privileged
white status. When we further discussed what it means to have done research on “pretty much everything” to do with race, Anna explained that her research was primarily based on Hollywood movies she had seen or articles that she read about how to “know the Other;” it can be presumed that these sources are not engaged in fostering critical awareness of the complexity of racial issues, but, rather, reinforce problematic stereotypes that potentially reinforce racist/oppressive social discourse. As a result, Anna is offered a range of contradictory and inconsistent subject positions and she seems reluctant to acknowledge the ways in which these various positions render her, too, as racialized.

White people may resist identifying the race or colour of another person so as to remain “innocent” (Fellows and Razack 1998; Srivastava 2005) and avoid ‘mistakes,’ out of fear that they are not being equitable. Further, using a colour-blind approach to position everyone as the same limits the ability for white people to interrogate their own privilege and the oppression of Others (Solomon et al. 2005). So while it is important for all students to acknowledge the ways in which they are feeling about topics in the classroom, to render certain topics as a problem strictly for others, as when Anna claims others should “watch a movie about it and try to understand it,” points to how what we feel may sometimes contradict what we know to be right/good (Pitt 1995). When Elizabeth Ellsworth critiques the “ahistorical and depoliticized abstractions” of critical pedagogy literature, she argues that “student empowerment has been defined in the broadest possible humanist terms, and becomes a ‘capacity to act effectively’ in a way that fails to challenge any identifiable social or political position, institution, or group” (1989, 307). In a statement that could apply to Anna, Ellsworth (1989) contends that the abstractions inherent to much critical pedagogy limit students’ ability to connect with the material as they cannot see its lived consequences in their lives and thus they have no “call to action.”

49 In a later part of this chapter, Anna’s continued reflection on race in the classroom becomes far more complex and contradictory.
Through our dialogue about classroom discussion, Shelly, another NU student, demonstrated a transformative relationship to the subject of race:

Shelly: I feel like I’ve been exposed to [race] so much already. Like I have experienced racism, I guess...not in the same way that a black person has experienced racism, but I see it, I see everything that is happening around. So, I don’t feel totally uncomfortable about talking about things that I have a personal opinion on other than when I feel like someone may discriminate against...I don’t know, now that I am talking about it out loud, I guess I am kinda afraid to talk about things like race. [laughs].

Victoria: So what would you be afraid to talk about?

Shelly: The race stuff, I guess. Let’s say if it was me, my prof and another student that was a different colour than me, I would be afraid to try and make up an experience that they might have experienced first-hand that I never will. Like, I’d be afraid to talk about something like that and then hear back from them that “Oh no, you can’t talk about that, you can’t have an opinion on something you’ve never experienced.”

It is interesting to read Shelly’s progression of thought where she first states that she, as a white woman, has experienced racism (or at least been witness to it) and is therefore comfortable with the topic and, as she is uttering that statement, she then becomes uncomfortable, unsure, and reflects on how she silences herself in the classroom. As I stated earlier, the process of discovery is crucial to the development of critical consciousness and it was an interesting part of the interview dynamic to witness Shelly question her belief aloud and realize that what she was saying may not reflect how she actually feels or, perhaps, how she should feel in the context of her interview with me.

The classroom dynamic at NU is often viewed as homogenous in its whiteness, but it is clear through Holly, Anna, and Shelly’s assertions that the presence of an Other disrupts their ability to
remain comfortable in the space, as their own whiteness can no longer be ignored. As Lemons argues,

When white students begin to speak about themselves in terms of their relationship to white skin privilege, whiteness, and its relation to white supremacy, they will begin a process of self-recognition that is about self-transformation....For white students to break white silence on race opens space for a critical dialogue aimed to ‘decenter’ whiteness as the signifier of white supremacy. (Lemons 2008, 127-8)

Whiteness in a homogenously white space can remain invisible, even when the subject of race is introduced, but whiteness in a space that is racially diverse forces the acknowledgement of difference and diversity. As Razack argues, “[t]hrough these everyday routines, the space comes to perform something in the social order, permitting certain actions and prohibiting others. Spatial practices organize social life in specific ways” (2002, 9). Discovering the ways in which bodies change spaces and classroom climates by normalizing some actions and bodies while prohibiting Others is crucial to understanding how critical identity classrooms can variously function. As Roya states,

Roya: I think you tend to double-think certain topics because you are worried what other people would think and I don’t want to offend anybody or make someone think I am judging them – especially if it happened to them or someone they know.

This sentiment of remaining silent out of fear of offending someone and/or maintaining innocence relates to notions of pretending in the classroom: pretending that you have nothing to say or that you are not thinking/believing things that you feel may offend others because of the topic being discussed. To think of silence as a performative act is not commonly addressed, especially using a student perspective, but it further demonstrates the need for students to have the opportunity to reflect
on their experiences in classrooms and to begin to process how they conceptualize themselves in relation to what they learn.

‘Mistaken’ Identities

As our conversations progressed, discussions of identity became more nuanced. The ways in which the students began to speak of their identities had as much to do with the ways that they do identify as with the ways that they do not. By this statement I mean that our discussion focused on the students’ claims that Others presumed to know what the students’ ‘real’ identities were and how they feel this ‘knowing’ is incorrect. Goffman asserts that misrecognitions are a function of social interactions: “It has been suggested that the performer can rely upon his audience to accept minor cues as a sign of something important about his performance. This convenient fact has an inconvenient implication. By virtue of the same sign-accepting tendency, the audience may misunderstand the meaning that a cue was designed to convey...” (Goffman 1959, 51). Turner furthers this sentiment in stating,

Whatever the philosophical problems, it is clear from a sociological stance that having a body with specific features, which has a particular placement in society, is crucial for everyday recognition and identification of persons. The interpellation of persons is typically the interpellation of specific bodies. This claim is not to deny that there are mistaken identities, false identities, impersonation and mimesis. (Turner 1984, 55)

Cues of identity – skin colour, accent, dress/fashioning of the body – relate to many different aspects of our social selves, such as our social relationships, where we are located, and so on. These cues may often relate to what I call notions of realness – how we understand ourselves and what we take to mean/reflect the essence of who we are.
A focus on (mis)recognition can be intimately tied to Butler’s discussion of performativity that I introduced in Chapter 2:

[Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler 1997a, 173)

The ways in which we appear to one another are socially constituted and exceed the ways in which we each individually know what it is that we are ‘being’ or representing for others. Some of the students point to instances where they have been ‘misrecognized’ for one race or culture that they are not a part of, yet there are also moments where they participate in that same practice when speaking of Others. As such, this section of the chapter is divided into two parts: the first, That’s Not the ‘Real’ Me, explores the students’ discussions of how they feel they are interpreted by Others (and how they interpret those Others as well); and, in the second part, Passing, I explore the ways that the students reflect on their explicit attempts to subvert how their identities can be read.

That’s Not the ‘Real’ Me

As I demonstrated in Chapter 4, the students seemed to vary between being critically self-reflective on the depths of their identities to engaging in processes of normation – using one’s social dominance as a way to mask or normalize their privileged identities. While many of the students had some difficulty in articulating how they identify themselves, once we started discussing classroom encounters (and other social encounters) regarding their identities a key theme emerged – they all had a very clear sense of who/what they are not. The students had many stories of how they have
experienced misrecognitions or miscategorizations (Renfrow 2004) from Others and how they found these experiences to be quite negative. Similar to Butler’s relational notions of performativity, Goffman also asserts, “[w]hat the individual is for himself is not something that he invented. It is what his significant others have come to see he should be, what they have come to treat him as being, and what, in consequence, he must treat himself as being if he is to deal with their dealings with him” (1971, 279). This externalization of identity – how we understand ourselves in relation to what Others mis/understand us to be – weighed quite heavily on the students, especially regarding notions of race.

Roya: People are always automatically assuming things about me. One time I was at a restaurant and I was ordering a Caesar salad and the waitress looked at me and said “Oh, just to let you know, there’s pork in it” and then I was like “Oh, that’s fine” and she said that she just wanted me to know. It was clear that she assumed that I was a Muslim, but I’m not, so just by my features she assumed that I am middle-Eastern and probably Muslim.

Victoria: Did that bother you?

Roya: Um, it doesn’t bother me, it did when I was younger, but I’ve grown to get used to it. Well, it kinda bothers me. Before, I would question “Why do I have to be Muslim? Why is that the assumption?” But then I’ve learned through studying this stuff that people will assume and judge you no matter what.

I asked Roya if being misrecognized bothered her because, while she was discussing the incident, her voice trailed off and she looked away from me. While Roya asserts that it does not bother her to be misrecognized, she then goes on to claim it does bother her and this sense of being bothered is shared amongst a few of the students.
Alexia: No one really asks me. They think I am white because I look white or tanned, but that’s not the real me.

Chloe: I often get lumped in under the miscellaneous heading of brown. Wow. Thanks guys, I actually have a place of origin, but brown is easier I suppose.

Race is a “regulatory fiction,” yet its “performances take place in constrained places” amongst the “oppressive framework of racialized meanings” (Mahtani 2002b, 436). The ability to (mis)recognize Others positions the (privileged) subject as the knower and the bodies of the above students as something that can be known. Alexia claims that her being read as white is a mistake – that it is “not the real” her. The association of identity with real is significant here. As a mixed race woman, Alexia’s assertion forces us to acknowledge that mixed race “identities do not necessarily fit in socially constructed categories of race. Many ‘mixed race’ women explained that their racial identity is defined differently over time and space because of the shifting spaces of racialization” (Mahtani 2002b, 429). Further, thinking through the sense that there is a ‘real’ that exists for each of us beneath the myriad performances that we offer, further speaks to our perpetual desire to use identities to carve out our understandings of ourselves, with the seemingly paradoxical understanding that what ‘real’ for us is not ‘real’ for others. Interestingly, this relational aspect of assuming and being known was most clearly conveyed in my conversation with Amanda.

When Amanda and I were discussing the ways in which a man in her race, class and gender course was discussing his identity, she stated:

Amanda: We were doing group work and he said that he’s not white and so I asked him “What are you?” because he is white. He said “I’m not, I’m Serbian” and so I asked him “What do you define as white?” and he said “All those major countries, all those colonizers,
like Britain, France...” So, I said, Serbia is also European and he’s like “That’s Eastern European” [and I replied], “...so you’re not colonizers? What?” [laughs]. Like, where did he get that from?

Victoria: I guess whether or not someone identifies that way, if you look white to everybody else then you would classify them as white?

Amanda: Exactly, and when we are talking about race and someone got offended and was like “No, I’m not white, I’m Italian, I’m Greek, I’m this” and I’m like “Well, what’s white then?”

Here, Amanda positions herself as the knower, the one who can define the identity of another. When she claims the student in her tutorial “is white” it is in direct contrast to his explicit announcement that he does not see himself that way. Importantly, Jennifer J. Nelson asks “How does power operate in such a way that certain actions and outcomes – and not other actions and outcomes – appear self-evident?” (2008, 14) Whether Amanda’s classmates’ assertion of his non-whiteness is somehow right or wrong is not the issue here, but rather what is at issue are the ways in which we enter into power relations with one another, as the attempt to define for someone else what their identities are comes from the use of privilege to claim to ‘know.’

As our conversation goes on, Amanda states that her own racial/cultural identity is often in question:

Amanda: I get Mexican, Indian, I don’t know where that came from. I’ve gotten Indian, well, that’s close enough. I’ve never really gotten Guyanese, which is what I am.

When I asked Amanda if she ‘corrects’ people on their misrecognition, she stated,

Amanda: Yeah, most of the time. Some people are like where is Guyana? It’s in South America! [laughs]. Do they not know geography? Ignorance is annoying.
It is compelling to think through the ways in which Amanda establishes boundaries for understanding the realness of her identity and the identity of the student that she finds problematic. As Butler contends, “the reading of ‘performativity’ as wilful and arbitrary choice misses the point that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms...constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names” (1993, 187). While Butler is specifically referring to gendered performances here, her argument can be applied to racial understandings as well. The ways in which discourses of power, race, nation, and so on surround every social interaction, especially in the critical identity classroom where discussions of power and race are confronted, enable Amanda to use her social power to point to her classmate’s privilege in refusing his ‘real’ white identity and lament her own experience of being mistaken for another Other. Clearly, the privilege being enacted within these exchanges is multifaceted, dynamic, and even confusing, as the power to identify yourself against how another may identify you disrupts the discourses that enable recognitions to occur.

While many of the instances of mistaken identities involved racialization, notions of belonging as it relates to ‘race’ and ‘nation’ also combined to point to misrecognitions.

Kelly: It’s not that I mind having to correct people about my being Korean and not some other Asian, but when they assume that I’m one thing and I’m not that, it does get annoying. In my head, I’m Korean and Canadian, but mostly Canadian as I was born here, but I guess I’m never going to be or look Canadian enough to please anyone anyway, so whatever.

Terry: People assume I am Canadian because I was born here. I never say “I’m Canadian.” I don’t feel Canadian and I don’t like Canadian things. I’m Caribbean.

Victoria: So what is Canadian to you?
Terry: I don’t know. I just know I’m not that, but others assume I am since I was born here. For non-white people in Canada, “their own bodies are used to construct for them some sort of social zone or prison, since they cannot crawl out of their skins, and this signals what life has to offer them in Canada. This special type of visibility is a social construction as well as a political statement” (Bannerji 1993, 149). There is an interesting tension that Kelly and Terry are pointing to, in that neither of them feel appropriately recognized in terms of their national identity. As both women were born in Canada and are citizens, they are “officially” Canadian, but the ways in which they are interpreted does not match the identities that they wish to embody – Kelly wants a more recognizable Canadian identity, while Terry wants to refuse it. “It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of different – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 2005, 2). The inability to access a desired identity reflects the existence of a liminal identity – being suspended between the identity that you desire to be recognized for and the identity you are misrecognized as having. These disruptions to notions of ‘real’ are the complications and confusions that go along with identifications and, similar to Terry’s desire for refusal, the ability to pass utilizes one’s power to further disrupt the ways in which identities (both privileged and oppressed) can be read.

**Passing**

Passing is conceptualized in the literature as (at least) two distinct practices, the first being its (outdated) association of relating to a social deception. Anna Camaiti Hostert (2007) argues that this traditional theoretical approach to passing positions the passer as “[o]ne [who] sees oneself in a certain way yet deceptively presents oneself in a manner contradictory to that vision. Passing is to present oneself as something that one is not; it is a matter of violating the laws of identity and

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50 I will discuss this tension in more depth later in a section entitled “Where Are You From?” – Being Mis/Placed By Others.
The second, more-nuanced main approach to notions of passing positions the passer as one who is involved in self-preservation or self-protection: “By passing, individuals travel through fluid, multifaceted phases of their existence, experiencing a multidimensional identity as a remedy against forms of indifference or hostility towards the other” (Hostert 2007, 80). For my purposes, I am primarily using the second description to address instances of a practice (which can be active or passive) of passing, such as remaining silent about a queer identity when it may be unsafe to ‘out’ oneself. It must be noted that the first definition haunts the second one in some instances as evidenced below, in that passing can seem both like a strategy/practice and a means through which to engage with feelings of guilt and anxiety about one’s identities.

Passing is not a simple process. Throughout our interview, the students who speak to moments of passing articulated their ability to pass as a process. By this I mean that most of the students did not announce “I pass in this way,” but rather, because our interview setting was an attempt to explore aspects of identity not often discussed, stories of passing emerged slowly throughout the students’ discussions of themselves. For example, Carmen, who is the only mature student that I interviewed, spoke eagerly about many issues related to identity and classroom experiences. However, she seemed to struggle with thinking through her racial and cultural identities, as indicated by significant pauses in her response below.

Carmen: I’m actually, I have to say, um, my Métis background is very personal. I’m exploring my culture and my values. I’ve always, um, aligned with the traditional values of the culture [2 second pause] however, I’ve been so brought up in a European culture, I feel that I’m being... because I haven’t suffered similar oppressions, I’m very careful because of my experience I have been privileged. So I don’t, I can’t necessarily say when I identify, I identify [2 second pause], I should acknowledge both backgrounds with the knowing that
I’ve been privileged in my life experience because of my family. I’ve been brought up in a white middle-class society, you know? [4 second pause] I can pass easily unless I self-identify. My background is very personal.

The significance of the pauses in the above quotation must not be overlooked as this was the only instance in my interview with Carmen where there was any significant pausing at all. To pause when discussing a particularly difficult issue, as Carmen intimated that it was, can indicate a sense of discomfort with the topic under discussion or, at the very least, uncertainty regarding how to proceed (Tree 2002). This could be because “[p]assing never feels natural. It is a second skin that never adheres” (Kroeger 2003, 8). Brooke Kroeger is arguing here that the act of passing implies a sense of discomfort, perhaps which was demonstrated by the pauses that Carmen provided. Carmen’s internalization of a cultural and racialized history that she feels both apart of and yet disconnected from leads her to pass as white. She clearly has a critical engagement with the history of colonization and oppression that Aboriginal and Métis peoples face in Canada and she does not feel that she can appropriately tap into those identities.

This desire to pass and somehow disconnect from one’s Aboriginal identity was most prevalent in my discussion with Jackie. During our interview, Jackie positioned her identities by claiming,

Jackie: My background is that my dad is Jamaican and my mom is Inuit Canadian. As the interview progressed, Jackie stated that she did not feel particularly aligned with her racialized self, even though she is “kinda conflicted” because “has dark skin, well not that dark,” but she sees herself as “all white on the inside.” I asked her how she saw those conflicts in her life, to which she replied,
Jackie: Well I mean, my mom’s white... I don’t know. We’re all just feeling white...me and my sisters, I mean.

It was only during my transcription of the interview that I noticed the contradiction in her identifications of her mother’s racialized identity. Shortly after the transcription of this interview was complete, I received Jackie’s journal, which added another layer to her engagement with identity and, more specifically, passing.

Jackie (J): There are many situations where I am with my Inuit grandmother and her relatives and I almost find myself not wanting to fit in, not wanting to admit that they are a part of my ancestry. Why? I have no idea, but I do feel bad when I feel this way, but maybe it’s because of the stigmatism surround Aboriginal peoples and their way of life. For example, when people ask me what I am, as if it is not obvious that I am 100% Canadian, I say my dad is Jamaican and my mom is white Canadian (I know I told you Inuit Canadian) (but I lied!) I mean, I do not encourage negative stereotypes of Natives, or hear something prejudice without saying something, but I do not feel I have to tell the world I am Native unless I have to.

For Jackie, her acknowledgement that she “lied” within our interview further speaks to the conflict that she feels regarding how she identifies – the way she does identify and what she excludes versus the way she could or should identify. Her reflection in the journal also attends to how racial identities, which are often positioned as ‘real’ and unchanging through notions of visibility, can be fluid and multifaceted, as Hostert (2007) noted (see above). While there may be many reasons for Jackie’s desire to hide historicized aspects of her Aboriginal background with which she has an ambivalent relation, as Garland-Thomson contends, “passing is an intentional quest for civil inattention in a racist or sexist environment” (2009, 42). To this end, Jackie addresses her conflicting...

51 (J) – indicates that this quotation was transcribed from a journal.
feelings towards her Inuit background and the grant money that she has received based on her Inuit ancestry further by writing,

Jackie (J): I know the Canadian government is paying back to the Native communities for all the wrong-doing, so they have a lot of money to give towards the new generations, but sometimes I feel like part of the problem (when not wanting to admit to my heritage or do anything in return for my education).

The desire for “civil inattention” is clear in Jackie’s journal writing. She writes that “I do not feel I have to tell the world I am Native” and, yet, she is also critical of that position: “I feel like part of the problem.” Jackie is clearly struggling with the constructed boundaries around the privileges in her life. She is using whiteness to shield herself from what she feels is shameful admission to her Aboriginal heritage and, in so doing, the privileges associated with whiteness also make her feel ashamed. Here, privilege is complicated by notions of belonging as it is evident that “the presumption of belonging that undergirds dominant ideology formations such as whiteness and heterosexuality erases the choices that we make around our belongings, which are constitutive of our identities. This erasure fixes identity, however unintentionally, in individualistic terms: ‘I am’” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 39-40).

Jackie’s desire to pass and the accompanying guilt that she feels for hiding her Aboriginal background is also similar to the ways in which Alexia conveys how she feels she is (sometimes) shamed into adopting a white identity. Alexia, as I addressed in Chapter 4, expresses much ambivalence about her multi-racial identity and this ambivalence seems to emerge from her problematic engagement with her boyfriend and her friends regarding her racialization.

Alexia: My friends joke around about it. They’ll see 50 Cent and call me 25 Cent, because I am a quarter black. We just joke around about it. It doesn’t bother me at all. [laughs].
In this instance, Alexia contradicts herself, as she previously stated that when her friends poke fun at her racialized background it makes her “feel like I am not enough black.” With the knowledge that she had contradicted herself by earlier claiming that her friends’ comments do bother her, I continued asking her about her social engagements regarding her race.

Victoria: So have you ever encountered people who are openly racist in your presence because they may assume...

Alexia: That I am white? Yeah, that pisses me off a lot.

Victoria: Do you respond to them?

Alexia: It depends who I am with. My boyfriend’s friends are so racist. They are all white. It drives me nuts. We were at a party once and they were saying all these racist jokes, mostly black jokes, and I was just sitting there biting my tongue...feeling like shit. They all know who I am and after every joke they will say “No offence Alexia” so they know it bothers me since they know my background. But when it is in class...and it has happened in class... I won’t say anything. I let it pass.

Alexia’s decision to “let it pass” when racism is happening to her or around her speaks to the internalization of oppression that she experiences as a racialized woman who says that these comments make her feel “like shit” even as it also speaks to the externalization of normality that she is attempting to maintain. As Titchkosky argues, “[t]o be marginal and to pass as ordinary is to find one’s self positioned somewhere between a set of expectations about what any ‘normal’ self ought to be and the actual work involved in these ‘doings of ordinariness’” (2003, 69). Alexia suppresses her feelings by saying nothing in these racist moments and, in so doing, is partaking in ‘doing normal’ at the price of “feeling like shit.”
Attempts to pass as privileged are also undertaken by Holly, as she discusses how she often passes for straight.

Holly: It’s pretty much assumed that, with me, I’m straight. ...I think that it’s assumed that mostly everybody is straight. But it’s good because then I don’t feel isolated all the time. I never ‘out’ myself in class. It would then be like, “Look there’s that gay person sitting there”, but then at the same time you can feel excluded because you know you’re not involved...So in that way you feel a little excluded, but in other ways you are not always singled out as being one more of the two or three gay people that someone might know.

Here again is the desire to be considered ‘normal’ and, by ‘doing normal,’ Holly feels included in a larger social group. As Goffman notes, “[b]ecause of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent” (1963, 74). Goffman’s claim here also points to how the desire to pass is not only for those who want to pass-as-privileged, but also for those who want to pass in order to be included, such as the NU students who discuss remaining silent in class so that their “inexperience” with diversity will not be made known.

Furthermore, the desire to be seen or deemed normal by your peers does not necessarily translate into the desire to be normal. Holly expresses confidence when discussing her queer identity (she is actively involved in the LGBTQ committee on her campus and discussed her new partner at great length), but she also admits that it is upsetting to her when her ‘deviant’ embodiment is known, as it often becomes considered the only aspect of her identity that is significant.

The instances of passing that the above students reflect upon do not resemble the active social disruption that Hostert is suggesting: “Passing, then, is a way of evading the increasingly categorical imperative of belonging, of affiliation, which attaches labels to everybody, assigning roles that soon turn out to be cages” (Hostert 2007, 80). While the students may not want to be slotted into a strict
categorization of a non-dominant identity, that does not seem to translate into a desire to be released from belonging to, and having a place within, the privileged norm.

**Being In and Out of Place**

Having a sense of place, both in one’s social environment and in one’s body, is fundamental to how we are in the world. To feel out of place is often to be denied an experience of belonging and the ability to connect with those who do feel ‘in place.’ Tim Cresswell argues, “[s]omething or someone belongs in one place and not in another. What one’s place is, is clearly related to one’s position to others” (1996, 3). Carrillo Rowe furthers this by stating, “[t]he point is not to be correct, consistent, or comfortable. We need not, or cannot, be the same person everywhere – in different communities, on different occasions, at different times in our lives” (2008, 41). A sense of place manifested for the students in various ways – the most obvious emerged from a sense of feeling ‘out of place,’ particularly in the critical identity classroom (Should I Be Here?” – Feeling ‘Out of Place’). Yet, the racialized students also expressed attempts to be placed by others (“Where Are You From?” – Being Mis/Placed By Others), while the white students could not seem to fathom receiving such a question of their belonging in Canada.

‘Should I Be Here?’ – Feeling ‘Out of Place’

Experiencing the feeling of being ‘out of place’ manifested for students primarily in relation to race and gender in the classroom. Some of the white students expressed how they felt that their privilege positioned them on the outside of critical race discussions, insofar as they feel that they should not even be present for such discussions. In contrast, some of the racialized students discussed how they were made uncomfortable by racist assumptions in the classroom that they felt isolated them. As Creswell argues, “…a sustained investigation of the ‘out of place’ metaphor points to the
fact that social power and social resistance are always already spatial. When an expression such as ‘out of place’ is used it is impossible to clearly demarcate whether social or geographical place is denoted – place always means both” (1996, 11). This dual sense of place – social and geographical/physical – was clearly conveyed by Devra (an NU student) as she discussed her course topic and classroom composition.

Devra: Do I say much? Well, it depends on who is there....especially when we talk about race.

Victoria: When other people are speaking on that, do you ever feel like you should be adding something?

Devra: Oh yeah! Every time in class you sit there, and the teacher asks questions, and I’m sure everyone does it, but in there, right away I have an answer but I would never open my mouth just because I feel out of place, I guess.

Victoria: Do you think if that class was all white, would you be more comfortable? Do you think you would say something?

Devra: Yeah. And you know what’s funny, because it usually is all white, but in my class on race and gender there is, like, one or two [people of colour].

Devra’s decision to remain silent on issues based on who is present in the classroom further demonstrates the multifaceted engagements that students have with how they are perceived and how they perceive the presence of Others. Mary M. Reda claims, “...students understand their own silences in far more complicated ways than we [teachers] do, often seeing multiple causes and issues at play in a teacher’s request for oral participation and their decisions to speak or not” (2009, 7).

Throughout our interview, Devra moves between articulating that being white causes her to feel
uncomfortable and shameful of the oppressions that Others face, while also questioning how “it’s not my fault that I am white, so what do I do?”

The feelings of resistance and inexperience were also clearly conveyed by another white NU student, Anna.

Anna: I just find that when people have different stories to share, I know what they’re talking about, I’ve seen it, I have no stories, I can’t think about anything that I remember that can be used as an example. So I am listening to everyone else talk and I wonder if I should really be in this class. I feel like I shouldn’t say anything. The transgender issue, people talk about that. Race, homosexuality, the, you know, that kind of stuff and I’m like “I’ve researched it and maybe seen it in movies a couple of times, but...should I be here?” I don’t know.

While it can be argued that Devra and Anna are merely expressing a privileged sense of discomfort surrounding the complexity of racial issues that they see as external to them, they also share how they feel they should perhaps not be engaging in critical identity studies because of their privilege. Bishop (2002) contends that when people with privilege take on guilt for the oppressions that they have become recently aware of, the guilt immobilizes them and they often feel unable to resolve their personal feelings in the face of larger systemic inequalities. For Devra, she seemed to verbalize a sentiment that Anna also felt in that she said she “really isn’t sure what to do” and “the feelings that I have make me want to stay home.” Coming to consciousness regarding one’s social position is not easily resolved and needs lengthy critical discussion to explore, explain, and move forward from.

While there are expectations that certain courses and instructors will put forth an anti-racist curriculum, these expectations may not be followed through in practice. Interestingly,

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52 Anna’s statement here interestingly contrasts her previous position as the ‘knower’ that I developed earlier in this chapter.
Chloe, a woman of colour, identifies feeling ‘out of place’ in her class on post-colonialism and feminism.

Chloe: I feel really out of place sometimes when [the instructor] talks about issues of colonialism and slavery and she talks about slaves as nothing, just as an accessory to the bigger story, I find that uncomfortable because I feel like it’s so dismissive. Or if in my English course on identity, [the instructor] talks about certain types of authors, like Joseph Conrad said “blah blah” and [acknowledges that] although his work is racist...that doesn’t really matter because it is a work of genius. I find that really dismissive and uncomfortable.

Victoria: Are these instructors white?

Chloe: Oh, of course!

Chloe’s experience of feeling out of place stands in stark contrast to Anna and Devra’s experiences, as Chloe is made to feel powerless by the authority in the room – the instructor (and the curriculum being put forth). As it is an expected part of the instructor’s role to attempt to be inclusive and, at the very least, anti-oppressive in the classroom, Chloe’s experience conveys a sense of feeling negated and isolated by the experiences that she has had. As Nelson claims, “[i]n various contexts, the subjugated, racialized body is rendered ‘outside’ legitimate space; its movement is dictated by the tacit rights of occupancy. It cannot simply ‘be’” (2008, 40). This sense of being or belonging is also conveyed by Fatima, who similarly discusses the critical identity classroom as a space of isolation.

Fatima: Um, sometimes, like I had mentioned about my culture and stuff like that, [the classroom environment] makes me not want to talk about it. I find, I don’t know, it’s not a supportive environment, so questions of ethnicity and background, unless I know a friend or someone who is from the same background in the class with me...I feel out of place and that’s
not because I have something against [people not like me], but it’s because of the way the class is set up or how the conversations go.

This feeling of isolation is compounded for Fatima by how she feels that her experience and body is delegitimized when she does not see her identity reflected in other students in the space. Similar to Holly’s desire to pass, Fatima is expressing how the unsupportive environment of her classroom makes her desire to be silent regarding her identities as well; the difference between Holly and Fatima, however, is that Holly’s identity can pass as ‘normal,’ whereas Fatima’s racialized embodiment is a visible Other. This feeling of not being reflected in the classroom’s space was also a gendered issue, as conveyed by Julian.

As the only male student that I interviewed, Julian must not be seen as a primary example of how men experience critical identity studies, but his experiences do shed light on the ways in which masculine privilege can become complicated by deconstructive, and primarily female, spaces.

Julian: In that classroom, I was the only male student...I seem to always pick the classes that are all females, I have a gift, I guess....and there was one student who was African American and the rest were all Caucasian, so they regarded us differently at the beginning and then I found when we started doing different topics, like when a girl admitted to being dyslexic, she became part of us – the Other – the prof would honestly ask her for her opinion because of that fact. She would turn to me constantly and ask me “What’s the male perspective on this?” or turn to the African American girl and ask her what her take was on whatever topic based on being a different ethnicity. As if I could speak on behalf of all men and she could speak on behalf of her race. It was a little bit of a problem [sarcasm].

The practice of having the lone Other in the class, even when the Other is the one with the most social privilege, speaks to the “common conception that a ‘native informant’ would be the best route
to educating others in the class about difference” (Kannen and Acker 2008, 34). Asking Julian and other Othered students to speak ‘on behalf of’ is problematic for many reasons, but the most significant here is that it requires these students to use one of their identities as if it is separate from the rest of how they understand themselves and politicize it in a way that may not be comfortable or appropriate for them.

Julian: I assume nothing on the basis of appearance because I also consider myself, at least in a physical sense, asexual, so I don’t care about appearance in any way, shape, or form. I wear what is comfortable and I assume other people do that too, so I don’t look at it as a means of describing them. I wait until people talk to me, like actually communicate, and then I figure out from there what they are like. But I would say, in general, people do make assumptions about others based on how they look. That’s why I am always asked to talk from the “guy” perspective...but why should I know it? I don’t think I do. Maybe no one does?

Upon hearing Julian’s dislike of being placed in the position of ‘masculine informant,’ I asked him why he continues to take critical identity classes if he is made to feel uncomfortable by often being the only visibly male body in the space.

Julian: I get to learn things I never knew possible. Even the act of questioning my being there is contradictory and interesting. I want to be there for it, even when I feel like I shouldn’t be there.

As Bourdieu argues, “[a]t the risk of feeling themselves out of place, individuals who move into a new space must fulfill the conditions that that space tacitly requires of its occupants. This may be the possession of a certain cultural capital, the lack of which can prevent the real appropriation of supposedly public goods or even the intention of appropriating them” (1999, 128). In the case of the critical identity classroom, feeling out of place is experienced by those with privilege because that
privilege demands impossible identity homogeneity and therefore the conditions of that space, as Bourdieu expresses, cannot be met. Similarly, those who are racialized, because of the privilege signified by white students, are unable to access the cultural capital or privilege that would allow them to feel *in place* when white privilege always already prevails in Western society. Significant here, beyond the differences that exist amongst the students, is the commonality that they share in that they *all* feel out of place in their critical identity classrooms at one point or another.

“Where Are You From?” – Being Mis/Placed By Others

The question “Where are you from?” has sparked much research, the vast majority of which focuses on the ways in which teachers of children can negotiate cultural differences in the classroom (Dutro et al. 2008; Gay 2000; Grantham-Campbell 1998). For my purposes here, however, I am exploring the ways in which the question of “Where are you from?” relates to a sense of being mis/placed by others. Research on this topic is quite varied, in that some theorists demarcate this question as an apolitical approach that speaks to the ways in which people understand their context and relations to others (Myers 2006), while more critical scholars speak to the ways in which this question causes isolation and a denial of belonging (Ahmed 2007; Cheryan and Monin 2005; Mahtani 2002). While aligning myself within the critical approach on theories of passing, I also argue that this question functions to maintain the pervasive discourse that white *is* Canadian. As Titchkosky claims, “[m]arginality always involves making some types of people distant from their culture and outsiders to the taken-for-granted status of the practices which are treated as ‘normal’ or typical aspects of everyday life” (2003, 69). In relation to the concept of ‘belonging,’ Carrillo Rowe claims that,

> These belongings may be multiple, shifting, and even contradictory (in terms of the norms they produce, the politics that drive them, the conditions of loving they request, or demand):
family, neighbourhood, friends, allies, colleagues, social groups, lovers, nations, transnations.

These sites of belonging are political as they operate in relation to power: with and through, as well as against, in resistance to, and possibly in directions that redefine and redistribute it.

(Carrillo Rowe 2008, 28)

The student discussions that follow express the ways in which Othered bodies are assumed to have ‘no place’ in Canada as they do not belong.

In my plan for the interviews, I had very loosely thought to ask if the students had ever been asked “Where are you from?” as I did not expect the majority of white students to understand why I was asking them that. As I began my interviews at SU, however, I did not need to ask the students if they had experienced being asked the question, as the majority of the students introduced it into our dialogue.

Bushra: But at least every day someone will be like “Where are you from?” so I like to clarify that I’m born here, because I’m proud that I’m Canadian even though that whole discussion begs the question “Who is really Canadian?” because if you’re not British or French... What about the Aboriginal?

Fatima: Or, like I always get this, it’s like “Where are you from?” So, I tell them the actual country [Dubai], and they’ll even question my actual, real background, which is from Pakistan, and they’ll say “You can’t be, you’re so light-skinned” and it’s like, what do you say to that? I get that all the time and it’s quite, I think it’s quite racist and because to be Canadian isn’t to be brown and I get it all the time, not just in school. It’s also like I can’t be brown too, because I am so light...or I can’t be from Pakistan because I’m so light, or whatever. So, where am I allowed to be from?
Chloe: Like, I get the question from everyone...brown kids, white kids. The white ones are
different though. You can just tell they don’t expect to be asked the same thing back....and,
it’s funny, but I never think to anyway.

Bushra, Fatima, and Chloe are reflecting on how their racial identities and the colonial historicization
of the Canadian nation interfere with how they feel their bodies are being read and by whom. As Sara
Ahmed argues, “[t]he politics of mobility, of who gets to move with ease across the lines that divide
spaces, can be re-described as the politics of who gets to be at home, who gets to inhabit spaces, as
spaces that are inhabitable for some bodies and not others, insofar as they extend the surfaces of
some bodies and not others” (2007, 162). This quote emerges from Ahmed’s discussion of the
‘stranger’ – one who is positioned as ‘out of place’ and suspect regarding their origin and belonging
in the space they are found. While this could relate to many notions of travel and crossing various
other boundaries of identity, the fact that the above students are not travelling signals that their bodies
are never read as ‘in place.’ Similarly, Goffman notes, “[s]ometimes when we ask whether a fostered
impression is true or false we really mean to ask whether or not the performer is authorized to give
the performance in question, and are not primarily concerned with the actual performance itself”
(1959, 59). The search that is being employed when one is asking “Where are you from?” exceeds
the performance of ‘Canadian’ that a subject may be offering, as the question is not seeking to know
if one is a member as it already assumes membership is impossible.53

As I have already asserted, asking “Where are you from?” rests with the implied assumption
that whiteness is read as Canadian (or more Canadian than some Others). As Schick articulates,

53 This assertion is borne out of a lengthy national debate on the “myth” of the Canadian mosaic (developed in contrast to
the American ‘melting pot’) and multicultural initiatives that originally rested with the belief that each cultural/ethic group
that has immigrated to Canada retains a distinct identity and contributes to the nation as a whole. As discrimination and
oppression exists for groups who are seen as Othered within the Canadian state, this mosaic is now most commonly
described as a cultural myth (Backhouse 1999; Day 2000; Skerrett 2008; Young 1987).
“[t]he question ‘Where do I fit in?’ must be answered so that white identity, as a condition of its privilege, will be secure” (2002, 114). Based on visual assumptions of what Canadian means, white people never have to ask the question of “Where do I fit in?”, similar to how their appearance never begets the question “Where are you from?” with the assumption that they are somehow not Canadian: “Belonging, then, is intimately tied to power. It is an affective force that can be used to reproduce and/or to challenge whiteness as a hegemonic form” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 38). In our interview, Maham expresses that she also receives the question and that, similar to Fatima, the answer that she provides sparks further questioning, as if she is not providing the ‘real’ answer.

Maham: It’s such a weird question, because when you say “Canada,” they’ll be like “No, really, where are you from?” Like, okay, is that not an acceptable answer? Like, when other students question you...they question your identity basically.

Victoria: Do you feel that you have to explain or do you...

Maham: You have to go through all the whole history [laughs] as opposed to someone who is Caucasian, when we ask you, they tell you and that’s it. They don’t have to explain themselves.

Victoria: Exactly, like when people ask me where I am from, they usually mean which location in the country or the city.

Maham: Exactly. Like I’ll make it difficult for them and say the suburb I’m from and they’ll be like “No, really, where are you from? Like your country?” ...now I don’t even answer, I just say Canada, that’s it.

The above dialogue is similar in tone to Mahtani’s (2002) study of ‘mixed race’ women and their relationship to multiculturalism policies and the Canadian identity. As with Maham, it is clear in

54 The focus here is strictly on appearance. Many other factors, such as accent, for example, could impact assumptions of belonging.
Mahtani’s analysis of her interview with Julia, a 29 year-old ‘mixed race’ woman, that she is expressing a similar sentiment of resistance to being questioned on her Canadian identity:

In the process of deliberately identifying herself as Canadian to deflect the question, ‘Where are you from?’ Julia refuses to conform to prescriptive racial categories, creating new meanings of nation during social interactions. However, this still reflects a struggle on Julia’s behalf, where her desire to identify as Canadian is vigorously interrogated, frequently challenged and often rejected. (Mahtani 2002a, 78)

To respond to “Where are you from?” with the answer “Canada” is an act of explicit resistance to the implied meaning of the question, and the above respondents are conscious of this. Of course, taking on the identity of “Canadian” as equated with an act of resistance is wholly contextual and reliant upon being physically located in Canada when the question is asked. As Aisha notes,

Aisha: When I am in America, I claim Canadian status every time. I *emphasize* Canadian.

When I’m in Canada, I say I’m Guyanese... I feel the American state is much more racist – I’d never want to be confused for American! Having said that...no one is asking if I am Canadian when I am here. They are asking for what I really am.

Aisha’s re-positioning of her identities as dependent upon where she is reflects Alcoff’s assertion that “[i]dentities are relational to the body in the sense that their ramifications in one’s life are context dependent and that the identity designations themselves are context dependent...” (2006, 91). While it may be true that identities are contextual and fluid, in daily life they are assumed to be constant and stable, which is implied within the question of “Where are you from?” The search for origin, belonging and realness reifies the social uncertainties and anxieties that surround how some people are seen to belong in Canada/as Canadian and some Other people do not.
Summary

This chapter explored how the study of identity is complex and personal. The students that I interviewed used their studies to discover aspects of their identities that were somehow unknown to them, while attempting to carve out who they are in relation to how others understand them and where they feel in place versus where they feel out of place. These are complex issues that expose the ways in which privilege can function to shield dominance (discovering whiteness), be used to pass as ‘normal,’ and render some bodies as belonging while Other bodies are excluded. From my perspective, the most engaging aspects of this chapter relate to the ways in which the student’s engagements with identities are constantly changing, being further complicated, and infinitely expanding; however, there are also moments where the students seem to want to resist these expansions by attempting to limit or contain their identifications. As stated by Bushra, identities are a “hot mess” – confusing and enticing. In Chapter 6, I introduce the instructors and focus specifically on the power dynamics inherent within their embodiment as instructor and how they discuss their relation to enactments of power in the classroom.
CHAPTER 6

EMBODYING POWER: THE INSTRUCTORS

Very often, the women’s studies classroom is the place where some of the students’ identity issues or their articulation of power and privilege begin to come out... or where they get to articulate how the power and privilege of their women’s studies teacher, i.e. me, has played a very big role in naming a new reality for these women. Naming something that is possible in a different way for them is very potent in itself. They’ve felt something, they’ve had a hunch about something, something is different about women, that’s why they’ve taken the course, and all of the sudden now they get to understand the roots of oppression, both in North America and globally. (SU Instructor)

Introduction

Thus far, I have placed emphasis on the experiences of the students. The focus of this chapter, however, is on the secondary group that was interviewed – the instructors. In my interviews with the instructors an overarching theme emerged regarding power. hooks states, “[a]s the classroom becomes more diverse, teachers are faced with the way the politics of domination are often reproduced in the educational setting” (1994, 39). It seemed as though every dialogue I engaged in with the instructors focused on their relationships to power. This is not surprising, for, as Lewis claims,

In higher education, the industrialization of our collective enterprise is also apparent, at the very least, in the rise of surveillance and control mechanisms such as performance audits and measures of academic production and merit, in work intensification, in the entrepreneurialization of academic work, and in academic practices that seem increasingly to close down research and scholarship aimed at critical social intervention. (Lewis 2010, 2)

It is through these trends in the increasingly corporatized and neo-liberal university that instructors must navigate the places that they occupy and the powers that structure those understandings of place. Power was framed in our interviews as being embodied by them (Embodying Power), the way
they used it to create the space/dynamic of the classroom (Space Creators), or shifting away from them through student resistance to politicized identities (Politicizing Identity, Experiencing Resistance). These are the key themes of this chapter.

The difficulty in engaging with literature on power and teaching is that most of the research on the topic does not speak to the intricacies of identity. Of great interest to my work are the more ‘fundamental’ engagements – the physical position of the instructor in relation to the students, how the instructors convey the ways in which the space of the classroom is created, who is in the room and what being there comes to mean for one another. As such, this chapter, much like the rest of this dissertation, combines research from a variety of disciplines in order to achieve the complex theoretical analysis that I wish to gain from my discussions with the instructors.

Before exploring how the instructors’ understandings of power relate to the study of identity, it is important to look at how the instructors speak to their roles as instructors in critical identity classrooms. As I made clear in Chapter 3, while all 8 instructors are women who teach critical identity studies, the majority (6 of the 8) teach women and gender studies, while the other 2 instructors teach critical sociology. The descriptions of the role of the instructor, as evidenced in the quotation that opens this chapter, often emphasize the continued importance the instructors place on critical identity work and how meaningful it can become for them and their students.

SU Instructor: I get their stories as they experience stress with their multiple identities... We hear the challenges that women face in our classes. I mean that in both senses – in our classes, we as their professors are privileged to hear the struggles and experiences of our students and it is because of the kinds of classes we teach that we are able to hear these struggles because they often surface there.
NU Instructor: I always tell them they are the #1 authority on what they understand and when I start to tell them or to expose them to the influences under which a lot of their belief systems lie, they react in one of two ways. They resist as I tell them “You know, you are being sold a value system – there is no such thing as natural, it’s been constructed and created” and often that’s upsetting to some students, but when they can break through that and see their world in a new way, that’s the moment that I value the most.

Both of these instructors focus on what and how they teach in order to demonstrate the connections that they form with their students. As Barbara Grant argues, “[i]n these times of mass higher education it may seem too complex to consider our role in the production of student subjectivities, but a refusal to contemplate it is a refusal to acknowledge the ethical dimension of being a university teacher” (1997, 113). As one of the students asserts,

Chloe: I don’t even understand how I could have power in relation to the prof. They are the one standing there, determining my life for me – well, the TA too – but ultimately, the prof is in control. We sit here and we know it. We feel it. Very few of them try to make me feel like I have any control at all.

These power dynamics are crucial to thinking through how it is that students and instructors are together in critical identity classrooms and what that being together can mean.

As stated in Chapter 3, the instructors will be addressed in a different way from the students in terms of maintaining anonymity. As there are only 8 instructors that were interviewed for this study, it could pose a risk to their confidentiality if I were to provide consistent descriptions of and pseudonyms for them. Therefore, I have chosen instead to merely attach the university at which they currently teach to their comments and not distinguish between them. The instructors will become enmeshed and speak together on behalf of their university and the experiences that they have all had.
within it. When there are details that are crucial to what they are discussing in a particular quotation, such as their race, age, etc., these will, of course, be mentioned so as to place their dialogue in context.

**Embodying Power**

In Chapter 2, I established how theorists such as Johnson and Bhatt (2003), Diane P. Freedman and Martha S. Holmes (2003), Diana L. Gustafson (1999), Roland Mitchell and Jerry Rosiek (2006), and John T. Warren (2005) centre their analysis of the connections between students, instructors, and pedagogy with a focus on how bodies/embodiments are pedagogical. In this chapter, I explore how the instructors that I have interviewed convey their ideas about embodiments as related to power in the classroom. Power, as Nelson argues while echoing a Foucauldian approach, “is not something that is possessed or held in particular bodies or places; it is, rather, accessed differently by different groups and individuals and *employed* in particular moments in a variety of ways. Power is not essentially negative or positive; rather, it is *productive*” (2008, 15). The aims of this section of the chapter are twofold. First, I want to address the ways that the instructors discuss their experiences of having a body that is in power (*Bodies in Power*). By ‘bodies in power,’ I mean that many of the instructors discussed the ways in which their bodily appearance in the role of instructor became meaningful in the classroom. The emphasis is not so much on who they are as people, but what they represent as instructors. The second part of this section focuses on the ways in which the instructors see themselves as powerful and also (sometimes simultaneously) powerless (*Instructor as Powerful/Powerless*).
**Bodies in Power**

As the distinctiveness of my tall body has been the centrepiece of many of my daily conversations, thinking through the body and how it appears is of great interest to me. As Titchkosky (2007) argues, our bodies are enactments; while we all have and are a body, we also do them through our everyday practices. Elizabeth Teather furthers this point by stating, “[t]he body and gesture are inseparable: bodies make statements, involuntarily and/or through deliberate choice” (1999, 7). Bodies are never separate from what they do, how they are received by others, and what their relationship is to those around them. Using a poststructural approach to the body is helpful as it “simultaneously emphasizes that particular types of corporeality do not express a ‘truth’ about the body but rather ‘articulate certain conditions of possibility’ among multiple possibilities” (Burns 2003, 231). The themes that emerged through the discussion of the instructor’s body reflects how the body of the teacher is a figure that is often sedimented in the power dynamics of the classroom and in the ways in which material is interpreted by the students, and how other bodies always already can be/are read in relation to the instructor.

The body of the teacher is one that has been studied fairly often (Freedman and Holmes 2003; Hockings et al. 2009; Johnson 2006; Weber and Mitchell 1995); the body of the professor/instructor, however, is far more difficult to locate in the literature as it is seen to be something seemingly unresearchable due to its “endless” everyday representations. Dan Polan argues, “[p]rofessors are in fact endlessly represented, endlessly figured, and that representation and that figuration may work according to tightly coherent patterns” (1997, 79). Polan is harkening the work of other authors, such as Christina Fisanick (2006) and Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell (1995), who argue that the figure of the instructor is that of the ‘normal subject’ – white, male, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual; essentially, the embodiment of privilege. This image of the
‘normal subject’ contrasts with the image of the teacher as she, by virtue of being a woman, is interrogatable, incoherent, and questionable.

During the interviews, some of the instructors discussed the ways in which they feel their bodies appear and how they force their bodies to appear in the classroom – as a pedagogical tool.

NU Instructor: I come out in the classroom. Obviously I’m out as a person of colour. So you know when I say “As a black queer woman, blah, blah, blah.” I don’t stand up and say “Did you know that I’m queer?” but, I just sort of work it in, right? I can see the sort of reaction on their faces, I’m used to the reaction now with students go like [pauses] “Ohhh.” [laughs]. She said she’s a lesbian, dot, dot, dot. To me, it’s just very normal, you know? Okay, the word normal is a problem [laughs], but you know what I mean. But to me, it’s just sort of everyday, and so when I make it everyday then maybe they are not as weirded out by it, I’m not sure. They stare at you. You are the one standing there. They are trying to figure you out. You do it to them too. No one has ever really had any kind of weird reaction when I’ve done that and I’ve done that in every classroom that I’ve taught.

SU Instructor: I talk about who I am right at the beginning – my identity and power dynamics and why am I teaching this course on colonialism when I am just a settler – that kind of stuff. We do this thing after a few classes called the Line of Privilege, I made it so that it is not just about race privilege, but sexuality, gender, mobility, those kinds of things. For all of us, we see visually where we locate ourselves and what privileges we experience. I talk a lot about my community work because that also is about me as a very privileged person in this community as a homeowner, as a woman who is not doing sex work to pay the bills, I have a partner who has a full-time secure job. I talk a lot about my own privileges and how do I, as
someone who is privileged, but does not support the kinds of things that people in the same identity categories/demographic position or whatever have, be an ally? Or, how do you challenge things from where you are? I place myself squarely in the mix with my students...my identities may be different, but they are not excluded.

Both of these instructors address how their raced and sexed bodies become read in the classroom and, as they are conscious of these readings, they want to make their embodiments explicit. As Stanley and Wise claim “...‘the body’ is seen in terms of embodiment, a cultural process by which the physical body becomes a site of culturally ascribed and disputed meanings, experiences, feelings” (1993, 196). As the subject of critical identity classrooms is often so personal, the decision by the instructors to ‘speak their bodies’ can be understood as an attempt to deconstruct some of the power dynamics that occur between instructors and students. For, as hooks argues, “[w]hen professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material” (1994, 21). While it may ‘often’ be productive for instructors to take the ‘first risk,’ as hooks argues, deciding upon what aspects of one’s personal life are pedagogically significant can be a difficult task.

Attempts to hide the body of the instructor are not as commonly addressed in the literature, but Hogan speaks to her experience with this subject:

There is a feeling of shocked helplessness, I told this group of 18 to 20-year-olds, when you discover that you have crows feet, or chronic gas, or cellulite on your butt. Suddenly I realized that they were all looking at me and I blurted out, ‘‘I’m not being autobiographical,’’ which of course was a blatant lie. Terrified that they might be imagining my body, my flesh
and blood, I quickly tried to suggest that I am actually made of plastic under my clothes. They were relieved when I did so. We all chuckled nervously, thinking how narrowly we escaped having to actually think about the teacher’s body. (Hogan 2006, 359)

An SU instructor⁵⁵ that I interviewed felt quite differently from the instructors quoted above (and far more similarly to Hogan in this described instance) in that she believed that ‘speaking her body’ was inappropriate in the classroom.

SU Instructor: I don’t think it’s appropriate. I would imagine that me being the teacher, they would assign more importance to such an anecdote than it really warrants. It would become too distracting because if the teacher is doing that then it must become the rule or it must be what’s always happening, etc. etc. So I would rather avoid that and remain neutral.

While bringing one’s personal experiences and identities into the classroom is an individual decision, the majority of the instructors that I spoke with felt, as many feminists do, that the (thoughtfully introduced) personal is political and theoretical. Further, a quest for neutrality can be argued to be impossible, which, as the above interview progressed, the instructor admits when I ask her if she feels that she achieves the neutrality that she desires.

SU Instructor: No, I can’t get into their heads, but I am obviously a foreigner. I am obviously not a WASP like yourself, um, I don’t know if it has anything to do with that. I doubt very much that they don’t consider me in relation to themselves.

All bodies that enter into the critical identity classroom are consistently engaged in relations of power; therefore, to attempt to remain neutral when in the position of authority, as the above instructor is, may not only be impossible, but also antithetical to the project of critical and

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⁵⁵ This instructor is unique to the sample in that she described her own resistance to having to teach gender as a topic. She accepted the position in critical sociology because “that was the only course offered” to her as a sessional instructor. She described teaching gender to be a “chore” that she would rather “avoid” and claimed that she “hopes not to do it again.” Further, she described her experience as particularly difficult because she is often the only woman that is “not brown,” but race is “not a topic appropriate for this course” so she chose to not address it in her classroom.
progressive education. It is also possible that her use of the word ‘neutral’ may be misleading – perhaps she intended to refer to an ability to refrain from overly-influencing her students. Chloe’s comment that I presented in the introduction to this chapter regarding how she feels that the instructor ‘is the one standing there’ that has the power to ‘determine her life for her’ reinforces Polan’s argument as well: “Professors don’t come into class as pure figures of a knowledge that simply passes through them. The medium is the message, and the image of the professor often matters more than the ideas of the lesson. Given that the professor is a figure in the media, he/she cannot be purely a neutral medium” (Polan 1997, 77). While the above instructor acknowledges that she is not recognizable as ‘Canadian,’ as she has an European accent, the privilege of her whiteness and her position as the authority in the room where (as she acknowledges) she is often the only woman who is “not brown” (read: white) should not be negated in an analysis of power in the classroom.

As a senior instructor explains, moving past discourses that praise instructor neutrality may be a process that occurs over time through deconstruction of privilege and experience.

NU Instructor: For me, it was a very difficult odyssey of a sort, I guess, to really get my head around concepts, pretty basic concepts, around my own privilege, such as what is meant by systemic racism, systemic kinds of oppression, and the absolute necessity of making sure that our students no longer thought of women as an unproblematic category, but indeed considered issues of diversity, and intersections of oppression and their own privilege as well as their own disadvantage. So, for me, through the 90s, that was the most difficult thing, learning how to teach issues, learning how to approach a class of mostly white students about racism, help them to understand what it meant, helping them to see that it was important and had to do with them [laughs]. Of course, I also had to recognize the body they were staring at
– meaning mine – was representing something to them, something white and privileged too.

That was really hard and it still, it’s still hard, I think, but I have developed a lot of practice doing it and I no longer find it as difficult as I once did.

Many of the instructors spoke of the ways in which their bodies are stareable (Garland-Thomson 2009). They are stared at, watched, observed and commented on by their students as though their bodies in themselves hold power. Expanding upon Goffman’s theory of face-work, Garland-Thomson argues, “[b]ecause we recognize ourselves in the faces of others, we often seek out faces we suspect will tell us what we want or need to know about who we are in the social world. In this process, we first visually identify a face with which we want to engage and then stare at it intently to discern its response to the face we have put forward” (2009, 103). The power dynamic between teacher and student amplifies this engagement of recognition. The paradox of the instructor’s body as powerful and powerless is the next key area that I will explore.

**Instructor as Powerful/Powerless**

The symbol of the instructor – the body at the ‘front of the room’ with power, influence, and knowledge – resonates throughout social discourse as the ‘normal’ expectation of the role of an instructor. As a result of these traditional discourses, it becomes crucial to question the ways in which this positionality of the ‘instructor as powerful’ in relation to the ‘students as powerless’ can be disrupted. As women, the instructors that I interviewed cannot gain access to the privileged norm of the white, male professor, but they do all access power – some in more ways than others – and it is through this access that the power dynamics of the classroom become explicit (Burghardt and Colbeck 2005). As an NU Instructor claims,

Teaching [women and gender studies] is all about de-centring power and making the students conscious of what I am doing as well and, of course, I never do completely de-centre the
power. I’m still the tenured professor and I still have the ultimate power. I give them the mark at the end, but I am always telling them that. The ways in which I have power, getting them to be critical of it, but then also pointing out that in this institution that we’re in, it isn’t completely challengeable. There are some things that I have to give them. I have to give them a mark and they have to get a mark.

Victoria: And because you have tenure...

NU Instructor: Because I have tenure, any mark they may give me, in terms of an evaluation, doesn’t really matter....as shitty as that is.

This instructor is articulating the ways in which her position in the academy, as a tenured professor, makes her feel that she has power over (Kreisberg 1992) her students and that, even when she is critical of that power, it is still present and often unchanged. Acknowledging this power may be a new phenomenon, even for critical scholars, as Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Nancy K. Miller claimed two decades ago that as women with tenure “...we never really feel in power. It is important for tenured feminists to articulate that, as difficult as it may be for younger feminists to hear. I don’t know what it would mean to feel in power” (1990, 355). Yet, the other senior instructor from SU seemed to align herself with Foucault, as he states “...one should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with ‘dominators’ on one side and ‘dominated’ on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination” (1980, 142). In our interview, I asked the senior SU instructor how she understands her power in the classroom and her response spoke to the notion of power with (Kreisberg 1992) as she referenced the ways in which power circulates.

SU Instructor: We all have power. The students have power over me...they just don’t realize it.
These two different reactions to acknowledging one’s relationship to power demonstrates how understandings of power, which presumably underscore the majority of critical identity teaching, may be variously taken up, personally and pedagogically. This is particularly notable, for if power is discussed in the classroom as a quantity or a possession one has, rather than in terms of having or doing power, then notions of privilege and oppression will likely also be taught in these limited and dualistic forms.

Conversely, as 6 of the 8 instructors that I interviewed can be classified as sessional instructors/new faculty, these positions are often insecure within the academy as these jobs are not cemented within the tenure hierarchy.\(^{56}\) In an era where full-time tenured jobs are becoming increasingly unavailable, these instructors are without that safeguard and are likely to be cautious about upsetting students as these ‘unsafe’ positions are often reliant upon the attitudes toward them/their teaching as expressed in student evaluations (read: “the all-important consumer voice”) (Webber 2008, 51). For the sessional instructors, their power dynamics in relation to the students were relayed quite differently than the more senior instructors.

SU Instructor: I try to be subversive and teach them to be critical of everything. Of course, as a sessional instructor, I’m like “Oh God! I’m going to get fired” [laughs]. I do worry about that, there have been profs recently that have been doing things that aren’t really...you can see why the university would be freaking out about it – like, not giving grades or giving everyone an A+, that kind of stuff, but at the same time, I wonder, I mean the university is so conservative that when people start doing things differently I do worry about that.

Similarly, another SU new faculty member claims,

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\(^{56}\) While there is no consensus on the exact amount of non-tenured teaching that is occurring within Canadian universities, Rajagopal (2004) estimates that roughly 50% is tenured (or tenure-track) teaching and 50% is taught by other contingent teaching faculty.
SU Instructor: Here’s a challenge: I was afraid to teach Persépolis\textsuperscript{57} as [Marjane] Satrapi is very critical of the veil and makes no bones about it. She talks about it as the total oppression of women. As you know, many of our students at [Southern University] are veiled, many by choice and some, rumour has it, not by choice. So, I was worried, I was interested, I guess to her condemnation of the veil and I was careful to present that and to say “This is her experience of the veil, as it was imposed upon her and her family.” I was careful to say this as I’m trying to never generalize to them and because I don’t want to get fired. [laughs].

Both of these instructors nervously laughed following their claim that they, of course, do not want to be fired from their job because of their pedagogical choices. As feminist content may be seen as too controversial, even in women and gender studies, many sessional instructors may strategically alter their pedagogical priorities in order to ‘maintain the peace.’ As Michelle Webber argues, “[i]n the case of contingent academics, there is a heightened nervousness around ‘rocking the boat,’ not just around student interests but also around what are perceived as the conservative interests of the department” (2008, 41). Clearly, though, while they may feel that there is insecurity in their position as a sessional instructor/new faculty, this powerlessness does not (yet) deter them from their engagement with critical pedagogy.

As Foucault argues, “[d]iscipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (1975, 146). The fear that these instructors are conveying is occurring early-on in their careers, yet as they go forward and earn seniority, their positions are likely to become more secured. The transformation that Foucault is

discussing, however, is not as linear as his above quotation suggests; rather, power dynamics are in constant motion as bodies are disciplined in far more ways than just academic rank.

An intersecting factor into the power relations that the instructors also discuss is that of age. As Butler argues, “[t]o the extent that we understand identity-claims as rallying points for political mobilization, they appear to hold out the promise of unity, solidarity, universality” (1993, 188). In actuality, Butler is implying here that these identity-claims fail to deliver these promises, and, rather, any claims to identity are being constantly altered as they are forever in motion. The study of age, for example, makes explicit how identities are never static. While the above discussion of power in the classroom rests with explicit academic rank and authority, the intersecting factors that are often made invisible, yet are involved with those classifications, must not be ignored. Age was quite salient for the senior instructors as well as the sessional instructors/new faculty. The senior NU instructor claimed that her age functioned to create a barrier between herself and her students, while an SU instructor feels that her middle-age status may resonate as unusual for the students.

NU Instructor: Now, one thing I find really hard – and this is an identity issue too – is the age gap. I am nearing 60 now and that’s a big age gap between me and my students and my cultural references are very different from theirs. Cultural references are just not the same. With respect to my identity as a woman and to my history as a feminist, you know, things that are still like yesterday to me, like the Montreal Massacre. I was talking about that yesterday...they weren’t even born. So that, again, is something that I find difficult and I have to [sighs] develop new ways of dealing with it.

SU Instructor: I behave in a pretty typical way....other than the way I look, which could be middle-age, whatever, a-typical to them.
Interestingly, a similar disconnect was experienced with two of the younger instructors as well.

SU Instructor: And we’re young, we look like you’re sort of their age... I was young when I started teaching too. You can tell that they feel there is no separation between me and them. Also because I am younger than some of their other profs... well, I’m not younger than one other prof, but I’m much younger than most. They feel free to ask me, for example, very personal questions. Invasive even. So inappropriate.

NU Instructor: The informal way that they deal with me has a lot to do with my age, I think. There is not as much respect there. I don’t think it has anything to do with me being a sessional. They never really know or care who is a sessional and who isn’t...so age seems to be the difference.

From these four responses emerges the question – Is age always oppressive for women who teach in higher education? Answering such a question would undoubtedly be another study altogether, but according to theorists such as Dorte Marie Søndergaard (2005), the ways in which age, specifically youth, manifests for academics is markedly different for women than it is for men: “So the young colourful, charming and lively woman in lower positions have to undergo – compared to their same-age male colleagues – an extra development, in the sense that they need to develop a way of doing mature academic, but to do it femalewise, in order for them to become appropriate within the accessible discourses” (Søndergaard 2005, 198). Similarly, in Meg Maguire’s (2008) study of older women in the academy, she discovered that while some of these women feel empowered by their length of experience, they too often feel oppressed by their inability to be seen as youthfully competitive and as equal to their male colleagues. While these two studies cannot speak to the varying experiences that all women in the academy have, they do address the responses from the
above interviewees. For the women in this study, age as combined with gender is seen as something
to overcome, rather than an aspect of identity that will aid in greater classroom success either
personally or pedagogically.

While power is something that underlies this entire chapter, I wish to end this particular
section by pointing to the broad ways in which some of the instructors were clearly at odds with how
they are both powerful and powerless. One SU instructor was particularly grappling with her position
in the classroom when she discussed disruptive students that she wanted to single out.

SU Instructor: I try to be respectful, but some of them are just terrible. Yeah, what I want to
do is to kick people out of my class – “Please leave, you are disrupting this” [laughs]. But can
I do that? No. Well, I guess I could? But they are paying to be there, right? So I can, but I
can’t.

Similarly, an NU instructor discussed the ways in which she had a white student enrolled in her
course who felt that she could experience oppression if she painted her face black.

NU Instructor: I require students to move away from the notion that there is a right or wrong
answer and to actually grapple with the hard stuff, which means that they might say
something offensive and they have to be okay to be called on it and that’s the part that never
happens. Well, that whole ‘there are no wrong answers,’ I’m sorry, but there actually is. In
my opinion, if you get up there and say “Can I paint my face black....?” that’s a wrong
answer [laughs], something we have to deal with. When I say it’s wrong, I don’t mean for
them to get out of the classroom or something, but it’s like no...so, I guess I do get to decide
right and wrong. Whatever.

This last comment relates to DiAngelo and Sensoy’s (2009) take on right and wrong in the
classroom: “In invoking individual entitlement (everyone is entitled to an opinion) and provoking a
neo-liberal democratic rights discourse (exemplified by simplistic binaries like: ‘that’s wrong, this is right’), the student rouses a collection of interrelated knowledge claims that together function to uphold existing relations of power” (DiAngelo and Sensoy 2009, 444). The above instructor does appear conflicted as to how she should handle being the authority in the room, and it is clear that she is exploring her positionality in relation to being powerful and powerless. As Goffman claims, “[a] status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease of clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized” (1959, 75). For the above two instructors, their status and position is “something” that is in motion; their power is realized through their decisions about their role, the boundaries that surround them, and how they envision who they want to be as an instructor. A fundamental component to understanding the power of an instructor is to think through the space of the classroom – it is to this discussion that I now turn.

Space Creators

Every time a new semester begins and a group of people enter into a classroom, the social environment of that classroom – the feeling of it – is new. The instructors that I interviewed acknowledge how integral students are to the creation of classroom dynamics, but at the beginning of the course it is primarily up to the instructor to provide a sense of structure. The structure and expectations that I am referring to are not merely the concrete foundations of the course, such as the syllabus, but rather the ways in which the instructor attempts to create a desired atmosphere of the classroom. Each of the instructors put forth guidelines for the interactions that they hoped would happen in the classroom – some were developed in combination with the students, while others were
laid out as an expectation for the students to agree to. These expectations are often a component of critical identity classrooms – notions of inclusivity, ‘safe’ spaces, and making the personal political. As Boler claims, “[t]he challenge within educational environments is to create a space for honest and collective self-reflection and inquiry rather than closing off discussion. At the same time, such inquiry needs to avoid letting ourselves ‘off the hook’ from responsibilities and ethical complexities” (1999, 187). In analyzing the themes that emerged from my interviews with the instructors regarding these topics, it became evident that two atmospheres are borne out of these expectations (and they can happen simultaneously) – an atmosphere of openness and an atmosphere of caution.

*Atmosphere of Openness*

As hooks states, “[t]he classroom is one of the most dynamic work settings precisely because we are given such a short amount of time to do so much. To perform excellence and grace teachers must be totally present in the moment, totally concentrated and focused” (2003, 14). These are high expectations, and, from my interviews with the instructors, they aim to achieve inclusive and dynamic spaces.

NU Instructor: I try really hard to build an atmosphere of trust and I say that explicitly that that is what is supposed to happen in this classroom, uh, I make rules about attendance and then I get them to question those rules and challenge me on them if they want to [laughs].

NU Instructor: I attempt to learn people’s names. I try to learn...there are 80 people, so I try to learn as many as possible, not just people who put their hands up, but that is very challenging, I find. We always do some sort of set of ground rules at the beginning of the year [sighs]. I ask them to develop some rules – maybe 3 things that they would like to see happen or not happen in classroom discussion. We discuss those and I compile them and they have access
to them. It empowers them. Of course, everybody violates them left, right and centre, but we’ve had that discussion and so I can come back and refer to them.

These are just two examples of the ways in which the instructors express their desire to create an atmosphere of openness in their classrooms; while these strategies are not always carried out as intended (as will be seen in the upcoming section) it is important to explore what the instructors envision as possible for the critical identity classroom.

As DiAngelo and Sensoy claim, “[w]hen referring to equity-oriented approaches to education, we refer to those traditions (including social justice, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-colonialist, and feminist approaches to education) that work from a shared belief that schooling is a political project and part of a network of social institutions that serve to hold existing relations of power in place” (2009, 444). Seeing education as a political project of inclusivity – where diversity is embraced, respected, and acknowledged – is seen as a fundamental component of the space of the classroom for the following SU instructor.

SU Instructor: The first thing we do is this activity called *Uncommon Commonalities* and it’s partly an introduction thing and it’s partly trying to see what students think they are going to learn when they come here and it’s partly about them actually talking in the first ten minutes of class. So I ask them what they think are the top 3 issues regarding the topic of the course, and then they’ll list them. Then they go around in the class and keep track of who had answers in common with you and which of your answers are uncommon. So, once they’ve talked and walked around, there is a lot of noise, whatever...so I think that is good from the beginning because that’s what I want our class to be like for the rest of the year, and then we come back to the big group and we just do on the board the commonalities and uncommonalities and they shout out answers and whatever. Then, I debrief and say that “You
came to this course, and in a traditional classroom I would see you as empty vessels that know nothing about this and I would just fill you up with what I think is the most important knowledge, and really it’s not even what I think because I’ve been disciplined by the academy and trained in a certain way, so it’s really what they think and so now that’s what I think too. So, instead you can see all of these things that you may not know tons of stuff about, but you are certainly interested in and things that you came to realize other people are interested in as well, and now there might be things you are now interested in, that when you came in here you knew nothing about. You’ve already learned from each other and so I want you to think about this, because this is going to be the way that learning will be done – it will be multi-directional and that you’re going to learn as much from each other as you are from me. You can’t learn from each other unless everyone is willing to listen and to speak.

This SU instructor, while acknowledging that she is in a position of power, is also attempting to disrupt that power through the learning space that she wants to create. In our interview, she said that her strategies are “almost 100% effective” in fostering critical engagement and providing as inclusive a space as possible. She acknowledges, however, that “[n]ot everyone will get it. It’s my job to make sure that those who don’t get it do not disrupt the process for the vast majority that do.” Patricia Mayes (2010) argues that a crucial component to creating empowering critical classrooms is to do as the above instructor does – involving the students in agentic action so as to foster empowered thinking and a more personal commitment to the material than traditional approaches often expect.

The majority of the instructors that I interviewed discussed how their interests in critical pedagogy often stemmed from a belief that personal experiences give them the ability to challenge social structures and institutions, even when that knowledge comes from a place of privilege. As queer women who have decided to theorize their personal life in their classrooms, Smith and Yost
also believe that speaking from their oppressed and ‘out-group’ standpoint puts forth engaging and authentic pedagogy: “...we recognize that our personal experience is a source of learning for our students when that experience is relevant to course content” (Smith and Yost 2009, 200). As one NU instructor contends, being conscious of personal aspects that you bring into the classroom is key to making students form connections between their own lives and course content.

NU Instructor: I insist that we don’t use protective language. I use language that is in their heads and I encourage them to do so too. I don’t know – it seems to work. It seems to make students less afraid. For example, in terms of sexuality, not so much race, but sexuality – we talk about other dangerous language things like gay, lesbian, fag, dyke, whatever...I use this language in my class and of course at first, there is fear from them but you know if it is in your head, let’s say it and use it and get comfortable with it because it is what is out there and let’s not act like it’s not... I mean, I’ve never said “I’m a lesbian” in those words. I’ve alluded to it. Now it’s not that I’ve avoided it. I don’t feel afraid with them about my life and they know quite a bit about me; I don’t want them to feel afraid with me.

This insistence of the personal being theoretically relevant was made most clear by another NU instructor who claimed throughout the entirety of our interview that to deny or silence personal experience in the classroom is antithetical to the point of critical identity studies.58

NU Instructor: I never do an ‘us/them.’ If you were to hear me lecture, I never talk about ‘us/them.’ That dichotomy can be used in almost any topic that you can talk about in women’s studies. It can be used, but it doesn’t need to be used. What it allows people to do is to slot themselves into an ‘us’ or a ‘them.’ Instead, I name citizenship when I talk about identity. I name racialized identities when I talk about those identities, or whether those are

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58 The problematic elements of bringing personal experience into the classroom are discussed in a later section of this chapter entitled “‘Dad Cleans, So There Must Be Gender Equality’ – Personalizing Resistance, Denying Difference.”
sexual identities. I try to name things for students to give them critical language so they can politicize their lives, our lives through our work together...if we can’t do that, there is no point.

Prioritizing the personal is not without criticisms as DiAngelo and Sensoy contend “[t]he discourse of opinion, when deployed in the equity-oriented classroom, functions multilaterally to reduce critical scholarship to the level of opinion and then to negate that opinion by countering it with another of equal (and uncontestable) value” (2009, 447-8). They conclude this argument by claiming “[l]imiting our analysis to the micro or individual level prevents a macro or big picture understanding of these dynamics” (DiAngelo and Sensoy 2009, 452). While these points are valid, in that focusing only on anecdotal opinions will not produce substantive critical dialogue, forming connections between ourselves and our scholarship is a gateway for students to begin to understand themselves as legitimate social actors who are involved in systems of privilege and oppression, as the following instructor argues.

SU Instructor: I specifically do not use many, but when I do, I try to use every personal example to illustrate some key point – around the boundaries of teaching, what we bring, how we share our identities, what that means as being in the world, being who we all are and all our identities as a form of our political act – so everything that I do, whether rightly or wrongly and whether someone agrees with it or not, in my mind, has a purpose in the classroom. So I’m very conscious of doing it for a reason. Those two hours, for me in the classroom, are intentional. I mean everything has its purpose.

While this instructor is arguing that being open to exploring one’s personal experiences in the classroom is purposeful, she is also implying a sense of caution – caution about how much to
acknowledge and being conscious that every point an instructor articulates must have a substantive purpose.

Atmosphere of Caution

In thinking through the ways in which the instructors are integral to the creation of atmospheres within the space of their classroom, it became apparent that as much as the instructors wish to have spaces that are open and inclusive, they feel that this aim must be balanced by an appropriate level of caution. Approaching the creation of space with feelings of caution is largely conveyed by the instructors to surround the concept of safe space. The notion of spaces that are ‘safe’ was borne out of the schooling practices that were intended to no longer allow for bullying of queer youth in the classroom (Macintosh 2007). Many scholars have taken up the concept of safe space in the creation of their classrooms to imply that those who enter into the classrooms recognize that oppressive language and opinions are not welcome and will not be tolerated (Boostram 1998; Chan and Treacy 1996; Datum 1992; Van Soest and Garcia 2003). As Lori Macintosh points out in relation to sexuality this framework of ‘safety’ is limited: “[T]hey fail to ask for whom might these spaces be safe, and how the intersectionalities of sexual minority identity might alter the terms of a general heterosexualized notion of safety. Rarely do educators embrace the messy, pedagogically complicated enterprise of addressing the silent and invisible underpinnings of normalcy...” (Macintosh 2007, 35). Even the instructors who do address the underpinnings of normalcy find the notion of safe spaces no longer feasible.

NU Instructor: Over time, I have realized that putting so much stock in safety in the classroom is just not an important place to put my energy. It isn’t possible. I need to focus on what is possible and within the power that I have to control what happens in my classrooms.
NU Instructor: You realize you can’t have a safe space because my safe space might not be your safe space, etc. So what we do at the beginning of the year is I have classroom discussion guidelines that we go over as a group. So it is basically: “Here are the things that I hope would not happen in the classroom; here is what I want to strive for; these are the things that are important to you... Or what you would like to have happen in the classroom? How can we guarantee or maintain that for each other?” So some of the basic things are that I tell them to use ‘I’ when speaking, no generalizations...speak from your own position and social location and don’t expect to speak about other people’s experiences, even if you think you share a social location. Watching airspace; obvious avoidance of racism, etc...

As hooks claims, “Suddenly, the feminist classroom is no longer a safe haven...but is instead a site of conflict, tensions, and sometimes ongoing hostility. Confronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing conflict we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth” (1994, 113). Considering the critical identity classroom (and all classrooms) as spaces where conflict should emerge in order to foster education is a point that other scholars make as well. As Ahmed argues, “[e]motions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don’t necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling. Given that shared feelings are not about feeling the same feeling, or feeling-in-common, I suggest that it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such” (2003, 11). This observation becomes important in thinking through classroom dynamics and the interpretability of what safety can mean, for whom, and when. Barbara S. Stengel furthers this point as she argues, “[c]ompletely safe space is not education; thus, educational space is by definition unsafe to some degree...” (2010, 539).
To be open to the messiness of identity bursting forth in the critical identity classroom may be vital to the project of critical thinking itself, but this messiness or ‘unsafety’ needs to be controlled in some ways so as to not hinder education and create fear of the learning space. For example, one NU instructor discussed how the dynamics of the space created a much different experience for her than when she taught in a more diverse university.

NU Instructor: A lot of students, as well, do not want to talk about issues of race and racism here at [Northern University], specifically around stuff around Aboriginal people. That’s been hard. I’ve had a lot of people say some stuff that just wouldn’t fly in a classroom in [South City]...I’m not saying people didn’t think that in [South City], I’m not saying that, but people knew what you couldn’t say...

While the topics may be similar across various campuses, the spaces in which they emerge change based on who is in the space and what kinds of issues are more or less relevant in those spaces and so expectations of caution (rather than necessarily a desire for uniform critical consciousmess) also changes depending on where and when the classroom is located.

The instructors discussed the difficulty inherent in attempts to balance the un-safety of educational spaces and the ways in which they feel they should proceed when ‘unsafe’ moments occur.

NU Instructor: There’s another piece to that as well, you know in discussion, in making sure that you call on people or respond to people when they do speak in ways that don’t completely shut them down. Sometimes you want to shut something down so badly, that’s something that I’ve really struggled with, especially when there are fucked up things being said and I’m like “That’s fucked up.” Sometimes you might say, like, “Well that’s a racist point of view” [laughs]. Right? Like, “Based on the definition that we just discussed, that
idea would be considered racist,” but I say that instead of saying “You’re a racist” which leaves some room, I think, to talk about the issue that we’re trying to deal with.

SU Instructor: You have no idea how much time I had to devote to those white students who kept coming into my office after my class discussion about silence and taking up too much space. They were on the floor, crying, throwing tantrums, regressing almost. I shouldn’t have to be consoling to them, right? Like, they were so unwilling to look at their privilege. I kept saying to them that “It’s not even about you! We are part of a system. History and current power dynamics are operating through us. We are socially indoctrinated; we gain benefits from this!” It was so frustrating...the women of colour started to be pretty combative in class. Then, I had the white women complaining that they were being silenced... this environment gave some women pause. Pause to consider if they should speak. Of course, guilt played a negative role, but I think it is so important for them to be uncomfortable, right? Because now, good, we are all uncomfortable.59

As white women, the above instructors elaborated further on their sense of what it means for everyone (the students and instructors) to be uncomfortable in the critical identity classroom. One claimed that to be uncomfortable, especially for those with privilege, is “part of the point”: “I teach these courses because it is gut-wrenching – for me and them.”

To be “gut-wrenching” for both instructors and students emerges because of the difficult topics that are being brought up: “It could be argued that... interdisciplinary ways of thinking have a tendency to be more disorganized, error-prone and incomplete than established forms of knowledge. But if a certain messiness goes with the territory, this is also what makes that territory worth

59 This narrative is also compelling in light of the earlier emphasis on personal experience within the classroom. Here she claims that studying identity is not about certain (white) students, while the same instructor earlier emphasizes how personal experience is integral to critical identity studies.
occupying” (Moran 2002, 184). The above responses point to how there can be no right way to engage with the messiness that accompanies critical identity classrooms, but, rather, the importance lies in recognizing that feeling uncomfortable should not be seen to hinder the socially progressive work that can be done in those spaces. The last section of this chapter turns to student resistance to learning about politicized identities, with a specific focus on how the instructors discuss the (unsettling) role of feminism in their classrooms.

**Politicizing Identity, Experiencing Resistance**

As demonstrated throughout this study, teaching students to be critical of their social world and how they can, in turn, understand themselves can be a difficult balancing act between inviting students to think through new possibilities or shutting down conversations entirely: “...attending to feminist politics and cultural critique in the classroom requires difficult emotional work from them and from me. I know that new understandings are often experienced painfully, and that lives are transformed” (Lewis 1993, 155). The instructors spoke of their students most forcefully when discussing student resistance; this resistance manifested, as described by the instructors, in two ways: 1) as resistance to feminism, and 2) as denial of social difference. I have organized these two themes of student resistance into the final two sections of this chapter: “Dad Cleans, So There Must Be Gender Equality” – Personalizing Resistance, Denying Difference, and “They See Alliance with Feminism as Defeat” – Resisting Feminism. Addressing how the instructors articulate student resistance speaks to the ways in which power can be productive. The students’ actions of resistance point to the complexity of the role that the instructors have in their position of authority; while they

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60 As the main focus of Chapter 7 is an analysis of the explicit ways in which privilege was discussed in the interviews, the instructors’ discussions of privilege will be explored there.
are technically ‘in charge,’ the active engagement of students is crucial to the atmosphere, productivity, and enjoyment that can occur in critical identity classrooms.

“Dad Cleans, So There Must Be Gender Equality” – Personalizing Resistance, Denying Difference

As I encountered in my interviews with the students, the use of personal experience, as encouraged as a critical learning practice by many of the instructors, can also lead to singular (or limited) interpretations of how identities are formed and what is possible in the social world (McWhorter 2005). This (over)prioritizing of individual experience was made clear by an SU instructor as she addressed the ways in which a student refused to acknowledge that sexism was still a social problem because her father cleaned the house on a regular basis.

SU Instructor: I had this one student who I could not get through to. I tried over and over to explain sexism in various ways – to make it clear that sexism happens on various levels in various places. She refused to hear me. It was as if because her father was different, so all men were now different. I heard this from other girls too. Their dad cleans, so there must be gender equality. [laughs].

Individualizing understandings of oppression can be fruitful for students when they connect their experience to larger social themes, but, as in the above example, the student resisted seeing beyond her own parental experience and did not want to open up to other possibilities of gendered scenarios. Experience, however, is crucial to the ways in which women and gender studies politicizes social life. In discussing how to bring various experiences into the classroom, an NU instructor spoke to the difficulty of bringing in her personal experiences and making them theoretical in order for the students to do the same.

NU Instructor: I do bring in my life. That is something that is part of my pedagogical philosophy, but I don’t use it as proof of anything, but just as an example. I want to
encourage them to speak of their own experience. Experience is such a problematic concept, but it’s always been the basis of women’s studies, though we are much more critical of it now than when we began and we used to say women’s studies is about valuing women’s experiences and we never thought about how we construct our experiences. [laughs].

As theorists who problematize bringing the personal into the classroom, DiAngelo and Sensoy (2009) argue that prioritizing individualism can lead to the denial of the ways in which the social world is always already impacting our lives and affecting our opportunities – to focus on the micro levels of social life, such as the intricacies of identities, can be to close your mind to critical education.

As in the above examples, the role of parental influence on the students’ opinions (as many of them still live in their familial home) can become prevalent in the classroom.

NU Instructor: I think I concern them. Especially in the female sexuality class where we talk about sex-work and pornography and they are just like “Oh no! Bad! Pornography bad!” And I’m like “No, pornography good!” I remember last year I had a student who had done a presentation on sex-work and was really like “I think prostitutes are bad” but then she said to me “I feel that you don’t feel that way” and I’m like “I don’t.” She said “I can tell by the articles you’ve chosen, that you don’t feel that way.” For her, there can be nothing else than bad porn because that is what her parents told her!61

The instructors consistently reiterated that teaching students to question and/or reconceptualize the ways that they understand polarizing issues, such as prostitution, can impinge upon the ways in which they have been invested within moral discourses of right and wrong. When teaching critical sociology, according to Angela T. Haddad and Leonard Lieberman (2002), student resistance is often

61 Here, as with previous instances, it is important to note how this instructor is insisting on teaching students to question beliefs that they have held, yet she also purports to know ‘the truth’ or the ‘right answer.’ As I will address in Chapter 7, these conflicting messages can be both provocative and confusing for the students.
based on the perception that deconstructing issues of identity, such as racial profiling or sexism, poses a moral challenge to notions of good or bad. While Haddad and Lieberman problematically conclude by denying their role in engaging/causing/encouraging student resistance by stating “[a]ll of our students would be well served to be more sceptical about and less stolid in their beliefs...” (2002, 338), a lack of critical self-reflection is not a practice that the instructors that I interviewed seemed to encourage.

NU Instructor: [Teaching critically] is difficult because it means students have to grapple with their own identities. So, when I say, for example, “Let’s talk about gender,” a lot of people who are in women’s studies have never really thought about gender beyond what the word means ‘boy/girl.’ So basically what it means is that you have to unsettle their already fixed notions of what that word means and along with it, because we teach intersectionality, we have to get them to ask even harder questions, so not only do we discuss “Why do you think that wearing a dress makes you a woman?” we also have to say “What is it about you, as a white person, defines yourself?” or we talk about sexuality...and sure, they resist, but it is my job to work with that resistance and to see how what I am doing may be encouraging it and break that down.

The individualizing of non-oppressive experience is also discussed by the instructors as a means through which the students are trying to grapple with concepts that they see as outside of them. As hooks claims, “[i]n classroom settings I have often listened to groups of students tell me that racism no longer shapes the contours of our lives, that there is just no such thing as racial difference, that ‘we are all just people’” (2003, 25). As I explored in Chapter 5, some of the students felt out of place in the classroom because they did not identify with the oppression that was being studied – they
could not relate to the discussion as they felt on the outside of it. The instructors conveyed this resistance in similar ways, particularly for the students at NU.

NU Instructor: So talking about identity here is difficult, because it looks like it could be homogenous, but it isn’t, but then people don’t want to break down the spaces where it is homogenous – like whiteness, for example.

Victoria: So do you think that your students recognize that they are white?

NU Instructor: No. [laughs]. Some do, I mean especially those that have gone through an intro class or sociology class or something. Some are prepared. It’s interesting you mention this, I had a student last week say “Can all people talk about race issues?” and I said “For sure, we talked about this at the beginning of the year, there is this thing called racialization and it happens to everybody, it’s a process” and she said “You know, can I just go paint my face brown and talk about race?” and I said “Blackface is not a really good option” [laughs] and, inside, I was shocked, but really to her [the student], if I am to talk about race, I need to come from a place of authenticity or authority and the only authority I can have is if I’m not white.

As a woman of colour, the above instructor discusses how her body, as often the only visibly non-white body in the classroom, is seen to reflect an authentic expression of racialization, which is something that she feels she constantly has to break down for her students. This supports Srivastava’s claim that, “[i]f one’s identity as feminist, as woman, as Canadian, as liberal rests on being tolerant and just, then antiracist challenges profoundly unsettle that foundation. Here, as elsewhere, some whites may direct anger and defensiveness at those who have disturbed that imagined identity” (2005, 43). Another NU instructor articulates a similar sentiment when stating that her students see themselves within a seemingly absent position: “It is often expressed as ‘Well, we have no culture
here.’ It comes through in a blank slate, sort of way, like they are a benign, neutral figure in the
world.” This instructor, a white woman, repeated throughout our interview that she felt denying
differences in the classroom was a way for students to “protect themselves” from the difficult
realities that racism, sexism, etc. exists “out there,” and if they believed that it was also “in here” then
they could no longer pretend that it was not happening.

Problematizing individualized sentiments is also discussed by Schick, as she claims, “[i]n
many examples drawn from their discourses, participants perform themselves as belonging ‘in here,’
a place characterized by abstraction, objectivity, and rationality; quite unlike ‘out there,’ where others
belong and which participants describe as political, embodied, and not necessarily neutral” (2002,
101). The belief that certain things belong ‘in here,’ in the heterotopic space of the classroom, was a
sentiment expressed best by an SU instructor as she discusses her coming out as queer in the
classroom.

SU Instructor: A few years ago...the very first time I taught as a professor, in one of the
course evaluations someone said “Prof shouldn’t have come out because it may have
intimidated students or scared them. It doesn’t belong in here.” And I was like “Well,
obviously you, as an individual, felt scared” [laughs], but for me, I find it really difficult to
teach women’s studies without talking about myself or making references, so the place where
I come out is normally in the 6th or 7th week.

While an analysis of the multi-level power dynamics inherent within student evaluations would be
interesting (Webber 2005), what is again made clear here is that power is constantly in motion for
students and instructors (particularly new instructors).

The desire to keep diversity ‘out there’ was also reflected in my interviews. SU and NU
students, Kelly, Vanessa, and Shelly, consistently emphasized that the people in their life – their
family, co-workers, or friends – were not racist or sexist and so sometimes they were not sure why
the instructors would focus on these aspects anymore because they are no longer relevant. Perhaps
these denials of different experiences via focusing on one’s singular experience of the world can be
theorized, as the above instructor claims, as a privileged measure of protection. Engaging with
concepts that disrupt one’s sense of self, personal history, lived experience, and ‘moral’ upbringing is
to begin a difficult journey of unsettling who/where you are in relation to Others and what you can
rely on as ‘truth.’ When my interviews with the instructors turned to discussions of feminism, these
unsettled encounters became far more contentious.

“They See Alliance with Feminism as Defeat” – Resisting Feminism

Politicizing identities in the classroom can be tenuous. As I demonstrated in Chapter 5, many
of the students who are enrolled in critical identity classrooms align themselves in apolitical ways in
relation to the theory that they are engaging with. The instructors consistently conveyed that making
feminism present in the classroom is one of their most difficult challenges.

SU Instructor: Young women, I think, perceive admitting an alliance with feminism as a
defeat. They perceive it as admitting weakness. When we name oppression, for this group,
these groups that I’ve worked with so far, the majority of them convey that when we name
oppression we admit defeat. That we’re weak.

SU Instructor: I have done things where I asked them if they would consider themselves a
feminist and they would write a journal about it. The majority were like “No, but I support
equality...” Then other people say “No, I think they are lesbians and man-haters...” It’s just
like a reproduction of backlash. “I wear makeup, so I guess I can’t be a feminist.” [laughs].
As Crossley contends, “[w]hen headlines indicate that feminism has failed or sexism is no longer a problem, these representations contribute to an overall landscape of silencing the realities of gender inequalities” (2009, 127). The purpose of this discussion is not to merely repeat what I established in Chapter 5, which is that students express resistance to feminism because they internalize the discourse that claims the fight for equality is now a historical concept; rather, I am employing the instructors’ discussions of this resistance to speak to the ways in which student resistance becomes productive for the instructors.

NU Instructor: You never know what kinds of students you get. Are they open to feminism? Are they backlashers? I have to be able to adapt what I am going to do in order to bring them in.

SU Instructor: Do I say I am a feminist? No. I talk more about a feminist perspective and I always say explicitly that people are not required to call themselves feminists. This is part of understanding the label or identity before you put it on yourself. So, the whole point of the course is to talk about gender as a critical, analytical lens, we don’t do as much feminist theory even though it is all implicit in there, but I do tell them that we are looking at a topic from an anti-racist feminist point of view or we are looking at this topic from a postmodern feminist point of view. And I think that, regardless of whether I say I’m a feminist or not, they’ve already decided that I am so I think the burden is on me to show how many different perspectives there are within that.

Interestingly, the students that I interviewed and the students that the instructors reference seem to no longer strictly conflate women and gender studies with feminism.
NU Instructor: In one particular course, Feminist Theories, the very first thing I do is ask them what they are scared about. It’s a required course and they have a lot of nervousness at the word ‘theory’ and the word ‘feminism’ so I immediately free them up to express their weaknesses, I guess, that’s not a very good way of putting it, but so many of them are afraid, you know? Of talking, thinking, that they are going to say something wrong, they are really worried in that case, because they are intimidated by the title of feminist theories. Doesn’t always work that way though, they are not always forthcoming about what they are afraid about, in general. It is usually that they are scared of the feminist part the most.

Perhaps this fear is because, as I have already stated, the age of most students positions them to see the women’s movement as a historical occurrence that they cannot relate or belong to: “…our belongings are conditioned by our bodies and where they are placed on the globe…. It is not to be bound by the regulatory practices of any particular group nor by the need to remain consistent or pure, but rather to take a risk and move in the direction of multiple others” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 43-4). The students’ movement away from feminism may also be because of the confusing nature of what feminism is intended to represent: “While feminism finds its closest expression in women’s studies and while women’s studies is the most stable representative of academic feminism, they are still distinctly different. Feminism in some ways is a theory and women’s studies is a practice” (Luhmann 2004, 157-8). Many of the instructors found that the concept they find most difficult to decide how to work with is feminism because of the fears and uncertainties put forth by the students.

While Luhmann makes an interesting point regarding the separation of the discipline and the theory that informs it, the language of feminism itself is also seen as a problem.

SU Instructor: We have been talking more about feminism, because a lot of what we do in our classes is challenging and deconstructing the whiteness of feminism and how western it
is, or has been, or at least what we are studying has been. In pretty much in every class, I ask them if they see feminism as something, because when we start talking about intersectionality and stuff, I think they think “Well, is it about women or is it about race or everything? What is it not about?” Well, then when we talk about women - women do not just occupy one position, etc. Also, now we talk about gender, so that is men too and the relations...anyway, a lot of students feel like we need to change the name. It conjures up things that they don’t relate to.

NU Instructor: Some of my colleagues would disagree, but I don’t use the word feminist anymore. It’s in there. It is in my teaching, but I find it too distracting. I’m teaching the same thing, but I keep the feminism stuff a bit quiet.

In the above examples, the instructors are attempting to resolve how they can employ feminism in their classrooms and how they feel it is best received by the students. The instructors who are engaged in critical pedagogy are resistors themselves, as, in their classrooms, they resist and deconstruct the oppressive social relations that are woven into the fabric of social life (Webber 2005). Perhaps, then, their decisions to reimagine how feminism is present in the classroom without explicitly verbalizing its name is also a resistive act.

**Summary**

As I have outlined throughout this chapter, critical identity instructors embody power, create the classroom space, politicize identities and, according to the instructors that I interviewed, they do so in order to deconstruct and engage with power, embrace the contradictions inherent within
studying identities, and approach the difficult task of exploring all forms of resistance as critical practice. This chapter’s summary is contained within a narrative from one of the instructors.

NU Instructor: I ask [the students] how they knew what to do, where to sit when they walked into the classroom. The fact that we’re walking is relevant, because this building is accessible but not really. [laughs]. How did they police one another in discussion? What types of authority do I assume when I come into the room? When I come into the room, I know to go to the front of the room, I don’t stand at the side or in the corner. I take control of the class at the front of the room but how do you resist what I do? You whisper, you leave, you watch video games, you play solitaire on your computer. They all might have done it or have seen others doing it, and when you think about it like that, they always have power to challenge what I’m doing – whether they say something or they physically do something, but they really, really like that. There’s always, I feel, a light that goes on after we have that discussion. It comes up again and again throughout the year. I don’t know how much of it stays with people, but I always notice something happen when we talk about power.

The next chapter combines the ways in which power manifests in the critical identity classroom for both the instructors and the students with a more explicit discussion of privilege.
CHAPTER 7

ENCOURAGING TURBULENCE: SPEAKING PRIVILEGE

For students of colour who have a white teacher talk about whiteness as an identity, whiteness as a race, whiteness as privilege is extraordinary to them. That’s my sense. So regardless of whether they are white, black, or brown students those conversations are extraordinary. That somebody is talking about this, somebody is naming it in a non-defensive way, somebody is naming their experience and telling them that they get it – they get that it impacts the student, society and beyond and that we are going to work together to understand it. (SU Instructor)

I think the fact that women’s studies focuses on gender, but always race too has made me more aware than I was before. Before I took women’s studies classes, I just thought women were being affected by men. I didn’t realize that it was like completely affected by your race, or your class, or your sexual orientation. I didn’t think of those things. I just thought, men versus women. Women are oppressed by men moreso than anything else, but then I learned how there is a lot more factors to oppression and to privilege. It’s soooo complicated...and scary! [laughs]. (Rebecca)

Introduction

Privilege, as a topic of discussion, was often implicitly (and purposefully) woven throughout the entirety of each interview. It was not until some trust and openness was established between myself and the interviewee that I felt explicit use of the word ‘privilege’ could be introduced as a questioning point. This ‘holding back’ from asking explicit questions about privilege and what it means for the participants was brought on by the initial two interviews that I conducted. I first interviewed Rebecca who, as seen in the above quotation, used the word “scary” to discuss what it feels like to acknowledge the intersections of identity and the ways in which critical knowledge can be intimidating. In my second interview, with Chloe, she too expressed that studying privilege is “frightening.” After I had introduced privilege fairly early-on in the interviews with them, it felt to me as though that word became a heavy cloud over the rest of our conversation. As implied by the SU instructor in the epigraph to this chapter, there is such an absence regarding explicit discussions of privilege – not only in critical identity classrooms at SU, but, I argue, at all universities – that its
presence in conversation becomes “extraordinary.” Once I mentioned the word privilege, it seemed that the students began to perform ‘as students’ for me, as though I was implying that they may need to acknowledge certain aspects about themselves regarding any privilege they may have. Following those two interviews, I decided it was best to use the language of privilege throughout my interviews (words such as power, dominance, importance, hierarchy, etc.), but refrain from using the actual word ‘privilege’ until much later in our discussion. While the term still conjured up many contrasting, and often negative, connotations for the participants, the ways in which privilege was discussed became more expansive once each interviewing relationship had been further developed.

As this chapter explores the ways in which privilege was explicitly discussed in our interviews, here I aim to create a ‘dialogue’ between the instructors and the students so as to begin to think through how discussions of privilege can lead to different classroom engagements. The first major section of this chapter addresses the students’ discussion of how they experience privilege in their lives and its relation to what they have learned (Speaking Privilege). To speak privilege, something many of the students were unfamiliar in doing, demonstrates how these conversations must happen in the classroom for students to more fully engage with speaking out against privilege so that it, like oppression, cannot remain “… complicit with forces of power that seek to silence it” (Lemons 2008, 126). The second section of this chapter positions the reflections of the participants as a ‘dialogue’ – as learners and teachers – regarding how privilege is (and is not) made present in the classroom and the consequences of these (non)conversations for the critical identity classroom (Reflecting on Privilege in the Critical Classroom).
Speaking Privilege

For the students, privilege was a difficult concept with which to engage. There was much uncertainty in their tones of voice and in the questions that they seemed to be left with once we started to explicitly discuss privilege. Originally I had begun to ask the students “How do you see privilege in your life?” This question resulted in answers that were often wholly outside of critical notions of identity. Many could not answer this question and those who did often answered by addressing their luck at having loving family or friends. I subsequently reworded the question by asking them “Do you see yourself as privileged?” While this question was perhaps more leading than I had originally intended, it often furthered our dialogue, as it caused them to ask me questions. The two most common questions that they had centred on what I meant by privilege and if it related to their position in the classroom. My answers to them were posed as further questions so that we could explore their questions and understandings together. In the vast majority of the interviews, these questions and explorations of privilege resulted in two themes: privilege was an identity that the students have because they do not have an Other identity (I Am Privileged Because I Am Not _________), and privilege is an unattainable identity because the embodiment of a student is one who is always already oppressed (“They Control Our Fate”: Students as Underprivileged and Powerless). As evidenced in these headings, the experience of privilege is not something easily accessible in our language. The lack of ease with which privilege is discussed resulted in our discussions being full of questions that often lead to more questions. While difficult to analyse because of the lack of coherent discourse on privilege, the ways in which the students approached these issues are crucial to explore in order for the social dialogue on privilege to be furthered.
The students seemed to have a difficult time expressing the ways that they see themselves in terms of privilege. Some openly acknowledged that they “don’t think about it,” while others made comments like “no one has asked me about my privilege before,” and so it became a process for them to reflect on how they could or should answer my question: “Do you see yourself as privileged?” Some students responded by discussing how their oppression (most often racial oppression) overshadowed any experiences they have with privilege, while others would quickly change the subject and not answer the question. Those who did answer the question, however, seemed to focus on how they are privileged in having an identity because that identity is not considered Other. For example, Devra and Bushra discuss how they recognize their privilege because they do not use a wheelchair.

Devra: Um, [3 second pause], because I’m, well, because I am not disabled [lowers voice], I don’t have to use a wheelchair. People get in a car accident and then they are in a wheelchair for the rest of their lives, so because I am not in a wheelchair, I don’t see how, you know, inaccessible it is, certain rooms, or at work, like, how, our store is designed, how it is harder for people to shop, um, things I don’t have to think about, I guess?

Bushra: Like, for example, I think it was a couple of years ago, there was a student with disabilities who was in a wheelchair and she was on the 5th floor and the only elevator wasn’t working. She had to call campus police and they had to carry her down because she needed to get to her class on the second floor and they had to carry her down. I’d feel so uncomfortable because they had to take off the wheelchair and carry her. The other people were carrying the
wheelchair behind her. That's so uncomfortable, having some random stranger holding you and bringing you down, so in that sense, I am privileged. That would never happen to me.

It is significant to note that while Devra and Bushra speak to their able-bodied privilege, the vast majority of people do not consider themselves able-bodied at all for, as Robert Murphy claims, “[e]ach person simply accepts the fact that he has two legs and can walk; he does not think about it or marvel at it any more than he would feel gratitude for the oxygen content of air’” (1987, 12).

Murphy’s claims may seem an over-simplification of social engagements with disability; however, the majority of students that I spoke with acknowledged that they had never considered critical disability studies to be a component of identity studies, nor had they considered themselves as related to dis/ability.

Clearly, critically self-reflecting is an important component of critical identity studies, yet Devra and Bushra’s reflections on being privileged because they are not disabled could also be argued to reify how certain bodies and “people deemed disabled are barred from full citizenship because their bodies do not conform with architectural, attitudinal, educational, occupational, and legal conventions based on assumptions that bodies appear and perform in certain ways” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 46). As disability is often an identity that is framed within a binary, it is not surprising that many of the students who think critically about identity would use an able versus disabled binary to express how they see themselves as privileged: “Disability is the ‘not’ condition, the repudiation of ability” (Linton 1998, 30). The ways in which the above students are asserting their privilege by addressing how they are not Othered is not an isolated occurrence, as an NU instructor recalls how the wheelchair itself signifies a common Otherness for students.

NU Instructor: The thing is students don’t know where to go with [discussions of privilege]. Our class does talk about ability, but it’s interesting how quickly that gets dropped off...
privilege in general is where they’re really not willing to tread. Although, some of them think of it as much more clear cut, like “Okay, I’m not in a wheelchair,” which again, is problematic, but they don’t know how to think about the magnitude of it all. It’s really overwhelming to them.

The difficulties that students have with discussing privilege, especially with regard to ability, is because the concept of privilege is so often excluded from classroom discussion that the students do not seem sure how to speak about privilege in an engaged way. Further, because the discourses on privilege that travel outside of the academy are often used with strictly positive connotations, many of the students seem apprehensive about engaging with the idea of privilege at all.

Fatima demonstrates this difficulty in speaking privilege when she discusses her relationship to privilege and her racialization.

Fatima: Well, I think of privilege as advantage – so getting advantages, right? In my sense, I’m not white, clearly [laughs], so I usually relate privilege with race, because it’s a fact that, even today, there is hidden racism that exists. People are more diverse, but there is always that hidden racism that exists, so I would say I have privilege in a sense that when people don’t think that I am brown – ‘cause I am a bit lighter – gets me, I guess, ahead of things. I know this is very wrong to say...

Fatima’s narrative echoes the issue that Devra and Bushra raise, in that Fatima expresses that she experiences privilege because she does not have darker skin. Fatima differs from the students who discuss their abilities, however, as she struggles with acknowledging that she has more privilege than some Others – she is Other but less oppressed than some people and so she feels that this confers privilege on her. As Fatima demonstrates and Ahmed argues, our focus should not be on the particularity of an Other, but on the “particularity of encountering others”: “In this sense, introducing
particularity at the level of encounters... helps us to move beyond the dialectic of self-other and towards a recognition of the differentiation between others, and their different function in constituting identity, and the permeability of bodily space” (Ahmed 2002, 561). Those who spoke of class privilege also used similar continuum-like terms to describe their privilege: I am privileged because I am not as oppressed as some Others. For example, Holly and Amanda also use a continuum to discuss their class privilege.

Holly: Financially, I feel I or we are privileged, right? Like, I have to work to put myself through school, my parents don’t pay for my school, I do. But, I get to still live at home and all my home expenses are taken care of. So, in that way I feel privileged. I’ve never been asked a question like this before, so it is hard to think about... Cause I feel in some ways I am and in some ways I’m not. I mean, we don’t have money to really spend like other people do. So, I don’t know. Is that privilege? I have no idea.

Amanda: In some ways I feel like I’ve been sheltered a lot of my life. It wasn’t until I was 17 or 18 that I started thinking for myself. Until then, my parents did everything for me even though they are divorced. I never really felt poverty or anything. My mom went back to school and I never lacked anything. I felt sheltered from real life because everything was done for me. In that way, so when I see people on the street, like homeless people, or when people go bankrupt, I’m just like “That happens?”

Important to note is how these students are not denying their privilege, as is commonly the case. As I introduced in Chapter 1, Fellows and Razack argue that those who attempt to claim non-involvement in hierarchies of oppression and privilege are ‘racing to innocence’: “The compelling reasons, then, for our race to innocence have to do with how the systems of domination operate among subordinate
groups, limiting both what we can know and feel and what we can risk acknowledging about one another and about ourselves” (Fellows and Razack 1998, 340). The above students are in no way “racing to innocence,” but rather they are attempting to explore how it is they are related to privilege and where it manifests in their lives. I can only speculate as to why these students acknowledge their privilege – perhaps it is because of their various experiences in critical identity studies or as an attempt to please the researcher, as they know I have an interest in exploring privilege or, of course, it could also be based on forces completely external to classroom learning. Regardless of why the students are acknowledging their identities, these distinctions are important, as they point to the ways in which critical self-reflection is something that these students are prone to use, even when social privilege may not be an issue they have consistently engaged with in their classes.

“They Control Our Fate”: Students as Underprivileged and Powerless

The title for this section is, admittedly, gloomy. When I asked the students if they felt they had power or privilege in the classroom, I did expect more of an empowered response as many of them so forcefully expressed how passionate and committed they are to their education. During this portion of the interview, I found myself reflecting on my own experiences in the upper years of my undergraduate degree because, as Acker and Feuerverger claim, “[w]hen we gaze at our subjects, we think about ourselves” (2003, 49). Recalling my experiences in the undergraduate classroom, I remember feeling quite confident and empowered in the knowledge I had acquired and was far more conscious of my position in the world. While my privileged positionality was still often uncomfortable for me to engage with, I experienced the classroom as a challenging, provocative, and exciting place where I wanted to be. A few of the students shared in this more affirming approach to their education and their place in the classroom.
Kelly: I feel like I’ve learned a lot. I don’t feel uncomfortable in my classes because I know things. Sure, I would say that I feel powerful because of that. I don’t think I’ve thought about it like that before, but I can now. [laughs].

Roya: I think that I might be privileged because I live in a free country, where I can go to school and do what I want to do and I can pursue my education.... I feel my knowledge is my privilege. I really enjoy learning these things.

Further, in the epigraph of Chapter 2, Jackie expresses how she uses her education to empower herself outside of the classroom.

Jackie: I just find myself taking what I’ve learned and provoking discussions with others...and questioning why it is they think it’s okay to call women ‘bitches’ or ‘sluts.’ I find myself calling out racism all the time. When I watch TV or movies, I find that I am really critical about things like that now and I never was... [Thinking critically] kinda seeps into you. I do it and I don’t even realize it anymore...it’s now a part of who I am.

The statements by Kelly, Roya, and Jackie reflect “the idea that students will be empowered outside of the classroom” through experiencing empowerment in the classroom, which makes critical education “very powerful in terms of creating possibilities for social change” (Mayes 2010, 191). This empowered perspective was what I had hoped more of the students would express in discussing their power in the classroom. But while many of the students had expressed excitement and appreciation for the knowledge that they have gained through education, the classroom space itself was described in consistently negative ways.

The majority of the students echoed Chloe’s claim that she does not “even understand how [she] could have power in relation to the prof,” as I discussed in Chapter 6.
Amanda: I don’t think, overall, students have much power in what happens in a classroom necessarily...which is sad, but I don’t see where I have a say at all.

Julian: I feel power in a few ways, but never on the basis of being a student. That’s why I plan on being a teacher and taking it back! [laughs].

Shelly: I don’t think I have power. No, a lot of the time, in big settings where I don’t know people, I do not speak up.

Shelly’s response was a particularly common answer in that the students associated having power with feeling that they have “a voice” in the classroom. While I briefly addressed silence as a potential performative act in Chapters 4 and 5, the ways in which the students speak to (not) having a voice/feeling silenced here is directly related to their engagements with power in the classroom. The students conveyed that feelings of empowerment in the classroom via having “a voice” were most often based on the type of environment created by the instructor as combined with the various students in the room. For example, Shelly further explains that because she was raised in a more diverse city, she feels that her experience in her NU classrooms is not conducive to her wanting to participate.

Shelly: Coming from the home that I do, I feel like it is always placed as white people and all the rest of them in my classes. Like, the prof talks about ‘us’ as, like, it’s pretty much all white people in my class, and then we talk about everyone else who is being discriminated against, who aren’t as privileged, who aren’t getting things, who have to work for things. It is weird for me to feel like an ‘us’ – I have never thought about life like that and I have no idea how to respond.
For Shelly, the positioning of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ creates a dynamic that she is not comfortable with. As Shelly reflected on her own privilege, she conveyed that she does not feel that as a white woman in a predominantly white space she can disrupt that Othering that is occurring because she will be “the odd one out in here.” Here again are notions of the classroom space as a politicized environment of belonging based on the often-repeated expressions related to ‘fitting in,’ ‘in here,’ and ‘out there’ (Schick 2002).

The students’ notions of ‘voice’ did not only rest with the ability to speak in class; ‘voice’ further reflects the ability to belong and be recognized, remembered, seen, and respected for beliefs they have which may differ from those of the instructors. For example, a few of the students used terms that related to learning as if they are being passively fed knowledge – similar to Paulo Freire’s (2007) banking method of education.

Chloe: No. [laughs]. I can’t say that I do [feel power in the classroom]. I always feel the opposite actually. I am just at the liberty of whatever the professor says or feeds me. They control our fate. [laughs]. I don’t ever feel like I have any power in class! My classmates are, ugh...never powerful...now that I think about it.

Jackie: 90% of students don’t learn by a teacher standing there and feeding us information, but I’ve never felt in a position of power in class. Never in class.

As women of colour, Chloe and Jackie’s feelings are undoubtedly complicated by their gendered and racialized embodiments: “I have taught brilliant students of color... who have skilfully managed never to speak in classroom settings. Some express the feeling that they are less likely to suffer any kind of assault if they simply do not assert their subjectivity” (hooks 1994, 39-40). Jackie’s response is particularly interesting in contrast to her earlier statement where she implies that her education – as
a whole – empowers her, yet recalling her embodied experience of being in the space of a classroom is not empowering for her. Jackie does not feel privilege in the classroom, as she goes on to claim “most days, I don’t even want to be there.”

In addition to Jackie, many of the students – Roya, Anna, Shelly, Natasha, Lenore, Maham, Fatima, René, Holly, and Chloe – expressed their desire to not be in class and, often, their refusal to attend. The acknowledgement of their resistance to attending their classes refutes much of the work on the ‘good student,’ which positions the student body as one who aims to please by following the expectations laid out by the structure of the university: “The technologies of the self, the more covert constructive effects of the university’s practices, function to create a certain kind of identity – that of the good student – with a ‘conscience’ which is informed/form ed in particular ways, resulting in the shaping of ‘appropriate’ needs and desires: the desire to know, to be wise, the desire to please, the desire to be successful” (Grant 1997, 110). For some, their desire to not attend class is because their personal lives are too busy with other responsibilities, such as full-time employment or familial duties, but some of the others described the ways in which the class size feels oppressive to them.

Anna: Classes are too big. I am insignificant in there. An ant among many. I am not important.

Holly: I find that in really big classes, you get lost in them. A first year sociology class that I took had 100 students in it and I sat at the back and so I was just lost in there. That doesn’t feel like empowered learning to me. Well, I guess I didn’t feel I had no power... I think that if I wanted to approach the professor for help, I could. Maybe?

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62 As these conversations occurred in the latter phase of our interview, it is quite possible that the students were comfortable enough with me that they did not feel required to perform within the role of ‘the good student.’
Kelly: Profs just are intimidating. I am never comfortable around them. I mean, some are better, but mostly I feel like a lowly student. Maybe it’s because I am never their ‘pet.’

Additionally, some students expressed that the expectations of the instructor can clash with their own beliefs and so they feel required to pretend to believe (particularly via their assignments) what they feel the instructor believes in order to achieve a grade that they desire.

Natasha: Um, I find that professors aren’t willing to let students do what they want regarding a topic. Sometimes I find that I have to remember which professor likes this type of theorist. For instance, don’t bring in structural functionalism if you are talking to a Marxist because it’s just not going to work. Sometimes I find myself just regurgitating what my professors want, which I don’t enjoy in that power hierarchy. And so, I’m not actually learning...I learn best when I understand and I am passionate about something, so I find that hard.

Fatima: I alter my opinion for them. It really sucks, as much as they say critical thinking, it is usually bound within the prof, or what kind of TA you have, like their expectations basically.

Victoria: Does that make you feel like you have no power in class?

Fatima: Like very passive. In some way, I think most students would never think about that, because the whole society is based on pleasing the person who is on top of you. [laughs]. I mean, ahead of you.

For Natasha and Fatima, what happens in the classroom is felt in the body and inscribed on the body as “the student is both subject to the controls (regulations) of the institution and to her or his own ‘conscience’ which ‘knows’ what it means to be a good student” (Grant 1997, 104). Grant furthers this argument by stating that “[t]he culture of autonomy and individualism at the university constructs students who believe that success or failure lies with them. Thus, solely responsible for
their academic success, they seek to take care of themselves...” (Grant 1997, 110). Perhaps it can be argued that the students who recognize how to ‘play the academic game’ to further themselves and their work are achieving power that they would not otherwise have, but at what cost? The above students do not feel as though aligning their beliefs with that of the instructors is adding to their educational experience. Rather, as Natasha claimed later in our interview, participating in this top-down power dynamic can make many students “feel like a puppet.”

As the above discussion demonstrates, the number of students in the classroom, the atmosphere created by the instructor, and the assumed expectations of the instructors intersect with each other and demonstrate how multidimensional the experience of learning is and how that experience is often disempowering for students in critical identity studies.

Chloe (J): As a female student from a visible minority, with a learning disability, from a middle class suburban home, I feel that I face a unique set of expectations and challenges that will give me a disadvantage in some ways, but also allow me to face situations with open-mindedness. Typically, I feel a loss of power is the common thread found in various kinds of oppression – a kind of helplessness and the lack of having a voice. Not having a voice is unquestionably one of my primary reasons for pursuing a career in journalism. Chloe explains that it is through using her education to pursue her career that she feels she will overcome the oppression of her identities, even though she also feels that these identities disempower her in the critical identity classroom. The shifting nature of privilege, conveyed through the experiences of the students and instructors, gives voice to discussions that can occur within critical identity classrooms and it is to this dialogue the discussion now turns.
Reflecting on Privilege in the Critical Classroom

The title for this section is purposefully general as the ways in which privilege and education were reflected upon by the participants was decidedly varied. The participants addressed how critical education often strictly focuses on oppression and so discussions of privilege must be inferred. In contrast to these participants are those who ‘spoke back’ to the claim that critical identity studies equals a study of oppression, as they expressed that critical education makes privilege teachable and visible in their lives. The contrast within this ‘dialogue’ reflects the importance of individual pedagogical intentions on privilege because, as Carmen Luke claims, “[a]s a craft and art, pedagogy is seduction and performance: we cajole, humor, invite, persuade, convince, in efforts to seduce students into the knowledges we embody, over which we have authority, and which we want our students to see and grasp in that pleasurable ‘ah-ha’ moment of (en)light(enment)” (1997, 194).

Yet, as privilege is a topic that is so under-theorized in much critical and educational discourse, its absence in the classroom is beyond pedagogical intention as it is often not even assumed to be a topic that is necessarily teachable and/or learnable. The importance of making privilege visible in the classroom must not be overlooked – social transformation is not possible without knowledge. As evidenced in the following ‘dialogue’ between the instructors and the students, it is clear that the difficulties inherent to discussions of privilege cannot be overcome easily, but it is through these discussions that the social embeddedness of dominant conceptions of privilege can begin to be unmasked, grappled with, and better understood.

Critical Identity Studies = Study of Oppression?

Exposing the socially constructed ways in which identity categorizations are used to exclude certain bodies from full social participation, while elevating other bodies to social dominance, is a
primary aim of social justice teaching. According to Marilyn Frye (1983), the study of ‘oppression’ exposes the ways in which some bodies are caught between entrenched systemic forces and barriers that are so entwined with one another that they jointly immobilise groups of people. The study of oppression within critical identity studies has changed the landscape of how social relations are understood (within and outside of the classroom) and the ways in which hierarchizations of identity can be problematized. To study a hierarchy of identity reflects how various power dynamics are consistently at play, and yet the study of those normative identities – in terms of their relationality – rarely occurs. While the existence and power of privilege underlies much of the study of oppression, it became clear throughout the interviews that thinking through the concept of privilege was so consumed by the language of oppression that it was a difficult area for the participants to discuss.

The purpose of this section is to explore how the participants consider critical identity studies as an almost exclusive study of oppression, rather than as an interplay of privilege and oppression.

The difficulties that the participants had with discussing critical identity studies as a study of oppression and privilege speaks to the ways in which privilege is often under-theorized in the classroom. As the following students demonstrate, they are unclear about how they are supposed to discuss privilege and if it should be discussed at all.

Terry: My courses focus on oppression actually...so not privilege by itself. Like in our eco-feminism class we kinda talked about privilege, not in the sense of gender, race and class, but in terms of the environment. Like, [laughs] privilege doesn’t come up much actually. I’m not sure that we are supposed to be talking about it?

Roya: Whenever the topic of privilege has come up, it was always about men, white men. I think we talked about it in a few of my women and gender studies courses, say there are two
women – a black woman versus a white woman [lowers voice] – the white woman is privileged, so even though she’s a woman, her race makes her more privileged.

It was apparent by the way that Roya lowered her voice in the above narrative that she was uncomfortable with discussing this topic and so I asked her why that was.

Roya: Well, I mean...I’m not used to talking about this. I feel like talking about privilege is wrong somehow. It’s kinda funny. [laughs].

In Chapter 1, I argue that re-centring privilege is often critiqued, using whiteness studies as the example, for further prioritizing areas of social life that are always already over-advantaged and therefore should not be afforded any more verbal or theoretical space in the classroom than it receives on the ‘outside.’ It appears, through the above students’ assertions, that privilege is considered a taboo subject in their classrooms. The explanations for why privilege remains outside of dialogues on oppression and identity are difficult to locate in the identity literature. What I can speak to, however, was an experience that I had during the recruitment process in a fourth-year sociology course focusing on Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class. During my talk to the class, I spoke of my interest in identity. The instructor for the course interrupted me and asked me “Do you talk about intersectionality in your work or when you teach?” When I told him that I do, he then asked, “Can you teach it to them? Because they don’t know what it is.” I turned back to the class and asked, “Can you raise your hand if you have heard of the word intersectional before?” No one did.

As this was the sixth-month of a full-year course, I was surprised at the instructor for a few reasons. In my journal, following this experience, I wrote “I don’t really understand what just happened. If [the instructor] wanted the students to learn about intersectionality, why did he wait until I was there and then ask me – a total stranger to them – to teach it? How can you even have a course on gender, race, ethnicity, and class without teaching about intersectionality? What/how could
they be learning??” When I interviewed Natasha, she immediately brought up my discussion on intersectionality in her class.

Natasha: It was great what you did with our class.

Victoria: Thank you. I wasn’t sure, as I hadn’t planned to teach anything!

Natasha: No, it was really great. I had never heard of that concept before. I mean, it makes total sense now. I kind of thought that piecing identities together was something I was just doing in my head because it made sense.

Victoria: You hadn’t heard of intersectionality before? At all?

Natasha: No, I realize now I probably should have?

What emerges as relevant to knowledge at NU can be quite different from what is emphasized at SU. This is not to say, of course, that other courses at NU do not emphasize more critical approaches to teaching and learning (as all of the instructors that I interviewed do emphasize critical approaches), but it is a difference that is worth noting here. At SU, critical identity studies would be impossible to teach without the acknowledgement of the intersectionality of identities because of the diverse student body, regardless of whether privilege is discussed (which it often isn’t). Whereas, at NU, the separation of gender, race, class, and ethnicity from one another – as though they are distinct and knowable in isolation – was seemingly unproblematically being taught and learned during the majority of a course on identities.

As one SU instructor and I discussed, decisions to remain silent on issues of privilege in the classroom (specifically for white instructors) is something implied through the discourse on anti-oppressive teaching.
SU Instructor: You see, I’ve heard this too – this critique when I raise stuff around privilege and whiteness that I am recentring privilege, but still it’s about whiteness, right, which gives white people the authority to talk about it and critique it, I’d think. [Sounds exasperated].

Victoria: Right, but if we don’t talk about it, then it’s this much bigger problem, in my opinion. I don’t understand though if we don’t talk about it, how is that not making it bigger? Giving it more power?

SU Instructor: Because it is already centred! For sure. [Teaching it is] not re-centring it, it’s already there [laughs]. I’m glad to hear what you have to say about that…phew. I can’t imagine how confusing it must be for students to talk about oppression all the time without ever delving into the flip-side of that. Privilege is there, why are we pretending it’s not?

Research on the area of teaching privilege is limited, for, as all of the above quotations from the respondents assert, privilege is something that is often silent in the classroom – in spaces that are diverse and seemingly homogenous. The difficulty in teaching the nuances of identity is expressed by Diane J. Goodman as she states,

Dividing people into dominant and subordinate groups tends to promote dualistic and dichotomous thinking. It implies that people can easily be classified into one group or the other (i.e. either White or a person of color, either able-bodied or disabled). Yet there are degrees, gradations, and variations within and between social groups, and our individual social identities are not distinct from each other. (Goodman 2001, 7)

As every person experiences privilege and oppression, teaching to see these embodiments through notions of “gradations” or, rather, what I see as a web or network of relations helps to explain the ways in which privilege and oppression are not opposed, but rather connected and mutually informing.
The dilemma of teaching oppression as a study of identity and as an interplay of privilege and oppression is best conveyed by an SU instructor who, when asked about how she teaches privilege to her students, discusses it strictly in terms of oppression.

SU Instructor: You know many years ago, I used to teach a feminist philosopher to my first years, whose name eludes me, about the intersection of oppression and it’s called the birdcage metaphor. The example was very profound to students in Intro. If a bird is stuck in a cage, why doesn’t it leave, why doesn’t it escape? It’s then in showing the system of bars in a birdcage that each represent an oppression in the world and it’s the interconnectedness of the oppressions that keep the bird in a bird cage. I used that all the time and my experience with students do very well in approaching these notions since I teach in a place that is mostly non-white people.

This SU instructor is claiming that teaching privilege, within a space of mostly racialized students, should begin from a starting point of the interlocking nature of oppressions. Perhaps, teaching privilege and oppression as existing upon the same network of relations would enable a move away from where privilege and oppression are seen as binary oppositions and instead demonstrate how they intersect, rely on, and inform each other within existing power structures.

In the following excerpts, two NU instructors discuss the ways in which they find teaching concepts of privilege to be a difficult task.

NU Instructor: The idea of privilege, that’s a hard one. It’s really hard to do. It’s much easier for students, I think, to say “Here’s a group and they’re oppressed and these are the features of their lives and this is what they face.” It’s much more difficult to turn the microscope on themselves and see what the flipside of that oppression is, even though there must be

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privilege happening somewhere. ...I mean we do stuff on anti-racist pedagogy and also on special needs classrooms. They are really vocal about these topics. They are very opinionated about whether there should be Native-only schools and whether there should be classrooms for special needs children that are integrated or not integrated, but they do not position themselves within those discussions. I just don’t think they can. No, that’s not true. I think because they see Native students and students with special needs as so disadvantaged, that that makes their own advantages more clear to them. To have a more generic discussion about privilege always has to be anchored to some particular topic. It’s a really hard one to approach, it must be firmly anchored.

NU Instructor: [Teaching privilege] is not something I think women’s studies is doing successfully, to be honest. I think that, I shouldn’t sort of say that generally, as I think that there are definitely breakthroughs. In first year courses, we often read *Unpacking the White Knapsack*\(^{64}\) or the *Non-Trans Privileged List*\(^{65}\) and these kinds of things and I think those kind of resonate with students because they can begin to see concrete examples of how they have privilege, but it’s a fine line between identifying it and just feeling guilty about it and not moving from that position. I haven’t really found a good way of moving students, well, I’ve tried, but I haven’t found a foolproof way of saying “Yes, you have privilege, we are all variously privileged, we are all variously oppressed, but how do we negotiate these positions in society?”, but I haven’t really found a good way....

It is clear in the comments made by the first instructor that oppression is seen as the “flipside” to privilege, in that they are somehow opposites; this binary positioning, I believe, further causes


privilege to be seen as difficult, uncomfortable, and undesirable to teach. In teaching privilege as an opposite to oppression it causes both privilege and oppression to be something that happens ‘out there’ to ‘those people’ as we, ‘in here,’ know that our identities are fluid and transitory – as this is what we teach. The second instructor speaks to this disconnect in saying “…we are all variously privileged, we are all variously oppressed, but how do we negotiate these positions in society?” It is clear that we need to ‘mess up’ the ways we – as educators and learners – place privilege as the “flipside” to oppression so that we are able to blur the boundaries between them and see the ways in which we use our identities to variously travel along them.

The latter of these instructors also repeatedly conveyed that she feels critical identity studies has failed on its progressive promises. She critiqued many of her colleagues, at NU and other institutions that she has taught at, for not trying harder to “buck the system” in terms of teaching controversial topics and attempting to teach students how to “think beyond the basic –isms that we are supposed to teach them.” When I asked this instructor if she discussed her concerns openly with them, she replied “No, you have to put up the front that everything is good and progressive and important.” The act of conveying her opinions to me on the current state of critical identity work, specifically with regard to women’s studies, reflects Luhmann’s argument that,

In the public spaces of classrooms, in university meetings and in the context of the wider community, women’s studies practitioners speak up forcefully on behalf of the field’s past accomplishments and achievements, highlighting its exciting history, its contemporary relevance and its future possibilities….But in less public contexts – for example, when among women’s studies colleagues and friends with whom we feel intellectually and politically affiliated and with whom we may share a commitment to the field – we discuss our
about the project of women’s studies, its current state and its intellectual future more openly and, at times, disparagingly. (Luhmann 2004, 150-1)

The perceptions being conveyed by the above instructor and Luhmann are significant for critical identity studies for many reasons – its future in the academy, if/how critical scholarship is taught in a coherent manner and, perhaps most importantly, the ways that the students interpret its significance and importance in their lives.

In my interview with Vanessa, she spoke forcefully about the topics that she engages with and the questions that she is left with once she leaves the classroom.

Vanessa: We learn overwhelmingly about oppression in terms of inequality. Disadvantage. But I think to fully understand it – and maybe I am thinking this more because of your project – that you need both perspectives to understand that the reason I have certain privileges are the same reasons that you are oppressed. But, in 4 years, I haven’t really learned about that. Shouldn’t I have? I feel like I am inferring it now, in this moment, more than in my classes.

That is pretty weird.

In Vanessa’s journal, she continued grappling with her curiosity about the role of teaching and learning privilege.

Vanessa (J): I’m still wondering why I am not taught to think about my privilege more. I can’t make sense of it.

Interestingly, even our engagement in the interview speaks to how privilege is something that can and should be consistently discussed, for as Vanessa says “I am thinking this more now because of your project.” Vanessa’s inability to “make sense” of why her experiences in critical identity studies has not exposed her to more critical engagements with privilege can also be easily and confusingly
contrasted against those few who I interviewed that have been taught notions of privilege and convey it with ease.

_Critical Identity Studies = Privilege as Teachable and Visible?_

In contrast to the above narratives which position the study of privilege as difficult and/or invisible in the classroom, the following students and instructors speak back to these assertions as they identify privilege as a concept that is both teachable _and_ visible in their classrooms. I do not intend to imply here that the interviewees claimed privilege was a concept that proliferated in their studies, as many of them still asserted that privilege was discussed far less than oppression, but their opinions on its feasibility and presence as a topic for study and reflection differs from the aforementioned participants, who could not ‘place’ privilege within their educational experiences.

Holly, currently in her third undergraduate year, expressed that the study of privilege was something that she was more exposed to in her first year in university.

_Holly: Well in first year sociology we talked about it a lot – the knapsack, I think? – and in one class I am in now, we talk about class systems and...we talk about it where, depending on your sexual orientation, your colour, and your gender, you do have more privilege and power. First year, we discussed that a lot and I wrote a paper on it. How there are still a lot of inequalities for women. Women earn 79% of men’s income? And you know, if the husband and wife have the exact same credentials and they have a child, well the man will be chosen over the woman because she is expected to be more committed to the child than her work, right?’_  

As stated by two instructors in the previous section, the study of privilege is something made explicit in first year – most commonly taught through use of McIntosh’s (1990) seminal piece on the

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66 While Holly recalls being taught about privilege, she frames it as a discussion of women’s oppression: “Women earn 79% of men’s income?”
“invisible knapsack.” Beyond the discussion of the knapsack, however, it seems that any discussion of privilege is highly dependent upon the pedagogical intention of individual instructors.

Chloe: We study oppression more, but privilege, yeah, I guess we talk about what gets more preference in histories. Well, that is in one class I am taking anyway. That’s what I’ve noticed – it really depends on the prof. For example, my prof has taught us that people that were wealthy or have the right body image are more privileged in getting their histories told, where people who didn’t have all that, or were different, don’t get a place in history as much.

The emphasis that Chloe places upon the intentions of the instructor to teach concepts of privilege is also reflected in the discussions that I had with the instructors. As the following two excerpts indicate, the intention of the instructor to make privilege a teachable concept is crucial to the ways that it has a place in the classroom.

NU Instructor: I’m hoping that when I talk about the social construction of gender they get that everything is socially constructed. I talk to them about there being very few social universals amongst cultures...I do hope they infer our notions of abled and disabled are socially constructed....with power attached to it. I hope they infer a lot.

SU Instructor: They have to do a privilege diary, which is one activity that they do before they get into the action- project stuff. Now, given what we’ve been studying about interlocking systems and privilege – they read McIntosh and stuff like that and then I take it further so that they discuss power dynamics in the classroom and again, make connections between academic stuff and their lives.

While these instructors are teaching somewhat different courses – the NU instructor teaches a gender and work course and the SU instructor was teaching a gender and colonialism course – the critical
intentions of their courses were described in similar terms. The ways that these instructors engage
with privilege, however, demonstrates how the SU instructor’s active commitment to make privilege
explicit dramatically alters how students may ‘see’ privilege, whereas the NU instructor takes a more
passive role and hopes that the students ‘get’ it on their own.

In Elizabeth de Freitas and Alexander McAuley’s (2008) analysis of pedagogical strategies
for critical engagements in a predominantly white classroom, they argue that making privilege
explicit, while often uncomfortable, must occur for the disruption of thinking that identity is
something that happens ‘out there.’ As Fellows and Razack claim, “[t]o be the norm, yet to have the
norm unnamed, is to be innocent of the domination of others” (1998, 341). At one point in our
interview, an SU instructor began to criticize her students of colour for claiming that they experience
oppression, rather than focusing on where they may experience privilege. Yet, this instructor
acknowledges that she does not teach privilege as a topic of study.

SU Instructor: I think most of them like to “play the race card,” in that being from not-white
races that they are underprivileged. I think they think that. I think that’s the first thing that
comes to their mind and that they don’t think about other aspects of themselves. I’d be
surprised if they ever thought about disability, for example. I certainly don’t think they realize
the privilege that comes from being heterosexual, heteronormative, I don’t think they see that.
I think they’re blind to some things. That sounds mean, but I think they are. In having this
discussion with you, I see the importance of perhaps having to teach that.

This instructor’s contention that students are “playing the race card” needs to be explored here. In
social life, people of colour hold, by virtue of a “low card,” what Frantz Fanon (1967) describes as “a
losing hand,” as they are born into a game already under way – a game that promotes white privilege
through the oppression of Others. The racist discourse surrounding this phrase often refers to
attempts by people of colour to gain advantages by calling attention to racial inequalities. However, the idea that critical identity classrooms are heterotopic spaces, as I argued in Chapter 2, makes them ‘other places,’ places that are unlike most other places on the ‘outside.’ As such, within the heterotopic space of the critical identity classroom at SU this understanding of “race card” becomes more complex. The very fact that this instructor, who is white, spoke to the students’ use of the “race card” demonstrates the ways in which these students are seen to shift the balance of power in critical identity classrooms. At the risk of overextending the metaphor, these students reveal that the rules of the game can differ according to location, and that the low card might also be an ace – which is, depending on the game, either the least or the most valuable card in the deck. Moreover, it is difficult to understand why this instructor expected the students to make connections between privilege and oppression when she made explicit that – before we spoke – she did not see the “importance” of discussing privilege with her students, even though she said that she also felt privilege is a “fundamental concept.”

When privilege is made present and integral to the critical identity classroom, students do not as often question, as Terry and Roya did in the previous section, whether a discussion of privilege “should” happen. As Jackie and Kelly make clear, they respond to that common absence and argue that privilege should be a component in every women and gender studies class.

Jackie: It comes up in every women’s studies class at some point, I think it has to. In my eco-feminism class earlier today, we talked about how some communities are more privileged. Like, harmful chemicals can be dumped into racialized communities because the government doesn’t care if it seeps into their water. Some people are then seen as privileged since they don’t even have to worry about it.
Kelly: I guess we don’t talk about privilege as much as we talk about oppression, for sure.

But we do talk about it. I think that, for most profs, it is weird not to...especially when we study this stuff....but it should totally be there.

The word “should” seems crucial here – the ways in which Terry and Roya ask whether we should be talking about privilege, even in the interview; Vanessa thinking about why she hasn’t learned about privilege and “shouldn’t” she have?; and Kelly expressing that privilege should be in her courses. What should be in the classroom, but often does not appear in the classroom, is significant, for as Boler and Michalinos Zembylas contend, “what is not included in the school curriculum can be as telling as that which is included...The ways in which such absences create knowledge (or lack of knowledge) shape teachers and students’ identities and define the present knowledges as normal” (2003, 120-1).

To end this section, I will use the narrative of two of the students – René, an NU student, and Aisha, an SU student – to explore how it is that each connects the role of education and the study of privilege as having a profound meaning-making effect in her life.

René: Privilege? Only in that women’s studies class have I ever heard the term. Yeah, I have never thought of myself as racist or even white. Like I see colour, but I don’t really see colour....or at least I never used to. Now, I think it is important that I do. Not in a racist way, but in a way thoughtful way. Differences are significant. I’m not sure that I constantly think of myself in terms of my race though, but I am certainly more conscious of sexism and racism.

Aisha: Me, alone, I’m Portuguese, I’m Black, I’m Indian, and I’m British, so all of that and more. Through sociology and women’s studies, I feel more educated about my background
and they’ve compelled me to want to know more about the different ethnicities around me,
not just what is at face value for most people – my blackness. To everyone, I look African
American, but within that there are different fabrics of what my heritage holds. I know now
to see privilege in different ways. Privilege is power, but knowledge is also power.
Knowledge about who I am gives me privilege. It’s not just white men who have privilege.
Education is my privilege too.

Aisha allows us to think about privilege in reclaiming ways; she is empowered by her education and
this empowerment confers privilege upon her. Her critical self-reflection is a privilege as she can
“embrace the different fabrics” of her identities – even when those identities emerge to her as
oppressive. Aisha clearly embodies the purpose of my work – she is using her education to give
voice to her identities because they matter and to navigate through the ways that they have and will
continue to variously emerge to her.

Summary

In this chapter, I have explored how privilege was explicitly addressed by both the students
and the instructors. The ways that the students spoke about privilege in their lives reflected the sense
that privilege is always already elusive to them – they either see privilege as something conferred on
them only because they are not some Other (or more Othered) identity, or, as students, they feel they
have little or no power at all. The difficulties that they had with discussing privilege expressed the
limited ways through which they have been taught to consider the ways that privilege manifests in
social life. The instructors acknowledged that the discussion and study of privilege is something that
does not often occur in critical identity studies and it is in these silences in the classroom where the
study of identity becomes limited. The participants’ discussion of privilege made it seem as though if
Privilege is made present in the classroom (beyond McIntosh’s ‘knapsack’), its presence is due to the (rare) pedagogical intention of the instructor. Privilege is not readily seen as something teachable or integral to the study of identity and its absence limits the ways in which identities can be understood, problematized, and explored.
CHAPTER 8

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: SOME CONCLUSIONS

I am sitting in a coffee shop waiting for my first student to arrive. I wonder where this will all lead. What I will learn. What others will learn from these encounters. I feel like I am being dramatic, but I also feel like I am on the verge of something important. (Victoria, personal journal, October 2008)

Introduction

Throughout my teenage and adult life, I have reflected on my experiences through the use of journaling. My writings in these journals most often reflect what I am feeling or experiencing in a particular moment. The above epigraph reflects how I felt in the moments before I began the most engaged portion of my research – the interviews – but I believe it also reflects where this work is now. This stage in my research is both important on its own and on the verge of being something more important. In this final chapter, I reflect on the findings of this study as well as the questions that have emerged through the process of carrying out this project. This chapter is divided into four main parts. In the first section, I describe the project itself (The Project: Reflecting on Process). Here, I briefly outline the main tenets of my dissertation in terms of my research questions, theoretical framework and methodology. The second part considers the findings of this study in terms of its key themes and their relation to my research questions (Identity as Contradictory, Privilege as Elusive: Reflecting on Key Themes). Next, I discuss the limitations of the study and how I perceive some of these ‘limitations’ to be functional contributions (Limitations and Limitations as Contributions). Finally, I explore directions for future research based on the contributions and questions that my work has inspired (Looking Ahead: Contributions and Future Research).
The Project: Reflecting on Process

For my dissertation, I wanted to study something that challenged me; the difficulties inherent to researching a topic that is both polarizing and ill-defined, such as privilege, certainly exceeded those expectations. Being a person with a highly visible body – a woman who stands at 6 feet and 3 inches tall – I have always considered appearances to be crucial to the ways in which people read one another. My unusual body is read and commented on almost daily. Most often, my height is spoken of as a privileged embodiment – something shorter people desire to have – but this is not always how I experience it. My body has also been labelled “freakish,” “abnormal,” and “weird.” Of course, my other identities – my whiteness, femininity, blue eyes, and naturally-light hair – also contribute to how my body is read and approached. For me, the visibility of our bodies, the (often) normalizing of our privileges, and the experiences that our bodies and identities enable us to have causes me to consistently think of what we embody for each other and how that impacts our understandings of ourselves.

Privilege, as I stated in Chapter 1, can be characterized as a category through which to define certain bodies and classes as possessing unearned advantages that are systemically created and culturally reinforced (Bailey 2003; McIntosh 1990; McWhorter 2005). The purpose of my project has been to expand upon this definition in order to explore how it is that where we are (in terms of location/space), who we are (in terms of how we understand ourselves), and what we learn (based on our education) can intersect to expose how fluidity is inherent to the embodiments of privilege.

As a reminder of what I laid out in Chapter 1, the research questions that guided this study focused on how 30 participants (21 female students, 1 male student, and 8 female instructors) who are engaged in critical identity studies in Canada identify privilege, both for others and themselves. In so doing, I have also explored how the participants understand their identities as they relate to what
they have learned, who is present or absent in the classroom with them, and the significance of the location of the university that they attend. Here, as a reminder, are the research questions as I presented them in Chapter 1:

(1) How do students in higher education who are engaged in critical identity studies interpret privilege, both for others and themselves?

(2) How do the participants understand their experiences inside and outside the classroom to be related to notions of privilege and oppression that often arise in critical identity classrooms?

(3) How does using a multi-site approach to study critical identity classroom experiences extend the ways in which students’ understandings of privilege can be explored?

The intersections and separations of privilege, identity, and space (which I will explore further in the following section) have been consistently woven throughout my dissertation as the project was informed by feminist poststructuralism. In particular, the critical aims of my project were able to flourish through the use of feminist poststructuralism, as it prioritizes individual experience, the questioning of social hierarchies, and embodied notions of power. Below, I address in more detail the ways in which I can attempt to ‘answer’ these questions. I place ‘answer’ in quotation marks as I feel that any answers below can only be partial, based on the myriad responses to each question that appear throughout the preceding chapters. In the section that follows, I weave the questions through my discussion of the chapters in reverse order – as I see questions 2 and 3 building towards the possibility of ‘answering’ question 1.
Identity as Contradictory, Privilege as Elusive: Reflecting on Key Themes

The space of the critical identity classroom is one that is nearly unique. There are very few spaces where there is a possibility to discuss, interrogate, debate, question, and discover the history, complexity, and meaning of the identities that shape social life. It is in these spaces where we may be able to learn more about who we are, what that may mean to those we engage with, and how those meanings may change over time. While these spaces have the potential to enable critical possibilities, it is also important to note how critical identity classrooms can create atmospheres of pain, suspicion, and be infused with ideologically-slanted expectations. The student participants often critically self-reflected on their multiple relationships to the critical identity classroom and their place(s) within it. Inspired by the key terms that I introduced in Chapter 1 – power, privilege, identity, and space – I have divided this section on my key findings into two areas: Space and Identities and Privilege. The reason that these key terms are divided into two sections here is because I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation that power is entrenched within each of these areas and cannot be separated from them; further, I have also shown how the classroom space and the mattering of identities mutually inform one another. Privilege, on the other hand, can still be seen as outside of discussions on the critical identity classroom and, often, discussion of identity itself, and thus I will use the section on privilege to explore and critique that separation.

Space and Identities

My sites of analysis, as described in Chapter 3, were chosen because they are disparate in their populations – NU provided a more homogenous racial and class population, while SU offered a diverse student body in terms of race, culture, class, etc. Even though all of the students were engaged in critical identity studies, within courses that even have similar titles/course aims at the two schools, the differences in their classroom experiences within these locations were, at times, difficult
to decipher. Reflecting on the significance of the question – How does using a multi-site approach to study critical identity classroom experiences extend the ways in which students’ understandings of privilege can be explored? – rests with how those sites contributed to what is seen to appear in the classroom. Alcoff states, “...race and gender operate without a doubt as visible identities; their visibility is key to the ideological claims that race and gender categories are natural, and that conflict is understandable because of our fears of what looks different” (2006, 103). As all participants in my study (except for Julian), as well as the vast majority of those who enter into critical identity classrooms (especially in terms of women and gender studies) are women, the most significant aspects of appearance for these students were racialized bodies.

At NU, appearance in the classroom was most commonly discussed in terms of the “one or two” racialized bodies that were present. The presence of racialized students in a predominantly white space, where discussions of identity are being explored, often rendered these students as ‘informants’: “...having to present our experiences as people who have experienced homophobia, or as people of color, produces and reproduces those categories. In this case, the telling of experience may circumscribe us, for example, as victims of homophobia or resources on racism” (Srivastava and Francis 2006, 287). Importantly, at SU, Rebecca (a white student) also felt that she was placed in the role of informant, as she was asked to speak to her class “on behalf of” the experience of white people. While all of the students that I interviewed expressed how they thought singling out a particular student was problematic, even when they too were curious to hear about the experience of an Other, these experiences cannot be read in the same way. In the heterotopic space of the SU critical identity classroom, Rebecca’s experience of being the ‘informant’ is a departure from her ‘outside’ normative experience of racial privilege; whereas for racialized students at NU, being the ‘informant’ is far more likely to occur both inside and outside of the classroom.
As I discussed in Chapter 7, my experience during recruitment of being asked to teach the concept of intersectionality in a fourth-year sociology course was something I would never have expected at SU, but it certainly did not overly surprise me (especially in retrospect) at NU. This is because the majority of students that I interviewed at SU engaged in critical self-reflection. It appeared that the SU students’ interests in the intersectional aspects of identity were in direct relation to the amount of diversity that they were immersed within and, thus, many of them reflected on the countless ways that identities manifest for them and Others in social life. At NU, however, there were very few students that referred to their classrooms as places to explore the complexity of identities. I saw this absence as resulting from a variety of reasons, though, most notably, because in spaces of assumed homogeneity social difference is not seen as an “issue” (Kannen and Acker 2008). While I acknowledge that this statement is an over-simplification, many students at NU used processes of normation to render their identities ‘normal’ and absent as, especially in a white space like North City, calling attention to your own whiteness would be considered, as an SU instructor claims in the epigraph to Chapter 7, “extraordinary.”

The ‘answers’ to my second research question – How do the participants understand their experiences inside and outside the classroom to be related to notions of privilege and oppression that often arise in critical identity classrooms? – also became largely inextricable from understandings of space. When the students began to discuss their identities, as described in Chapter 4, space was integral to their notions of self. When asked “Where do you consider home?,’’ the students had much to say about their relation to physical space and how those physical spaces were entwined with their personal lives. Whether home was discussed in terms of their parents, the university, a culture, or a country, the concept of home held a strong connection for them as a space of identity. The students’ emotional responses to the subject of home were unsurprising, as it is a subject they all could relate to
in some way; however, what was particularly notable were the ways in which these spaces were described as integral to identity formation. For example, the young age of the majority of the participants (particularly as it relates to their transition to university), as combined with their discussions of social class used to make sense of ‘home,’ encouraged me to veer our subsequent dialogue towards discussing the locations and spaces that they feel impact how they see themselves.

Our discussions on home created an avenue for the rest of each interview to be spatially-focused, particularly with regard to the students’ experiences in the classroom. As I analyzed the interviews further, the understandings of their identities emerged as inseparable from a relation to Others; by this I mean that the ways in which the students began to explore their identities in the classroom was due in large part to who else was in the space with them and how they felt able to discover aspects of themselves through this relationality. In Chapter 4, for example, the students’ discussions of their gender, race, and dis/abilities were framed as an experience of oppression, such as feeling ‘less than’ based on being a woman, or feeling ‘misplaced’ by not being associated by others with the race or Canadian identity that they consider themselves to have, or feeling ‘different but not that different’ based on their dis/abilities.

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, once the students began to grapple with thinking through their relationship to the classroom, it became clear that being in the critical identity classroom was often integral to the discovery of identities and, ultimately, notions of self. Because of the explicit confrontations of gender, race, class, and sexuality that commonly occur in critical identity classrooms, the students spoke forcefully regarding how they understand certain identities as salient in their lives and/or how the presence of Othered people/identities makes them uncomfortable. Discovery in the classroom often related to realizing one’s privilege (as I will address in the next section), but, disturbingly, it also led many of the students to resort to silencing themselves in the
classroom once they began to recognize and learn more about the oppression of Others (who were often in the classroom with them).

Once the unsettling of identities started to unfold in our interviews, it became quite clear to me that the students were reflecting on their identities as they relate to privilege in multiple ways, some for the first time. Following our initial discussion of the classroom, the complexity of critical identity studies, specifically as it relates to relations in the space of the classroom, started to emerge more explicitly. Many of the students spoke to the idea that their identities were often read as ‘mistakes.’ For the students, this meant that their embodiments were being interpreted as something other than who they believe they are. For example, some of the students discuss being mistaken for a different race or ethnicity than the one that they identify as, while other students talk about how they pass as a more privileged identity than the one they ‘actually’ are. These assertions of ‘realness’ are fraught with questions regarding the supposed authenticity of identity, often specifically related to a (lack of) Canadian identity, and what it means to be read as something that you do not feel you represent. Perhaps more crucial to my analysis are the ways in which these assertions of ‘mistaken’ or ‘real’ identities led some of the students to question whether they even belong in the critical identity classroom. To question whether or not you belong in a classroom, not based on your interest or level of knowledge, but, rather, on what you embody is not something often discussed in educational research. It was difficult for me to hear the students struggle with their sense of place in the classroom – both for those who experience privilege, as well as those who receive the ‘Where are you from?’ question – as they claim that they often resorted to remaining silent in class in order to be able to remain as comfortable as possible. Clearly, these students have much to say, but their difficulty with finding ‘voice’ in the classroom – because of fear of what they represent to those they share the space with – affects how successful their engagement with critical education can be. Some
of the students conveyed that they had resisted enrolling in future critical identity courses because of the experiences that they have had or been witness to.

Thinking through the connections that the participants made between space and identities did not solely rest with the students, as instructors also positioned location as integral to how identities are expressed and understood. In Chapter 6, I categorized the instructors as ‘space creators,’ as they discussed the intentional and explicit decisions that they used to create an atmosphere in the classroom. As the instructors explained, once they set the guidelines for what they wanted to occur in the classroom, it often became clear to them how integral being both open and cautious are when navigating various classroom interactions. As with many facets of my study, the contradictions that are seemingly inherent in creating atmospheres that are both open and cautious are, in fact, essential to the complex dynamics of the critical classroom. The instructors explained that they try to enable a balance between wanting the students to use their personal experiences in order to theorize social life, and, at the same time, being cautious about what ‘experience’ can mean and how it can be problematic when varying experiences are found within any one group.

Within my discussion of the study of privilege and its relation to the critical classroom in Chapter 7, the contradictions around space and identity became further apparent. As addressed by the instructors and students, critical identity studies is most often the study of oppression, yet privilege is also (sometimes) seen as teachable and visible. The dissonance that exists between these two understandings of critical identity studies is differentially resolved according to the intentions of the individual instructor, the diversity of student bodies that appear within the classroom space, and the topic(s) under study. These variables, in different combinations, position the study of privilege as something that is transient and often unexpected.
Privilege

Privilege is not a topic of study that is familiar or expected in the majority of critical identity classrooms. The absence of privilege as a comprehensive topic of study reflects the overwhelming lack of a critical dialogue on privilege within social life. In the literature review found within Chapter 2, I outlined the various ways that privilege is taken up in the critical literature. For example, when privilege is positioned in terms of bodily appearance, it is often associated with whiteness; if privilege is discussed in terms of social status, it is considered to be a phenomenon of the upper class or upper middle class. Most commonly, however, privilege falls underneath the umbrella concept ‘normal’ and this equating of privileged bodies with normal bodies maintains the invisibility of privilege, as the position of ‘normal’ is one that is unacknowledged and, often, unconsidered. As I made clear in Chapter 2, while the study of white privilege and gender privilege, via whiteness studies and feminist theory, is a crucial undertaking for the deconstruction and demystification of privilege, advances in the study of privileged identities beyond race and gender are still lacking.

Using a multi-site approach certainly added to the ways that identities were seen to impact classroom climate, expectations about course topics, and the levels of comfort that various students expressed based on who was in the room with them. Yet, the most interesting theme that emerged based on these two locations was how similar the (non)experience of privilege was for the students and instructors in the classroom at both institutions. While it is seemingly more plausible that privilege (and oppression) can be made invisible at NU, what I found in this study was that whether privilege was made visible and explicit in the classroom seemed to have less to do with where the classroom was located and more to do with who the instructor of the classroom was. Instructors’ reliance upon the understanding that power can be possessed rather than enacted consistently positions the self as something that has been achieved, rather than something that is always already in
a state of *becoming*. To theorize privilege and oppression as existing upon the same, fluid network forces the awareness that privilege and, by common extension, power are woven throughout our identities in ways that are nuanced and crucial to the ways identities must be studied, taught, and learned.

While a critical discussion on privilege is perhaps becoming more common, my study makes it evident that the theoretical aspects of privilege do not necessarily translate into making privilege an easily learnable or teachable concept. My first research question asks “How do students in higher education who are engaged in critical identity studies interpret privilege, both for others and themselves?” and, oddly enough, the phrase that keeps appearing in my mind as I think through the answer is “quietly. They approach privilege quietly.” I believe their quietness, discomfort, fear, and uncertainty is due in large part to how embodiments of privilege are often named in accusatory terms; privileged identities are almost always synonymous with identities that serve to oppress Others. As I did not explicitly use the term ‘privilege’ throughout the interviewing process (because of the difficulty the students had engaging with the term itself), discussions of identities and space as they relate to power was how I unearthed the majority of the participants’ understandings of privilege. In so doing, it became clear that privilege, while inherent to all aspects of identity, is not something readily called upon when describing one’s identities. In fact, when I asked the students to describe their identities, very few critically self-reflected on the relations of power that are entwined with their identifications; rather, the majority of the students did not position themselves as anything beyond ‘normal,’ and others individualized their identities so as to seemingly depoliticize themselves. Interestingly, those students who were able to engage with the complexity of their identities did so, as I mentioned earlier, primarily through their understandings of the power that they understand as Others having/not having. Inherently problematic here are the ways in which power, as
it relates to privilege and oppression, is predominantly understood by the students within the dominant discourses of *power over*, rather than *power with* (Kreisberg 1992); the students are often taught to see privilege and oppression in oppositional terms, rather than as working within the same network of relations regarding enactments of power. Through my study, it has become clear that using this notion of a network would be useful to students, so that they can understand that each of us exists along this network of privilege and oppression and that no body is ever on the outside of it.

The theme of relational power dynamics continued within my analysis in Chapter 5, as I addressed the identity discovery that students experienced within the critical identity classroom. Realizations of identities were most commonly associated with discovery of privilege, such as coming to an awareness of being white or able-bodied. A number of the students addressed the difficulties they experience because of how psychologically weighty these discoveries can be, leading them to feel uncomfortable, experience guilt and fear, and/or question their ‘truths.’ These difficult realizations were often intimately tied to the academy; white NU students and their discoveries of white privilege, for example, seemed unattainable without the space of the critical identity classroom and the instructor who guides it.

The majority of the instructors, while embodying privilege in many ways via the function of their position, also attempt to convey to their students the complexities of privilege. While some of the instructors emphasize privilege far more than others in their teaching, all of the instructors expressed awareness that privilege should be a critical component to their courses. However, many were unsure of how to include the study of privilege beyond introductory texts, such as McIntosh’s (1990) piece. Increasing the social dialogue on privilege as inextricable from discussions on oppression and marginalization would certainly aid in the ability for all classroom participants to place themselves within a relationship to enactments of power as a perpetual presence within their
lives. Encouraging this social dialogue, in my opinion, needs to originate in the academy so as to destabilize the term from its normalizing confines and encourage actual conversations – in a variety of educational spaces – about how and why privilege matters.

In Chapter 7, I focused on the explicit discussions of privilege in our interviews and concluded that the ways in which the students and instructors engaged with privilege points to the problem of the absence of critical dialogue on privilege in higher education. The participants in this study have an interest in identity. They study identity because many of them want to think critically about their relationship to gender, race, class, sexuality, and (for some) disability, but it is telling that these two groups of people, studying in two different locations, experience hesitation, confusion, or even embarrassment when the subject of privilege arises. Studying, teaching, and learning about privilege and oppression positions our personal, social, and political lives within a far more holistic and informed framework – a framework that encourages a clearer vision of the social structures that affect systemic inequality in social life.

Limitations and Limitations as Contributions

As with any study, there are limitations to what can be accomplished and known based on the efforts of one (new) researcher. Importantly, I see the majority of these limitations as contributions as well. As much of my work revolves around critical reflection, I feel that it is important to explore and reflect on the ways in which my methodology produced results that were unexpected due to the practical limitations, expectations and recollections within interviews, contradictions, and some confusions of terminology.
General Limitations

Practical limitations of a study of this kind are decidedly the most obvious. Participant observation would have garnered rich data regarding the ways I could have combined participant reflections on their experiences in-process if I had access to see them within their critical identity classrooms. Further, explorations into how the experiences of students and instructors in Canadian critical identity classrooms compare to those in other countries would add nuance to how discourses of identity and privilege manifest through various (inter)national academic contexts. However, the length of time, access, and financial support that I would have needed to conduct such a study would not be feasible within the time limits and financial constraints that exist during the course of a doctoral degree program.

Other limitations in this study are based on the concept of reflection and experience. As my approach to this study was based on the use of reflection, it is crucial here to add to what I discussed in Chapter 3 and think through the limits of reflexivity. As Audrey Kobayashi claims,

While reflexivity is an important, and some may say essential, aspect of recognising the difference between the studier and the studied, and even in some cases of taking moral responsibility for that difference, indulgence in reflexivity is ironically the very act that sets us apart. Reflexivity thus opens us to the charge not only that it is a selfish, self-centred act that is the very antithesis of activism, but that it can even work actively to construct a sense of the other, to deny the reflexivity of others, and to emphasise the condition of detached identity. (Kobayashi 2003, 348)

The use of reflection to study experience is fraught with complexity, as experiences are mutable, interpretable, and reliant on recollection and a willingness to engage them. Clearly, the students who volunteered for this study have some interest in participating in a dialogue about education; it is
impossible to know, however, what the rest of the students who did not volunteer to be interviewed have experienced in the critical identity classroom – these experiences could be similar or they could be entirely different. Further, the limits of my own experiences have informed my approaches to the analyses offered in this study. For example, I am not yet an instructor; as a teaching assistant and student, I have had many experiences in these types of classrooms, but my perspectives on the position of an instructor is decidedly from that of an ‘outsider.’ The following section speaks to the limitations of experience in more specific terms.

*Expectations and Recollections within Interviews*

As Davies claims, “[f]rom a poststructuralist perspective, there is no longer any ‘real’ lived story. Stories we observe, hear, and read, both lived and imaginary, form a stock of imaginary story lines through which life choices can be made. The choices I make in any current moment will depend on the story line I take myself to be living out” (1992, 69). As with any qualitative study that relies on the memories of the participants to create the narrative under analysis, what is significant or important to the participant in the moment of the interview may be quite different from how that same participant would answer my question years, days, or even moments later. Similarly, what participants may say about the classroom may dramatically differ from what they do in the classroom. As part of my methodology included the use of reflective journaling following our interview, I wanted to speak to this dilemma of interviewing while also giving the students a voice in a forum that was temporally and spatially distinct from the interview itself. This distance from the interview could allow students to recollect on our conversation and speak to the original experiences that they expressed to me during the interview setting.

Some have argued that there are tensions in the interviewing process where participants may feel an expectation “to construct a cohesive narrative out of their lived experiences,” which “often
leads to a degree of artifice in the resulting data” (O'Connor 2007, 262). While I agree with O'Connor in terms of the power of the researcher (or even just the position of ‘researcher’) to impact the ways in which participants construct narratives, I also think that being conscious of that possibility in the interviewing process can be crucial to the deconstruction of that dynamic. For example, when I asked Devra, who was describing her identity to me during the interview, if she was saying what she thought I wanted to hear, she admitted that she was.

Devra: I’m a 26 year old, woman, who is, um, trying to get through university to make it to be a teacher, um, I’d say I’m shy but not as bad as I used to be. I’m [3 second pause], I don’t know whether to say white or Caucasian now. [laughs].

Victoria: I think that’s because we have been talking about it now, so that has influenced your answer.

Devra: I guess I would say one of those....?

Victoria: Would you actually say either?

Devra: No, I just said that because I thought you wanted me to. I’m so glad you are okay with that! [laughs].

This scenario demonstrates that it is possible to ‘read’ your participants in such a way that it may lead to a recognition that they are saying what the researcher wants to hear, based on the earlier responses that they have given in the interview. It was very important to me during the interviewing process to carefully manage the power dynamics (as much as I was able to) in order to disrupt the moments, as I did above, where I realized that the power of my position (and the power inherent in a research context) was impinging upon the research process.

It is my contention that attending to the difference between one’s recollections versus the ‘real’ version of how the events may have taken place should in no way be a deterrent from engaging
in such research. As Davies articulates above, there is no longer any ‘real’ lived story and so the purpose of my research is not to capture the ‘real,’ but rather to explore the significance of the feelings and meanings that are thrust upon us based on the experiences that we have had. It is through these meanings that we come to understand ourselves and those around us.

Contradictions

As I have articulated in every analysis chapter that I wrote in this dissertation, contradictions are inherent to the study of identity. As Davies contends, “[w]ho I am potentially shifts with each speaking, each moment of being positioned within this or that discourse in this or that way” (1992, 57). Clearly, these shifts need not be contradictions, but when they can be seen to be contradictory – as with Jackie’s interview discussion of her Aboriginal heritage and subsequent journal reflection that she felt that she lied in the interview, as she does not regularly identify as Aboriginal – these contradictions should be explored rather than problematized. To speak of ourselves in multiple ways, even in conflicting ways, points to how fluid our identities can be and how where we are affects what importance we place on certain aspects of ourselves: “For instance, in one location a participant may assert one identity, such as that of political official, and in another location answer interview questions from a different perspective, such as that of concerned parent” (Elwood and Martin 2000, 652-3). Natasha spoke to these poststructuralist-infused contradictions beautifully when I asked her to describe how she understands her identities.

Natasha: I think it depends on where I am identifying. I think if it is in a school setting and I need to identify for academic reasons, I put my disability first. Above white or female because it changes how people understand me and what I’m doing. In my work profession, I think because I look young and I am young, I have to identify myself by my professional work role and my work status... I think we show different sides of ourselves depending on
where we are. I think we also, um, have sort of a fake identity that we will also put forward because we are afraid to define who we are in some contexts, which is odd for me. I mean, this is a massive contradiction for me as an advocate for social justice, but I hide my disability in moments where I know it will benefit me to do so and yet that contradiction is something I am okay with...for right now anyway.

The various selves that we embody exist within a range of subject positions available for us to take up (or not) for, as many of the students contended, the priorities of their student-self may not align in desirable ways with the other roles that they embody, such as daughter, employee, or partner.

Confusion of Terminology

The dialogues that the participants and I created together are – in and of themselves – an interesting space for exploration. Thinking through the physical dynamics of such encounters points to how many levels of analysis are possible within a study of this kind; even those interviews that were conducted over the phone have interesting spatial dynamics via the rooms in which we were, the time of the day the conversation occurred, and/or who else could have been in the room with us.

In my Master’s research, I was inspired to further explore the barriers of communication within the interviews that I conducted with kindergarten teachers, as it became clear to me throughout the process that the concepts and terminology that we were exchanging could be (and were) understood by each of us to mean various things (Kannen and Acker 2008). As this dissertation is far more focused on exploring the terms of identity, I decided to interview those with a fuller grasp of the concepts that we would be exchanging in the hopes to avoid some of the barriers of communication that I previously experienced. As was evidenced throughout the majority of the discussions that we had, there were very few barriers to communication based solely on the terminology that we were using. As with any discussion of an academic nature, there were moments
of confusion in the interviews, as some of the students had never thought to consider how they would identify themselves before, or when some others asked if I could define the term ‘privilege’ for them because they were not sure how I was employing it. Of more significance here is the student resistance to certain terms based on their social significance.

Interestingly, two white NU students expressed in various ways that before entering into higher education they considered themselves Caucasian because they never knew that they were white and so I asked these students to clarify how they understood the difference.

Devra: I know this is weird, but I always thought of myself as Caucasian...like both my parents are, like my dad was adopted so we’re not sure of his background, but somewhere down the line, I know my grandma...there is some Native back there, but I don’t have a status card though... So I know that much, but I always considered myself Caucasian but then, this is probably the first year where I would see myself as a white kid, you know?

As I was still unclear by this answer, I probed further.

Victoria: By Caucasian, you mean...?

Devra: Like, not as white as white people.

Similarly, René claimed that she understood Caucasian to mean “more oppressed than white people...like a real race, I guess?” The term Caucasian has had many meanings, but in more contemporary dialogue the term has been used to connote Europeanness: “...modern racist domination has been bound up with the history of how European peoples defined themselves (and sometimes some other peoples) as members of a superior ‘white race’” (Baum 2006, 247). Currently, the term is considered by many scholars to be outdated, which is why I was particularly surprised that two of the students considered themselves within its understandings and other students that I interviewed had also conflated its meaning with white. Interestingly, I could find no definition that
incorporated Aboriginality to relate to its usage (as Devra did), nor has it been used to determine a group of less-white white people as per René’s understandings. Bruce Baum argues that the ‘Caucasian race,’ in the ways that it was used since the early twentieth century, was developed by European scientists and ethnologists to signify ‘“racial” and civilizational superiority’ by emphasizing ‘racial’ differences between white and non-white ‘races’ in order to maintain a “rationalized global white supremacism” (2006, 247). The conflation of terminology in this way is telling about the lack of social discourse on privilege, specifically with regard to whiteness and the histories associated with it. Antiquated and refuted ‘scientific’ classifications of identity are being (mis)used by these students as a way for them to make sense of who they are and how they fit within the social and historical climate of race and identity.

As I discussed in Chapter 5, Lenore, a fourth year student completing a major in women and gender studies, conflated Aboriginal with any person who is non-white. She confused this terminology throughout our interview, but in one particularly clarifying moment, Lenore’s discomfort with the presence of non-white people at SU became clear.

Lenore: I find our women’s studies classes have been completely dedicated to, I don’t know [sigh], “other women”....like Aboriginal women and that kind of thing. I don’t like that because everybody that I know, my best friend goes to Trent and she is two years ahead of me. She was always saying “Go take women’s studies, it’s great, you’ll learn so much about yourself”, but I feel like it hasn’t taught me about myself because it has specifically focused on people, Aboriginal whatever, and that’s not what I signed up for. I want to learn about me. Lenore, a white woman, consistently expressed dissatisfaction with her educational choices and how she feels that studying race in women and gender studies was both “unnecessary” and a “waste” of her time. Here, Lenore’s interest in desiring to learn about herself speaks to discourses that have
encouraged her, as a white woman, to place herself as the centre: “...in the face of antiracist challenges many white feminists may feel that it is their self-image – as good, implicitly nonracist people – and particularly their shared moral identity as feminists that is under siege” (Srivastava 2005, 30). Further, confusion surrounding identity, specifically for those engaged in the study of identity, may have less to do with general misunderstanding and more to do with the social discourses that place us inside and/or outside discourses of privilege and oppression. It is our contingent subject positions within privilege and oppression that can lead to the extent of our engagement with certain topics at certain times in certain spaces; a desire to further explore our relationship to these issues is required, however, so as to no longer rely on muddled understandings of the possibilities of identity. As a conclusion to this section, I do not understand any of these moments of limitations to be failures, as they contribute to an understanding of the ways in which identities are complex, fluid, and cannot be wholly captured through any methodological process.

**Looking Ahead: Continued Reflections and Future Research**

Exploring the ways that people understand their education as it relates to their identities is a captivating, yet nerve-wracking study to undertake. As Bourdieu asks, “[h]ow can we not feel anxious about making *private* words *public*, revealing confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on a trust that can only be established between two individuals?” (1999, 1). The nuances of teaching that the instructors expressed regarding the desire for openness with a required balance for caution also spoke very clearly to the ways that I approached the interview process. To speak with people about the multiplicity of their identities—something not many are used to being asked to do – required the development of mutual respect and trust in a fairly short time. Many factors combined to allow each situation to unfold as it did and, while there were some
uncomfortable moments, the experience of researching and writing this dissertation has been undeniably life-changing for me. Not only has the creation of this dissertation run alongside the birth of my daughter, but the ‘birth’ of this study has only encouraged me to further engage with identity studies and education.\(^{67}\)

I will use this last section to continue reflecting on the project in terms of what this work has contributed to the study of privilege and identity studies (Reflections: The Functions of Privilege). Throughout this dissertation I have also left a trail of questions for myself – in my notebook, on my computer, random sticky notes stuck to my desk, and those that are ever-emerging from my mind. In a section entitled Moving Forward: Possibilities for Future Research, I discuss some of the thoughts that I am left with as this study nears its conclusion, and where I believe these thoughts and questions may lead in terms of future research.

**Reflections: The Functions of Privilege**

Privilege is everywhere and it interacts with everyone. In the critical identity classroom, privileged identities are embodied and fluid, as are oppressed identities. Many privileged identities are fluid as they are identities that can change over time; for example, age, ability, social class, social position, and political affiliation can all be considered transitory categorizations that are alterable and interpretable. While privileged identities are also ever-present, processes of normalization render them in/visible. As privilege is under-theorized, as demonstrated not only through my literature review in Chapter 2 but also by the over-reliance the instructors have on the few texts that speak

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\(^{67}\) My intentions for this dissertation are many, but some of the underlying contributions that this research study offers are less explicit than some others that I have already explored. Specifically, I have received many compliments from those who have encountered pieces of this work over the years that it has been becoming what it now is; the comments that stick out in my mind, however, are not from academics, but those who have little to no experience in the academy – such as my parents. Although, this thesis employs what my father calls “25-cent words” that “bewilder” him, I am proud that he can engage with it and find (most of) it accessible. I have struggled throughout the years with dense theory, often wondering if I am the only one who doesn’t always enjoy having to twist my mind around the same few, albeit amazing, quotes for an hour or more. It is my hope that this work will not only be read and engaged with by those who love me and/or have been in academia for the majority of their adult lives.
directly to it, the study of privilege becomes intimidating and, often, avoided in the critical identity classroom.

Feeling uncomfortable in a critical identity classroom does not have to be seen as hindering the process of critical education. Boler articulates that “a pedagogy of discomfort calls not only for inquiry, but also, at critical junctures, for action – action hopefully catalyzed as a result of learning to bear witness. Just as self-reflection and passive empathy do not assure any change, so the safe project of inquiry represents only the first step of a transformative journey” (1999, 179). In relation to the student and instructor self-reflection stages, many of them are clearly at this important and uncomfortable ‘first step.’ Privilege is not a seen as a desirable subject of conversation. Teaching about privilege is a risk. Learning about privilege is a risk. These risks cause us to confront aspects of ourselves that are (often) so desirable, for the social advantages that they confer, that they become undesirable to acknowledge. Confronting our privileges can unsettle the investments that we have in our social advantages and, perhaps, encourage us to see that our sense(s) of what is right and ‘normal’ depends upon the oppression of an Other. When we do acknowledge and begin to interrogate the relations of power that inform privilege (and our own relations to it), we can be enabled to move forward as learners and educators. It is crucial for students to begin to learn to think in critical ways, rather than to strictly align themselves with the beliefs of their instructors. In Chapter 1, I address the ways in which I know that identities are fluid, but that I feel I am never-not white. Through this work, I realize that I, like the participants in this study, yearn for a space to explore privilege, to explore the aspects of my identities that seem opposed, yet always already inform each other, and to understand that definitive answers are not the goal of this work – the process is.

While I have often spouted the beliefs that the critical identity classroom is a space that enables the potential for personal and social transformation, I also want to acknowledge that it can be
none of those things. As anti-oppressive education is seen to be the mandate for many critical identity courses, this causes students to sometimes align their beliefs with that of the instructor so as to earn a desired grade, rather than express their own, perhaps divergent or less politicized, beliefs. Further, as feminism has become somewhat passé in the academy, it is difficult for academic feminists to encourage their students to explore feminism, as they are often distancing themselves from the ‘bad’ feminists of the past by avoiding feminist-language or ideas. These issues are further complicated by the continued lack of male presence in many critical identity classrooms (especially courses with an explicitly gendered focus); while certain courses may draw in more male students, these courses also have to be “strategically named” so as to not “scare off” men entirely (NU Instructor).

As heterotopic spaces, critical identity classrooms require special access to enter into; these boundaries point to how, for those who can and do enter, these classroom experiences are often only a small part of their life. As Lemons ponders, “I have asked myself the same questions as a black professor (teaching mostly white students over the course of seventeen years), wondering whether white students in my ‘race classes’ leave them to live life ‘as usual’” (2008, 51). This question could be asked of all students who enter into critical identity classrooms as engagements with gender, dis/ability, class, and so on could be fleeting and unmeaningful encounters for some. It is my contention that, even for those students who are resistant to anti-oppressive beliefs, making critical thinking something for students is a tool that is difficult to unlearn once you learn it. As Lemons continues, “[i]f, from the foundation of this nation, it took four hundred years for the institution of slavery to end, how could one four-month course accomplish what took several centuries to even begin to eradicate?” (2008, 179). Obviously, Lemons is implying that it cannot be the point of the critical identity classroom to achieve unreachable ideals, but, as Bushra said in the opening epigraph of this dissertation, her ability to think critically is now “just always around” her. This sentiment was
echoed not just by those who are as immersed in critical identity studies as Bushra is, but also Jackie, Vanessa, Chloe, Katie, Roya, and Rebecca and others who expressed that they can’t watch movies, be in conversations, or think about the world in general without questioning that which they had taken for granted as ‘true’ before enrolling in women and gender studies, sociology, and so on. For me, this is the desire of critical identity classrooms – they can change how you encounter the world, how things come to matter to you, and what you see as possible and transformative for your/the future.

Moving Forward: Possibilities for Future Research

Working within and from critical identity approaches has elucidated for me that privilege needs to be further grappled with; not silenced or ignored, but explored and developed as something that is crucial to the study of identity. For students, critical inquiry into privilege and oppression can develop the conceptual tools to enable a critical engagement with the various appearances, assumptions, and ideologies that they encounter over the course of their lifetime.

There were too many instances in the interviews and journals – where the students and instructors made reference to how they had never considered the importance of how education makes them feel, the significance of it in their ‘outside’ lives, the ways that my questions about their experiences caused them to reflect on their life in new ways, and how no one had ever thought to ask them why they are interested in identity – for me to be convinced that identity is passé. Rather, this project demonstrates that giving space to our experiences of identities in the classroom is meaningful, not only because it contributes in shaping the contours of our lives, but because it speaks back to the ways in which we want to teach, study, and learn.

In Chapter 1, I defined privilege as that which is granted to identities that are, or are perceived to be, culturally dominant. This definition requires more research to be done in order to
expand upon it, as the forms and contours through which privileges are made visible are dependent upon the spaces within which these privileges are located and the processes of recognition and interpretation in which individuals are always already involved. What is the experience of privilege? How can we further explore the ways that privilege functions in our lives in order to name and disrupt its oppressive effects?

It is also my contention that it is no longer in our best interest as critical scholars to teach identity solely through a lens of oppression within critical identity studies. To continue to glaze over the study of privilege not only negates the important contributions of social movements, activists, and critical identity theorists, but it also reinforces the dominant power over discourses of privilege. By not allotting space and effort to the often-turbulent study of privilege we encourage it to go unchallenged, uncritiqued, and unacknowledged. I say this with the understanding that critiques of privilege are still rarely discussed outside of academia, but the effects of privilege and the current cultural vernacular have started to acclimatize to discussions of whiteness and masculinity as socially and culturally dominant, as well as problematic.

As social dynamics, political movements, and academic climates change over time, so do our understandings of the cultural significance of politicized identities. This project has not only inspired me to further explore the silences around privilege, but also the silences that exist surrounding the meaning of higher education in our lives. One of the most significant contributions of this project must remain with the voices of the students. The students in this study offer a call to their instructors. Through the reflections of the 22 students that I interviewed, it is clear that they are asking for their instructors to listen to them because they have something to say about what happens in their classrooms: what is meaningful to them, what matters to them, what they struggle with, and what more they want to know. While these wants and desires may be conveyed differently by each
student, the importance of recognizing that these wants and engagements exist and can be explored is crucial for educators. Clearly, from the depth of their answers, it was not that the interviewees had little to say on the subjects of privilege, power, and identity, but, rather that no one had ever asked them before. In a cultural climate that falsely breeds notions of universal equality and the supposed death of the women’s movement and identity itself, it is now more crucial than ever to explore the meaning of identity studies in our lives, while also focusing on the collective realities that inspire these studies to continue.

As with most qualitative research projects, there are numerous possibilities for the future trajectory of this work. As I said in the limitations section of this chapter, in-depth observation as combined with in-depth interviewing and journaling over the course of a term would do much to speak to the specific kinds of learning, dialoguing, and feelings that emerge from a critical identity course. Moreover, emotions were definitely an avenue that I had not expected to emerge so loudly throughout the study and I see future work in this area delving into the emotional dynamics between what happens in the critical identity classroom and the ways in which students reflect on those experiences outside of that space. Perhaps, an analysis using concepts of affect (Seigworth and Gregg 2010) in order to engage with the nuances, forces, and ‘in-between-ness’ of educational encounters would be able to speak more intimately to notions of belonging and educational possibilities.

While I am concluding this dissertation, it is with the hope that my work in this area will continue. In reflecting upon my experiences with this project over the last few years, what I think has surprised me the most is the joy that has been brought out of the conversations that I have had with the participants. Although many of the conversations that we had were difficult, almost every participant told me how much they appreciated the work that I am doing and how they feel the questions that I have asked should not seem so unusual. For me, this process has fundamentally
changed the ways I understand the relationships between space and identity, while also allowing me
to further reflect on how my body *matters* within the power dynamics of the critical identity
classroom. As I am entering a new phase of my life in the academy, I feel that my work here has
forever changed the ways that I will experience the classroom, both pedagogically and personally – it
is now, and forever will be to me, a hot mess.
APPENDIX A

INFORMATION LETTER FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

(OISE/UT letterhead)

Dear Participant,

I am a third-year doctoral student in Sociology and Equity Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Working under the supervision of Professor Sandra Acker, I am researching the views of undergraduate students and instructors on a range of issues related to identity and understandings of privilege and oppression.

I would like to invite you to participate in an interview that will focus on your experiences in classes that focus on identity. The interview will be a discussion regarding your viewpoints on your own identities and your experiences in courses that take up concepts of power, privilege, and oppression.

For this reason, I am inviting you to assist me by agreeing to participate in the study, which will consist of one tape-recorded interview that will last approximately one hour. For those interested, you may also volunteer to participate in a journaling component following the interview.

All data generated during this study will remain confidential. Neither your name nor the name of your university will be used in the completed study or any other document which may arise from the study, and only Professor Acker and I will have access to the primary data. You will be free to raise questions or concerns with me or Professor Acker throughout the study, and may withdraw at any point within one month after the interview is completed, if you choose. Please be assured that you are under no obligation to agree to participate in an interview and your instructor will not know whether or not you take part.

Although the findings of this study will not benefit you directly, by participating in this study you will be contributing to the production of new and potentially illuminating knowledge about how identities come to be understood by those who partake in socially progressive university classrooms.

Upon request, you will receive a copy of the summary of findings from the study, and can access the entire thesis from the library once it is completed.

Thank you for your consideration.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact:

Principal Investigator
Victoria Kannen, PhD Candidate
647.430.9091
vkannen@oise.utoronto.ca

Thesis Supervisor
Professor Sandra Acker
416.978.0425
sandra.acker@utoronto.ca
APPENDIX B

STUDENT RESPONSE FORM

I AM or I AM NOT (please circle one) willing to be contacted regarding participation in a 1 hour interview for Victoria Kannen’s doctoral study on understandings of identity, privilege, and anti-oppressive studies.

First Name: ___________________________
Last Name (optional): ___________________________

I can be contacted regarding my participation by:
Email___________________________ and/or Phone ___________________________

I am currently in year ____ of my undergraduate studies.

Please return this form to Victoria before you leave class today.

Your willingness to participate is greatly appreciated!
APPENDIX C

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT
(OISE/UT letterhead)

I, ______________________________, agree to take part in a study of how undergraduate students and instructors convey the understandings of identities, privilege and oppression.

I understand that, as a participant in the study, I will be interviewed at a location convenient to myself and the principal investigator and I will be asked to respond to interview questions. I understand that participation in the study may involve discussing my experiences in classes that focus on identity, privilege, and oppression.

I understand that the interview will take about 1 hour and will occur at a time and place that is convenient for me. I understand that I am under no obligation to agree to participate in an interview. I understand that no other student, faculty member or administrator will be informed as to who agrees to participate in the study and who does not, and neither decision will have any consequences for my academic life. I understand that I may refuse to answer any questions, to stop the interview at any time or withdraw from the study within one month after my interview has been completed.

I understand that involvement in the interviewing portion of this project does not require participation in the journaling component. If I choose to participate in the journaling component, I understand that my involvement is entirely voluntary and I will sign a separate consent form which outlines the expectations of that aspect of the project.

I understand that my specific answers and comments will be kept confidential. I understand that neither my name nor the name of my university will be identified in any report or presentation which may arise from the study. I understand that only the principal investigator and her thesis advisor will have access to the information collected during the study.

I understand that while I may not benefit directly from the study, the information gained may assist both researchers and education professionals to better understand identity as it relates to the study of privilege and oppression. I understand that a summary of the findings of the study will be sent to me upon request, and that if I wish I may also obtain a copy of the thesis.

I understand what this study involves and agree to participate. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Name ______________________________

Signature ______________________________
Date ______________________________

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact:
Principal Investigator
Victoria Kannen, PhD Candidate
647.430.9091
vkannen@oise.utoronto.ca

Thesis Supervisor
Professor Sandra Acker
416.978.0425
sandra.acker@utoronto.ca
APPENDIX D

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT – JOURNALING
(OISE/UT letterhead)

I, ______________________________, agree to take part in the journaling component of this study as it relates to my reflections on the interview previously conducted.

I understand that, as a secondary aspect of this study, I have been asked to provide a journal following the interview. I understand that participation in producing such a journal may involve discussing my experiences in classes that focus on identity, privilege, and oppression.

I understand that I am under no obligation to agree to participate in the journaling component of this project. My participation in this component of the study is based on my reflections and thoughts regarding the topics discussed during the interview portion of this project. The length, breadth, and scope of any contributions that I make to the journal are entirely at my discretion and I am not expected to work on the journal for more than 1 week following the interview.

I have been made aware that a notebook and self-addressed stamped envelope will be provided to me by the principal investigator so that upon my completion of the journal I can mail the journal to her at no cost or inconvenience to me. Conversely, if I am interested in discussing the contents of my journal, then the principal investigator and I will meet to discuss it.

I understand that no other student, faculty member or administrator will be informed as to who agrees to participate in the study and who does not, and neither decision will have any consequences for my academic life. I understand that I may withdraw from the study within one month after my involvement has been completed.

I understand that my specific reflections and contributions to the journal will be kept confidential. I understand that neither my name nor the name of my university will be identified in any report or presentation which may arise from the study. I understand that only the principal investigator and her thesis advisor will have access to the information collected during the study.

I understand what this journal involves and agree to participate. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Name____________________________
Signature __________________________
Date_______________________________

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact:

Principal Investigator                  Thesis Supervisor
Victoria Kannen, PhD Candidate          Professor Sandra Acker
647.430.9091                            416.978.0425
vkannen@oise.utoronto.ca                sandra.acker@utoronto.ca
APPENDIX E

REFLECTION JOURNAL INFORMATION SHEET

The purpose of this journal is for you to reflect on the interview that you participated in. These reflections can take the form of writing, images, “doodles”, or anything else that you wish to include.

You could possibly,

- Reflect on the experience of being interviewed.
  - Was the interview what you expected?
  - Were there any questions that surprised you? Troubled you?
- Reflect on the discussion that we had during the interview and add anything you feel like adding.
  - Do you wish you had answered something differently?
- Think/work through any ideas that came up during the interview.
  - Do you think of yourself/your identities in the same ways regardless of who you are with?
  - Where do you experience privilege(s) in your life? Where do you experience oppression(s)?
  - Do you think that the way you appear impacts how others treat you?
- Discuss an experience that you have had since the interview that may be related to our discussion.
  - Think of classroom, family, friend, media, etc. encounters/discussions. Has anything related to the interview?
- Add anything else that you wish to add.

Remember:

There is no length requirement for the journal – include as much or as little as you feel is necessary.

You do not need to keep it for longer than 1 week following the interview.

If you want to discuss your journal with me (or anything else), contact me whenever you like [vkannen@oise.utoronto.ca].

Thank you again for your participation!!!
APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW GUIDE

STUDENTS

Background

Introductions

Brief explanation of project

Discuss their year of study; major(s); age; personal interests.

Possible Questions

  Where do you consider home?

  What made you enrol in courses with a social justice/critical identity focus?

  Could you describe the kinds of classes you have taken with this focus?

  Do you work in addition to attending school?

  What do you plan on doing once you graduate?

Identity

Ensure that a discussion of identity concepts has happened in some way.

Possible Questions

  How do you understand identity – as a concept?

  How do you understand your identities?

  What aspects of identity are most important to you?

School

Discuss the university, City.

Discuss their scholarly interests in more depth – as they relate to critical identity classes and their other classes as well.
Possible Questions

How do you feel about the courses you have taken? If you could go back in time, would you take them again?

Can you describe some of your classes to me? What do they feel like? Or look like?

Do you feel you have learned anything new in these classes?

Does what you study seem relevant in other aspects of your life? Family? Work? Friends?

Are certain classes [or topics] more comfortable for you?

What importance do you place on the role of the instructor?

Power and Privilege

Possible Questions

Have you ever studied the concept of power in classes that you take?

How do you understand the concept of power?

Do you ever think about yourself in relation to power while you are in class? Or in relation to your education?

What do you think of when you hear the word ‘privilege’?

Have you ever studied the concept of privilege? Oppression?

Do you see privilege as something significant in your own life?

INSTRUCTORS

Background

Introductions

Brief explanation of project
Discuss their educational, employment, and activist backgrounds; teaching and research interests; personal interests.

**Identity and Teaching**

*Possible Questions*

- Can you describe the university? Its relation to the city?
- Could you describe the kinds of classes that you teach? Size? Scope? Aim?
- What led you to teach courses on identity?
- Can you describe the students that typically enrol in your courses?
- How do you feel about the courses you have taught? If you could go back in time, would you do anything differently?
- Do you think that you have learned anything about yourself through teaching these courses?
- What do you hope that the students take with them once they leave your course?

**Power and Privilege**

*Possible Questions*

- Are there certain classes or topics that you particularly feel comfortable with teaching? Are there classes or topics that you feel less comfortable or uncomfortable?
- Do you teach about notions of power?
- Has there ever been an in-class scenario where you felt that you had too much or too little power?
- Do you teach the concept of ‘privilege’ in your classes? If yes: What kinds of materials do you use? If no: Why not?
- How do you see students engaging with concepts like oppression? Privilege? Power?
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