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A Visual Inquiry into the Abolition of Whiteness

Abby C. Emerson (Touro University) aemerson2@touro.edu
ORCiD: 0000-0001-5099-3133

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to make sense of how whiteness is constructed and the possibilities of deconstruction. To do this, I pursued arts-based educational research (ABER) methods as a means of creating, entangling myself with, and understanding the data. Through this art-as-research method (Wang et al., 2017), I interrogated what I could learn about whiteness and the possibility of abolishing it through the construction and deconstruction of entanglements made of string. This means of researching whiteness is not one that is universal since art, like everything, is weighted by our racial histories (Kraehe, 2020). However, whiteness leaves permanent marks and makes a severe imprint upon our educational system that could perhaps be better understood through ABER. Ultimately, I turned towards the possibilities found within Afrofuturist art.

Keywords: arts-based educational research, critical whiteness studies, white supremacy

A Visual Inquiry into the Abolition of Whiteness

"Even when they are dangerous
examine the heart of those machines you hate
before you discard them"
Audre Lorde

Introduction

In this study I work to visually interrogate the construction and deconstruction of whiteness. Whiteness is elusive, insidious, and deeply harmful. It consists of an ideology connected to systems of oppression that lives to create hierarchies (Leonardo, 2009; Leonardo & Broderick,

2011; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). For those that inhabit it, whiteness is often invisible (Ahmed, 2007). The project of whiteness in the United States is embedded in education in a multitude of concrete ways: it permeates teacher education certification tests (Fenwick, 2021), teacher candidates' worldviews (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019), and even the classroom curriculum (Picower, 2021). Concern for students, both present and future, who are being educated within a system mired by racism, whiteness, and white supremacy drove this study. To be extremely clear, whiteness is a problem not to be reformed, but to be abolished.

Whiteness can appear nebulous and abstract, especially for those who exist within its grasp. However, it is important to note that while whiteness may appear abstract, it is not. It has material impacts – positive ones for those who are white and negative ones for those that are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Given its elusiveness for white people, I sought to create visual representations of whiteness that could serve as a metaphor. Metaphors can be powerful ways of communicating with people; visuals can also be powerful. Literally entangling the two together, I explored whiteness. I wondered if presenting something abstract and invisible (to some) in a concrete and visual form could help us understand whiteness in a new way. The ubiquity of whiteness and its entrenchment in educational systems is what encouraged me to lean into this way of knowing that goes beyond the textual and into the visual. I take up what George Yancy, in an interview with Daniel Blight for *The image of whiteness,* described as "lingering with the gravity of white privilege and what privilege means within a social ontology that challenges the idea that white bodies are fundamentally discrete, atomic" (Blight, 2019, p. 195). I sought to explore my entangling within whiteness, especially as the artist who constructs and deconstructs it with physical materials. Further, Yancy also notes that, "The process of coming into view raises important questions within the context of critical phenomenology, specifically regarding race as *lived* (author's emphasis, p. 191). As I physically brought a metaphor for whiteness into view with my work, I was not only seeking understandings, but also generating more questions.

This inquiry is nested in my larger study that examines whiteness critically within antiracist professional development for teachers in New York City schools. This paper serves as an opportunity to explore the linkages between the theoretical framework of critical whiteness and methodological commitments to arts-based educational research (ABER). As a white researcher who was raised in a family and community steeped in whiteness, taking the time to ensure epistemological congruity is important to me academically and personally. While researchers are always encouraged to reflect on how well the theories and methods from which we draw are aligned, the reality of engaging in research does not always provide the time allowing for that deeper reflection. In the spirit of slow scholarship (Mountz et al., 2014), this project provides me that time. It gives me an opportunity to ensure I am not relying on the traditionally dominant research methods that feel comfortable and reliable without critical analysis on what an arts-based project committed to critiquing whiteness actually entails.

Towards the much larger project of white abolitionism, this arts-based inquiry engages in the first step of solving the problem: visibilizing whiteness so that it can be ultimately dismantled. Here,

the use of the visual arts is a tool to “help facilitate discussion and movement” towards a future that rids itself of White supremacy (Wilson, 2019, p. 84). In that pursuit I created threaded entanglements. However, most important is not the final products, but what I came to know in the creation process (Barone & Eisner, 2006; Wang et al., 2017). This paper seeks to understand whiteness through a visual process of tangling and detangling white thread (Figures 1-9). It asks, how is whiteness constructed and how can whiteness be deconstructed? While this research bucks against the positivist traces that leave their residue in qualitative research, below I present the study in the traditional journal article format since my work aims to speak to multiple audiences. First, I outline the theoretical framework of critical whiteness studies. Then I review literature where artists and artist-scholars produce artworks and studies that engage with whiteness. Following that, I elaborate on the data creation and engagement process. I then analyze the construction and deconstruction of the entanglements before arriving at a conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

Whiteness

This arts-based educational research (ABER) is theoretically grounded in critical whiteness studies. First, it is important to grasp where whiteness comes from. Casey (2016), in reference to the United States, writes, “whiteness was invented to create a false sense of solidarity between impoverished white servants and their property-owning (both in land and human capital) white masters” (p. 56). White plantation workers in the 1800s saw living conditions more similar to enslaved Black people than to white slaveholders. Therefore, white elite established whiteness as the norm as a means of blocking any class coalition building that would unseat their economic dominance (Casey, 2016; Du Bois, 1962; Roediger, 1991). Throughout history whiteness has shapeshifted and maneuvered to benefit capitalistic demands (e.g., European immigrants being considered white or not based on economic pressures).

Given this historical construction, what is whiteness? One of the challenges of whiteness is that it "is not a culture but a social concept" (Leonardo, 2009). It can therefore be challenging to nail down. Chubbock (2004) writes that “Whiteness comprises ideologies, attitudes, and actions of racism in practice” (p. 303). Whiteness is only a single perspective or worldview, but it is one that is maintained by institutions and systems as dominant (Leonardo, 2009). That constant support from structural factors leads to whiteness becoming a common sense or “taken-for-granted way of doing, imagining, and being” (Franklin-Phipps, 2020, p. 133). The perceived universality and neutrality of whiteness hides its insidious and harmful manifestations. Whiteness is a “master of concealment” (Yancy, 2016, p. 220). For example, whiteness can manifest as passive-aggressiveness towards Black women professors within teacher education programs when white students debate due dates and feedback on coursework (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019). In K-12 classrooms, whiteness can look like white teachers who evade discussions of race with students (Chubbuck, 2004; Pollock, 2004) and with each other (Emerson, 2025). Often whiteness is conflated with white people, but part of the broader work of critical whiteness is building knowledge that separates whiteness from white people while simultaneously not letting white

individuals distance themselves from accountability. Examining the ways whiteness is problematic is central to the abolition of whiteness (Ignatiev, 1997).

Critical Whiteness Studies

Educational research literature often points to critical race theory of the 1970s as the birthplace of critical whiteness studies (CWS), but it is important to also note the foundational role that earlier Black scholars had in establishing the epistemological roots of CWS. Du Bois (1968), who was called the "greatest historian of whiteness" by Roediger (Blight, 2019, p. 159), and Woodson (1926) argued the significance and protean nature of racism approximately 100 years ago. Critical race theory was first established in the legal field before Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applied it to educational research. Subsequently, CWS emerged as an explicitly named and distinct framework for analysis in the early 2000s based on intellectual lineages in labor studies, literary studies, feminist theory, and legal studies. Love (2019) defined it as "a body of scholarship that aims to underscore how White supremacy and privilege are often invisible in society yet are still reproduced" (p. 132). Morrison (1992) also writes:

> A good deal of time and intelligence has been invested in the exposure of racism and the horrific results on its objects. But that well-established study should be joined with another equally important one: the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it...to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination and behavior of the masters (pp. 11-12).

This is important work for the critical whiteness studies and a great deal of scholarship takes up this charge. Yet, rightfully, Matias and Boucher (2023) flag concerns about a shift in the last 20 years wherein critical whiteness studies' *centers* how white people are privileged by whiteness. However, prior work centered how Black, Indigenous, and People of Color suffer whiteness' grasp and the authors caution scholars in the field to not abandon that critical foundation. In what follows, and particularly within my own data creation, I seek to bring together these two emphases. I explore whiteness, but not simply its impact on Black, Indigenous, or People of Color or on white people, but tangling the two together. Matias et al. (2017) framed race as a coin in which one side studies the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and the other studies that of white people. Both sides are necessary and make up a fuller understanding of race and racism. When academic work does not address whiteness, (whether its impact on white people or Black, Indigenous, or Peoplc of Color) white people are able to superficially disengage themselves from the problem avoiding culpability and implication, considering conversations of race as simply about the "Other" (Leonardo, 2009).

Within CWS there is a recognized first wave of educational studies which explore questions related to white privilege and race-evasive identities (McIntosh, 1992; Sleeter, 2001). A second wave of studies digs deeper to interrogate the complexity within white identities and disrupt the race-evasive/white ally binary. Broadly, CWS asks questions such as: "Whose understandings circulate?" (Apple, 2021, p. 190) and asks of white people: "How does it feel to be the problem?" (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013, p. 154). A CWS project necessitates a look at institutions, examining the ways they create and maintain whiteness. Schools are no exception considering whiteness

discourses permeate educational spaces (Leonardo, 2009; Mensah & Jackson, 2018; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2017). Hope lies when we contemplate that whiteness was socially constructed by people (Chubbuck, 2004) and in turn, it can be deconstructed by them.

Literature Review

In this literature review I explore two areas: artists who interrogate whiteness in their artwork and artist-scholars who do the same in their arts-based research. As Morrison (1992) suggests, attention should be given to the perpetrators of racism and their dominant ideologies. To address this problem, I review work by visual artists and scholars that narrow their gaze on whiteness specifically.

Artists interrogating whiteness

The Image of Whiteness: Contemporary Photography and Racialization, a text edited by Daniel Blight (2019) is a visual tool for seeing whiteness' prevalence. The collection of photos offers an oppositional gaze (hooks, 1992), casting a necessary critical eye towards whiteness and its normativity. The book features photography from various artists including Rankine and Lucas' (2018) work titled *Stamped* and two photographs from Gonzales-Day's (2013) work titled *Erased Lynchings*. The first, *Stamped*, interrogates the societal value placed on blond hair through a series of postage stamps. Rankine and Lucas raise questions about blondness as connected to Aryan-favoring European Nazis of the 1940s and beauty more generally today. The photos in the series show zoomed in images of blonde hair on people of many races. Through this work Rankine considers blondness as an extension of whiteness that can sometimes go beyond white people as she works to document the "proliferation of blondness" around her (Blight, 2019, p. 176). In conversation, Blight and Rankine discuss whiteness as a visual backdrop surrounding us that at times requires intentional pointing for us to see it, let alone question it. Differently, but with a parallel aim, Gonzales-Day digitally removed the Black men who were lynched from photos of the lynchings. By removing them from the photos, all that remains are the tree and white spectators. By removing the victims, it forces the viewer to engage with the lynching actors and grapple with the physically violent manifestation of white supremacy and whiteness in which they are partaking. This work takes up Audre Lorde's idea in the poem starting this article; we must examine the "heart of the machines" that we hate. We have to look directly into the painful realities of whiteness even though it might be tempting to look away. Yancy (2016) notes that in whiteness there is always a distortion of the racialized other. The white gaze inherent in whiteness distorts Black bodies and Blackness broadly. Yet, Gonzales-Day's work forces the viewers to look at white bodies and their complicity. The work of Gonzales-Day as well as Rankine and Lucas encourage viewers to question what is considered normative. They do so by turning the viewers' attention to something overlooked (e.g., the lynching observers themselves) or seemingly mundane (e.g., blonde hair), noting the ways whiteness permeates. My work similarly surfaces whiteness through visual methods.

Another work that explores whiteness visually is titled *Captured: People in Prison Drawing People Who Should Be* (Greenspan & Tider, 2016). In this body of work, people who have been

incarcerated painted and drew images of various Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) who have committed environmental, economic, and social crimes. For example, artist Brandon Meyer used pencil, blending stones, and 100lb Bristol paper to sketch an image of Rex. W. Tillerson. This ExxonMobile CEO was included in the *Captured* project for his participation in a company that has engaged in corporate welfare abuse via tax exemptions, fraudulent oil and gas extractions, theft of gas station owners, environmental poisoning, and concealing evidence regarding climate change. As one views the images in this collection, one can see that whiteness works as a buffer for many of these CEOs as most are walking free. Whiteness serves as form of protection (Picower, 2009). Greenspan and Tider's project aims to break through that protective layer of whiteness and critique the CEOs and their actions. Like Gonzales-Day, Rankine, and Lucas, the visual work draws the viewers' attention to the whiteness that creates oppressive conditions for humans and the environment.

The visual works of Rankine, Lucas, Gonzales-Day, and the incarcerated artists like Meyer are not simply artistic statements, but these are educational interventions. They construct a visual curriculum of whiteness that challenges viewers to see, question, and perhaps humbly, disrupt. Their works extend beyond the curriculum of antiracist trainings we might see in schools that review the definition of racism with teachers. They invite viewers into a different way of understanding that is visual but also stretches into the abstract. Their offerings provide educators another possible tool for eliciting understanding from those with whom we work.

Arist-scholars interrogating whiteness

I also turned to educational artist-scholars who explore race (and whiteness specifically) in their teaching and research. For example, Hamlin and Restler (2021) utilized images to create a collective archive that can disrupt whiteness and White supremacy in educational institutions. As part of their workshops for educators, the images invited participating educators to visually see the dominance of whiteness within education. Through this work they also encourage and push towards action by preparing educators for conversations and actions that can change the structural conditions of racism in their various educational settings. Another teacher educator, Franklin-Phipps (2020) also uses visual art to engage white preservice teachers in an embodied pedagogy that resists intellectualizing racism and seeks to grapple with white supremacy on an emotional and affective level. Her utilization of art-based teaching methods such as collage is a refusal to cater to the racial comfort of white students. Similarly, Ohito (2020) writes about her work in a postsecondary classroom where she asks students to create a multimodal essay composition. She considers this fugitive literacy practice as one that helps educators "pivot away from the *disruption* of whiteness and anti-Blackness as a defined target, and turn toward the *destruction* of both as a desirable goal" (p. 186). Ohito's work brings about an important attention to Blackness in conversations of whiteness that she notes is too often overlooked.

In Tanner's (2016) scholarship, he weaves together the drama pedagogy of playbuilding with Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to support high school students in creatively seeing and analyzing whiteness. Like the researchers above, his work seeks to connect students with

understandings of whiteness in a pedagogy oriented towards racial equity. These scholars all outlined their use of the arts with students and as a vehicle to support the development of students' own inquiries into whiteness. There is also a body of arts-based scholarship exploring whiteness that goes beyond the visual and into the sonic. For example, Ohito (2024), mentioned earlier, engaged in a sonic cartography exploring how whiteness shapes the discussions of race in a teacher education classroom through sonic and narrative mapping. Gershon (2019) wrote about a study that used sound arts-based research to document and sonically disrupt the everyday experiences of policing faced by five Men of Color at a "Ridiculously White Institution" (RWI). Blending sound and text, the work critiques the disconnect between liberal diversity rhetoric and the lived realities of racial marginalization. Together, these examples demonstrate how various forms of arts-based methods can uncover, challenge, and reframe the pervasive yet often obscured operations of whiteness in educational spaces.

In framing my work, I also look to the work of Moore (2020). In her dissertation that uses a critical whiteness framework, Moore utilized poetic inquiry to consider how *her* modeling of vulnerability as course instructor in fact reified whiteness. Her engagement with poetry was a more personal process of coming to understand whiteness and its maneuverings. My work is also about my own art-making processes as related to whiteness and what I came to understand along the way.

The aforementioned artists and scholars have established intriguing ways of interrogating whiteness through arts methods. Their works draw attention to and critique its presence in education, business, and even beauty standards. My work extends these conversations by interrogating not just the presence of whiteness, but working to visibilize in material form the processes that go into the creation and abolition of whiteness. How did we get here? How can we get out?

Data Creation and Engagement

I initially engaged with my data, which I constructed, assembled, and continues to be dynamic across a period of four months (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020; Riddett-Moore & Siegesmund, 2012). In doing so, I engaged in a dialogical process where I created and journaled iteratively (Freire, 1968). In my art making, I first inflated colorful balloons and then wrapped them with white, cotton thread (Figures 1; 2; 3). I sprayed them with adhesive and when they dried, I popped and removed the balloons (Figures 2; 3). I was left with several masses of tangles (Figure 4), which I then tied together to make even larger entanglements (Figures 5; 6). After creating the entanglements, I then worked to deconstruct them (Figures 7; 8; 9). The researcher journal I continuously kept paid close attention to not just my artistic process, but my thought journey throughout and what I attended to (or didn't) regarding whiteness. I also debriefed my process with critical friends who gave me feedback and challenged my perspective (Mena & Russell, 2017).

ABER opens ways of coming to know that are more expansive than traditional qualitative research for it has the capacity to "invent fresh ways to show us aspects of the world we had not noticed" (Eisner, 2001, p. 136). In that sense, arts-based methods offer strong possibilities for a study

grounded in a critique of whiteness like this one. Using Wang et al.'s (2017) framework for ABER, this study falls in the category of *art as research* where my process of creating art was an act of research itself. Riddett-Moore and Siegesmund (2012) refer to this approach as arts-based research as studio practice. Whether art as research or a studio practice, this approach emphasizes inquiry through the artistic process. Despite having no formal art training beyond my high school graduation requirement, I selected this approach because I felt intrinsically compelled to do and make. I leaned into Barone's assertion that the artwork can be "good enough" and not necessarily the highest level of technical artistry (as cited in Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, (2008)).

As I worked to consider the abolition of whiteness, I was drawn to methods that simultaneously released the embodied formalities of whiteness I had internalized in my own upbringing as the daughter of two New England pastors. The relationship between the materials and me in my inquiry became important, as Barad (2003) notes:

> Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing' – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation…Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter (p. 801).

I worked to consider the entanglement of myself with the materials as an intra-action between the human and the non-human (Barad, 2007), exploring how the physical matter of the thread, balloons, and glue provoked me. Riddett-Moore and Siegesmund (2012) cite Dewey when they write, "Art has less to do with expressing meaning and more to do with inscribing nonlinguistic thought in physical materials" (p. 106). This study seeks out the latter, while at times certainly falls into the former. Through the process of making, concepts related to whiteness came through; the materiality of the thread and the glue brought forth embodied knowledge that perhaps I was still finding words for. In the act of working with the materials, I was able to meditate and develop new understandings of whiteness. Undoubtedly understandings developed in the process are not aptly captured in words. Yet, now, in writing the manuscript I am tasked with the challenge of expressing both the process and the understandings in a (hopefully) linguistically coherent manner. I do not present the entanglements in themselves as professional works of art. On the spectrum of writing about whiteness (e. g., a dissertation) and taking action around antiracism (e.g., organizing working groups that dismantle structural racism), for me this fell/felt somewhere in the middle. I wholeheartedly acknowledge that the material act of creating art about whiteness does not mean I materially dismantled racism, but the somatic quality of generating art was undeniable and that was important at this point in my academic and personal life.

The field of critical whiteness studies needs ABER methods as it offers a space in which to create research that resists narrow positivist "criteria of validity and reliability or rigor and value neutrality" that is so aligned with the predominant whiteness of educational research (Mulvihall &

Swaminathan, 2020, p. 164). Otherwise, the field risks reinscribing whiteness and its associated values (e.g. overreliance on the written word) in research contexts. The narrowness associated with white supremacist and Eurocentric epistemologies must be expanded (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Arts-based analysis methods are not a magical cure; especially considering the whiteness that penetrates most research at predominantly white higher education institutions (Moje, 2000) or the historically white liberal construction of arts education generally (Kraehe, 2021). Yet, ABER has the potential to crystallize thinking that is much more expansive than traditional qualitative research (Ellingson, 2014). In that sense, arts-based analysis methods offer strong possibilities for a study grounded in a critique of whiteness like this one.

Despite the cohesion between ABER and CWS, there is also tension between the two in this project. Scholarship has addressed this concern wherein the arts is "White property" (Harris, 1993) or a "bastion of white liberalism" (Kraehe et al., 2018). So, what are the implications of critiquing whiteness using a tool (the arts) that is sometimes ensnared in whiteness? Does this not echo Lorde's often quoted (1984) "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 97)? Can we ever abolish whiteness using the same tools it has co-opted to oppress? These are important questions, but I am reluctant to give up the arts to whiteness. While the arts have been patronizingly used by white liberals to "civilize" Students of Color in school settings, art can also be used in transformative ways that resist (A. Kraehe, personal communication, April 28, 2021). There are thousands of years of art created not in the service of whiteness that would be nonsensical to ignore (McDermott, 2021). For example, Afrofuturist art offers forth very powerful visuals that give little credence to whiteness (Anderson, 2016). Later I will discuss the possibilities of those works in imagining beyond the abolition of whiteness.

A further tension must be acknowledged in my positionality as a white researcher. Whiteness has a stronghold on white people across diverse intersecting identities (e.g., different classes, across all genders) and I am no exception. When I entered teaching in the United States over fifteen years ago, I held a white savior mindset whereby I believed that my work with elementary school Students of Color was to share my ways, beliefs, and privileges with them. I held a distorted view of whiteness that was painfully grounded in anti-Blackness. I understood Blackness like Ohito's (2020) white students understood it: "brimful of problems" (p. 213). Over time I participated in many contexts, moments, and learning experiences that ruptured these deep misunderstandings, helping me see the devastation of whiteness and beauty of Blackness. As much growth as I have made, my thinking and analysis is always emic to whiteness and therefore inevitably falls short when it comes to racial analysis. According to Yancy (2016), "even the field of one's white gaze continues to construct the social world falsely" (p. 236). That is relevant here. Further, for a white researcher such as myself to devote time, energy, and resources to studying whiteness as an object (versus taking action outside of academia to dismantle it from educational spaces), am I not reifying and strengthening its existence? Ahmed (2007) asks, "Could whiteness studies produce an attachment to whiteness by holding it in place as an object? Such questions are addressed by scholars not in order to suspend the project of whiteness studies, but to consider what it means for a project of critique to be complicit with its object" (p. 149). In turn, I hold space for this

tension in the study here. Part of the larger project of abolitionism means abolishing whiteness and that means I must constantly work to extricate my thinking from whiteness. The analysis that follows is deeply connected to me and my reluctant home in whiteness. Undoubtedly someone else might have different interpretations and I welcome the reader into that thinking alongside me.

Discussion

In this section I present and analyze my process of creating the visual constructions of whiteness, the tangles. As I take the reader through my making practice, I also discuss my thinking around the construction and deconstruction of whiteness broadly.

Constructing Whiteness

Figure 1. Construction #1. Balloons, white cotton thread, spray adhesive

The process of creating a visual whiteness highlighted the significance of the material: thread. As I wound the thread around the balloons, each individual thread seemed soft, flimsy, and fragile (Figure 1). However, it was strengthened when it was tangled with and adhered to the other threads. Whiteness works in similar ways. It is constructed and strengthened when people network together, explicitly and implicitly, to uphold it. They do this through institutions (Kendi, 2019), through individual actions and behaviors (Picower, 2009), and even through ideologies (Leonardo, 2013). The threads represent the "connected systems of oppression" (Utt & Tochluk, 2020, p. 127) that create and maintain stratified hierarchies along racial lines.

There is tension in my choice if materials. The cotton thread is reminiscent of the cotton industry in the United States. This industry dominated not just the southern states where enslavement had a stronghold, but textile mills that processed the cotton in the north as well. The supremacy of whiteness in the United States is built upon the enslavement of African peoples and their forced laboring with cotton (Asante, 1991; Hannah-Jones, 2019). Since the cotton boom of the 1780s, "Southern planters understood that their cotton kingdom rested not only on plentiful land and labor, but also upon their political ability to preserve the institution of slavery" (Beckert, 2014). The white ruling class developed their economic capital that would sustain them for generations

while simultaneously developing the concept of whiteness to maintain it. Whiteness, as it is often conceptualized in the United States, was born out of enslavement, cultivated by enslavement, and is one of its legacies. To acknowledge that historical entanglement between enslavement and whiteness, it is clear that whiteness is "nothing but oppressive and false" (Roediger, 1991, p. 13). The use of cotton thread to construct whiteness even in this visual exploration is poignant. A material that has become as mundane and ever-present as whiteness itself. It is only through pausing, looking historically, and examining critically that the layers of whiteness (or cotton) can be seen.

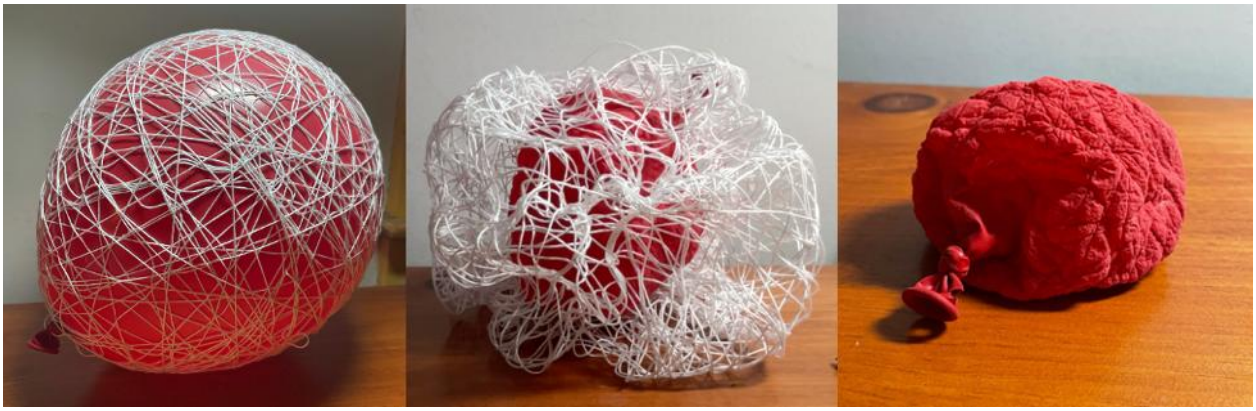

Figure 2. Construction #2

Figure 3. Construction #3

While I was making the tangles I reflected on and analyzed whiteness by attending to the white thread and the way it moved. However, critical friends (of Color!) pushed me to also contemplate the impact the thread had on the colorful balloons (Figures 2; 3). The indelible marks left on the balloons are like scars; the white threads leaving permanent marks on the balloons as they wither

away. In my initial process of creating a visual whiteness, I discarded the colorful balloons once they were no longer of use. However, this action reflects a recent critique made by Matias (2022a, 2022b), Matias and Boucher (2023), and in some ways Ohito (2020) where the way critical whiteness has been taken up in scholarship is devoid of any meaningful engagement with Black epistemologies. Drawing upon the work of Leonardo, Matias (2022) makes the point that, "whiteness studies that fixates too narrowly on white people and the betterment of white people into antiracist beings are in and of itself too self-indulgent, narcissistic, and self-serving" (p. 5). Beyond the field of critical whiteness studies, my removal of the balloons is metaphorical for the way Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are removed from places where they do not serve to the benefit of whiteness. This is parallel to United States' settler colonialism wherein the US government and its actors spent centuries removing Indigenous people from land deemed economically valuable in some way (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Or how in the wake of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision, over 31,000 Black educators were fired or relocated to different schools (Siddle Walker, 2013). In these instances, the actions taken by the US government at federal and local levels indicate that whiteness is held at a premium. Those that are perceived to exist outside of whiteness are subject to modes of control or removal. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color played pivotal roles in the building of this nation just as the colorful balloons played a pivotal role in my artistic creations. Yet, just as I threw away the balloons, in essence, the US threw away – or tried to at least - the very people it relied on for its construction. After these conversations, I stopped throwing away the balloons.

Figure 4. Tangle #1. White cotton thread, spray adhesive

Once I created the smaller tangles (Figure 4), I started to bring them together to make larger entanglements (Figures 5 and 6). In this step I reflected on my internal desire for more. In my research journal, I wrote:

> However, in that desire, I found myself self-consciously wondering how parallel that is to white peoples' (un)acknowledged desires for an expansive whiteness. Leonardo and Broderick (2011) write that "Whiteness is defined as an ideology untied to certain bodies,

> but an articulation of disparate elements—some racial, some not—in order to build a racial cosmology that benefits Whites in absolute ways and [minoritized] groups relative only to one another" (p. 2209). I think for most white people, they don't even realize they are entangled in whiteness, yet it is something so beneficial to them that even when the harsh "disparate elements" are made visible, it is incredibly hard for them to disentangle themselves.

As I worked, I questioned how long to keep building the entanglements and I found a strong internal desire for them to be bigger and take up more space. When would I know when to stop? When would I have enough whiteness? Those questions are provocative when applied to the lived experiences of whiteness also - when will it be enough? When will we reach that point when it can stop? When will enough people mass together to say no more (Ignatiev, 1997)?

Figure 5. Entanglement #1

Figure 6. Entanglement #2

These questions probed me to continue the project, but instead of constructing whiteness, consider what could be learned about deconstruction. If the abolition of whiteness is the aim, could a visual engagement help me understand that possibility?

Deconstructing Whiteness

As much as the construction process was helpful in understanding some of the nuances of whiteness, deconstruction is more important. Within critical whiteness studies, there is discussion as what to do with whiteness. Is understanding and visibilizing it enough? Can whiteness be reformed? The critical whiteness conversations I find most compelling are those that hold the abolition of whiteness as its goal (Ignatiev, 1997; Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996; Leonardo, 2009; Ohito, 2020). Keeping that orientation in mind, I sought about dismantling the whiteness creations I had made.

Mechanically speaking, to find the end of a thread that I could pull or work with to get the process started was challenging. The adhesive had made the entanglements so complicated and so interwoven that it was difficult to find a piece to work with (Figure 7). Whiteness holds a similar grasp over people and institutions. It is complex, deeply seated, violent, and sometimes invisible such that it can be hard to know where to begin. There is a great challenge in finding white people who are willing (and able) to start the dismantling process. It is difficult to find those that will lead the way for other whites. Leonardo (2009) offers a helpful reframing when he suggests that it is not about whether a person is white or not, but the question is what kind of white person they are. Those individual threads that detangled themselves and were able to pull away from the white mass represent those white people who have chosen a different path of existence that tries to step away from whiteness.

Figure 7. Disentangling

The quiet, but incredibly abrasive screeching sound emitted from the string as I pulled it free from the tangle was penetrating. This is a reminder that dismantling whiteness will not happen quietly. It is a loud and sometimes violent process, as the January 6, 2021 attacks on the United States

Capitol Building demonstrated. White people, refusing to accept the election results where their blatantly White supremacist leader was ousted, swarmed the building in a violent attack on a symbol of democracy (Levine, 2022). Just like the string, their screeches were abrasive and jarring as one symbol of whiteness, Trump's presidency, toppled, if only temporarily. This is not to say that Donald Trump's removal from office removes the pervasiveness of whiteness by any means, but his public presence in office, which had been linked to an increase in white supremacist violence (Wilson, 2020), is an important step. To remove whiteness from all facets of society will be met with resistance – both vocally and physically.

Figure 8. Cutting.

The work I put in to untangle individual threads with my hands did little. I had to resort to a method of deconstruction that was bolder, perhaps a bit more violent: cutting. The scissors were the only way to separate the threads and deconstruct the white mass. Deconstructing whiteness in the world must follow a similar path. Like the screeching noise, the act of cutting was a violent process. There is no way that whiteness will fade from our social structure quietly. Similarly, incremental change focused on individuals falls short. It is through larger, systemic change that racism can be dismantled (Kendi, 2019). It will take a radical upheaval of the system to eviscerate whiteness. This is reminiscent of the white abolitionist, John Brown, who espoused and enacted aggressive action in 1859 at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (Bordewich, 2009). After years working within the Underground Railroad and publicly denouncing enslavement, Brown's frustration turned to rage. He felt bolder action was necessary. To be sure, attempting to lead a slave rebellion is on a significantly different level than my act of cutting threads as part of arts-informed research. However, both acts beg questions about the place, or necessity, of violence in the deconstruction of whiteness.

As I worked on detangling the white entanglements, I became impatient. This contrasted curiously with the patience I did have during construction. The process of construction was quicker, and I got faster as I worked. My hands moved automatically in "a felt, repetitive, somatic process" (Riddett-Moore & Siegesmund, 2012, p. 108). Yet with deconstruction, it was more time consuming. I had to put in more sustained effort and put simply, I found it boring. In relation to my positionality: what does impatience with deconstruction mean for a white researcher who relies on frames of critical whiteness? How does impatience serve the broader project of abolishing whiteness? How is it a detriment? Who gets to be impatient with whiteness? Who does not?

My thoughts ventured to possibilities of simply burning the entire tangled mass, which could perhaps be interpreted as abolishing the pieces of whiteness. However, the mechanics of burning, working from home, full hospitals due to COVID-19, my nearby children, and the baby growing in my belly were all factors that stopped me. Burning a mass of string that was covered in industrial adhesive was inherently dangerous and I did not feel artistically prepared to follow that path. Yet I wondered how perhaps those reasons were excuses just like white people use in real life. Abolishing whiteness is an inconvenient prospect and project. There will always be reasons why it cannot happen, but Love (2019) asks, "how and where do we fight?" (p. 121). My fear of burning the tangles was rooted in a desire to not endanger myself, my children, or my home. This is so parallel to white people's desire to hold onto whiteness. Whiteness exists because it gives societal favor to the ways of existing often associated with white people (although not universally and exclusively white people). To give up or abolish the hierarchy that places white ways of being at the top would mean that white children would not be seen as inherently superior to Children of Color. The fear of white children losing out on their (unearned) advantage is an unconscious threat so deep that white people creatively come up with excuses as to why they are not able to participate in the abolition of whiteness.

Afrofuturism & the Conclusion of Whiteness

As I detangled the threads, I wondered how to organize the now unwound threads. I reflected on more questions. What would our world look like after the abolition of whiteness? What would the new organization of people be? How would we operate? Related to these questions, I was concerned that the threads might tangle once again. I had spent so much time and labor unwinding them from each other (Figure 9), I did not want them to quickly go back as they were. How could I organize them so that they would not become tangled again? Contemplating whiteness, it is important for scholars to not just envision what the new future would look like, but how it could be structured so that whiteness does not ever have power in the same way. We must not get tangled in its stringy web again. I sought out intentional forms of arrangement: perhaps individually wound rings, or maybe individual threads not touching the others. This new order of threads felt so sterile. So isolated. It did not seem possible to create a new world using the remnants of whiteness. Instead, something else would have to be created entirely.

Figure 9. Deconstruction

Rubbing a critique of whiteness up against arts-based methodologies gave me an opportunity to think about how these projects are aligned and in tension with each other. I engaged in a research method that entangled my body with the materials in order to produce knowledge that informs my reality. According to Barad (2007):

> Which shifts occur matter for epistemological as well as ontological reasons: a different material-discursive apparatus of bodily production materializes a different configuration of the world, not merely a different description of a fixed and independent reality. We are responsible for the world of which we are a part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped." (Barad, 2007, p. 390)

I did not simply observe whiteness, but my artistic actions symbolized whiteness, produced whiteness, critiqued whiteness, and materially shaped whiteness. This project also gave me opportunity to welcome readers and viewers into thinking about whiteness much like the earlier mentioned works of Rankine and Lucas, Gonzales-Day, Meyer, Hamlin and Restler, Ohito, and Franklin-Phipps. As these point out the problematic presence of whiteness, my inquiry further examines the processes of how we constructed a reality wherein whiteness was dominant. My inquiry also ponders how we can look towards the future and remove the overwhelming presence of whiteness (Sleeter, 2001). Yet my work has limitations. While my inquiry into abolishing whiteness could be categorized as social critique, Haddix (2021) stresses that to know and understand is not enough. The more important part of abolition is pushing beyond - towards imagining, towards building (B. Love, personal communication, July 11, 2022). We are asked to speculate what could exist otherwise. Booker & Vossoughi (2020) describe this process of imagining as a way of preparing. At the same time, Rosa (2020) and Booker & Vossoughi (2020) raise up the rightful concern that there is an immense challenge to imagining a future while you yourself are rooted in a past and present grounded in what *currently* exists. How do we even

imagine a world without whiteness when we are so deeply entangled in it now? To reimagine what society looks like, it does not mean everyone is given access to the oppressive tools and habituses of whiteness, but instead, whiteness is abolished and something more creative, more connected, more joyful, more liberating, and more human is in its place. Where could one turn for such imaginings?

Speculative design encourages us to not look at the constraints, but around them – forcing me to shift my eyes away from whiteness but to other worlds. That is where I turn to Afrofuturism as one such space. The art of Afrofuturism spans many genres including film (e.g., Black Panther), music (e.g., Sun Ra), and books (e.g., Parable of the Sower). According to Anderson (2016), "Afrofuturism is a critical project with the mission of laying the groundwork for a humanity that is not bound up with the ideals of white Enlightenment universalism" (p. 229). It is a "design aesthetic which plays with science fiction, magic realism, and non-Western cosmologies to project forward from the lived realities and (deleted) histories of people of color" (Holbert et al., 2020, p. 329) Black people are (and have been) creative and brilliant in the face of societal constraints (B. Love, personal communication, July 11, 2022). Afrofuturist art offers forth important understandings that could be helpful when we imagine life after whiteness. Just as I turned to art to deepen my thinking about whiteness, turning to Afrofuturist art offers further inspiration. Artists such as Nettrice Gaskins (Figure 10) and Osborne Macharia (Figure 11) among others create works that suggest a future world that is layered, critical, interconnected, multimodal, multiplicitous, joyful, intergenerational, and engaged with technology. Afrofuturism provides a framework to understand the ways in which certain stories have existed, but they have been ignored, silenced, or erased. While Afrofuturism encourages an imagining forward, it also reminds us to look back into the past and make critical decisions about what we can use in developing the new order as well.

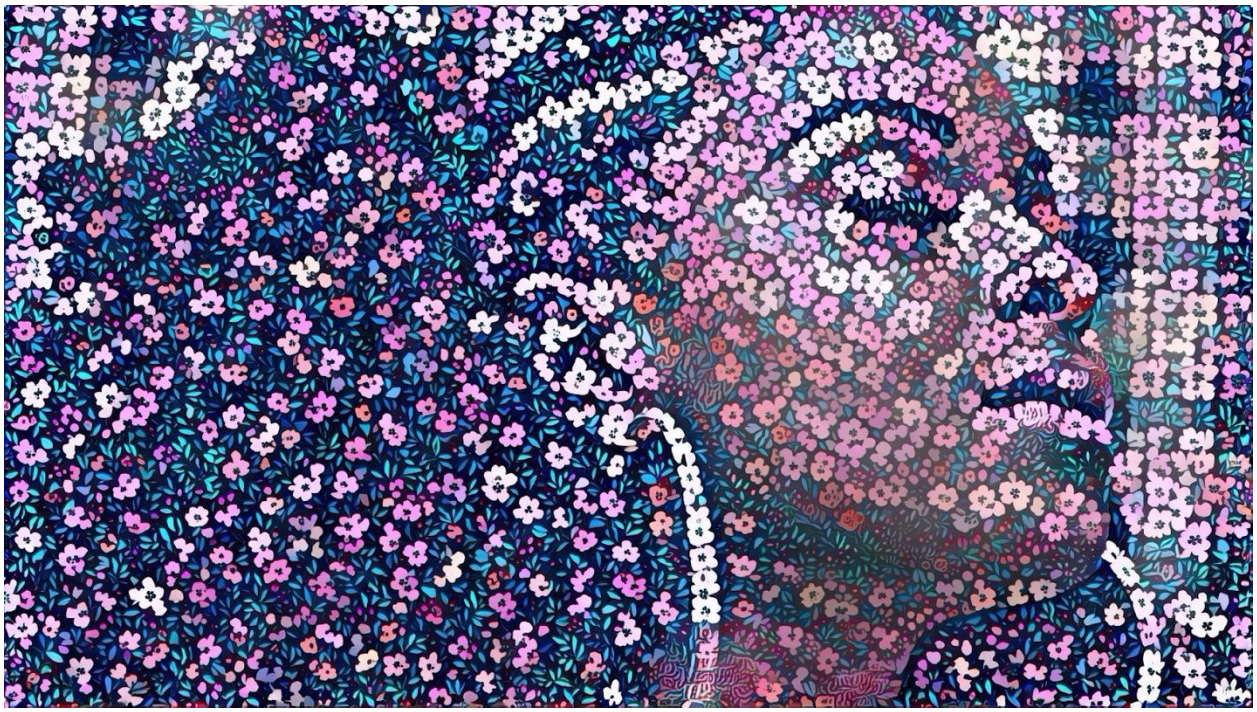

Figure 10. Created using deep learning and a custom, hand colored image style From "Afro Primavera VIII" by Nettrice Gaskins, n.d. Retrieved from https://www.nettricegaskins.com/gallery/afro-primavera-viii

Figure 11. Little is known about them till now… from "Gikosh" by Osborne Macharia, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.macharia.studio/gikosh

There are many scholars who have proven the validity of projects centered on critiquing whiteness (e.g., Leonardo, 2009; Love, 2019; Wilson, 2019), but there is still a gap between this project and racial justice realized in the world. As Garza (2016) suggests "Co-conspiracy is about what we do in action, not just in language" (para. 4). This artistic inquiry is not a means of taking action to dismantle racialized systems of oppression, which is fundamental to abolition. However, it does serve as a reflection on whiteness and its construction, which is a necessary step in its deconstruction. While engaging in whiteness through artistic inquiry, I bumped up against the inherent limitations that project holds. Yet, hope is also central to abolition, and I find myself hopeful when I ponder the possibilities of art both as a method for understanding and imagining a

new future after whiteness

Figures

Figure 1. Construction #1. Balloons, white cotton thread, spray adhesive

Figure 2. Construction #2

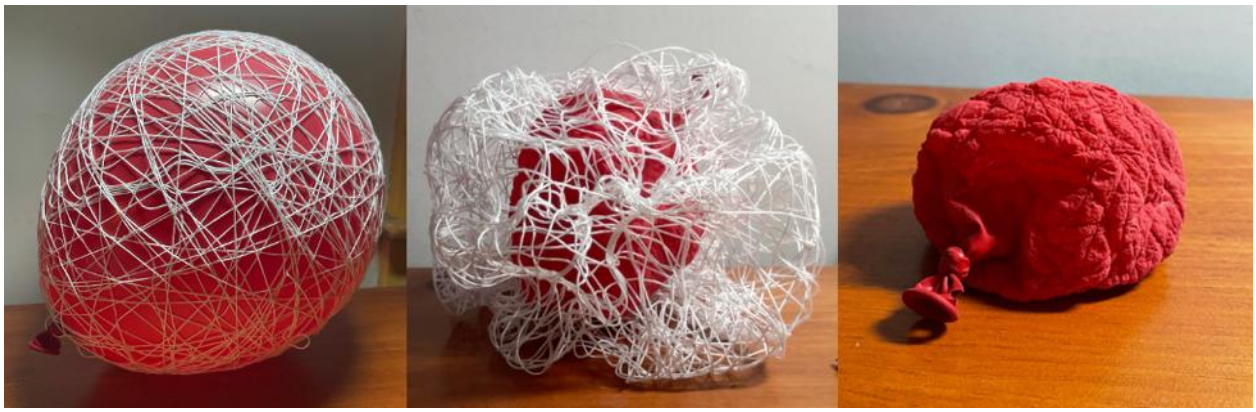

Figure 3. Construction #3

Figure 4. Tangle #1. White cotton thread, spray adhesive

Figure 5. Entanglement #1

Figure 6. Entanglement #2

Figure 7. Disentangling

Figure 8. Cutting

Figure 9. Deconstruction

Figure 10. Created using deep learning and a custom, hand colored image style From "Afro Primavera VIII" by Nettrice Gaskins, n.d. Retrieved from https://www.nettricegaskins.com/gallery/afro-primavera-viii

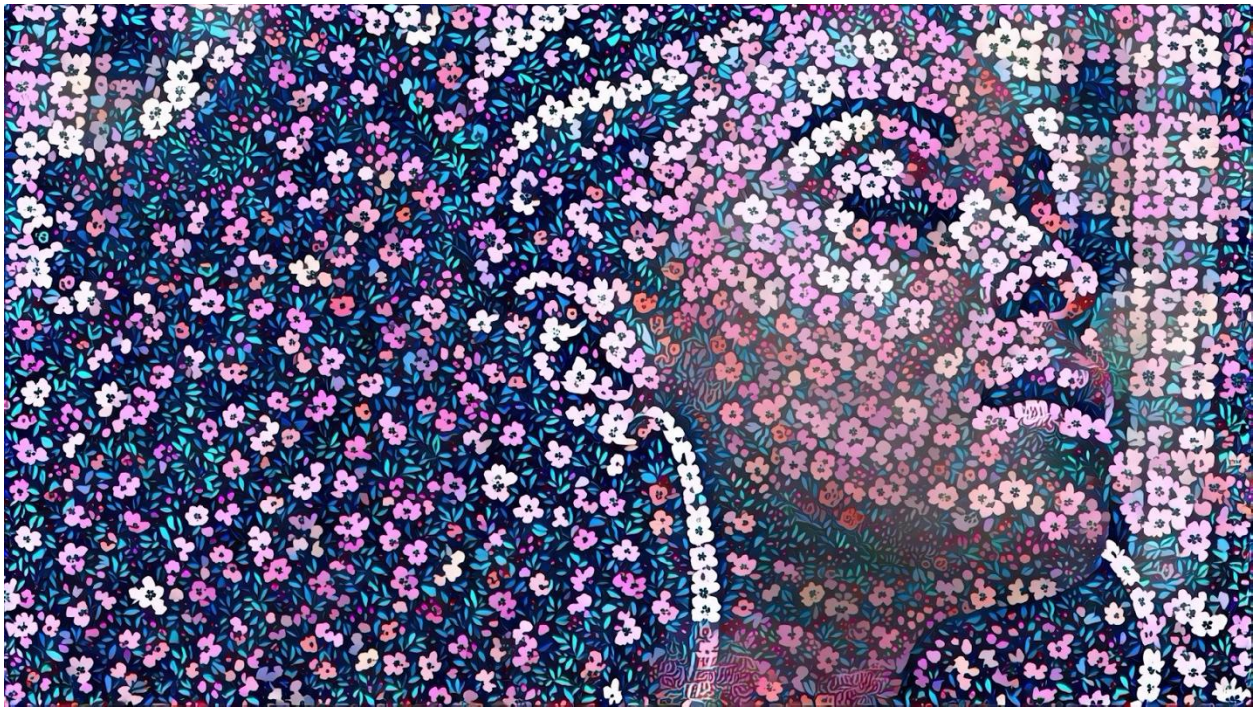

Figure 11. Little is known about them till now… from "Gikosh" by Osborne Macharia, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.macharia.studio/gikosh

Announcement

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