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Stories of Color: An Exploration of Storytelling and Racial Microaggression

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Communication and Performance  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Communication and Storytelling Studies

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by  
Tama Lunceford  
December 2019

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Dr. Amber Kinser, Chair  
Dr. Delanna Reed  
Mr. Patrick Cronin

Keywords: Racism, Storytelling, Microaggression, Performance Ethnography, Critical Race  
Theory

## ABSTRACT

Stories of Color: An Exploration of Storytelling and Racial Microaggression

by

Tama Lunceford

This study examines experiences of racial microaggressions as related to an audience through the art of Storytelling. Integrating Performance Ethnography and Critical Race Theory, it examines how storytelling may serve to illuminate the concept of racial microaggressions. After examining the current body of work on Racism, Storytelling and Microaggression, the author moves through the stories of experiences with racial microaggression from four individuals, gathered and performed as a storytelling event, before a live audience. The communicative management methods individuals use when talking about race and racial microaggressions are explored in presentation of the audience discussion which followed the performance. The author concludes storytelling has merit as a tool for the illumination of racial microaggressions, yet the potency with which racism is ingrained in the psyche of white people in U.S. indicates significant structure must be applied to public discussions of race to support the utilization of storytelling in this manner.

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my most ardent supporter and fan, my late husband Robert Lunceford. For sitting through late nights with me screaming at the computer, for emailing me forgotten assignments, for letting me leave his bedside for teleconferences with my advisor, but most of all for always reminding me I can do this and telling me I'll be great, my gratitude to him is as eternal as our love. Without his love and support I would not have had the courage to follow my heart and embrace such an academic challenge as represented here. Future directions will be difficult without him, but he has gifted me the courage to pursue my dream of making a difference. Forevermore, I thank him.

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This work would be sadly incomplete without acknowledging those individuals who helped to make it a reality. First and foremost is my Committee Chairperson, Dr. Amber Kinser, Chair of the Department of Communication and Performance of East Tennessee State University. The support and guidance she provided were instrumental in helping me to overcome barriers and obstacles, girding the foundation of my critical thinking processes, structuring the study for success, and formulating written material in academic prose. It wouldn't have happened without her.

Next I acknowledge another member of my Committee, Dr. Delanna Reed, Assistant Professor Storytelling of East Tennessee State University. Dr. Reed facilitated the expansion my understanding of storytelling as an art form with applications far beyond just entertaining children. She helped me to embrace and engage the methodology of Ethnographic Performance with all its beauty, nuances and complications. She supported my development as a storytelling artist with her leadership on voice and performance skills.

I would be remiss to overlook the third member of my Committee, Patrick Cronin, Theater Professor at East Tennessee State University. Without his expertise, the script for this study may have proven an insurmountable challenge. He was always there, lingering in the background with a kind word, a small piece of advice or just a friendly smile. The value of his support cannot be discounted when thinking about the arduous task of academic research and the toll on the self that this work demands.

Last, but certainly not least, I acknowledge the four individuals who gifted me their stories for this work. They generously gave their precious time and memories that I might further our understanding of storytelling and racial microaggressions. They received only my eternal thanks for their generosity. I trust this work honors their stories.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	2
DEDICATION .....	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	5
Chapter	
1. AWAKENING TO MY WHITENESS .....	9
2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS .....	16
Racism.....	16
Racism and Identity .....	18
Racism as Microaggression .....	22
Storytelling .....	25
Story/Narrative/Discourse .....	25
Storytelling: Timeless and Universal .....	29
Living and Learning in Story.....	31
The Storytelling Experience and the Potential for Change.....	33
Storytelling and Racism .....	35
3. GATHERING STORIES AND CRAFTING THE PERFORMANCE .....	38
Performance Ethnography and Critical Race Theory .....	38
Recruitment.....	43
Data Collection .....	45

Shaping the Performance .....	46
4. PERFORMING THE STORIES .....	50
Jeremy .....	51
Patti .....	55
Ron .....	60
Paul .....	68
5. FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION .....	73
6. REFLECTING ON THE PROJECT .....	78
Preparation .....	79
Recruitment .....	79
The Interviews .....	81
The Script.....	84
Performance .....	87
Post-Performance Discussion .....	89
7. SURVEYING THE PAST AND THE FUTURE .....	92
Limitations .....	92
Future Directions .....	93
Research Reflections .....	94
REFERENCES .....	97
APPENDICES .....	105

Appendix A: Printed Recruitment Flyer .....	105
Appendix B: Printed Performance Flyer.....	106
Appendix C: Full Performance Script .....	107
VITA.....	125

## CHAPTER 1

### AWAKENING TO MY WHITENESS

A momentous incident of racial violence erupted in Charlottesville, VA on Saturday August 12, 2017. Skirmishes between White Supremacists gathered for a planned rally to protest the removal of a Confederate statue from a public park and counter protesters had escalated throughout the day until the local authorities were forced to announce that the rally was an unlawful assembly in order to curb the growing violence. Shortly thereafter, “rallygoer James Alex Fields Jr. allegedly roared his Dodge Challenger at a crowd of pedestrians. Heather Heyer, 32, of Charlottesville was killed, and 19 others were injured” (Heim, 2017). The brutality of the incident and the voracity of the hate evidenced as the event saturated news media and social media alike, sparked in me an awareness of my complicity, either by action or lack of action, in the persistence of racism within U.S. culture. This awareness demanded further introspection. I embarked upon a journey of personal reflection on the role I play in perpetuating racism. Toward that end I posted the following as a blog to my website. The verbiage I used in the blog was intentionally strong, perhaps even scathing, in an attempt to prompt responses and discussion.

August 17, 2017

It is so hard to admit I am part of the problem. I much prefer to think of myself as part of the solution. In most aspects, and like most people, I am both. I am traditionally educated yet open minded. I am intelligent, articulate, reasonable, and hard working. I am empathetic and compassionate. I am spiritually and morally grounded. Yet none of that negates the fact that I am white.

I am arrogant enough that I think I actually know something. How can I know anything about the sting of discrimination, the horrors of abuse, the injustice of racism? Without firsthand experience, my understanding is inherently limited. My knowledge is based on what I see or hear, not what I know or feel. My perceptions are even more flawed when you consider my self-constricted sources. I live, work and play in a world of predominantly like-minded and like-skinned others. Diversity of any sort is not a strong characteristic of my world.

I am selfish enough to be complacent. My family's economic stability is more important than your social justice. I'll write, I'll march, I'll stand with you; as long as it doesn't cost me anything. I'll like and share on Facebook all day long but don't ask me to show up in real time. Sorry, I'm just too busy scratching out a living under the illusion of the American dream. I need my job and my healthcare. I can't be caught making political statements.

I am ignorant enough to think my impact is negligible. So what if my friend tells me an off color joke in the lunchroom. It's one joke among friends. Who does it hurt? No one but me even heard it. And confronting my friend? No, not me. We've been friends a long time. What would be the point? I mean, it's one little joke. So what if I get her to think before she tells that joke again? I lose a friend over that? And for what? Nothing I do would ever make a difference. I'm just one person. I'm not a racist.

I am an average white American. I am the problem (Lunceford, 2017a).

The post goes on to illustrate ways in which I am also the solution. By acknowledging my complicity in the problem, I am freed to use my resources, "my gifts; my mind, my voice and my conviction. And I tell stories" (Lunceford 2017).

I am a storyteller. I seek to tell stories that matter. That was my response to Kiran Flip Singh Sirah, President of the International Storytelling Center, when he visited our graduate class on Communication Theory and asked why we were there. I tell stories not only to entertain, but also to engage. To quote a former professor “she tackles significant and difficult themes on levels that are political, social and personal, and she handles them using aesthetic devices and bold artistic choices that render them immediate and compelling” (J. Sobol, letter of recommendation, August 31, 2017). Racial inequality is an issue that is definitively immediate and compelling in the current landscape of the United States. My reflections and my passion for telling stories that matter led me to craft stories I felt may help to illuminate racism as it manifests in my life; or as my blog puts it, in the life of “an average white American” (Lunceford, 2017).

My story repertoire contains two stories that address the issue of race; *The Rake* and *The Admission*. Both are personal stories told in the first person. *The Rake* details my first exposure to racism as enacted in my hometown, a tiny, all white village in northern New York. The new corporate ownership of the local paper mill had promoted a black man from Atlanta, Georgia into middle management. When he and his family moved into a small bungalow in the center of town, their presence divided the town along lines of tolerance and intolerance. At the tender age of five years old, I was confused to witness the intolerance firsthand when the local hardware store owner refused to sell a rake to this black man, a manager at the paper mill, even though I could see the hardware store owner had plenty of them in stock. I characterize *The Rake* story as a story of overt racism. It reflects a significant, public, obvious display of racism, an act easily identifiable as abhorrent. *The Admission* tells a different tale.

The Admission recounts a much more recent event wherein I witnessed the vocalization of a racial slur by a white colleague within an all-white assembly of coworkers. My colleague described how she was more afraid of driving through a black neighborhood than she was concerned over visiting her father-in-law, a felon convicted of child pornography. This appalled me. Yet I said nothing. In the end, it is my own silence that appalls me. It is that silence that makes me part of the problem. I conclude the story with the admission that my silence makes me a racist. Here again, as in my blog post, I choose strong language to evoke a response. There are those that would argue my simple act of silence does not warrant such a label as racist. I characterize The Admission as a story of racism vastly different from the racism reflected in The Rake; as subtle racism. In The Admission the racist acts are equally significant and abhorrent, yet not so public and not so obvious. There is a duality in both the original racial slur and my silence which begs to be addressed.

I have come to understand race as a social construct. For many, race is a biological concept. Some researchers ground the biodiversity of race in a difference of geographic origin. Renowned American evolutionary biologist, Ernst Mayr, purported a 'geographic race' as "an aggregate of phenotypically similar populations of a species inhabiting a geographic subdivision of the range of that species and differing taxonomically from other populations of the species" (2002, p. 90). More recently, Hardimon (2003) imparts a definition of biological race as groups of people who have "a distinctive pattern of genetically transmitted phenotypic characters that corresponds to the group's geographical ancestry" (p. 99). Genetic differences have been empirically traced back to the origin of the species. It is the reality of the social manifestation of these biological differences that is relevant today. It is how we use these biological differences to define ourselves and others, to frame our interactions and uphold or disrupt the dominant

narrative of our society that undergirds our understanding of race as a social construct.

Hardimon (2003) depicts the social manifestation of race as the “racialist development of” the ‘logical core’ concept of race as an aggregate of genetic and geographic commonality. He suggests it is racialist development that

motivates the step from (a) representing another group as racially different to (b) taking these differences to be humanly important, to (c) regarding the other group as inferior, and (d) making it the object of hatred and contempt, to (e) imposing upon it involuntary servitude or (f) colonial rule, or (g) attempting the liquidation of all its members—a sequence of steps historically all too familiar. (p. 453-454)

More simply, Hardimon suggests it is racialist development that turns race into racism.

It is logical to me that anything constructed can be deconstructed. If one examines the elements, the compounds, the components, the connections, the adhesions, the intersections of its makeup, anything built can be torn down. But demolition is not always an easy task and it can come at extreme cost. Many times, the elements of construction are forever lost. Race as a social construct has been extensively researched. As a result, many visible, egregious, historically accepted racist practices have fallen out of favor and habit amongst white people. So much so that many white people no longer consider racism to be a significant social issue.

Paraphrasing Herring (2006) and Sack (2008), Bell (2010) states “the majority of white Americans believe that racism is no longer a major obstacle to advancement for African Americans and other people of color, often asserting that we are in a ‘post-racial,’ color-blind era and have moved ‘beyond race’” (p. 30). Yet the stories of racism persist. One need only comb news reports to find daily incidents of racially motivated violence. The recent explosion of racially organized groups reflects the polarization growing in the American public. Conflicts

between longstanding groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and new groups originating on social media such as Black Lives Matter, attest to the voracity of racism as a living breathing force in the hearts, minds and lives of the American people. As a storyteller, and part of the problem, what can I do to slay this beast?

I spent many years working in accounting and there I learned the difference between a single \$50,000.00 debit and one thousand \$50.00 debits. While both have the same ultimate impact upon the bottom line (\$50,000.00), and I could clear either from the ledger with one solitary transaction, their meanings are very different. The single \$50,000.00 debit may be more immediately painful to realize and resolve, but it is the result of a single isolated incident, from a single source, usually with an easily identifiable root problem. The one thousand \$50.00 debits on the other hand, could be from one thousand incidents, with one thousand sources and root problems hidden amongst one thousand variables. Debits repeated one thousand times become common perceptions, which become accepted practices, which become formal policies. To me, the manifestation of racism is like these debits. Stories like *The Rake*, stories of overt racism, those that dominate the public eye, are like the \$50,000.00 debit—significant, public, and easily identifiable as painful. In contrast, stories like *The Admission* are akin to the one thousand \$50.00 debits, where the transgression is less obvious and more frequent. The repetitious prevalence of these less apparent racist acts makes them powerful in their ability to undergird the dominant narrative of white privilege. Here, is where I focus this work.

In the pages that follow, I examine the impact storytelling may have on the spaces of what I have presented as subtle racist acts; otherwise termed microaggressions. In this examination, I move beyond my current storytelling repertoire, into the stories of people directly impacted by racism. To position this work, I begin with a review of existing research on racism,

storytelling, and change. I then recount how I collected the stories of racial experiences from four ordinary individuals and crafted a performance of these stories. In chapter four, I present and discuss the storytelling performance event. I start with a brief description of the setting to include the venue, the audience and my frame of mind as I waded into the performance. Following this introduction, I present each of the stories in turn as scripted for the event. The full script for the event can be found in Appendix C. Each character's story will conclude with a short discussion of my artistic choices and the experience of telling the story. Following presentation of the performance data, I reflect upon the research process and consider whether a project such as this can illuminate the nuanced micro-aggressions of which those who perpetrate them are often oblivious in unconscious furtherance of the status quo. Within these reflections I analyze the preparations, the performance, and the post-performance dialogue in an effort to inform our understanding of the power of storytelling to address the manifestations of racism in everyday life. I conclude with my reflections on the research process and suggestions for related future work.

## CHAPTER 2

### UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS

#### **Racism**

Racism is alive and well in American Society today. In contrast to the poll of white Americans cited earlier (Bell, 2010), a recent poll not segregated by race conducted by NBC News shows that 64 percent of those responding agree that racism remains a major problem in the U.S. (Avenge, Perry & Clark, 2018). I'll examine what current research reflects on the evolution of racism in the U.S, how racism and identity relate, and what is meant by the term microaggression, in turn, but a baseline definition must first be established to ensure a common frame of reference. For the purposes of this work, I use the term *racism* to represent discriminatory thought and behavior based on the social construct of race. It includes “our racialized social practices: practices which cannot be identified or explained without reference to the concept of race such as segregation, racial profiling, and affirmative action” (Hardimon, 2003, p. 437).

The timing of the conception and development of racism, in thought and behavior, is argued to be both relatively contemporary and longstanding. Reflecting on racism as a more recent construct, Bonilla-Silva, Vargas and Jung (2011) remark:

according to the consensus of scholars—it is only with modernity that race even comes into existence as a category of identity and as a social reality. Class oppression may date from the period when technological advance creates a social surplus that makes slavery possible; gender oppression may go back even further, to the sexual division of labor in hunter-gatherer societies. But the advent of race and social orders structured around race is a very recent development in human evolution. (p. 27)

Douglas (2017), on the other hand, purports that the roots of prejudice against black people predate the formation of the United States, stating that “the narrative of anti-blackness became most conspicuous during the Europeans’ earliest incursions into the African continent during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries” (p. 299). Confronting the differences between white and the black “other” led Europeans to a perception of different (from white) as inferior. This pre-nation fixation on anti-blackness indicates such attitudes and practices were already an inherent part of the European founders of our country even before arrival on the shores of what we now call Massachusetts.

Other scholars contend that the roots of racism were written into the very fabric of U.S. democratic society. Lensmire (2017), in unison with Ellison (1986), argues that the Founding Fathers, in constructing our most revered document, the Constitution, failed to enact the document’s most sacred principle, that all men are created equal. When they surveyed the landscape of operationalizing equality, realizing it would mean the dismantling of slavery, and comprehending the economic fallout, the authors of our most foundational tenets “balked in the face of the arduousness and uncertainty of actually attempting to live out democracy” (Lensmire, 2017, p. 48). They failed to establish the inclusive nature of “all,” and ordained, instead, that all white men were created equal. Thus setting the stage for inherent, institutionalized, sanctioned racism as an acceptable practice in American society. As Ellison puts it “the Founding Fathers committed the sin of American racial pride” (p. 335).

This predilection toward anti-blackness paved the way for the flourishing slave trade that supported the economic emergence of our young nation. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) situates the conceptualization of black people as a commodity remarking “At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth four billion dollars, more than all of American industry, all of

American railroads, workshops and factories combined” (p. 101). Even after the end of overt, socially sanctioned slavery achieved at the end of the Civil War, the undercurrent of anti-blackness continued to simmer in the cultural psyche of the post-war power structure boiling over into the creation of Jim Crow laws and other legal wrangling to keep blacks poor, dependent, and uneducated. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s addressed many legal manifestations of racism, but could do little to erode the intangible cultural perceptions of inequality that even today result in racist behavior and violent encounters. Following the Civil Rights movement, what has changed is white people’s conversations about race. Bonilla-Silva (2003) describes how white people have adopted “a language of color-blindness,” enacted through “semantic moves such as ‘I am not a racist, but,’ ‘Some of my best friends are...,’ ‘I am not black, but,’ ‘Yes and no,’ or ‘Anything but race’” (p. 70). And yet, in this era of political correctness, Lensmire (2017) concludes, “a deep, recalcitrant and racist ideology still characterizes white people’s thinking and feeling” (p. 25). If not blatantly, then in the recesses of their hearts, white people still embrace racism because of the functions it performs in their identity and societal roles.

### **Racism and Identity**

Issues related to identity often evoke strong emotions. Race, as both a biological and a social construct is fundamentally tied to identity. One’s racial identity cannot be defined except in relation to the “other;” there can be no white without black. Several researchers ground the emergence of white identity in the formation of the working class and the onset of industrialization. The move of our economic base from farms to factories forced a transition to new ways of being for many Americans. They had to leave behind autonomy in setting schedules, priorities and tasks fundamental to the pre-industrial, agrarian way of life. Family

became secondary to the needs of the job. Severe reprimand and discipline were the tools employed by bosses to ensure workers adopted these new demands. The desires and pleasures afforded in the simple, farming life had to be abandoned if one were to attain the identity of a good worker. In response to the struggles of adjusting to the new ways of life, white people “othered” blacks projecting onto the black population a lifestyle which retained the simple desires and pleasures whites were now forsaking (Lensmire, 2017; Roediger, 1991; Thandeka, 2001). Additionally, with the growing disparity between wealthy and poor whites, black identities, real or imagined, became essential to poor white people in defining themselves. As Roediger states “White workers could, and did, define and accept their class position by fashioning identities as “not slaves” and as “not Blacks” (p. 13). W. E. B. Du Bois (1935/1992) describes the individual rewards reaped for this differentiation as:

A sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks. ... Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. (p. 700-701)

The benefits of othering Blacks became an inherent part of everyday life for white people. This was and is most obvious in consideration of wealthy white people.

U.S. racism has historically functioned as a primary tool for the protection of wealth. Thandeka (1999) argues that in pre and post-Civil War America, “by playing the labor costs of both whites and Negroes against each other, contractors kept the earnings of both groups low” (p. 38). By actively and consistently promoting racism, those with wealth and power co-opted

poor whites in coalition along racial lines, thus preventing coalition along economic lines which contained the potential for revolt and subsequent redistribution of wealth.

Nowhere is racist behavior more evident than within groups characterized as white supremacists. Today white supremacists not only proliferate ideas of racial inequality but celebrate them. This extreme ideology is “not simply a cognitive process; it is a socioemotional process of identification motivated by concerns related to individual and group identity” (Mascolo, 2016, p. 223). Supremacist ideologies magnify the relationship between race and emotion. Mascolo goes on to explain that supremacist ideologies “tend to rise from deep-seated grievances involving strong emotion” (p. 224). This grounding in grievance is mirrored in the Alt-right movement, a subset of supremacist ideology far less publicized. Phillips and Yi (2018) denote perceived “grievances” as a unifying element within the Alt-right movement. Reflecting on the varied beliefs, backgrounds and affiliations of participants in the Charlottesville Virginia Unite the Right demonstration of August 2017 referenced in the introduction to this work, which ended in tragedy, Phillips and Yi (2018) observe “one narrative connected them: ‘Non-privileged’ whites are victims of unfair governmental policies, such as affirmative actions, sanctuary for illegal immigrants, and the cultural cleansing of “white history” (p. 2). Repeatedly, Phillips and Yi witnessed Alt-right participants defining themselves as victims.

Racism, grounded in the political and individual identities of white people, institutionally and publicly rewarded, has become an inseparable element of what it means to be American. Combine this with racist participants identifying as victims and one can see the appeal of the Make America Great Again campaign to racist ideologists. In addition to racist ideologists, many white working-class Americans also identify as victims. As Packer (2016) remarks, the white working class “has succumbed to the ills that used to be associated with the black urban

“underclass”: intergenerational poverty, welfare, debt, bankruptcy, out-of-wedlock births, trash entertainment, addiction, jail, social distrust, political cynicism, bad health, unhappiness, early death” (p. 3). Packer goes on to explain these voters “are driven by a sense of violent opposition: against changes in color and culture that appear to be sweeping away the country they once knew” (p. 7). The white working class is reacting to perceived losses they had suffered as a direct result of racial progress. These voters see themselves as victims of the system that is now attacking their superiority. They react by supporting the election of Donald Trump.

Researchers and media alike have argued that the rise in racism is not only supported by but also perpetuated by President Donald Trump. In a guest editorial for the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Maulana Karenga, Ph.D., Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; and Executive Director of the African American Cultural Center writes:

He has used against whole peoples words such as murderers, rapists, terrorists, drug dealers, AIDS carriers, hut-dwellers, and with extra self-indicting gall, abusers of women. He has indicted and banned Muslims, promised to build an apartheid wall to keep out undesirables, took out an ad to bring back the death penalty for four Black and Puerto Rican teens later found innocent, racially harassed Pres. Baraka [sic] Obama with birtherist claims that he wasn't a citizen, attacked Black athletes and activists for resisting racial injustice and police violence, and praised neo-Nazis and White supremacists as having “very fine people” among them. (p. 4)

This demonstrated approval of bigotry by the President of the United States has had a profound effect upon our nation. As Johnson (2017) notes “hate crimes are up, way up” (p.459). The most recently released FBI report of hate crimes, also of 2017, shows that of the bias motivations for hate crimes categorized as race/ethnicity/origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity,

disability and gender, race/ethnicity/origin accounts for 58.1% of all hate crimes reported in 2017 (2017 Hate Crimes Statistics Released, 2018). That bears repetition. Nearly 60% of all hate crimes in the U.S. are attributable to race/ethnicity/origin. Reports of police violence against blacks pepper the evening news so frequently that such reports are practically mundane. Research has shown “the risk of being killed by police, relative to White men, is between 3.2 and 3.5 times higher for Black men and between 1.4 and 1.7 times higher for Latino men” (Edwards, Esposito & Lee, 2018, p. 1241). But this work is not about racism as found in the headlines.

### **Racism as Microaggression**

While many have come to understand racism as overt, intentional, public, and often viciously violent acts, there is another side to this insidious social disease. In the soft underbelly of American culture lie the unconscious, often unspoken social slights, innuendos, oversights or assumptions that sustain the inextricable nature of racism in American society: the microaggression. Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, and Willis (1977) first used the term asserting that it is the “chief vehicle for pro racist behaviors are microaggressions” and define them as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders” (p. 65). Pierce et al. explain that these “offensive mechanisms” may be “innocuous.” They go on to say,

the cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions. This accounts for a near inevitable perceptual clash between blacks and whites in regard to how a matter is described as well as the emotional charge involved.  
(p. 65)

Microaggressions can be as simple as expecting people of color to be cultural experts, deferring consultation to subordinate whites despite the obvious authority of a person of color,

mispronouncing a name or being insensitive to a racial slur. More recent scholarly attempts define microaggression as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).

In and of themselves, the actions or conditions of microaggression may amount to little, yet the cumulative effect can be significant, including: routinely feeling required to project a presence that contradicts established stereotypes, being professionally or educationally less supported, having competencies questioned, and endlessly feeling drained by the constant need to address racist encounters (Basit et al., 2006; Hoodless, 2004; Pearce, 2019; Smith, 2004). In summarizing the work of Solorzano et al. (2000), Sue et al. (2007) conclude “experience with microaggressions resulted in a negative racial climate and emotions of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation on the part of victims” (p. 279). Individually, D. W. Sue further exhorts that “this contemporary form of racism is many times over more problematic, damaging, and injurious to persons of color than overt racist acts” (D. W. Sue, 2003, p. 48).

Not everyone has jumped on the bandwagon of microaggressions being the new racism. John Mcwhorter, an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, remarks in an article for Time magazine

there is something equally counterproductive about the microaggression concept, at least as it is currently put forth. The scholars promoting this concept claim that it is a microaggression even when someone says, “I don’t see you as black,” claims to be color-blind, purports not to be sexist or in general doesn’t acknowledge one’s race or gender. But if it’s considered racist for whites to designate any trait as a “black” one, we can’t turn around and say they’re racist to look at black people as just people. That would be

fixing it so that whites basically can't say anything right, as if being white were itself a microaggression. (p. 21)

Still others question the validity of claims of microaggressions, reflecting that the obscure, subjective nature leaves incidents difficult to substantiate (Harris, 2008). Despite these oppositional stances, the overall consensus within current research supports microaggressions as common and pervasive manifestations of racism.

In order to better understand racial microaggression, one needs first to recognize its materialization in everyday life. There is a superfluity of white people in the U. S. who engage in racial microaggressions unintentionally, and in many cases unknowingly. It is only after the fact, when exposed to the effect, that the microaggression becomes apparent for these people. Even then, racial microaggressions, once recognized, may often be dismissed in the mind of the perpetrator as a one off, or singular incident, and not indicative of deeply ingrained racist perspectives begging for reflective introspection. Still, I expect in some instances, if the effect is not immediately and clearly communicated, the act of the microaggression may go completely unnoticed by the perpetrator. I can't imagine how I as an individual, or anyone for that matter, could refrain from engaging in offensive behavior, if I do not, or choose not to recognize when I am engaging in it.

Additionally, as part of the dominant culture, I am not in the habit of analyzing or critiquing my racial social interactions on a regular basis. My whiteness presupposes such an activity as redundant. It is not that I refrain from self-reflection, but rather I conclude that for me it is an indulgence whereas for my counterparts of color it is often a necessity. Given the limited nature and utilization of social mirrors by whites in the U.S., how to build awareness of racial microaggressions becomes a significant challenge. Here is where I turn to story.

## **Storytelling**

Storytelling is life; past, present and future. It preserves our history, our heritage and our memories. It connects humanity across cultures and generations. It educates, empowers and inspires future generations. It is the thread of existence that transcends time and space interwoven with the joys and sorrows that are the human experience (Lunceford, 2017b, para 4).

Although beautiful and eloquent, these grandiose claims of storytelling do little to structure the framework needed to understand storytelling as a communicative tool to promote social change. While the description above depicts storytelling as a timeless, universal experience where humans make sense of our existence, it falls short of providing the necessary foundation for scholarly work. First and foremost, let us find commonality in the language on which these discussions are based.

### **Story/Narrative/Discourse**

Communication is only effective when we speak the same language. Ensuring that the words used in academic writing embody a precise meaning commonly understood between writer and reader is an endeavor ripe with the potential for scholars to become mired in circuitous thinking. It is easy when trying to differentiate terms, to use one term to define another. I am not immune to this, as I find myself challenged to describe what makes a story a story. Narrative and discourse are two similarly ambiguous terms both in common usage and in scholarly work. As we venture into this discussion of storytelling, it is important to ensure a common understanding of what is meant by the terms story, narrative and discourse. Many researchers have used the terms story and narrative interchangeably. Discourse, although most often tied to the term “text” in scholarly work, is very closely related to both story and narrative in meaning and in use.

Haven (2007) reports, after having reviewed multiple dictionary definitions for the word story, virtually all “used the same wording in their primary definition: *Story: n.: a narrative account of a real or imagined event or events*” (p. 17). Many researchers agree. Of the numerous other definitions Haven references, verbiage includes either narrative accounts, or telling, or presenting information or describing, as well as references to events, experiences, happenings or sequences of actions (Blythe, 2004; Dalkir & Wiseman, 2004; Booth, 1979; and Ricoeur, 1984). Still, I find Haven’s treatment of the term limited.

Professional storytellers know a story is so much more than a narrative account of events. It is the characters. Could one imagine a fairy tale without fairies, or a Jack Tale without Jack? It is the language. How boring would the Br’er Rabbit tales of the southern United States be without the use of the Gullah dialect? A story is in the setting; a moonlit night, a creepy forest, a castle, child’s bedroom, a board room or the jungles of South America. Yes, a story includes the words used to tell it, but it also incorporates the history of the story, how it’s been told or used in the past as well as how listeners or readers have previously experienced the story. Story includes not only choice of words, but also sequence of events, inclusion/exclusion of details, development of characters, and creation of the scene that evokes sense memories. Engaging the physical senses, sight, sound, smell, taste, feel, even if only in imagination, is crucial to engaging the audience.

Like story, narrative is far more than the simple description of an interaction. Ellis (2012) explains, “It encompasses all those additional elements that make it possible to have an effect on the listener or reader” (p. 15). It is that impact on the other that gives narrative meaning. Bochner and Riggs (2014) support the interactive nature of narrative, remarking that

stories should be recognized as fluid, co-constructed, meaning-centered reproductions and performances of experience achieved in the context of relationships and subject to negotiable frames of intelligibility and the desire for continuity and coherence over time (p. 203).

Stories are born in experience, come alive in the process of interaction, are made tangible in the negotiated frames of reference we know as reality and flourish when shared again and again. Just as our experiences, our interactions and our realities change, so do our stories.

Academically, the interchangeable use of the terms story and narrative is acceptable. Yet, instances where narrative is addressed without reference to the term story can be found. Mascolo (2017) offers a simple definition of narrative as “representational vehicles that draw upon common frames of meaning and reference that allow us to make experience understandable to others and to ourselves” (p. 238). More often than not, narrative and story are used each to define the other, each serving as a form or type of the other. This mutuality is evident not only in Haven’s remarks above, but in the definition of narrative offered by Jerneck (2016) in her work on narrative as a mobilizing tool for change. She defines narrative as “an unfolding story with the potential to serve as a theoretical thinking tool and an empirical guide to promote practical action” (p. 15).

Similar to the interchanging of story and narrative, though less common, is the interchanging of narrative and discourse. Mills (2004) notes that “the term ‘discourse’ has a wider range of possible interpretations than any other term in literary and cultural theory, yet it is often the least satisfactorily defined within theoretical texts” (p. i.) She goes on for over 150 pages attempting to define this single term. Many theorists have mirrored her attempt at defining discourse. Existing attempts to codify meanings of the term “illustrate a range of understandings

of ‘discourse’, partly influenced by the disciplinary background of the authors” (Bargiela-Chiappini 2009, p. 3). In summarizing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes, Mills (2004) explains that “a discourse can be taken to represent a voice within a text or speech position” (p.8). Despite the academic volumes of research devoted to discourse, clarity of its definition remains elusive. Yet the apparent connection between the terms story, narrative and discourse remains unrefuted. Even investigation of the definition of discourse reveals direct reference to story. Take for example Burr (1995), who defines discourse as

a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. . . . [sic] Surrounding any one object, event person etc., there may be a variety of different discourses, each with a different story to tell about the world, a different way of representing it to the world. (as cited in Baker & Ellece, 2011, p. 31)

Burr’s inclusion of the world in the definition of discourse is not surprising. The idea that the term discourse encompasses a larger field of reference than narrative or story is part of one of the few commonly held understandings of the term. Usage of the term does not customarily reflect reference to single conversations or individual perspectives. Discourse is most often used to describe the intersection of multiple conversations with a common theme addressing larger concerns. And yet, as aptly referenced by Fox and Fox (2004) the term discourse remains “massively overused in daily interaction, frequently abused by mass media, and extensively exploited by the humanities and the social sciences” (p. 15).

The terms story, narrative and discourse are conceptualized as similar in construct and utilization yet each seems to represent an increasingly expansive application. All three terms depict the verbal or written account of an event or events, real or imagined, including characters,

setting, language, plot and those who exchange the information presented (tellers and listeners or authors and readers) conveying both interpretation and meaning. For purposes of this work, I identify a need for differentiation. The term story is used here to describe the representation and exchange of information at the individual level, narrative at the level of community, and discourse at the level of society.

### **Storytelling: Timeless and Universal**

Stories are found in every culture and in every age. Haven (2007) writes “Humans have told, used, relied on stories for over 100,000 years” (p. 3). He goes on to remark that “current research indicates that stories even predate language” (p.4). Consistent with Haven, Marshack (1972) argues that

at the human level there is a wide, changing, developing and diverse interplay of meaning, understanding, and recognition between a mother and infant *before* words are used intelligibly between them, and this pre-verbal interlay includes the communication of relatively complex “storied” meanings. (p. 119)

More simply, Marchack purports that even without words, a mother tells her child stories with her gaze, her touch, her voice and the child responds in kind. Mime is a modern example of storytelling without words. Whether with or without verbal language, both Haven and Marshack agree stories have been a part of the human experience even before recorded history.

Fire is often correlated with the birth of storytelling. Many have romanticized about early humans gathered around a campfire telling stories in grunts and gestures, communicating the location of game, victories of the hunt or other such conquests. Brockway (1993) notes “Ice age hunters undoubtedly had their myths, legends, and tales about the hunt, their heroes, villains, and lovers” (p. 30). The harsh wintry conditions may have driven humans into the caves of

southern France and northern Spain where the great cave paintings including those of Font de Gaume, Lascaux, and Altamira have been discovered. Schechner (2002) considered the cave paintings “a repository of group memory, desire, and imagination” (p. 57). As such, it could be argued, these paintings tell stories. Brockway (1993) offers a multilayered observation here. On the one hand, he notes there has been abundant speculation and that we can never know what drove the upper Paleolithic peoples into the caves, or what the paintings and their symbols may mean. Conversely, he goes on to say “works of art located in the very deep recesses of the caves must be associated somehow with mythic themes. They must have meaning” (p. 29). Although we cannot know the message intended to be communicated through the paintings, we can know their purpose was to communicate something. The narrative nature of humankind wants—no, begs—for us to believe that the something communicated through the paintings is stories.

From the tale of Gilgamesh first carved onto stone tablets to the plots of today’s digital games expressed in binary code, stories have been a part of every civilization. As Haven (2007) declares

Every culture in the history of this planet has created stories: myths, fables, legends, folk tales. Not all have developed codified laws. Not all have created logical argument. Not all have created written language and exposition. All developed and used stories. (p. 4)

Aesop regaled ancient Greeks with fables a full 200 years before Demetrius Phalereus collected them into literary form around 300 B.C. (Jacobs, 1902). Regarding the tradition of the Ancient African Griot, Akoma (2007) notes “African folkloric and mythic figures such as Ananse, Eshu, Mammy Water, and Sango feature prominently in New World literatures and cultures” (p. 113). From Kabuki Theater, to the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, to the antics of Latin American trickster Pedro de Urdemalas, to the Jack Tales of the Appalachian Mountains, stories are

everywhere. From the family dinner table to the boardroom conference table, from the refugee camps of the Hmong people to the festival stages of the United States, from Irish bars to African villages, stories blanket our world with tradition, learning, and hope.

### **Living and Learning in Story**

We live through stories. Fisher (1984, 1985, and 1987) clearly affirms that narrative is a critical element in communication as a way of making meaning, stating that “symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience” (1984, p. 6). To him, storytelling comprises the very nature of being human. Fisher suggests the phrase “*Homo narrans* as the overarching metaphor for defining humanity” (as cited in West & Turner, 2014, p. 358). Further commenting on the importance of story to the experience of being human, Bochner and Riggs (2014) remark “Storytelling is the means by which we represent our experiences to ourselves and to others; it is how we communicate and make sense of our lives; it is how we fill our lives with meaning” (p. 197). It is through these efforts to fill our lives with meaning that we learn and relearn.

We learn through stories. Forest (2009) describes storytelling as “one of the oldest educational methods utilized by cultures globally since ancient times” (p. 81). New experiences are interpreted through the lens of stories previously learned and narratives previously internalized. We integrate new information into our minds by mapping the data using our mental inventory of stories. Metaphor is the tool we use to accomplish this task.

Metaphor as an integral component of language helps people create meaning. Metaphor is a way of supporting better comprehension of new or unknown concepts by means of ascribing to the new concept characteristics of a known concept (Haven, 2007 p. 58). It is by means of the neurological mappings created through use of metaphor that learning is incorporated into

memory. Haven (2007) goes on to explain “The metaphor activates our neural story map that then guides our creation of the shared space for the two domains that are merged in the metaphor. Metaphor works through story” (p. 60). Debatin (1995) supports this mental and neurological marriage of metaphor and story arguing that regarding metaphor as a story of the mind triggers the use of a “neural story map to create meaning” (as cited in Haven 2007, p. 59). Forest (2009) is more direct in her conclusions stating simply “Stories are a “complex form of metaphor” (p. 72).

As we make room in our memory for new contributions, we see where the new data and our old stories fit together and where they do not. We rifle through our mental memory files of concepts we have learned through story to determine where to file the new interpretations. We examine how this new information is related to the old information so we can store it and later retrieve when we need it; the old information we learned and retained in stories. While the comparison and subsequent integration of the old information and the new data mentally occurs subconsciously, from a physical standpoint it happens chemically and neurologically. In reflecting on Lakoff and Johnson’s landmark work on metaphor (1980, 2003), Forest remarks:

New understanding or learning is incorporated into our conscious and unconscious realms whenever disparate ideas are literally chemically wired together in the neural mappings of the brain. “Neurons that fire together wire together” is now common knowledge in the neuroscience community. (p. 81)

Reference to this neurological proximity between learning and recollection has earlier roots. Indeed, Caine and Caine explained in 1994 that both story and lived experience are stored in spatial memory. This sharing of storage space in spatial memory strengthens the neurological relationship between story and life allowing for faster and easier cognitive access (as cited in

Forest, 2009, p. 80). This intimate relationship between story and memory is further supported by Zaltman (2003) who states, “Storytelling is not something we just happen to do. It is something we virtually have to do if we want to remember anything. The stories we create are the memories we have” (p. 190). The use of metaphor within stories accomplishes this memory imprint.

The language of the metaphors we chose “defines your viewpoint, expectations, strategy, and actions” (Haven, 2007, p. 59). For example, metaphors regarding time illustrate differing perspectives on how we understand time. Does time fly, does it flow, does it pass by, or does it stand still? Each of these different metaphors reflect different perspectives and experiences of time and impacts our actions in relation to our perception. When time flies, we hurry through tasks and to destinations. When time stands still, we linger. The metaphoric language within the stories we hear and tell also define how we view, experience and impact the world. The way we perceive and act in the world is shaped by the stories we tell ourselves and each other.

### **The Storytelling Experience and the Potential for Change**

The interactive, relational experience of storytelling is triune in character. The act of storytelling creates interactive relationships between teller, tale, and audience. The National Storytelling Network declares that “storytelling emerges from the interaction and cooperative, coordinated efforts of teller and audience” (What is Storytelling?) This statement identifies two prongs of the relational triad of storytelling: the teller and the audience. The third is the story itself. The plot, the language, the word choices of the teller, the character development—all serve as interactive elements within the performance. The storyteller uses creative talent and skill to unite the triad of story, storyteller and audience into a space of being which is anomalous with corporeality; a place where our experience of reality is suspended, a place of fantasy. Yet,

the disassociation with reality remains incomplete; the audience continues to be aware of such things as the physical environment and their own physical state of comfort. As Scheub (1998) describes,

The storyteller uses her body, the music of the language, and the audience in such a way that they provide an artistic—not a realistic—framework for the communication of the word. The story is being told within that unnatural environment, and it is in that context that reality and fantasy have their meeting place. (p. 23)

In this meeting of reality and fantasy, the storytelling event can transport participants to a liminal place where reality is suspended. The successful integration of tale, teller, and audience in the act of storytelling allows all participants to enter the space between being in a real time and place performance venue and the imagined world of the story itself. Even when the story is based in lived experience, the story world has to be imagined because it is always apart from the here and the now. Here, in this space between, belief in anything becomes possible for those engaged in the storytelling experience. It is in this space that audience members can open their imaginations and believe that Peter Pan can fly and fairy dust cures everything. This is the point within the storytelling experience where listeners often report feelings of wonderment and magic. Sturm (1999) conceived this liminal space as the story trance and explains:

People who listen to stories can undergo a profound change in their experience of reality. The normal, waking state of consciousness changes as the story takes on a new dimension; listeners seem to experience the story with remarkable immediacy, engaging in the story's plot and with the story's characters, and they may enter an altered state of consciousness: a "storylistening trance." (p. 2)

It is in the “storylistening trance” that the storytelling event can manifest as a transformative experience. Existing research supports the transformative power of story. The liminality of the storytelling event can allow participants to explore differing viewpoints and experiences in a risk-free manner and open the imagination of participants to envision a better reality. (Forest, 2009; Neile, 2009; Spaulding, 2011).

### **Storytelling and Racism**

Significant research has been done regarding storytelling and racism from the perspective of Critical Race Theory and counter-storytelling. Much of the research substantiates the use of storytelling as an effective means of communicating the experience of racism from the perspective of the victim. As described by Reynolds and Mayweather (2017) “Counterstorytelling (sic) is a methodological tool with a history in communities of color that use oral interpretation to convey stories and struggles often not validated by the dominant culture” (p. 288). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) further support the use of counter-storytelling to combat racism, arguing that it affords a modicum of agency to victims:

Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence, or blame themselves for their predicament. Stories can give them voice and reveal that others have similar experiences. Stories can name a type of discrimination once named, it can be combated. (p. 43)

While the use of storytelling as “a vehicle by which voices from the margins are heard” (Reynolds and Mayweather, 2017, p. 288), far less research can be found extolling the use of storytelling as a practical tool for mitigation of racist attitudes and practices.

Research on the operationalization of storytelling as a tool for the illumination and diminution of racist mindsets and behaviors seems to be scant. One landmark work, *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching* (Bell, 2010),

provides a well-structured program of activities and discussions focused around a paradigm of four story types that can be used as pedagogical tools for teaching about racism. The work is grounded in the author's thirty years of experience in teaching about racism and finding time and time again that "the focus on words and stories of others prompted some of the least defensive most honest and genuine conversations about racism I have witnessed" (p. 9) While this may appear to be a miracle cure for the racist problem, its application is limited to formal educational or professional settings. It does not address the manifestations of racism in everyday life.

Several other researchers have centered their work on the problem of racism as a white problem. Many of these investigations focus on the development of white identities as the source of white supremacist beliefs, and subsequent racist behaviors, on both the conscious and subconscious levels. Storytelling is demonstrated as the preferred method of extrapolating and re-iterating the role of white identity formation in the manifestation of racist attitudes and behaviors. Through telling his own story of whiteness Tanner (2019) establishes that "white people also have to critically encounter our race, too, if we hope to better understand ongoing conditions of white supremacy and engage antiracism" (p.191). Lensmire (2017) focused on collecting and telling the stories of other white people to illustrate that racism persists because

As white people, we need stereotypes of people of color to give us relief from the strain of participating in and benefitting from a society that at every moment disregards a founding principle – that all people are created equal. Racial stereotypes enable us to continue believing in democracy even as we betray it. (p.16)

It is in the stories, both our own and those of others, where inroads to the mitigation of racism is possible.

While storytelling can give voice to marginalized populations, inform our understanding of racism in structured learning environments, and help us to better understand the relationship between white racial identity and the manifestations of racism, something seems to be missing. There seem to be no significant resources addressing storytelling and racial microaggressions. It stands to reason that if microaggressions are the new manifestations of racism and storytelling is the oldest form of communication, an investigation of where these two meet in everyday life could help to illuminate the nuanced embodiment of racial inequality reflected in American society.

## CHAPTER 3

### GATHERING THE STORIES AND CRAFTING THE PERFORMANCE

In this project, I sought to illuminate and examine lived experiences of racial microaggressions through the art of storytelling. As the previous chapter reveals, racism is a very complex social construct which embodies a wide range of multi-layered, nuanced, integrated and often deeply ingrained thoughts and behaviors. In that lived experience and storytelling combine to form the substance of data I examined here, qualitative inquiry was my choice of investigative framework for this research. As presented by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research is the “study of the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual” (p. xiii). As is evident in this vague description, qualitative research is a broad and varied field which includes a wide variety of scholarly structures reflecting varying philosophical perspectives and methodological practices. Denzin and Lincoln continue a characterization of qualitative research remarking that “this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture” (p. 9). This further supports my choice in that I also hoped to survey the potential of stories of racial experience to impact behavior. Below, I explain the particular theoretical lenses within qualitative research which forms the basis of this inquiry and the practices I used to construct this project.

#### **Performance Ethnography and Critical Race Theory**

We as human beings communicate our lived experiences through stories, or narratives. Fisher (1987) defines narration as “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (p. 58). I am a storyteller. I collect, craft and perform stories as an essential element of my vocation. But I am only half of this human equation. Storytelling requires listeners.

Almost everyone has heard that age old question. If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it does it make a sound? While it is beyond the scope of this project to answer that question, I can address the metaphorical application. If a storyteller tells a story but no one is there to listen, it's not a storytelling. As noted earlier, it is in the triangulated interaction between storyteller, story listener, and the story itself that the magic happens; that liminal opportunity for transformation. Performance ethnography is uniquely positioned to examine the interactive nature of the storytelling event.

In its simplest form, performance ethnography can be explained as the presentation of research findings using the format of performance. Yet this explanation falls short of encompassing one of performance ethnography's defining attributes: that the performance itself becomes part of the research and the findings. Since storytelling performance forms the foundational medium for this research, performance ethnography is an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. As Lester and Gabriel (2015) note:

Performative texts have been used to examine issues of power and justice, and illustrate how to elicit political engagement from the populace. In many of these performances, research findings that have traditionally been bound to "live" forever in the confines of a paper-based journal, find their way into classrooms, stages, and /or streets. What was once only shared with a small group of academics is potentially shared more broadly through performance. (p. 126)

The transformation of data from page to stage, the re-telling of stories garnered from participants, provides a layer of analysis not readily available in findings confined to text.

Moved by the multi-layered analyses reaped from the work of Dwight Conquergood, I endeavored here to mold this project similarly. In this way, the interaction of the teller, the

stories, and the audience might drive new insights and revelations in ways that reading written text cannot. As noted by Gergen (2018), “the performance of an evocative ethnography is not designed so much to ‘tell the truth’ as to provoke deliberation on our current and coming conditions” (p. 22). It is not just a revelation of data but an experience to generate new data and new meanings for all who participate. The experience of a storytelling performance allows for the integration of different kinds of knowing between the teller, the stories, and the audience.

Most everyone has a childhood memory of being in trouble with a parent or authority figure at one time or another. But listen to Donald Davis tell a story about his childhood and you begin to understand both his story—and yours—differently. You are transported back to that time and place; you smell the musty basement where he hid out, you feel the shame, the guilt, the fear, and the relief when he realizes he will live through the punishment doled out by his parents. When you are released from the liminal space of the story, it seems you have a new understanding. It is like you brought the wisdom of today to the experiences of yesterday and now you see those experiences and yourself just a little differently.

The experience is mirrored in the storyteller. Having told the story, having led this journey to and through the liminal space, even if for the hundredth time with that story, the storyteller knows the story, the audience and herself differently than before the story was told. The shared nature of the event creates a connection that expands understanding of ourselves, each other and our world. Donald Davis does this to entertain. Conquergood did it for scholarly purposes and to help communities. I endeavor to do both.

Because the storytelling performance involves not just the words but the verbalization of words, the emotions, the physical experiences, the sensory memories, the cultural knowledge and the interactions of all present, the internalization, integration and re-iteration of the experience

provides the opportunity for multifaceted analysis and interpretation. This multidimensional character of storytelling is mirrored in the research ethos of performance ethnography, the aim of which, Gergen (2018) notes, is "to expand interpretive potentials, suggest ramifications, enhance sensitivities, and invite reflections on a given condition" (p. 18). Denzin (2003) expands our understanding of the art of performance ethnography as a tool for social change reflecting on Performance Art pedagogy. He notes

Performance art pedagogy reflexively critiques those cultural practices that reproduce oppression. ... These performances join transnational and postcolonial narratives with storytelling about personal problems experienced at the local level. These interventions represent pedagogy done in the public interest, democratic art for and by the people. (p. 22-23)

Performance ethnography may be considered by some to be the perfect marriage of art and science. Furthering this metaphor of marriage, Performance Studies may be construed as a variety of wedding official; one tool that may be used for joining art and science into a single entity. The transformative space created in this union, allows for a blending of realities. Selecting storytelling as the faith or denomination of the nuptials adds an additional layer of liminality. An ethnographic storytelling performance has the capacity to bring together multiple "master" and marginalized narratives in a single event for the promulgation of experiential learning. As noted by Conquergood (2002), "the constitutive liminality of performance studies lies in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges, drawing together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry" (p. 151). Drawing on the marriage metaphor, I endeavor to bring together Performance studies as the pastor, the bridegroom of scientific data, and the bride of the artistry of performance under the theological framework of

storytelling to create a union of performance ethnography to explore racial microaggressions in everyday life. Collecting the stories of the experience of racism from individuals of varying racial/ethnic identities and then performing those stories publically lends itself to a multifaceted analysis of race and racism in a way other methodologies could not. Still, as commonly realized, marriages are rarely, if ever, perfect. Performance ethnography is no exception. Here, perhaps more so than in other forms of ethnographic inquiry, the issue of representation presents significant challenges. I gave serious consideration to the limitations of semi-structured interviews as a data collection process and how participants may edit responses based on the interview experience itself. I worked hard to ensure my performance skills and ability are sufficient to accurately embody racially divergent story characters. I strove to recognize and mitigate my own perceptions and experiences of race and racism to negate their impact on these stories of others. Lastly, I contemplated under what cultural authority I tell the stories of persons racially different from me and how I would ensure I do so respectfully.

Counter-storytelling, as an element of Critical Race Theory, helps me to address some of these challenges. Solorzano and Yosso (2002), extending the work of Mari Matsuda (1991), note that one of the foundational tenets of Critical Race Theory is that it “advances a strategy to foreground and account for the role of race and racism” in our society (p. 25). They go on to define counter-storytelling simply as “telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” noting “it is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 25). The elevation of race and racism as central to research and the efficacy of counter-storytelling attest to the applicability of Critical Race Theory to this project. For purposes of this study, I expanded the application of counterstorytelling to include stories of white people which may also not be “validated by the dominant culture” (Reynolds &

Mayweather, 2017, p. 288). In this way, I attempted to illustrate both the manifestations and effects of racial microaggressions.

### **Recruitment**

The original intent of this study was to explore ways in which storytelling could serve as a tool for the mitigation of divisive racial discourse. I had intended to bring together into a single performance stories from both extremes of the racial divide. Early on it became evident that my efforts to engage the extremist voice were proving unsuccessful. My invitations to them to tell their stories were met with either silence or a barrage of verbally abusive, berating responses, so much so that attempts to engage this segment of U.S. culture were abandoned. A change in perspective was needed. I stepped back and reviewed my work to date, which included recruitment efforts and interview questions. I asked myself, what could I learn from this data? Finding that most of my survey respondents could be characterized as non-extremist, and expecting that racial microaggressions would be a common experience, I refocused my work as is evident here.

The purpose of this research study is to explore the ways in which storytelling may serve as a tool to illuminate the experience of racial microaggressions both from the perspective of the perpetrator and the victim. Additionally, I hope to survey the potential of storytelling for the mitigation of racist behavior by collecting and re-creating stories about experiences of racial microaggressions from people of varying racial/ethnic identities in current U. S. American society for public performance and discussion.

Participants were recruited using a dual pronged approach. Both involved the use of social media. For my initial method, I posted a flyer (see Appendix A.) on my social media explaining the study and directing interested individuals to an online survey. My direct

relationships within the social media were asked to share the invitation. Once on the survey website, participants were invited to complete ten questions addressing demographics, general perspectives on racism, and racial experiences. The survey instrument was designed as intentionally preferential. It was intended to elicit strong feelings about race and was used to identify the most invested survey responders as appropriate interviewees. As the survey also noted the race of participants, it allowed for balanced racial representation. I structured the instrument to help identify individuals who might have the best stories. Three participants were selected this way.

The second approach was a direct appeal for interviewees via social media. I made a direct request post on my Facebook page asking interested parties with strong feelings about racism to message the researcher. Of the four respondents to this second method, two declined interviews and two agreed to be interviewed. One of those who agreed to be interviewed later declined the interview with no stated reason.

The four participants interviewed included two black men with advanced degrees who were between jobs, one in his fifties and the other in his thirties. Additionally, two white people were interviewed; one a man in his seventies who is retired and the other a woman with an advanced degree who is a homemaker and caregiver for her disabled daughter. The woman is a partner in a long standing mixed race marriage. All participants are considered middle class and reside in Southern Appalachia.

## **Data Collection**

I conducted four semi-structured interviews, each lasting sixty to ninety minutes, to document selected participants' stories of racial experiences. I chose the interview for a data collection method as, like Denzin (2003), I conclude "interviews are performance texts" (p. 84). Three of the interviews were conducted online using Facebook messenger video services. This option was offered to participants in consideration of those who lived more than an hour away from me. One participant and I met at a local restaurant at the participant's convenience. While a restaurant is generally not a good interview setting, based on noise and disruption, I felt the need to accommodate the participant's preference. Throughout the interviews, I worked hard to keep the focus on participants telling their stories. I did not specifically focus on the experience of microaggressions, but centered the discussion on racial interactions in general. I expected this format to have the greatest potential to uncover microaggressions of which participants themselves may have been previously unaware. During each interview I did my best to respond with encouraging, supportive yet neutral responses focused on the experience of the participant and not my opinion thereof.

Interviews were video and audio-recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. Video recording was included to facilitate my review of the participant's physical presentation throughout the interview. As a storyteller, I deemed it appropriate and beneficial to support my future embodiment of the stories being told in the performance. I emailed a copy of their interview transcript to each interviewee for review, comment, and/or edit. I received no comments or edits. I reviewed each of the video recordings with particular attention to gestures and physical presentations that either supported or seemed to contradict the verbal messages being performed.

## Shaping the Performance

I scoured the transcripts for incidents appearing as microaggressions. I combed these stories for relevant event details, emotional expressions, phrasing or particular word usage, and conversational tone to shape the story performances. I gave serious consideration to each participant's verbiage, syntax, and grammar to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the story.

I crafted a loosely constructed script for the performance based on the interview transcripts. The script included four stories, one from each participant. While the script focused on stories of microaggressions, I included some back story to enhance the audience's understanding of each character. It was important to me that my crafted script told the stories of the participants as authentically as possible. Some of this required resituating story lines. For example, it would not be believable for me to tell the story of a large, middle-aged black man from the South, in first person, my being a middle-aged white woman who hails from the North, without sufficiently setting up the story. Performance ethnography incorporates not only the words and observed behaviors of research participants but it necessitates the physical and vocal embodiment of participants, either as individuals or a collective. To address this issue of representation, I incorporated into the script details of each participant/character's race, age and situation. I used the assigned pseudonyms repeatedly within the script as a tool to remind the audience of each character as the story of that character was being performed. This was also done to support the audience in referencing the different stories during the discussion which followed.

In addition to addressing authenticity, I needed to ensure that, from a story standpoint, the constructed script embodied a sufficient story arc to emotionally engage an audience. To address this, two of the stories were further developed to include expanded backstories; one from the

older black man and the other from white woman. Both the older black man and the white woman had gifted me with stories ripe with emotional immediacy and relatability. I chose to place the white woman's story second as a way to build audience engagement, being longer than the initial story, and set expectations for the length of the stories with more meat to them. The story of the older black man was given pride of place as the third story presented. In most of my storytelling performances, this is the point of the event where I plan the climax of the emotional arc. In order to reduce bias and guard against promoting the stories of one racial group over another, I chose one long and one short story from each racial pair. I structured the script to present in order; a brief introduction of the project including announcement of the discussion to follow, a shorter story from the younger black man, a longer story from the white woman, a longer story from the older black man, a shorter story from the white man, and a conclusion repeating the character names for reference and reminding the audience of the expected discussion to commence after a brief intermission. The choice to start with the story of a black person and alternate between black and white stories was intentional.

Unlike Anna Deavere Smith, acclaimed actress and social activist, in her well-publicized, provocative, one-woman plays such as *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, where intricately crafted costumes and meaningful props were used to fully embody the characters, I chose not to use costumes or props. I did not want my incorporation of either costumes or props to detract from the authenticity of the participant stories. Additionally, I concluded use of costumes could prove cumbersome as it would require costume changes which the venue would not easily support. I wore casual business clothes as I usually do when performing. Similarly, I expected the use of props could prove distracting. I chose instead to focus my physical embodiment of each participant/character on the body language and vocal

characteristics I had observed in the interviews. The first story, the younger black man, was told using exceptionally straight and formal posture reflecting his athletic physique and military history. For him, I spoke with a deep but smooth voice. For the white woman's story, told second, I softened my stance just a bit, being sure to keep my shoulders straight to reflect her connections to the military. I used a voice just a tad higher than my narrator's voice. Although the participant/character performed third, the older black man, also had a military history, I softened my shoulders even more than for the white woman while telling his story to reflect his age and the weariness he represented. I also tried to enlarge my ribcage to embody his larger physical frame. For this story I chose a deep but gravelly voice as it best exemplified what I heard in the interview. For the last story, that of the white man, I stood straight but with slightly bent shoulders also reflective of age. I used a gravelly voice for this story as well, although it was not as low as the previous story; again representative of what I had heard in the interview.

The venue I contracted was a small two bedroom condo. It had been promoted as a great place for a house concert, a storytelling event generally characterized by lower attendance with a more intimate setting. The performance was to be set in the living room of the condo with the audience seated on both the living room furniture and additional folding chairs. It was not overly large so to enhance the intimate nature of the event, yet sufficient to accommodate a small audience comfortably.

Staging was limited by the physical capacity of the performance venue. Still, I made an intentional choice to tell the stories of the black men stage left (viewed as on the right from the audience perspective) and standing and the stories of the white participant's stage right and seated. This was done as a way of elevating the significance of the stories of the people of color as the stories of the white participants are by default part of the dominant narrative.

The script was reviewed with my academic advisors to examine elements of representation, theatricality and story construct. I created a performance flyer announcing the event (see Appendix B.), and posted the event on social media. All participants were invited to the performance via personal emails from me.

## CHAPTER 4

### PERFORMING THE STORIES

The day of the performance dawned bright and warm. I spent the day in my usual performance day mode attending to last minute details such as buying the refreshments, gathering supplies, and final rehearsals as I paced my dining room floor. As the venue was not particularly obvious as a performance site and the availability to post public notice of the event was limited, I purchased black and white balloons to flag the location. I considered it serendipitous when I found and bought cookies frosted half black and half white to underscore the contrasting nature of the stories to be presented. Additional refreshments of various colors were also included. While I considered a costume of black and white, I decided on black pants with a mauve blouse. The venue, a small two bedroom condo, was set up in advance of my arrival. The owner of the venue had provided an assistant available to assist in the set up. Twelve seats were ready; four on the upholstered furniture of the living room and eight folding chairs in front of and beside the plush seats. I set up the refreshments, the video camera, and put a small pad of paper on each chair.

Sixteen people attended the performance; thirteen women and three men. All were white. Audience members ranged in age from early thirties to over seventy with many in their fifties. All are considered middle class. These demographics are reflective of the draw area characterized as a predominantly white, middle class, area of Southern Appalachia including both urban and rural areas. Based on my experience as a Storyteller performing in the area, it is also representative of those who attend storytelling events in the region.

The first to arrive were storytelling friends and fellow members of the local storytelling guild. One of the participants I interviewed for the study, Paul, attended with his wife. One

guest I had known in my last job. She had no connection to storytelling nor to the University, and no particular interest in racial issues. She was there simply to support me as a friend. As the time drew near and my last academic advisor arrived, I settled into the center of the performance area to welcome the audience of sixteen.

The welcome and introduction for the performance was presented from center ‘stage.’ This introduction set the expectation that this was an academic performance, and a discussion with the audience would follow. I presented the term of microaggression as defined by Sue et al. (2007) “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). As storyteller I performed the roles of narrator and the characters. For the narrator I used my speaking voice and a natural stance. For each character, I assumed the voice and stances previously detailed.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Jeremy**

*Storyteller shifts stage left, remains standing.*

NARRATOR: Jeremy, the younger black man, told me of experiences he had which classically define microaggressions. Jeremy is a middle-aged, black man born and raised in a mixed yet predominantly white community in Appalachia. He recounts being raised in a Christian home, where race was not talked about. He knew from an early age that he was “different” but does not remember how he came to know it. The primary focus he recalls of his upbringing is his Mom’s efforts to ensure both he and his younger sister had a sense of self-esteem. Although overt acts of racism were rare in his childhood, they

were still a part of his reality. He remembered being stunned by racist name calling. As he tells it:

JEREMY: There was, the first time I really got mad about race was, I was walking home from football practice and as I was walking by this one house I heard you know, "Run baby nigger nigger." And it was crazy because I kind of knew, I knew the girl's house, she rode the dang school bus, they picked her up from that house. So I was like in shock, I mean I wasn't scared, I was ready to pick up a rock and throw it through their window or something. But I just took my butt home and it just kind of burned me up.

NARRATOR: Following high-school Jeremy entered the armed forces where he had expected racism to be less blatant. He wasn't disappointed. Although racism was as pervasive in the military as it was outside, Jeremy recounted it as decidedly more sophisticated. He couldn't tell of any overt acts but does recall often being the scapegoat for things he wasn't responsible for. And there was nothing he could do about it. After the service, he spent several years on the West coast exercising his passion for acting before returning to his Appalachian roots. Jeremy shared two stories which illustrate classic racial microaggressions. In the first, he was working the stage door at a theater. Part of his role was to check in the actors as they arrived for the rehearsal or the performance. He recounted how he would often get calls asking for directions, which he readily and accurately provided. He found over time he could tell when the lost souls arrived at the theater, because it seemed they initially wanted to thank him for the wonderful directions, but when they realized who they had spoken to, that they had been

speaking with a black man, there would be this air of conflict in the mind, this sense of something being off.

JEREMY: A double take, sort of thing where they all of a sudden put your color and the conversation together and for them it doesn't mix. That a person of color could've had that conversation.

NARRATOR: In that Jeremy had lived on both sides of the U.S. I had asked him in the interview to compare his experiences of racism in L. A. and in Southern Appalachia. I found his description of racism in the latter revealing.

JEREMY: But Southern Appalachia, I feel like the racism is straight forward you know? I see the Dixie flag waving, I know the history, I know that there are bodies in those mountains and so, I know what it is. I know what it is. There's a lot of poor, poor white people here so I understand that. I understand a lot of people in East Tennessee feel whiteness is the only thing keeping them afloat, it's the only thing keeping them from total and utter despair. Because they can look at a black doctor driving a BMW, call him a nigger and know in their heart of hearts, don't matter what he got, don't matter what he accomplishes, that's a nigger and I'm better than him. That's the power. That is what it, that is that power that you, that racism gives you. It allows you to take your rightful place above a person of color. Doesn't matter what you've done, doesn't matter what they've done, who you are, what you own, nothing. At the end of the day when you look

at your skin color and you see white skin you know, "I'm in the preferred class." Bottom line.

NARRATOR: While perhaps more open in Southern Appalachia, Jeremy's exposure to racist attitudes and behaviors continued to be painful and frustrating. In his next story, Jeremy tells of his visit to a local Yoga studio here in Appalachia.

JEREMY: I walked in there and the owner and the receptionist, they just stood there and looked at me. They didn't say hello welcome to the studio, can we help you? Nothing. You know they just looked at me. So I looked back at them and I said, "Hello." So then they kind of, "Oh hey." And asked if, "Look I just came to check the place out. I studied Yoga for about five years in LA, I just came to check it out see what this studio is all about." And you know that's it. So, once I did that then they kind of opened up. I kind of resented having to make them feel at ease when I'm going to check out their business.

NARRATOR: Jeremy went on to tell of how such experiences have become a part of ordinary life and how he's tired, so tired of having to constantly validate himself in a white world.

At the words "white world" the storyteller brings her arms up from the elbows, palms raised toward the ceiling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although Jeremy's story would be one of the shorter ones, it clearly illustrated the concept of microaggression as I had come to understand it. Also, I wanted to highlight the

insights Jeremy shared during the interview when asked to compare racism in southern Appalachia and racism on the west coast as I found his response an unexpected revelation. Knowing the chilling effect it had on me, it was critical to include his words “I know that there are bodies in those mountains.” Additionally, this portion of his story spoke directly to the practice of “othering” as conceptualized by Roediger (1991). Roediger spoke to the notion of poor whites creating “an image of the Black population as ‘other’ — as embodying the preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for” (p. 14) as the industrial revolution required poor white’s chained by the new capitalist work ethic. Jeremy spoke of current era feeling of superiority based on not being black. Both Jeremy and Roediger reflect the importance of separating “us” from “them” in perpetuating racism.

Jeremy’s experience of microaggression which I chose to present centered on the experience of being invisible. The event occurred in a small, predominantly white city in Southern Appalachia where he lived. I expected telling of this event to foster significant empathy as realization you are in an unwelcome place is an experience many people have shared.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Patti**

*The Storyteller moves stage right and seats herself upon the stool.*

NARRATOR: Patti also offers a rather clear example of a microaggression but her story is from another side. Patti is a white woman in her fifties, who brings a unique perspective to my study. Although raised in an exclusively white community, Patti married a black man in her early twenties and together they have raised three biracial children. As she puts it:

PATTI: That's kind of my unique story by today's standards, because I don't think there's a lot of people that had such a white bread existence as I did

NARRATOR: After college, Patti went into the military as a nurse. It was here she had her first meaningful interactions with people of color. Here she also met her husband, a doctor. In our interview she felt the need to explain

PATTI: It wasn't because he was a different color. It was just that I found him a really attractive person. We hit it off right away.

NARRATOR: Shortly after the birth of their first child, their daughter was diagnosed with a disability so Patti left her nursing career and has spent the years since caring for her family. Her husband remained in the military for some time and they lived in several middle-class integrated neighborhoods through the years. In the process of parenting biracial children, Patti experiences several rather unique racial encounters. It started early on with people asking her if her children were hers.

PATTI: I can't tell you the number of times that people have said, "Are they yours?" When they're little in the grocery cart. "Oh, your kids are really cute. Are those kids, are they yours?" I'm like, "Yeah. Want to see my C section scar?" Because they look like their dad a lot more than they look like me. I felt so bonded to my children that I couldn't believe anybody would even question that.

NARRATOR: It continued as her children entered school. The children's registration forms forced a selection of race; "other" was not an option. Patti was very uncomfortable making a definitive choice. As she put it:

PATTI: I remember sitting down with my husband going, "What do we put down? Because I don't feel comfortable with choosing." Because that's like denying half of who our kids are. He husband responded "Because the world will see our kids as Black before they're going to see them as white. If you have to pick, then you need to put Black". I never really put that together before, until he brought that up.

NARRATOR: The most telling experience Patti recounted is multi-dimensional. In her words,

PATTI: You know, this is a mixed story now that I'm thinking about it. Because it is what you asked me, but it's also, it was a big a-ha moment for me about racism and cultural sensitivity. You'll know why I say that as I kind of progress through the story a little bit.

NARRATOR: She tells of a time when she unknowingly engaged in a microaggression. At the time she and her husband lived in an upper middle class integrated neighborhood with their three children. She had come to know several other Mom's in the neighborhood on a casual basis.

PATTI: We were never really close friends, but we knew them in the neighborhood. We'd hang out now and then. The boys would sometimes play. Well, the Black woman invited me to her house for a party, and I honestly don't remember the details of what the party was. But it was all women. When I got there, it was a mixed group of people. Different races. Most of whom I didn't even know. But I'm not a wallflower, like you knew. I knew enough people there from the neighborhood that I felt totally comfortable. There were three women of color, all Black, sitting on a bench in the living room. You're going to probably cringe when you hear this, because I do now that I'm more aware of what I shouldn't have said. But anyway, I'm talking with people and I look at them and I said, "Oh, you three are so cute. It's like see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." The party went on. Then I get a call the next day from this neighbor that I knew. She said, "I just want you to know that you deeply offended my friends. That they basically accused you of being a racist, and were offended that I even had you at the party. I'm really upset that you said that to them. I couldn't let it go without letting you know that this was a really big problem." I said, "You know me. You know my family. You know I'm married to a Black man and I have biracial kids. You know I'm not racist. Why didn't you stick up for me and tell them that?" Then, I got really hysterical and I went to my husband. Because I still didn't understand what the problem was. Why they were so deeply offended by this. I asked him to explain it to me. He's like "Pattie, I know your heart. I know you're not a racist. But there is a stigma in the Black culture of see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, and monkeys. Being called a monkey is a really bad racist thing." I'm like, "That's not what I was doing. Anybody who knew me would know that's not what I was doing." He's like, "Yeah, but Pattie, there are Black racists as well

as white racists. It's very possible that all they were doing is looking at you and your white skin, and you saying that, and assumed immediately that you were making a racial slur at them.” Anyway, that's probably one of the more hurtful and more racially charged incidents that's ever happened to me. It was, I mean it's still, I feel really emotional right now just thinking about it. Because it was the first time that I had ever been judged on my skin color in a really negative way. Just based on the fact that I was white.

NARRATOR: In some ways Patti's experience may be considered similar to that of those she offended and in other ways it is vastly different. Food for thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I had moved stage right to begin Patti's story, I sat on the edge of a chair placed there. I chose the edge of the seat as it forced me to sit straight and upright. Although seated I did not want to give the message that I was now more relaxed or the story was “lighter”. I needed to maintain a serious decorum.

Patti's story also required significant background. I felt the audience needed to know that she had grown up in a monochromatic world as Patti herself characterized her childhood as unusual. I also felt Patti's marriage to a black doctor significantly influenced her experiences of racism. Her children looked more like her husband than her, so her biological relationship to them was questioned many times. She also had to confront the naivety inherent in her white privilege when she went to register her children for school and pondered how to answer the question of race. I strove to portray the ingenuous nature of Patti's concept of racism accurately, and the role played by her husband to remediate Patti's limited understanding. This was

necessary as it was her husband’s reframing of the event I depicted in the storytelling performance that allowed Patti to see her behavior as a microaggression.

I struggled with the choice to include that last part where Patti reflected being treated in a negative way based on the color of her skin. I needed to be careful in the performance to reflect the nature of Patti’s realization. I did not want to evoke the sentiment of “white women’s tears” as promulgated by Ruby Hamad (2018) because Patti did not represent that affect to me in any way. A journalist and PhD. Candidate at the University of New South Wales she characterizes the term ‘white women’s tears’ to embody “the tactic many white women employ to muster sympathy and avoid accountability, by turning the tables and accusing their accuser” remarking such “tearful displays are a form of emotional and psychological violence that reinforce the very system of white dominance that many white women claim to oppose” (Hamad, 2018).

Although this displaced invitation for sympathy could, and most likely does, occur frequently, it was not what Patti communicated to me in any way. She characterized her epiphany as genuinely revealing, saying it was a big a-ha moment for her about racism and cultural sensitivity.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Ron**

*The Storyteller stands and moves to stage left, remains standing.*

NARRATOR: Ron, a black man in his fifties, also brings a unique perspective to our stories tonight. Describing himself as unapologetically liberal, he paints his life and his personality as triangular. In his words,

RON: I grew up in a poor Southern dilapidated ghetto and my parents were illiterate. I don't come from a background of academics or white collar people. Mostly who are all blue collar, poor blue collar people. That comprises one element of who I am as a person. The other completely distinct element is the 20 years I served in the army as an enlisted man. I like to say I was a real soldier. I didn't drive trucks. I didn't play with computers. I wasn't an administrator. I was an infantry man, a paratrooper. I served in direct combat and I did that for 20 years and of course that's got its evolutions but that's part of who I am. Then there's a third element and that's my life after I got out of the army in academics. The last maybe 20 years. Going to graduate school. Doing the rounds for that, [getting my degrees] so you need to know about me, those three elements, the poor boy from the ghetto, the Army paratrooper and the academic, those three things, [don't] always smoothly come together. I generally interact with people in one of those areas and never in combination. It's just I don't know people or I haven't known people long enough or in the right places to have all three of those things come together and usually they never do. Almost never.”

NARRATOR: Unlike Patti, whose childhood was insulated from an understanding of race, for Ron, race was something he was always aware of; from his earliest memories.

RON: [Maybe in] first grade but definitely before that even, before that for certain because my Mother was a ... to say she was a maid might put a high level title on what she actually did. She cleaned white people's houses and watched your kids and made them lunches and did all the stuff and raised their kids all my life. I went with her to

work several times and that whole dynamic of how they lived and how we lived and stuff they said and stuff I learned in school because I went to segregated schools.

NARRATOR: Unlike Jeremy, Ron did not relate significant experiences of ongoing racism while he was in the service. Maybe this was about the nature of his combat service. In his words:

RON: I served in combat with people of many races and white people. I trusted them. They have trusted me. I have risked my life for them. They have risked their life for me.

NARRATOR: He did however, relate a significant experience while traveling through the Deep South as a sergeant in the Army. It seems to me to be a bit more than a microaggression although no physical violence ensued there was lots of innuendo. See what you think.

RON: I was on leave and I was going to another base and I had to drive through Mississippi to get into Louisiana and I was running out of gas and I ended up having to pull over to this little, I mean the furthest place being picked up out in the middle of nowhere, you know...you may see a guy would be sittin' out there with a deer on his hood, somebody talkin' about farmin', Guys smokin' a cigarette. Just people pickin' up stuff at the store. You could probably get a hunting license, fish and worms. One of those kind of stores. So it's lit up like Christmas. [people everywhere]. So I pull over to this place. I go in the store, get some peanuts or somethin' and right away I'm lookin' at

all the people. Guys in cowboy hats and big belt buckles and you know. Every stereotypical role like that, you'd think, and people were just hanging out. So, I'm out there, I go get to my gas, I pump my gas, I go back in the store and pay. This kind of system, you got to go out and pump, pay, go back and forth, you know, there's no technology involved in this. I go in, I pay. And I pay with a whole bunch of \$1 bills. It was payday, the day I had left so I had a lot of cash on me. Fresh brand new \$1 bills and people weren't dealing in \$1 bills now. I don't think you can get them out the ATM machine any more or from the bank but nobody gets paid in \$1 bills. I had nice thick old stack of \$1 bills and I paid for gas and I'm about to pull off and this black guy, who I saw in the store and he irritated me because he was dancin' or something and a bunch of white guys was laughing and jokin' around and like, "Yeah look at the black guy go." And that already pissed me off because to me he was being a buffoon. So this is the guy, he goes, "Hey, hey, hey man, they're gonna need you to come back in the store." And I said, "For what?" And he said, "Where did you get these dollars from that you paid for your gas?" And I go, "What? What kind of a question is that man? I got 'em from the bank. Why? Why you asking me?" He said, "Well they want to talk to you about it. They think something funny with the money. And I'm thinking right there, "What? This guy's a fool." Look at me. I'm clean shaven. I've got a high and [tight] haircut. I'm in great physical condition. I've got an American flag in the back of my car. I'm a drill sergeant in the United States army. People respect me . . . kids everyday as a drill sergeant. Training them to be patriotic. I'm a respected person. What is this shit? You're a buffoon, you're not like me. You walk in here and get these white guys straight. This is my attitude. So I walk in there and I'm gonna check these fools and so this guy, he's

lookin' at the dollar. He's showing me that the dot, the black marker is kind of fading. The dye inks on the money aren't gonna come off. Okay, so I snap immediately because this is some shit I've seen before. Okay, brand new money, here to buy gas at least, it will wipe off. It does do that. They do smudge. They will smudge. I mean it's just a little bit, it don't mean nothin'. It's just something I know, something anybody would know if you work in a place where you handle a lot of people with wrinkled money. At least it being at the time. It wasn't that we had a thing so I'm tryin' to explain this to the guy but I'm also tryin' to explain to the rough, like I said, I'm gonna teach these rednecks, you know I'm a respectable American man and I'm gonna talk shit to them and explain to these dufus's about this dollar bill. Well, while I'm doing that the guy had already called the Sheriff's department and the deputy comes and he immediately comes and they talk to him for a second. I've got my hand on my hip like these idiots and he looks at the money and he's going, "Yeah, this don't look right." And I'm goin' like, "You're as dumb as these guys are. Who the hell would counterfeit a \$1 bill anyway?" Now their eyes was lightin' up. So, I told them I gotta go to the bathroom. So, I go to the bathroom and while I'm in there, that black guy, he comes in the bathroom behind me. And he says, "Hey man, I don't know where you think you're at but you're in Mississippi and these people will kill you." And I'm goin', "What?" And then when I came out of the bathroom, I did start to think. It's like I was starting to focus now on everything I had learned about being a black person all my life. I had completely forgotten where the hell I was. I completely lost my sense of what the environment was. For me the skills I had as a kid, I mean growing up, I just ... I didn't see the environment. What the hell could happen. This wasn't a damn joke. Whether or not the \$1 bill was real or not real ... the fact was I'm a

black guy, I'm in rural Mississippi talkin' shit to the authority in a place where they ... like I don't know what's goin' on. Who gives a shit that I'm in the army or where the hell I come from, none of that stuff. So I immediately become aware, immediately of what's going on here. So now I've gotta wait because he wants to call somebody else, some detective or somethin' and he shows up and we go through this thing of him lookin' at the money and him goin' who the hell would counterfeit a \$1 bill. And I'm not sayin' anything. I'm basically just ... I just want to cut through the damn ... look just get me out of here and more people were starting to show up at the store. Whatever is goin' on, people are calling one another or somethin's happening because more and more people are just casually showin' up and standin' in corners, not really doing nothing. It went from maybe seven or eight people to now it's about 25 or 30 people at the damn store over the course of about 45 minutes. People were just kind of hangin', not really buying nothing but the store is filling up and everybody's talking and I'm the center of attention. I'm cutting this story a little bit short but this went on for about an hour and a half until a guy showed up and he was pissed off. I don't know if he was Secret Service or what, I know that he was pissed off because he was sayin' something about he shouldn't have to come here and let's see the money. He took a look at it, he looked at it for about 15 seconds and he said, "This is not counterfeit, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And then he left, wastin' my time and went out the door. They all kind of merged around and it was like, what's goin' on? And ultimately what ends up happening is I'm at that store probably until the sun comes up again. The thing is, they had let me go, hours ago but I was so paranoid and so not knowing what the hell was getting ready to happen, I just stayed there. And the black guy, say's, "They let you go a long time ago."

NARRATOR: When asked about more recent examples Ron related tales of being the token black person on a board of directors for organizations.

RON: There are two different occasions where I was appointed to these boards. I'm being real specific. I was appointed to these boards to sit on these boards but in both cases, and they were separated by some time but in both of those cases I was not on that board to ... let's put it this way, people didn't pose questions to me about the things that I was supposed to be qualified for to be on that board. In fact, they never did. I was just sittin' there. And that's because they weren't interested in what I had to say. They were just interested in me just being there. So over a period of time, I found myself in situations and you start to notice it when people don't really engage you and it's like, why am I even here. Although, people never verbally said anything like that. At least not in my experience, nobody would but I knew that's why I was there.

NARRATOR: Throughout our time together, Ron found it hard to focus on a single incident. Given this pervasive nature of race in Ron's life, he found it difficult to target specific stories. He explained,

RON: And that might be the story itself. It's that these experiences are so common that they're difficult to actually pin down. It wouldn't surprise me why people get confused in their telling of stories of racism or bigotry. Certainly, for somebody like me who was born and bred in the South, of my age. You will have so many of these encounters and then you mix those in with people retelling you these encounters and hearing them third

person. Your stories and their stories, collective stories can get bled together. You made me think about why it's important to try to get people to try to focus on the story because we all got these stories like folklore. It's kind of my story but it's not quite my story.

\* \* \* \* \*

As noted earlier, Ron's story had "pride of place" in the storytelling performance placed to traverse the emotional arc of the production. I based this choice on conclusion that for Ron, race and racism had saturated his life. I wanted to ensure the audience got the sense of being smothered by race and racism that Ron had conveyed to me during the interview. I took care to use as much of Ron's very descriptive but clear anecdotal verbiage as I could. Ron's story was the longest as the tale of his experience while traveling in the army took some background in and of itself. I included that story as it illuminated the continuation of racism and racist acts many whites consider eradicated. Many whites have seen the old television shows, and heard the old stories of blatant racist acts, but find it difficult to comprehend that such offenses still happen in our supposedly color-blind society. I didn't count this story as a microaggression, concluding the incident was both intentional and blatant. Still I felt it had value to the performance as it illustrated the magnitude of fear such blatant racism can create in seemingly strong individuals. The actual microaggression I presented from Ron's interview centered on the issue of being a token black person in social or occupational situations. I chose that event as I considered it common and highly relatable to the audience. Additionally, I had chosen for Paul's story a mirrored experience of being a token, but as a white man.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Paul

*The Storyteller moves to stage right and sits on the stool.*

NARRATOR: Paul, a white man in his seventies, has a different attitude towards stories of his racist experience. As he put it:

PAUL: My story's my truth. Nobody can debate it. That's what it is. They can't say, "Well, Paul, you're right, " or, "Paul, you're wrong." It's my story.

NARRATOR: Paul's story starts with his childhood in large Midwestern city. Although, the city wasn't segregated, the neighborhoods were and his was "lily white." He recalls being fairly oblivious to issues of race growing up. Paul concludes his father was probably racist and expects he had heard the "N" word more than once growing up. Paul describes his mother differently.

PAUL: My mother was compassionate and very accepting. Probably she was that type of racism that she didn't know she was a racist because she didn't understand the African-Americans. She was fairly open and I think that's where I get my, whatever openness I have, from her.

NARRATOR: Paul remembers hearing a very racist remark in the barber shop about not letting blacks in town after dark, but remarked it went right over his head. As he put it, I had other issues, such as girlfriends, school and others that were more important. Paul's

awakening to racism came very late in his life and appears to have been twofold: an intellectual awakening and an emotional reckoning. The first came while Paul was in Seminary.

PAUL: I guess the most important event or situation was in 1993. I was at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and during the summer we were required to participate in what was called clinical pastoral education. And for some, I won't say unknown reason, but unknown to me, I picked the prison system. In fact, one of the chaplains of the complex of prisons from Columbia, South Carolina. I was assigned to a low security one, however, the chaplain over the whole system guided us. Kind of a mentor. And he would bring all of the people who were in that clinical pastoral education together once a week. And one time, I had a realization when we were in the meeting. All of us were talking about our clinical assignments and experiences and I suddenly just felt crushed inside. I realized that 85% to 90% of the people I saw were Black. And that meant one of two things: Either God created a group of people that were criminal or we had systemic racism in the system. And of course my faith system and everything else said it had to be systemic racism. And it crushed me. It just crushed me. I didn't know what to do about it. So that's when I really came to. Even with that experience in the prison system, I knew it in my mind but I just put that aside in a section of my brain. It was still up here. It wasn't down in my heart.

NARRATOR: Paul told the story of his emotional reckoning when I asked him to tell me about being white.

PAUL: I didn't know I was White. There is an article called, "I, Racist." I can't think of the author right now, but if you went up on Google you can find it. And his comment, which impacted me considerably, "You are a racist if you think White is normal." And internally I raised my hand. I was normal. Being White and the experience of that has come through my education, my experiences probably in the ... I guess the benchmark is the Charleston murders at the Church. That's my benchmark for starting to learn about White privilege, White superiority and everything that I have received because I'm White. That's really what I think. I guess part of the impact for me was the fact that here were X number of people sitting down praying with this guy. Praying with ... and he opened fire. And it's the unfolding of the story, finding out he was a racist. Finding out that he was probably with an Aryan Nation connected somehow. Finding out he goes to a Lutheran Church. Finding out that the minister graduated from the same seminary I did. And all those connections, I don't know, just triggered. I can't say . . .it's just something happened.

NARRATOR: The integration of these two experiences and his pastoral education brought Paul into racial activism. He started a group to initiate cross racial dialogue and is actively addressing diversity as an issue with local politicians. In our conversation, Paul tells me of a racial experience that mirrors a story told by Ron. Ron, the older black gentleman I interviewed, had often found himself the token black person when asked to serve on a board. Paul was asked to be the token white person on a local planning committee. Although a minority within the group, his membership in the dominant group

of the culture meant Paul's experience of being a token was decidedly different than that of Ron. His privilege allowed for the use of humor which he found encouraging.

PAUL: I was the token White on a committee that's gonna have the MLK, Jr. Annual Interfaith breakfast. And we were meeting just last Friday or Thursday. And Howard, one of the people in the group, there's only four of us, said, "Well, we're gonna notify all the churches." I said, "Wait a minute. I'm the White guy in the room. Are you gonna be notifying just Black churches?" And then Oscar, a black guy who's a friend of mine, just started laughing and howling about it. And then he said, "Well, you have to understand, Paul, that Howard, he's talking all churches. But there are groups that are really only, Black groups that are really talking about Black churches." I said, "Like the NAACP." He said, "Yes. I'm Treasurer of the NAACP."

NARRATOR: Paul seemed equally encouraged when he recounted a story of a racist joke told in racially mixed company.

PAUL: Another that involved me is when we initiated a community dialogue centered on race, my wife and I decided to have, there was a small group of only eight, have 'em over for dinner. Simple chicken salad was what it is. And there was four Whites, four Blacks. Four women, four men ages 27 to 80 something. And they were both wealthy and poor. And one Black guy got there early. And the other Black guy came in about 20 minutes, 30 minutes late. And the first Black guy said, "What are you on? CPT?"

NARRATOR: Paul had to explain to me CPT is Colored People's Time but expressed his hope remarking:

PAUL: And then I knew the walls were starting to come down because they could joke about that in front of every person.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul's recollections of racist encounters was limited. Although he concluded that as a much younger man he probably engaged in overtly racist behavior, he couldn't recollect a specific incident. Although his heart had ached at realization of the systemic racism inherent in the U. S. Penal system, he took no action. He later recounted to me that even the community dialogue efforts he and his wife were now working on resulted mainly in 'preaching to the choir.'

I once again thanked the audience for their time and attention. I ended the performance with a brief synopsis of the stories, an overview of what the discussion may look like and an invitation for a short break. As folks were directed to the refreshments and the restroom, the group began to mingle. While I didn't want to appear rude and absent myself completely, I tried to disengage as much as possible in order to prepare for the post-performance discussion. The substance of the discussion is presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### FACILITATING THE DISCUSSION

The flyer announcing the performance said nothing about a discussion to follow. The only indication was an ending time for the performance which encompassed a two hour window. Most folks familiar with storytelling performances would expect something in addition to the performance as a full two hours of performance would be an arduous task for even the most seasoned of storytellers. Perhaps the label of Performance Ethnography was also a hint. Regardless of foreknowledge or not, the discussion was addressed in my opening remarks. It was and is grounded in the academic nature of the project and essential thereto. I had planned up to an hour for post-performance discussion, expecting conversation to last about thirty to forty-five minutes.

There is a characteristic of the audience which weighed heavily on the discussion and my efforts at facilitation which I need to address here. I knew everybody in the room. Most were colleagues from the local Storytelling Guild. Some were fellow students, alumnae and of course my academic advisors. Two women I did not know well, but we had been acquainted prior to the performance. This single characteristic guided both preparation and management choices within the facilitation process.

It was these prior experiences which led me to the choice of letting the discussion develop “organically.” I had discussion questions prepared, but I wanted to see what surfaced without being overly directive. These prior relationships with the audience members also drove the choice to forego research into facilitation of group discussion and public conversations on race. The efficacy of these choices is addressed in the researcher reflections of this work.

During the break, one of the men in the audience, I'll call him Fred, approached me about the discussion. When I expressed my fear that no one would have anything to say, he noted he had a comment. Thankfully, I agree to start with him. I invited all present to take their seats again and reviewed the brief and general expectations of the discussion. Imagine my surprise when I called on Fred for his comment and he began "I'm not a racist but....!" While this comment induced a modicum of concern in me and sheer panic in my academic advisor, I was confident, here again based on prior relationships with the audience members, that someone would respond with a polite but contradictory viewpoint. I was not disappointed when Paul, the one person interviewed for the project who was in attendance, took up the conversational banner. Although I was relieved, this activity supported the manifestation of another facet to the discussion which I had not expected. The men, all white as previously noted, dominated the conversation about race to the exclusion of addressing what they were doing in the moment; subjugating the voices of the women in the room. I made directed efforts to elevate the participation of the women in the room, yet it proved a constant challenge.

Much of the conversation offered by the audience members was personally reflective although not necessarily connected to the stories that had been presented. Several commented on the racism experienced in their upbringing. Many acknowledged an understanding of what makes such overt racism wrong, but also communicated a sense of uncertainty about how the remnants of such an upbringing plays out in their lives today.

The concept of racial stereotypes surfaced when an older woman (I'll call her Barbara) commented offering her view that many black actors on television today "don't act, or sound black." When asked to clarify, she had great difficulty articulating exactly what she meant by acting or sounding black relying frequently on the phrase "you know what I mean." No one in

the room proffered a clearer explanation. Toward the end of the evening this sentiment was reiterated by a younger woman in the audience (aka Susie), again without direct confrontation from others or clarity of meaning being clearly communicated. It seemed as though there were a common, unspoken understanding, yet no one could or would verbalize it.

This reluctance to confront each other was clearly evident in another part of the conversation. Another older woman, I'll call her Mary, noted she had been raised in the United Kingdom, which she characterized as a racist free environment. She repeatedly referred to herself as a "racist virgin," depicting that she embodied a purity in her innocence of racist thoughts or behaviors. No one confronted her self-concept or the idea that the U.K. was a racism-free environment.

While confronting each other was not actively pursued in the post-performance discussion, confronting oneself was a common theme. One woman asked if Patti had talked about having a conversation with her biracial children about driving while black. I noted that although not reflected in the script I performed that night, Patti had indeed talked about having that conversation with her children. This woman, a grandparent of biracial children remarked she hadn't thought about it before. Her grandchildren were of mixed race, she didn't think of them as black. Yet, she remarked, as with Patti, the public would see them as black and so she now felt the need to have "that conversation" with her grandchildren as well.

An interesting dichotomy that emerged in the conversation centered on the experience of being black in the local community. Paul, the interviewee, noted that only one merchant in the region carried cosmetics for people of color. Paul proffered empathy on how frustrating this can make everyday life when you can't get what you need in your community. Fred, who opened our discussions, countered rationalizing that the choice not to carry cosmetics for people of color

was a sound business decision based on the limited representation of the target market within the general population. The mixed responses of empathy and rationalization present a contrast worthy of further exploration. Both are valid observations, although the latter appeared to be intended to invalidate the discriminatory nature of the situation.

As noted above, much of the conversation focused on self-reflection and a generalized uncertainty over what racism is. A woman I'll call Marjorie, locally known for her editorial cartoons, asked the group to help her understand what was racist about one of her sketches related to eating duck for a holiday dinner. She explained she had received a scathing response saying the cartoon was racist against people of Asian descent and said "I just don't understand."

This lack of understanding was further supported by a generalized lack of knowledge as conversationally evidenced. Mary, the 'racist virgin,' had talked about her experience in nurses training assigned to the VIP floor with three experienced black nurses. Mary noted these three nurses taught her very well, yet it was still some time before she felt comfortable addressing questions of race. Her perspective, as presented, came from a genuine interest in professional learning as she had difficulty conceiving such things as how to tell when a person of color was flushed or had a first degree burn on their skin.

Attempts to focus conversation on the stories that had been presented remained a challenge throughout the discussion. One exception was talk of Jeremy's experience at the yoga studio. One of my advisors, noting the commonality of realizing you're in the 'wrong place,' prompted a discussion of what it means, when you get 'the look' that communicates that your presence is at minimum unexpected, if not unwelcome.

At one hour ten minutes, I asked for final remarks and invited those who had as yet been silent to speak. I concluded the discussion at one hour twenty minutes remarking I needed to

vacate the property per my rental agreement. Again, I thanked everyone for coming and participating. As people left, I received many positive comments about the performance and the discussion. Seemingly as an aside, criticisms of individual participants were offered by some, most focused on Fred. I responded neutrally, noting the participation of everyone, even those with whom we may disagree, adds value to the conversation.

Now came the hard work; figuring out what it all can mean. I needed to analyze the impact the performance had on me as a story teller, on the audience members as part of my community and on the audience discussion as an integral part of this study. In the next chapter, I discuss my journey through this study, with a reflective narrative on the project as a whole.

## CHAPTER 6

### REFLECTING ON THE PROJECT

As a nation, we have yet to hold a serious and sustained engagement about the legacy of genocide and racial terror in the country. Even more needed is truthful racial storytelling from and amongst white people. These almost socially forbidden stories are essential to creating the conditions of understanding and trust needed for inter- and intra-racial relationships to be re-imagined and remade. (Henery, 2017)

Henery's words touch on several elements which helped to shape this study. Racism has a deeply rooted, longstanding history in the United States. The impact racism has on the lives of everyday people weighs heavily on the national psyche. Racism is meaningful not only personally, but culturally and politically. The communication we engage about racism needs to be truthful, not based on perceptions but experience. The dialogue about racist thoughts, behaviors and manifestation needs to happen with white people. It is crucial that the fear and stigma associated with racial storytelling needs to be addressed if we dare to hope of advancing social change. These elements serve to help structure my analysis of this study.

Incorporating the precepts of Performance Ethnography and Critical Race Theory, first I examine the personal, cultural and political conversations that help shape the preparations, performance and post-performance experience. Second, I discuss how white only and mixed race conversations impacted the narratives encountered. Lastly, I consider how the choice of storytelling as the medium may or may not have influenced the events of this study.

## **Preparation**

Undertaking a study of this complexity was an ambitious and arduous task. Significant planning was required within the activities which preceded the actual performance. Here I discuss laying the groundwork for the storytelling event.

## **Recruitment**

From the start, I had expected the culturally sensitive, emotionally charged nature of racial interactions to present challenges within my work not customarily encountered in studies not centered on race. While I was not disappointed, I was not prepared for the magnitude of the challenges. In addition to the challenge of race as a subject, I conclude that the concept of Performance Ethnography was not well understood by myself or others involved in this study. I was specifically asked more than once, by the Institutional Review Board, other scholars, even professors, if the scripts for the performance, the performance itself, and the audience discussion which followed comprised research activities. I return to Denzin's comments on the ethos of Performance Ethnography to better illustrate the basis for my reply. In summarizing the work of Christians (2002), Denzin (2003) states

The purpose of research is not the production of new knowledge per se. Rather, the purposes are pedagogical, political, moral, and ethical, involving the enhancement of moral agency, the production of moral discernment, a commitment to praxis, justice, an ethic of resistance, and a performative pedagogy that resists oppression (p. 247).

As performative pedagogy incorporates these elements, a performative qualitative study cannot be conducted without a script, a performance, an audience and an analysis.

The original intent to focus on racially divisive groups also raised challenges which manifested in two ways. I was required to list the extremist groups I intended to contact in my

recruitment efforts and name the general subculture of each on my application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This limited my outreach to the groups listed unless I chose to re-submit and await the expanded approval. Additionally, the rigor of the informed consent required for the ten question survey used to identify interview candidates is concluded to have reduced the completion rate of the survey. These restraints contributed to my efforts to engage divisive voices proving ineffective.

I had hoped with the original focus on divisive racial stories, that the choice of storytelling as a performance medium might entice participation with the racially extremist voice. I naively expected that because I am white, and willing to tell their stories, as presented, they would be interested in using the study as a platform to spread their ideology. They weren't. I deduce the fear of established institutions, often a part of extremist identity, dissuaded them once they associated me with a University and furthermore upon reading the language of the informed consent.

Another noteworthy realization emerged under the original intent of the study. When I was still hopeful to engage extremists, and planning to meet with some of them, I was cautioned by family members to take my son, a thirty year old, concealed carry permit holding white male, six foot tall and 200 pounds with me. I didn't disagree. The idea of meeting white supremacists ignited fear in me. I had not encountered anyone I could identify as a white supremacists and yet the attribution of violence to such groups in the news media, and general distaste for the violence of the rhetoric I read on social media left me scared. I didn't end up meeting anyone of this nature, but believe recognition of my fear deserves mention as it factored into the overall experience.

## **The Interviews**

All interview participants were known to me before the actual interviews took place although I was not close friends with any of them. Previous encounters did not include elements of a subordinate relationship but rather reflected our communication as equals. This history of equitable interactions helped to stabilize the perceptions of power within the interview experience. I gave diligent attention to ensuring I used the same questions, attended with the same attitude, and maintained the same comfort level for all interviews and yet found that differences emerged along racial lines. The first of these differences focused on my motivation for the study.

Jeremy, the younger black man I interviewed, began our conversation asking me “Why do you want to do a study on black people?” His question came in reply to my offer for clarification of the informed consent form. I responded explaining the study was not “about black people” but a balanced look at both black and white experiences of racial microaggressions as related through stories. I went on to explicate my intent to evaluate storytelling as a tool to promote change and the need to include voices of black people. My desire to include voices of color stems from and is supported by elements of Critical Race Theory. Delgado and Stefaniec (2001) note:

The voice of color thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that whites are unlikely to know.

Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism. (p.9)

Jeremy seemed to accept my answers and we continued to talk. Upon reflection, I noted that Ron, the older black man I interviewed, also asked more questions about the study in general and my motivations than did either of the white participants. Once my desire to illuminate microaggressions as a prompt for self-examination on the part of white audience members, Jeremy and Ron both accepted that this study would not “turn them into objects of white study” (Denzin, 2003, p. 247).

The second difference in the interviews that emerged along racial lines can be ascribed to the concept of representation. All interviews began with a brief discussion of the project, review of the informed consent requirement, and a few questions about the participant themselves. It was intended that getting participants talking about themselves would help them feel at ease. The first question I asked each participant was “What do I need to know about you to tell your story well?” I explained that to tell their stories well I needed to understand something about them as person. Within the interview experience, I chose to pose a follow-up question to the participants of color which was not posed to the white participants. I specifically asked “Do you think a white storyteller can effectively tell the stories of people of color?” Upon reflection, I conclude I used this question to underscore the sincerity of my desire to represent the stories of all participants authentically. Additionally, I questioned my personal skill in the embodiment of persons of color in story performance. I was at the time undecided about the positional voice (first, second or third person) from which I would tell the stories collected. This question not only contained the potential for validation of my perceived skill as a performer, but could help to clarify the issue of which voice to use. Both participants of color were intimately familiar with storytelling as a performing art, and the importance of bringing authenticity to the stories being told. I trusted them when both affirmed that I could effectively tell the stories of people of color.

Neither chose to comment on the effectiveness of other white storytellers to tell stories of persons of color. I like to think that our previous encounters supported honesty in these responses, but as I am a member of the dominant culture, I continue to question if their responses were more intended to please than to be honest.

Another unexpected development in the interviews was the impact the interview platforms had on the communicative power within the event. Three of the interviews were conducted over the internet and one was at a restaurant. Each of these “locations” influenced the interviews in unique ways.

All of the interviews conducted over the internet began with technical difficulties. Either I could see them but not hear them, or they could hear me but not see me. This maneuvering through the resolutions to establish working audio and video communication contributed to a perception of equality in the interaction. Neither party was an expert. The disparity of power evident in the interviewer/interviewee relationship seemed diminished by the shared experience of technical challenges. The electronic interview platform also afforded participants more control over the recording of the exchange. They could shut down their microphones or cameras whenever they chose and there would be nothing I could do about it. Fortunately for me, and for this study, they did not.

The restaurant environment also influenced the communicative power of the interview event, although with race no longer being a difference, it was gender that came in to play. Paul asked the Hostess for a quiet table in the corner. She obliged showing us to a small table in the back of the restaurant. Conforming to gendered expectations, Paul invited me to follow the Hostess first and Paul then followed me. This allowed me first choice of seat. I chose the outer seat with my back to the rest of the dining area. Paul chose the seat opposite me. Although I

made the choice, in retrospect I might have chosen better. The set up I arranged allowed Paul's field of vision to include the entire dining area. This contributed to the emergence of distractions and also did not allow me the vantage point to be watching for potential breaches of confidentiality by eavesdropping patrons or staff of the restaurant. Although I had exercised the power of choice, Paul had greater control over the physical environment for the interview, given his advantaged viewpoint. I found the juxtaposition of being a woman and an interviewer uncomfortable. Reflection leads me to conclude Paul was allowing me the power of choice, assuming, in keeping with the cultural expectations of his gender and age, that it was his to give.

### **The Script**

Repeatedly going back to the transcripts and the videos was integral to understanding the nuanced communications that were happening within incidents identified as microaggressions. It was essential to this study that the words and phrases used to tell the stories of Jeremy, Patti, Ron and Paul reflected them as individuals in all the complex, messy cultural identities they inhabit every day. The participants in my study are more than just black and white people who gifted me their stories. They are sons and a daughter, some are parents and grandparents. All have roles, friends, responsibilities which shape their lives and their communications. To represent them as the singular beings they are, using the unique verbiage and turns of phrase each used to tell me their individual stories, I felt compelled to document the words I would use to illustrate their experiences to others. And the words I chose needed to genuinely reflect the nature and experience of these four individuals.

Authenticity also helped shape the data I selected to characterize each of the participants as I crafted their stories. Stories need characters and I needed to communicate the complex, integrated identities of Jeremy, Patti, Ron and Paul to people who know nothing about them. I

needed to string words together in just the right way to provide the audience with a legitimate sense of each person quickly based on limited time allotted for the performance. I intentionally tried to create these representations truthfully, yet as positively as possible. I took care to avoid including characteristics normally associated with racial stereotypes. Unless it was integral to the stories of racial experience I circumvented admissions of drug or alcohol abuse, unemployment, or legal encounters. I tried, instead, to focus on the characteristics that may generalize Jeremy, Patti, Ron and Paul to the intended audience. My thinking was to maximize the relatability of the characters to the general public.

Another concept that shaped the performance script was the notion of balance. It was important to me that I include an equal number of stories from each racial category. I chose to include two stories from each side, black and white, for a total of four stories, based on the limited performance time I planned. Additionally, I sought to balance the duration and emotional weight of the stories along racial lines. This proved more difficult than expected. As I had not focused the interviews specifically on racial microaggressions, I collected a limited number of specific events. For both Jeremy and Paul, I identified only very few occurrences of microaggressions, and those presented seemed underexplored in the transcript. Fortunately, as Jeremy is black and Paul is white, I used a brief story from each to bracket the performance. This left the stories of Patti and Ron for the core of the presentation.

Ron, a gifted storyteller himself, had shared several stories of racial discrimination which peppered his entire life. I felt compelled to include one of these, despite my indecision as to whether or not the event fit the definition of a microaggression. As he had told the story, and I had heard it, there didn't seem to be anything micro about the aggression, although no physical violence or injury had occurred. The emotional weight of the memory could not be ignored. I

included that story, as it yielded rich language that revealed Ron's identity as an individual and not a victim.

Unlike Ron, Patti's life had not been peppered with racial discrimination. Similar to Ron, she had a story of which the emotional magnitude could not be overlooked. While the actual event of Patti's I captured for her story was a singular incident, I incorporated significantly more backstory for Patti. Patti is part of a longstanding, stable, mixed race marriage. This characteristic needed expanded exploration in the storytelling performance to support accurate presentation of the emotions attached to the microaggression, and highlight her oblivion to the event as it unfolded. It was critical to illuminate her lack of awareness of the microaggression as she performed it to focus attention on this common attribute of racial microaggressions.

Counterbalance, rather than balance, became the structural frame on which I anchored both the order of the stories in the script and the staging. It was important to me to do what I could to counteract the effect of my whiteness on the performance. I am a part of the dominant culture but I did not want that to dominate the storytelling. For that reason, I ordered the stories first with Ron, a younger black male; then Patti, a middle-aged white female; followed by Ron, an older black man; and ending with Paul, an older white male. In this way, the stories of the black participants held the dominant performative spaces; the beginning and the emotional arc. As noted earlier, I staged the event so that I would tell the black stories stage left (appearing to the right of the audience) and standing, and the white stories stage right (to the left side of the audience viewing area) and seated. This staging was also motivated by my desire to elevate the experience of the black stories and diminish the effect of the dominant narrative of whiteness on the performance as a whole. It was interesting observation that only one person commented on

this staging, but from a feminists standpoint remarking that the woman's story was told sitting down, oblivious to the same stance used for the white man's story.

Lastly, I can say that writing the script was challenging due to the nature of storytelling. So much of storytelling is experiential, in the moment, it is difficult to document in advance of the performance. Gestures and positioning, aside from general spaces, are often birthed in the performance experience. If, as a teller, I feel I am losing audience connection, or the story is moving emotively slowly, I may adjust not only my words, but my use of space and gestures to improve engagement. Trying to anticipate what I might do or what physical/spatial tools I may use to deliver the stories well was tough.

### **Performance**

As with the script, attending to balance and counterbalance, within the performance many choices were grounded in sensitivity to being a part of the dominant culture. The first of which was my attire. Given my limited wardrobe, a black and white outfit would have had to be a white top and black pants. This portrait of white up and black down bothered me, being white and part of the dominant culture. I considered an all-black option but wondered if that would serve to give the impression of the performance being about black people. And so I choose neither. The choice of the black and white balloons and the black and white cookies, was made to help to underscore the contrasting nature of the event. I could have chosen a multicolored array of balloons, but felt this may detract from the serious nature of the event I was trying to communicate. The black and white cookies were just a fun find.

I was delighted we had to set up additional folding chairs to accommodate the gathering. The composition of the audience both comforted and disappointed me. Performing in front of friends and acquaintances eased the burden of performance, yet I mourned the absence of black

audience members and discussion participants, knowing it would seriously curtail the richness of the experience for all. I worried how those in the audience who had seen me perform previously would receive this show. It was not like the folk or fairy tales I was fond of telling. It was not even like the more provocative stories I had crafted on events in faraway places or the distant past. These were real stories, of real people, in real time; our time.

I have not experienced a storytelling with adults seated so close to the performance area. My friends and colleagues were about three feet away. This wasn't unusual with children, as their personal boundaries are not as yet so well established. While in storytelling you do want to engage the audience, you still need some space to define the as the story space. If not, it can seem more like a group conversation than a performance. The limits of the venue and the confined area made defining that boundary difficult and uncomfortable for me. I did not get the sense it bothered any audience members as I was careful to remain at arms-length.

Although initially very nervous, I soon settled into the rhythm of the performance; I was not only among friends, but among like-skinned others. Had persons of color or additional interviewees chosen to attend, I would have had a greater challenge being at ease in the performance. Issues of authenticity and representation of characters of different race than I would have emerged with greater significance. Given the homogeneous makeup of the group, these two concepts were non-issues. Throughout the performance, the audience appeared engaged. They laughed where expected and I did not observe any heads bobbing with sleepiness despite the warmth of the room. I didn't observe any side comments between people seated next to each other during the performance yet conclude that was more a matter of the limited space and needing to appear polite than anything else.

## **Post-Performance Discussion**

The need for research on facilitating group discussion and particularly discussions of race in public settings was immediately evident. While I had not focused my confidence for a polite but contradicting reply to Fred's opening remark in Paul, a white male, emergence of a 'white knight in shining armor coming to save the day' motif cannot be overlooked. There were strong women in the group which I felt could also easily have chosen to reply first. While two women did reply to Fred's opening statement, the women's remarks being secondary and somewhat removed, as Paul's retort was lengthy, seemed less impactful.

As noted in the performance review, one theme that surfaced repeatedly throughout the discussion was this sense of not knowing what racism is, not recognizing it in ourselves or in others. This was a significant struggle as the conversation focused on microaggressions. Talk of identifying microaggressions both in the stories presented and in examples brought by the audience, aimed at revealing what made certain incidents a microaggression, and when did the interactions transition from equitable to aggressive, and how transitions from equitable to aggressive transpire did not materialize. Much of the conversation was mired in whether or not those present "felt" like a racist. 'If I don't feel like a racist, I'm not a racist' emerged as a chorus among many present. This grounding of racism in the feelings of whites underscores how easily racism is often invalidated amongst whites. It was nearly impossible to de-couple intent from experience within the group conversation. Perceptions of the term aggression appeared fixed with intent. Communicating the concept that behavior could be racist exclusive of intent seemed like banging my head on a brick wall. Consistent with the egocentric nature of cultural dominance—it's all about me—moving to the understanding that racism is centered on the

experience of the aggrieved, not the aggressor, developed to be an insurmountable task in this instance.

I go back now to Fred's opening remark "I'm not a racist, but ...." It was, as one may expect, followed by a racist statement which in this case served to blame the victims. Not only was I unprepared for such a discriminatory opening to the conversation, I was surprised by its source. As stated earlier, I knew everyone in the audience. The voracity of the racism evident in Fred's statement shocked me. I thought I knew him. Although not intimate friends, I had counted him and his wife as friends for several years. Had anyone asked me before this conversation if Fred was a racist I would have said definitely not. That was one of the reasons I chose him to proffer the first comment. Still, my saddest realization is Fred's unshakable belief that he's not a racist.

Despite the many shortcomings of the post-performance discussion noted above, the event was not a loss. On the contrary; it served as an effective, performative learning tool for all present. One of the biggest results for many audience members was the realization that we don't know, what we don't know, until we know it, and talking about it helps. While the event was absent of grandiose revelations on the nature of racism and racist microaggressions, many comments indicated most audience members left the event with an increased awareness of how they may be participating in racism and how important reflecting on our own behavior can be in addressing our individual participation in this cultural sickness. I conclude that telling the stories in advance of the discussion helped. Although not directly referenced often in the discussion, I regard it was the hearing of the stories, and relating to the ordinary nature of the characters and their behavior, that set the stage for the self-reflection that became evident. Had the discussion been preceded by an academic exercise or a guided imagery exercise where audience members

were asked to imagine racial microaggressions, I believe the nature and content of the conversation would have been much less immediate and personal. The stories made a difference. Still the voracity with which racist attitudes persist in white identities, leads me to conclude adding significant structure to the post-performance discussion would have resulted in more meaningful communication.

In the next chapter I conclude this work with an examination of considerations needed when evaluating this study as well as researcher reflections.

## CHAPTER 7

### SURVEYING THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

This chapter serves to take a look back on the project as a whole, as well as to look forward to how this serves the body of knowledge and furthers our understanding of race and storytelling. It includes research limitations, considerations for future directions and concludes with researcher reflections.

#### **Limitations**

Performance Ethnography is a complicated, multifaceted methodology. Racism is an even more complicated, more multifaceted issue. Combine the two in any research activity and you get a complicated, multifaceted result. Some may even call the combination downright messy. This study is no exception. While research is not designed to end in the proverbial happily ever after, there are many limitations which impacted how this story unfolded.

An initial limitation of this study was the time allotted to work with such a multifaceted method on such a messy issue. The seventeen months since this study's inception doesn't seem anywhere near long enough to thoroughly explore the nuances of recruiting for a study on race, the special needs of interviewing for stories, the demands of crafting a meaningful performance or the delicacies of facilitating a public discussion of such an emotionally laden topic. More time and attention to any of these aspects, would expand our understanding of both the process and the subject significantly.

Another primary limitation of this study is the geographic location from which the interviewees and the audience were drawn; Southern Appalachia and for the audience, specifically, East Tennessee. While all of the interview participants currently live in Southern Appalachia, only the black men grew up here. I am left to ponder what impact a childhood in the

North may have had on the choice of the white man and woman to participate in this study, and why white people who grew up in the immediate area of the study did not exhibit the strongest potential for stories centered on racism. It would be interesting to see what differences in the number and variety of stories collected would emerge if the study were duplicated in other geographic regions.

It is equally noteworthy that the audience was drawn from an area where storytelling as an art form and public event is well known. Away from this area, storytelling is often conceived of as reading aloud from a book or an activity solely for children. I expect the regional relationship to the art form had a decided impact on the size of my audience. Additionally, in this area, storytelling events are most often patronized by white, middle-class, middle-aged or older members of the community. My audience was representative of this tradition.

The racial and age homogeneity of the audience was also a significant limitation of this study. Having had racial diversity in the audience would have shaped my performance as well as the discussion which followed very differently. A younger audience may have brought a different perspective to the discussion, as most audience members were born when segregation was still a legal practice.

### **Future Directions**

There is much potential to see work exploring storytelling and racist attitudes and behaviors expanded. Although I am rather certain it would drive me completely insane, I would embrace the opportunity to resurrect a study addressing my initial concept of bring stories from divisive groups into a single performance, followed with an audience discussion. I think there is much we can learn about the capacity of storytelling to illuminate commonality despite

differences in such an endeavor. Simply overcoming the initial challenge of engaging extremists in an academic study has much to teach us about communicating across the boundaries of hate.

Further research on facilitation of public discussions of race is another area ripe with possibilities for future research directions. It is clearly evident in this study that white people are significantly challenged to talk about racist attitudes and behaviors without engaging in dialogue which serves to invalidate the experience of racism. The inability to decouple intent from racist behavior warrants further exploration. Further research on public dialogue about race could help to identify a method of communicatively uncoupling intent and aggression so that we may open up the conversation to move beyond the egocentric habits of white people which serve to protect the dominant narrative. This work could help to move white people to an understanding that racism, particularly microaggression, isn't about them or how they feel but about the victims and how the victims feel.

Another avenue of further research would be to structure the study so that ultimately the stories of microaggressions are performed by audience members instead of a storyteller. Perhaps the immediacy provided by the first person experience of performing the story would serve to bridge the emotional distance that the third person experience of storytelling affords. Another alternative would be to have the stories told by storytellers of the same race as the original story source. It would be interesting to see how much of a difference it would make in the performance for multiple storytellers to embody visual congruence with the spoken word.

### **Researcher Reflections**

There is a very old folktale about two characters, one named Story and the other Truth. As with most folktales there are a plethora of versions to be found each with slightly differing details or settings. In most versions, Story is beautiful, attractive to the eye and the ear, dressed

in the finest attire, wearing the finest jewels. Everyone in town follows Story around, hanging on every word. Truth on the other hand is not. Not only does no one follow Truth around, Truth is actively shunned at every turn. The only significant difference in the variants is found in how they end. The shorter versions end with the revelation that Truth is shunned because Truth is naked and no one wants to see the naked Truth. In the longer versions, Truth is clothed by Story so that Truth may be looked upon. I guess in some small way that was what I tried to do in this study; to wrap the truth of racial microaggressions in story in order that it may be looked upon and examined.

This journey has been long, arduous, fraught with challenges, and subject to restructuring and interruption. It has been a complicated and messy task. And yet, this work reflects me; who I am as a researcher, a storyteller and an individual. As a researcher, I embraced and continue to embrace the multifaceted methodology of Performance Ethnography. I continue to uphold the value of multilayered, experiential learning embodied in the ethos of performance studies. The activities of gathering the data, crafting a script, mounting a performance and analyzing the result with witnesses provides multidimensional opportunities of learning and knowing other methodologies cannot duplicate. Although I must admit, this journey has shown me just how very complicated and how very complicated Performance Ethnography can be.

As a storyteller, I believe and trust in the power of stories to open the door for positive social change. Yet, this journey has shown me I have more work to do in structuring stories for social change. I conclude the here, the stories were told, and they were heard, but they weren't listened to. I'm not sure if it was the whiteness of the audience or simply a practice of listening to respond, but something got lost in the translation from page to stage. Not that it's going to deter me from engaging in storytelling for social change. I simply have room to improve.

As an individual, this study reflects my passion to improve the world around me and my fearlessness in confronting difficult issues. This work leaves me struggling to remain positive that dismantling racism is an attainable goal. I leave this particular work enlightened and yet somewhat disheartened to see just how deeply racism is engrained in the psyche and everyday lives of ordinary white Americans. Even within a supportive community, under the guise of a scholarly discussion, most folks could not help but to engage the attitudes, responses, and defenses learned in childhood which undergird the dominant narrative that white is normal. I am equally challenged to face in myself the blinders I wear when it comes to recognizing racism in the mirror and in my friends. It's hard work. It challenges your mind, your heart, your relationships and your self-image. But then I've never been afraid of hard work.

To me, the ultimate question at the end of any project is, if you knew then what you know now, would you do it all again? With one exception, my answer is a resounding yes. The exception is a personal challenge within this study previously mentioned only in the dedication. This study, as with most research, did not happen in a vacuum. In the middle of everything life happened; my husband of thirty years was diagnosed with cancer and passed away. Literally, in the middle; like between the Institutional Review Board approval and the interviews, tragedy struck. That part, I would not want to repeat. Everything else, even though it was complicated and messy and challenging and frustrating—I'd do again in a heartbeat. It's hard work, but it's important and that combination brings me joy.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Printed Recruitment Flyer

# RACE

**Is race an issue for you? Do you have strong feelings about race? If so, I need you.**

I am a Graduate Student of East Tennessee State University Department of Communication and Performance conducting a study on the ways storytelling may improve understanding between people of opposing racial viewpoints. The purpose of this research study is to collect and re-create stories about experiences of race in current American society for public performance and discussion. Given such a broad scope, it is necessary to recruit participants from various backgrounds and experiences in order to provide a balanced representation. I have developed a survey to help me identify potential interview candidates. In order to find a few people to interview I need many people with many different backgrounds to take the survey. If you would like to participate in this study, please follow this link (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RK9YHRX>) to a brief survey that will determine your eligibility. If you have any questions or would like additional information you can email me at [luncefordt@etsu.edu](mailto:luncefordt@etsu.edu). Your time and attention are greatly appreciated.

**THANK YOU!**

This study is approved by the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board.

Approved by ETSU Campus IRB / Approval Date: September 28, 2018 / Expiration Date: September 27, 2019

Appendix B

Printed Performance Flyer

East Tennessee State University  
Department of Communication and Performance

# Stories of Color

A Performance Ethnography

Featuring Storyteller

*Tama Lunceford*

Wednesday June 19th 6:00 – 8:00 pm

Storytelling Condo  
208 N. Second Street  
Jonesborough, TN

Appendix C  
Full Performance Script  
Stories of Color  
Performance Script

Int., living room of one bedroom condo, six chairs and a sofa align the west wall and adjacent south corner where the audience is seated with pen and paper in hand. The opposite corner of the room constitutes the stage area. A small stool sits stage right in the midst of the open space along the east and north wall corner.

*Storyteller enters stage left and stands in the center of the open space comprising the stage area.*

Narrator: “Good evening and welcome. I am Tama Lunceford, and tonight’s performance is different for many reasons. Tonight, my stories are offered as provocation. I hope they will serve as catalysts to engage us in self-reflection and dialogue both in this venue and beyond. Following the presentation, I will lead an interactive discussion in which I hope you participate. You are encouraged to take notes during the performance to help make the discussion more enriching. Hence the reason you all have pen and paper. The storytelling performance is being video recorded. The recording is for my own analysis and may become part of my thesis but is not for public viewing. The discussion afterward will not be recorded. As we talk, I will be taking notes myself.

Tonight’s performance is also different in that it is not an ethnographic performance with a script performed by multiple actors and/or the audience. This is a storytelling performance, where stories collected from others are performed by a single individual. . This performance, in conjunction with the interviews on which it is based, compose the data to be used in my

Graduate Thesis. I started this journey, intending to bring together into a single performance stories from the extremes of racism in an attempt to examine the story as a means to find commonality in the hopes that such commonality could serve as a trigger for dialogue. . I quickly discovered that I could not easily engage the extremist, racist voice. Not wanting to abandon an exploration of where story and racism meet, my study was adapted to address the new racism - microaggression. Recent scholarly attempts define microaggression as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).

After you have heard the stories, I will ask you to reflect and comment on the performance and if you choose, to share your own story of how racism and sexism in all of its forms may have impacted your life. Let’s begin.”

*Storyteller shifts stage left, remains standing.*

Narrator: “As a basis for this performance, I interviewed four individuals, a black man in his fifties, a white man in his seventies, a black man in his thirties and a white woman in her fifties. All would be considered middle class. All are educated beyond high-school. Pseudonyms have been assigned and are used in this performance to protect the privacy of those who graciously participated. In support of the academic definition of a microaggression previously presented, I proffer a story.

Jeremy, the younger black man, told me of experiences he had which classically define a microaggression. Jeremy is a middle-aged, black man born and raised in a mixed yet predominantly white community in Appalachia. He recounts being raised in a Christian home, where race was not talked about. He knew from an early age that he was “different” but does not

remember how he came to know it. The primary focus he recalls of his upbringing is his Mom's efforts to ensure both he and his younger sister had a sense of self-esteem. Although overt acts of racism were rare in his childhood, they were still a part of his reality. He remembered being stunned by racist name calling. As he tells it"

Jeremy: "There was, the first time I really got mad about race was, I was walking home from football practice and as I was walking by this one house I heard you know, "Run baby nigger nigger." And it was crazy because I kind of knew, I knew the girl's house, she rode the dang school bus they picked her up from that house. So I was like in shock, I mean I wasn't scared, I ready to pick up a rock and throw it through their window or something. But I just took my butt home and it just kind of burned me up."

Narrator: "Following high-school Jeremy entered the armed forces where he had expected racism to be less blatant. He wasn't disappointed. Although racism was as pervasive in the military as it was outside, Jeremy recounted it as decidedly more sophisticated. He couldn't tell of any overt acts but does recall often being the scapegoat for things he wasn't responsible for. And there was nothing he could do about it. After the service, he spent several years on the West coast exercising his passion for acting before returning to his Appalachian roots. Jeremy shared two stories which illustrate classic racial microaggressions. In the first, he was working the stage door at a theater. Part of his role was to check in the actors as they arrived for the rehearsal or the performance. He recounted how he would often get calls asking for directions, which he readily and accurately provided. He found over time he could tell when the Lost souls arrived at the theater, because it seemed the initially wanted to thank him for the wonderful directions, but when they realized who they had spoken to, that they had been

speaking with a black man, there would be this air of conflict in the mind, this sense of something being off.”

Jeremy: “A double take, sort of thing where they all of a sudden put your color and the conversation together and for them it doesn't mix. That a person of color could've had that conversation”

Narrator: “In that Jeremy had lived on both sides of the U.S. I had asked him in the interview to compare his experiences of racism in L. A. and in Southern Appalachia. I found his description of racism in the latter revealing.”

Jeremy: “But East Tennessee, I feel like the racism is straight forward you know? I see the Dixie flag waving, I know the history, I know that there are bodies in those mountains and so, I know what it is. I know what it is. There's a lot of poor, poor white people here so I understand that. I understand a lot of people in East Tennessee feel whiteness is the only thing keeping them afloat, it's the only thing keeping them from total and utter despair. Because they can look at a black doctor driving a BMW, call him a nigger and know in their heart of hearts, don't matter what he got, don't matter what he accomplishes, that's a nigger and I'm better than him. That's the power. That is what it, that is that power that you, that racism gives you. It allows you to take your rightful place above a person of color. Doesn't matter what you've done, doesn't matter what they've done, who you are, what you own, nothing. At the end of the day when you look at your skin color and you see white skin you know, "I'm in the preferred class." Bottom line.”

Narrator: “In his next story, Jeremy tells of his visit to a local Yoga studio here in Appalachia.”

Jeremy: "I walked in there and the owner and the receptionist, they just stood there and looked at me. They didn't say hello welcome to the studio, can we help you? Nothing. You know they just looked at me. So I looked back at them and I said, "Hello." So then they kind of, "Oh hey." And asked if, "Look I just came to check the place out. I studied Yoga for about five years in LA, I just came to check it out see what this studio is all about." And you know that's it. So, once I did that then they kind of opened up. I kind of resented having to make them feel at ease when I'm going to check out their business."

Narrator: "Jeremy went on to tell of how such experiences have become a part of ordinary life and how he's tired, tired of having to constantly validate himself in a white world."

*At the words "white world" the storyteller brings her arms up from the elbows, palms raised toward the ceiling. The Storyteller moves stage right and seats herself upon the stool.*

Narrator: "Patti also offers a rather clear example of a microaggression but her story is from the other side. Patti is a white woman in her fifties, who brings a unique perspective to my study. Although raised in an exclusively white community, Patti married a black man in her early twenties and together they have raised three biracial children. As she puts it"

Patti: "That's kind of my unique story by today's standards, because I don't think there's a lot of people that had such a white bread existence as I did"

Narrator: "After college Patti went into the military as a nurse. It was here she had her first meaningful interactions with people of color. Here she also met her husband, a doctor. In our interview she felt the need to explain"

Patti: "It wasn't because he was a different color. It was just that I found him a really attractive person. We hit it off right away."

Narrator: "Shortly after the birth of their first child, their daughter was diagnosed with a disability so Patti left her nursing career and has spent the years since caring for her family. Her husband remained in the military for some time and they lived in several middle-class integrated neighborhoods through the years. In the process of parenting biracial children, Patti experiences several rather unique racial encounters. It started early on with people asking her if her children were hers."

Patti: "I can't tell you the number of times that people have said, "Are they yours?". When they're little in the grocery cart. "Oh, your kids are really cute. Are those kids, are they yours?". I'm like, "Yeah. Want to see my C section scar?". Because they look like their dad a lot more than they look like me. I felt so bonded to my children that I couldn't believe anybody would even question that."

Narrator: "It continued as her children entered school. The children's registration forms forced a selection of race; "other" was not an option. Patti was very uncomfortable making a definitive choice. As she put it"

Patti: "I remember sitting down with my husband going, "What do we put down? Because I don't feel comfortable with choosing". Because that's like denying half of who our kids are. He husband responded "Because the world will see our kids as Black before they're going to see them as white. If you have to pick, then you need to put Black". I never really put that together before, until he brought that up."

Narrator: “The most telling experience Patti recounted is multi-dimensional. In her words,”

Patti: “You know, this is a mixed story now that I'm thinking about it. Because it is what you asked me, but it's also, it was a big a-ha moment for me about racism and cultural sensitivity. You'll know why I say that as I kind of progress through the story a little bit.”

Narrator: “She tells of a time when she unknowingly engaged in a micro-aggression. At the time she and her husband lived in an upper middle class integrated neighborhood with their three children. She had come to know several other Mom’s in the neighborhood on a casual basis.”

Patti: “We were never really close friends, but we knew them in the neighborhood. We'd hang out now and then. The boys would sometimes play. Well, the Black woman invited me to her house for a party, and I honestly don't remember the details of what the party was. But it was all women. When I got there, it was a mixed group of people. Different races. Most of whom I didn't even know. But I'm not a wallflower, like you knew. I knew enough people there from the neighborhood that I felt totally comfortable. There were three women of color, all Black, sitting on a bench in the living room. You're going to probably cringe when you hear this, because I do now that I'm more aware of what I shouldn't have said. But anyway, I'm talking with people and I look at them and I said, "Oh, you three are so cute. It's like see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil". The party went on. Then I get a call the next day from this neighbor that I knew. She said, "I just want you to know that you deeply offended my friends. That they basically accused you of being a racist, and were offended that I even had you at the party. I'm

really upset that you said that to them. I couldn't let it go without letting you know that this was a really big problem".

I said, "You know me. You know my family. You know I'm married to a Black man and I have biracial kids. You know I'm not racist. Why didn't you stick up for me and tell them that. Then, I got really hysterical and I went to my husband. Because I still didn't understand what the problem was. Why they were so deeply offended by this. I asked him to explain it to me. He's like "Pattie, I know your heart. I know you're not a racist. But there is a stigma in the Black culture of see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, and monkeys. Being called a monkey is a really bad racist thing". I'm like, "That's not what I was doing. Anybody who knew me would know that's not what I was doing". He's like, "Yeah, but Pattie, there are Black racists as well as white racists. It's very possible that all they were doing is looking at you and your white skin, and you saying that, and assumed immediately that you were making a racial slur at them". Anyway, that's probably one of the more hurtful and more racially charged incidents that's ever happened to me. It was, I mean it's still, I feel really emotional right now just thinking about it. Because it was the first time that I had ever been judged on my skin color in a really negative way. Just based on the fact that I was white."

Narrator: "In some ways Patti's experience may be considered similar to that of those she offended and in other ways it is vastly different. Food for thought."

*The Storyteller stands and moves to stage left, remains standing.*

Narrator: "Ron, a black man in his fifties, also brings a unique perspective to our stories tonight. Describing himself as unapologetically liberal, he paints his life and his personality as triangular. In his words,"

Ron: “I grew up in a poor Southern dilapidated ghetto and my parents were illiterate. I don't come from a background of academics or white collar people. Mostly who are all blue collar, poor blue collar people. That comprises one element of who I am as a person.

The other completely distinct element is the 20 years I served in the army as an enlisted man. I like to say I was a real soldier. I didn't drive trucks. I didn't play with computers. I wasn't an administrator. I was an infantry man, a paratrooper. I served in direct combat and I did that for 20 years and of course that's got its evolutions but that's part of who I am.

Then there's a third element and that's my life after I got out of the army in academics. The last maybe 20 years. Going to graduate school. Doing the rounds for that, (getting my degrees)so you need to know about me, those three elements, the poor boy from the ghetto, the Army paratrooper and the academic, those three things, (don't) always smoothly come together. I generally interact with people in one of those areas and never in combination. It's just I don't know people or I haven't known people long enough or in the right places to have all three of those things come together and usually they never do. Almost never.”

Narrator: “Unlike Patti, whose childhood was insulated from an understanding of race, for Ron, race was something he was always aware of; from his earliest memories.”

Ron: “(Maybe in) first grade but definitely before that even, before that for certain because my Mother was a ... to say she was a maid might put a high level title on what she actually did. She cleaned white people's houses and watched your kids and made them lunches and did all the stuff and raised their kids all my life. I went with her to work several times and

that whole dynamic of how they lived and how we lived and stuff they said and stuff I learned in school because I went to segregated schools.”

Narrator: “Unlike Jeremy, Ron did not relate significant experiences of ongoing racism while he was in the service. Maybe this was about the nature of his combat service. In his words”

Ron: “I served in combat with people of many races and white people. I trusted them. They have trusted me. I have risked my life for them. They have risked their life for me.”

Narrator: “He did however, relate a significant experience while traveling through the deep South as a Sargent in the Army. It seems to me to be a bit more than a microaggression although no physical violence ensued there was lots of innuendo. See what you think.”

Ron: “I was on leave and I was going to another base and I had to drive through Mississippi to get into Louisiana and I was running out of gas and I ended up having to pull over to this little, I mean the furthest place being picked up out in the middle of nowhere..you know..you may see a guy would be sittin' out there with a deer on his hood, somebody talkin' about farmin', Guys smokin' a cigarette. Just people pickin' up stuff at the store. You could probably get a hunting license, fish and worms. One of those kind of stores. So it's lit up like Christmas. (people everywhere) So I pull over to this place. I go in the store, get some peanuts or somethin' and right away I'm lookin' at all the people. Guys in cowboy hats and big belt buckles and you know. Every stereotypical role like that, you'd think and people were just hanging out. So, I'm out there, I go get to my gas, I pump my gas, I go back in the store and pay. This kind of system, you got to go out and pump, pay, go back and forth, you know, there's no

technology involved in this. I go in, I pay. And I pay with a whole bunch of \$1 bills. It was payday, the day I had left so I had a lot of cash on me. Fresh brand new \$1 bills and people weren't dealing in \$1 bills now. I don't think you can get them out the ATM machine any more but or from the bank but nobody gets paid in \$1 bills. I had nice thick old stack of \$1 bills and I paid for gas and I'm about to pull off and this black guy, who I saw in the store and he irritated me because he was dancin' or something and a bunch of white guys was laughing and [inaudible 00:33:07] around and like, "Yeah look at the black guy go." And that already pissed me off because to me he was being a buffoon. So this is the guy, he goes, "Hey, hey, hey man, they're gonna need you to come back in the store." And I said, "For what?" And he said, "Where did you get these dollars from that you paid for your gas?" And I go, "What? What kind of a question is that man? I got 'em from the bank. Why? Why you asking me?" He said, "Well they want to talk to you about it. They think something funny with the money. And I'm thinking right there, What? This guys a fool. Look at me. I'm clean shaven. I've got a high and (tight) hair cut. I'm in great physical condition. I've got an American flag in the back of my car. I'm a drill sergeant in the United States army. People respect me. Kids everyday as a drill sergeant. Training them to be patriotic. I'm a respected person. What is this shit. You're a buffoon, you're not like me. You walk in here and get these white guys straight. This is my attitude. So I walk in there and I'm gonna check these fools and so this guy, he's lookin' at the dollar. He's showing me that the dot, the black marker is kind of fading. The dye inks on the money aren't gonna come off.

Okay, so I snap immediately because this is some shit I've seen before. Okay, brand new money, here to buy gas at least, it will wipe off. It does do that. They do smudge. The will smudge. I mean it's just a little bit, it don't mean nothin'. It's just something I know, something anybody would know if you work in a place where you handle a lot of people with wrinkled money. At

least it being at the time. It wasn't that we had a thing so I'm tryin' to explain this to the guy but I'm also tryin' to explain to the rough, like I said, I'm gonna teach these red necks, you know I'm a respectable American man and I'm gonna talk shit to them and explain to these dufus's about this dollar bill. Well, while I'm doing that the guy had already called the Sheriff's department and the deputy comes and he immediately comes and they talk to him for a second. I've got my hand on my hip like these idiots and he looks at the money and he's going, "Yeah, this don't look right." And I'm goin' like, "You're as dumb as these guys are. Who the hell would counterfeit a \$1 bill anyway?" Now their eyes was lightin' up. So, I told them I gotta go to the bathroom. So, I go to the bathroom and while I'm in there, that black guy, he comes in the bathroom behind me. And he says, "Hey man, I don't know where you think you're at but you're in Mississippi and these people will kill you." And I'm goin', "What?" And then when I came out of the bathroom, I did start to think. It's like I was starting to focus now on everything I had learned about being a black person all my life. I had completely forgotten where the hell I was. I completely lost my sense of what the environment was. For me the skills I had as a kid, I mean growing up, I just ... I didn't see the environment. What the hell could happen. This wasn't a damn joke. Whether or not the \$1 bill was real or not real ... the fact was I'm a black guy, I'm in rural Mississippi talkin' shit to the authority in a place where they ... like I don't know what's goin' on. Who gives a shit that I'm in the army or where the hell I come from, none of that stuff. So I immediately become aware, immediately of what's going on here. So now I've gotta wait because he wants to call somebody else, some detective or somethin' and he shows up and we go through this thing of him lookin' at the money and him goin' [inaudible 00:37:29] who the hell would counterfeit a \$1 bill. And I'm not sayin' anything. I'm basically just ... I just want to cut through the damn ... look just get me out of here and more people were starting to show up at the store. Whatever is

goin' on, people are calling one another or somethin's happening because more and more people are just casually showin' up and standin' in corners, not really doing nothing. It went from maybe seven or eight people to now it's about 25 or 30 people at the damn store over the course of about 45 minutes. People were just kind of hangin', not really buying nothing but the store is filling up and everybody's talking and I'm the center of attention. I'm cutting this story a little bit short but this went on for about an hour and a half until a guy showed up and he was pissed off. I don't know if he was Secret Service or what, I know that he was pissed off because he was sayin' something about he shouldn't have to come here and let's see the money. He took a look at it, he looked at it for about 15 seconds and he said, "This is not counterfeit, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And then he left, wastin' my time and went out the door. They all kind of merged around and it was like, what's goin on? And ultimately what ends up happening is I'm at that store probably until the sun comes up again. The thing is, they had let me go, hours ago but I was so paranoid and so not knowing what the hell was getting ready to happen, I just stayed there. And the black guy, say's, 'They let you go a long time ago.'”

Narrator: “When asked about more recent examples Ron related tales of being the token black person on a board of directors for organizations.”

Ron: “There are two different occasions where I was appointed to these boards. I'm being real specific. I was appointed to these boards to sit on these boards but in both cases, and they were separated by some time but in both of those cases I was not on that board to ... let's put it this way, people didn't pose questions to me about the things that I was supposed to be qualified for to be on that board. In fact, they never did. I was just sittin' there. And that's because they weren't interested in what I had to say. They were just interested in me just being

there. So over a period of time, I found myself in situations and you start to notice it when people don't really engage you and it's like, why am I even here. Although, people never verbally said anything like that. At least not in my experience, nobody would but I knew that's why I was there."

Narrator: "Throughout our time together, Ron found it hard to focus on a single incident. Given this pervasive nature of race in Ron's life, he found it difficult to target specific stories. He explained,"

Ron: "And that might be the story itself. It's that these experiences are so common that they're difficult to actually pin down. It wouldn't surprise me why people get confused in their telling of stories of racism or bigotry. Certainly, for somebody like me who was born and bred in the South, of my age. You will have so many of these encounters and then you mix those in with people retelling you these encounters and hearing them third person. Your stories and their stories, collective stories can get bled together. You made me think about why it's important to try to get people to try to focus on the story because we all got these stories like folklore. It's kind of my story but it's not quite my story."

*The Storyteller moves to stage right and sits on the stool.*

Narrator: "Paul, a white man in his seventies, has a different attitude towards stories of his racist experience. As he put it"

PAUL: "My story's my truth. Nobody can debate it. That's what it is. They can't say, "Well, Paul, you're right, " or, "Paul, you're wrong." It's my story."

Narrator: “Paul’s story starts with his childhood in large Midwestern city. Although, the city wasn’t segregated the neighborhoods were and his was “lily white”. He recalls being fairly oblivious to issues of race growing up. Paul concludes his father was probably racist and expects he had heard the “N” word more than once growing up. Paul describes his mother differently.”

PAUL: “My mother was compassionate and very accepting. Probably she was that type of racism that she didn't know she was a racist because she didn't understand the African-Americans. She was fairly open and I think that's where I get my, whatever openness I have from her.”

Narrator: “Paul remembers hearing a very racist remark in the barber shop about not letting blacks in town after dark but remarked it went right over his head. As he put it I had other issues, such as girlfriends, school and other that were more important. Paul’s awakening to racism came very late in his life and appears to have been twofold, an intellectual awakening and an emotional reckoning. The first came while Paul was in Seminary.”

PAUL: “I guess the most important event or situation was in 1993. I was at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and during the summer we were required to participate in what was called clinical pastoral education. And for some, I won't say unknown reason, but unknown to me was I picked the prison system. In fact, the chaplain of the complex of prisons from Columbia, South Carolina, I was assigned to a low security one, however, the chaplain over the whole system guided us. Kind of a mentor. And he would bring all of the people who were in that clinical pastoral education together once a week. And one time, I had a realization when we were in the meeting. All of us were talking about our clinical assignments and experiences and I suddenly just felt crushed in side. I realized that 85% to 90% of the people I saw were Black.

And that meant one of two things: Either God created a group of people that were criminal or we had systemic racism in the system. And of course my faith system and everything else said it had to be systemic racism. And it crushed me. It just crushed me. I didn't know what to do about it. So that's when I really came to.”

Narrator: “Paul later explained:

PAUL: “Even with that experience in the prison system, I knew in my mind but I just put that aside in a section of my brain. It was still up here. It wasn't down in my heart.”

Narrator: “Paul told the story of his emotional reckoning when I asked him to tell me about being white.”

PAUL: “I didn't know I was White. There is an article called, "I, Racist." I can't think of the author right now, but if you went up on Google you can find it. And his comment, which impacted me considerably, "You are a racist if you think White is normal." And internally I raised my hand. I was normal. Being White and the experience of that has come through my education, my experiences probably in the ... I guess the benchmark is the Charleston murders at the Church. That's my benchmark for starting to learn about White privilege, White superiority and everything that I have received because I'm White. That's really what I think. I guess part of the impact for me was the fact that here were X number of people sitting down praying with this guy. Praying with ... and he opened fire. And it's the unfolding of the story, finding out he was a racist. Finding out that he was probably with an Aryan Nation connected somehow. Finding out he goes to a Lutheran Church. Finding out that the minister graduated from the same seminary I did. And all those connections, I don't know, just triggered. I can't say it's just something happened.”

Narrator: "The integration of these two experiences and his pastoral education brought Paul into racial activism. He started a group to initiate cross racial dialogue and is actively addressing diversity as an issue with local politicians. In our conversation Paul tells me of a racial experience that mirrors a story told by Ron. Ron, the older black gentleman I interviewed had often found himself the token black person when asked to serve on a board. Paul was asked to be the token white person on a local planning committee"

PAUL: "I was the token White on a committee that's gonna have the MLK, Jr. Annual Interfaith breakfast. And we were meeting just last Friday or Thursday. And Howard, one of the people in the group, there's only four of us, said, "Well, we're gonna notify all the churches." I said, "Wait a minute. I'm the White guy in the room. Are you gonna be notifying just Black churches?" And then Oscar, a black guy who's a friend of mine, just started laughing and howling about it. And then he said, "Well, you have to understand, Ron, that Howard, he's talking all churches. But there are groups that are really only, Black groups that are really talking about Black churches. I said, "Like the NAACP." He said, "Yes. I'm Treasurer of the NAACP."

Narrator: "Paul seemed equally encouraged when he recounted a story of a racist joke told in racially mixed company.

PAUL: "Another that involved me is when we initiated Black/White dialogue my wife and I decided to have there was a small group of only eight, have 'em over for dinner. Simple chicken salad was what it is. And there was four Whites, four Blacks. Four women, four men ages 27 to 80 something. And they were both wealthy and poor. And one Black guy got there

early. And the other Black guy came in about 20 minutes, 30 minutes late. And the first Black guy said, "What are you on? CPT?"

Narrator: "Paul had to explain to me CPT is Colored People's Time but expressed his hope remarking

PAUL: "And then I knew the walls were starting to come down because they could joke about that in front of every person.

*The Storyteller stands and moves to center stage.*

Narrator: "I have done my best to help you to know Jeremy, a middle aged black man born and raised right here in Southern Appalachia; Patti a fifty-some odd year old white woman, married to a black doctor; Ron, fifty-some odd year old black man raised in south with a military history and an advanced degree; and Paul, a seventy plus year old white man with a history of ministerial leadership. You have heard their stories as the stories were told to me. In a few minutes, I will be opening a dialogue in which I hope you will participate. We will look at the stories you have heard and talk about where we see racial microaggression, and where or if similar situations may have occurred in your life. I invite you now to take a few moments and reflect on what you have heard and how you have heard it. Please feel free to take notes on the paper provided. I will not be collecting these papers, so feel free to write whatever. We're going to take a bit of a break in the performance for everyone to think about their experience tonight. There is coffee and cookies in the kitchen. Everyone is welcome to help themselves. We will reconvene in about fifteen minutes to begin our exploration of the stories and our reactions to them. Thank you.

VITA

TAMA LUNCEFORD

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South Lewis Central School, Turin New York

B.S. Social Work, Keuka College, Keuka Park, New York  
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Festival Storyteller, Mountain Makin’s Festival,  
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Storyteller, Alps Adult Day Services, Morristown,  
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Honors and Awards:

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