Waiting for Superwoman: White female teachers and the construction of the "neoliberal savior" in a New York City public school

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Abstract

The narrative of gendered White savior in urban classrooms is ubiquitous not only in film (Smith, 1995, LaGravenese, 2007), but also in popular and academic literature. White female teachers are at the front of the majority of increasingly privatized U.S. classrooms (Pickower, 2009, Cochran-Smith, 2004). This article ethnographically critiques the trope of the White female savior teacher in the context of a New York City public school, which I call the College Preparatory Academy (College Prep), where I conducted two years of ethnographic teacher research. College Prep created its own in-house nonprofit organization in 2008 and is dependent on corporate charity to create a colorblind and meritocratic "college-going culture." Based on data gathered from four of College Prep's White female teachers, I create two composite characters, which I contrast with the "ideal type" White saviors found in media and literature. I analyze how my data articulates with the construction of race, class and neoliberalism in U.S. public education, and argue for possible alternatives to the troubling trope of the "White neoliberal savior" in education.

Keywords: neoliberalism; White teachers; urban schools; race; college-readiness; philanthropy; deficit discourse

I ran into Ms. Barnes[i], the head of the college office, leaving the traditional public New York City high school that I call the College Preparatory Academy (hereafter "College Prep") on a spring day in 2009, just before some alumni elected to return for homecoming. In her excitement about the upcoming event, Ms. Barnes, who is White[ii], told me how proud she felt about the fact that College Prep plays the role of "family around the dinner table" for its urban, college-bound students. By this statement, Ms. Barnes implied that students would only become educationally successful if College Prep provided them guidance on how to enter higher education. Through constructing herself as responsible for students' success, Ms. Barnes problematically constructs students and their families through a deficit lens; they can only be 'saved' with the school's help.

As Ms. Barnes shared her thoughts, I thought back to the interview I conducted with Howard Jackson just one week prior. Mr. Jackson, one of the few African-American, male teachers at College Prep, was planning on leaving this institution for a Ph.D. program the following year. In the interview, I asked him why he was leaving. He spoke about the fact that he felt he had "hit the glass ceiling" at College Prep. He stated,

> There is this belief by some of my White colleagues in this idea of 'White savior.' And I think this is true of Hollywood, of all the many movies we see. I may need to get better skills so that I may not run up against this…but I may always run up

> against this, I don't know. I have felt great difficulty in my work here because I have had to deal with this and navigate this.

Using the image of the dinner table to signify middle-class security and the image of the family to signify care, support and love, Ms. Barnes demonstrated the savior mentality that Mr. Jackson critiques. The savior mentality is built upon on a deficit discourse about students' families, who are not expected nor invited by the school to be involved in students' college application process nearly to the degree that the school's college office is.

In 2008, the school created its own in-house nonprofit organization (which I call "the Foundation") in order to solicit funds from the private sector. The school's college office, partly funded by the Foundation, plays a key role in the institution – students begin to work with the college office from their freshman year, and are mandated to apply to at least seven CUNY (City University of New York) campuses during their junior year. As a result, almost the entire senior class matriculates into college (although the figures for how many College Prep alumni remain in college are not available). "College readiness" takes up a great deal of the conversation in classrooms and at faulty meetings. I demonstrate in this article that the school's model, which is dependent on corporate charity to create a "college-going culture," demonstrates a problematic kind of savior mentality. I begin with a brief critique of popular images of White female teachers, and then contrast these images with ethnographic portrayals of White female teachers at College Prep. I conclude with an analysis of how my data articulates with ideologies of Whiteness, neoliberalism and secular saviorism in the United States, and

share advice on possible alternatives to the troubling trope of the White neoliberal savior.

Marketing at College Prep

The savior mentality pervades the ideologies of some staff members, like Ms. Barnes, who, through her praxis, defines social justice as helping some students to become marketable in an inequitable social and economic system, as opposed to critiquing the system itself, or taking action to eradicate oppressive social relations. This mentality is furthered as a result of the political economy of urban education in the United States, which increasingly depends on the private sector for resources (Lipman, 2011). College Prep is not a charter school. It is a small, traditional public school that is well resourced due to an in-house nonprofit organization (which I call "the Foundation") that the school's founding administration created in order to acquire private donations from the corporate elite. The school's website thanks five foundations, seven elected officials, thirty-four companies and organizations and more than 300 individuals who have each donated five thousand dollars or more to its organization. Falling into step with New York City Mayor Bloomberg's citywide education reforms, College Prep markets itself to its funders as preparing needy or "at-risk" students to become "college-ready", and boasts graduation and college matriculation rates of close to 100% for its seniors; the school's college office, funded by charitable donations, ensures that every student matriculates into college after graduation.

A New York City law firm (which I call "the Firm") is the school's most significant source of support; it is both a funder and founder of College Prep. The school has been lauded many times in newspapers and magazines for the great opportunities it provides to its at-risk (or in the school's words, "college-fragile") population of urban Black and Brown students. College Prep has demonstrated excellence at getting its students into college with the help of its college office (which pays its advisors with funds from the Foundation), and at managing its external image.

College Prep must maintain a relationship with its funders. Therefore, the school manages its image by constructing urban teachers and students as both needy and deserving of corporate charity. By propagating the idea that corporate charity is the solution rather than source of the problem of educational inequalities in urban contexts, College Press savior ironically reifies the hierarchies of race and class that it purports to alleviate.

Nice White Ladies

The popular documentary *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2010) profiles the stories of five students in five different cities in the United States, each of whom attempt to get accepted to charter schools (as opposed to their neighborhood public schools) through a lottery system. The beginning of the film portrays an interview with Geoffrey Canada, the President and CEO of Harlem Children's Zone, charter school in New York City. Canada explains his reaction, as a young boy growing up in Harlem, when his mother told him that Superman didn't exist: "he always shows up and he saves all the good people… I was crying because there was no one

coming with enough power to save us". Not without its critics (Ayers, 2010, Ravitch, 2011), the film vilifies teachers' unions and valorizes privately supported charter schools as the antidote to failing traditional public schools in the United States. It also supports the claim that individuals such as Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee (former chancellor of Washington D.C. public schools) and Canada can act as saviors within the context of a failing public school system. The film focuses heavily on school reformers, on students and their families, and for the most part, does not focus on teachers. Racialized and classed discourses of saviorism operate not just in terms of school reform in a broad sense, but rather in classrooms, in regard to the construction of the White female savior teacher.

Movies like *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese 2007) feature a young, straight, attractive White female protagonist who goes to an inner-city school to "save" Black and Brown students from their communities and themselves. *Nice White Lady* (2007) a popular MadTV skit, is a spoof of these films. This narrative of gendered White savior in urban classrooms, or the "great White hope" is ubiquitous not only in film (Robert, 1967, Ritchie, 1986, Smith, 1995, Craven, 1999, Mandel, 1996, LaGravenese, 2007), but also in popular and academic literature. The film versions of *Dangerous Minds* (Smith 1995) and *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese 2007) are both based on "true stories," the autobiographical writing of Louanne Johnson (1992) and Erin Gruwell (1999), respectively. Besides Johnson's book, several other academic sources, from various White female perspectives, generate stories of time spent as educators in segregated Black and Brown urban classrooms (Paley, 1979, Codell, 1999, Landsman, 2001, Baldacci, 2004).

While in the past, dominant images of urban teachers in film were male (Ayers, 1996), women increasingly seem to dominate the image of the 'urban teacher' in this historical moment. The popular trope of the White female teacher reflects a trend in K-12 U.S. classrooms: A 2005 article in the *New York Times* entitled "Those Who Can, and Can't" reveals that since the year 2000, 500,000 more teachers have taken jobs in U.S. elementary and secondary school classrooms (Simon, 2005). These teachers are primarily women (75%) and primarily White (84%)[iii]. Ferguson (2001), King (1991) and Hyland (2005) have noted the ways in which racist ideologies can masquerade under White teachers' good intentions, even in those cases of White women who mark themselves as "good teachers of Black students."

It is important to note that this trope is reproduced in teachers' minds, not only through mass media, but also in teacher training and professional development programs, as well as through national policy debates in education. The enduring production of these tropes is illustrated through ongoing critiques of deficit discourse in schools (Valencia, 2010), as well as critiques of pseudoscientific recycled "culture of poverty" discourse in teacher training (Valencia, 2010, Bomer, 2008, Foley, 2008, Foley, 1997). Mainstream, racialized "ideal types" (Weber, 1999) of teachers and students are often overly dramatized, but teachers at College Prep often cited mainstream literature and film in critiques of these 'ideal types'. They believe many new and underprepared teachers who enter New York City's classrooms employ these tropes when structuring classroom practices and structuring relationships with students and their families.

Freedom Writers (LaGravenese, 2007), the story of White teacher Erin Gruwell, differs from other films of its kind in an important way. I argue that this is a direct reflection of neoliberal capitalism. Gruwell's narrative, although still that of the savior, embodies another trope that I call the "White neoliberal savior." While Gruwell still has a social or moral agenda, she also courts the favoritism of private donors who help to fund her mission of not only saving students from their backgrounds, families and communities, but also helping them access material gain and social mobility through college. The neoliberal savior's social justice agenda includes a moneyed logic intertwined with the liberal agenda of tokenistic diversity and equality that is suspiciously absent of a critique of how the gutting of social entitlements for citizens is twining with corporate control over most aspects of social life to fuel growing social and educational inequalities in the US (Apple, 2001b, Akom, 2008). There seemed to be a similar ideology permeating College Prep.

Not unlike the antebellum White proselytizers who expanded the influence of the church by teaching Black slaves, whom they called the "heathen of the new world," to read so that they could read the bible and one day find salvation (Woodson, 1919), or the U.S. Federal Government and Bureau of Indian Affairs 19th and 20th century projects of Native American assimilation through schooling (Lomawaima, 1995, Farb, 1991, Hunt, 2012), a missionary zeal lies behind much of the discourse of urban alternative certification programs, and many of the ideals of young teachers in urban classrooms. These programs, through "populational reasoning", can serve to normalize young predominantly White middle-class teachers while constructing "urban" or "at-risk" students as an 'Other' who needs to be

saved (Popkewitz, 1998). Yet, salvation does not come through helping the oppressed to assimilate and find God in the neoliberal era; rather, it comes through helping the oppressed pinpoint the constitutive forces that give rise to unjust social conditions inside and outside of their own social circles. Becoming "marketable" for college or a career becomes synonymous with salvation in the neoliberal imaginary. Besides *The Freedom Writer's Diary* book, and subsequent *Freedom Writers'* film (Gruwell and Writers, 1999, LaGravenese, 2007), this recent turn is not encapsulated in many of the ideal-type White teachers who are so common in popular film and literature. Much of the academic literature that critiques White racism in urban classrooms discusses unintentional, passive, "colorblind" or dysconscious racism (Hyland, 2005, King, 1991, Marx, 2006, Solomon et al., 2005, Lewis, 2003). Here I am naming another way that racism operates in tandem with classism in a specifically neoliberal sense; in order to remain competitive, schools use the discourse of meritocracy and college readiness to market urban students and their teachers in an explicitly racialized and classed sense. Therefore, this discourse continues to block educators and students from interrogating how neoliberal ideologies perpetuate structural relationships that are responsible for oppression of working-class citizens across the globe.

Positionality

In the over two years of teacher-research I conducted at College Prep, I served as an English teacher, mentor teacher, and cheerleading coach. I was twenty-eight years old when I was hired. I identify as White and come from a middle-class background. Before moving to Texas in 2006 for graduate

school, I had three years of teaching experience in New York City public secondary schools. I began as a New York City Teaching Fellow in 2003, which is an alternative certification program that recruits new teachers from fields outside of education. I did not embark on my field research with the goal of writing a qualitative critique of neoliberal school reform. Rather, I had hoped to document how teachers in a contemporary U.S. public school were rewriting critical pedagogy in context. Yet, when I began my teacher research at the school in 2008, rather than finding the wealth of critical pedagogues that I had hoped to, I found the teachers had varying degrees of critique and agency regarding the school's racialized and classed relationship to the private sector.

College Prep Demographics

College Prep aligns demographically with much of the literature that documents the race and class segregation prevalent in U.S. educational institutions (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, Kozol, 2005, Oakes, 2005). In the 2009-10 school year, of the school's thirty-five teachers, twenty-three identified as White, seven identified as African-American or Black, three as biracial or mixed-race (one African-American and White, two Latino and White), and two as Latino. Of the 458 students enrolled in the school, grades 9-12, 81% identified as Black, 17% as Hispanic, 1% as Asian / Pacific Islander, and fewer than 1% as White or American Indian[iv] (nysed.gov, 2008-9). According to the New York City Department of Education's profile of College Prep, 62% of its students were eligible for free lunches and 16% were eligible for reduced price lunch. While these statistics are typical of New York City schools, College Prep's 93% graduation rate and 97%

college acceptance rate for seniors stand out as atypical compared to New York City's average graduation rate of 62.7% (schools.nyc.gov, 2010).

The school's exterior is clean and welcoming – a proliferation of windows, outlined in bright primary colors, lighten the building's grey façade. It is located in a renovated building in a relatively affluent neighborhood, close to quite a few bus and subway lines, stores, restaurants, and public buildings. The school had resources that seemed incomparable to those at the two other New York City public schools where I taught previously, where photocopiers, overhead projectors, and working computers were unavailable or limited, and chalk was the only teaching tool distributed freely. College Prep boasted four working copy machines, unlimited paper supplies for teachers, Smartboards and LCD projectors in almost every classroom, computers for teachers and students, and overhead projectors available for teachers who wanted them.

Methods: Research and Writing

In my second year of teacher-research at College Prep, I interviewed 44 school staff members (including teachers, school safety agents and administrators). 13 of the teachers whom I interviewed were White women. I observed each of their classes at least once. Out of those 13, I chose four to focus closely on. I conducted weekly classroom (or extracurricular) observations of each for an entire semester. I chose to focus on these four because parents, students, and colleagues see them as effective pedagogues, students demonstrate evidence of learning in their classes, and each sees herself as a social justice educator. I recorded and transcribed one formal

interview with each teacher, which lasted between one and two hours. In addition to observing these teachers' classes or extracurricular activities, I also observed the teachers at faculty meetings and professional development events and listened closely to what parent/guardians, colleagues and students said *about* these women relative to their teaching and interpersonal relationships with students, staff and families.

In an attempt to preserve the anonymity of my participants, as well as to move towards a more efficient way of voicing my emerging conclusions, I created two composite characters based on my data (Banks and Banks, 1998, Hemley, 2006). In order to synthesize the data for this project, I read transcripts from interviews with teachers and coded for emergent themes of race, class, gender, college readiness, social justice, teaching practice, views on philanthropy and education, views on the savior mentality, and views of students and parents. I noticed the themes that emerged from two of the teachers closely resembled one another, and the same was true for the other two teachers. These similarities formed the basis for the characters that I created for this paper; based on my initial coding, they exhibited similar classroom ideologies and politics around their White female identities and the school's racialized and classed neoliberal project. In each case, I altered and combined small details about participants' lives or backgrounds, while taking care to preserve the general, more significant details of their teaching practice, politics or ideology in the context of this study. Quotes from teachers' interviews remain unchanged.

Ms. Joseph

Twenty-eight years old, Ms. Joseph is in her fourth year teaching history and research writing at College Prep. She graduated from a small, women's college, and is originally from a city in the Midwest, but she shares that she has ancestry from Germany and the Southern United States.

She says that she attended a "very selective private school"; she graduated from high school as one in a class of 46. Because the school had extremely small classes, she says, there were "zero classroom management problems anywhere." Ms. Joseph tells me that the school was predominantly White, with the exception of two African-American students, and that most students came from very privileged backgrounds. During our interview, I ask her what keeps her teaching at College Prep. She remarks how awestruck she was at how students respected and internalized the "culture" of the school:

> It was like a half an hour before class started, the kids were just milling about, sitting in front of their lockers, talking to their friends. All the classrooms were open whether there was a teacher in there or not. Students were, like, helping out in classrooms. They were helping teachers get ready. They were just like reading a book, or they were just sitting talking to their friends. It was like the whole place had this aura of just like, it was like a college campus in that sense. It was just like, 'oh yeah, we're all here to learn and we're all happy to be here'... I was just like, 'oh my gosh! If our students would just like mill about the hallways like this, we would have no problem'. But they don't…. we've had so much trouble in the mornings, and students who like sneak up the back staircase, and they like literally run and scream and curse and chase and hit each other in the hallway.

Given her portrayal in the above comments about her own high school versus College Prep, I wonder what moves her to stay at College Prep, especially since the reason for her visit to her high school was that she was considering moving back there to live. Because she is nostalgic at the self-motivation and class culture of the students at her old high school, I wonder what keeps her in New York City, and what motivates her to teach. When I probe about this subject, she responds that she sees teaching as a career and as a profession. She continues:

> I did not come into teaching because I wanted to save kids. I think that the relationships with students, and seeing the success of students, that is the reward of a job well done. And definitely kind of the intrinsic motivation that goes with it. But I came into teaching because I thought I would like teaching. I thought I would like the material and the discussions about texts and you know, and that somewhat academic aspect to it.

Ms. Joseph's statement here is provocative in that she explicitly negates the idea of the teacher-as-savior. She came into teaching because she believed that she would enjoy the career, and she likes to be pushed as a professional. While not completely satisfied at College Prep (she says that had the economy not been so bad, she might have found another job for this year), and aware that she does not see herself in "this kind of environment" for life, she believes College Prep is "the devil I know, versus the devil I don't."

Ms. Joseph, Students and Parents

Ms. Joseph purposefully maintains emotional distance from students and parents. When I ask if she could recount a day or an experience at College

Prep that stands out from the rest, for either good or bad reasons, she describes an incident where she cried in front of the class because she was knocked over by a fight between two girls in her class. When she cried, students were able to "access" her emotionally. She subsequently regretted her vulnerability in the incident, and seemed to harden her shell further as a result. She says,

> I was upset that I didn't control that situation…I was afraid that showing feeling in front of the kids would show them weakness, and that I was gonna be undoing some of the progress I had made. From other colleagues I had heard good rumors about how strict I was, and I liked that and I wanted to keep that up.

The above quote is evidence of the fact that Ms. Joseph sees good discipline and classroom management as maintained through a careful performance that emphasizes consistency and a lack of emotional display. This demonstrates a marked difference from the savior figure of the "nice White lady" portrayed in many mainstream films.

> When I ask Ms. Joseph to describe *school culture*, she tells me that it is:
> Pretty positive. We try to maintain cordial relationships with the students, that we say hello and how are you, and, you know, we follow up with each other, we try to interact with the kids on, you know, on a personal level in terms of like, oh, did you get new glasses, they look really nice, or like, great job at the game, but maintaining a nice professional distance in order to show them what that looks like and what that feels like to have a professional relationship with someone. Kids understand that there's the importance of getting into college and everyone is college motivated and they look to us as models for what that could mean for them.

This description is backed up by how she interacts with students: she is cordial while maintaining a "nice professional distance." She expects students to rise to her academic expectations, and to see her as a model for how to be a professional. This ties into the class culture that Ms. Joseph sees as vital for students to learn in order to be successful in college or careers after they graduate from College Prep, demonstrating a different, more neoliberal form of the savior mentality.

Students say that "Ms. Joseph doesn't play," and when I sit in her fast-paced eleventh grade research writing class, I see what they mean. Ms. Joseph's "teacher moves" are calculated. She uses an egg timer to keep herself on track. Her whole class feels businesslike, and moves quickly. There is the sense that everyone is getting something done; students are to be disciplined and productive workers.

Many students and parents tell me that they appreciate how strict Ms. Joseph is, according to Ms. Joseph, however, not every parent is equally as supportive of her work with students. Going into greater detail about why she continued to work at College Prep, she says:

> I know that the principal respects me as a professional and I know that I am safe as a teacher. Like I know that when a parent screams at me and curses at me and hangs up on me, which has happened to me a couple times now, that when I send that e-mail to the principal that if the parent's next phone call is to the principal that she has my back.

I wondered what caused such conflict between Ms. Joseph and the parents that had cursed and hung up on her. I form a hypothesis later in the

interview, when Ms. Joseph and I talk about student behavior. I ask her why her students don't just calmly "mill about the hallways" as did the students at the high school she attended. She responds:

> I mean I really don't know. I really—I mean, to sound terribly classist and terribly racist, I mean like they're just predominantly White kids from two parent families that are raised in homes that it's not appropriate to run around and scream and curse and hit people—like they don't do it. That is not ok.

Ms. Joseph reveals here a great disconnect between her expectations and educational autobiography, and students who don't obey the school's norms. She marks this disconnect by race, class and family structure, which are the most visible way that it manifests for her. The assumption that she makes here (with the caveat that it "sounds incredibly classist and racist") is that in the homes of poor and working-class, non-White students who come from single parent families, it is okay to "run around and scream and curse and hit people." I wonder how this rift manifests when Ms. Joseph calls the parents of students who are not behaving in her class according to her expectations. Perhaps this was one reason for parents' defensiveness in relation to her phone calls home.

Ms. Joseph, Social Structure and Social Justice

Ms. Joseph describes her classroom persona to me as "prim and proper." She says, in relation to her students:

> I am not going to try to be your friend, I am not going to try to be your buddy. I am not going to get down and boogie with you. I am not going to speak your

> language. And, so in a way, it's like I showcase the difference, rather than trying to conceal it…and it's a personality thing as well…like I am the 'please and thank you,' I am the 'sir and ma'am.'

Her belief in "proper" behavior and language manifested one day when I observed a grammar lesson in her research writing class. Students were supposed to be labeling subject, verb and object in the following sentences:

1. My brother go to school in Flatbush.
2. When you cut it, it send a bitter, sharp, unpleasant smell to your nose.

When the class came back together after students had labeled subjects and objects, Ms. Joseph stood at the front of the room and helped them make the corrections. She asked students what the "correct" version of the sentences would be in "grammatical language." When students said that it should be "goes" to school as opposed to "go," and sends instead of "send" she said, "most of you know the correction because it sounds bad [in Standard American English]."

While the overt curriculum here was about grammar, I found the hidden curriculum here to be particularly provocative not only as a class project, since they are being taught what Ms. Elliot might see as "professional" language for the workplace, but also as a racial project (Omi and Winant, 1994). Smitherman (2001), Gee (1996), Alim (2006), and Delpit (1998) have argued (among many others) the importance of an explicit curriculum of linguistic and discursive code switching for students, especially in predominantly African-American classrooms. While it is important, these

scholars concede, to teach Standard American English (SAE) or the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) to prepare students for socioeconomic success, it is just as important not to demean students' home discourses by marking them as "improper," "wrong" or "incorrect." The scholars listed above argue for conveying to students that African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (or any other language or discourse) is just as "correct" as SAE, but is just used in different scenarios. They show that AAVE is just as complex and nuanced as SAE, but is not recognized as such due to hierarchies of social class intertwined with racial and linguistic supremacy. To name SAE as the only correct way of expressing oneself is a covert project of White supremacy, since SAE is most commonly conflated with the professional class in the United States, and AAVE most commonly associated with impoverished students.

Her use of "Flatbush" in the first sentence also becomes part of the same racial project. College Prep is not a neighborhood school, and many students come from communities all over New York City. Some live in Flatbush, which is a predominantly African-American and Caribbean community. Not only is the sentence written in AAVE, it also refers to a geographic area that is racially marked. This further pathologizes the grammar of the "incorrect" sentence by associating it with a geographic area of Brooklyn that is marked as "Black." Ms. Joseph elevates her own raced and classed discourse above that of her Black and Brown students, without explicit social critique or self-reflexivity. In other words, she does not seem to demonstrate an awareness of herself as a racial actor in that setting who elevates her own experience to normalcy and correctness without a critique of the constructed and problematic nature of this hierarchy.

This ostensibly deracinated (yet raced), ostensibly declassed (yet classed) and power-evasive lesson follows the same logic as the pedagogy of professionalism mentioned earlier by Ms. Joseph at College Prep. Here, Ms. Joseph sees it as part of her job to "un-teach" students who come into her classroom possessing both linguistic and discursive deficits from their homes and communities. She sees it as her job to transfer, through a banking model (Freire, 1970), the college- or career-driven logic of College Prep to students. This is part of the marketizing project of urban schools like College Prep, who have faith in the ostensible meritocracy of the capitalist state to reward those who perform correctly, and who support the systems of expertise (Giddens, 1991, Mitchell, 2002) that come along with these ideologies. While Ms. Joseph is explicit about the fact that she is not at College Prep to "save" students, her own methods in the context of College Prep's philanthropy-based college-readiness project demonstrate the missionary mentality that she holds in regard to marketized success and social justice, and her complaisance in the school's reification of the race and class inequalities that it claims to alleviate.

Although Ms. Joseph explicitly avoids talking about race with other staff or with her students because she does not see it as part of her own mission, or the mission of the school, I pushed her during our interview, asking whether the school maintains or contests racial and class-based disparities. She responded:

> I think the thing that we are doing in order to challenge ideas about race is not so much in our discussion of like, 'what does it mean to be Black?' but that we as teachers are trying to confer as much of our privilege that we were lucky enough

or coincidentally fortunate enough to grow up with on our students. We are trying to send students out into the world more likely to go to college, more likely to be academically successful, you know, with a kind of…give them the opportunity to have them enter whatever social sphere they would like to…we give them the opportunities that their racial group traditionally or stereotypically doesn't have.

Ms. Joseph uses a deficit discourse to talk about College Prep students, combined with a narrative of colorblind meritocracy to argue that teachers in some sense can confer their own race and class privilege upon students who come from less privileged backgrounds. The logic here is that if students can perform in the right ways by imitating their privileged teachers, then they too can pull themselves up by their bootstraps to embrace their share of the American dream. It demonstrates a lack of awareness that economic inequality continues to increase in the United States, greatly impacting the opportunities for college graduates, many of whom are likely to end up in part-time or temporary, service-oriented jobs with no health benefits and little chance of economic stability (Scipes, 2009). It also demonstrates College Prep's uncritical adherence to marketized systems of assimilation and expertise. While she is still seen as an effective teacher by students and some parents, Ms. Joseph can hide deficit discourse behind a narrative of meritocratic or neoliberal salvation for students.

Ms. Easton

Bronx-born and raised, Ms. Easton, who identifies as White, reports to me that many students ask her if she is Puerto Rican (or "Spanish") because of the way she talks. Indeed, her accent marks her immediately as a local. This

is rare among teachers at College Prep; most are not originally from New York City. Ms. Easton teaches 9th and 12th grade math, serves as the chair of the Math Department, and facilitates many extracurricular activities at the school.

While I knew that she had been raised in Bronx, she filled in some of the gaps. Born in the early-1970s, she witnessed the gentrification of her community firsthand. Until fifth grade, she attended one public school, which she describes demographically as 60% White and 40% Puerto Rican. For sixth grade, she attended a different public school where, she tells me, she was one of the few White students. She describes the school as "kinda rough," and says that her parents pulled her out of the public school system after the sixth grade and put her in Catholic school. She began at the all-girls school where her mother teaches. The tuition was exceptionally high for its students, and so she said that many wealthy Italian families sent their daughters there. She describes this school as "super snobby."

This teacher describes the experience as a sort of "racial awakening": out of a class of 500 girls, only five were African-American. She witnessed a teacher who frequently mixed up the Black girls' names, and she was shocked that these girls seemed to be "all the same" in the teacher's eyes. Ms. Easton marks this as the first time she became aware of her Whiteness. She subsequently transferred to another private Catholic school where the tuition was much lower and the students were more diverse, both racially and socioeconomically. She says that this was a more comfortable environment for her, since growing up in the Bronx, you "went on the block and you played with whoever was there," White, Black or otherwise. She

tells me that several of College Prep's students also attended her elementary school, and that this helps her relate to students. She knows what is available to her students because their backgrounds are part of her own childhood. She adds

> I don't know what it's like to come to New York and be in this brand new place and try and situate yourself, and try and deal with kids, but I can imagine it would be a lot more difficult, not understanding where they are coming from and where they are growing up. And there's a lot of people that do make the effort to get in and understand and talk to people that live in this neighborhood [the predominantly African-American neighborhood where we both lived, and where we conducted our interview], for example but then you also have the people that have like seen some movie about teaching in New York City and base their knowledge off of that.

Now, despite that she is busy teaching full time, chairing the department, running an after school empowerment for girls as well as other after-school activities, and pursuing a Ph.D., she sees it as her responsibility not to leave the classroom. She continues, telling me that while there are many people in teaching, not all of them are good at relating to the students. Ms. Easton is not in the classroom to confer her own privilege on her students, and she has a clear critique of the popular mainstream narrative of teacher-as-missionary or savior. Rather, she stays in the classroom because she relates well to her students and she is good at teaching. In looking at many of the adults around her, she does not see these qualities reflected.

Ms. Easton also sees herself in a crucial role of inspiring gender awareness for young women. "The issues we fight about as women", she tells me, "are

the very issues that we need to come together on." She sees the empowerment club as an opportunity to inspire young women to become critical and politicized along both race and gender lines. In addition to what she sees as her responsibility to keep teaching, Ms. Easton's intersectional race and gender politics (Collins, 1991, Crenshaw, 1995) provide her with a personal and embodied investment in her work.

Ms. Easton is a strong believer in change through critical community input. In October 2010 at a professional development meeting for staff, I saw this ethic come to fruition when I presented data from the schoolwide student questionnaire given in spring 2009. In response to a question that compared College Prep to a prison, a typical NYC school, a private school, a second home or family, a university, a corporation or business, a party, or "other," 37% of students responded that College Prep was like a prison. Mr. Thomas, the director of the Foundation, shared that he did not agree with the wording of the question, and thought that the results were skewed by the extreme nature of the choices. Ms. Easton quickly shot back: "Why is it that we always try to make excuses to get out of looking at what we don't want to see? Students are telling us something important here: we can't ignore it!" She believes in making her point regardless of whether it will be popular or accepted and frequently does so. She listens, weighing others' opinions, but is not afraid to make her opinions known. She views students' communities and experiences through an asset-based lens, and does not normalize her own experience through her pedagogy or praxis.

Ms. Easton, Students and Parents

Ms. Easton is concerned about the college-only option that College Prep perpetuates for its students and is also concerned with the lack of parent involvement at the school. She sees this, in a way, as perpetuating an unrealistic meritocratic narrative of achievement for students who are "set up to fail". Although she does believe in teaching for college-readiness, she is interested in doing this, while at the same time, creating a supportive classroom community that provides students with a more holistic kind of education.

Early in the 2008-09 school year, when I told her that I was interested in exploring contested definitions of *social justice* at College Prep for my research, Ms. Easton asked me if I was interested in helping her facilitate an exchange program between our students in New York City and a group of predominantly White working-class students in rural Maine. Our students would stay in the homes of their Maine counterparts, and teacher chaperones would stay in the homes of Maine teachers. Later in the spring, the Maine students would come to New York to stay in the homes of their counterparts, and Maine teachers would stay with New York teachers.

As we planned the after-school sessions that we would conduct with students, I got a better sense of Ms. Easton's politics regarding students and the trip itself. She told me that while, traditionally, the trip had been focused on furthering a colorblind multiculturalism between predominantly Black New York City students and predominantly White Maine students, she wanted this time to be different. She hoped that we could bring in activities

that would help all students to notice and be critical of differences, as opposed to ignoring them. In a flyer for tenth- and eleventh-grade students who were going on the trip (they had all been to Maine in their previous years at College Prep), she wrote:

> You should consider your Maine partner your investigative counterpart this year. The two of you will bring together your different identities, different experiences, and different perspectives to an investigation of how stereotypes and discrimination function in our society. As allies, you will have to think about how you can promote understanding and connection across differences.

At one meeting, students who had been on the trip before expressed that kids in Maine can get away with not doing their schoolwork, smoking, drinking, and doing drugs, and no one seemed to notice. Ms. Easton used this organic opportunity to say: "it's called privilege, that's what that is—when you are born with all these opportunities that you didn't earn. And that's the thing— you guys have to work twice as hard to get the same things." Tina, an eleventh-grader, observed, "if you think about the stereotypes that prevail about us [Black and Brown urban kids], the Maine kids are the ones who actually do these behaviors". Yet ironically, she expressed, it's the New York City kids who are the most surveilled. Ms. Easton makes it a point to create opportunities to make structures of privilege obvious to students through conversation, in the same ways that she does with her colleagues.

Part of the work that Ms. Easton does with students is in getting them to feel comfortable engaging race with her, even though she is White and they are not. When I ask her about the times that she is aware of her Whiteness at

College Prep, she says that she is always aware. She understands that cultivating a relationship of trust with students and engaging, rather than ignoring, difference is an important point of human connection. Ms. Easton foregrounds the ways that she is an oppressor, through cultivating self-awareness as she moves through the space of the building and in her interactions with students. Unlike Ms. Joseph, as well as other White teachers whom I interviewed, Ms. Easton says that she has explicit conversations with students about race "often." When I ask her how they normally go, she elaborates: "I find kids to be a little wary, like they don't know that it's ok to talk about race, or they call White people 'Caucasian' or something like that. They are trying to respect me, but I don't need that level of not talking about the issue."

Remaining critical of her Whiteness in that space is one way that Ms. Easton combats both the White neoliberal savior mentality and the deficit discourse that the school applies to its students. She also combats the deficit-based construction of parents. When I ask her whether she has a strong partnership with parents now, she says,

> Not necessarily this year, [but I have in the past]. We definitely need more parent involvement at the school. That's one important link. And I think that could be a bias that people in public education have. If I were to bring that up at College Prep, they would be like, 'well you can't expect our kids parents to [get involved]; they have to work or they come from poor communities', and I am like: 'what do you mean, they are poor, so they can't come to the school? They can't be involved?' I feel like we just make their decision for them; we use that as an excuse.

Ms. Easton believes that teachers and students are more successful when schools work in partnership with families. In June 2009, a meeting at the school was scheduled with parents because of a fight between two cliques of girls that morning just outside of the school. Principal McCarren and the deans of discipline called the parents in for a conference. Yet, when the parents arrived, a physical altercation arose between them just outside the school's main office. School safety agents broke up the fight. Ms. Easton was picking up her mail in the main office, and she witnessed the altercation. Rather than blaming the parents for what occurred, Ms. Easton interprets the situation as parents advocating for their children when the school would not.

In relation to parents, she adds that after the fight, she saw an angry parent talking to the principal. Ms. Easton believes from what she overheard that the parent was implicating the school in why the fight occurred, because the school was aware of the conflict as it was developing and did nothing to stop it. Ideally, Ms. Easton says, schools should be in partnership with families, but at College Prep, they seem set in opposition to one another. Ms. Easton recognizes that while College Prep may have good intentions, the school needs to get better both at being in partnership with parents, as well as at giving students a viable option to pursue a successful academic identity at school while maintaining allegiance to their home communities. Rather than blaming parents or students for incidents of violence, Ms. Easton wants to explore the possibilities for students to embrace school norms of behavior, especially in relation to resolving conflicts peacefully or through talk, without ascribing a deficit to the realities of students' lives outside of the building. This runs directly counter to the White neoliberal savior mentality,

which depends on pushing parents and families out of Black and Brown students' education.

Ms. Easton, Social Structure and Social Justice

As a child in the Bronx, Ms. Easton was accustomed to being in diverse settings, and says that she feels uncomfortable in settings that are too homogenous. When I ask her about racial politics and segregation among the adults at College Prep, she speaks about how teachers' backgrounds influence the ways they are able to get along with students, as well as their initial reasons for teaching:

MS. EASTON: There was someone who was touted as this amazing teacher here, but this was someone who I knew would never be able to relate to kids because of like, because they couldn't get past that, like they couldn't be in their world, like, ever. And I think a lot of it had to do with, like not just race, but also with like socioeconomic status and education.

AB: So you are talking about someone with a White, elite background.

MS. EASTON: I am talking about like, 'oh I am gonna come in and like save these kids.'

AB: Yeah, the White missionary complex?

MS. EASTON: Right, but without the idea of who you are even giving to, you know? Like if I come in and tell you that everything that I know is going to make your life better because my life is good.

While Ms. Joseph and Ms. Easton both voice a critique of the White savior discourse in urban schools, they do so for different reasons.

Unlike Ms. Joseph, Ms. Easton sees part of her job as a teacher as being able to deeply connect with students and families. She knows that there are important skills, content and knowledge, including class discourses that teachers need to incorporate into students' learning experience, but that this cannot happen until teachers cultivate respect for and understanding of their students. While she acknowledges that race might be a part of this, she also cites the importance of gender and social class as it intersects with race in terms of teachers' alienation from students, and from one another. While critical conversations about social structures and inequities should be a regular part of schooling, she recognizes that this is not sufficient to combat the inequities perpetuated by gender inequality and class segregation. Regardless of what kind of education College Prep students get, unless larger patterns of social structures change, talk about fighting race, class, and gender disparities can only go so far. Ms. Easton sees the necessity of fighting for social equity both in and outside of schools.

Brayboy et al. remind us that equity (a system where unequal goods are redistributed to move towards a society where there is a greater likelihood of equality) is not the same thing as equality (sameness) (2007); the future of critical scholarship in education, they write, should be based on a goal of equity and justice, as opposed to one of equality. It seems that while Ms. Joseph demonstrates an uncritical meritocratic ideology of colorblind equality, Ms. Easton's ideology is equity-based – teaching and learning have to start from critiquing and engaging differences in privilege, power and positionality, both in and beyond the classroom.

Concluding Thoughts

Neither of the composite characters that I document above align with the "ideal type" White teacher as "Christian" or "liberal" savior that is so common in many movies and literature. While Ms. Joseph voices a refusal to embody this stereotype, she ironically ends up embodying another version of the savior through her adherence to a definition of neoliberal social justice and expertise. For her, uncritical support of the school's mission marks her, by default, as a neoliberal savior. She sees her place at the school as doing the impossible: saving students from a socioeconomic crisis that already exists, as opposed to religious or moral crisis. Perhaps embodying the trope of the White savior or missionary, in whatever form, provides a way for her to cope with the discomfort of a White racial ambivalence (Lensmire, 2010, Lensmire and Snaza, 2010) that is also the product of economic privilege, while not confronting her own privilege, (nor White supremacist social and economic structures) head-on (Fine et al., 1997).

The composite characters of Ms. Joseph and Ms. Easton help to nuance the "ideal types" of urban teachers so popularized in literature, media and film. While students, parents and colleagues see both teachers as effective pedagogues and classroom managers, there are marked differences between their views of their work and the socially charged raced, classed and gendered issues they are willing to discuss with their students. Ms. Easton explicitly voices and embodies an activist agenda through a refusal to see students and communities through lens that is deficit-based. She critiques the model of the school, and critiques the politics of her colleagues when she sees it necessary. Her pedagogy is emblematic of self-reflective and critical

race, gender and class politics, and she recognizes her activist work as serving her own interests as well, because it demonstrates a critique of intersectional oppression (Crenshaw, 1995, Collins, 1991).

Both of these characters, in their own ways, talk back to popularized ideal types of White teachers, yet Ms. Easton critiques the neoliberal White savior model that Mr. Jackson marks as the problematic prototype of social justice at College Prep. Ms. Easton understands that to challenge the social positions of her students, she must challenge her own social position and think critically about how the institution maintains differentiated social positions for predominantly White teachers and predominantly non-White students. While she believes that some aspects of mission of the institution (a college-preparatory curriculum, encouragement of critical thought, social justice) are noble, she continues to be critical of those aspects of the institution that further the hegemony of racial and class dominance and that purport an uncritical narrative of meritocracy. She does not see her work as conferring privilege upon her students, but rather sees relationships with students, colleagues and parents as mutually beneficial in effecting change. She challenges racial ideology by "not only reconceptualizing [her] own racial identity, but [reformulating] the meaning of race in general" (Omi and Winant 1994, 91). Ms. Easton succeeds in relating to colleagues, students and parents in a self-critical and humanizing way while engaging in important conversations about difference, privilege, oppression and power. She is open to what students teach her about their families and communities, as well as about how to be an effective and respected teacher in a power-laden and complex educational space.

It is not my intention here to vilify the pedagogy or politics of Ms. Joseph while idealizing those of Ms. Easton. Rather than constructing one teacher as having "bad" philosophies of social justice and the other as having a "good" version, I find it more useful to conceptualize these teachers on a spectrum of more or less problematic. I am building here upon Ullman and Hecsh's assertion that teachers' sociocultural consciousness is a continuum (2011), and that it is essential for administrators, teaching practitioners as well as teacher educators to conceptualize it as such in order to design teacher training that inspires critical reflexivity, informed agency and cultural competence. Neoliberal social practices exacerbate inequalities (Apple, 2001a, Giroux, 2004, Lipman, 2004, Hursh, 2009) and democratic practices in classrooms become a necessary, but not sufficient condition for social justice pedagogy, human agency and participatory democracy (Young, 1990). In a moment of increasing privatization in public education, educators are encouraged to equate social justice with the classic liberal ideals of individual freedom and equality of opportunity in the free market (Smith, 1776, Friedman, 1962). I argue that action must be continually coupled with skepticism about the goals of social justice teaching, as it relates to the hegemony of the free market.

Although I am not prepared to quantify the ways that White female teachers critical of social inequity might impact students' learning, mental or emotional well-being, or success, it does seem that teachers can make choices about their level of affiliation with or critique of the racial and class projects of their institutions. My observations reiterate Ladson-Billings' "culturally relevant pedagogy" (1995) to some degree – yet demonstrate that we cannot conceive of "culture" outside of a critical awareness of the

salience of how race, class and neoliberalism intersect. My findings speak to the importance of recruiting and maintaining teachers who have thought deeply about the fact that race, gender and economic inequities continue to increase and who therefore are willing to engage in a structural and intersectional critique of these disparities. While the teaching profession needs to be diversified, the predominantly White women who are already in classrooms must demonstrate willingness to critique the trope of the "great White hope" in its neoliberal form, and deepen their investment in fighting inequity through a critical and embodied discomfort with intersectional oppressions.

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Notes

[i] In accordance with the University of Texas at Austin's Institutional Review Board, all names are pseudonyms, which in most cases were self-selected by participants.
[ii] I elect to capitalize racial markers (i.e. 'White', 'Black' and 'Brown') both to highlight race as a central aspect of my analysis and to emphasize the ongoing maintenance of socio-historically constructed racial privileges and oppressions in the United States. See Collins (2004, pp. 17, 310) and Vargas (2006, p. 249) for related discussions.
[iii] The article also states that 8% of U.S. teachers are Black, 6% Hispanic, and 1.6% Asian, while 40% of public school students are minorities.
[iv] Of the 458 students enrolled in the school, grades 9-12, 72% are female and 27% are male. Students and staff often hypothesize that this atypical imbalance is due to the school's lack of a football team, as well as its law and justice theme, which they assume is more popular with young women.