

Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability

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In this article, I trouble the pedagogical practice of comforting discomfort in the social-justice classroom. Is it possible to support white students, for instance, and not comfort them? Is it possible to support white students without recentering the emotional crisis of white students, without disregarding the needs and interests of students of color, and without reproducing the violence that students of color endure? First I address the dangers of comforting discomfort and discuss Robin DiAngelo's notion of white fragility, which has been used to explain the tendency of white people to flee discomfort rather than tarry with it (DiAngelo 2011). Employing Erinn Gilson's work on vulnerability, I argue that white fragility is not a weakness but an active performance of invulnerability (Gilson 2011; 2014). I conclude by arguing that developing vulnerability is a counter to white fragility, and that one way such vulnerability can be encouraged is through offering critical hope, which I maintain is a type of support that does not comfort.

The first sign of the success of a pedagogy of discomfort is, quite simply, the ability to recognize what it is that one doesn't want to know, and how one has developed emotional investments to protect oneself from that knowing. This process may require facing the "tragic loss" inherent to educational inquiry; facing demons and a precarious sense of self. But in so doing one gains a new sense of interconnection with others. ... Through education we invite one another to risk "living at the edge of our skin," where we find the greatest hope of revising ourselves.

—Boler 1999, 200

Last year my colleague invited me to visit her class and address the topic of "Discourse, Truth, and White Strategies of Denial." After my presentation, a lively conversation ensued around white denials of racism and complicity that was led

primarily by the students of color in the class. These students gave numerous examples demonstrating how white denials of racism and complicity manifest themselves in their university classrooms, and in fact, they gave ample instances of such denials that transpired in the very classroom in which I was invited to speak. Most significantly, they poignantly articulated the effects that such denials had on them.

Noticing that the white students in the class were silent, I pressed them to engage with what the students of color were saying. A white male student, clearly agitated, said he didn't understand why the students of color were so "angry" and that they seemed to be over-sensitive and offended by practices that were not ill-intended. Two female students of color reacted to his comments with frustration and infuriation, one announcing that she was contemplating leaving the room, to which the white student protested with both anger and tears insisting that he was not racist.

Given that the very topic of my presentation was white discursive practices of denial, the white student's violent resistance could not remain unchallenged. As I critically questioned the white student's discomfort and drew attention to the violence the students of color were experiencing, the white colleague who invited me to speak to her class interrupted by reproaching me for being too "hard" on her white student. Another student put his hand on the white student's shoulder to comfort him. I immediately noticed that no one expressed the need to comfort the students of color who were experiencing difficult emotions. What just happened? White comfort was recentered, and white denials were protected in a class whose purported aim was exactly the converse.

Recently, some educational theorists have argued that in the context of social-justice education (whose primary purpose is to unsettle dominant beliefs and practices), discomfort is a necessary catalyst for growth and learning (Boler 1999; Kumashiro 2002; Mayo 2002; Berlak 2004; Zembylas 2015). Megan Boler, for example, advances a pedagogy of discomfort that invites students and educators to shift out of their comfort zones by critically assessing their most cherished beliefs and habitual social practices in order to open up a space where individual and social transformations become possible (Boler 1999, 176). Often theorists who value discomfort as a vehicle for learning difficult knowledge build on the work of Shoshana Felman, who insists that "[i]f teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis... it has perhaps *not truly taught*" (Felman 1992, 53). A pedagogy of discomfort counters universal expectations that teachers must create comfortable environments for students and assumes that comfort can foreclose learning and obstruct change. Discomfort thus becomes synonymous with the possibility of individual and social transformation.

Yet even for those who agree that discomfort is not only unavoidable but necessary for learning, questions arise as to whether discomfort might also be counterproductive and unethical (Rak 2003; Ivits 2009; Mintz 2013; Zembylas 2015). Felman, whose work focuses on how her students witness narratives describing the atrocities of the Holocaust, insists that her responsibility as an educator is to create "the highest state of crisis... without 'driving the students crazy,' without compromising the students' bounds" (Felman 1992, 53). This implies that discomfort can be transformative only under qualified conditions and that too much discomfort may be counterproductive to learning and possibly unethical. One solution for the dilemma of

discomfort, suggested by Michalinos Zembylas, is to employ “strategic empathy” that helps “students integrate their troubled views into anti-racist and socially just perspectives” (Zembylas 2012, 113).

Strategic empathy refers to the need for an educator to tactically inhabit the subjective universe of her student, even as she may implicitly disapprove of what the student is saying or doing. Zembylas notes that when an educator takes sides too early in the class discussion, this might alienate the student. An educator must “work sometimes against her own emotions in order to empathize with students’ troubled knowledge, even if this means to acknowledge ‘difficult’ or ‘unacceptable’ emotions” (Zembylas 2012, 172). This does not imply that critical engagement is abandoned. Zembylas insists that the educator continue to critically engage with the students’ uncomfortable emotions, and thus he reconciles a possible inconsistency between a pedagogy of strategic empathy and a pedagogy of discomfort. Such a form of empathy, however, may be problematic. Had I turned to strategic empathy in response to my colleague’s concern that I was being too hard on this white student, such empathy might function as a form of comforting the white student. Even when strategic empathy continues critical discussion, would it be read as a form of comfort and/or as a form of support and by whom?

My primary concern in this article is the pedagogical practice of comforting (as a verb) white students’ discomfort. Is it possible to support white students, for instance, and not comfort them? Given the discourses of denial at their disposal, how can social-justice educators support white students to *stay with* rather than *flee from* (Yancy 2012) the discomfort that is necessary for learning and without appeasing or pacifying their discomfort and without providing absolution and redemption? Most significantly, is it possible to support white students without recentering the emotional crisis of white students, without disregarding the needs and interests of students of color and without reproducing the violence that students of color endure?

To situate this inquiry, I first offer a number of observations about the dangers of comforting white students’ discomfort. Next, I examine Robin DiAngelo’s notion of white fragility or weakness to help explain why white people have a tendency to flee discomfort instead of tarrying with it (DiAngelo 2011). DiAngelo proposes developing stamina as an antidote to white fragility. Employing the work of Judith Butler, I argue that white fragility is a form of racial violence and an active performance of invulnerability (Butler 1990/1999). As a counter to white fragility, I advocate developing vulnerability in Erinn Gilson’s sense of that term rather than focus on developing stamina (Gilson 2011; 2014). Finally, I suggest one way that such vulnerability can be encouraged, that is, offering critical hope, and argue that this is an illustration of support that does not comfort (Boler 2004).

COMFORTING AS (HIDING) COMPLICITY

A productive place to begin an examination of the dangers of comforting can be found in the scholarship around “white tears.” In her study of feminist organizations

and the tensions of their internal debates around racism, Sarita Srivastava observes how white tears in the face of antiracist critiques get taken up by white feminists (Srivastava 2006). Instead of focusing on organizational change, the self-centered strategies of white feminists comforting one another serve to preserve white moral self-image and to deflect attention away from the concerns and emotions of feminists of color. Among the patterns of “therapeutic conventions” that Srivastava finds are “taking care of those white participants who are crying or emotionally distraught, the hug, as social, political and emotional connection, apology, reconnection, to bridge rifts, surmount anger” (Srivastava 2006, 68).

Although comforting might seem to be a virtue of certain streams of feminism in which nurturing, empathy, and caring for are valued (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982), comforting white students’ discomfort stems from investments in white innocence (Fellows and Razack 1998) and serves to reconstitute white women as victims rather than as perpetrators. Comforting not only alleviates white discomfort and preserves white innocence, but it also constitutes feminists of color as the offenders. Feminists of color who offer antiracist critique are labeled as “angry” and carry the burden of being blamed as the source of white discomfort. They are also accused of threatening feminist solidarity. As one feminist of color in Srivastava’s study put it, “And this white woman spent a lot of time balling (sic) her eyes out during the meetings. So it was like (we) were the nasty women” (Srivastava 2006, 70). Thus women of color who critique white women were interpolated by them as “not caring” and “unfeeling” and going against imposed visions of feminist happiness (Ahmed 2010).

Srivastava underscores not only that white tears terminate the conversation but also that white “calming techniques” provide absolution from guilt. In fact, white women’s *professions of weakness* serve “as a buffer from consciousness, responsibility, and struggle” (Griffin 1998, 12). When white discomfort is comforted, white women are relieved from all accountability. In other words, white comforting becomes the mechanism by which white women can avoid confronting their complicity in racism and whereby power inequities in the organization can be maintained.

Educational theorists have similarly noted how white emotions are protected in classroom discussions around racism. Zeus Leonardo explains that white students’ crying during difficult classroom discussions around race changes “the dynamics in those settings by redirecting sympathy away from People of Color” (Leonardo 2016, xiv). Leonardo also points to white confessions that function to assuage guilt. When white guilt is placated, Leonardo argues, questions of accountability are dispelled and continued discussion of complicity comes to an end. Comforting white discomfort provides a type of absolution that restores the white comfort that was disrupted and is a form of violence that allows for the suffering of students of color to go unnoticed.

To sum up, comforting white students’ discomfort validates their emotional pain at the expense of dismissing and ignoring the emotional pain of students of color, provides absolution from white guilt, and protects challenges to the status quo by ending the discussion. In addition, protecting white students’ comfort serves to confirm the position of students of color as culprits who are the “cause of tension” (Ahmed 2009). White people will often respond to challenges to their moral

goodness by shifting the blame to people of color. It is not uncommon to hear white people declare “You are racist if you are accusing me of being racist”; all the while they are being cared for by other white people (Srivastava 2006, 74).

Comforting white students’ discomfort not only impedes discussions around white complicity, it is also a manifestation of white complicity itself, especially when blame for causing white discomfort is directed at the person of color. In the next section, I examine DiAngelo’s notion of white fragility that she offers as an explanation for white people’s tendency to flee discomfort instead of tarrying with it. Analyzing white fragility through the lens of Butler’s notion of performativity and Gilson’s critique of invulnerability, I argue that white fragility is performative practice of invulnerability.

PERFORMING WHITE FRAGILITY

Fragility (fragile)

1. easily broken, shattered, or damaged; delicate; brittle; frail:
2. vulnerably delicate, as in appearance:
3. lacking in substance or force; flimsy:¹

White fragility is a term that has been gaining popularity on social media. Aurin Squire discusses “white fragility” on *Talking Points Memo* (Squire 2015). Writing for the *Huffington Post*, Amelia Shroyer painfully explains how white fragility leads to forms of racial violence (Shroyer 2015). Courtney Martin urges her white readers to transform white fragility into courageous imperfection (Martin 2015). Sam Adler-Bell borrows the term to understand white defensive responses to real conversations about race (Adler-Bell 2015).

Coined by DiAngelo, *white fragility* gives a name to the ubiquitous practice in which white people react with a range of defensive moves that compensate for even the slightest distress caused by challenges to their racial worldviews and/or to their racial innocence. White fragility is the “state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (DiAngelo 2011, 54). White fragility is implied when George Yancy describes white people as “not in crisis vis-à-vis their whiteness; they are under constant therapeutic reprieve, assured there is nothing problematic about whiteness, about their *white selves*” (Yancy 2014, 62).

DiAngelo provides a term to describe the phenomenon but also explains the vulnerability or lack of “psychosocial stamina” of white people to face contemplating their individual and collective roles in racism. White people become inept at tolerating the slightest unease when the question of one’s complicity in racism is even intimated because they are socially afforded tools that encourage this ineptness. According to DiAngelo, white privilege insulates white people in a protected cocoon of comfort that creates an expectation of comfort. When that comfort is disturbed by the challenge of having to confront their “unconscious habits of white privilege”

(Sullivan 2006), whites have a repertoire of socially sanctioned discursive practices of escape. These discursive practices of escape include “the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving” the scene (DiAngelo 2011, 54). Such moves function to restore comfort and, in fact, are manifestations of such habits of privilege that leave whites fragile and incapable of contemplating their role in racism. The effect of such discursive practices is that white stress and discomfort can be avoided and white racial equilibrium can be recovered and reinstated.

DiAngelo’s *white fragility* can help in understanding how social-justice educators themselves may fall into the trap of allaying white fears and white guilt because they empathize with white students’ frailty and inability to withstand challenge. Yet it also may be the educator’s own discomfort that is being alleviated. Sometimes educators want to avoid conflict in the classroom or do not have the tools to deal with conflict. Liz Jackson, for example, considers with remarkable frankness whether it is her own wounding that she is trying to prevent rather than that of her students (Jackson 2008, 235).

Not only social-justice educators but even students of color may be compelled into the position of caring for white discomfort. In their discussion of the discourse of safety, Zeus Leonardo and Ronald Porter articulate the dilemma that students of color experience. “Either (people of color) must observe the safety of whites and be denied a space that promotes people of color’s growth... or insist on a space of integrity and put themselves at further risk not only of violence, but also risk being conceived of as illogical or irrational” (Leonardo and Porter 2010, 140). Displays of white fragility in the classroom are a form of microaggression that induces “cray-cray” (Matias and DiAngelo 2013) or crazy-making for students of color. The term *white fragility* helps to illuminate the pressure people of color often feel to mollify white discomfort at the sacrifice of their own educational and emotional needs.

When the classroom becomes centered on and controlled by white fragility that puts white students (and educators) at ease, then the normative violence that the racially marginalized undergo from white students is difficult to name. When people of color challenge white students to acknowledge their complicity in racism, DiAngelo insists that white students complain that they feel unsafe but what they really feel is discomfort.

DiAngelo discusses a number of overlapping factors that inculcate fragility, such as segregation, dominant beliefs in universalism and individualism, entitlements to racial comfort, racial arrogance, racial belonging, psychic freedom, and constant messages that whites are more valuable than people of color. DiAngelo contends that white people *become fragile* and “ill-equipped” to confront racial tension, and consequently they forfeit opportunities to learn from unease. In other words, DiAngelo understands white fragility as a form of weakness to which the answer is developing stamina.

As a way forward, DiAngelo insists that white people need to cultivate “psychosocial stamina” (DiAngelo 2011, 56) or the resilience required to acknowledge the violence whites themselves enact. In addition, DiAngelo counsels white people to take

the first step and to “let go of your racial certitude and reach for humility” (DiAngelo 2015). I want to examine the connection between developing stamina as a remedy for a low threshold for discomfort and fostering humility in order to introduce an argument that developing stamina is insufficient to counter white fragility.

DiAngelo implies that white people become weak, almost as if they become victims of their own socialization. White fragility, however, is not *only about having* a low threshold for discomfort—a passive sense of being. White people actively *perform* fragility and continue to perform it in a way that consolidates white narcissism and white arrogance—signs of power and privilege, not weakness.

The *performance* of white fragility becomes glaring in Alison Jones’s critical analysis of dialogue across difference (Jones 1999). Jones observes a course on feminist theory and education in which the white (Pakeha) students and students of color (Maori and Pacific Islander) were divided for a significant part of the course. Jones presents some of the student feedback about the arrangement and concludes that while the white students were resentful, the students of color were energetically overjoyed. Jones reads these different responses as symptomatic of the differential power that exists in racially and ethnically integrated classrooms. When confronted with a denial of access to their marginalized peers, the white students felt discomfort stemming from the loss of the opportunity to receive absolution and redemption from the students of color. Although she does not use the term *white fragility*, Jones concludes that the white students’ professions of fragility—“teach me... care for me”—were actually manifestations of privilege, invulnerability, and reassertions of power.

WHITE FRAGILITY AS A PERFORMATIVE ENACTMENT OF INVULNERABILITY

The idea of performativity is introduced in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* when Butler states that “gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (Butler 1990/1999, 25). For Butler, a performative act is one that “brings into being or enacts that which it names” (Butler 1995, 134). Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s account of language, Butler insists that gender is an imitation or miming of the dominant norms of heterosexuality (Derrida 1974). As Butler puts it, “the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that’s been going on before one arrived on the scene” (Butler 1988, 526). When those imitative discourses are exposed, the *construction* of a subject that is intelligible can be acknowledged, and the possibility to reiterate norms differently becomes conceivable.

Like gender, whiteness “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1990/1999, 43). Whiteness is thus a doing: less a property of skin than *an enactment of power reproducing its dominance in both explicit and implicit ways*. More significantly, when Butler refers to performativity she does not imply that whiteness is performed by a sovereign subject

who takes on or acts a role, but rather that the subject is performative in the sense that it produces a series of effects. One of the effects is that our practices consolidate, construct, and constitute us as the subjects we are and can be.

White fragility is a form of *doing* whiteness. Butler's notion of performativity helps us to understand white fragility as a doing: a form of reiterating whiteness and a form of complicity. Yet, as Butler insists, to be constituted is not necessarily to be determined. Because norms only exist in our particular performance of them, norms are not stable and can be subverted. Norms can be reiterated differently and subversively and in doing so their constructiveness is exposed. As with gender, if white fragility is a regulated process of repetition that is constitutive of the subject, the possibility exists to repeat such discourse differently.

Emphasizing white fragility as performative exposes the risks of associating white fragility with weakness or mere lack of stamina, and it underscores the links between practices of white fragility and complicity in systemic oppression. White fragility allows for the suffering endured by the marginalized to continue without outrage and without a second thought, contributing to marginalization, as previously noted.

To claim that white fragility arises because of socialization also hazards the assumption that white people are passive and not responsible for what they have been socialized to do and be. The emphasis on performativity, in contrast, underscores that the subject is neither helpless nor innocent. Moreover, white fragility understood as weakness can foster in social-justice educators and others the invitation to comfort white students' discomfort. If, as I have argued, white fragility is a form of complicity, then I submit that the primary pedagogical response to white fragility involves encouraging vulnerability that has the potential to lead to the humility DiAngelo calls for. I turn to Gilson's recent work on vulnerability in order to flesh out what I mean.

In her insightful analysis of an ethics of vulnerability, Gilson exposes the role that the ideal of invulnerability plays in prevalent definitions of vulnerability (Gilson 2011; 2014). Gilson begins her analysis by noting how most philosophical discussions of vulnerability assume an exclusively negative definition of vulnerability as involving fragility, frailty, and weakness. Being vulnerable implies being weak, not protected, susceptible to harm, exposed to or at risk, defenseless and dependent, and, significantly, a victim. People who are vulnerable require others to care for them or come to their aid, sometimes also manifested as paternalistic protection.

Vulnerability, in this sense, is something to be avoided. Invulnerability in the sense of strength, independence, and control is its counter and what frames the negative meaning of vulnerability. Gilson argues that valuing and pursuing invulnerability necessitates distancing oneself from vulnerability. If vulnerability is something we aim to protect ourselves from because it leads to harm and suffering, then we will want to pursue safety measures that will counter the possibility of being vulnerable—we will strive for safety. In order to avoid vulnerability and the pain and discomfort it entails, a number of defense strategies are activated. One of those strategies is ignoring or denying vulnerability as a common human condition. The ideal of invulnerability supports the significance in Western society that is given to control and

mastery. In a profoundly insightful move, Gilson contends that invulnerability is a position that “enables us to ignore those aspects of existence that are inconvenient, disadvantageous, or uncomfortable for us, such as vulnerability’s persistence. As *invulnerable*, we cannot be affected by what might unsettle us” (Gilson 2014, 76; emphasis added). Invulnerability thus invites *closure*.

Gilson connects the ideal of invulnerability and its attendant ethical and epistemological closure with the recent scholarship around epistemologies of ignorance. Invulnerability enables one to ignore what is uncomfortable, to ignore that vulnerability is a fact of life. Significantly, Gilson points out that invulnerability as an uncontested and unacknowledged social norm encourages an *inability* to be affected by what might disrupt our ways of understanding and being in the world. If invulnerability functions as closure, then in seeking invulnerability we can ignore the ways in which we are vulnerable and dependent on our relations with others. Invulnerability is shored up by an ignorance or denial of vulnerability and is the basis of other forms of ignorance that enable the systemically privileged to maintain a position of privilege (Gilson 2014, 86).

Rather than relying on the exclusively negative conception of vulnerability, Gilson suggests reconceptualizing vulnerability as encompassing an openness to change, dispossession, and willingness to risk exposure. What is captivating about Gilson’s expanded definition of vulnerability is that it involves a condition of potential as well as a condition of possible limitation and suffering. Gilson maintains that vulnerability is a common human capacity that, first and foremost, involves the capacity to be affected and to affect in turn. Gilson contends that vulnerability is ambivalent in that it is the condition that makes both positive and negative experiences possible.

Being vulnerable makes it possible for us to suffer, to fall prey to violence and be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of these feelings. Vulnerability is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn. (Gilson 2011, 310)

Vulnerability thus presumes *continual* openness to what one does not know or what one cannot control even at the cost of risking discomfort, whereas invulnerability involves being closed to change and challenge. This emphasis on continued openness leads to the accent that Gilson puts on an acknowledgment of uncertainty.

Gilson advances epistemic vulnerability as a counter to the ideal of invulnerability. If invulnerability entails closure and not wanting to know, epistemic vulnerability begins with being open and an acknowledgment of uncertainty. This, according to Gilson, is the precondition for learning and growth. Epistemic vulnerability involves “the ability to put oneself in and learn from situations in which one is the unknowing, foreign, and perhaps uncomfortable party. . . . Without an acceptance of the genuine value of discomfort the real necessity of immersing oneself in situation in which one does not normally find oneself, learning does not happen” (Gilson 2014, 94). Fostering epistemic vulnerability requires a rejection of the masterful, invulnerable

knower “who has nothing to learn from others or for whom others are merely vehicles for the transmission of information” (93). Moreover, epistemic vulnerability is not just about being willing to challenge one’s ideas and beliefs but, even more significantly, it is about a constant vigilance and willingness to change one’s self. Vulnerability thus is not promoted as a means to achieve invulnerability or strength but rather goes beyond the weakness/strength dichotomy to highlight the significance of eschewing closure.

Borrowing from Gilson’s language around invulnerability, I contend that white fragility is a stance that *enables one to ignore those aspects of existence that are inconvenient, disadvantageous, or uncomfortable for us. . . . As fragile, we cannot be affected by what might unsettle us*. Like invulnerability, white fragility is about closure to a certain understanding of our relations with others as well as closure to certain features of ourselves. Its remedy, I submit, is first and foremost promoting epistemic vulnerability.

EMBRACING VULNERABILITY AND THE ROLE OF CRITICAL HOPE

Understanding white fragility as an enactment of invulnerability acknowledges the part that white students and social-justice educators play in reproducing power hierarchies in the classroom. One example of how such an understanding of white fragility can serve to disrupt oppressive practices is revealed in a frequent white response to the justified moral anger of the marginalized. Audre Lorde, for example, describes the reaction of white women to her speaking from anger.

I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a White woman says, “Tell me how you feel but don’t say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.” But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change? (Lorde 1984/2007, 125)

When white fragility is understood as an enactment of invulnerability, however, a space is opened for white people to hear the message behind anger because instead of responding with violence or tears, white people might respond with vulnerability. Moreover, by not comforting white discomfort, social-justice education promotes rather than forecloses discussions that address how white practices contribute to such anger and allow for the possibility that white habits of privilege may be changed.

How can such openness in the systemically privileged be fostered when the privilege to flee rather than to stay with discomfort is socially sanctioned? If the remedy for white fragility is developing vulnerability, is it possible to support white students in developing vulnerability without comforting them? Building on Boler’s notion of critical hope, I suggest some directions for addressing these questions.

In the epigraph that opens this article, Boler notes that in facing loss, one gains new interconnections with others; it is “where we find the greatest hope of revisioning ourselves” (Boler 1999, 200). In her later essay, “Teaching for Hope: The Ethics of Shattering World Views,” Boler proposes critical hope to her students, which is

hope that “requires a clear explanation of what is lost and *what might be gained through this suffering of loss*” (Boler 2004, 130; emphasis added). Boler advances critical hope as a complement to a pedagogy of discomfort.

Critical hope is distinguished from naïve hope, which is defined as “those platitudes that directly serve the hegemonic interest of maintaining the status quo” (128). Critical hope, first and foremost, *acknowledges that systemic oppression exists*, and such hope entails *a responsibility* to challenge what Boler refers to as “inscribed habits of emotional inattention” and involves “a willingness to exist within ambiguity and uncertainty” (129). Critical hope does not obstruct purposive and critical reflection around one’s complicity in systems of oppression but instead encourages a “willingness to be fully alive in the process of constant change and becoming” (126). Critical hope aims to encourage openness toward continued struggle and forefronts discomfort as a signal to be alert for what one does not know about others but also about oneself.

Critical hope is an illustration of support that can avoid comforting white discomfort. Like strategic empathy, critical hope encourages and does not terminate uncomfortable critical discussion around complicity. But unlike strategic empathy, critical hope does not risk offering absolution or redemption. The focus is not on white moral innocence or on allaying white guilt. Instead, critical hope offers a sort of assurance that discomfort will be an opportunity for profound learning about not only the other but also about oneself. Moreover, in emphasizing uncertainty and ambiguity, critical hope advances support in the embrace of vulnerability, which may lead to a willingness *to stay in discomfort* because discomfort can broaden the limits of one’s frame of intelligibility. According to Boler, critical hope entails an ethical and political responsibility requiring constant vigilance in the process of change and becoming resulting in the potential for relations in solidarity with others.

The motivation to stay in discomfort may consist in the hope and promise of learning to become more human; this may unlock opportunities for the interests and needs of students of color to be addressed without being sabotaged. The difference between support and comfort lies in the responsibility borne by the student. Rather than narcissistically needing to alleviate discomfort, the student might welcome a challenge to his/her worldview and be receptive to new possibilities even when they imply his/her complicity.

Supporting white students, however, will risk comforting them and recentering their needs and interests if serious critical attention is not paid to its effects on the systemically marginalized. Supporting but not alleviating white students’ discomfort necessitates that the genealogy of the emotions that circulate in the classroom and their discursive effects be interrogated. Most significantly, supporting will avoid comforting only if “critical analysis begins from the objective experiences of the oppressed” (Leonardo 2004, 141). Any practice of support must be constantly evaluated for its effects on the marginalized. Studies on white benevolence have revealed how crucial it is to discern the meaning of “help” from the perspective of those being helped, not of those who are helping (Razack 2007). Similarly, the conditions and

the context within which support is given must always be examined from the perspective of those who stand to benefit the least from such support.

I submit that when white fragility is conceptualized in terms of performativity and as a form of complicity, there is less temptation to offer comfort to systemically privileged students, but there is still reason to provide critical hope. Understanding white fragility as performative underscores the reality that the more comfortable a space is for white students, the more likely it will be violent for students of color. Because the system encourages white people to deny the material, psychic, social, and political benefits of whiteness and works only when oppressive patterns are made difficult to name, even the practices of well-intended white people can result in making whites feel comfortable and “good” while simultaneously harming people of color.

Dialogue across difference might not be able to avoid imperialist and colonizing dangers (Jones 1999; Boler 2004), but if the systemically privileged are willing to take ownership of discomfort and not be defensive, this can lead to more transformative learning experiences for all. As educators, it is important that we question the tendency to be tempted to comfort the white “victim” in the classroom at the expense of ignoring the harms the marginalized experience at the hands of the “victim,” as well as by the comforting of white discomfort. How to respond to professions of white fragility in the classroom may be crucial. I have argued that encouraging vulnerability is key to countering white fragility, and critical hope may be a way of supporting vulnerability without providing comfort. Encouraging vulnerability through critical hope can help white students not fear discomfort and better appreciate that the “willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes *our chance to become human*” (Butler 2004, 136).

NOTE

1. Dictionary.com, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/fragile> (accessed January 11, 2017).

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