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shea wesley martin
The Ohio State University

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What Do We Do with the White [Cis] Women?: Juliet Takes a Breath as the Blueprint for Reimagining Allyship in Literacy Instruction

shea wesley martin
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Introduction

In fall 1996, I spent most school days reading *Goosebumps* under my desk in Mrs. Duncan's[1] second-grade classroom. Mrs. Duncan, a freshly minted, wide-eyed white woman from Iowa, "loved kids with all her heart" and always smiled. One afternoon, she called me to the front for a special reading group. I grabbed the latest *Goosebumps,* but Mrs. Duncan said I wouldn't need it. In the reading group, I shone brightly. I knew all of the words in the books. A budding literacy educator at just seven years old, I became the reading specialist's assistant. That evening at dinner, I recounted my day to my parents. The next day, my mother marched to the school demanding answers. As she expected, well-intentioned Mrs. Duncan had sent all of the Black kids to the remedial reading group. Mrs. Duncan cried a lot that day. The next morning I was in a new class, with a new teacher, and a new *Goosebumps* book.

Every BlPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person/People of Color) I know has a "Mrs. Duncan story"—a narrative full of bias, inequity, and racism that continues to impact their consciousness and trajectory. When I first met Harlowe Brisbane in Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath*, I already knew her. Harlowe—well-intentioned, feminist, progressive, working in close proximity to BIPOC—was as familiar as breathing. As a queer, genderfluid, Black literacy educator, I am a unicorn in a profession swimming in whiteness and cisgender womanness.[2] These days, I spend a lot of time thinking about Mrs. Duncan, Harlowe Brisbane, and all of the white cis women working toward allyship in literacy spaces; the interventions needed to develop their consciousnesses; and how to hold them accountable as we work to build more liberatory literacy

[1] I have used a pseudonym to honor the privacy of my second grade teacher. While "Mrs. Duncan" held these biases and beliefs in 1996, my hope is that her work in diverse classrooms and continued course work in cultural responsiveness have resulted in a development of her consciousness and budding allyship.

[2] In data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics during the 2017-2018 school year, more than 76% of teachers surveyed identified as white; 79.1% of teachers surveyed were female (Irwin et al.).

spaces. Throughout this article, I use "cis women" to address two issues: (a) to illuminate the lack of data regarding gender identity in the teaching profession; and (b) to acknowledge the white trans women and nonbinary folks who exist within literacy spaces and may have adversely different experiences in their work due to transphobia (and other intersecting identities).

For three decades, scholars have explored the need for a more diverse teaching population and more culturally responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings; Gay; Hammond; Bettina Love; Muhammad). Despite recruitment and professional development efforts, our reality is that almost 80% of the teaching profession is white cis women who must be equipped and held accountable for the education of BIPOC children (de Brey et al.; Irwin et al.). Much of our field's current work is aimed at making learning experiences more inclusive and representative of the schooling population—diversifying curriculum (Ebarvia et al.), recruiting and retaining more BIPOC (Rafa and Roberts), and reimagining instruction (Muhammad; Simmons) —*but what do we do with the white cis women?*

The answer is simple: we must engage white cis women in our work toward liberation or risk not obtaining our goal at all. Every day, literacy educators use texts as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors for our students (Bishop). Those same books, particularly dynamic, #OwnVoices[3] texts, can also be tools for our own development as educators. With this idea in mind, I position *Juliet Takes a Breath* as a vehicle for reckoning with the elephant in literacy education: the overwhelming existence of white cis women who drive our conversations, curriculum, and decision-making.

[3] While #OwnVoices has become a problematic publishing "catchall" and thus has been recently discontinued by We Need Diverse Books, I use it in this article as I think it still encapsulates (and provides a shorthand for) a great need in our work: work by and about folks from traditionally marginalized communities (Lavoie).

A Foundational Text for the Reckoning: *Juliet Takes a Breath*

Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* provides a narrative guide to navigating white allyship in the quest for BIPOC liberation through literacy. The book chronicles queer Boricua protagonist Juliet's summer interning for her literary idol and idyllic white feminist author, Harlowe Brisbane. In many ways, Harlowe's character mirrors the archetype of white cis women in PK-12 literacy classrooms: she is passionate, well-meaning, and well-versed in her craft (Jiménez). In Juliet's introductory letter to Harlowe, Rivera illuminates Harlowe's impact on Juliet despite their racial, class, and geographical differences: Harlowe is a middle-aged white feminist vegan living in Oregon; Juliet is a college-aged Boricua living in the Bronx. Despite these differences, Harlowe's book, *Raging Flower: Empowering Your Pussy by Empowering Your Mind*, is Juliet's "magical labia manifesto" and "bible" in her identity development (Rivera 1-2). In her letter, Juliet questions Harlowe's understanding of intersectional identities of readers like her. She writes, "if you don't know my life and struggle, can we be sisters?" (2).

Juliet's line of questioning echoes the wonderings of feminist scholar Audre Lorde in her open letter to her white colleague Mary Daly. Lorde questions Daly's usage of BIPOC authors as props in her work, writing, "did you ever read my words or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connections between us?" (69). Allyship from white cis women in literacy classrooms demands an intentional investment in unpacking their own journey and learning the histories and narratives of BIPOC not for the sake of performative short-term interventions, but instead as a means to disrupt and decenter whiteness. More than just knowing and learning, what I hope to evoke in my analysis is what Cheryl Matias deems a requirement of

white allies: “a deep anger for human pain,” a rage that centers BIPOC liberation through literacy (28).

With a Black romantic partner, queer Filipino roommate, and a complex understanding about gender and its intersections with sexuality, race, and class, Harlowe appears to be the quintessential ally to the BIPOC community. However, like many white allies, she still struggles in relinquishing her own power and privilege. This struggle echoes a trend I have seen when working with aspiring white allies across the United States, particularly in our field; all too many are eager to consume antiracist literature and yet fail to make space for folks like me. As bell hooks writes, “the system of racism, classism, and educational elitism remains intact if [white women] are to maintain their authoritative positions” (12). Thus, in their hesitation to make space, white cis women teachers routinely attempt to claim allyship without reckoning with the white supremacy and privilege that made, protects, and elevates them to positions of power within an inequitable, violent system of schooling. As our field seeks to diversify libraries and the teaching force, white cis women must be willing to risk and sacrifice their power in literacy spaces.

Harlowe Brisbanes exist in literacy classrooms across the United States—white cis women with access, privilege, and power to shape the narratives and trajectories of BIPOC students despite the difference in identity and experience; white cis women who are making efforts to become better allies for colleagues and students; white cis women who need development and accountability in their allyship. Recent scholarship has explored the parallel between fictional characters in young adult literature (YAL) and strategies for more inclusive teaching as well as more routinely using YAL as a tool for professional development (Miller et al.; Bach et al.). In the same vein, Rivera’s Harlowe provides our profession theory in practice—

a narrative that brilliantly depicts the tenets (and complications) of a white cis woman's quest in allyship and coalition-building in literacy. A close reading of the text illuminates what Harlowe gets right and wrong about showing up for BIPOC in our work and offers a roadmap to reimagining white cis women's allyship as we work to solidify culturally relevant teaching as our core pedagogical framework for transforming literacy instruction.

Reckoning With Our Reality: White Cis Women in Literacy Education

The truth is we, as an educational community, have been at this for a while—talking about race, unpacking our privilege, trying to connect content to community, repackaging curriculum. As a teacher-researcher, I have lost count of how many diversity, equity, and inclusion presentations I have attended and facilitated. If we have truly been implementing culturally relevant teaching, why have we not closed the opportunity gap? Why have we made such little progress at dismantling the white supremacist systems that plague our reading lists, test mandates, and best practices for literacy? What is our field missing? Perhaps the answer is not what we are missing, but what we are afraid to examine, to surrender, to interrogate—the profusion of white cis women in our field, the fragility that protects and shields them from accountability, and the necessity to *gather*[4] and build coalitions with them as a means of truly shifting our practices.

To truly build allies in our field, I propose we meet white cis women in literacy classrooms where they feel most powerful—at the intersection of feminism and teaching. However, let us not overgeneralize the connection between white cis womanhood and passion for gender justice. According to a 2016 poll, only 61% of women identify as feminist (Horowitz

[4] This use of *gather* follows the AAVE denotation of the word meaning to respond fiercely to someone's disrespect or faults in a way that humbles them (also: collect).

and Igielnik). Even with the opportunity to elect the first woman president in 2016, 53% of white women voted for Donald Trump, a politician with a history of alleged sexual assault and disparaging remarks about women; exit poll results revealed a 2% increase in his bid for reelection in 2020 (CNN). Further, the nation's largest education unions, AFT and NEA, reported that 20-25% of membership cast a vote for Trump in 2016 despite Hillary Clinton receiving endorsements and wholehearted support from union leadership (Toppo). So where is the disconnect among white cis women and advocating for gender justice? Some scholars suggest white cis women are more inclined to align themselves with white men in power in order to maximize their proximity to power and progress thus distancing themselves further from other marginalized groups and efforts for equity and justice (Kendall; Jiménez).

Thus, while there is no guarantee of the white cis women's ability to make connections between their own fight for equity and those of others, the gendered and racialized reality of the teaching profession begs to question what might happen if pre-service programs and continuing professional development were to pair their focus on culturally relevant teaching with an intentional investment in feminism and feminist pedagogy (Matias; Blankenship-Knox). Admittedly, the use of "feminist" includes folks with diverse beliefs, commitments, and ideas concerning gender justice. From the Suffrage Movement to the Women's March, movements for gender justice have been riddled with racism, classism, ableism, and trans-exclusionary practices (Desmond-Harris; Vesoulis). Further, scholars have argued the victimhood and fragility ingrained in the white cis woman psyche makes it difficult to build and sustain interracial coalitions (Palmer; Phipps; Accapadi). Palmer writes, "the problem for white women is that their privilege is based on accepting the image of goodness, which is powerlessness" (170). Building on Palmer's assertion, Mamta Motwani Accapadi argues this positionality of white women,

particularly those in education, often results in an imbalance of power couple with frequent displays of what Robin DiAngelo has termed "white fragility," or "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (Accapadi; DiAngelo 11). These defensive moves, such as the hysteric crying and screaming, coupled with white cis women's power in education makes interracial coalition building a dangerous act that "shields privileged white women from accountability in interpersonal interactions," argues feminist scholar, Allison Phipps (84). This reality makes this task of *gathering* white cis women in education even more imperative for our work, particularly keeping in mind the safety and well-being of their BIPOC colleagues, students, and families.

While mainstream (white) feminism often erases the concern of non-white, non-cis women and gender-nonconforming folks, our pedagogy must not. In a society where white cis women's womanhood is dependent on the denigration and powerlessness of BIPOC, the feminist pedagogy I position in tandem with culturally relevant teaching is grounded in intentionality, accountability, and authenticity. Further, it is a framework that centers BIPOC women, prioritizes intersectional analyses (Crenshaw), affirms transness, rejects carceral systems, and demands accountability in the seeking of gender justice.

Moreover, situating gender justice and culturally relevant teaching as foundational to effective pedagogy may bridge the gap between white cis women's desire for power (or adjacency to power) and the necessity of equity, justice, and agency for BIPOC students in classrooms. Pairing of these justice-oriented pedagogies serves as a vehicle toward white cis women's investment in developing racial consciousness and allows for the accountability lacking in many shifts toward more diverse, equitable, and inclusive practices. The pedagogies converge on several fronts; both culturally relevant teaching and feminist pedagogy offer a critique of

hegemonic norms, affirm the nuances of identity, and seek to create more liberatory learning spaces (Ladson-Billings; Shrewsbury). However, while culturally relevant teaching focuses on making classrooms more inclusive and equitable for BIPOC students, feminist pedagogy aims to create learning spaces that seek liberation through gender justice work that acknowledges the diversity within the experiences of teachers and students. Combining the two orientations in teacher education and development would allow us to progress toward achieving three aims:

1. Creating more equitable learning structures for students from traditionally marginalized communities (BIPOC, LGBTQ+, dis/abled)
2. Developing the pedagogy and consciousness of white cis women teachers without relying on trauma (martin)
3. Building coalitions between white cis women and BIPOC stakeholders that prioritize accountability, reflection, and collaborative advocacy

Capitalizing on Culturally Relevant Teaching

Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings' 1995 essay, "But That's Just Good Teaching," gave us a revolutionary answer to tackling a structurally inequitable educational system—culturally relevant teaching. Since then, conversations about how to connect the three areas of Ladson-Billings' approach—academic achievement, sociopolitical consciousness, and cultural competence—have dominated conversations concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion in classrooms. Urgency around shifting instructional practices has intensified in the past decade given the proliferation of police brutality, deportations, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, xenophobia, hate crimes, and growing right-wing radicalism (Fay). Once deemed too radical for conversations in schooling, terms like antiracism, abolition, and justice have become the new

buzzwords in professional development (Newkirk; Morgan). Decades after its introduction, Ladson-Billings' framework continues to provide a springboard for new approaches to more liberatory pedagogies (Muhammad; Bettina Love; Paris and Alim). While their orientations and outcomes may differ, scholars continue to wrestle with the same question—how do we do *right* by students from communities most harmed by our educational system?

We know the implementation of culturally relevant teaching makes schools more welcoming, affirming, and inclusive for BIPOC students (Aronson and Laughter; Byrd). However, an overwhelmingly white teaching force often fails to authentically implement the reflection necessary for long-term results (Matias). I have met many white teachers who hear "relevant" and think the work stops at diversifying bookshelves and celebrating culture. While it is clear that there are misinterpretations concerning Ladson-Billings' framework, what is more evident is the absence of accountability for those seeking to implement it. Without accountability, pedagogies of liberation and justice remain lofty goals with no clearly defined metrics for progress. There is no denying the urgency with which we must work to make schools more inclusive and affirming for historically marginalized students. However, urgency without a shift of our orientation to teaching rooted in intentionality and accountability is simply a distraction from our goal of structural change.

Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant teaching demands more than superficial adjustments to curriculum and classroom policies. At its core, the successful implementation of culturally relevant teaching requires an individual and collective commitment to what Dr. Barbara Love calls the development of one's "liberatory consciousness" (601). Love's cycle of developing one's liberatory consciousness is a prescription for the long haul: equal parts work and radical hope. The cycle requires a continuous investment in four stages of consciousness-building in

community: awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/allyship. When coupled with culturally relevant teaching, it has the potential to truly transform our pedagogy as we seek to disrupt an intentionally violent system of schooling.

In Conversation: Culturally Relevant Teaching and Feminist Pedagogy

In our efforts to diversify and disrupt white supremacist cisheteronormativity in our schools, we must not overlook our reality that white cis women will undoubtedly impact the identity development of BIPOC children. Acknowledging this reality, I suggest we couple culturally relevant teaching with feminist pedagogy as a means to engage white cis women educators, particularly those who identify as feminist, in movement work that necessitates their allyship while also centering the needs and narratives of BIPOC. Feminist pedagogy is a liberatory framework "concerned with gender justice and overcoming oppression. It recognizes the genderedness of all social relations and consequently of all societal institutions and structures" (Shrewsbury 6). When paired theoretically and in practice, culturally relevant teaching and feminist pedagogy require an investment in collective growth and disruption of structures and systems, and demand white cis women invest in justice efforts beyond their own interests, identities, and goals.

Applying this intersectional lens to feminist pedagogy is necessary and stresses attention to the complexity and a focus on "social inequality, social structures and how these relate to lived experience and the struggle for social justice in specific socio-economic contexts" (Gray and Cooke 404). This coupling requires white cis women in our field to acknowledge the rich intersectionality within their students and families and actively seek to dismantle the intersectional oppression (Combahee; Crenshaw; hooks). With this focal point, white cis women in literacy spaces must reckon with their presence, privilege, and power in their classrooms and

the field at large. Consequently, the use of an intersectional feminist pedagogical lens enables white cis women's quest for agency and affirmation in a patriarchal society to connect to a larger movement for equity and justice.

The question we face in our profession is how to bridge this gap for white cis women in literacy education in ways that honor their dedication to teaching and the urgency for a pedagogical shift that keeps them accountable for their allyship. Perhaps the answer is in our craft and the tools we leverage every day (Glenn; Schieble). *What might happen if we positioned #OwnVoices YAL not only as a tool for empowering BIPOC and white students alike, but also a vehicle through which white teachers may grapple with their whiteness, privilege, and responsibility in our work?* My analysis that follows provides an example of the potentiality of using the texts we teach and recommend to young adults as vehicles for our own introspection and work toward a more equitable and liberatory literacy pedagogy.

On Doing Better: Rivera's Harlowe as a Road Map for White Cis Women in Literacy

A case study in white allyship in literacy, Rivera's Harlowe Brisbane offers a multitude of examples of "what not to do." As a tool for professional development, Rivera's complex characterization of Harlowe illuminates what white cis women must begin (and continue) to do as partners in our work toward creating more equitable and affirming classrooms. Through the following analysis, I offer three prescriptions for white cis women aiming to be better allies both inside and outside of literacy classrooms.

White Cis Women Teachers Must Make Space for the Folks on the Margins

Throughout the novel, Juliet consistently seeks space for herself not only in feminism but also for her queerness among family, her brownness in Portland, and her questions in queer

spaces. In many ways, Harlowe's hospitality and welcoming of Juliet is a model of making space for BIPOC in our classrooms. Upon Juliet's arrival at the Portland airport, Harlowe wraps "her arms around" Juliet and hugs her "tight enough to lift [her] off the ground" (Rivera 44). This welcome accompanies Harlowe's embrace of Juliet's "sweet human" presence in her home as her summer intern (50). Despite her notoriety as an established author, Harlowe positions Juliet's presence in her life as necessary and valuable. Juliet notes this connection in her reflection of her work with Harlowe that summer, writing, "*The* Harlowe Brisbane needed my help with a reading at a fancy bookstore" (62). Thus, Harlowe's hospitality supports Juliet's identity development, self-confidence, and curiosity. In the literacy profession, white cis women have immense power —at the front of classrooms, in the grade book, in department ordering and curriculum decisions. In allyship, that power comes with the responsibility to decenter one's whiteness, to give up comfort, privilege, and power in service of making space for others.

When we make space in literacy classrooms, we must first ask two questions: for what and whom are we making space? How will we use that space in service to our goals of equity, justice, and liberation through literacy education? With a feminist and culturally relevant pedagogical pairing, we must seek to make space for traditionally marginalized voices and narratives to not only be included but also centered as beacons of brilliance, affirmation, and criticality. Further, the culturally relevant teaching framework requires an attention to using a student-centered pedagogy to achieve goals of academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness (Ladson-Billings). With these goals in mind, educators must make space for our students to grapple, grow, question, shine, and celebrate. In their allyship, white cis women must make space for BIPOC students to be thought-partners, leaders, and teachers in the classroom, an intentional shift that requires reflection and divestment from power and whiteness

in classrooms. This divestment creates greater possibilities for increased student autonomy, voice, and freedom in literacy classrooms (Freire; Shrewsbury).

White Cis Women Must be Held Accountable for Their Allyship

At first glance, Rivera's Harlowe seems to be as good as we get in allies: she listens, learns, unlearns, and takes action. However, Rivera complicates this depiction of perfection with missteps, conflict, and dialogue centering a culture of accountability required in coalition-building across lines of difference. In Harlowe's struggles, Rivera talks back to a white feminism that often circumvents critique through fragility and rage (DiAngelo; Phipps). While the novel begins with Juliet attempting to hold Harlowe accountable for her ideas of inclusion in *Raging Flower,* Rivera illustrates it more clearly in heated interactions between Harlowe and her partner, Maxine, a Black womanist scholar. In "Ain't No Party Like An Octavia Butler Writer's Workshop," Harlowe attends an open BIPOC workshop with Juliet and Maxine. Juliet and Maxine participate in the workshop while Harlowe attends as an ally-observer. Following the workshop, Harlowe confronts another white attendee who complains about the silence requirement for white allies during the workshop. Harlowe affirms the requirement, reminding the woman that white cis women often dominate creative spaces and are "constantly being validated" despite having "lots of shit to deal with because of the patriarchy" (Rivera 111). However, Harlowe suggests that white cis women "need to give women of color space for their voices" thus reinforcing the power held by white cis women within larger society (111). This "trash ally"[5] enrages Maxine who confronts Harlowe, criticizing her centering of whiteness,

[5] "Trash allies" is a concept I use to describe bandwagon fans of equity and justice: they are hesitant to initiate advocacy; hyper-performative in their support; and tend to deflect, weaponize their privilege, or avoid accountability when critiqued or pushed in their allyship. This use of "trash" as an adjective follows a denotation of the word use within African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

saying "y'all don't need to give us anything" (113). Maxine's response not only prioritizes the self-determination, genius, and resilience of BIPOC communities, it also unearths a quiet truth I have found in my work with many white cis women who teach Black and Latinx kids: the idea that their commitment to culturally relevant teaching, to teaching *those kids* in *that neighborhood* is a gift.

Maxine checks[6] Harlowe in ways we must with white cis women who stumble in their allyship. Allyship requires an accountability that involves building trust and having difficult conversations with liberation in mind; it requires us to check ourselves, our colleagues, and the structures in which we exist regardless of fear or uncertainty. In "Developing a Liberatory Consciousness," Dr. Barbara Love pairs allyship and accountability, writing, "working in connection and collaboration... across and within "role" groups, we can make progress in ways that are not apparent in isolation and in separate communities" (604). Truly working in coalition means we must find ways to hold white cis women accountable for their pedagogy and impact. However, that accountability requires a level of trust between BIPOC and white cis women in spaces that have historically privileged white supremacy at the expense of BIPOC. Beginning conversations by connecting gender justice (feminist pedagogy) to collective liberation may bridge this gap but is only the beginning of a long journey to truly building spaces where real accountability can occur without fear of retaliation or resentment.

For example, Harlowe's initial response to Maxine's reaction is textbook white fragility. She is hurt and becomes defensive before eventually listening. The post-workshop scene demonstrates the messiness of building interracial coalitions as we work toward equity, justice, and liberation. While Maxine and Harlowe are equals, that is not always the case. What happens

[6] My usage of the verb "check" refers to AAVE denotation simply meaning to hold someone accountable or to address someone for wrongdoing.

when the white cis woman needing to be held accountable is a tenured teacher, department chair, or administrator? Existing hierarchical structures and the racial demographics of our profession demonstrate the necessity of white cis women's commitment to seeking, accepting, and acting on feedback given. Without a commitment to accountability and track record of allyship from white cis women, BIPOC may be wary and hesitant to engage in coalition-building. Thus, Harlowe's struggle illuminates the never-ending undoing, unlearning, and decentering of whiteness as well as the acknowledging of the emotional labor required of BIPOC in coalition work. Building together, particularly within our educational system, is tough and requires solidarity and "sustained, ongoing commitment" to learning and accountability from both the white cis women and their BIPOC counterparts (hooks 64).

White Cis Women Must Invest in Developing Their Consciousness

In order to create and maintain systems of accountability, white cis women must do *the work.* Rivera provides a case study for *the work* through Harlowe's learning and unlearning throughout her summer with Juliet. This continual nature of identity development for those seeking to create more equitable and liberatory literacy spaces is particularly imperative in the context of an education reform movement that seeks quick solutions to centuries-old inequities. While many white cis women aim to perform allyship through reading the necessary books, teaching in urban schools, and making curriculum changes, they often fall short (@mochamomma; Wong). Without a continuous investment in the development of one's consciousness, white cis women teachers risk embodying traits of white saviorism and a static, insular understanding of allyship (Miller and Harris).

Rivera illustrates the necessity of continuous self-examination through a pivotal moment of Harlowe's failed allyship. During Harlowe's book reading at Powell's Books, she talks in

front of a sold-out room for fans hanging on her every word. Despite her existence in larger society as an unmarried middle-class white woman, Harlowe holds all the power in the moment. When her allyship is questioned by a Black acquaintance during the Q&A, Harlowe relies on her proximity to Juliet to demonstrate her investment in the BIPOC community and responds:

> Do I think queer or trans women of color will read my work and feel like they see themselves in my words? Not necessarily, but some will and do…. someone right now sitting in this room who is a testament to this, someone who isn't white, who grew up in the ghetto (Rivera 206).

In her response, Harlowe uses Juliet as her "proof" of allyship (206). In this pawning of Juliet, Harlowe displays a pattern of white allies' reliance on their work with BlPOC as evidence of their investment in creating an antiracist and just world. "I am not racist, I work in an all-Black school," one teacher shouted at me during one presentation. In her response, this white cis woman conflated proximity to BIPOC with the development of consciousness. When this happens, the effects are devastating for BIPOC students. For example, Juliet is embarrassed, furious, and feels betrayed, eventually fleeing Portland. What effect might this have on a student's trajectory in academic literacy spaces? How might we impact students' academic performance and love for literacy? If we are truly to disrupt a system of white supremacy in literacy and schooling, white cis women must commit to learning and unlearning as practice (Helms; Lawrence and Tatum).

I am not suggesting that white cis women in our profession need to be perfect. However, what I do suggest is that they must become innately aware of their place along the white racial identity continuum and remain accountable to our goals in our work. White cis women teachers must invest in "explicitly naming how and why race and whiteness matter in the professional

teaching context [as it] forges alternative intellectual pathways for disrupting oppressive schooling" (Warren and Hancock ix). In order to solidify culturally relevant teaching as core praxis, white cis women must do better in service to our larger goals of equity, justice, and liberation through literacy.

The Kids Gon' Be Alright: Rivera's Ava and the Clipper Queerz as CounterPoint Possibility

While investment in interracial coalition-building is necessary for gender and racial justice work within the educational system, we must not ignore the power of BIPOC students who navigate and thrive within the system despite barriers. To say that BIPOC *need* white cis women for survival negates our demonstrated ability to organize, persevere, and thrive despite white supremacy. The analysis in the previous sections aims to relieve BIPOC children in schools from a necessity of resilience. What might students from historically marginalized communities be able to achieve and experience when offered space that affirms their identities and prioritizes their agency?

Rivera acknowledges BIPOC narratives of joy, strength, and community that run counter to whiteness through Juliet's cousin, Ava. If Harlowe's character exists as the well-intentioned white feminist, the character of Ava is counterpoint—innately self-aware, invested in the progress of queer and trans communities of color, and dismissive of whiteness. While Juliet initially relies on Harlowe's guidance for identity development, Ava intentionally seeks to learn and exist outside of white feminism. On a phone call, Ava warns Juliet saying, "watch out for those white girls" (Rivera 90). Juliet's failure to understand and heed Ava's warning throughout the book illuminates the power of the connection between Juliet and Harlowe (and Harlowe's impact on her identity development). Rivera uses Ava's character to talk back to white feminism, writing, "Harlowe assumed that... all connect through sisterhood. As if sisterhood looked the

same for everyone" (229). The critique of the overreliance of common ground and similarities exemplifies the previously discussed importance of intersectionality, deepening knowledge, and accountability in our pedagogies. For white cis women to avoid centering whiteness and reducing the nuance of their students and colleagues, "difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (Lorde 111). With this in mind, Ava represents the potentialities of liberated pedagogies that center BIPOC voices, accountability, and criticality.

These potentialities are further illustrated when Juliet accompanies Ava to the Clipper Queerz (CQ) party, an event for queer, trans people of color (QTPOC). For Juliet, the party is home, a place where BIPOC "take on the world and reimagine it" (Rivera 239). The CQ party allows Juliet to embrace a confluence likened to that discussed by Gloria Anzaldúa in her exploration of queer Chicana womanhood in her 1988 autobiographical text, *Borderlands*—a space of radical possibility and existence. The CQ space recognizes what Anzaldúa calls "the emotional residue" of oppression as well as the joy and community that arise from that oppression (25). Rivera's portrayal of Juliet's transformation at the CQ party demonstrates what is possible in spaces that truly decenter whiteness, honor the intersectionality of BIPOC, and build community. It is a reminder that BIPOC possibility, joy, and strength already exist; it is our job to let it shine.

Recommendation: #OwnVoices as Expertise in Pedagogy

There is no exact prescription for allyship. What I suggest, instead, is a commitment to showing up, embracing the messiness, and creating systems of accountability in community. Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath* provides guidance as white cis women literacy teachers

interrogate their personal, professional, and community identity. While many flock to how-to books, I propose our profession return to our first love—books with rich narratives, complex characters, and imagined worlds. As we shift to center #OwnVoices texts in our libraries, why not also use them in our own learning and identity development? Not only will this centering of #OwnVoices YA texts position historically marginalized voices in publishing as guides in our personal and pedagogical development, it will also prioritize youth perspective in our learning—a shift that may reorient our thinking about whose voices and ideas are worthy of being heard in our classrooms, decision-making, and larger movements toward equity, justice, and liberation.

Juliet Takes a Breath offers a glimpse into the complex nature of coalition-building in a seemingly best-case scenario. Harlowe Brisbane is doing *the work*; she is seeking knowledge, taking action, and working in community with BIPOC. Even in the best-case scenario, this work is messy. In her essay "Transformation of Silence in Language and Action," Audre Lorde pleads with feminists to "constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old ideas disparage" (38). This encouragement happens when we learn in community, commit to the critical examination of systems of oppression within our schools, and hold each other accountable in our work.

Admittedly, there are systems within the educational landscape that will be barriers to our goals. That being said, this argument for this proposed shift might be a bit idealistic, but it is no more idealistic than seeking and dreaming toward liberation in a world that deems it impossible. The alternative, however, is an unacceptable reality—an educational system that continues to fail to affirm, support, and love BIPOC students. As a queer Black nonbinary teacher, I choose to believe in the power of intentional community and accountability. Community is work, though—it's found in the messiness, accountability, and critical unpacking within coalition-building. To

truly seek collective liberation as students, educators, families, and community members, we must do the necessary work.

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