BECOMING A CRITICAL LITERACY EDUCATOR:
A SELF-STUDY OF UNLEARNING AND RELEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore how critical literacy can be used as part of an anti-oppressive pedagogical approach. This paper will use self-study as the research methodology along with poststructural theory to analyze the roots of my understanding of critical literacy and how my positioning as a white, Christian, female, middle-class educator pushes against a critical orientation. Throughout the study, I will identify places of tension and resistance that come from resignifying my identity as an anti-oppressive educator within an education system rooted in rational, positivist ideologies and dominant practices.

The research conducted focuses on dominant ideologies such as multiculturalism, race, and Christianity that have been influential in the construction of my identity as a white, Christian, female, middle-class educator. I will use self-study to retell my personal and academic history in an unfamiliar way that identifies and deconstructs the normative centre in Western society and my role within this.

This paper will continue to analyze the impact of hegemonic discourses and dominant ideologies by looking at my teaching practice and reflecting on one of my attempts at critical literacy. I will deconstruct my teaching of the novel *The Breadwinner* (2000) by Deborah Ellis and how my lack of understanding about privilege and dominant norms maintained and reinforced oppression. I will use the research and theory presented in this paper to reimagine and transform my teaching of this novel as evidence of my growth of understanding of critical literacy and anti-oppressive pedagogy.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE RESEARCH PROJECT

1.1 The research context

“Mommy, I’ll let you go down the pink aisle if you like.” My little blond boy was only three when he sweetly gave me permission to go down the Barbie aisle in the toy section of a local department store. I was amazed that at the age of three he was keenly aware of gendered spaces and followed the rules around them. He believed that only girls were allowed in the “pink aisle” and that a boy would only be permitted in the presence of a female. How was it possible that my toddler was already influenced by normative ideologies and gender stereotypes? Was he also aware that there are consequences for “breaking the rules” and was protecting himself from ridicule? Children are assaulted by powerful ideologies on a daily basis and this moment with my son brought home to me the power of discourses that influence and produce children’s identities.

Taking a critical perspective when teaching children is an important part of my role as an educator. Critical pedagogy provides students with opportunities to question the world around them and deconstruct the power structures that are designed to influence them (Wallowitz, 2008). A critical approach to education supports students in reading the word and the world around them (Freire & Macedo, 1987). The work of Paulo Freire provides a foundation for an approach to critical pedagogy (Luke, 2012). Grounded in Marxism and phenomenological philosophies, Freire was critical of what he referred to as the “banking concept of education” which he believed devalued learners’ lives and cultures and resulted in the continued marginalization of oppressed peoples.
(Cherland & Harper, 2007; Luke, 2012; Wallowitz, 2008). He believed in accessing the lived experiences of marginalized peoples to help improve literacy. He advocated for an approach to education based on reciprocal exchange that would critique and transform binary relationships of the oppressed and the oppressor and the teacher and learner (Luke, 2012). According to Cherland and Harper (2007), Freire viewed literacy education as a form of social action. They write, “Literacy education according to Freire is viewed not as a set of skills to be learned to secure one’s place in the status quo, but rather as the vehicle for promoting social change” (p. 26). A Freirean approach to education would focus on naming and renaming the world and “unpacking myths and distortions, and building new ways of knowing and acting upon the world” (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Wallowitz credits Freire for adding critique and transformation to literacy instruction. The work of Freire continues to shape current critical pedagogy and influence social justice work in education.

Freire and others who have followed his lead have inspired me to critique my own approach to education and to be more active in promoting social change. However, my challenge to taking a critical pedagogy approach is that even though I am aware of the discourses of power and privilege on young people and believe that a critical approach to education is essential to deconstruct dominant ideologies, I am sometimes hesitant and lacking in confidence with my attempt to confront these issues in my work as an educator. I feel the pull of discomfort and risk that comes from challenging the status quo and deconstructing what the dominant norm sees as the so-called neutral, safe spaces created in educational institutions. I also feel the disruption that comes from looking critically at my own life and coming to an understanding of how dominant
ideologies and hegemonic discourses have constructed my identity. As an educator, it is easy for me to default to a cognitive approach and seek concrete pedagogical approaches and strategies for critical literacy instruction; but the issue is much more than deepening my understanding of critical pedagogy. The problem for me is working through the cognitive dissonance and destabilization that comes from challenging and shifting dominant power structures and doing this work while others continue to resist.

Vasquez (2004) suggests that a critical perspective is a deliberate attempt to expose inequity in the classroom and society and should be part of daily classroom life. Kumashiro (2004) writes, “challenging oppression requires more than raising awareness about more progressive perspectives on the world. The reason we fail to do more to challenge oppression is not merely that we do not know enough about oppression, but also that we often do not want to know more about oppression.” (p. 25). As a teacher, I made attempts at confronting social issues but I realize now that my approach to critical pedagogy neutralized my efforts so as not to cause too much discomfort for my students and for myself. Kumashiro acknowledges that teachers often search for comfortable ways to do this work. He writes, “Common definitions of ‘good’ teaching often means that crisis is averted, that lessons are doable and comfortable, that problems are solved, that learning results in feeling better, that knowledge is a good thing” (p. 47). Teaching critically is a political act that runs the risk of being softened by a neutral, liberal discourse (Cherland & Harper, 2007; Wallowitz, 2008). I now understand that the softening of discourse for the sake of keeping my students safe and comfortable only serves those who are part of the dominant norm. It is not softened for the marginalized others who bear the burden of dominant normative practices on a daily basis.
Kumashiro advocates that change will only happen if teachers are willing to step out of their comfort zones and be open to work through crisis. He writes, “An anti-oppressive teacher is not something that someone is. Rather, it is something that someone is always becoming” (p. 15). He reminds educators to never stop questioning and examining why some things are comfortable and why some things are not. Pratt (1991) calls this space a “contact zone” where different groups of people meet to confront social issues of power (p. 34). It is in this contact zone of discomfort where change can happen and real teaching occurs (Wallowitz, 2008). In the contact zone “no one (is) excluded and no one (is) safe” (Pratt, p. 39). The discomfort that comes from questioning the comfortable is part of the unsettling process of becoming an advocate and activist for anti-oppressive education.

A critical approach to teaching propels the participants into social action (Wallowitz, 2008). It is an active process that provides opportunities to interrogate, challenge, confront, disrupt and transform. I am challenged to understand the role of a social activist in education and where I fit in this role. My image of an activist is someone like Chief Theresa Spence¹ who in 2012 went on a six-week hunger strike to bring attention to First Nations issues. Or the Russian feminist punk band, Pussy Riot² whose members were arrested in 2012 for performing a protest song against the Russian

¹ The goal Chief Theresa Spence’s hunger strike was to demand a meeting among First Nations, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and a representative of the Crown to discuss improving conditions on First Nations reserves. This protest was prompted in part by the Idle No More movement started in Saskatchewan in the fall of 2012 to raise issues about treaty and Indigenous rights as well as concerns for the environment. (CBC News, 2013; APTN News, 2012)

² Members of Pussy Riot, a Russian feminist punk rock protest group were arrested on March 3, 2012 for staging a performance on February 21, 2012 that criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin and his links to the Russian Orthodox Church. Two of the members spent almost two years in a Russian jail for the protest. (O’Flynn, 2012; The Guardian, 2013)
Orthodox Church and Russian President Vladimir Putin. These extreme, bold and
dangerous actions are what I have connected to the role of an activist and are far removed
from actions that I feel comfortable with.

Wallowitz states that critical literacy is a “vehicle through which educators teach
for social justice. Critical literacy aims to challenge the status quo by disrupting
commonplace notions of socially constructed concepts such as race, class, gender and
sexuality” (p. 1). Central to my work as a teacher is using literature as an entry point for
challenging controversial issues. I use picture books, young adult novels, graphic novels,
songs and poetry to raise questions about the world and discuss social issues. I am
coming to an understanding that I do not “teach” critical literacy; it must be a part of who
I am as a teacher and it is how I can be an activist. I don’t have to starve myself or go to
jail in order to be an activist; teaching texts in a deliberately disruptive way can be my
form of social activism.

Critical literacy has the potential to be a vehicle that transforms harmful social
structures in order to create a more equitable and just society. Morrell (2008) explains
why critical literacy is necessary:

In order to define ourselves on our own terms, we must understand the role of
language and texts in the construction of the self and the social. Not only must
these citizens understand these constructions, but they must also intervene with
them: They must speak back and act back against these constructions with
counter-language and counter texts. Critical Literacy, therefore, is necessary not
only for the critical navigation of hegemonic discourses; it is also essential to the
redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures and relations of production. (p. 5)

I want to use literacy, which can be a tool of oppression, as a tool of liberation. Teaching literature is my comfort zone but I am encouraged to move my approach to literacy outside of my comfort zone and into the contact zone. My confidence with teaching texts can provide me with the footing I need to take the uncomfortable steps towards challenging dominant power structures.

1.2 Purpose of the study and the research questions

The potential of critical literacy to redefine the self and transform oppressive social structures and hegemonic discourses leads me to the questions I will explore throughout this paper: How can I use critical literacy as a tool for social activism? Furthermore, what is the tension and resistance to enacting the identity of a critical, anti-oppressive teacher and what deters me from using what I already know? I will explore the roots of my self-understanding of critical literacy and how my positioning as a white, Christian, middle-class, female educator pushes against a critical position.

Confronting the complexity of what it means to be an activist using critical literacy and revealing my inner struggles will help me strengthen my voice and move me to action. In order to commit to and engage in anti-oppressive education it is essential for me to look beyond what I know about myself. I thought that I could just “be” an anti-oppressive teacher by learning some practical strategies and developing a teaching approach for critical literacy. What I am learning, however, is that the true shift is in becoming comfortable with the crisis and destabilization that comes from working within the contact zone of anti-oppressive education.
1.3 Methodology

Self-study with the influence of poststructuralism will allow me to reflect on the teacher I thought I was and what I now understand that I am becoming as a result of my learning experiences. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) express that self-study must “engage history” in order for the author to take an honest stand. Self-study offers new perspectives on established truths and reveals a “tension between the self and the self in action in relation to the other” (p. 18). Self-study will allow me to confront and unpack critical moments in my life where “unlearning” happened and new learning took place as well as identify moments where unlearning should have occurred and explore why I resisted this. I will chronicle my intellectual history and reveal the patterns of my experience in order to provide insight into the experiences that have brought me to an acceptance of and resistance to critical literacy and anti-oppressive education. Engaging in my history will illuminate the tension I feel towards critical literacy by revealing what I find troubling and challenging about being a critical teacher.

Post-structural theories will also be useful in my self-study analysis. Cherland and Harper (2007) explain that post-structural theory reveals the self as unstable, shifting and always in a state of flux. It is the understanding that the self is produced and performed and that “through crisis and resistance, the self is resignified” (p. 11). Kumashiro (2001) suggests that two “post” perspectives “unknowability, multiplicity, and looking beyond the known; and resistance, crisis, and resignifying the self” can be useful for educators teaching in anti-oppressive ways (p. 3). He writes, “By urging us to look beyond the repetition of commonsense and tradition that often helps perpetuate multiple forms of oppression in schools and society, they are able to offer insights that
can help improve the educational experiences of all our students” (p. 11). In the sections that follow, I explain these two perspectives that can allow me to trouble my own practice and imagine different possibilities for teaching and learning.

1.4 Self-Study

Self-study is a research approach that allows for individuals to study personal experience within a social context in order to better understand practice (Loughran, 2004; Pithouse, 2011). Pithouse writes, “self-study involves using methods that facilitate a stepping back, a reading of our situated selves as if it were a text to be critically interrogated and interpreted within the broader, social, political and historical contexts that shape our thoughts and actions and constitute our world (p. 45). According to Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), self-study research joins biography and history to confront an issue and uses private experience to provide insight and solution for public issues. Self-study is the focus on the “space between self and the practice engaged in” and the tension that occurs between self and practice. (p. 15). Bullough and Pinnegar summarize the potential of self-study:

(Self-study) attends to ‘nodal moments’ of teaching and being a teacher educator and thereby enables reader insight or understanding into self, reveals a lively conscience and a balanced sense of self-importance, tells a recognizable teacher or teacher educator story, portrays character development in the face of serious issues within a complex setting, gives place to the dynamic struggle of living life whole, and offers new perspective. (p. 19)

In education, self-study focuses on improving the practice of teachers and teacher educators through reflection and transformation (Pithouse et al., 2009). LaBoskey (2004)
writes that through self-study, “we aim to improve our practice based upon a careful and thorough understanding of our settings, which in turn results in an enhanced understanding of that practice. By making changes in this way and then taking them public, we also hope to contribute to a larger reform agenda” (p. 845).

Pithouse et al. (2009) outline key characteristics of self-study. They point out that self-study is inquiry-orientated and involves looking at the problematic structures of the current school system and reflecting on how a teacher’s individual role can bring about change. Self-study focuses on the conception of the “self” and the various evolving and changing experiences that lead to this conception. The authors write, “Knowing more about ourselves as teacher educators changes us, provokes growth, jolts us out of complacency – sometimes radically, in ways that can seem transformative… The very process of self-study itself changes its practitioners and their situations” (p. 48). Self-study leads the researcher to multiple perspectives, opening up possibilities to see the world through diverse viewpoints and provides the opportunity for “mucking about, making mistakes, changing one’s mind” (p. 47).

In their guidelines for quality self-study research, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) highlight that self-studies in teacher education are about the “problems and issues that make someone an educator” (p. 17). The narrative form of a self-study tells the story of becoming a teacher educator, the journey of understanding what teaching is and coming to terms with the complexity of the role. It is the story of personal development as a teacher and confronting critical points along the learning journey. Self-study will allow me to look for patterns in my experiences that reveal the critical moments in my personal and teaching life that have brought me to critical literacy.
Self-study research will allow me to position myself as the text in my story. Exploring the “self” as the text is an important component in self-study. By exploring the self as the subject or text, the researcher is able to pose different questions such as “Where am I in this text?” (Pithouse et al., 2009). The more you learn about yourself, the more questions you ask and posing questions in the field is a significant part of teacher development (LaBoskey, 2004). By positioning myself as the text to be analyzed, questions and conflicts of what it means for me to be an activist using critical literacy will be revealed. I will be able to examine how underlying assumptions and ideologies have shaped my personal and professional identity. It will allow me to look for hidden agendas and interrogate how dominant structures have constructed my identity. I will be able to examine influential discourses, such as race, gender and Christianity, and examine how my performance as a white, female educator has been constructed through these discourses.

1.5 Poststructural theory

Poststructural theory is useful as I resignify myself as an anti-oppressive educator using critical literacy. According to Cherland and Harper (2007) poststructural theory seeks to “disrupt the ‘truth’, and unsettle the ways things are” (p. 11). The goal for poststructuralism is to “examine our cherished attachments to see how they limit us” (p. 11). Con Davis and Schleifer (1998) explain that deconstruction and poststructuralism aim at “describing the limits of understanding in terms of such various factors as the intellectual assumptions that allow limits and definitions to be assumed, the social relationships of power that are served by these definitions, and individual and ‘subjective’ ends that are served” (p. 319). Deconstructive critique “examines and tests
the assumptions supporting intellectual insight in order to interrogate the ‘self-evident’
truths they are based on” (p. 320). Rather than creating a new model of understanding,
deconstructive critique attempts to reveal the “unexamined axioms that give rise to those
models and their boundaries” (p. 320). Poststructuralism will be useful as I identify and
deconstruct the oppositions, binaries and hierarchies that define Western society and in
turn construct my identity as a white, Christian, female, middle-class educator. Western
concepts of “truths” and common understandings are based on a hierarchy of beliefs that
are defined in relation to their opposites. Some examples of these concepts are
“goodness,” “naturalness,” “reason,” “truth,” “transcendentally,” “God” and “man.” (Con
Davis & Schleifer, p. 320). Rather than creating new ways of understanding, the process
of deconstruction questions and tests intellectual assumptions and universally accepted
“truths” and seeks to uncover the boundaries of these. According to Con Davis and
Schleifer, “decentering”, or deconstruction, “deeply undercuts or destroys all notions of
self-evident and absolute grounds in knowledge” (p. 322). Deconstruction destabilizes
self-evident truths so they can no longer be seen as authoritative.

Con Davis and Schleifer consider deconstruction as a strategy with a “playfulness
intended to be radically disruptive” (p. 325). Play, according to Con Davis and Schleifer,
is intended to subvert “fundamental strictures of seriousness” and “displace and
‘contaminate’ the very basis of (Western) authority” (p. 325). Considering deconstruction
as a form of “play” allows for new forms of questioning and thought that brings about a
new responsibility in writing and thinking about universally accepted truths in Western
thought.
Cherland and Harper (2007) point out that in postmodern times “there are no grounds for an ethic of responsibility, no rules, no foundations, no certainties that can guide our human lives and actions” (p. 8). This leads the authors to question how researchers assume responsibility for others and act to advocate. They state that “poststructural theories do not call researchers into social action” but deconstruction “offers no excuse not to act” (p. 8). While poststructural theory in itself does not prompt me to become an activist, it does allow me to question and play with my identity as a critical teacher. The “play” that is always an attractive part of poststructural theory is also accompanied by the discomfort of a disrupted sense of self, and through dominant discourses, recognition of an implicated and non-innocent self.

Mellor and Patterson (2004) argue that poststructuralism in the English classroom is critical literacy. According to these authors, English instruction was in need of a radical change and poststructuralism offers the opportunity to look critically at the approach to teaching English. Mellor and Patterson critique the personal approach to English that ignores social, cultural and historical practices. They criticize methods such as “Personal Growth” models or “Reader Response” because of the potential to disenfranchise students whose experiences are not the dominant ones by focusing on questions that only invite personal response. They argue that personal responses to texts “blocked analysis of how interpretations of texts were actually produced” (p. 84). They go on to explain that students who had been taught to bring their own personal experience by emphasizing the personal, individual, and empathetic responses “produced readers who were unaware of the ways in which they operated to construct meanings and who were unable to ‘read’ not only the terms of their own interpretations but those of
others as well” (p. 84). They believe it is unlikely in “Growth” model practices that there is an analysis of the construction of “divergent readings” or a challenge to a particular type of reading and the values that are supported (p. 84). Reader Response is also limited by a lack of understanding by some educators and the misrepresentation of the role of the reader and the aesthetic purpose of reading. I will explore this further in chapter four when I examine how my practice overlooked the importance of the aesthetic and the impact this has on the interpretation of texts.

Morrell (2008) also believes that there is a compelling connection between poststructuralism and critical literacy:

Each critiques the essential notions of the modern project such as rationality, progress and the existence of ultimate truths, whether proponents are deconstructing the grand narratives that shape society’s values or showing how meanings are not fixed entities so much as they are created through ideological linguistic and semiotic systems (or discourses) situated within specific historical moments. (p. 49)

Morrell points out that poststructuralism exists as a method of inquiry and is always questioning the source of knowledge, the position of the creator of knowledge and the values that shape the knowledge. Morrell believes that the investigation of discourse and the connection between knowledge and power are connected to the “project” of critical literacy (p. 49).

These authors illuminate the tension and pull that I experience as I reflect on the critical literacy teacher that I thought I was and the critical literacy teacher I am attempting to become. Linking poststructural theory to a critical literacy approach
expands my understanding and takes me beyond my default approach of the “growth model” or “reader response” methods. This default position is rooted in the dominant discourse and practice that I was presented with as a student in my elementary and secondary education as well as my post-secondary teacher preparation courses. Principles of poststructuralism such as the conception of texts and reading as ‘made’ or constructed, the idea that a piece of literature emerges not from a timeless, placeless zone but from a particular social context and that it is read in another context, and lastly the argument that texts and readings are never neutral (Mellor & Patterson, 2004, p. 87) are useful as I analyze my own practice throughout this paper. Chapter four will provide an analysis of my treatment of texts in my English classroom and how poststructuralism is reframing my pedagogical approach to critical literacy.

1.6 Summary of the research project

This research project uses self-study to document my growth as an activist and anti-oppressive teacher using critical literacy. Chapter two provides a review of the literature focusing on features of critical literacy and hegemonic structures such as race, multiculturalism and Christianity that conflict with a critical orientation. This theory provides the foundation for my reflection and transformation of pedagogy.

Chapter three retells my personal and intellectual history in an unfamiliar way. This alternative history will expose and analyze personal experiences and reveal how dominant discourses and structures such as race, gender, and Christianity have led to the production and re-production of my identity. Through self-study, I will deconstruct my resistance and acceptance to these critical moments of learning and how they are leading me to reconsider and adjust my understanding of my identity.
Chapter four shifts the lens from my personal and intellectual history to the construction of my identity as an anti-oppressive teacher using critical literacy as a form of activism. In this chapter, I analyze one of my attempts at critical literacy by reflecting on how I taught Deborah Ellis’ (2000) *The Breadwinner* when I was grade six classroom teacher. This chapter is constructed in two parts; part one provides an analysis of my teaching approach to *The Breadwinner* guided by poststructural theory and part two applies poststructural theory and critical literacy approaches and features to reimagine and transform my approach to teaching this novel. The application of the theory in the second part of this chapter fulfills the requirement of self-study to enhance and transform my teaching practice in order to bring about change. The reimagining of my teaching approach is also my opportunity to play with my identity as an anti-oppressive teacher and to “muck about” and make mistakes (Pithouse et al., 2009). I will be able to identify risks of doing this work and navigate through the possible crisis and resistance that I may feel.

Chapter five concludes my research by reflecting on the learning that I have gained throughout this process, the challenges based on the characteristics of the methodology and possibilities for future study and exploration of this topic.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Critical literacy as pedagogy

Researchers identify critical literacy as a way to confront, challenge, disrupt dominant structures and take social action (Baker & Freebody, 2001; Comber, 2001; Green, 2001; Janks, 2000; Luke, 2012). Mulcahy (2008) identifies critical literacy as a “mindset” that addresses issues of power, social injustice and transformative action. She sees critical literacy not as a set of teaching skills and strategies but rather as a philosophy that allows students to view and interact with the world. Critical literacy does not offer a cookbook solution. It is a pedagogy that involves examining texts to identify and challenge inequality and injustice:

From a pedagogical perspective, critical literacy is a philosophy that recognizes the connections between power, knowledge, language, and ideology, and recognizes the inequalities and injustices surrounding us in order to move toward transformative action and social justice. In order to do so, critical literacy examines texts in order to identify and challenge social constructs, underlying assumptions and ideologies, and power structures that intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices. Furthermore, it examines the way in which texts use language to position readers, transmit information, and perpetuate the status quo. (Mulcahy, p. 16)

Mulcahy sees critical literacy as a way to look deeply into political, social and cultural issues that are embedded into texts and to use these texts to question the construction of knowledge and the hidden agendas in social institutions such as schools, corporations, the government, and the media.

Mulcahy’s references to critical literacy being a “philosophy” or “mindset”
identify the dilemma I face when I consider my approach to critical literacy. As I have identified earlier, a default position that I am trying to resist is the desire to find a clear definition and pedagogical approach to critical literacy. Researchers point out that there is no formula or one way to teach critical literacy (Behrman, 2006; Janks, 2000; Luke, 2000). In fact, Luke expresses that a formula for critical literacy should not exist. Luke writes, “Fortunately, no formula for ‘doing’ critical literacy in the classroom has emerged, and many have attempted to actively combat the distillation of critical literacy into a single-step method or a commodity for publishers” (p. 454).

Another challenge or dilemma with critical literacy in education is the broad application of educational approaches to critical literacy and the generalized use of the word “critical” (Cherland & Harper, 2007). Cherland and Harper explain that the term “critical” is used in so many educational contexts that in some ways it has lost its meaning. They write, “critical is often inserted into educational discourse with much hope but without much meaning” (p. 24). Embracing the understanding that critical literacy does not and will never have a defined approach is crucial to making the shift from focusing on the identification of a specific approach to critical literacy to having critical literacy as a central philosophy or mindset when approaching issues of dominance, power and oppression.

2.2 Features of critical literacy

While researchers resist defining approaches to critical literacy, some commonalities are revealed. Despite the fact that critical literacy does not have a consistent set of instructional strategies, authors such as Wolfe (2010), Luke and Woods (2009), Behrman (2006), Comber (2001), Green (2001) and Janks (2000), attempt to
identify some defining features of what a critical literacy perspective could entail. First, there is a focus on textual and discourse analysis. Second, there is an investigation and deconstruction of multiple viewpoints and sociopolitical issues and lastly there is an element of social action. Listening to and honouring students’ voices is another important component of critical literacy. According to Green (2001), critical literacy is an active and challenging approach to literacy. A critical reading of texts looks at how texts are constructed and how these constructions position the reader. A critical literacy perspective offers the potential for students to understand how language works and the ways that literacy can be used as a form of power.

The aim of critical literacy is to critique and transform dominant ideologies and challenge the status quo by disrupting commonplace notions of socially constructed contexts such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (Luke, 2012; Wallowitz, 2008). According to Luke (2012), critical literacy is the “use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (p. 5). It is an “overtly political orientation to teaching and learning” that blends social, political, and cultural critique with text and discourse analysis (p. 5). Wallowitz (2008) sees critical literacy as a way to interrogate texts in order to challenge power structures, highlight sociopolitical issues located in texts, and promote social justice through political activism. Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) believe that critical literacy disrupts the commonplace, interrogates multiple viewpoints, focuses on sociopolitical issues, and takes action to promote social justice (p. 382).

Principles that guide an approach to critical literacy according to Comber (2001)
are; repositioning students as researchers of language, respecting student resistance and exploring minority culture constructions of literacy and language use, and lastly, problematizing classroom and public texts (p. 92). For Janks (2000) an orientation to critical literacy education considers how language or discourse is used as a powerful means of maintaining and reproducing domination. Generic features of dominant texts become visible giving students from marginalized backgrounds the opportunity to access dominant texts. These characteristics of critical literacy create opportunities for students to take on the role of critical analyzers and support teachers in creating spaces for critical literacy in the classroom while fostering a culture and climate of critical thought and analysis.

Wolfe (2010) identifies critical literacy as a way to shift students’ relationships with the symbolic order. A resistant reader and social activist approach allows teachers to “provide access to dominant forms of language through shifting of subjectivities” (p. 157). This encourages students to think about hegemonic structures and talk about how to disrupt these structures. Students are seen as active, not passive and students’ questions and understandings drive the curriculum. The goal is to have students question what is considered as valuable knowledge and interrogate their own environments. Teachers focus on changing their classroom content to study materials that might be seen as non-traditional, subversive and even dangerous. They use materials that are not thought of as valuable school knowledge in order to disorient students to understand the political and social goals of institutions. The resistant reader and social activist approach allows students to question dominant discourses and reveal dominant ideologies and beliefs.
The various principles, dimensions and lenses of critical literacy that have been presented by researchers will serve to guide my approach to critical literacy. Using literacy, as advocated by Freire and Macedo (1987), to create a change in consciousness is the goal of this work. Freire’s work is a reminder to me that critical literacy is a vehicle for change and can be used to educate against the status quo.

2.3 Critical literacy and the ideological lens

Identifying research, ideologies, perspectives, and pedagogies that align with and support a critical literacy approach is useful for me as I consider the perspectives and ideologies that are at work in educational settings and how these ideologies may come in contact with a critical orientation. Vibert and Shields (2003) believe that ideology does matter when looking at pedagogies. They write, “In these days of the quick-fix package or program designed to address educational ‘problems’ that are often located in complex social conditions and changes, unnamed and unclaimed ideology matters profoundly” (p. 238). It is important that I question what is critical about critical literacy and where it fits within different ideological lenses found in education.

Vibert and Shields (2003) and Cherland and Harper (2007) provide insight into different ideologies or paradigms that are present in pedagogy. They identify these as rational/technical or positivist, interpretive/student-centered, critical/transformative and poststructural. Cherland and Harper write, “Because each paradigm has a different ontology and epistemology, each paradigm offers different views of knowledge and power, of justice and injustice, and of how injustice can be remedied. Inevitably, each paradigm has different goals or purposes for advocacy research in literacy education” (p. 9).
According to Vibert and Shields, the primary purpose of the rational/technical lens on education is preparation for participation in the world and successful competition in the labour market. Capitalism and the production of consumers are at work within this ideology. A dominant aspect of the rational/technical approach is “adults ‘doing for’ rather than ‘doing with’ students” (p. 230). In a rational/technical model, student engagement is directed and developed by the educators with little input from the students. Similarly, Cherland and Harper identify that a positivist perspective is concerned with uncovering the laws of nature to discover the “truth” of matters in the world and the right answers to problems.

The interpretive/student-centered perspective, according to Vibert and Shields, believes that the purpose of education is self-discovery and individual fulfillment. The curriculum is based on students’ interests and choice and students have some control of their projects. Vibert and Shields criticize that this pedagogy is more commonly found in professional and middle-class communities because student-centered pedagogy is “closely associated with the values, aims, and dispositions of the professional classes: that is, students learn the value of individual choice, of individual responsibility and independent work, of order and organization, of politeness, cooperation, team-work, turn-taking, productivity and good management” (p. 233). Vibert and Shields found no evidence that this pedagogy raised political issues and in fact inquiry in this lens may be seen to “violate the norms of politeness” resulting in a manifestation of a hidden curriculum (p. 233). In this lens, there is an appearance of shared power and decision-making, provided that students and teachers make the right choices. Cherland and Harper identify that interpretive research seeks to understand participants’ meanings in order to
“listen, and to hear participants’ voices, so that suffering can be eased” (p. 10). This perspective attempts to provide freedom and autonomy but in fact has the potential to maintain and perpetuate hegemonic structures defaulting to the position of the conservative, techno-rational.

In contrast to the previous two lenses is the critical/transformative perspective. This lens focuses on the beliefs and practices that become a transformative process:

A ‘critical/transformative’ lens encompasses those sets of beliefs and practices through which education is imagined as a potentially transformative process in the lives of individuals and communities. Through this lens, the purpose of education is not so much preparatory as urgent; that is, it is the purpose of education to take up, examine, and work on the world as it presents itself to students (and teachers) here and now. A critical lens commits educators to take seriously a number of concerns; the democratic purposes of schooling; the inevitability of the political dimensions of education and teaching; the importance of dealing explicitly with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and all embodiments of social difference as a concern for social justice; and the centrality of the notion of ‘praxis’. (Vibert and Shields, p. 228)

Vibert and Shields indicate that critical pedagogy involves “explicit taking up of questions and issues often deemed sensitive or controversial within schools, and a view of curriculum as grounded in the lives and experiences of students” (p. 228). The authors identify that the role of a teacher in a critical curriculum is to provoke “critical re-thinking”:
A critical curriculum explicitly raises and deals with political issues including the question “in whose interests is this account of things?” Such a curriculum introduces the impolite (in the sense of uncomfortable) into public discourse, so that within a critical pedagogy, “respect” means more than listening to others and responding politely. It comes to mean dealing with difficult and sensitive issues openly and compassionately. (p. 235)

This ideological perspective shifts thinking, disrupts dominant perspectives and challenges status quo.

Cherland and Harper also take up poststructuralism as an ideology that supports the goal of empowering people to act against privilege and status quo. Poststructural research disrupts, deconstructs, and unsettles truth to “examine our cherished attachments to see how they limit us” (pp. 10 - 11). The attachments that limit us, according to these authors, are positions of social power enacted through class, race, gender, language, ability, sexuality and other ways of identifying. The social power based on these identifications is not evenly distributed.

Critical/transformational and poststructural ideologies are most closely connected to the goals of critical literacy. However, Vibert and Shields argue that many educators “seek rational, technical, and relatively rapid solutions to what are in fact, deeply rooted and pervasive education and social problems” (p. 222). According to Cherland and Harper, positivist research “rarely advocates” and interpretive research can “rarely go beyond presenting what participants think and feel” (pp. 9 - 10). The ideological orientation that I default to and the dominant ideologies demonstrated in the schools that I have attended as a student and worked in as an educator appear to be rooted in positivist
and interpretive ideologies and in my experience, teachers rarely, if ever, go beyond this to a critical, poststructural lens; yet, it is within the critical, poststructural lens that literacy has the potential to reform or emancipate. Critical literacy education grounded in critical, poststructural ideologies has the potential to transform and interrupt hegemonic ideologies and shift dominant thinking.

2.4 Literacy and Power

A crucial component of critical literacy is unpacking the ways that language and literacy are used to maintain and reproduce power and domination (Cherland & Harper, 2007; Janks, 2000; Morrell, 2008; Mulcahy, 2008). It is important to investigate how literacy and language can be used as a tool to maintain and produce power, particularly focusing on how literacy and language have been used in the history of Canada as part of a colonialis project with First Nations people.

The creation of the “other” through literacy and language is part of the colonialis project (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Episkew, 2009). Cannella and Viruru argue that language has been used as a method to create binaries that distinguish between civilization and barbarism. Civilizations that used written languages were seen as superior to those that did not. They write, “Language is seen by many as a behaviour that shapes and creates cultures and that has been used to further the political ends of colonial powers” (p. 38).

They also challenge the definition of literacy and what it means to be literate. They contest that “literacy is another false fact created in particular social and political contexts in which it is valued; however, human beings have functioned very successfully in a range of times and cultures without being literate” (p. 39). Indigenous people have a
rich oral history but since they were not literate in the ways that Europeans privileged, their oral tradition was devalued and wiped out (Episkenew, 2009).

The creation of binaries such as literate versus illiterate and oral language versus written language privilege middle-class literacy norms and serve to produce further oppressive binaries (Janks, 2010). Janks argues that what is valued with literacy is defined by institutions that favour middle-class communities over working class communities. She also believes that access to communication technologies is socially stratified and those with more privilege have greater chances to become literate across the range of modalities. Janks sees literacy as one of the many social goods that are distributed. Being illiterate, as defined by the dominant society, impacts educational opportunities and affects the ability to access appropriate resources and be part of the status quo.

2.5 White privilege, Christianity and the mythology of the Canadian identity

White privilege, multiculturalism, Christianity and a Canadian identity all have influence in the creation of inequality. These social practices and identities familiar in Canada overlap and reinforce each other to create inequality in the form of sexism, racism and ongoing colonialism. Having an understanding of the production and effects of these discourses is essential so that critical literacy can be used to reveal the hidden power in these structures and work to deconstruct and dismantle them.

If a goal of critical literacy is to challenge the status quo (Mulcahy, 2008; Wallowitz, 2008) then it is essential to consider the role that race has to play in constructing power and privilege. Leonardo (2009) challenges the generally accepted notion that whites do not know very much about race. In order to make race visible,
Leonardo acknowledges the need for a “critical reading of Whiteness” in that “White ignorance must be problematized not in order to expose Whites as simply racist but to increase knowledge about their full participation in race relations” (p. 231). Leonardo argues that Whites do know a great deal about race and their participation in race relations and that White racial knowledge constructs itself while simultaneously remaining invisible. He writes, “White racial knowledge is an epistemology of the oppressor to the extent that it suppresses knowledge of its own conditions of existence” (p. 233). This unspoken knowledge is a barrier to antiracist education in that it denies the reality of racism.

Keeping white privilege invisible continues to cause hurt and damage to all people but in particular, racially marginalized people. Dei, Karumanchery and Karumanchery-Luik (2007) address that “whiteness” is the norm to which racially oppressed people are compared and compare themselves to. These internalized images of whiteness as the ideal image perpetuates oppression by creating a “dislocated and disconnected self” (p. 140). The authors explain how the internalized reaction of the oppressed actually serves to maintain their own oppression. They write, “In our desire for safety and in our alienation, we take on the task of becoming as much like the oppressor as we can, because that is the forbidden site of safety to which we aspire” (p. 140). Racial trauma forces the oppressed to constantly shift between who they are, to who they feel they must be, to who they are allowed to be. The authors write, “our skin becomes a social marker of everything that we can never be, made in direct relation to Whiteness” (p. 142).
Another marker that constructs unearned privileges and benefits is Christianity (Blumenfeld, 2006). Those who do not adhere to the values and standards of Christian traditions in a Western society can be marginalized. Blumenfeld argues that Christian privilege constitutes invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged benefits. He writes, “This system of benefits confers dominance on Christians while subordinating members of other faith communities as well as non-believers.” (p. 195). The most obvious example of the manifestation of Christian privilege is the mainstream calendar scheduled around Christian holidays. The universalization of the Christian experience and culture as the norm allows Christians as the dominant group to “project and transmit their particular beliefs, values, and perspectives (through hegemonic discourses) thereby rendering subordinated groups virtually invisible while simultaneously constructing stereotypes about these groups” (p. 199). Christian privilege has been subconsciously woven into the social fabric of the Western world situating Christianity as the dominant norm that all others are compared to.

The function of Christianity and white privilege as status quo can also be linked to the creation of the mythology of the national identity of Canada. Christianity also reinforces notions of white supremacy, of who will be tolerant and who will be tolerated. In her investigation of the construction of the Canadian national identity, Mackey (2002) explores the ideology of pluralism, hierarchies of difference and the construction of dominant national identity and culture in Canada. Mackey explores how Canadian national identity has been constructed around the idea of tolerance and justice towards racial and linguistic minorities in order to create nationalism. Mackey examines the “project of nation building” and the focus of multiculturalism as part of the construction
of Canadian identity (p. 3). A dilemma with identifying multiculturalism as a key component of Canadian national identity is that in essence, multiculturalism is constructed in relation to the “unmarked yet dominant Anglo-Canadian core culture” (p. 2). Mackey argues that while Canada’s “nationalist narrative” has been constructed around the idea of tolerance and acceptance of minorities, examples from both the past and the present reveal how the unmarked, dominant culture, which is to say “white”, has influenced and shaped this narrative.

Mackey challenges that multiculturalism actually “constructs a dominant and supposedly unified, white, unmarked core culture through the proliferation of forms of limited difference” (p. 164). The core culture see themselves as authentic Canadians or “Canadian-Canadians” who tolerate and celebrate multicultural others (p. 106). Mackey believes that the project of Canadian nation building is about controlling and managing difference through the construction of a dominant, white, unmarked core culture. The multicultural “others” are fragments and are “by definition subordinate, and the unmarked core Canadian culture is, by definition, dominant” (p. 153).

2.6 Multiculturalism and anti-racist education

Further critical investigations of multiculturalism and its connection to education continue to unravel the ideology of multiculturalism. Speaking specifically about First Nations people, Dion (2009) believes that while the multicultural discourse is appealing and engages students, it does little to promote any true appreciation of the complexities of different cultures. She writes, “teaching about material culture without attention to the values, concepts, beliefs, and world views of First Nations people reproduces stereotypical representations” (p. 74).
St. Denis (2011) argues that the inclusion of Aboriginal content and perspectives is taken up through a multicultural approach and that many Aboriginal people consider multiculturalism a form of colonization. She identifies that a multicultural approach neutralizes race and helps to “erase, diminish, trivialize, and deflect from acknowledging Aboriginal sovereignty and the need to redress Aboriginal rights” (p. 309). Multiculturalism attempts to equate Aboriginal people with ethnic minorities thus erasing the position of Aboriginal peoples as Indigenous to the land and diminishing the ways settlers dominated Aboriginal people through colonization. According to St. Denis, “Multiculturalism is used as a pretext to justify refusal of an authentic engagement with Aboriginal people, culture, and history into public schools curricula… Multiculturalism in schools makes it possible for non-Aboriginal teachers and schools to trivialize Aboriginal content and perspectives, and at the same time believe that they are becoming more inclusive and respectful” (p. 313). Rather than multiculturalism, St. Denis (2007) suggests anti-racist education and critical race analysis. She writes, “critical anti-racist education could provide a foundation to forge alliances between diverse Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in a common search for social justice in education” (p. 1070). Anti-racist education goes beyond the surface level approach of multiculturalism to “explore the practices, processes and ideologies of racism” and investigate the production of racial identities and the history of racialization (p. 1087). A multicultural approach has many limitations and evades injustice towards minority groups allowing for the systemic denial of colonization and the maintenance of white dominance. Anti-racist education addresses the production and construction of racism and how this can be
addressed in the education system. An anti-racist approach connects to critical literacy in its attempt to confront, challenge, and disrupt dominant ideologies.

2.7 *Why critical literacy is difficult to do*

Confronting white privilege, challenging dominant discourses such as Christianity, questioning the identity of Canada and challenging colonialist practices like multicultural education can easily be met with discomfort and resistance. White (2009) acknowledges that teaching critical literacy can be a double-edged sword that can cut in many directions. The first challenge, according to White, is that many teachers have little to no training in a critical literacy approach and do not understand what it means to read critically. The teacher education courses in my training were primarily focused on teaching reading for comprehension and critical literacy was deemphasized or absent. Because of the lack of exposure to good examples of critical literacy instruction, White questions whether a flawed understanding of critical literacy may actually cause more harm than good. There is a potential to confuse critical literacy as a social and political critique of systemic inequality with critical thinking skills that can be applied to any topic thus reducing the emancipatory potential of critical literacy.

Another challenge that White addresses is the conflict felt by educators to follow the requirements of their program or curriculum. Scripted curricula, pacing guides, and norm-referenced assessments are “anathemas” to critical literacy (p. 56). In order to teach “true” critical literacy, time, support from administration, and resources to work outside the curriculum are required.

Lastly, and possibly the most challenging, is the political and disruptive nature of critical literacy. White (2009) addresses the fact that through critical literacy students are
questioning the very texts that society values and holds dear or perhaps even more 
simply, the texts that teachers have access to in their libraries and bookrooms. He writes, 
“Ironically, if we are successful in teaching critical literacy to students, we may also be 
teaching them to critique – and to try to change – the materials, pedagogy, and school 
structure we are using to educate them” (p. 56). Another potential conflict is the fact that 
critical literacy “encourages students to critique the tenets by which their own parents 
live and their cultures operate” (p. 56). In actuality, there is a danger associated with a 
successful critical literacy approach. When White imagines what a school full of students 
who have been taught critical literacy would look like the possible results might be, 
“students dissatisfied with the very society, schools, and culture(s) we are preparing them 
to join and parents dissatisfied with us” (p. 56). Being successful with critical literacy 
could be a very uncomfortable position for educators to be in.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) also address challenges with a critical 
literacy approach. One of these challenges is when teachers work to disrupt the 
commonplace in their classrooms. This dimension takes teachers out of their traditional 
roles as transmitters of knowledge and places the power into the learners’ hands. Luke 
(2012) supports this understanding and writes, “In such a setting, traditional authority 
and epistemic knowledge relations of teachers and students shift. Learners become 
teachers of their understandings and experiences, and teachers become learners of the 
same contexts” (p. 7). In order to work through this shift of responsibility, Lewison et al. 
believe that as teachers develop the language of critique, they are able to move towards 
an activist perspective in their roles and responsibilities as educators.

Another unconventional perspective for teachers, according to Lewison et al.
(2002) is interrogating multiple viewpoints. The open-ended process of critical literacy does not provide neat and tidy conclusions and challenges the traditional perspective of “right” and “wrong.” The authors write:

In moving toward enacting critical practices, most teachers are faced with a continuing examination and revision of long-held beliefs. Their initial efforts toward implementing a critical literacy curriculum are often shadowed by hesitations and uncertainties of what critical literacy looks like in classrooms and what is appropriate for elementary classrooms in terms of materials, texts, and discussions. (p. 390)

The constant flux and discomfort that results from a critical literacy approach can be a difficult position for teachers to place themselves in.

Becoming a “successful” critical literacy educator is a dilemma in itself. The shift of power that critical literacy requires destabilizes the dominant definition of what it means to be a teacher. In a critical approach it is not only dominant structures and ideologies that are being challenged but the very sense of self is being challenged and shifted as well. The loss of self is a critical challenge and the ability to be comfortable within this crisis is part of the process of becoming a critical literacy educator, a process about which we will read more in the next chapters.
CHAPTER 3: THE UNFAMILIAR AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF KIRA FLADAGER

In this chapter I trace the construction of my personal and intellectual history in a way that is, for me, unfamiliar. Autobiography is used in this chapter as a method to inform my self-study by highlighting critical moments in my personal history that reveal how dominant ideologies and normative discourses have produced and reproduced my identity as a white, Christian, female, middle-class educator. This autobiography is not presented chronologically but rather as a collection of experiences and memories that have surfaced from theoretical analysis and personal reflection. I sifted through my experiences and responded to times when I had visceral reactions of discomfort. The visceral reaction was a signal of unsettling and resistance and indicated an opportunity for further analysis. Through this self-study, I will deconstruct my resistance and acceptance to these critical moments of learning and how they are leading me to unlearn my identity and relearn how I am constructed within the context of normative ideologies. This will be useful as I begin to analyze how these influences have reproduced dominant ideologies and affected my teaching practice.

3.1 The production and reproduction of Kira, a white, Christian, middle-class, female educator

I start my autobiography with familiar constructs that I have long since considered to be my “truths.” My familiar identity reveals me as Canadian, middle-class, female, descendent of white settlers. I am a wife, mother, daughter, and sister. I am an educator. I am Christian, moral and hard working. I believe in common sense and fairness. I have a supportive and loving family and good relationships with my friends and colleagues. I have a rewarding job that provides me with all the comforts in life. I
have the ability to problem solve and work through life challenges. I can openly celebrate my spirituality and the holidays that are important to me. I can travel freely and proudly showcase my country.

This static representation has all the modernist assumptions that one’s identity is given in advance; that a person simply “is” her identity and within the rules of modern life, a person can be self-made, autonomous, and self-determining. This is the dilemma. I have worked hard to make sure that I am normal and fit in, yet I was not aware that because of my social class, and racial identity, I was already part of the norm. This representation is rooted in the concept of meritocracy and that I achieved my successes by being a good person and working hard. The belief that “you only get out what you put in” is what McNamee and Miller (2002) to refer as the “meritocracy myth” (p. 1). The commonly held belief about meritocracy is that the distribution of resources such as wealth and income is based on the merit of individuals. According to the authors, “combined effects of non-merit factors” lead to the construction of meritocracy as a myth (p.1). Non-merit factors can be defined as social and cultural advantages, unequal educational opportunities and even luck. The success I thought I achieved by my own merit has been produced and maintained by my social class, religious orientation and racial identity.

Graham and Slee (2008) argue that the “subject’s relationship to the norm is dependent upon whether the subject as object is internalized within the boundary of the norm or externalized as beyond its limit” (p. 283). There is a need to identify an “Other” in order to produce and maintain both the margin and centre: “Privilege and position at the centre is dependent upon the subjection and marginalization of the Other” (p. 284).
This power is often exercised from a hidden place and produces a “ghostly centre” that “eludes critical examination” (p. 284). My familiar autobiography is rooted firmly within the normative centre and the critical examination that follows takes me beyond the limits of my familiar story to illuminate the ghostly centre and how it constructs and produces the boundaries that maintain my position within the norm.

When coming to an account of oneself and attempting to discover the truth by which I am known, Butler (2001) suggests that instead of asking “what” I am or “what I am to become” it is important to consider the simple question, “who am I?” This question, according to Butler, “assumes that there is an Other before us, one we do not know, whom we cannot fully apprehend” (p. 24). This view exposes me and makes it necessary to learn how to handle this exposure. Exposing myself and coming to the understanding that I exist in relation to the other helps me to further discover that my identity has been constructed to perform and maintain my status as a white, middle-class, Christian, female, all identities that are socially constructed and not preexisting categories of race, gender and social class.

This journey is not without risk and Butler explains how once a transformation takes place, there is no returning:

…recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and, therefore, also, the process by which I cease to be able to return to what I was. There is, then, a constitutive loss in the process of recognition, a transformation that does not bring all that once was forward with it, one that forecloses upon the past in an irreversible way. (p. 23)
A “vacillation between loss and ecstasy” is inevitable in this process (Butler, p. 23). As I work through the unfamiliar stories in my personal and academic history, I weave in and out of feeling loss for who I once was and the ecstasy of rediscovery and resignification. It is both distressing and liberating.

3.2 Racial ignorance as a strategy to produce and reproduce white privilege

Leonardo (2009) challenges Whites to make race visible by critically problematizing their full participation in race relations: “White ignorance must be problematized not in order to expose Whites as simply racist but to increase knowledge about their full participation in race relations” (p. 231). Leonardo points out three ways that Whites are aware of racial conditions. First, he believes that Whites “know who” they are and quickly build a “racial cosmology” that allows them to know their place in terms of racial order (p. 235). Secondly, Whites also “know where” they belong and experience freedom of mobility. Lastly, they “know how” the world works in racial ways and are both experts and authorities on race (p. 236).

My participation within race relations has involved the development of a seemingly invisible yet well-defined spatial cosmology and racial order. This structuring, while carefully hidden from my immediate consciousness, has a deep impact on how I continue to seek out comfortable racial environments for myself as an adult. Razack (2002) declares that the construction of racial others are produced through spatiality: “spaces are organized to sustain unequal social relations and how these relations shape spaces” (p.1). Areas that exist outside of the elite spaces of middle-class life reinforce binaries of respectable spaces and degenerate spaces. “Spatial relations of domination” highlight white respectability and entitlement (p. 128). A question was posed to me in
one of my graduate classes, “How many First Nations people have you invited into your house?” This question drove home the harsh realization that I feel most comfortable and choose to construct my life within clearly defined racial spaces. I live in a community that is predominantly white and I work with predominantly white people. Leonardo (2009) points out that as a white person I know where I belong and have the freedom to choose to live and work in a space where I feel most comfortable. I can remain ignorant of my role within a dominant racial cosmology and avoid disruption of my constructed identity.

A critical moment in my awareness of racial spaces and the production of racial identity came when I began to teach at a community school in an urban centre populated primarily by Aboriginal students and teachers. I had been teaching for six years and was given this placement after putting in a transfer request. When my colleagues learned about my placement, the reaction was quite negative and not reassuring. However, I had experienced good success as a teacher and felt confident that things would go similarly for me in this new placement.

I was the visible minority among a majority of students and staff who were of First Nations and Métis ancestry. There was an Aboriginal identity and ethos throughout the school with strong Aboriginal educators and advocates. There were daily references to Indigenous traditions and knowledge that I had never considered. For the first time in my teaching career, I had trouble connecting with many of the students. I tried my usual “get to know you” games and activities. I tried to connect with them about their families. I got nowhere. I was also having trouble connecting with some of the staff and could sense distance and distrust. I was ignorant of the impact that my race had on this
experience and that within this setting my role within the normative center of larger society was not valued. Graham and Slee (2008) write, “it can be unsettling to acknowledge that the norm is a fiction; however, normalization is a man-made grid of intelligibility that attributes value to culturally specific performances and in doing so, privileges particular ways of being” (p. 281). My norms, influenced by white European and Western ideologies were not privileged and I was finding it difficult to manipulate my way within new ways of being. My identity as white woman was painfully obvious to everyone but me. This discomfort and disruption of my generally accepted identity forced me to consider why I had never felt this before. The schools I attended in elementary, secondary and post-secondary as well as the community I live in had never made me feel like an outsider. This shift in the dominant norm was unsettling and disruptive; it became a critical learning moment for me to see how race is normalized within spaces and in particular the school setting and where my place is within the normative centre.

The reproduction of white privilege can be defined geographically. I have lived in a prairie province my whole life and have internalized the mythology of the people from this province as good, friendly, community minded and supportive of each other. In contrast to these “truths,” there is a different reality for Aboriginal people as shared by an Aboriginal colleague about what it meant for her to be from the prairies. Her experiences of discomfort, hostility and racism were the opposite of my reality and disrupted my nostalgia about my home province. The new knowledge was disturbing and uncomfortable. I began to understand that part of the mythology that I have internalized about my province is also about the “other.” My colleague’s story helped me learn more
about my place within the mythology of this province and increased my consciousness about how “others” are placed as well.

A significant gap in my understanding and experiences concerns the role that treaties have played in the construction of the Canadian identity and the reproduction of racialized spaces in this city. The neighbourhood I live in is part of the numbered treaties established from an agreement signed between First Nations peoples of this geographic location and the British Crown. Despite the treaty agreement, the area I live in is predominantly populated by white, middle-class citizens. Poverty and crime do not have a significant impact on my neighbourhood and the police presence is minimal. One afternoon when my son and I were out for a bike ride, a police car pulled up beside us. My heart raced slightly as I wondered what we had done wrong. The police officer rolled down his window and, with a large smile on his face, congratulated my son for wearing a helmet and following bike safety rules. My son felt honoured that he had received such positive reinforcement from a police officer. This encounter instilled in him the belief that the police are there to help him and look out for his safety.

Children from other communities do not equally share the same perspective as my son. I was showing pictures of community members to three and four–year-olds in a pre-kindergarten class located in a core community school. I showed a picture of a police officer and asked the class to identify the occupation. One of the little boys got a very serious scowl on his face and said in a low growl, “that’s a cop.” It made me wonder what kinds of interactions this little boy had with police officers to prompt such a negative reaction. This boy comes from a community where the police presence is not necessarily as positive of an experience as what my son encountered. Through these
encounters, I am learning how the racial divide is reinforced. The spirit and intent of treaties is to provide mutually beneficial arrangements and benefits for all people living on this land however, I am coming to an understanding that I have benefited differently from the interpretation and enforcement/neglect of the treaties. Recognizing racial spaces that have been constructed in this province and how these have been produced and reproduced through the interpretations of the treaties is part of the unsettling of my identity.

These personal reflections increase my understanding of my participation in race relations and expose how racial ignorance maintains and protects privilege and dominance. Leonardo (2004) writes, “the theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation is described as happening almost without the knowledge of whites” (p. 138). The discourse of privilege allows whites to be seemingly oblivious to the role they play in domination. Leonardo (following McIntosh, 2004) provides a metaphor of race being like “fin-like figures dancing out of the water before submerging and disappearing from sight” and knowing that underneath the surface there is something greater attached to it (p. 139). Underneath the surface is the understanding of the processes that secure domination and the ways that whites recreate white dominance on a daily basis.

Moon (1999) provides insight into some of the discursive practices and strategies that produce and reproduce whiteness, especially employed by white women. She investigates how the bourgeois notion of womanhood plays a central role in the production and reproduction of “whiteness” and in particular the “whiteness” that aligns with and manages domination and white supremacy. She asks the question, “How does
one get to be (and remain) white?” (p. 178). Moon describes three practices or strategies that are utilized to maintain whiteness. The first is “Optic Whiteness” which is the connection of whiteness to civility, respectability, credibility and dignity (p. 183). Secondly, “Whitespeak” is a strategy that masks domination and racist expressions through coded speech. Racism is manifested through a passive voice that disembodies the participant from the responsibility of the perpetuation of racism (p. 188). Lastly, “Hyperpoliteness” enables white people to avoid engagement with the realities of white supremacy and its implication in their own lives (p. 192).

Leonardo (2004) points out similar uses. He says, “Whites spend a lot of time talking about race, often coded/coated in apparently racially neutral or color-blind terms” (p. 236). When I started teaching at the urban community school one of the first things my colleagues prepared me for was “cheque day.” I was coached to prepare my lessons differently on these days because cheque day generally led to low attendance. While this was a consistent result of cheque day it was troubling for me that this was one of the first things that I learned about the new community I was working in. This attempt at being responsive and understanding as educators was rooted in racial judgments and stereotypes. Coded speech or “Whitespeak” as Moon (1999) calls it, is a strategy that, as far as white people are concerned, masks domination and racist expressions. According to Moon, Whites frequently “shift linguistically into a kind of ‘white code’” (p. 188). She believes that talking about race-related matters in a passive voice disembodies Whites from the responsibility and perpetuation of racism. Moon believes that what is not said, or the absences and silences in conversations, is often more revealing that what is said. Hare and Pidgeon (2011) argue that indigenous youth and families are blamed for their
failure to achieve in schools, “This belief is rooted in deficit theories used to explain the school failure of students from low-income minority families that continues to be reproduced with disadvantage students from diverse linguistic and cultural communities” (p. 94). The hidden messages around cheque day produce and maintain deficit thinking of the community and perpetuate the cycle of attendance issues related to poverty in community schools. The community and its conditions of poverty are blamed for the low achievement of their children.

3.3 Multiculturalism as a strategy to produce and reproduce the “other”

Hidden discourses and partial knowledge within educational settings maintain deficit thinking and construct the identity of the “other” in relation to the norm. Kumashiro (2001) acknowledges that the school curriculum does little to address partial knowledges and that there is a privileging of certain groups in curriculums. Kumashiro writes, “By learning about only certain groups and perspectives in society, students are not learning about alternative perspectives and the contributions, experiences, and identities of Others, and by not learning such knowledge, students are not troubling the (mis)knowledge they already have” (p. 5). The majority of my educational experience reflects a normalized, Western knowledge and discourse centered around white, European, heterosexual perspectives. Graham and Slee (2008) argue that there is a production and protection of normative domains through “normalising discourses that affirm or negate particular ways of being” (p. 282). The textbooks that we used in history and science were written from a Western perspective. I studied the public education “canon” of literature written by white, middle-class, heterosexual males. The first novel that I remember reading that wasn’t written by a white person (or that I was
aware of anyway) was in the third year of my education courses when we read April Raintree by Beatrice Culleton-Mosionier (1992). While studying this novel, I do not remember addressing the impact of colonization and racism or discussing the reality of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. It is no wonder that I have gaps in my understanding of the history of Canada when I had no exposure to First Nations and Métis history or authors. I was twenty years old before I read anything by an Aboriginal author.

My educational experience has centered on liberal, multicultural discourses. St. Denis (2011) suggests that a common sentiment about public education is that it is a “neutral multicultural space” but she argues that this actually limits the meaningful incorporation of diverse content and perspectives in schools, especially in relation to Aboriginal content (p. 306). The concept that Canada is superior because of its multiculturalism was a deeply engrained ideology for me by the time I was done my primary and secondary education. According to Mackey (2002), multiculturalism is part of the construction of the Canadian identity with tolerance and justice towards minorities as key indicators of this identity. Mackey points out that white Canadian identity has been shaped through comparison and competition with non-white others and that exclusion and division has been part of the nation-making project. According to Mackey, multiculturalism “constructs a dominant and supposedly unified, white, unmarked core culture through the proliferation of forms of limited difference” (p. 164).

St. Denis notes that multiculturalism encourages social division and can intensify misunderstanding by pitting one group against the other. Instead of confronting social inequity, multiculturalism focuses on cultural “others” and limits understanding to food,
song and dance. I learned about other cultures through a superficial “beads and feathers”, “heroes and holidays” approach. The deepest impact was that I learned about other cultures in comparison to Western ideologies that were considered the “norm.” What was hidden or missing from this part of my educational experience was the meaning and intent of the treaties, the effects of colonization, racism, oppression and the rights and privileges of oppressed people. St. Denis writes that a multicultural approach neutralizes race and helps to “erase, diminish, trivialize, and deflect from acknowledging Aboriginal sovereignty and the need to redress Aboriginal rights” (p. 309). She suggests that meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives would involve “providing curricular content and teaching practice that exposes the ways in which Aboriginal people have been dehumanized in Canada” (p. 314).

My academic history provided a surface level approach to the inclusion of First Nations and Métis content and perspectives and left a wide opening for Aboriginal perspectives to be approached through multiculturalism. My education evaded the investigation of injustice towards Aboriginal people; it simply ignored processes of colonization and maintained white dominance. Ahmed (2007) argues that multiculturalism is a politics of happiness and this is how my schooling has revealed itself to me now. Masquerading within a tolerant and accepting society, the majority of my educational experience has been constructed to protect and maintain status quo through the construction of the “other.”

3.4 Christianity as a strategy to produce and reproduce the “good, white girl”

Another significant role that has gone unexamined in my life is Christianity and how being a Christian maintains my place within the normative centre and awards me
unearned privileges and benefits. Blumenfeld (2006) argues that there is a “system of benefits” that confers dominance on Christians while subordinating non-Christians. “Hegemony”, according to Blumenfeld, describes how Christians as the dominant group “successfully disseminate dominant social realities and social visions in a manner accepted as common sense, as ‘normal,’ as universal” (p. 196). These implicit beliefs and attitudes are used to maintain a status quo of Christian standards and ignore the lives of others. My primary and secondary public school education is an example of how educational institutions are rooted in Christian hegemony. Christian norms and standards were present in the school calendar and the holidays we observed. School concerts and art projects reflected Christian traditions and celebrations. I remember reciting the Lord’s Prayer every morning after the singing of O Canada even though my school was a public institution. The singing of O Canada is an example of standard practices found in public institutions that are rooted in Christian discourse. These practices are rarely examined as to how they continue to uphold and advance Christian hegemony and legitimate Christianity as the norm to which all else is compared to.

Because Christianity is seen as the dominant faith in Western society the privileges that come from Christianity can be connected to white privilege. Blumenfeld writes, “Dominant groups project and transmit their particular beliefs, values, and perspectives (through hegemonic discourse) thereby rendering subordinated groups virtually invisible while simultaneously constructing stereotypes about these groups” (p. 199). Christianity in its historic association with whiteness reproduces racial distinctions of “us” and “them” and is expressed in the assumption that the role of the Christian is to save the other and transform “them” to become like “us.” The savior role is never enough
yet always necessary to maintain dominance. Christians see “Proselytizing”, according to Blumenfeld, as a gift to non-believers yet many non-Christians consider this as an imposition, manipulation, and oppression (p. 205). Here we can see how the colonial project and Christianity are linked. The process of colonization removed power and devalued the traditions, customs and ways of the colonized (Episkenew, 2009).

According to Episkenew, “the colonizers believed so zealously in their superiority to their fellow human beings that they considered it their responsibility to eradicate pagan superstition and replace it with ‘truth’” (p. 5). The two forces of colonization and Christianity mutually benefit each other in their connection to superiority and subordination.

Christianity has awarded me the ability to perform as part of the norm and to make judgments on what is considered outside of the norm. Upholding the Christian worldview within my normative centre has contributed to a misconception that Christianity is superior to all other worldviews and perspectives. This has left significant gaps in my understanding and respect of other beliefs and worldviews. Christian dominance, according to Blumenfeld is “maintained by its relative invisibility, and with this invisibility, privilege is neither analyzed nor scrutinized, neither interrogated nor confronted.” When someone challenges or attempts to reveal the privilege, members of this dominant group can be “triggered” and can react negatively and there is a danger of being branded or labeled as “subversive” or “sacrilegious” (p. 206). Moon (1999) notes that the home is a critical space for the formation of identities and that for white women this is where the “white gaze” is reproduced and indoctrinated. Moon writes, “becoming a ‘good girl’ within the context of white family relations often takes on a racialized
dimension as what it means to be ‘good’ is frequently bound up with issues of racial loyalty and solidarity” (p. 181). The construct of a particular kind of goodness, especially as prescribed by Christian-dominated social practices, makes it easy for Christians as well as non-Christian whites to be blind to prejudice and notions of superiority. The unwritten guidebooks of how to be “good” are influenced by a Christian discourse and constructed around binaries of good versus evil, Christian versus heathen, civilized versus uncivilized, saved versus damned.

Christianity teaches little girls to be loyal through the promise that this is how they will become good. Christian solidarity requires not only goodness but also loyalty that hinders critique. I have shown loyalty by performing and reproducing “good Christian girl” roles that follow gender and heterosexual norms. My loyalty is offered in exchange for a positive self-identity, and in this white dominant system, this is nothing short of salvation.

I am reluctant, even fearful (in the sense of losing one’s faith or self-identity), to question the privileges afforded the followers of mainstream Christianity. Even more difficult and unthinkable is launching a critique of the unfair system that hegemonic Christianity organizes and supports. I am trying to figure out how to be both critical and Christian as this is not a role that I am familiar or comfortable with. Reproducing Christian ideals and maintaining the status quo have been influential in my definition of goodness but this is now shifting and I feel a significant amount of resistance to this shift. It is easier for me to accept that I have white privilege than for me to question Christianity because, for me, Christianity and being a good person are linked. This is part of the loss and tension that I feel when I critically examine the role of Christianity in my
life. By critiquing Christianity, I risk being placed on the other side of the constructed binaries. If I question, am I no longer civilized, saved, good? It is also this reasoning that my role as a Christian comes in conflict with the role of a critical, anti-oppressive educator. As a Christian, I have been taught to believe without question and to seek it out as “the” universal truth. This position is rooted in a positivist orientation and is in contrast to the critical, poststructural perspective that is part of being a critical literacy teacher.

Blumenfeld explains that “Unpacking the knapsack” of Christian privilege “is to become aware and to develop critical consciousness of its existence and how it impacts the daily lives of both those with and those without this privilege” (p. 196). According to Clark et al (2002) “our social identities not only inform how we engage in the world, but how the world engages us. Denying that these identities exist or that they have no impact only guarantees that certain identities are allowed to manifest publicly uninterrupted while others remain closeted. The practice ensures the persistence of social injustice” (p. 57). Christianity is at the core of the construction of my identity. This is what makes the process of deconstruction and critique critical even though it is difficult. In order to move forward as a critical, anti-oppressive educator, I cannot deny the existence of Christian privilege and the impact it has on the construction of my personal and professional identity.

3.5 The process of destabilization

Critical moments of learning about power and oppression were invisible in my experiences prior to beginning my teaching career. In 2005, five years after I started teaching, I took a class for my English degree called “Images of Indigenous People.”
This was my first educational experience that addressed contemporary issues of First Nations people. We investigated the concept of the “noble savage” and the “vanishing Indian” and how popular culture and history books written from a Western worldview are influenced by these images. Throughout this class I was challenged to consider how these concepts constructed my views of Aboriginal people.

Other classes for my English degree challenged me with new and different learnings and began to bring awareness to many of my long held beliefs and understandings. I took a class called “Queer Theories” that introduced me to the critical theories of Foucault and how the creation of binaries enforce and maintain power and dominance. I also took class called “Residential School Literature” where I learned for the first time in my academic history about residential schools and the lasting impact of historical trauma. I often felt uncomfortable and in a state of crisis while taking these classes. I was confused and overwhelmed by the material and went through phases of anger, confusion, embarrassment and guilt. These were all emotions that I had not felt before within my normalized Western education. These classes were a far cry from the happy, innocent curriculum that I was used to.

While I was taking these classes, I started teaching at the community school I have mentioned previously. The personal stories and experiences of my students and colleagues reinforced the new learning that I was receiving. I remember complaining about the behaviour of a student to one of my colleagues and she informed me about his family history in that he was the descendent of victims of residential schools. Without the critical theory and background that I had received from these classes, I would not have
been able to make the connection of historical trauma and oppression to the student’s present behaviour.

These classes were the starting point of awareness for me yet I still resisted many of the ideas. While I understood the theory, I had not opened myself up to a shift in my own identity. I was at the beginning stages on the process of destabilization when I completed my Bachelor of Arts degree.

Continuing with graduate classes has propelled me forward on the process of destabilization. The work in my graduate degree has taken me to a deeper understanding of what it means to be part of the dominant norm and how I can use my privilege to confront oppression. As I move forward on the process of destabilization, I am caught in the flux of ease and discomfort. Goodman (2011) writes, “There is generally little opportunity, support, or incentive for people from privileged groups to explore their identity and examine its social implications” (p. 31). Writing this chapter has given me the opportunity to explore my identity as a member of the privileged group. As Butler has warned, this is difficult work and once you have started the journey, you can never go back. I feel as though I have new responsibility in my life. Moon (1999) believes that white women can play an important role in creating a different vision for white people that develops an understanding of racism and rejects dominance. She writes, “whitewomen, in particular, have a moral and ethical responsibility to place the abolition of white supremacy at the forefront of their personal and political agendas” (p. 196). My colleagues, family members and friends may be dissatisfied, uncomfortable and perhaps even angry with my new responsibility but these are the risks and consequences that I am willing to confront from “outing myself” as an anti-oppressive educator.
In this chapter, I have addressed the strategies that have been used in my life to produce and reproduce privilege and dominance. Exposing and analyzing these strategies has helped me in the process of deconstructing and unlearning my identity. The decentering and disruption that this chapter has provided requires that I become comfortable with the crisis and destabilization that occurs from questioning and examining my experiences. There is no conclusion to this work. The privilege that I hold is always present and that is why it is crucial that I continue to always be aware of the systems and strategies of oppression and my role within these. Now that I have opened myself up to looking for evidence of dominance and oppression, it is much more visible to me yet I still resist challenging it. I also understand that the fact that I can choose whether or not to challenge oppression is part of the privilege of being in the dominant norm. Revealing the structures in my life that produce and reproduce dominance and oppression are constructive in my goal to expose and dismantle systems of oppression through critical literacy. Chapter four will examine how my dominant and privileged experiences and perspectives have shaped my position as an educator and how common traits of being a dominant group member such as lack of consciousness, denial and avoidance of oppression, and a sense of superiority and entitlement (Goodman, 2011) were present in my attempts at social justice and critical literacy in my classroom.
CHAPTER FOUR: REFRAMING MY APPROACH

This chapter will be divided into two sections. The first section will theorize the novel *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis (2000) and investigate the Western ideologies present in the novel. This investigation will provide a theoretical consideration that interrogates, interprets and interrupts my attempt at teaching *The Breadwinner* and supports my work at developing a critical consciousness as an anti-oppressive teacher. The second section will reimagine and reframe a critical, anti-oppressive approach that uses this novel to support students in becoming active, critical readers.

Rousmaniere (2000) encourages educators to review and interpret memories in order to examine the context and politics behind the remembered events and use the memories to make sense of the present. The retrieval and reflection of memories can help educators understand how their professional practices and beliefs have been shaped by normative practices of the past. Consistent with the practice of self-study, autobiographical reflection, as Rousmaniere writes, can help turn life lessons into curricular development. The previous chapter looked into the context and politics behind my personal and academic history and this chapter will go from memory to curriculum by reviewing and interpreting one of my earlier attempts at using critical literacy with grade six students. This analysis will reveal the dominant discourses that I was reinforcing through my teaching and how I can use this critical consciousness to shift my teaching into a critical and anti-oppressive approach.

4.1 Western ideologies present in *The Breadwinner*

*The Breadwinner* is a young adult novel that tells the story of Parvana, a young girl living in Kabul, Afghanistan during the Taliban regime. Forbidden from earning
money because she is a girl, Parvana adopts the role of a boy in order to become the breadwinner for the family. *The Breadwinner* was promoted heavily post 9/11 as a text to support social justice issues surrounding Afghani people and in particular Afghani girls and women. According to Sensoy and Marshall (2010), *The Breadwinner* and other young adult novels with similar themes are often used as instructional resources and springboards to teach about the lives and experiences of Muslim girls and women:

> Each (novel) features a young heroine trapped in a violent Islamic context from which she must escape to save herself, her family, and other innocents in the region. The authors of these stories portray Muslim girls as haunted by a sad past, on the cusp of a (usually arranged) marriage, or impoverished and wishing for the freedoms that are often assigned to and embodied by the West (freedom, safety, prosperity, and education). (p. 297)

Texts like *The Breadwinner* and other narratives packaged and marketed for Western audiences tell a story of the Middle Eastern experience that follows a dominant narrative constructed in the West about Muslim girls, Islam and the Middle East. These novels construct a fascination with the “other” and reinforce the stereotype that the “other” is in need of being saved by the West and its solutions. Sensoy and Marshall believe that *The Breadwinner* exemplifies a “fascination in the West” with Afghani girls and women post-9/11 (p. 296). The consumption of this popular text as a teaching tool without critical analysis constructs the Muslim female as a fixed, oppressed figure. Sensoy and Marshall critique the discursive construction of Muslim girlhood in *The Breadwinner* and the ways in which that representation “positions ‘First World’ girls as the saviours or caretakers of the ‘Third World’ (read: brown/Muslim) girls” (p. 296). The colonial
discourse in this novel presents girls and women in the East as poor, uneducated, constrained and in need of rescue from those in the West. According to the authors, these books dilute the complexities and history of the Middle East and focus on the role of the West as saviours of Muslim girls and women. These texts work as “empowerment narratives” that rely on binary relationships between the West and the East to reinforce “girl power.” “Western girls,” according to Sensoy and Marshall, “perform as ‘good girls’ who participate in the patriarchal salvation of non-White oppressed women/girls” (2009, p. 302).

Muslim women and girls in *The Breadwinner* are repeatedly represented as veiled, nameless and silent which reinforces a stereotypical belief that the veil equals oppression. Sensoy and Marshall (2009) write, “The repeated images of veiled girls reinforce familiar, mainstream ideas about the confined existence of Muslim women and girls. This is the Muslim girl story we expect to read” (p. 1). The image of the veiled girl “reinforces existing ideas about their silence and suggests that we in the West (conceptualized as ‘free’ and ‘liberated’) need to help unveil and ‘give’ them voice. The images also invite ideas about girlhood innocence and vulnerability, and invite Western readers to protect, save, and speak for these oppressed girls” (p. 1). Razack (2008) addresses how the West sees the veiled woman as a marker of pre-modern thinking that justifies the need for rescue and emancipation by the West. Razack states, “Gender operates as a kind of technology of empire enabling the West to make the case for its own modernity and for its civilizational projects around the globe” (p. 18). The Western project to civilize Muslim women and rescue them from patriarchal violence does not provide much of an option for Muslim women because they are still being controlled and
managed through Western politics. Imposing Western values on Muslim women and girls only serves to cast them out of their own community and since they will never belong to Western society, they have nowhere to belong. This is why it is problematic and simplistic to use the veil as a marker of oppression. The use of this image in The Breadwinner reinforces a generalized stereotype and maintains the binaries that prop up the sense of superiority in the West, which is a lesson that our students learn very well.

The themes and images in The Breadwinner not only reinforce the perceived need of Western societies to protect oppressed women and girls, but also the desire to protect Western society and defend it from the “Islamic threat” (Razack, 2008). Razack writes, “Three allegorical figures have come to dominate the social landscape of the ‘war on terror’ and its ideological underpinning of a clash of civilizations: the dangerous Muslim man, the imperiled Muslim woman, and the civilized European, the latter a figure who is seldom explicitly named but who nevertheless anchors the first two figures” (p. 5).

According to Razack there are distinct binaries constructed to create camps that cast Muslims out of Western society:

There is a disturbing spatializing of morality that occurs in the story of pre-modern peoples versus modern ones. We have reason; they do not. We are located in modernity; they are not. Significantly, because they have not advanced as we have, it is our moral obligation to correct, discipline, and keep them in line and to defend ourselves against their irrational excesses. (p. 10)

This places the non-West in a zone outside of the law, a place where violence can be directed at “pre-modern” people without consequence. These discourses of people outside the law create a space where the suspension of rights and an increase of
surveillance and detention for Muslim-looking people are accepted. Texts like *The Breadwinner* reinforce this space within educational institutions by constructing Muslim people as someone to either save or fear. This marker as an outsider gives Muslim students little chance to be included within the community of learners.

In my grade six program, I used *The Breadwinner* as a main text for a social justice unit about peace and conflict. I understand now that without the critical consciousness that the above theory has provided me, I approached this book as an accurate and universal representation of the experiences of girls and women living in Afghanistan. This is also a reflection on the resources that are available at schools. I had limited knowledge and selection of texts to use for the peace and conflict unit. My lack of understanding and limited awareness of resources led to a misguided and perhaps harmful attempt at social justice.

I subscribed to the empowerment narrative in the text and promoted my students to take social action for the girls and women who were being oppressed by the Taliban. “Breaking Bread” potlucks and other fundraising efforts inspired by *The Breadwinner* prompted a wave of humanitarian efforts in schools to help less fortunate girls in Afghanistan. I believed that reading this book and participating in fundraising events helped my students and me feel socially empowered that we were part of a larger social movement making a difference for people in Afghanistan. Given my background of Christianity and the production of my identity as a good girl and saviour of the other it was easy for me to connect to this empowerment narrative. I was unaware however, that my feeling of empowerment was accomplished by reinforcing even further the binaries
of West/East, powerful/powerless, male/female, strong/weak, self/other—all in a single lesson plan.

It is also important to note that I taught the history of slavery in the United States and the holocaust as part of my social justice unit. Reflecting on this now, I acknowledge the significant absence and decontextualized relationship to a Canadian context, in particular the history of colonization and the numbered treaties in this province. As I have addressed in the previous chapter, my education had significant gaps in my exposure to First Nations, Métis and Inuit content and perspectives and I was ignorant about the history of treaties. Authentically integrating Aboriginal texts in my curriculum was not something that I had deemed a priority. Upon reflection and through the analysis of white privilege, I am now coming to the understanding that I was more conscious of the lack of inclusion than I let on. Leonardo (2009) suggests that a colour-blind discourse should not be confused with the idea that Whites lack racial knowledge. He writes, “Constructing Whites as knowledgeable about race has two advantages: one, it holds them self-accountable for race based decisions and actions; two, it dismantles their innocence in exchange for a status as full participants in raced relations” (pp. 231 - 232).

Discomfort of my lack of knowledge and fear of offending Aboriginal people played a significant role in the exclusion of Aboriginal content in my classroom. I had self-declared First Nations and Métis students in my class and I was worried that I might say or do something wrong that would offend them. I now realize that excluding Aboriginal texts and materials and ignoring Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews was a colour-blind approach to teaching that supported oppressive systems of privilege and denial.
The irony is that I taught *The Breadwinner* as part of a two month “Social Justice Unit.” Kumashiro (2001) acknowledges that working to bring about change can be labor intensive and may need to be a year-round process, not isolated in rare moments or in a one-off unit as I attempted. I believe the deeper reason for me to teach social justice as an isolated unit was because it was more comfortable to engage in this work for a short amount of time. When the unit was over, we were able to release from the tension, discord and disruption that it presented and move on with our “normal” lives. Kumashiro writes, “Anti-oppressive education is not an easy, rational, straightforward process, and pretending otherwise can actually contribute to additional forms of oppression” (p. 8).

Using *The Breadwinner* as an isolated resource within a decontextualized learning experience promoted and maintained dominant ideologies and did not attempt to challenge them. Our two months of social justice reinforced the misconception that we as a people in the West are removed from oppressive experiences and that social justice and anti-oppression is something that can be turned on and off at our convenience.

I treated this text as a universal story of the Afghani experience and took a “soft” liberal, multicultural approach that skirted around deeper issues such as colonialism and the impact of Western involvement in the Middle East. I searched for comfortable ways to approach this topic and as a result, my students gained a distorted view of Afghanistan and of the West. We read the text uncritically with very little effort or awareness to challenge racist and imperialistic prejudices. The critical consciousness that I have developed from my analysis of *The Breadwinner* provides me with a foundation to analyze the texts I use in my program for bias and prejudice and to use these texts as opportunities to challenge norms and status quo. Foss (2002) believes that critical
literacy is like peeling an onion: “As texts and readers embody multiple layers, we work
to peel away the various levels of meaning of books while recognizing and exploring the
ways in which a single person approaches a text from different identities based on race,
etnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality and religion” (p. 394). These “onion texts”
provide the space for multiple readings that provide different experiences and questions.
Texts like The Breadwinner can provide opportunities to challenge common Western
stereotypes and ideologies that are universalized in texts. Teachers need to ask critical
questions that challenge assumptions and pedagogical purposes when taking up
oppressed Muslim girl stories. Questioning depictions of characters, facts about the
accuracy of historical information, background about the author, and the target audience
can serve to reveal dominant ideologies as well as perspectives and history that may be
missing from a text. The challenge to doing this work is that there isn’t a set of rules or
pre-scripted approaches to critical literacy. Instead, it will be useful to focus on an
approach that supports students to develop their own critical consciousness and critical
reading strategies.

4.2 An approach for critical literacy and anti-oppressive teaching

The sections that follow fulfill the expectations of self-study by explaining how
my exploration of self has led me to transform my pedagogy. Identifying approaches to
critical literacy and anti-oppressive teaching provides me with a foundation to enhance
my practice as a critical, anti-oppressive educator. By understanding my practice and my
self more fully, I am able to draw myself away from my cognitive default and into an
ideology and approach that is more closely connected to critical literacy.
The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education English Language Arts 6 Curriculum (2008) suggests that an effective English Language Arts program provides meaningful contexts for students to learn about their connections to others and become engaged citizens through inquiry, questioning and efficacy. Inquiry learning, according to the curriculum, “provides students with opportunities to build knowledge, abilities, and inquiring habits of mind that lead to deeper understanding of their world and human experience” (p. 16). The challenge with this statement is that without my own critical consciousness as a teacher, the deeper understanding expected from my students may still be rooted in Western ideologies and the status quo. Inquiring into this novel using the critical theory provided in this chapter can guide students to develop their own critical consciousness to resist dominant perspectives and Western ideologies that are part of how the text is written and read.

Critical questions and conversations that encourage students to read texts in multiple anti-oppressive ways are central to this work (Kumashiro, 2001; Foss, 2002). This approach supports students to develop strategies that allow them to explore the text in critical ways. Students can learn to read for silences and reflect on the meaning of those silences as well as examining why they read in certain ways and where they feel resistance. This does not limit learning to what is said in the text but rather that there can be multiple readings of every text. This work helps students understand that reading is a socially constructed experience that is influenced by multiple subject positions such as race, gender and privilege.

Elements such as the aesthetic work, the artist and the reader must also be considered in the critical process (Mission and Morgan, 2006). When I took up the novel
with my students, I only focused on the reader and neglected to consider the role of the artist and the aesthetic work. I took up the novel through a Reader Response approach and focused on having my students make personal connections to the text. This approach overlooked the ideologies that are tied up within personal and aesthetic connections. Mellor and Patterson (2007) criticize Reader Response because personal responses can be rooted in dominant ideologies and can block analysis of how texts are produced. It may also not offer anything outside of the readers’ own ideological assumptions or previous aesthetic experiences with texts. Kumashiro (2001) critiques that students are only able to produce partial understandings when their responses are based only on who they are or what they know and this promotes repetition and comfort for both the student and the teacher. What came out of my students’ Reader Responses was very similar to what Sensoy and Marshall (2010) discovered from their students’ responses to The Breadwinner. Students were well versed in mainstream discourses and their knowledge about the Middle East was primarily connected to media coverage of 9/11. Their responses contrasted the Afghani experience to the Western experience perpetuating a sense of pity for Afghani women.

The role of the teacher in this critical process is supporting students to break the cycle of traditional reading practices and address the ways that we read in order to maintain our sense of self. Kumashiro (2001) writes, “We can help readers overcome their desire to read in traditional ways and be open to reading in ways that bring about change” (p. 8). There must be a shift from learning in a representative way, where information is repeated or retold, to a performative enactment where there is a process that brings about change in the learner. I will model this process for students by
demonstrating a non-traditional reading of *The Breadwinner* that focuses on identifying Western ideologies that are present in the text. The goal is to model this process for students so that they become more familiar and comfortable with the process and transfer a critical consciousness to their independent reading practice. This kind of teaching is not facilitative. Instead, as Mission and Morgan address, it “unashamedly intervenes in students’ reading and writing, it interferes with texts, and it aims at times to interrupt the ‘natural’ (that is naturalised) processes of engagement and response” (2006, p. 177). The work of intervening, interfering and interrupting is not linear but something that is always happening through the analysis and reflection process. The reimagined teaching of *The Breadwinner* that follows attempts to interrupt a positivist and student centered approach by shifting to a critical and poststructural orientation that involves asking critical questions that challenge Western ideologies and stereotypes and supports students to learn to read in an anti-oppressive way. This reimagining will focus primarily on framing critical questions about *The Breadwinner* and providing students with strategies that challenge and resist a dominant reading of the text.

The following description is not intended to be a prescription but a consideration of questions and approaches that I will employ. Critical reflection often occurs as the response to students’ questions and there are many unpredictable teaching moments that will occur therefore it is unlikely that all lines of inquiry that follow will be used every time I study the text with students. The age and maturity of the student must also be considered and the depth of the critical process must remain age appropriate.

Note that the topic of ability and disability is not taken up in this research, and the critical approach that follows does not describe the differentiation that some students
would require in order to engage in this critical work. There are many ways students can learn to understand and “read” power such as through the use of visual texts, music, poetry, dance and drama. A fuller account of literacy would take into account the ways that students of all abilities can learn to read, if not interfere with, power and oppression. For the purposes of this paper and since *The Breadwinner* is the focus, reading a text is part of the critical process.

4.3 Reimagining teaching *The Breadwinner*

To study *The Breadwinner*, I will employ a before reading, during reading and after reading process that provides questions for deeper understanding, strategies that support the students to answer the questions provided and explorations that encourage students to extend their learning beyond the novel to synthesize and apply their learning. Ironically, the before, during and after reading process is a normative discourse rooted in the positivist perspective of “best practice” that defaults to a cognitive, positivist approach to teaching reading, an approach that I am attempting to disrupt. It is my hope that the application of poststructural and critical theory will disrupt the linearity of this normative discourse and support students to challenge the way people, places and events are depicted in the novel and emphasize that reading is a social practice. Questions can be framed so that students critically analyze what the text says about race, gender, patriarchy and colonialism. Within this process, students will be supported to read for the things that are not said and identify the gaps and silences by working through questions and activities that stimulate discussion and critical thought around the themes and ideologies that are present in *The Breadwinner*. 
1. Before Reading.

Prior to reading the novel, students will activate and challenge their existing knowledge about Afghanistan and Middle Eastern Countries as well as Muslim girls and women. Questions about the context of the text such as the role of the author, geography of the land, and the history of the conflict in Afghanistan can reveal students’ understanding of the text and this can be useful to determine the level of critical consciousness that students already have as well as biases that may be present. This questioning prepares students to critically explore and examine representations that are found in The Breadwinner and begins the process of interrupting the production of the racial other and the empowerment narrative by identifying what students know or don’t know about the context of the novel. Possible questions and extension activities that guide thinking about historical, cultural, political and geographical context are:

- What facts and history do you know about Afghanistan and the Middle East? How did you come to know about Afghanistan and the Middle East and where did you get your information?
- What do you know about the geography of Afghanistan? What countries are close to Afghanistan?
- What do you know about the events of 9/11? What do you know about the Taliban?
- Locate Afghanistan on a world map and identify the other countries that are around it. What do you know about the other countries around Afghanistan?

Investigating the role of the author supports students to think about the ways that authors produce texts and why. Learning about Deborah Ellis and her purpose for writing
the book can provide a context for students that reveal the positions of the author and her view of the world. Prior to reading the novel, students will explore who Deborah Ellis is and other books she has written. Ellis, an anti-war activist and advocate for women’s rights, went to an Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan and recorded the stories of the women in the camps. The stories from the women became the premise for *The Breadwinner*. The royalties from the sale of her books go to organizations to support women and children in war-torn countries (Bethune, 2012). It cannot be denied that Ellis is a strong advocate for women and girls and has put the spotlight on relevant issues about oppression but it is important to note that the background she comes from is removed from the reality of the women that she writes about. Her legitimacy and authority should be considered when discussing this novel. Possible questions to guide thinking about the author and her purpose are:

- How does Ellis legitimize herself as an expert?
- What might be Ellis’ motivation for writing *The Breadwinner*?
- Who is she speaking to and for?

Examining the form and content of the text will also begin to interrupt the discourses and ideologies that are embedded in the text. An examination of the various features of the book such as the description on the back, author’s note, dedication, map, glossary and reviews will provide a glimpse into how the book is marketed and what readers are being targeted. Possible questions to guide thinking about text features and their role are:

- Who is the intended audience?
- How is the Muslim girl visually depicted on the cover?
Anticipating some of the binaries and ideologies that are present in the text will support students in the development of their critical reading skills. Discussion prior to reading the novel will prompt students to consider the ways that binaries and ideologies are produced in society. Critical questions can be useful to introduce concepts of patriarchy, heterosexism and meritocracy that are present in the novel. Students can be introduced to binaries that construct images of the threatening Muslim male and the oppressed Muslim woman by looking at discourses that construct these binaries. A discussion of the ways that texts reinforce the binary of good versus evil and saved versus oppressed reveals how readers are led to place people in a specific category of either/or. In The Breadwinner, Ellis explicitly reinforces the binary of good versus evil: “Up until then, (Parvana) had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings?” (p. 80). The image of the oppressed Muslim woman is reinforced in the novel through the representation of the veil. Wearing a veil is only ever described as a burden and something shameful that needs to be shed. Parvana’s older sister says, “As soon as I get out of Taliban territory, I’m going to throw off my burqa and tear it into a million pieces” (p. 139). These examples do not show any shades of grey and this is why it is important for readers to be aware of the ways that discourse can manipulate a dominant reading of a text. Discussing the ways that texts produce and reproduce partial knowledges through the construction of
binaries prepares students to resist this by reading in critical ways. Possible questions to guide pre-thinking about ideologies present in the text are:

- What does it mean to be a breadwinner? Why is it such an important role?
- Who is typically a breadwinner? Who is the breadwinner in your family and why would he/she be considered this?
- What roles in society are considered most important?
- Who is to be feared and who is to be trusted in society?
- Who can be a hero? What makes a hero?
- How are women controlled in a Western society? How are women silenced?
- What does the book tell us about who a breadwinner can be? Do you believe this is true?

2. During Reading.

While reading *The Breadwinner* students will have many opportunities to explore and articulate the ideologies that are present in the text as well as their own ideologies that impact their interpretation of the text (First Steps, 2008). Supporting students to identify places they feel resistance when they read is also part of the critical process. Readers can highlight places in *The Breadwinner* where they make a personal or aesthetic connection and go beyond that connection to analyze how it impacts the reading of the text. Mission and Morgan (2006) write, “Reading aesthetic texts is a personal thing, but the personal is not divorced from the social: it is largely constructed by it” (p. 67). Students should be aware of how they have learned to read in a particular way and how their emotional responses take up the text to construct that view and perspective of the world.
During the reading of the text, I will model my own critical consciousness by using the think aloud teaching strategy and sharing my critical thinking process with students while reading parts of the text. In my previous instruction of this novel, I modeled the Reader’s Response model for my students and focused only on my aesthetic reactions to the text, thus failing to demonstrate the shifting of my thinking to a critical stance. Mission and Morgan believe that teachers point to features that they find admirable in the text to present to students. While this may help to model aesthetic engagement, it does run the risk of reproducing colonized reading. My students’ responses were most likely impacted by my sharing of what I thought were the admirable points. Mission and Morgan write, “Teachers’ demonstrations need not lead to a premature packaging or to the imposition of a single reading. Teachers can model and promote a range of plausible readings en route and can keep them in play provisionally” (p. 182). While reading the novel I will model resistant reading that is required for critical thought and deeper understanding. I will also provide students with prompts and reading strategies to support their development as critically conscious readers. The modeling process will provide the scaffold that students need to take on the responsibility to read critically on their own. The following activities are guidelines to support the critical process and will gradually release responsibility to the students based on their maturity and readiness. Possible reading opportunities to model and support the critical thinking process are:

- Deconstruct and analyze the text to uncover themes and ideologies:
  - List adverbs and adjectives used to construct the characters in the story.
    How does the language in the text promote differences between characters
(i.e. East versus West, civilized versus uncivilized, male versus female, etc.)? How does the language invoke the readers’ emotions about the characters? (First Steps, 2008, p. 280)

- Identify places where Western values and virtues are promoted in the novel (i.e. value of education, being able to read and write, meritocracy, heroism, etc.). What does this say about the point of view that is being shared in this text? What assumptions are made about values in this text?
- Deconstruct the characters in the text and analyze the way the author has represented the characters. Collect key words and phrases that describe the characters’ age, gender, cultural group, appearance, clothing, thoughts, feelings and actions. Do these descriptions apply to all Afghani people? Is it fair to portray all Afghani people in this way? How else could the characters have been portrayed? (First Steps, 2008, p. 229)

• Compare and contrast photos from Afghanistan to the imagery presented in the novel. Draw attention to differences and similarities between the images and the text. How do the images shape your impression of Afghanistan?

• Consider multiple readings of the text by having students share individual reflections and interpretations and analyzing the different opinions, reactions and opinions to the text.
  - What are some similarities or differences between the characters in the text and yourself?
  - Has anything similar to what happens in the text happened to you?
  - How do you think the main character should solve the problem?
o What is your favourite scene? Why?

o What is unclear or puzzling about the story? (First Steps, 2008, p. 169)

• Have students record the emotions they feel as they read the text. Encourage students to explain their feelings with reference to the text and highlight similarities and differences that individual readers have to the same piece of text. (First Steps, 2008, p. 222)

• Provide opportunities to discuss, question and challenge Deborah Ellis’ point of view. Adapt or change parts of the text (the characters, character traits, setting, time period, etc.) to consider the impact the changes may make on the themes that are present in the text.

During the reading process, it is important for students to be aware of how texts are constructed and produced (Mellor & Patterson, 2004). Students should be aware that reading a text in a particular time or particular place shapes the interpretation of the text. It is also important for students to identify places in the text where new information has been gained and how that information has shaped their understanding of the context. Charting the historical events in the novel is useful to critically analyze The Breadwinner by confirming the accuracy of the information presented in the text and looking at alternative perspectives. Possible questions and extension activities to guide thinking about the context of the novel are:

• How did the events of 9/11 affect the reading of The Breadwinner?

• How does the threat of ISIS affect the reading of the text in 2015?

• Which parts of the novel are you absolutely certain are true? How do you know? Where did you learn this information?
• Research information about Afghanistan in the present day. What is the same and different from how Afghanistan is portrayed in the text?

• Create a visual timeline of the events that are referred to in the novel and compare this to additional sources of information that can serve to confirm the accuracy of the information and add alternative perspectives.

3. After Reading.

Providing opportunities to extend learning after reading the novel supports students to synthesize and apply the critical process to new reading experiences. Comparing The Breadwinner to additional aesthetic works that illuminate other lives, histories and perspectives of Afghani people is important to resist a universal story of the Afghani experience. Sensoy and Marshall (2009) ask: “Whose story is missing? Whose story is this? Whose stories are not here, and where might we go to learn about their stories?” (p. 3). Reading The Breadwinner in isolation results in the telling of a single story of the Afghani experience. Mission and Morgan present the teaching idea of “Juxtaposing Texts” to make it possible to “trace the specifics of the ‘conversations’ each text has with the culture within which it was produced and the influence that has on the specific satisfactions the text offers” (p. 193). They suggest selecting texts from different historical or cultural contexts as well as texts whose discourses and ideologies are in some way equivalent and having students look at how they are or are not similar. This would be an opportunity to investigate the role and effect of colonization and how the colonization in The Breadwinner is similar or different to colonization in other countries and in particular Canada. Oppressive strategies and structures such as the Indian Act and Residential Schools can be connected to the oppressive regime of the Taliban. Students
can also juxtapose other dominate approaches by reading texts that address issues such as human rights violations around the world, gender equality, and LGBTQ rights. This inquiry can disrupt misconceptions that Canada does not have a history of oppression and can help students become aware of power and privilege and how it is controlled in multiple contexts including in Canada.

It is also necessary that the learning go beyond investigating the exploitation of the other to a critique of our own way of living in the West. How does a text like The Breadwinner confirm Western ideologies and practices as superior? Critical literacy practices can help students understand the norms of racism, sexism and homophobia in the West and develop their own self-consciousness in light of other peoples in the world. A critical understanding of the ways readers are influenced by multiple subject positions and how we read to maintain our sense of self is part of the critical analysis necessary to dismantle systems of inequity. For example, the maintenance of male dominance and gender stereotypes is just as prevalent in the West as in the East and students need to understand how texts continue to reinforce this inequity. In The Breadwinner the girls and women only achieve success either in the care of a male or by taking on the role of a male. When Parvana embodies the identity of a boy her mother tells her that no one will stop her (Ellis, p. 63). As she transforms, Parvana begins to like the change and feels like a different person. She likes her short hair and the fact that she has pockets in her clothes. As a girl, Parvana tries to be invisible and now as a boy she has courage and confidence. Ellis writes of Parvana’s transformation, “…with her face open to the sunshine, she was invisible in another way. She was just one more boy on the street… I’m a boy, she kept saying to herself. It gave her courage” (pp. 70 -71). This is a literal reference to the
invisible and unearned privileges that are afforded to all males even in the West. Looking for other examples in texts that reinforce male dominance is one way to challenge students to resist traditional reading practices that continue to reinforce Western hegemonic assumptions. The necessity of this critique arises because the inaccurate portrayal of the other also serves to take the focus off the problematic nature of the present context in a Western society. Studying *The Breadwinner* without relating to a current Western context reinforces the misconception that the West is innocent of oppression and domination. Students can use this text to examine and identify oppression in their everyday lives in order to confront and dismantle systems of domination.

Students can apply the critical thinking skills modeled while studying *The Breadwinner* to investigate issues, questions or challenges in the new texts that they read. Kumashiro (2004) writes, “in addition to changing what students read, educators are also changing how students read. It is not enough to expose students to a wider variety of literacy if students continue to interpret or analyze the literature as has traditionally been done. Students need to be asking very different kinds of questions about whatever it is that they are reading” (p. 62). I will provide opportunities for students to apply the critical questions and reading strategies practiced while reading *The Breadwinner* to new texts so that students can continue to examine how they read and how this influences their understandings and interpretations of text.

4.5 *The challenge of a pedagogical shift*

Supporting students to read critically can be a difficult process for them but perhaps, more so, for teachers therefore is important to address the investment and support that will be required to move forward with anti-oppressive education. This means
a shift from the traditional role of the teacher as transmitter of knowledge to being a teacher that is constantly “looking beyond” what it is to teach and learn (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 6). According to Kumashiro, working through crisis and unknowability is essential in anti-oppressive education:

Recognizing unknowability requires departing from a rigid adherence to the traditional model of teaching in which teachers think in terms of what they wish to achieve (i.e., the objective), what they will do to achieve their objectives (i.e., the activities, and what will tell them how well they have achieved their objectives (i.e., the assessments). This is not to say that such a format should be abandoned, but lesson plans need space for the unpredictable and uncontrollable things that always get in the way of knowing our students and achieving our objectives. (p. 10)

Kumashiro suggests learning to tailor lessons to recognize the individualities of students as well as the partialities of their knowledges. I would also argue that it is important for the teacher to also recognize the partiality of his or her own knowledge. He also reminds teachers that reflecting on lessons should go beyond asking what worked in the lesson to asking questions like, “What did this lesson make possible and impossible? In what ways did it enable repetition, crisis, change, and so forth?” (p. 10). The unknowablity and uncertainty that is part of this work is not a bad thing. It pushes against the positivist notion of right and wrong and teaches students to recognize and honour multiple perspectives. This helps students prepare for the discomfort that comes with negotiating through the real world of ambiguity. Discomfort and uncertainty in this context is
something to be accepted and not feared and teaches students to use a wider basis for making decisions.

Vibert and Shields (2003) provide questions that help to interrogate practice. They contend that the role of the teacher in provoking a critical re-thinking involves explicitly confronting political issues that asks, “In whose interests is this account of things?” They write, “such a curriculum introduces the impolite (in the sense of uncomfortable) into public discourse, so that within a critical pedagogy, ‘respect’ means more than listening to others and responding politely. It comes to mean dealing with difficult and sensitive issues openly and compassionately” (p. 235). Questions like these are foundational for constantly troubling my practice. These are the things that I need to think about everyday as I am planning. They remind me that there is no perfect way to go about this work and that being an anti-oppressive educator will always be an evolving process.
CHAPTER 5: A CONCLUSION WITHOUT END

5.1 The learning

The purpose of this self-study has been to interrogate my position as a white, female, Christian, middle-class educator and use this exploration to enhance and refine my identity as a critical, anti-oppressive teacher. I have come to the understanding that my goal to use critical literacy as a tool for social action is not effective without the critical work of revealing privilege and identifying the normative centre and my position within. The tension between my constructed self and the role of anti-oppressive teacher is in constant flux and without the understanding and analysis of the role that privilege, race, gender and Christianity play in the construction of my identity, my attempts at anti-oppressive pedagogy have been misguided and even harmful. My confidence in taking on the role of a critical, anti-oppressive teacher is increasing but there are still moments when it seems easier to retreat back into the normative centre to avoid the tension and resistance that occurs in the contact zone.

The research approach of self-study has enabled me to explore and analyze how dominant ideologies and hegemonic assumptions are influential in the production of my identity as a white, Christian, middle-class female. The reflection on one of my attempts at critical literacy reveals how dominant ideologies are reproduced in my teaching practice and how a critical, poststructural approach can disrupt this.

What this research has accomplished is an understanding of how dominant practices push against a critical orientation and how difficult it is to move out of a deeply rooted positivist, rational lens. I have been able to explore critical, poststructural teaching approaches that encourage students to challenge binaries, sexism, racism and colonial
practices by reading in non-traditional ways. I have also come to the understanding that there is no correct answer or conclusion to this work and this is difficult because it goes against the default in education that seeks truths and specific procedures and solutions to educational inquiries. This work is ongoing and never finished because systemic, dominant discourses will continue to be reproduced. Critical literacy with poststructural theory supports students and myself to challenge dominant norms and push through traditional approaches to move to a critical orientation.

Becoming an anti-oppressive activist in the current education system poses significant challenges. This work is constrained by the values and “truths” that are systemic in public education. Cherland and Harper agree that “discourses of truth demand deconstruction” (p. 221) yet the barriers seem insurmountable when attempting to interrupt and disrupt a system that is constructed to protect the status quo. They write, “The status quo is not acceptable to those who advocate, because the status quo disadvantages the other, and causes the suffering of the other” (p. 222). Anti-oppressive education has the transformative and emancipatory potential to challenge ideologies that are so heavily protected.

Understanding the ideologies that are present in pedagogies has been a significant learning for me. The ideological lens that I work within does matter to how and whether I move forward as an anti-oppressive teacher. Through the work of Vibert and Shields (2003) and Cherland and Harper (2007) I have been able to critique my pedagogy through the lens of different ideological beliefs and determine where I feel most comfort and resistance. I can see that the status quo of the education system most often falls within the safety, comfort and control of the rational/technical, positivist lens that I have
to work to resist. Kumashiro (2004) questions what would happen if teachers placed a priority on examining why we feel comfortable with only certain kinds of teaching. He writes, “learning to teach toward social justice involves constantly engaging with the things that make whatever we are doing uncomfortable and queer” (p. 46). My attempts at critical literacy were rooted in an interpretive/student centered approach but I now understand that this does not go far enough to do the critical work that I am attempting.

Anti-oppressive teaching falls within the critical/transformative and poststructural/deconstructive lens.

What comes in direct contact with the critical/transformative and poststructural lens is the social construction of my identity as a white, Christian female. As I have explored throughout this paper, the conserving role that I have played as the “good girl” conflicts with the critical orientation that is required to do anti-oppressive work. I understand now that I must unlearn what I have believed to be the identity of a “good girl” and shift what this means to work against privilege and inequality. Kumashiro acknowledges that this shift is difficult:

Challenging oppression requires more than simply becoming aware of oppression, and this is because people are often invested in the status quo, as when people desire repeating what has become normalized in our lives. Change requires a willingness to step outside the comfort zone. And for those who are favored by or benefit from the status quo, change may be even more difficult since it requires interrupting one’s own privilege. (p. 46)

When considering the benefits and investment I have within the status quo there is a sense of crisis and loss when I attempt to interrupt my privilege. As I work through this, I
am developing an awareness of where I feel tension and resistance. It has even come across in my writing through this process. I can identify places of resistance in my writing, in particular in my writing about Christian privilege, in the very word choices where I would shift from an active to a passive writing stance.

It is also important to be aware of the potential for whiteness to recenter itself through this work. Doing anti-oppressive work does not make me a “better” white person. The temptation of enacting “goodness” by using anti-racist pedagogy runs the risk of becoming a new form of white supremacy. It is critical that I continue to trouble this position in order to resist the feeling that the work is complete or that I am different from other white people. Continuing to unlearn and relearn my identity as a critical, anti-oppressive educator limits the potential for anti-oppressive education to become a new form of dominant discourse.

In adding the poststructural lens to critical literacy I have gained a different perspective and approach to my work of becoming an anti-oppressive teacher. The poststructural view that all knowledges are partial, shifting and always in flux is challenging and destabilizing yet I am coming to understand the power of how this view can be useful to deconstruct truths, interrupt the status quo and disrupt dominant discourse (Cherland & Harper, 2007). A poststructural orientation is becoming more embedded in my practice and this has helped me understand the importance of shifting critical literacy from what we read to how we read. Confronting the subjectivities or “truths” that construct our understandings of texts is crucial in critical literacy. Kumashiro (2004) writes that examining literature “involves learning the literature and interpretations that matter in society. And it involves reflecting on how we as readers use
different lenses to read and how those lenses make possible only certain understandings, emotions and changes” (p. 66). According to Cherland and Harper (2007) advocacy researchers see discourses of truth as an “integral feature of the power relations that marginalize and oppress, and that must constantly be assessed as strategies of control and domination” (p. 221). An approach to critical literacy that includes a poststructural orientation supports the work of deconstruction that is necessary for social action.

My critical orientation no longer stands alone and is something that has embedded itself in my daily life. I can no longer go back to the same place of ignorance and I understand that this orientation will always be in a state of flux. As a teacher, not having all the answers and not being in control is a challenging position to place myself in. It is also challenging to know how to work within this flux when it is not part of the norm. Colleagues, parents, friends and family that do not have background knowledge of anti-racism may resist as I continue to push forward. There are risks and consequences to doing this work that may even result in being cast out of the normative centre. I must also work to avoid the pitfalls of what I call “soapboxes and silences.” There is a risk of getting up on a soapbox and speaking for the oppressed just as there is a danger in staying silent when oppression should be disrupted. Cherland and Harper (2007) acknowledge the danger of speaking on behalf of the oppressed:

Researchers who live in privilege must not speak “for” others who are poor and marginalized, without writing themselves (and the racial and economic structures that sustain their lives of privilege) into the text. Researchers who “care” must ask themselves how to “see” and to speak about what they see. (p. 224)
The consequences of critically confronting oppression both in the educational system and in society are uncertain and being comfortable to work within this crisis and destabilization is something that will continue to challenge me.

5.2 Challenges of the study

One of the challenges with this research is that people placed within the dominant norm may not be able to see themselves within this study and may be resistant to the deconstruction of long held beliefs and practices. This may limit the audience and engagement with this research. My own resistance is part of the boundaries of this research as well. Because I have a place within the dominant norm, I am afforded the privilege to choose what to research and how far I will go to confront dominance and oppression and my role in this. Fear of retribution from my family, friends and community and the loss of my sense of self as I have explored throughout this paper may have unknowingly limited the depth of my reflection.

The desire in education to find the “right” ways to do things is also part of the challenges of this research. The exploration of a critical, poststructural teaching approach using *The Breadwinner* runs the risk that teachers see this as a recipe of how to “do” critical literacy. Studying a text in isolation also has the potential to place the text outside of the racism, sexism and colonization that occurs in the present Western context. Throughout my research I have worked to resist the default of a positivist lens that seeks answers and truths of how to do this work. I have also tried to show that using *The Breadwinner* is only one part of a scaffold of supports for students to have conversations about oppression and domination on a daily basis and within multiple contexts. Opportunities must be provided for all students to engage in critical work and the
emphasis must go beyond the teaching of the novel to providing spaces, based on student readiness and ability, to participate in daily, ongoing critical conversations that continually expose and push against the dominant norms in society.

5.3 Recommendations for further study

I can confront the challenges of this study by engaging in further learning and creating opportunities to share my research with others. My current role within the education system allows me to work directly with teachers. As part of my commitment to anti-oppressive education, I will extend my research to the context of teacher professional development. I have already embedded anti-racist theories and critical, poststructural approaches into the professional development sessions I provide. I would like to engage senior leaders and administrators in my research as well.

This is not work that I can do alone. I will seek out allies and other educators with a critical, anti-oppressive lens to expand the circle of people who are working towards equality. Expanding the circle will strengthen everyone’s voices as advocates and activists.

Continued study in the area of anti-racist education and becoming an ally to oppressed people will support my work as a critical, anti-oppressive teacher. In the context of Aboriginal education, St. Denis (2007) identifies critical anti-racist education as a way to “provide a foundation to forge alliances between diverse Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in a common search for social justice in education” (p. 1070). Anti-racist pedagogy and critical race analysis can help me further understand the identity politics and effects of colonization as well as other forms of oppression and how this plays out in the education system.
The work of becoming an ally enacts solidarity between the oppressed and the oppressor in order to challenge inequity. Allies learn about oppression and recognize their role as oppressors and they use this knowledge to understand how this is normalized in society in order to challenge and disrupt it. Allies recognize and take responsibility to use their unearned privilege to change oppressive patterns. The research of Anne Bishop (2002) and Verna St. Denis (2007) is a starting place for this work.

5.3 Expanding the normative circle

My son was three when I began this journey of awareness, inquiry and exploration. He is now eight years old. My awareness of the unearned privilege that he holds as a white, Christian, male shows me how critical it is to help him understand the effects of his social positioning and the challenges of confronting and destabilizing unequal power relations. Moon (1999) challenges whitewomen to take on the moral and ethical responsibility to place the abolition of white supremacy at the forefront; this challenge confronts me as a mother on a daily basis. She writes, “As primary socialization agents of white children, whitewomen can build ‘home’ as antihegemonic spaces in which engagement with the movement against white supremacy is made a cultural norm” (p. 196). I have already begun the work to ensure that my son is aware of his unearned privilege and that he can use this privilege to push against the status quo. He will likely face challenges and resistance but I am committed to support him through the tension and discomfort that this may cause in his life.

I began this paper with a story about gender norms that influenced my son at a young age. That day in the “pink aisle” made me realize how critical it is for me to talk regularly to him about the hegemonic assumptions in a Western society. Discussions
about gender norms and stereotypes have become part of our daily lives and this has expanded to confront other areas of social injustice such as poverty, racism and homophobia. Five years later, I have another story to tell. There is a boy in my son’s class who loves Strawberry Shortcake. The teacher told me that the class was asked to pick a movie to watch over the lunch hour and this boy picked Strawberry Shortcake. The other students, both boys and girls, began to make fun of the boy for his choice. My son stood up in support of the boy and agreed to watch Strawberry Shortcake and encouraged his classmates to go along with the choice. The teacher was amazed that the class consented and in the end enjoyed watching the movie. It was a simple act but I know it made a difference. The boy now had an ally and the class was allowed to bypass stereotypes and gender normativity, at least for the moment. I am in awe at what I consider my son’s courage and bravery and, considering his age, what may be his less than complete familiarity with constructed and oppressive norms. I hope that he will continue to learn alternate discourses that will make it normal for him to question and resist injustice and inequity. He is my inspiration to do the same every day.
References


Bethune, B. (2012). A Breadwinner for Afghan women: Author Deborah Ellis has given more than $1 million in royalties to charity. *Maclean’s Magazine*, September 17, 80.


