

## Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

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# Have No Fear! White Ladies are Here!: Interrogating the Image and Institutionalization of White Womanhood in the Classroom

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## **Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities**

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# Have No Fear! White Ladies are Here!:

## Interrogating the Image and Institutionalization of White Womanhood in the Classroom

By Sophie Nadler

We find ourselves sitting in this large auditorium of a high school. It is a high school with its own name and story, but to some extent it feels just like mine. Hallways lined with lockers and bulletin boards. Linoleum speckled floors and an auditorium filled with worn out seats, just like the seats I used to sit in. It feels like my auditorium, my seats. This feeling of nostalgia mixes with empowerment in the air. This isn't just any high school assembly. The students are teachers and the teachers are students in this space. The question: "Education is \_\_\_\_\_" People stand up and describe a world where their education looks and feels as it should be. "Education is acknowledging indigenous histories." "Education is feeling supported." "Education looks like me."

"Education looks like me." My education does look like me, but that is not the case for everyone. I can count the number of teachers on one hand who had identities different from my own in my K-12 education. I sit there and think about that and how I am complicit in that truth. Is it my fault? Should I not be a teacher? Why do I even want to be a teacher? What does my whiteness mean in my pursuit of an educational career? I ask these questions everyday, but today, they are louder than usual.

As I run these queries through my head and I settle into my confusion, doubt, and growth, someone stands up near the front, microphone in hand and states "I am sick of all these people coming from the suburbs to come and 'save us.' We don't need you." As I let that comment sink in, untangling what that statement means for them, what it means for me, a white woman behind me turns to her friends and says under her breath, "It's not my fault I'm from Edina."

At first, I'm furious. How dare this person take something honest and brave said in a safe space for dreams and frustrations and turn it into something else! It was not meant to hurt, but instead bolster and empower! How could this woman twist something like that? As I sat in this anger, I began to ask more questions. Why did this comment hurt her feelings? Why did she feel the need to make this comment? And why, underneath it all, do I understand where she's coming from?

In this moment, I was already knee deep in researching for the original version of this project. I had settled on white women in the classroom as my focus, but I felt a lack of direction. Why does this matter? Who cares if we only have white women teaching? Even once I

was finished with the paper, sent it in, and got the grade back, I asked “Who cares? So what?” Connecting this interaction, almost an entire year later, to what I was studying answered that question for me. I knew the facts that there is a pattern in the education field where white women from the middle class come into urban spaces to teach populations that do not look like the classrooms that they grew up in. However, why has this pattern developed and why do we not question it? What about the conceptions surround white womanhood in the American imagination that cause and perpetuate the idea that the white woman is best suited for the classroom? Furthermore, how is this image created and reflected in our society? And lastly, why should we care?

In this paper, I explore what this image of white womanhood is and how that has influenced our perceptions of teachers and teaching. Through this exploration, I argue that the American ideology surrounding white womanhood has come to define what we think of as a good teacher. The teacher and the white woman have almost become synonymous in the American psyche, which has led to a “natural” pipeline for white women into the teaching field. What begins as a feeling of belonging, supported by American ideology and cultural discourse, is then institutionalized to perpetuate this pattern further. Ultimately, I believe that this is a negative cycle that does a disservice to the teaching field, students, and our larger educational system.

## Methodology

To explore the process or “pipeline” that I have argued is present, I will first explore the discourse that acts as the groundwork for this argument. This discourse spans from thought from the late 18th century up until quite recently, highlighting how pervasive these ideologies have been in American society. Two important features in this section are the defining of the white woman and white womanhood in the American imagination and how that has persisted today, specifically by examining films featuring white women as teachers. The movies I will be examining are *Freedom Writers* and *Music of the Heart*. Both films feature famous white actresses, including Hilary Swank and Meryl Streep, respectively, entering underserved communities to teach. I foreground these films with historical discourse to show how these ideas are presented in films and confirmed in contemporary research are part of a larger context that affects the everyday experience of centering a white woman in the classroom. My interdisciplinary approach illustrates the extent to which these images permeate our reality, highlighting the toxicity of their prevalence on screen. From this historical and cultural groundwork, I will examine how this discourse has been institutionalized, to the point where they are so ingrained in our understanding of the educational system, that we struggle to separate the two. From this point, I will begin to examine some of the consequences that this process has had on

the teaching field and our larger educational system.

I have chosen to examine historical and academic sources in addition to the films that guide my research due to much of American Studies scholar Paul Lauter's work. I first wanted to examine films after reading Lauter's piece on *Jurassic Park*, where he asserts that much of society can be explained and understood by examining a popular piece of cultural text.

<sup>1</sup> By combining this work with his piece *Reconfiguring Academic Disciplines*, there is a balance between a close contextual look at a film and an interdisciplinary look at the larger discourse that the film contributes to. In my work here, I attempt to utilize Lauter's use of contextualizing, historicizing, and closely reading a cultural text to explore how the larger discourse influences the classroom experience, which is exemplified in the research done on white women teachers.

This interdisciplinary method also falls under what Simon Bronner would refer to as "Americanistics."<sup>2</sup> Although I disagree on many fronts with Simon Bronner, as an individual and as an academic, one point that I particularly disagree upon is this distinction between "Americanists" and "American Studies." In outlining the history of the field of American Studies, Bronner distinguishes "Americanistics" as "analytical in

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lauter, *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture, & American Studies*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 104.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Bronner, "The Death of American Studies?" *European Journal of American Studies* 13, no. 2 Summer 2018).

approaching the society and culture of the United States" and "cultural history" that is "focused on the process rather than the product of America."<sup>3</sup> However, where we differ is Bronner's understanding of how to use this method for the wider world. Bronner explains how "Americanists" use their understanding of American culture, including pop culture, which has been historically ignored in academia, to understand "the masses."<sup>4</sup> However, this is as far as they will go for "the masses." Bronner and other Americanists, such as Dorson, have made it clear that the pursuit of knowledge should not and could not be connected to further activism or action in response to this knowledge.

I strongly disagree with that point of view and hope to refute that by adding another dimension to my argument. As I conclude, I hope to examine my own journey and answer some of the questions I have laid out for myself in this paper so far. Although I am not a white woman who teaches in the traditional sense, I am a white woman with hopes to join the educational field in other respects and in that process, have made connections to this work. By implicating and examining my own positionality, I am calling myself to action in a way that Bronner's Americanists would perhaps not align with. This research and paper looks at many sources that ask white women to understand the weight their identity holds in the classroom and in this way, goes

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<sup>3</sup> Bronner, "The Death of American Studies," 5.

<sup>4</sup> Bronner, "The Death of American Studies," 12.

beyond the ivory tower filled with “respected researchers rather than partisan activists.” Once we understand, only then can we take action. This is my first step into action, for myself, but hopefully maybe for others as well.

### Damsels in Discourse

To understand the way in which white women have been institutionally situated at the center of the classroom, we must first explore the ideas that lay this groundwork. Before Hilary Swank donned her set of pearls in *Freedom Writers*, in fact, before women were even a part of the educational workforce, specific ideas around white womanhood were already forming in the American imagination. It is these ideas and images that inform how and why white women originally get involved in teaching, but first, what images am I talking about and how did they come to be?

#### *Historical Discourse*

Pauline Schloesser devotes an entire book to the formation of what she identifies as the “fair sex” in early American discourse. She explains that in the late 18th century, right around the American Revolutionary War, through a “loose collection of discourses,” such as literature, short stories, poems, and political essays, the white middle class assembled a set of norms and expected behaviors to be performed by white women.<sup>5</sup> Women were expected to

exhibit virtues such as “softness, meekness, delicacy, domesticity, sympathy, agreeableness, self-restraint, modesty, politeness, purity, piety, subordination and deference to husbands... industry, frugality, and literacy.”<sup>6</sup> Schloesser explains, however, that “None of these virtues or vices defined white womanhood by itself, but taken together, the virtue/vice binaries in discourse on the fair sex would create white womanhood as a category and define its boundaries.”<sup>7</sup>

Schloesser’s argument that the “fair sex” is the overarching ideology behind white womanhood puts her views in direct conflict with those of numerous American historians, who would argue that the American ideology of white women is better defined by “republican motherhood.” If you’ll recall, this idea was a prominent feature in your basic American public school systems curriculum around the American Revolution. I took AP US History at least five years ago and I knew what that phrase was and how to define it without having to do any research for this paper. For clarity’s sake, “republican motherhood” referred to the idea that women and mothers held a special role in society to maintain the virtue and morals of the nation by teaching their children to be good little citizens of democracy.<sup>8</sup>

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*American Republic.* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 59.

<sup>8</sup> “Republican Motherhood,” U.S. History Online Textbook, Accessed November 25, 2018. <http://www.ushistory.org/us/12d.asp>

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<sup>5</sup> Pauline Schloesser, *The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early*

Although many historians illustrate this idea as one that embodied strength and independence, Schloesser points out that this understanding was still within the ideology of the “fair sex,” where white womanhood still had boundaries and values to uphold and spread.

Schloesser also points out that through discourse and context, it is clear the “the fair sex” is also raced and classed, in addition to gendered. The use of the word “fair” alone has tremendous connotations for white beauty standards, however the coding goes beyond that by examining the context.<sup>9</sup> When discussing the virtues of the fair sex, she clarifies that qualities such as “domesticity” and “delicacy,” which are both traits that a white woman in charge of the home could embody, whereas a black woman at the time in America would likely not benefit from these qualities if they are enslaved.<sup>10</sup> The assumption that grounds this racialization is that only middle and upper class white women would be the type of woman who would be able to reasonably fulfill the expectations of the fair sex. Therefore, the role of the mother and its associated qualities are isolated to white women of middle and upper classes.

This then leads to the discussion of how the work that white women do in society, ultimately works to reinforce the ideology around white womanhood. Schloesser describes how the “fair sex” virtues and expectations were reinforced through the woman’s role of a wife and

mother. Similarly, historians often discuss the “cult of domesticity” or the “cult of true womanhood,” which explains that the culture of the true woman limits her to the domestic, wifely, motherly sphere.<sup>11</sup> Both the ideology of the “fair sex” and “the cult of domesticity” tie middle to upper class white women to reproducing and serving, either their husbands or children. This definition of white women and its subsequent implementation in the classroom work together to categorize teaching as another form of mothering. Therefore, many of the features of being a mother, which have been coded as white women specific qualities, have made their transition into the classroom, making the white woman a central piece to the classroom and education experience.

As the classroom becomes more defined around ideals of white womanhood, the discourse is further entrenched by educational philosophy and philosophers of the 20th and 21st century, in this case espoused by two educational philosophers who are also white women, illustrating how this discourse is deeply ingrained in our conceptions of education and teaching. Mabel Carney was a rural teacher and the head of the Department of Rural Education at Columbia’s esteemed Teacher’s College from 1918-1941. Throughout her book, *Country Life and the Country School*, Carney refers to rural teachers and leaders as females, making the assumption that only women should be

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<sup>9</sup> Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 59.

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<sup>11</sup> “The Cult of Domesticity,” America in Class, accessed November 25, 2018. <http://americainclass.org/the-cult-of-domesticity/>

involved in the teaching field.<sup>12</sup> Nel Noddings, an important figure in educational philosophy, centers her entire philosophy on the feminine and motherly idea of “caring” in the classroom. In her two most significant pieces, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* and *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, written in 1984 and Noddings focuses her understanding of ethics and education around caring. Although she does not assert that only women can be teachers, she suggests that the feminine experience, specifically that of being a mother, can positively affect the classroom experience. She suggests that to care is inherently female, supporting the idea that feminine, motherly caring can and should be central in the classroom, curriculum, and student-teacher interactions.<sup>13</sup> These two views illustrate how the discourse has been further tied to the actual practice of teaching.

Looking back, it is clear that there are established and definitive borders within which white women are expected to behave, namely by filling their role as mother. By looking at historical discourse as it moves into today, these borders are applied to the teaching context, by others, as well as by white women themselves. This provides the historical groundwork

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<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Weiler, "Mabel Carney at Teachers College: From Home Missionary to White Ally," *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 12 (December 2005):2601.

<sup>13</sup> Tony W. Johnson and Ronald F. Reed, *Philosophical Documents in Education*. 4th Ed. ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2012), 124.

for a “natural” pipeline, that contemporary discourse plays into and expands upon.

#### *Film Discourse*

This discourse around white womanhood in the classroom takes on a new and significant form as time goes by and the way in which we share ideas transforms. In addition to Lauter and Bronner’s views on the importance of pop culture, many scholars have emphasized the significance of culture in discourse around white womanhood and the education system. Pauline Schloesser, in her explorations of the creation of the ideology of the “fair sex,” focuses mainly on how, and by whom, the fair sex is represented in culture. Her entire assertion of the fair sex is dependent upon this discourse. Colette Cann, in reference to more modern vehicles for ideology, stresses the importance of paying attention to the effects that white savior teacher films have on the educational field. She explains that “these narratives operate as a form of public pedagogy,” where they perpetuate and normalize the presence of under-qualified white women in under resourced classes.<sup>14</sup> Citing Henry Giroux, she explains that they “enable, legitimize, and reinforce discursive practices.”<sup>15</sup> These films are today’s literature, poems, and political articles that once informed the ideology of the fair sex, successfully doing so in the specific context of the classroom.

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<sup>14</sup> Colette Cann, "What School Movies and "TFA" Teach Us About Who Should Teach Urban Youth: Dominant Narratives As Public Pedagogy." *Urban Education* 50, no. 3 (2015): 292.

<sup>15</sup> Cann, “What School Movies and “TFA” Teach Us,” 292.

Although these movies are riddled with many stereotypes to pick apart, I focus on how they perpetuate the codifying of the teaching field as a white woman's. First, many of these films illustrate that, despite a basic lack of experience, these white women belong in the classroom simply because they are women. This identifier alone acts as justification for entering a space and community that does not look or experience the world in the same way that these teachers do. Building off of this feminization, these women also espout qualities that are often associated with motherhood, such as expressions of love and care, sacrifice, and being considered a life changing experience, further characterizing teaching a form of mothering.

In becoming familiar with how these films contribute to the discourse of white women in the classroom, we first need a basic understanding of what is going on in these movies. Chronologically speaking, we have 1999's *Music of the Heart* with Roberta Guaspari, portrayed by a frazzled, depressed Meryl Streep, who has just been left by her US Navy husband. In an effort to quell her sadness, she applies to work as a music teacher at a school in Harlem. Roberta actually does have two degrees in music education, but, unfortunately, no experience in actual music classrooms. Although Roberta is a mean, grumpy, inexperienced woman, she slowly, but surely builds a strings program at the school, despite initial pushback from

parents, students, and fellow teachers. The movie fast forwards ten years, where the program has blossomed, now being implemented at two other schools as well. This all comes crashing down with a sudden bout of budget cuts, with the strings program on the chopping block. To save the program, Roberta puts together a fundraising concert that features current and past students, parents, and even famous string players such as Itzak Stern. With a little networking and white lady magic, the concert is moved to Carnegie Hall and the program is saved.<sup>16</sup>

Our second heroine is Erin Gruwell, portrayed by Hillary Swank in 2007's *Freedom Writers*. Following the Los Angeles riots in reaction to Rodney King's beating in 1991, the school that Erin begins to work at is rife with racial tensions between black, asian, and latinx students. Erin struggles to connect with the students and control the classroom, until she realizes that racial tensions are getting in the way. She begins teaching the students about the Holocaust to address these issues, getting students engaged using journals. Once she has had this initial breakthrough, it is smooth sailing for Erin and her students for not one, not two, but all four years of highschool.<sup>17</sup>

All three of these movies underscore how these women's identities

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<sup>16</sup> *Music of the Heart*, directed by Wes Craven (1999; Santa Monica, CA: Miramax, 2017), DVD.

<sup>17</sup> *Freedom Writers*, directed by Richard LaGravenese (2007; Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2017) DVD.

as female alone act as proper qualification to become great teachers for underserved students. One key way that they do this is by creating an unpleasant male teacher counterpart to the white, female heroines as a way to emphasize this natural instinct to teach that women have and men do not. This dynamic is played out between Erin Gruwell and Mr. Gelford, a fellow teacher at the school who teaches honors English, a mostly white class. At first they get along, with him helping Erin get into the swing of things. However, as time goes on and Erin begins trying out more unconventional methods, Mr. Gelford becomes hostile to her. It is clear throughout the film that Mr. Gelford has disdain for Erin's students, going as far as to blame them for ruining an "A-list school" through the voluntary integration program. At the end, Erin petitions for the school to let her teach her sophomore students in junior year as well, which would typically be taught by Mr. Gelford. Mr. Gelford refuses to give up his class, to which Erin responds, "You can't teach them. You don't even like them." Mr. Gelford retorts, "What does that have to do with teaching?"<sup>18</sup> In this exchange, Nel Noddings concept of care and its inherency in white women is directly brought into conversation.<sup>19</sup> This relationship suggests that women are exceptional teachers because this caring is ingrained in who they are due to their

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<sup>18</sup> *Freedom Writers*, directed by Richard LaGravenese, 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson and Reed, *Philosophical Documents in Education*, 124.

biological sex. Additionally, both teacher characters enter the movie with little to no teaching experience, further suggesting that teaching comes natural to women as compared to their male counterparts, who have been trying to teach these "inner city" students for years to no avail. These comparisons are constructed to further the idea of women's natural affinity to teach.

If the woman has a natural affinity to teach due to her biological role as mother, then it would only make sense, using our working definition of white womanhood, that motherly tendencies and qualities would hold an important place in their teaching experience. One way this is expressed is through the care and love that they invest into their students. They illustrate this by making it appear as though they are the only teachers in the school, or even the world, that seem to care for their underserved students. Harkening back to Erin's worse, male counterpart in *Freedom Writers*, the film reminds it's audience that these white woman know how to love and care for children best, making them automatically qualified for the classroom.<sup>20</sup>

In *Music of the Heart*, this notion is taken even further, suggesting that these white women can care for their students better than their own, non-white mothers can, perpetuating a deficit framework placed on their students' families. A moment that exemplifies this is when Naim, a talented student of Roberta's, is taken out of the class by his mother

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<sup>20</sup> *Freedom Writers*, directed by Richard LaGravenese, 2007.

because “my son’s got better things to do than learn old white men’s music.”<sup>21</sup> Later, Roberta approaches Naim’s mother and “schools” her, or so we are to believe:

“I know you think you’re protecting your son, but you’re not. What if Arthur Rash’s mother had told him he couldn’t play tennis because it’s a white man’s game? You know the important thing is Niam. When he plays music, he’s – his whole face lights up. You should see that.”<sup>22</sup>

This interaction takes this concept of caring a step forward to suggest that she also knows this woman’s child more intimately than his own mother. The mother’s ultimate decision to re-enroll Naim in the class then adds another layer, solidifying the idea that the white female teacher knows best by having the mother concede to her. This trope in film then perpetuates the idea that othered communities want and need help from white women, because they are inherently better in these mothering and teaching roles, furthering the the distinction of white woman solely acting as mother and, therefore, teacher.

Another aspect associated with modern day motherhood that is highlighted in these films is the sense of sacrifice that is often considered part and parcel with becoming a mother. Many

contemporary mothers are faced with the decision between focusing on their career or their family. This same conflict is present in *Freedom Writers* and is a key feature of Erin Gruwell’s journey. To pay for enriching classroom experiences, like field trips and new books, Erin takes on not one, but two extra jobs. All the while, her handsome kind husband, played by one Dr. McDreamy, begins to feel ignored. The kids have become her life, which is, as her husband explains, is not a life he signed up for. According to him, she cannot be both responsible for her students and be his wife. When he asks her to choose, she says, “If you love me, how could you ever ask me that?”<sup>23</sup> She is not willing to sacrifice neither her job nor her marriage, and therefore, her husband must make this decision for her. This highlights a sense of pious motherhood, where the audience is left feeling as though she is also a victim in a way, pulling the attention away from any problematic behavior and instead promoting feelings of sympathy and understanding.

Lastly, the association of motherhood as life-changing makes its way into these narratives. It is a key feature to both Erin and Roberta’s stories that both the teacher and students are changed by their classroom experiences, especially for Roberta. At the beginning of the film, Roberta is going through a divorce from an unfaithful husband and looks to teaching as a way to introduce a

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<sup>21</sup> *Music of the Heart*, directed by Wes Craven, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> *Music of the Heart*, directed by Wes Craven, 1999.

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<sup>23</sup> *Freedom Writers*, directed by Richard LaGravenese, 2007.

stable, positive force in her life to counteract the negativity. Her students act as her motivation to help pick herself back up, so that she can go onto to do amazing things, such as perform at Carnegie Hall. As Roberta drives over to Carnegie Hall to perform with world renowned violinists, her mother makes a comment about Roberta's ex-husband, Charles. She mentions that she should not thank her own mother for "getting [her] out of bed," but should rather thank Charles because "If he hadn't have left you, none of this would have happened."<sup>24</sup> In a way, this teaching jobs restores Roberta's womanhood after she "failed" to be a wife that could manage to keep her husband interested. To restore this, she must succeed in another feminine domain and looks to teaching and children not only as a job, but also as a life changing and fulfilling experience.

By examining these contemporary forms of discourse, it is clear that our image of the white woman has remained fairly consistent throughout American history, especially in the context of the classroom. The white woman's associations and dependence upon the role of mother not only lead to the teaching field, but also contributes to how white womanhood has informed the larger societal perceptions of the teaching field. This is made especially clear through the examination of this discourse in films like the ones I have examined. However, is there relevance in any of these discourse,

ideologies, and images, etc. beyond naming them? Why are they significant?

### **Significance through Systemization**

As the films began to touch on, discourse does not exist in a vacuum. We do not just consume images and ideas with no consequences. Otherwise, American Studies, Media and Cultural Studies, Art History, etc. would not exist as academic disciplines. In the case of this discourse, this image, and this ideology, it has not only had real life significance worthy of examination on the educational system, but has been institutionalized to be part and parcel with the system. As a result of this persisting discourse, the education system and teaching field has been molded around white womanhood by the government, individuals, and the nonprofit industrial complex.

We first see the institutionalizing of the white woman in the classroom when women, namely white women, were allowed to enter the workforce as teachers. Although the concept of republican motherhood and values surrounding women as the torchbearers of culture and society would seem like an easy transition into the teaching field, it was not until the 1830s, with the expansion of public education, that women became heavily involved. Horace Mann and other reformers of the time wanted to make education more accessible to all and created the Common School, a precursor to the public school system, which was free, universal, and non-sectarian. This increased the need for

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<sup>24</sup> *Music of the Heart*, directed by Wes Craven, 1999.

not only more, but also better teachers, hence the introduction of women into the workforce.<sup>25</sup> Reformers explained that women would fill this role well due to their femininity, thus beginning what historians often refer to as the “feminization” of education. Horace Mann agreed, explaining “The school committee are sentinels stationed at the door of every school house in the State, to see that no teacher crosses its threshold, who is not clothed, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, in garments of virtue.”<sup>26</sup> Who better to step into this virtuous role than those defined by boundaries of the “fair sex?”

However, as Schloesser points out, “feminization,” like “fair sex,” does not apply to all women, but to middle-upper class white women. One way that this distinction of race and class, is made even more clear is through white women’s involvement with the assimilation efforts for Native Americans. Joel Spring outlines in his book, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*, the US state’s policy of taking Native children from their lands and homes and institutionalizing them in boarding schools from mid 19th century to early 20th century, in which they “were replacing the use of native languages with English, destroying Indian customs, and teaching allegiance to the U.S.

government.”<sup>27</sup> In these 25 boarding schools, the express mission, as infamously articulated by proponent Captain Richard Henry Pratt, was to “Kill the Indian to save the man.”<sup>28</sup> Considering how the role of the teacher and role of the white woman revolve around the idea of their ability to pass on cultural values, white women were important contributors to this assimilation process, where the explicit goal was to teach Native Americans how to, essentially, be white. As was examined earlier, the discourse and the history around these “frontier” women underscores their involvement in this movement was heavily influenced and supported by white womanhood in the classroom.

This coding of whiteness in the classroom is essentially made official through legislation in 1955 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which required that schools become integrated. Derrick Bell, in *Silent Covenants*, discusses how the *Brown* decision was ultimately ineffective in actually providing equal schooling opportunities to black Americans.<sup>29</sup> Instead of acknowledging that black communities could produce successful generations if they were provided the

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<sup>25</sup> “Only a Teacher: Teaching Timeline,” PBS Online, accessed November 25, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/timeline.html>

<sup>26</sup> “Only a Teacher: teaching Timeline,” PBS Online, accessed November 25, 2018

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<sup>27</sup> Joel H. Spring, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality : A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States*. Eighth ed. (Sociocultural, Political, and Historical Studies in Education Series. New York: Routledge, 2016), 22.

<sup>28</sup> Spring, *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants : Brown V. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.)

proper resources and equal funding, the *Brown* decision claimed that integrating into white schools was good enough in creating equity in education. Of course, this led to white flight and the under-resourcing of public schools that we still see today. Gloria Ladson-Billings further discusses this idea, arguing that the “achievement gap” of today should be viewed more like an “educational debt,” due to the years of politics and history that lead to communities of color not having the funding and support to support their own students.<sup>30</sup> By consistently cutting funds for public schools, which largely serve communities of color due to white flight to private schools, whiteness and white teachers are inherently valued as more effective means for education.

Today, we see a similar process occurring beyond legislative decisions and public policy. In organizations like Teach for America, we not only see the perpetuation of unqualified teachers being streamlined into the classroom, but an organization that thrives off of these ideas of love and care substitutes credentials. A study examined how TFA recruits their corp members and what types of people are ultimately hired. Many of those interviewed, who are TFA participants, described themselves as “idealistic and energetic, pursuing results relentlessly and not giving up, being intelligent, professional, and “high quality” applicants

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<sup>30</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings, “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools.” *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (2006): 3-12.

for whatever career they might pursue, and ambitiously aiming to do well in their work.”<sup>31</sup> Sounds like some pretty good qualities for a teacher!

However, the issue remains that these qualities, just like the qualities of white women, cannot substitute a teaching license or teaching experience. TFA requires a temporary teaching license, which includes a few weeks of training and an exam to prove that you are sufficient in the subject you will be teaching. Many of the participants in TFA actually talk about how this quick process is actually one of the main attractors to the program, since it is “something to do ‘right out of college’ without having to go through an extra 2 to 3 years of training and student teaching to certification.”<sup>32</sup> Colette Cann discusses how this aspect of TFA adds to the narrative, supported by white teacher savior films, that being unqualified and untrained is absolutely fine, as long as you have your heart in the right place.

Although TFA has been making efforts to diversify their members, the organization has been historically majority white women who come from top colleges and universities and have a privileged background.<sup>33,34</sup> Another

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<sup>31</sup> Rolf Straubhaar and Michael Gottfried. “Who Joins Teach for America and Why? Insights into the “typical” Recruit in an Urban School District.” *Education and Urban Society* 48, no. 7 (2016): 633.

<sup>32</sup> Straubhaar and Gottfried, “Who Joins Teach for America and Why?” 641.

<sup>33</sup> Cann, “What School Movies and “TFA” Teach Us,” 299.

<sup>34</sup> Straubhaar and Gottfried, “Who Joins Teach for America and Why?” 627.

interesting fact about demographics is that of the 14% that actually continue to be a teacher for longer than five years from their TFA start date, most of that percentage is black and Latinx women.<sup>35</sup> White women are being funneled into the teaching field, unprepared and unqualified, relying on their characteristics and qualities to help keep them afloat, which ultimately leads to their burnout and the issue of finding consistent and qualified teachers for the public school system remains unsolved.

This organizational model is deeply detrimental to the teaching field by claiming that teaching is not a career that necessarily needs training and thoughtful preparation. Schools, most likely underfunded one, then rely on organizations like TFA to supply the workforce, which then has a huge turnover rate. Essentially, TFA is giving these schools a fish, rather than teaching them how to fish. In trying to address the issues in education, they are ultimately further contributing to it. By undermining the teaching field, TFA also ultimately undermines our entire school system. They have taken the narrative around unqualified, caring white women's place in the classroom and turned it into a business model.

These institutionalizing acts have ultimately lead to an overwhelming presence of white women in the classroom, which is evident through statistics alone. According to a survey

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<sup>35</sup> Straubhaar and Gottfried, "Who Joins Teach for America and Why?" 630.

conducted in 2013, white people make up 82% of all public school teachers, while women hold 74% of teaching positions in public schools. This survey suggests that based on this information, white women make up about 62% of all teachers in the US are white women. Another survey claimed that white women made up over 75% of teachers in classrooms, but it is unclear whether this survey took note of other factors, such as public versus private, school demographics, etc.<sup>36</sup> Another statistic showed that in the 2009-2010 academic year, 80% of education-related degree recipients were awarded to white women.<sup>37</sup> Although it is unclear what the official picture looks like, study after study has shown that the people who become teachers are often white and often women. This creates a cycle that feeds into itself, where more white women continue to be encouraged to become teachers, while people of color are actively avoiding the same profession. One study found the students of color in college "feel discouraged from becoming teachers, due to negative personal experiences in school, concern about a lack of respect in the classroom due to race, the perception of teaching as a low-paying, low-status profession, and the perceived norm of

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<sup>36</sup> *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys: Understanding, Connecting, Respecting*. Edited by Eddie Moore, Jr., Ali Michael, and Marguerite W Penick-Parks. (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin, 2018), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Emily Deruy "Student Diversity Is Up But Teachers Are Mostly White," American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, accessed November 20, 2017.

teachers being predominantly White, middle-class women.”<sup>38</sup>

This strong presence is not inherently negative, but Eddie Moore Jr., Ali Michael, and Marguerite W. Penick-Parks connect these statistics to a larger issue in their book *The Guide for White Women who Teach Black Boys*. The fact of the matter is that many children, particularly black boys, are being failed by the school system that happens to be made up of largely white women. They explain, “*The Guide* did not evolve because we thought white women were bad people or bad teachers. *The Guide* arose because we realize that many white people struggle to understand race and the impact it has on the lives of students of color.”<sup>39</sup> They go on to discuss how racial and cultural competency is something that often doesn't get taught to white people growing up and that it is also not necessarily taught in the process of getting a teaching certification,<sup>40</sup> especially if it is a temporary or expedited one. They offer this guide as a way to change the educational system with an honest understanding of what it's demographics currently are.

We have an issue here. Are white women the sole reason for all of the issues in our educational system? Of course not. However, the blind acceptance of white women as teachers, despite qualifications or lack thereof, highlights many other

issues that may not initially seem relevant to white womanhood, such as the persistent presence of whiteness in our classrooms, the educational debt, and high teacher attrition rate. White womanhood and teaching have been portrayed as going hand-in-hand again and again and again and through the institutionalization of these narratives, the consequences have really begun to stack up.

### Reflection into Action

This project came out of a feeling of frustration. My own frustration, but others as well. Frustration by other white women teachers, such as Debby Irving, who joined the teaching force later in life as a mother, because she thought “My love of kids makes me a natural.”<sup>41</sup> Despite having a passion to help, Debby slowly but surely began to see how her color-blind approach to teaching was hindering her teaching ability. After careful reflection, only then did Debby realize, “I had no idea of the history I was repeating,” where she recognized that she had seen herself as a “cultural torchbearers...to model how to be good, right, moral, and compliant,” playing into the discourse just like so many white women before her.<sup>42</sup> Debby was frustrated with her own performance and decided to act in response to that change. Once she

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<sup>38</sup> Straubhaar and Gottfried, “Who Joins Teach for America and Why?” 629.

<sup>39</sup> *The Guide for White Women*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> *The Guide for White Women*, 4.

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<sup>41</sup> Debby Irving, *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys: Understanding, Connecting, Respecting*. Edited by Eddie Moore, Jr., Ali Michael, and Marguerite W Penick-Parks. (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin, 2018), 18.

<sup>42</sup> Irving, *The Guide for White Women*, 20.

began engaging in trainings and workshops in cultural competency, she found that she had a better understanding of her students and herself. Frustration begot understanding, which inspired change.

I see this frustration in my own mother, who was an educator for at least three decades. I once asked my mom what she most regretted in life and she told me that she regretted not pursuing architecture and design, something she was deeply passionate about and pretty darn good according to her professional design friends. My mom isn't around to talk about this with me, but I wonder if she too saw the qualities of white womanhood in herself and thought that that meant that she belonged in the teaching field. My mom had a lot of qualities that do fit into the narratives I have been discussing. She was a really great mom, probably one of the best. She had so much love and care that she held and I can see how as a young woman, maybe she saw teaching as a way to utilize that warm energy. It ultimately trapped her in a career she was unhappy in.

Ultimately, I feel this frustration on my own journey in education. In a way, I do not feel like I have choices in where I want to explore education. For example, every summer, there is the scramble to find a job or internship that you can slap onto your resume and hopefully impress some employer that you essentially volunteered to file papers or whatnot. When looking for that shiny summer opportunity in education, I have noticed

that you are lead down a particular path. Possibly the best and most competitive opportunity is Breakthrough, where you lead groups of middle schoolers in summer school with the help of a mentor to help you navigate your first teaching experience. The students that typically participate in Breakthrough are from underserved and under resourced communities, who need to use the summers to catch up. I'll admit that I did apply to Breakthrough because it was the thing to do. Although I do think Breakthrough has important merits, such as the mentorship aspect for the teachers, Breakthrough is still not exactly a choice, but rather an assumption.

Similarly, many of the internships and entry-level jobs and internships that I have encountered also cater to marginalized communities. While my American Studies background has given me a passion to examine the borders and those who reside there, sometimes it can feel daunting to enter the field with no experience and be serving groups of people that should really have the most qualified person, rather than the least. I feel lost and overwhelmed and really really frustrated. It does not help that when I mention that I am in education, people say that I remind them of Miss Frizzle. No, the resemblance is not lost on me. No, I still do not like being compared to a quirky science teacher with frizzy red hair. I feel frustrated that people have decided my career path for me before I have even figured it out for myself. I am frustrated.

However, my frustration is not what really drives this project because education is not just about teachers and my feelings. Education should be about the students and I believe that this has gotten lost in many of the narratives I have discussed. Research shows that students being taught by someone who has full certification outperform students who are in classes with teachers who hold temporary teaching license, showing that experience and training do in fact matter.<sup>43 44</sup> Even someone who may seem like a natural still needs proper training. Additionally, culturally relevant pedagogy is an extremely important teaching style to incorporate into the classroom, especially with students of color in urban locations. As *The Guide* mentions, that simply does not come naturally, especially for white women, and requires attention. Lastly, studies have also shown that there are tremendous benefits for students of color have teachers of color.<sup>45</sup>

I am not suggesting that white women cannot be good teachers. I am suggesting that to be a good, effective,

caring, loving teacher requires more than a “feeling.” It requires training and thoughtful reflection, something that does not come naturally. Our complacent acceptance of the persisting images of white women and its effects on the classroom clearly have consequences and we first need to understand the issue at hand, so that we can take action. For each person that looks different. Maybe that looks like an experienced teacher choosing to participate in a cultural competency course. For someone else it may look like reevaluating their own path to becoming a teacher. For me, I needed to understand. Now that I understand, I feel more equipped to change, whatever that may look like.

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<sup>43</sup>Dan Goldhaber, “Everyone’s doing it, but what does teacher testing tell us about teacher effectiveness?” *The Journal of Human Resources* 42, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 765–794.

<sup>44</sup>Ildiko Laczko-Kerr and David C. Berliner, “The effectiveness of “Teach For America” and other under-certified teachers on student academic achievement: A case of harmful public policy.” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 10, no. 37. (2002).

<sup>45</sup> Colleen M. Eddy and Donald. Easton-Brooks, “Ethnic matching, school placement, and mathematics achievement of African-American students from kindergarten through fifth grade.” *Urban Education* 46, no. 6 (2011): 1280–1299.

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