
Stories from the Cage: Autoethnographic Sensemaking of Workplace Bullying, Gender Discrimination, and White Privilege

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Abstract

This autoethnography examines white privilege and systemic discrimination within contexts of my experiences as a white woman encountering workplace bullying, presented and examined on three levels. In sections marked “Then,” I integrate my own memories of my employment at AAA. In sections titled “Now,” I analyze my experiences through three interpretive lenses: first workplace bullying, then cultural enactments of gender discrimination, and finally white privilege theory to reinterpret the organizational dynamics that took place at AAA. In a section called “Next Time,” I present descriptions of what I would do differently given what I know now in the form of two letters. Throughout, I engage in self-investigation and self-implication. In short, through weaving together the past, present, and future of my experiences, sense-making, and theoretical prose, I examine the intersections of race, class, and gender in workplace bullying behaviors, to make sense of my experiences and to help others.

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Prologue:Then

August 17th, 2004. A glass of white wine sweats in front of me at 11:55 am on my Tuesday lunch break. It may not be my only one today, if I can keep it down, in the 30 minutes before I have to drive the five miles back to another world, to return to work.

My boyfriend sits across from me, concerned and uncomfortable, glancing occasionally at the wait-staff and other diners who might notice his girlfriend's shaking hands, clenched teeth.

"We have to start going to a different restaurant," he offers up with a hopeful half-smile, clasping my clammy hand in his. "People here are going to think that I'm abusing you."

I attempt a watery laugh, light a cigarette, and stare at my pale, shaking hand.

Back in the office, I hunch in my cubicle, trying to make myself as small as possible.

As I resume work planning the parade and gala for the Avenida Amador Association,¹ Enrique's insinuating voice calls my name. "Rachel, Rachel, Rachel" he calls in a sing-song tone, which grows louder, ominously, like the buzzing of a fly, as he approaches. "Do you realize that my three-year-old son knows how to use Corel better than you do? Redo this invitation. If you don't get this right, I'm going to have to tell Ramón, who'll probably hire someone else much more qualified than you."

Less than a minute later, Enrique's voice slices through the air again: "Hey, Alberto, want to have sex? Come on, let's go out back and have a quickie."

Alberto chuckles nervously. "Maybe later, Enrique, I have to finish this grant by three."

"Yeah, that's okay; we wouldn't want Rachel to get too distracted from the minimal amount of work she has to do today anyway. Rachel, thank Alberto for saving your job."

Two beats go by, but just as I begin to relax, I hear: "I'm not kidding Rachel."

"Thank you Alberto."

Now

From March 13th through September 20th, 2004, I worked as an events coordinator at the Avenida Amador Association (AAA), a nonprofit neighborhood

association in a major metropolitan city in the southern United States.² I had searched for this “real job” for six months, waiting tables and living with my mom even though I had a master’s degree. The only job I could find seemed to be a dream for me: I could use events-coordinating experience I had gained from internships in college and my Spanish-speaking skills to help low-income families purchase their own homes.

Six months later, AAA would terminate my employment, after prolonged periods of subtle and escalating mistreatment. Seven years later, I still find myself trying to make sense of the experience. In those years, I learned terms to name and describe what happened to me, such as workplace bullying, discrimination, and harassment. I often tried to interpret what caused these experiences to occur. This essay represents the culmination of that work, presented as an autoethnography. Here, I problematize my experience, in order to make sense of what happened to me, and the multiple threads that weave together to create this story. Throughout this narrative, I address the following research questions: What happened to me at AAA, and how was I complicit in the events that unfolded? How do my experiences at AAA illuminate the complex intersections among culture, race, gender, and class in an organizational setting? What can we learn from this set of experiences that can help me and others?

Next Time

All of this work illuminates the necessity to create systemic change, but also change at the individual level. While much of what follows involves an indictment of the problems of organizational communication from a critical race perspective, ultimately, this piece calls out the culpability of all employees within the context of the toxic workplace (Vickers 2007), in a way that empowers employees to increase their awareness of the multiple intersections that take place in the day-to-day workings of an intercultural office. Additionally, I intend to complicate workplace bullying as a behavior that we can examine from an intersectional lens, within the crossing contexts of race, gender, and social class.

Method

Spry (2001, 710) defines autoethnography as “self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts.” Here, autoethnography works as an act of sense-making (Vickers 2007), situated within the culture of an organization. In situating this essay in the workplace in which the events took place, I engage in an organizational autoethnography, following the call

of Boyle and Perry (2007, 188), who argue “that the intensely personal process of identity construction is best documented through an autoethnographic approach.” Navigating the tension between my own identity (as white, middle-class, Jewish) and the social activity taking place at the non-profit organization during my six-month tenure, I construct a research narrative that attempts to “shed light on some aspect of humanity as it has been reflected in the everyday life of the author, in particular, and the reader, more generally” (Vickers 2007, 226).

The current autoethnographic essay examines workplace bullying from the context of my own experience as a white woman in an organization and neighborhood where I temporarily occupied the position of “minority.” I take a similar approach to Vickers (2007) in her autoethnography of workplace bullying, engaging in sense-making at both the individual and social levels. Anderson (2006) also influences this work in terms of his engagement in analytic autoethnography, particularly in the use of analytic reflexivity and theoretical analysis in order to transform my individual experiences beyond self-observation, into a means of understanding systemic facets of the social world (Charmaz 2006). As such, I attempt here to “turn private troubles into public issues” (Kleinman 1997, 553) in ways that, through theorizing their disjunctures, can provide useful lessons to others in analogous situations.

I also attribute my approach to the work of Spry (2001), in that it plays with temporality by weaving between the visceral-experiential and the theoretical. As such, I weave together three strands: in sections marked “Then,” I integrate my own narratives of my experiences, taken from memory, conversations, and correspondence during my employment at AAA, and a journal I kept at the time (from which I draw segments of dialogue often scribbled covertly, immediately after they took place). In sections titled “Now,” I analyze my experiences through three interpretive lenses: first workplace bullying, then cultural enactments of gender discrimination, and finally critical race theory (in particular, research on white privilege) to reinterpret the organizational dynamics that took place at AAA. In sections called “Next Time,” I describe what I would do differently given what I know now in the form of a letter. Throughout, I engage in self-investigation and implicature (Holman Jones 2005), as I revisit the events from different perspectives and position myself in different ways. In short, through weaving together past, present, and future experiences, sense-making, and theoretical prose (Spry 2001), I examine the intersections of race, class, and gender in an organizational culture, to make sense of my experiences and, hopefully, to help others.

A Caveat

I want to note here that what follows illustrates not only my first foray into autoethnography but also into analysis of organizational systems through critical race theory of any kind. I struggle here to learn a new language, how to talk about race and gender and bullying, knowing that my voice carries with it race and class privilege, and that I may not have the right to do this at all. The complexity of privilege and oppression exists in all of us; human beings share the capability of being oppressed and oppressor simultaneously, depending on the context of the situation. Through my struggle with these complex topics, I hope to help other people like me to learn how to talk about these issues. As the manuscript ebbed and flowed, I engaged the material with friends, mentors, colleagues, and students; I waded through the comments of anonymous and generous reviewers, learning to listen, to understand and interpret. What to add, where to cut, how to acknowledge without dichotomizing, how to speak to one audience without silencing another—I still grapple with every day, and as such, I offer this piece as a work in progress. As Jago (2002, 737-38) states:

There are always gaps in the telling. Names withheld. Details left out. . . . Secrets protected. Intersecting with other lives as it does, this story isn't only mine to tell. So I can't tell you everything. . . . you have to trust that I am telling enough.

With this in mind, the overall contribution of this essay lies in the following domains. First, I define and describe what happened to me (sense-making) in a manner that raises consciousness about the complexity of race/class/gender intersections in workplace conflict. Second, I engage with hopes/fears/frustrations of telling a complex narrative of marginalization and systemic violence with a privileged voice. Third, I complicate workplace bullying beyond an oversimplified, victim/victimizer perspective to one that lies at the intersections of race, gender, and social class. Finally, I use autoethnography to weave temporal threads and interpretive lenses, with the overall goal of raising awareness of a dearth of intercultural communication competence within organizational structures, and the potential harm of its outcomes.

Layer I: Workplace Bullying

Then: My First Day

March 13th, 2004. I love and dread first days.

I flush in anticipation as I try to open the door to my new workplace; this flush fades, anticlimactic, as I realize I cannot open the door. After a

moment's struggle, Luz, the secretary, buzzes me in. Ramón Piñon, the executive director and architect of the AAA foundation, is in a meeting, she tells me in her soft, rounded accent. Sweet, petite, and 60ish, with curly grey hair and smooth olive skin, she smells comfortable, like vanilla and fresh coffee. I relax a bit. Luz gives me a tour of the office, introducing me to my new colleagues and pointing out the bright artwork of neighborhood children displayed on the walls. I meet Alberto, the grants-writer, and Marisol, the publicity coordinator (hesitant—but friendly—smiles all around).

Then a tall, attractive, 30ish man walks in. Actually, he struts, chest thrust out, like a rooster in a henhouse. The atmosphere bends, becomes taut. My first impression: arrogance.

Enrique (Luz informs me) has worked for AAA for seven years. He puts on a tough face with new employees, but has a kind heart, which can be observed when he brings his adorable three-year-old son Manny to work with him. Enrique thrusts out his hand to shake mine, and before Luz can introduce him, barks: "Hi, I'm Enrique. Why don't we go into the conference room to go over your duties?"

For first time, I sit in the glassed-in conference room—which my new colleagues portentously call "The Cage"—located in full view of all the cubicles in the open-plan office. Enrique directs me to a chair and proceeds to pace around me in shark-like, concentric circles, stopping at points to sit on the desk, very close, always looking down at me from above.

"Ramón just had a heart attack, and should be bothered as little as possible. I will be the one to discuss the progress of your events with Ramón; I'm his right-hand man, and you I wouldn't want to disrupt the system, would you?"

Enrique tells me that I am the public face of the AAA, and that I should dress like it "Ramón prefers skirts; he's old school like that. He likes you to look put-together: makeup, high-heeled, you know." He looks me up and down. I feel like I've failed a test.

"NEVER use the internet on your computer—you should not have access to it." (Huh?) "Only Ramón, Alberto and me have internet access; you, Marisol and Luz use the laptop"—Enrique indicates a desk in the middle of the office—"if you need to use the internet or email."

Enrique receives a call on his cell phone, and thus ends my orientation.

As I exit The Cage, my face feels warm; why do I feel as if I have done something wrong?

Now: What happened to Me at Avenida Amador Association?

What happened at AAA exemplifies the subtle, incremental, volatile, and co-created nature of workplace bullying. I use the term “workplace bullying” as an umbrella term that refers to “conceptualizations of ill-treatment and hostile behavior toward people at work . . . from the most subtle, unconscious incivilities to the most blatant, intentional emotional abuse” (Fox and Stallworth 2005, 439). As applied to my experience at AAA, workplace bullying involves organizational skirmishes that include (among others) cultural discrimination and sexism. These skirmishes began on my first day. They continued, in a manner decreasing in subtlety as it increased in volatility and frequency, until my termination. The systematic, repetitive, enduring, and escalating aspects of bullying lend comparisons to sexual harassment (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts 2006, 6-7), with even blurrier boundaries. This frustrates my initial, two-dimensional frame of bullying, as so many of my memories sound overly sensitive to my own ears when I vocalize them. However, when I read Vickers’ (2007) descriptions of harassment, and Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts’s (2006) discussion of metaphors for workplace bullying, I feel myself reminded viscerally of my experiences at AAA. Similar to Vickers (2007, 223), who describes reliving her memories as reliving “much of the visceral component of those events, especially the fear, anxiety, humiliation, anger, rage, indignation, and disgust,” when I put myself in the space of remembering, I feel embarrassed, shameful, angry, helpless, and confused. When I initially read Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts’s (2006) bullied participants’ descriptions of being caged, I flashed on an image of *The Cage* and had a panic attack. The feeling of having my humiliation put on display gets so intense that sometimes I must walk away from this manuscript for weeks at a time, to breathe fresh air, to remember that the experience lies behind me.

Toxic workplaces. While this essay focuses on AAA from my own interpretive lens, I now believe that that my colleagues at AAA (to greater and lesser degrees) also experienced bullying at Enrique’s hands. The general setup of the AAA lent itself to this kind of “toxic workplace,” which Vickers (2007, 227) describes as characterized by “an authoritarian management style, unpredictable and changeable supervision, an atmosphere where the work and dignity of the employees is undervalued, and an environment that includes frequent invasions of privacy, a high degree of secrecy, more demands and less support.” Enrique’s authoritarian control through his access to Ramón and the board created an imbalance of power, further reified by the

discrimination blatantly practiced in the office. Often, I would come into work in the morning to find Enrique sitting at my desk or Marisol's, unapologetically perusing our Outlook calendars. The public computer that Luz, Marisol, and I used for internet did not allow us to erase user histories, and our computers networked to Enrique's anyway.

Enrique had unique ways of undervaluing the dignity of all the employees. He called Alberto a "fag," a "homo," and a "fat little girl." He branded Marisol an alcoholic, constantly teasing her about drinking forties of malt liquor on her front porch. He berated Luz for being old and poor. These insults flew around the office, over cubicle walls, primarily in one direction: from Enrique outwards. If someone said they needed to get back to work, Enrique would call them unproductive, lazy, and unmotivated, before engaging them again in meaningless or insulting chatter. But the second Ramón entered, Enrique became the picture of professional, treating us with cool distance, as minions accomplishing the tasks he delegated for Ramón.

The narrative became one of Enrique controlling the wayward troops in order to get the important work done—a victimizer/victim narrative. Or did I construct it that way? Vickers (2007, 227) notes that "the literature on workplace incivility specifically comments on the ambiguity of intention for many acts of low intensity, deviant behavior." The more I rehashed events in my head, the more I tried to talk to my colleagues, and the more I isolated myself, the less sure I became that my version of things mirrored reality. Slowly, subtly, my voice began to slip away, and with it, my credibility.

Then:Voices and Silences

July 15th, 2004. I sit on the steps outside AAA, smoking. Marisol has just gone back inside. She came out to bum a cigarette and found me shaking with anger. I tried to vent: Enrique deliberately made me look foolish in front of the president of our board. He appropriated my biggest accomplishment—securing a celebrity NBA player as Grand Marshal for the parade—as his own. I had come away looking inept and Enrique came away smelling like roses. Enrique would be handling all negotiations with said celebrity from now on.

Marisol had been vague, saying that Enrique just acts that way, and that the board has the reputation of an old boy's club. I began to doubt myself. Alberto and Luz come outside and Alberto lights up. Fuck it, I'll have another cigarette, anything to delay going back in there. Luz asks what is wrong and I explain. Alberto repeats his usual mantra: "Don't let Enrique get to you. He doesn't do it on purpose. He can be a jackass, but that's just his way."

Luz looks at me meaningfully: “DON’T talk to Marisol about this anymore. She and Enrique are like best friends. She will tell him everything you say.”
Shit.

Now: Bullying and Efficacy

One of the most challenging aspects of workplace bullying lies in the lack of efficacy of the target—who, robbed of voice and credibility, grows less likely to speak out against the bully. Indeed, bullying precludes the removal of the target’s voice (Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper 2002; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts 2006) in several different ways. No one really wants to hear an individual complaining that someone else picks on them, particularly when those complaints don’t explicitly fall into sexual or racial categories (in which more clarity delineates the boundaries of misbehavior). In this manner, the target of bullying transforms into the role of hypersensitive social hypochondriac (Field 1996, 19-20). Targets often experience social ostracization, positioned as unpopular and weak. Colleagues either tacitly side with the bully or only offer support when the bully leaves the scene (Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik 2010). This removes the target’s recourse in terms of finding social support in coworkers (Field 1996, 81). Finally, continued silencing of the bullying target can create reductions in productivity combined with heightened physiological side effects, which may lead to missed days and deadlines, and then to future sanctions, in a vicious circle (Field 1996; Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper 2002; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts 2006). In these situations, with no other resource, the target often finds no choice but to quit the job—the ultimate level of silencing (Lutgen-Sandvik 2006). The target disappears, becomes removed, invisible. No words tell the story of oppression; no words come to fight back.

As I spent more time at AAA, I grew isolated from my colleagues, our conversations punctured by Enrique. I tried to talk about the ill treatment with Marisol or Alberto, and they shrugged it off, explaining in hurried, breathless side-conversations that “that’s just the way Ricky is, you just have to get used to him.” Once, Marisol joked that I did not understand because “you white girls are so sensitive.” I found myself feeling suspicious of my colleagues, and feeling that they were suspicious of me. I learned quickly that communication regarding Enrique flowed unidirectionally: I would disclose to my colleagues, and rather than reciprocating, my colleagues reported to him what I had said. I learned how to shut up, and to record events in a journal that I kept in my purse. I turn to these notes when I doubt my memories. They paint a picture of a victim of circumstance. In these documents, I still see bullying from one dimension: Enrique as victimizer, me as victim.

The trope of bullying does have some limitations; indeed, it has been described as concealing as much as (or even more than) it reveals (see, e.g., Hutchinson et al. 2006). I interpret this as twofold: that the term *workplace bullying* has come to act as a signifier for all manner of workplace conflict—and as such may mask other forces of discrimination; and that once one utters the term “workplace bullying,” it removes the complicity of the target in the bullying cycle. As such, we often conceptualize workplace bullying in terms of a victim/victimizer relationship, even while much scholarship has been devoted to linking race and gender to bullying in schools. Klein (2006) describes the manner in which social inequality and gender violence play roles in high school bullying. Further, Poteat, Kimmel, and Wilchins (2011) illustrate the relationships between normative masculinity and aggressive behavior in adolescent bullying and homophobia. Workplace bullying literature does not always necessarily complicate bullying scenarios with issues of race, gender, and class. And yet, the construct of workplace bullying—particularly when intersecting with race, gender, and class discrimination—remains the most applicable to this analysis overall.

While gender discrimination, race, and class all played a role in the occurrences at AAA, workplace bullying addresses the increasing and insidious nature of the occurrences, the complicity of all members of the office (including myself) in the system of oppression, the removal of voice of the target. Systemic race and gender discrimination in organizations is similar in many cases to the characteristics of bullying; theorists need to problematize what we call bullying and the various issues that can play into it. With this in mind, I will now complicate the behavior by analyzing it through the lens of gender.

Layer 2: Masculine Identities and Gender Discrimination

Then: Sent Home

August 2nd, 2004. I drive recklessly. My knuckles clench the wheel so hard that they look like sweating white bone. As I accelerate through the highway's S-curves, I wonder, idly, what would happen if I just went straight, hitting the guard rail, sailing into the river dam below.

I resisted our insane “no-internet for women policy” by back-dooring the internet onto my computer. Returning from lunch, I once again found Enrique exiting my cubicle. My computer, which I'm sure I had shut down, glowed. I tried to log on to the internet. The screen blinked:

ACCESS DENIED.

I turned around, knowing Enrique stood behind me. He beckoned me to follow him to the Cage, where he told me I was lucky not to be fired. He whispered that if he wanted, he could surf porn on my computer when I wasn't at the office, creating a trail. He told me he wouldn't tell Ramón, as long as I behaved. Now, I should go home to "think about what I've done."

And I cried. Enrique saw me. One single tear escaped my left eye, which twitches now. My own body leaked, betraying me. Enrique saw through my computer to my weakness.

As I drive, to distract myself from thoughts of vehicular carnage, I make a list in my head, of all the injustices perpetrated by the AAA. This list helps me to regain control.

Now: Gender, Cultural Context, and Organizational Discrimination

At AAA, women employees could not access the internet from their own computers. Ramón required us to dress in skirts, heels, and makeup (which the board supported), while Alberto and Enrique could wear Dockers and button-downs with ties. Marisol and I had no keys for the locked doors in the office, including the back door, the copy room, and the lavatories. Luz had keys because she let people into the building; however, Alberto also had keys, although he had no more (or less) need for them than we did. This effectively meant that Marisol and I had to ask Luz, Enrique, or Alberto for permission to use the bathroom, like children in school.

The relationship between gender and workplace bullying has often been explored, given the abundance of literature on sexual harassment in organizations (Hutchinson et al. 2006; Ortiz and Roscigno 2009). Much of the bullying literature has sought to separate bullying from sexual harassment, because bullying needs its own set of [prosecutable] tenets, which sexual harassment already has. While workplace bullying can occur regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, serving as an all-encompassing definition for organizational abuse, Archer (1999) notes that "if you are in a minority by either gender or race—the likelihood [of being bullied] is dramatically increased" (as cited in Lewis and Gunn 2007, 646).

Masculinity, Machismo, and Manhood Acts

The Calle Amador neighborhood exhibits a marked dominance of men: men own the businesses, men chair the boards and sit on city council committees, and [in our office] men had the private internet connections. Many women do

not work outside the home. Those who work wear skirts, heels, and makeup. Those who do not adhere to these traditional gender roles do not receive respect by the neighborhood. Pompper (2007) theorizes this gender inequity:

Respondents in all cities shared stories of Latinos' gender discrimination. . . . It would appear that machismo is accepted as part of the culture. Respondents said that some . . . firms have dress codes requiring female employees to show their legs. A New York Hispanic corporate practitioner, age 44, explained that she would be fired if she did not wear a dress or skirt. A New York Hispanic account executive, age 28, said a Latino client told her: "Oh, next time why don't you wear a skirt instead of pants." (298-99)

I had never experienced such explicitly sexist attitudes before stepping into the neighborhood, and what is more, I never thought I would experience such inequities.

Much of the intersections between gender and organizational bullying exist in constructions of assertion of masculinity as a cultural norm. Katz and Jhally (1999, 3) describe a crisis in masculinity, in which "cultural definitions of manhood and masculinity are ever-shifting and are particularly volatile in the contemporary era." McGinley (2008, 1155) notes that "Masculinities theory—when combined with . . . new bullying research, feminist theory, and organizational theory—provides the key for understanding the gendered nature of these [bullying] behaviors when the behaviors are not overtly sexual or gendered." Saez, Casado, and Wade (2009, 118) describe an understanding of machismo as traditional masculinity ideology, and even endorsement of hypermasculinity, occurring in heteronormative Latino men, "which has potentially harmful effects for those who endorse it and those around them."

While this discussion by no means serves as the only orientation of Latino men to the gender role ideals (see, e.g., Hurtado and Sinha's 2008 work on Latino feminist masculinities), the endorsement of hypermasculinity has been found to be particularly strong when associated with strong affiliations to Latino as an ethnic identity (Pompper 2007). Wade (2001) finds that Latino men who identify with hypermasculine values associated with machismo tend to engage at higher levels in both gender-role conflict and sexual harassment.

Many of the occurrences at AAA can be interpreted as an outgrowth of a cultural normativity of hypermasculinity that the organization embraced under the guidance of Enrique (and to a lesser—or possibly greater—extent, Ramón). The masculine ideals present in the neighborhood and the office, which indicate a more traditional gender-role perspective as appropriate in

the workplace, allowed Enrique to feel justified in asserting power and control as a means of proving his masculinity while simultaneously demeaning us to ensure that we would be less likely to attempt to take control. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) describe the manner in which men who experience marginalization by class, race, socioeconomic status, and education level signify their masculine selves by asserting compensatory manhood acts over women symbolizing a threat to their power-positions. As I identified as a younger (26-year-old) woman with an advanced degree and Enrique identified as an older (33-year-old) man with an associate's degree, some of the overt bullying behaviors I experienced may be attributable to Enrique's insecurities regarding power, education level, and age.

Schrock and Schwalbe (2009, 287) note that in more traditionally feminine workplaces, "manhood acts . . . have the effect of legitimating occupational segregation by upholding the illusion that men are fit for certain kinds of jobs, especially those that involve the exercise of command." Petrie and Roman (2004, 592) describe how "men that work in mostly-female occupations may experience better labor rewards such as disproportionate representation in supervisory positions, which may result in more autonomy." Such a dynamic may have been at work at AAA. As a nonprofit, AAA is not a typically masculine organization. Ramón and Enrique may have overemphasized traditional gender roles in order to compensate for the lack of perceived masculinity in their professional positions. Ramón's distance from all of us except Enrique, and Enrique's total control of the office outside of Ramón's door, illustrate this cultivated separation of the powerful and the powerless. Ramón did not stoop to interacting with us, while Enrique's acts of dominance established his "similarity to those already at the top of the hierarchy and gets through what others experience as a glass ceiling" (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, 287), or in this case, a glass door (e.g., the door to Ramón's office).

The one man who did not necessarily show loyalty to the masculine hierarchy (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) faced constant humiliation. Alberto, while given more access and freedom than the women employees at AAA, still experienced targeting by Enrique's inappropriate sexual innuendo and steady stream of public insults. Alberto's sexuality embodied a root source of Enrique's jokes. Yet, as both men identified as heteronormative and Latino, this provides interesting food for thought. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009, 288) note that "claiming heterosexual identity as part of a [hegemonic] manhood act may . . . involve homophobic taunting." Enrique perceived of Alberto as a threat to be controlled by asserting dominance; Alberto passively accepted Enrique's dominant moves. Enrique's choice of sexualizing his offensive

comments created a position that reified his position of hypermasculinity, simultaneously expressing homophobia and the ability to dominate Alberto sexually through initiating sexual contact in an overt manner.

Enrique's behavior toward Alberto could be conceived of as sexual harassment, using this definition: "any deliberate or repeated sexual behavior that is unwelcome to its recipient, as well as other sex-related behaviors that are hostile, offensive, or degrading" (Fitzgerald 1993, 1070). Enrique's interactions with women in the office—while sexist at a systemic level—never involved sexual solicitation, unwelcome advances, inappropriate touching, or other "traditional" sexual harassment behaviors (Fitzgerald 1993). I believe that Enrique took care to insult us in manners that, if reported, could not be construed as sexualized in any way. Enrique criticized all of us at various points for being overweight, alcoholic, snobby, sloppy, lazy, and ultimately, expendable. But these barbs only contained a sexual component when lobbed at Alberto.

False parallels. When addressing the research of what happened to me at AAA, I position myself and my colleagues as victims of Enrique's behavior and AAA's toxic environment. This still oversimplifies, avoiding the question of complicity in this environment. While one can easily label the overt sexism at AAA as gender discrimination, I again feel frustrated: this still does not tell the whole story. Above, I attributed Enrique's bullying of me as targeting me because of my position as an educated woman, rather than an educated *white* woman. In making this "choice," my privileged position allowed me to construct myself as a victim of sexism, and even of discrimination, through systemic male dominance (Nakayama and Martin 2007).

Multiple theorists have problematized the positionality of a white feminist subject as the focal point for whiteness studies. Carrillo Rowe (2000, 64) discusses at length the paradox of white womanhood: "White women are racially privileged and gender subordinated." As such, white women may struggle to define the call of oppression in the face of becoming the oppressor when privileged above voices of people of color. Race and racism exist in white privilege paradoxically, insofar as "racism is something that white people can *choose* to deal with or ignore" (Carrillo Rowe 2000, 66, italics mine). Remembering AAA, I experience Carrillo Rowe's paradox; I inhabit a body both privileged and subordinated within the organization.

Through analyzing these experiences through a framework of gender and culture, the toxic workplace of AAA grows more complex. However, layers of systemic gender discrimination and Latino masculinities still only illuminate part of the story, and should not be portrayed as the only relevant factor. Schwalbe (2005) argues that such charges of parallel discrimination ring

false because they fail to take history, context, and differences in structural power into account. While I do claim that some cultural phenomena may account for some of the traditional gender roles in the office and the neighborhood, I want to make clear that I do not wish to claim that gender-based discrimination parallels race- or class-based discrimination.

This analysis must also incorporate issues of race and class, and these issues are not parallel to gender. As Johnson (2005, 167) states, “we can’t lump the two genders together and treat them as an undifferentiated whole, no more than we can act as if all races, classes, and ethnic groups participate and benefit equally in societies and their development.” As such, my own position as the sole white woman in the organization and neighborhood complicates the situation even further. Additionally, my location as a middle-class city native who never entered the Calle Amador neighborhood prior to my employment there further complicates the scenario. As Wilkins (2004, 105) describes, “gender, race, and class categories intersect . . . generating hierarchies both between and within categories.” Adding race and ethnicity to the analysis takes the interpretations of these events in a very different direction.

Layer 3: The Intersections of Culture, Race, and Place at Calle Amador

Twine and Gallagher (2008) describe the importance and of whiteness scholarship that addresses Latina/Latino communities in the United States, and the construction of these communities as living on the margin of whiteness. The authors conceptualize the Latina/Latino community as having

diverse origins . . . fractured not only along the lines of class, education and region but between those who self-identify as “white” and those who embrace a “brown,” black or multiracial identity . . . The complicated meaning of whiteness and white identities to the Hispanic/Latino populations, has been undertheorized by . . . scholars, particularly as it intersects with age, skin colour, tenure, and region in the United States. (Twine and Gallagher 2008, 13-14)

To understand the manner in which race and class intersect in this location, I revisit my initial foray into the Calle Amador neighborhood, contextualized through its place in the larger cityscape. This description helps to analyze the organization for the third layer of interpretation for these events: race, class, and complicity, which simultaneously stabilize and

destabilize (Wilkins 2004) my experiences of bullying and gender discrimination at AAA.

Calle Amador

Then: my first day. March 13th, 2004. I'm running late; NOT a good way to start. After driving around in increasingly stressful circles, I finally see a cracked street sign and turn left on Calle Amador. It's no wonder I got lost: I've only been to this neighborhood once (for my interview). Potholes riddle the street like pockmarks, and the buildings that line both sides wear their brightly colored exteriors like worn shawls: patched, faded, sewn with dark graffiti in places, but still displaying remnants of their original festivity. Business signs speak Spanish only. Traffic rolls at cruising speed: slow-moving low riders with shiny rims and rusted el Caminos with "I love my Spurs" bumper stickers leisurely float by, like floats at a river parade. At a makeshift fruit stand that could be toppled by a sneeze, an ancient woman sells tired oranges, perfumed with exhaust, to a steady trickle of customers. As I pull into the freshly paved parking lot in front of the sparkling, multicolored edifice of my new place of employment, I almost hit a squawking rooster. The building gleams, architecturally stunning, its purple and turquoise trim sporadically laced with small, angry scars of black spray-paint, resembling Japanese characters. Stepping out of the car, I feel an unexpected feeling of exposure, even as I glance surreptitiously around and see no one looking my way. Feeling like my skin glares white in the March sun, I try to open the glass door, and find that I have to be buzzed through and into the cool foyer within.

Now: descriptions and demographics. As of 2000, 58.66% of the population of this large city self-identified as "Latina/Latino or Hispanic," as compared to 31.83% of the population identifying as "white alone" (United States Census Bureau 2000). However, Calle Amador remains an ethnically homogeneous enclave: The vast majority of residents classify themselves as Latina/Latino and have lived in the city for at least three generations. Here, ethnic identity does not equate to a home in the community, which shuns middle- and upper-class Latina/Latinos—particularly those Nacionales who live part-time in the city. People in the neighborhood remain loyal to those who have lived there longest—generations of Calle Amador residents live, work, and marry one another across generations. Those who leave must prove their loyalty to be welcomed back into the community. Even the AAA Board President, who left to pursue an MBA and returned to open a small business, had to provide service to the community for several years before regaining acceptance, although his family had lived there for 80 years. In Calle Amador,

community loyalty trumps social class and education, which trump ethnicity; socioeconomic status contributes to and marks community membership.

Small and Newman (2001, 33) describe how socialization mechanisms create neighborhood and communal insularity through socializing forces, “suggesting that neighborhoods mold those who grow up in them into certain behavioral patterns.” The Calle Amador neighborhood socializes its members through a strong commitment to community loyalty and identification, which can be seen in its large number of local organizations (including AAA). As such, formal community associations such as AAA “foster neighborhood attachment and provide the infrastructure for resource mobilization and contact between residents” (Flippen 2001, 300). The neighborhood pulls together to resist the normativity of race and class privilege, becoming an example of an enclave resisting pressure to assimilate. Through its tight-knit social network, the community protects itself from incompetence. For example, the community does not often give away jobs to noncommunity members or trust outsiders claiming to want to assist the community (Sanders 2002). This community boundedness (Small and Newman 2001) acts as a strengthening mechanism, through which its members resist oppressions of race and class that permeate the city as a whole.

Now: An “Honorary Latina”

Growing up white and middle class in this city, I remained blissfully unaware that communities such as Calle Amador existed. Unconsciously supporting dominant ideologies, I never questioned why I had lived in this city for most of my life but rarely ventured beyond my affluent side of town. My sense of geography had been racialized; I never had to understand the way that race and space work together (Kobayashi and Peake 2000). I believed that my city represented an ethnic utopia, because my privileged gaze allowed me to see (or be blind to) the city this way (Bonilla-Silva 2003). My explanation for this, had I been asked, would have been that my Latina/Latino friends lived in the same neighborhoods where I had lived, granting us the same level of privilege in my mind. The notion that many of my friends had families living on the South and West sides of my city simply did not occur to me, because I never went there.

Growing up, I enjoyed membership in a close-knit, multicultural group of friends. This group, which included Mexican, half-Mexican/half-German, Cuban, Puerto Rican, white, and Chinese cultures, often discussed race and ethnicity. Many of my friends identified with class distinctions rather than race; we all attended a relatively affluent school in a relatively affluent

neighborhood. This integrates with Wilkins's (2004, 106) descriptions of the salience of class on the borderland occupation of Latina/Latinos between blackness and whiteness. Within my circle, I secretly considered myself to be ethnically boring, bland, and cultureless. As Perry (2001, 58) describes, I fell into a position in which "white identity was understood to have no ties or allegiances to European ancestry and culture, no 'traditions.'" I yearned for some kind of ethnic identification, on some level hoping that as a white girl who socialized primarily with people of color (predominantly Latina/os), "some of their coolness would rub off" on me (Wilkins 2004, 111).

Through my in-group, I constructed my own ethnic identity—one in which I could downplay my lack of culture (whiteness) by playing up other aspects of myself. As an alternative, I constructed myself as a pseudo-Latina, code-switching into Spanglish when I interacted with my friends, gaining access to Wilkins' "coolness" without having to relinquish my privileged status. And it seemed to work: my friends dubbed me an "honorary Latina," a badge I wore with honor, not realizing that in enacting these behaviors, I unintentionally engaged in appropriation of my Latina/Latino friends' identities in order to alleviate feelings of cultural meaninglessness (Hughey 2010). I coconstructed an "honorary Latina" status "as a 'remedy' to a negative and empty whiteness," using social relationships with my Latina/Latino friends and claiming "ownership . . . of objects and traditions symbolically coded as 'non-white'" (Hughey 2010, 1299). Unconsciously, I actually engaged in essentializing my friends and the Latina/Latino community in general in the process. And I did not stop there.

Reaching further, I often emphasized my Jewish identity to claim minority status, as taking on such minority-group self-representation allowed me to participate in our banter of self-deprecating ethnic jokes. When my Latina/Latino friends "included" me by making jokes about Jews, I believed I could also make jokes about Latina/Latinos—not realizing that I simultaneously engaged in self-victimization as well as subordination of my friends. I believed that humor worked to establish in-group status, cementing my community membership. Yet my friends and I actually created a sense of false power, in which nondominant individuals feel as if they confront power inconsistencies, but actually reify existing power structures (Kleinman 2007). In telling Jewish jokes, I racialized Jews in a manner that separated me from white privilege but constructed Jews as Ferber's (1997) mongrels, occupying a site of unlivability, and further reifying false parallels. Being Jewish does not equate to being Latina/Latino; it has different relationships to white privilege, and to class privilege. I believed that my friends and I bonded through differentiating ourselves against outsiders, but I [conveniently] forgot that I

had not experienced being *marked* as outsider—I *chose* to construct my Jewishness as salient to my self-presentation.

This detailed discussion of my performances of ethnicity and race as a teenager contextualizes my naivety in accepting a position at AAA, and the arrogance in which I attempted to “cross the color-line” and the class-line of this city. Even as an adult, I still saw myself as the “honorary Latina” my friends had dubbed me 10 years before. Ascribing to Hughey’s (2010, 1299) conception of white debt, I made up for my own perceptions of cultural inauthenticity by “converting relationships with people and objects symbolically coded as non-white . . . into a kind of credentialing form of capital,” that of “honorary Latina”-ness. I believed that this capital afforded me the right to work in the Calle Amador, and the duty to help its residents—never questioning whether or not they wanted or needed my help, or my ability to help them. This interpretive frame implicates my complicity in the circumstances at AAA, and not necessarily in the most flattering light. What doors did my race open and close in the community—why did they hire me to do this job?

Then: The Cage

September 6th, 2004. I sit in a white chair in the middle of the white room. Enrique surrounds me, on all sides at once. He yells. We have ten days until the parade. I lost more hair in the shower this morning. Our Grand Marshal backed out yesterday. The words hit me like pebbles in water, my silence radiating out in waves.

“You think you’ll last the week?” he sneers. I look through the glass wall. Marisol stares back at me. Alberto looks away, embarrassed. My eye twitches. “No Grand Marshal, no job. Don’t come back until you get us a back up. You’re lucky Ramón doesn’t get back to town until tomorrow. He’d have fired you already. I told him he made a mistake when he hired you.”

“We have [I name a former Latino child star from an early 90s TV show] on back up. He is waiting to hear from us,” I whisper.

“How’d you pull that? Did you promise him favors in exchange?” He draws out the word “favors,” faaay-vors, saying it loud enough so that everyone in the office can hear.

Under my breath, I mutter: “What’s your problem? It’s not like I want this job.”

“Speak up,” Enrique’s voice whispers as well. Then, he screams: “YOU think YOU’RE too good for us? I DO your job—you could NEVER do mine. You have NO IDEA what I do here. You think you can drive down to the barrio and do a better job than we do?”

I don't have to take this, I think. But I do. I stare, longingly, at the door. Smiling coldly, he motions towards the exit.

I inch past Enrique through the door, knowing I'm going to throw up. But he has the key to the lady's room. "Can I have the key?" I choke out. My body betrays me again.

"Oh, you mean this?" Enrique pulls out the key and drops it on the floor. I am six years old, playing keep away. I stare at the floor. The room's silence rings.

I kneel down and pick up the key. Then I bolt out the door to the bathroom.

Now: Sense-making

I began to dread work, and could feel a palpable sinking in my stomach that coincided with the first potholes my car bumped across as it turned onto Calle Amador. As the holiday events came together, I slowly fell apart. We had confirmed the floats, and sent out the road map. We trained volunteers. I substituted chain-smoking for eating, and dropped twenty pounds. Ramón remarked on my thinness with approval at a board meeting. He never acknowledged my work, but happily noted my "diet." I booked the hotel, confirmed the new Grand Marshal. I got sick and missed work, which led weight to Enrique's assertions of my incompetence. The work itself—liaising with volunteers all over the city, setting up the parade route, bringing in sponsors, and the like—extracted me from the office for hours at a time, and these became the only periods of my day that I did not dread. Sometimes I dreamt of driving the car into a ditch, a more desirable alternative to returning to the office.

The framework I had been using to understand the world and my place in it no longer felt safe. Rather than entertain the notion that I was, in some way, complicit in the events as they unfolded, I retreated to a state of avoidant hyper-politeness (Moon 1999), in order to preserve my sense of identity and face within the organization. In a last-ditch effort to regain control, I constructed false parallels (Schwalbe 2005); I believed Enrique victimized me through reverse racism. My perception of race's role in our interaction subverted itself. I offer this explanation for my reasoning: for the first time, my skin color, no longer a "benign characteristic" of my identity, marked my exclusion from the office and the neighborhood. In this initial awareness that I could not fit so easily into another culture, I constructed and performed my racial self "as victimized and culturally stigmatized largely because of [my] whiteness" (Hughey 2010, 1295). I believed that my position as an "honorary Latina" entitled me to respect in the office and the

neighborhood. In my mind, the fact that I identified as white and still wanted to spend my time assisting “these people” simply made me a better person. Enrique should have seen that, and treated me with the dignity and respect I deserved. But he did not respect me, and I thought I knew why: when Enrique looked at me, he saw a middle-class white woman who wanted his job. Of course I never would have wanted it; in the back of my mind, I considered Enrique’s job beneath me. I cast the play and my role in it, without any attempt to empathize with Enrique’s position at all. I never asked what really happened at AAA.

Perhaps the answer frightened me.

Now and Then: Driving Away

As I disengaged from the office, I began to view quitting as inevitable (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts 2006, 26). This inevitably became my only option—and yet, the ability to quit a bad job differs vastly from the inability to quit a racist system. I could *choose* to quit my job; I *had* that option.

I waited until the Monday after the successful completion of the parade, gala, and street festival. The envelope felt heavy in my hand; the typeset made of weighted lead. Six months and one week after I had arrived at Calle Amador, I would announce my departure, giving three weeks’ notice. After much rumination, I decided not to blow the whistle on Enrique. Why bother? I conceptualized his hatred of me as subverted jealousy, yet I did not want to be seen as a victim. I looked forward to retreating to my enclave where I did not have to be *so aware all the time*, so aware of my actions and my impositions and my whiteness. I hoped to silence Enrique’s voice in my head; instead, I silenced other targets of bullying, my colleagues. I planned to cover my ears and close my eyes and sing out loud until it all went away. For it would all go away, in time . . . in three weeks . . . maybe a month at most . . . seven years ago. Without looking at Enrique or Marisol, I caught Alberto’s eye. He nodded almost imperceptibly, sadly. He knew.

Then: My Last Day

September 20th, 2004. Ramón looks up at me in surprise. I never enter without knocking. I am dressed in pants, and I wear no makeup. I hand him the envelope, which he does not open.

“Ramón,” I begin, “I . . . I want to make sure that you understand that I appreciate the opportunity so much that you have given me. This letter gives three weeks’ notice. . . .”

He shakes his head once, not breaking eye contact; the gesture cuts me off. “Rachel, Enrique and I have been talking recently. While we thank you very much for your . . . hard work over the past few months, we have decided to eliminate your position. You can go home now.”

[It did not then occur to me that, in firing me, Ramón had made it possible for me to collect unemployment—which I could not have done if I’d quit].

“Your services are no longer required. Enrique will escort you out.”

The door opens as if on cue, and Enrique stands right outside it, arms crossed like a bouncer. He allows me to take my purse, my phone, and my photos of my friends and family. Enrique has removed my disks and CDs already; when I ask for them, he gleefully refuses. Access denied. I feel Marisol’s eyes on me. “Bye, Rachel,” she mouths, giving me a half-smile.

Enrique takes my arm and guides me out of the office, past Luz’s desk, through the security doors. “We will forward you anything that you may not have forgotten if it is yours. The alarm codes have been changed, just in case” [of what? I wonder]. “Thank you for your services.” I know I don’t imagine his smirk this time. He turns and struts back into the office.

Dazed, I turn back towards the building, to find Luz and Alberto standing in front of it.

“I’m so sorry dear, but you know it’s better this way,” Luz says and gives me a hug.

Alberto smiles at me. “We’ll miss you, kiddo,” he says. When he hugs me, he whispers, “I’m not far behind you. Enrique keeps ‘joking’ that I’ll be fired if I don’t sleep with him.”

I almost run over a rooster as I back out of the parking lot, and I wonder, idly, if it’s the same one I almost hit on the way in. Emotions of failure and relief fight at the knots in my neck.

“You think you can drive down to the barrio and do a better job than we do?”

The failure feels bad, but the relief feels worse, a weight that I never intend to express to anyone. A small voice—the voice that names my white privilege as the source of that guilt, the voice that asks how I will ever be able to see my city as an unracial utopia again—mutes (mutates?) as I cross over the highway, turn left off Calle Amador, and drive north.

Now: What Happened to Me at AAA, and How Was I Complicit in the Events?

Unpacking my own very real experiences of workplace bullying continues to present a difficult and multilayered task. I know that Enrique bullied me and several of my colleagues; race and class, however, complicate this situation.

I was hired as the public face of a nonprofit organization in which I was the only all-white employee, in a neighborhood in which myself and the representing councilwoman represented the only all-white constituents. *Why did this happen?* It never occurred to me that Enrique (and Marisol, Alberto, and Luz) might have wondered why the liaison to the outside world, the fundraiser, planner, coordinator, was the *least* representative of the organization. How had Enrique, Ramón's right hand, not represented the image Ramón wanted to send to the greater community—and yet I did?

At the intersection of bullying and racism stands the abuse of imbalanced power structures, ultimately designed to widen the gap between the dominant and the subjugated. This work complicates bullying beyond a simple victim/victimizer dichotomy. My experiences at AAA illustrate bullying for the following reasons: first, the organization fits the description of a toxic workplace (Vickers 2007), with hierarchical communication, a managerial gatekeeper between the “boss” and the staff, and abusive comments a daily part of workplace life. Second, the metaphor of the cage (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts 2006) provides an apt setting for the bullying incidents, in which the target of the bullying grows isolated from her colleagues, muted, and portrayed as a hypochondriac while humiliated in public. Third, the incidents fit into characteristic bullying behaviors: subtle, systematic, and increasing over time, leaving no choice but to quit, directed at removing the voice, credibility, and community of the targets. Fourth, I embodied the physical manifestations of the bullying on my body as a target, including decreased productivity, loss of sleep, weight, and hair (Lewis and Gunn 2007). Finally, the gender discrimination systematized by the organization contributes to my conviction that the events described in this essay indicate a toxic workplace infused with sexist and bullying behaviors.

Workplace bullying—and indeed bullying in general—is a complex phenomenon, shaped by the intersections of race, gender, and social class. Indeed, the story told here illuminates the complexity of bullying as a raced and gendered phenomenon, rather than an oversimplified, victim/victimizer dynamic. Now I see—and hope to illustrate—these problematic relationships as complex and multilayered far beyond my own position as a “victim” and Enrique's as a “victimizer.” The intersectionality of this perspective does not imply that whiteness provides an excuse for being bullied, nor do I believe being bullied excusable because I am white. However, I must implicate myself for several reasons. First, I believed that my “membership card” in my friendship group from high school could purchase Latina/Latino credibility and in-group status in the Calle Amador neighborhood and at AAA. Second, I chose not to notice that Enrique targeted other employees

of the organization, in particular Alberto. Indeed, when I spoke of the situation for years after, I only recognized my own victimization—and I named my bullying as reverse discrimination, without looking at the larger systemic issues at play. Third, I allowed my voice muted by retreating into a typical white-woman response to conflict: trying to please, being polite, and internalizing problems. In this timidity, I avoided helping myself and my colleagues, and I simultaneously reified power structures. Fourth, in truth, I assumed that my class status and education intimidated Enrique and entitled me to his job (which I also implied I could do better than he could). Finally, I enacted the choice to leave the organization and returned to the privilege of graduate school (i.e., my experiment negotiating the “other” was over and I could walk away). One can quit a job; one cannot “quit” an entire system of racial oppression.

Epilogue: Then, Now, and Next Time

In this essay, I have labored to make sense of what happened to me at Avenida Amador Association. I posit that this work contributes to social theory in that it creates space for dialogue that illuminates intersections of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and organizational discrimination. Further, in this piece I attempt to give voice not only to myself and other bullying targets, but to systemic discrimination and the complexities of bullying, power, race and gender. In moving from then to now and next time, I have complicated my initial oversimplification of the bullying experience as victim/victimizer. I now believe that we must examine bullying from an intersectional perspective. From this intersectional lens, my own white privilege highlights my role in the toxic workplace dynamic. I would like to again note that the term workplace bullying contextualizes the *organization* as existing as more than the setting for the events that occurred. We must anchor bullying, racism, gender discrimination, and heterosexism occurred at AAA within the toxic environment of the organization, the hierarchy of power, and the manners through which the organization positioned us against one another. I continue to use this term because the organization of AAA played as much of a role in the events that transpired as any one of the individual actors; I believe that the current work furthers bullying research through conceptualizing bullying as a complex behavioral event in which gendered, racialized, and classed actors participate. As such, context means everything in bullying events; we characterize all interactions in some way by the ubiquitousness of issues of race and gender within the culture of the workplace. Conceptualization of bullying must take into account the manner

through which the contexts of race, gender, and social class shape the interactions and dynamics of the relationships under consideration.

From this work, I draw the following conclusion: the AAA illustrates theoretical definitions of a toxic workplace, where several of my colleagues and I underwent bullying by our manager, Enrique. This mistreatment took several forms. These include classically defined bullying behaviors of escalating verbal and nonverbal violence, designed to remove our collective voice and sense of morale, to isolate us from one another, and to maintain Enrique's position of power. Enrique controlled us through direct insults and covert threats, taking credit for our ideas and work outcomes, and keeping the mechanics of the office opaque rather than transparent. The interactions of gender, culture, class, and race present in the Calle Amador neighborhood complicate these organizational skirmishes. AAA enacted a system that reified traditional gender roles, subjugating women and using techniques of homophobic sexual innuendo to demoralize a male employee, keeping the genders segregated and minimizing female employees' access to technology, authority, and opportunities for professional growth and social networking. When including issues of race and class, this inverts the interpretation of the events, from which I extrapolate that even though I cannot be blamed entirely for the workplace conflict, I must accept responsibility for my role in the events as they unfolded.

For me, the process of writing autoethnography gives me the distance from the situation to regain my voice, providing me with the efficacy that I lost during my employment at AAA. From my privileged position, I had alternatives through which I could escape the toxic environment, and can leverage my privileged voice to call attention to the situation and to analyze it from a safe distance. Gallagher (2000) describes race as central to the systemic structures in which we live our lives, and conceptualizes the white researcher as complicit in such a system. In turning my experiences into research, I enact my own white privilege. Can this research be useful without reifying the systemic structures it seeks to illuminate?

Here, I turn the gaze from the navel to the exterior. As much of this narrative involves engagement with my fears and frustrations during my employment at AAA and throughout my subsequent analysis, I want to conclude on a hopeful note. Therefore, I end this essay with a section titled "Next time," where I lay out what I would do differently and what organizations dealing with intersecting issues of race, class, gender, and culture might do to prevent or help their employees through similar circumstances. Looking back now, I see that I had not prepared myself to engage in the kinds of interactions I experienced in the city I thought I knew so well. I truly hope I am not the only

person who finds such a lack of exposure problematic. In this final section, I use my voice to draw attention to the things that could have gone differently, so that others can learn from my mistakes. I do this in the form of a letter.

Next Time: Knowing What I Know Now

Dear Former Me,

You sit at your desk, frustrated and alienated. Maybe this will help. What I write here I wish someone had told me, or that I had had the forethought and consciousness to see for myself. As you cross borders of race, class, and culture, take the following words to heart.

Whether you asked for it or not, you are privileged by race and class, even in “your city.” Be prepared when entering a situation where you do not occupy the majority position; this will affect your interactions and the way you see and are seen. Being subjugated due to your status in any group happens more often than you may think, given your own position of privilege. Calle Amador represents a community that has been both sequestered from and ignored by the dominant forces in this city (including you); be aware that your good intentions carry the potential to enact violence if not addressed with the local community in mind.

When resistance comes (and it will, in one form or another), do not play the victim. Remember that your voice contains privilege, and this influences the manner in which others treat you. The world sees color, and you must see it too. Pay attention to race, culture, and context in every interaction, and to your role in interpersonal and organizational relationships.

If your position involves working with people from different cultures and classes, be aware that your membership in the dominant culture comes with an ingrained system of privileges that will affect your interactions with your colleagues. You may have been an “honorary Latina” once, but that does not give you cultural capital here.

Do your homework. Ask questions. Learn the history of your position. (If you had asked at your interview, you would have found out that four young women had occupied your position in three years. This might have raised warning bells) Question motives for hiring you; understand why you work where you do, and how you fit into the system of the organization. Learn about the organization, neighborhood, and city where you work, about its history, demographics, and politics. Understand what you have been hired to do.

Widen your lens. Do not treat others the way you expect to be treated; learn how others expect and hope to be treated, and within reason, treat them

that way. Pay attention to the way you treat others, which will impact the way that others treat you.

You have a voice. Use it. Many researchers on bullying agree that targets often comply with bullies in toxic workplaces (Lutgen-Sandvik 2006). Your reactions to discriminative practices, whether they relate to you or to colleagues, help to construct and call out the bully's behavior. If practices bother you, write things down, and account for why they bother you. Your voice has power; use it, but carefully. Do not swallow the injustices carried out on others any more than you would ingest injustices on yourself.

Change never comes easily. When it comes down to it, organizational conflict coconstructs itself. Increasing awareness and mindful communication can help, but sometimes you must go beyond the easily accessible channels to enact change. Write things down. Make connections wherever possible. And always remember that you can choose to leave, but you can also choose to stay, engage, fight it out, and make a difference. These choices and the ability to make them should be taken with caution and care—not everyone has the privilege of choice.

If I knew in 2004 what I know now, I would like to think I would have behaved differently. But hindsight is 20/20, awareness carries a heavy weight, and standing up to oppression, particularly when it implicates you, requires more work than remaining mute. Good intentions do not necessarily lead to good actions. But awareness takes the first step to initiate change.

Good luck.

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1. The location of the city, the nature of the nonprofit (i.e., what the organization was attempting to accomplish), the name of the neighborhood, where it is located in the city, and all of the names of all individuals mentioned have been changed to protect identity.
2. Please note: As I am interpreting and theorizing from my own experience, this work falls under the auspices of oral history or even creative nonfiction, and as such has been granted exemption from the Internal Review Board at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

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Bio

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