Lonely methods and other tough places: recuperating anti-racism from white investments

Gulzar R. Charania
University of Ottawa, Canada

Abstract
This article wrestles with how white domination is reproduced in research methods, questions and priorities in the neoliberal university. Reflecting on the stuck and lonely places in my doctoral project, I consider the challenges of doing research on racism in institutions largely hostile to such inquiries. I also trace the pivotal insights that helped me to get unstuck and less lonely. This involved refusing to allow white audiences and white investments to determine the direction and priorities of anti-racist scholarship. The academy constantly returns us to the authority of these gatekeepers and this needs to be displaced and replaced with forms of accountability that do not consolidate white authority about matters pertaining to racism. The question of how to engage responsibly with the harm of racial violence became a central one as the concerns, priorities and desires of Black and racialised women rerouted questions of audience and accountability in this research project. Instead of being faithful to academic forms and conventions, I follow the insights of Black, Indigenous and women of colour feminisms to argue for a practice of careful and ethical engagement with one another.

Keywords
Doctoral education, loneliness, neoliberalism, racism, whiteness, research methods, higher education, women of colour feminisms, graduate students

Corresponding author:
Gulzar R. Charania, Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, Social Sciences Building, University of Ottawa, 120 University (Room 11002), Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada.
Email: gulzar.charania@uottawa.ca
If I read your article, know that it came at great difficulty. At age 37 and tenured, I can finally admit I really struggle to read academic works, even though I devoured books as a kid. Maybe we need to get better at telling stories in our articles, sometimes? (Dr Zoe Todd tweet, 21 July 2020)

The biggest hurt of my ever experiencing systemic racism, is having nobody to talk to about it. (Miriam, research participant)

This article tells a story about my struggles to make meaning out of racial harm and injury, recounted by Black and racialised undergraduate women in the course of conducting a qualitative research project for my doctoral project. I almost didn’t finish this project or my PhD. Despite the important public and scholarly work on failure, the material realities of living with or acknowledging failures of various kinds are not equally distributed. Too often, white failure gets consolidated into white power or projects of white self-improvement. As the participants in this study, Fighting Feelings: Racial Violence in Everyday Life (Charania, 2015), so forcefully reflected, Black and racialised girls and women rarely have the conditions of life and learning to make mistakes and to be granted multiple opportunities to reflect on and learn from them. Mistakes are often met with harsh punishments and dire consequences. Writing about the precarity of working-class lives, Carolyn Steedman observes, ‘there are people everywhere waiting for you to slip up […] so that they can send you back where you belong’ (1986: 34). Racialised scholars seldom have the space to acknowledge and think publicly about our struggles when our positions in the academy are always already contested and precarious. This is particularly true for those of us who come from working-class families and are the first generation to attend university. Like many others, I have a stash of post-tenure projects that I dream of writing. But I am tired of waiting.

I am writing during a pandemic when uninterrupted work time is scarce. I haven’t seen my octogenarian mother for nearly a year. I am writing when the idea of addressing an article to a handful of other academics feels uninspiring given the urgency of unfolding events in our shared and not shared worlds. What kinds of scholars we want to be and what we want our scholarship to do are always pressing questions – surely a global pandemic compels us to grapple with them and to reconsider academic habits and norms. This article is inspired by Zoe Todd’s epigraph, asking insistently: ‘Maybe we need to get better at telling stories in our articles, sometimes?’. I write this partly as an address to and for graduate students, particularly those of us conducting research on the impacts of racism. Doing this work in institutions largely hostile to these questions is complicated and difficult. In my work with graduate students, I have had occasion to observe the deep forms of isolation with which many graduate students struggle. This loneliness is familiar to me. This article is written, in part, to these students and for our collective loneliness in the academy. It is deliberate in its refusal to follow all of the academic conventions of a standard journal article. It refuses the distinctions between personal and scholarly and insists that there is something to be gained from thinking about how the journal article might be a space for shared intimacy and learning, much like the classroom. In this way, it is deeply informed by feminist attention to
process, pedagogy and form. It does not propose a new theory, great insight or clear argument. Instead, it wonders what we can learn from struggling with and through knowledge production out loud. It is modest in its aim to respond to loneliness – my own, that of graduate students and the participants in this study. Could a journal article help us to examine our loneliness and to feel less lonely or to feel lonely together?

But this article doesn’t only dwell in the loneliness of white supremacy in the academy and its forms and methods. It also considers how we might address our loneliness, not as an individual condition but a collective one shaped by white supremacy. Fighting Feelings revealed itself to me slowly and convinced me that writing only to and for white audiences is a losing proposition. The academy constantly returns us to the authority of these gatekeepers and this needs to be displaced and replaced with forms of accountability that do not consolidate white authority about matters pertaining to racism. While writing to white audiences is sometimes politically strategic and necessary, it has provided little by way of racial justice or remedy; it has given us so little in return. Racism has proven to be remarkably resilient despite many decades of critical research documenting its workings and effects. The only relief I found for the loneliness, the only way to get unstuck, was to stop thinking about the academy and white investments and to think instead with the participants, to stay close to their lives and struggles. Their concerns, priorities and desires rerouted questions of audience and accountability. This was not always easy or comfortable or without complications given the many power asymmetries within and between Black and racialised communities.

The question of what can be learned by being stuck, stalled or failing has been a difficult one. Leigh Patel (2016) argues for the usefulness of pauses in our scholarly work, despite the anxieties of missed deadlines and the push to certain forms of productivity in the academy. Pauses, she argues, can be important sites of learning, revealing among other things the relentless pursuit for data and publications within educational research. Patel reorients our focus to the ‘ethics and responsibilities of educational research’ (2016: 15) in deeply unjust and unequal conditions of formal schooling. While this article wrestles with and makes public some of the difficult pauses and lonely and stuck places of this particular project, there are others, still teaching me the limits of my knowledge in the unfolding and non-linear ways that learning often happens, refusing closure and moving on and the institutional time of past and future research projects.

The project in my head

There is always what we, as researchers, set out to understand and explore and then there is what people bring to the research process. They upend, reroute, demand, amplify, frustrate and affirm. This is exhausting and exhilarating. This research project was no different. As a scholar and teacher interested in cultivating the conditions for social justice and social change, I set out to understand how Black and racialised people develop what France Winddance Twine (2004, 2010) calls racial literacies. Like many scholars and people interested in cultivating the conditions that make social justice possible, I have long been curious about how change happens. How are people changed? How do people change things? How do they develop an attachment to ideas and practices of
social justice? How and what could those of us interested in anti-racism and social change learn from how and what Black and racialised people learn about racism? These questions were motivated, in part, by my work as an instructor in an interdisciplinary social justice programme at the undergraduate level. Over the years, I came into contact with students with varying degrees of fluency around issues of racism and social justice. Some were political in a way that was familiar – they were part of student organising and community groups that were explicit in their social justice mandates. But there was another group of students who were quieter in the classroom but also more tentative in their thinking about racial justice. The ideas were newer to them. Most did not think of themselves as activists, nor were they affiliated with social movements. The everydayness of their struggles that they sometimes shared interested me. I wondered about the genealogies of their political formation.

And so began this project with my wondering about how to reorient my own thinking and teaching around anti-racism from white dominated spaces to spaces full of Black and racialised people. I set out to talk to people not unlike the students with whom these ideas first developed. I wanted to know how they would reflect on their own processes of living with and learning about racism, the formation of their ideas and where they took place. Scholars thinking through issues of social change point out how ‘political horizon[s] get established, consolidated, stabilized, and reproduced over time’ (Gould, 2009: 3) in ways that are useful for my project. I was interested in how the political horizons of Black and racialised people are established and constrained, how the women learn to struggle and survive, remember and almost forget (Charania, 2019). The question of how and in what directions Black and racialised people learn to think, act and live in relation to racism crystallised for me in the classroom. The genealogy of this project lies in my desire to understand the organisation of racism, its complexity and effects in the lives of Black and racialised people, more and better.

**Enter participants**

I conducted interviews with Black and racialised undergraduates over three separate weeks. During the process of interviewing, I kept notes as I interviewed or sometimes, if the time was short, I made audio clips of things to circle back to. After most interviews, I jotted down notes to myself, memorable moments, non-verbal cues, things that stood out, ideas that were starting to repeat themselves and others that were unexpected. I sometimes recorded how I felt, questions that I wished I had asked and things that perplexed me. Transcribing was a very slow and laborious process. However, this also meant that I sat with participants’ lives for a long time. I listened over and over again to stories and memories, to tears and anger, to interpretations and complexities. It was hard to stay with pain for so long, and in slow motion no less.

During the transcription process, I kept a pad of paper nearby and I jotted down themes. This was the first and very rudimentary coding phase of the project. Each interview had a long list of themes and ideas. Some of these initial ones included family stories, the body, the nation, settler colonialism, migration, schools, love and empowerment. As I transcribed, I also created an ongoing journal called General Notes for
Analysis that started to map out ideas across interviews or words that kept coming up. The word ‘crazy’, for example, circulated across interviews in remarkably similar ways. I started to track it. Ideas about putting racism away or quarantining memories of racial harm were also abundant and so I started to notice and organise them together. They were often told in the context of imagining futures, and so ‘futures’ became its own category. There were things that were more anomalous or unexpected. References to religion or spirituality, for example, were few but striking. I had an unnamed category in which I kept track of things that I found moving, wondrous or perplexing.

At this point, I took my rudimentary codes and started to refine and organise them into a larger system of codes. I used NVivo, a qualitative software data management tool, to code all of the interviews into themes and subthemes. This involved taking excerpts of the interviews and using the software to place them into themes. Racism, for example, was broken down into: descriptions, survival strategies, family stories, silence, beauty and body, anti-black racism, Islam and complicities. Other large thematic areas included schools, early memories, family and university. Class, gender and sexuality were also prominent. Often, sections of interviews were placed in multiple codes. This process made it easy not only to retrieve and organise large volumes of life but also to connect them up across interviews. This process clarified the volumes of information that I did have but it also illuminated gaps, things, in retrospect, that I wish I had thought to ask participants. Reflecting on the complexity of conducting qualitative research, Boler (2008) points out that the research process facilitates the emergence of new and often unanticipated questions. As a result, after conducting surveys or interviews, she describes the frustration of wishing that she had asked an additional set of questions to explore something that wasn’t visible in earlier stages of the project. Boler underscores that this frustration can seldom be avoided in the research process. I shared her frustration. While much of my thinking on racism oriented me to the past, I wished that I had asked more about people’s hopes, fears, concerns and ambitions for the future. While I have glimpses into them, racism’s pedagogy extended deeply into participants’ futures – it did something to people’s sense of what their futures could be, who they could be, what was denied to them or possible. How participants imagined their lives, where they would work and live, what they wanted to learn and accomplish, who they wanted to love and what they hoped they might feel, revealed a lot about racism’s power, harm and influence and the struggle against it. I read traces of it, driving struggles and strategies for inhabiting a future, making meaning for the present and living with the past.

The interview transcripts and codes resulted in reams and reams of paper, stacked over and under my desk. I needed a way to see the interviews visually so I also went ‘old school’, using flip charts, index cards and markers. Each interview had its own flip chart with themes outlined on colour-coded index cards. This helped me to see across interviews in ways that stacks of paper sometimes did not facilitate. Depending on what I was worrying about or thinking on, I saw different things when I stood in the hall and looked up and down the flip charts. At some point after all of this, I was supposed to start writing, purposefully. But that’s not what happened. For a long time I was stuck. By that I mean that I wasn’t able to write. Pages stayed blank and days turned into weeks.
and weeks to months. In the business of producing something called a dissertation, blank pages = big problem. The task of thinking with people’s lives proved far more difficult than I expected. At the end of my interview with one of the participants, Monica, we had the following exchange:

M: I can’t wait to read this.
G: I can’t wait to read it either. I’m really interested in stories that will help us to think about how racism and systems of power work and how we can take them apart and change them.
M: I hope I helped in that sense. I think I gave you like 30 stories to tell.
G: People’s lives are very complicated.

As Patricia Williams writes, ‘that life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance’ (1991: 10). Theoretically, I understood this but still, I was unable to write. Each day, I was confronted with the blank page, desperate isolation and a visceral desire to set fire to my desk. Why is this so difficult? Is it this difficult for others, I wondered? The lives of participants did not present themselves as tidy ‘answers to research questions’ (Smart: 2010: 3). I read the work of scholars who documented their own crisis points in writing qualitative work, the ‘moving terrain with no clear goals’ (Smart, 2010: 3) and the many other impasses and tensions in producing knowledge. Reflecting on her writer’s block, M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) considers how particular questions and methodologies limited her ability to know. Instead, she had to confront her motivations and purpose and ‘begin to inhabit that unstable space of not knowing, of admitting that I did not even know how to begin to know’ (Alexander, 2005: 294). Alexander’s process required that she turn away from the ‘enclosure of the academy’. Situating ‘writer’s block as an aspect of alienation’ (Alexander, 2005: 320), Alexander undertook spiritual work and practice, forms of knowledge that were not in books or the analytic tools on which she had previously relied. Why was I stuck? What did I need to get unstuck? I tried to get some purchase on ideas, on stories, on things that could eventually become chapters. People’s lives were not coherent; they were complex. While this may seem obvious, how to engage that complexity and be accountable to it has been another matter (Lather, 2000). In retrospect, the question that I could not adequately answer was: What kind of knowledge production might be useful for or responsible to the issues and struggles that Black and racialised women had encountered, that they were living and remaking? What insights did I have into the questions with which I started out? Was that question still as relevant in the context of the stories I had gathered? What unexpected questions did participants’ lives open up? Was I equipped to respond to them?

I did what I do whenever I am stuck. I read, I organised my house, I did the dishes, I sat with and walked our dog, I talked out loud with interlocutors and tried to think myself through the problem, to walk around it, observe it, give it words. Everything returned me to the participants and our interviews. I started all interviews the same way, asking people to share with me why they decided to participate in this research. In one of the most unexpected answers to this question, Lily, the first person I interviewed, disclosed that while she did want to discuss a very affecting incident of racism, ‘my ulterior motive
for participating in this research is that so many queer women are political and I have to cultivate that a little bit’. As a person who identified as not being very inclined to activism but also being queer, Lily was finding it difficult to navigate the world of queer dating which she described as being very activist focused. Taking part in the interview was a way to make herself more attractive to other queer women. Her plan was to widely advertise her participation in this project to secure some dates. She later said that she hoped she hadn’t offended me through this disclosure and I assured her that she hadn’t, that I quite appreciated her candour. I hope that she found some good dates. Queer loneliness appeared in this and other ways that I didn’t anticipate in the lives of Black and racialised queer women.

In response to the ‘What made you say yes to participating in the study?’ question, most participants came with very specific racist incidents that they had experienced and were keen to discuss and the interview provided them with a place to look at these events; others detailed the importance of research to document and share the ways that racism harms Black and racialised people, speaking to a kind of political, collective and pedagogical purpose that they hoped would result from their participation. In some cases, interviews started with these deeply traumatising and harmful incidents of racist violence that few people had ever spoken to anyone about and in other cases, participants asked that we discuss these later in the interview, perhaps to give them an opportunity to assess their comfort with disclosing these incidents to me in the interviews. As Miriam, a participant in Fighting Feelings, expresses in the epigraph at the start of this article, participants spoke of overwhelming loneliness at living with racist violence and having few or no spaces to have these experiences publicly acknowledged. Many came to the interviews because of the profound isolation of living with racism. The question of how to responsibly represent and respond to loneliness, pain and suffering so abundantly recounted in interviews became one of the central issues with which I was forced to contend.

In her book on Act Up’s fight against Aids, Deborah Gould starts a section with the following heading: ‘When your data make you cry’ (2009: 6). Much of her book turns on the role of emotion in social change and activism. Gould explains that she did not conceptualise emotion to be central to her project at its outset but increasingly, she began to appreciate how pivotal emotions were to social movements, to moving people in particular ways and directions. She describes setting out to explain the origins of Act Up, the political work it did and its eventual decline but ending up with an archive of materials full of death, grief, sadness and loss that often left her ‘thoroughly undone’ (Gould, 2009: 6). For a long time, I also felt undone as Black and racialised women detailed over and over again all of the big and little injuries that were piled up in their lives, the names they were called, the ways they were and are hurt, how their lives were relentlessly limited and constrained through racist practices and how little accountability or acknowledgement they were able to exact for it all. Many of the interviews I conducted were punctuated by long pauses and hesitations. One, two, three, four, I counted silences as I transcribed interviews, poised to catch the words on my computer keyboard when participants resumed talking or forcing myself to let the room be still during interviews. I wondered about all of their meanings. I often asked if participants wanted to terminate the interview,
change its direction or take a pause. Sometimes they did. In recounting racist violence or remembering it, many participants were moved to tears. On occasion, the tears made it difficult to understand the words. I wondered what I was doing. I was concerned that I was probing pain in a voyeuristic and irresponsible way. On the other hand, nearly all of the interviews were full of emotions that I couldn’t detour around. I tried to be respectful of the emotional worlds and responses that came to occupy an important place in the interview process while also trying to think about the responsibility that I had in creating, following or amplifying these conversations. I reminded myself not to assume meanings based on things like tears and I asked all of the participants about the process of being interviewed, including the reasons for their tears.

The question of how to make meaning from the racial oppression which people endure and their responses to it, or what value one could extract for that matter, has been an ongoing preoccupation in writing this project. I simply did not know what to do with so much pain and I was reluctant to master, mine or repurpose it. In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman begins her book with reflections about the ease with which scenes of brutality against enslaved people circulate. She wonders what this violated body does and how people are invited to participate in its circulation. She challenges people to reflect on our relationship to such scenes, our fascination, repulsion, indifference or ability to witness horror in order to condemn it. Does the pain, Hartman wonders, ‘merely provide us with the opportunity for self-reflection’ (1997: 4)? Without collapsing the critical differences between the specificity of Hartman’s analysis and my own, it was clear in my mind at the outset of this project that I was not interested in dredging up the pain of racial violence and injury in the lives of Black and racialised women. The focus of my work was to look at how people had made meaning of such encounters, the conditions that enabled them to apprehend the racialised terrain of their lives and how they mobilised this analysis. In short, I was interested in political formation and the conditions that enable social change to take place. What I didn’t anticipate was that people recounted their analysis of racism and what it taught them through memorable and difficult experiences and stories, and often the interview provided a space for thinking aloud and making sense of racial encounters, many of which the participants had never shared or had themselves not revisited in years, even decades. The interviews turned out to be pedagogical spaces in which meanings could be made and experiences reflected upon. It wasn’t so easy to rush past the pain and harm or to find meaning in it. That racism hurts Black and racialised girls and women seems self-evident. Yet when I started to pay attention to the hurt, it turned out to be a vast landscape that fashioned so many complex practices and insights. What does the pain have to teach us? What did it teach them?

In the midst of this mess, I decided that presenting parts of this project might be helpful. It was a risky strategy. Nothing was coherent. I presented small moments from the interviews, ‘one small scene, one memory, one exchange’ (Lamott, 1995: 18), with no clear destination. In one instance, after I presented at an education conference on the theme of racial violence in schools, a white senior faculty member in the audience asked me how I could establish the veracity of my participants’ experiences or register them as racist without talking to the teachers or administrators involved. She
further expressed her deep discomfort with the naming of these incidents as racist. Her question turns our collective attention to the perspectives and intentions of mostly white teachers and administrators. In other words, they have the ability to authorise, as racist or not, the experiences of Black and racialised students, or at the very least their perspectives are required before any determination can be made of the nature of the incidents. Linda Alcoff’s work helps us to situate the doubting professor’s speech as social, that is, it is authorised and empowered in particular ways because the ‘discursive context is a political arena’ (1991: 15). It is a domain where positionality, power and knowledge are intertwined. The doubting professor comes to the defence of mostly white teachers and administrators in charge of schools, speaking with and for them. Alcoff insists it is not enough to analyse the social location, credentials or content of speech; ‘one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there’ (1991: 26). The doubting professor refuses my words and analysis of racism and domination and harm and works to rescue school officials from a narrative that requires accounting and responsibility for racism. She mobilises method to fortify oppression. The point of recounting this question and comment is to emphasise the standards of evidence that Black and racialised people and scholars are asked to produce when discussing racism. Who needs more evidence of the existence and brutality of white supremacy? As Mills (1997) notes, the power of the racial contract is not only in the political systems that it entrenches and the material consequences that it has. The power of racism lies in its ability to demarcate true from false, to declare what is racist and what is not and to delineate correct ways to interpret our experiences from incorrect ones. This demand to prove that racism is real and really happens continuously orient scholarship to white audiences and arguments, such as the doubting professor.

How many Black and racialised students need to attest to a similar experience of racism and racial injustice to make the accounts believable? What would the counting add up to? Would it provide proof, would the tally of pain and woundedness add up to evidence in the sociological study of education and racism? And if such proof could be offered, the evidence served up, what then? Might it provide justice? Could the pain be traded for proof? Eve Tuck makes an important intervention into what she refers to as ‘damage-centered’ research, that is research that attempts to document pain and brokenness in order to make ‘damage pay off in material, sovereign, and political wins’ (2009: 414). As a strategy to remedy oppression, Tuck appreciates the impulse to both participate in and conduct such research but she also worries about the long-term effects of ‘thinking of ourselves as broken’ (2009: 409; emphasis in original). Centring Indigenous communities in particular, Tuck recognises the need to expose the ongoing colonial consequences of life but she cautions that often the social contexts of damage are acknowledged but then ‘submerged’ (2009: 415). In the end, we are left with damaged people and communities outside of history, colonialism and racism and, as Tuck points out, damage, not sovereignty, is often all that is offered and reflected back to Indigenous peoples. Tuck does not turn away from the consequences of damage but is adamant that collective struggles, hopes and survival temper the focus on damage and its production. Damage is not a quality of variously disenfranchised communities and people; it is an outcome of social and historical conditions, to which Tuck insists that we remain attuned.
Implicit in Tuck’s reservations about damage-centred research is the question of audience, that research is directed to people in charge with the hopes that the damage will be devastating and convincing enough to trade in for some measure of response, if not justice. Sherene Razack similarly points outs that there is an expectation that people of colour will ‘tell our stories for your (white people’s) edification’ (1998: 48). It is perhaps obvious that academic work primarily orients us to other academics in the places we publish, how we write and the communities with whom we are in conversation. But what if the stories aren’t for white people? In her work on social science and educational research, Cynthia B. Dillard situates ‘research as a responsibility, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry’ (2000: 663; emphasis in original). bell hooks similarly centres the importance of turning away from dominant forms of recognition and asks instead what can be gained from turning towards ‘recognizing ourselves’ (1990: 22). The process of conducting this research and listening to the women who participated in it has convinced me of the need to clear space beyond convincing and proving or trying to register our pain in ways that are intelligible or useful for academic purposes. Racism is not a problem of lack of information or even misinformation; it is a problem of white people’s refusal to know. It is, in other words, a problem of power. No amount of evidence will change this. Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explain the normalisation of ‘white logic and white methods’ (2008: 4) in upholding racial domination in the social sciences under the guise of objectivity. In other words, the doubting professor is cast as the eternal adjudicator and gatekeeper of veracity and rigour. The end point of our scholarship only ever becomes to convince this often, but not always, white professor, displacing urgent questions about racial and social justice within and between communities of struggle to which we belong and to which we are committed. We must forever answer her questions. The doubting professor has many guises, some much more sophisticated than the one I encountered. She is only sometimes hostile but other times she appears benevolent, anti-racist even. It is a mistake to look for her. She is not singular. Her power, whiteness, speech and influence are dispersed and institutionalised in journal editorial boards, hiring and promotion committees, granting agencies, curriculum committees, course syllabi, university presses and boards of governors. The power she wields robs us of so much, including all of the other questions that she silences or never even gives us a chance to formulate and dwell on. Wrestling with how academics, including those of us attempting to do anti-racist scholarship, inherit this terrain is critical. When I finally started to understand this and refused her authority, words came – chaotically and clumsily and haltingly.

In the larger project, the tension that I try to balance is one that Tuck outlines, and that is to attend to the damage of racial harm, injury and injustice but to insistently draw attention to the conditions of its production. While it is a mistake to think of people as only hurt or damaged, I found in the work of Michael Dumas (2014) a further way to bridge Tuck’s cautions around damage with Dumas’ careful, nuanced and structural attention to suffering. In his work on schools as sites of Black suffering, Dumas insists that while racial suffering is an entirely predictable outcome of state schooling in America, we know much less about how Black and racialised subjects understand, articulate and know their losses. It is important, he argues, to get under how mundane
their suffering appears and to attend to its social production. Refusing to make suffering the property of individuals, Dumas insists that it reveals instead a collective experience of Black and marginalised subjects organised by and through white supremacy. In the end, I gathered defining and diffuse memories of racial violence that were imprinted in the lives of Black and racialised girls and women. The challenge of working with this method of moments was not to lose the focus on structure. Racial domination eviscerates context, history and relationships of force, demanding that we live in a perpetual atomised present tense. I focus on the moments but follow their patterns and structuring logics so that context, history and events are written together. Racism is not only about Black and racialised people. It is about a system of power that classifies and organises people and knowledge in hierarchies. It distributes opportunities and resources and makes life more liveable for some and less for others. It invites and incentivises Black and racialised people to disavow racism and settler colonial violence or punishes them for refusing to do so. Many participants in this study reflect incisively on how racism and whiteness are organised, its effects and the multiple relations of power in which all people and communities are variously situated. This strategy also resituates the preoccupation with comfortably and easily consuming the experiences of Black and racialised women. It shouldn’t be so effortless. As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang argue, ‘pain is more compelling than privilege, scars more enthralling than the body unmarked by experience’ (2017: 229). It is also, for dominant audiences, more comfortable. As scholars doing critical work in the social sciences and education additionally observe, research conducted with Black and racialised or marginalised peoples is too often simplistically read as being about specific populations under study. In other words, ‘certain critiques of power are flattened into theories of identity’ (Tuck and Yang, 2017: 9; see also: Pillow, 2003). Black and racialised women’s lives are not raw data from which we can efficiently extract experiences to theorise. Instead, they push our analysis and have insight into the organisation and consolidation of racial power in schools, knowledge systems, homes and the nation as well as hopes for a future not so heavily governed by racial violence. Their analysis is theory. My task was to materialise this complexity that I was slowly starting to understand and could now better name. In the end, the study sets out to prove nothing. It assumes the realness of racism and seeks to understand its organisation and impacts. The words continued to come – chaotically and clumsily and haltingly.

In their discussion of American studies in the academy, Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz argue that while scholars concerned with issues of oppression and social justice have rightly criticised neoliberal policies and forces, they often overlook how centrally neoliberalism is ‘learned, legitimated, and implemented’ in the academy (2013: 7). They elaborate that neoliberal assumptions drive what counts as good research, successful arguments and evidence. In particular, they detail how the search for new paradigms and results is not naturally occurring but ‘speaks to desires for novelty, diversion and distraction’ endemic to neoliberal formations (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013: 8). In her examination of how intersectionality and Black feminist theories more broadly are thought to be outdated and disposable in the neoliberal academy, Tiffany Lethabo King reminds us that ‘anxious neoliberal subjects […] are produced by the corporate
university, and in turn reproduce the neoliberal ecologies of the university’ (2015: 118; see also: Bilge, 2013). We are all coerced or seduced to make ourselves ‘legible to power’ (Ferguson, 2012: 38) by reproducing these market-like behaviours with accompanying modes of critique and knowledge production. The ‘neoliberal university’, King observes, ‘does not provide the time to sit and struggle with a concept in order to see it in a new way’ (2015: 134). She cautions that this anxiety can result in graduate students and others aligning their own views and practices with those of the corporate university, namely ‘anti-Black women racism and misogyny’ (King, 2015: 134). Scholars are encouraged to unsettle, critique or discard the work of previous scholars, in order to claim for themselves and their work the status of new or ground-breaking. We have to be unfaithful to these academic conventions, ‘refusing to be tamed by whiteness or the academy’ (Simpson, 2017: 33). King and Tomlinson and Lipsitz reorient our focus from newness and argument, suggesting that it is far more promising ground to think about ‘what we want our work to do’ (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013: 9; emphasis in original). Perhaps relevance is a better horizon than newness. They helped to further word and clarify the research conventions of empiricism, argument and newness against which I kept quarrelling. It was hard to discern the relations of power in which I was embedded, to give them words, form and analysis. It is not lost on me that this is precisely what I was asking my participants to do, to trace how they learned to apprehend, navigate and give words to racial structures. It can be slow, difficult work to see what surrounds us.

Reflecting on how her academic work takes shape, Audra Simpson considers ‘what analysis will look like, or sound like, when the goals and aspirations of those we talk to inform the methods and the shape of our theorizing and analysis’ (2014: 98). Describing the Western academy as a contested ‘place of unwritten rules, old implacable cultures, and high stakes’ (Million, 2014: 35), Dian Million observes the many ways that the theories and intellectual traditions of Indigenous peoples and women are disciplined and discarded. Stories, poetry, memoir, oral traditions, personal testimonies and documentaries, she argues, are ‘felt knowledge’ (Million, 2014: 32) that illuminate structures, histories of pain, relations of settler colonialism and Indigenous survival and futures. It was in the work of Black, Indigenous and women of colour feminisms that I was reminded not to allow the academy’s preoccupation with theory as commodity (Christian, 1988) to drive my work. Many of the people who participated in this research did so because racism had harmed them in immeasurable ways and they wanted to explore, understand and pass on some of these memories and reflections. For them, participating in this research was about protecting other Black and racialised people, keeping them safe and contributing to forms of collective knowledge that help non-white people to better understand and interrupt the racial conditions of their and our lives. Their concern was not with academic audiences, supposedly new and clever arguments or field-changing claims. Creating work that could put the voices, concerns and preoccupations of Black and racialised people in conversation with and for each other became the central focus of my writing and thinking. It took me a while to fully apprehend the very long tradition of knowledge keeping and sharing within Black and racialised communities of which the participants are a part. They reminded me that we inherit not only racism’s harm and humiliation but also the stories of people who name it for us, who
help us to survive and organise and not be alone in our despair. We inherit people who point us to histories gone missing, words hard to find and times difficult to survive. They offer up their despair so that we do not have to speak ours or so that maybe we can. In their lives and analysis, full of complex longings and contradictory desires, they keep us good company and share their own lessons as protection so that ours may not be so hard, lonely or painful. The doubting professor left me with rage and fury. I could not write from this place, it could not sustain or nurture words, but when it was joined by this force of love, the unstuck places loosened and words continued to come – chaotically and clumsily and haltingly.

Eventually I had to sort out how to follow some scholarly conventions but still hold onto what I wanted to do in my research and what I hoped this research might do. I was also caught up in the ‘problem of speaking for others’ (Alcoff, 1991: 5), as we all are in conducting research. As Alcoff urges, we have to assess the relationship of speech to resisting or fortifying oppression. Trying to develop strategies and ways of thinking that worked against mastering the lives of Black and racialised women became one of the guiding principles of this project. This was all part of the slowness of producing knowledge, of being slowed down. In turn, I have written to slow down readers, particularly academic readers. Racism is hard. Reading about it can’t be so easy or efficient. I leave things on the page that aren’t required for a line of thinking. Not everything is tied up and folded into an argument. Academic texts are often confined to certain places in the text or to footnotes so as not to disrupt the flow and emphasis on stories I sometimes wanted to centralise. Academic readers looking to skim the data for analysis may be frustrated. Details about participants’ lives, including their racial backgrounds, family configurations and childhoods, are dispersed slowly throughout Fighting Feelings. This information is not consolidated in a participant overview section or appendix. We still don’t know everything, or sometimes we don’t know everything at once. This often requires reading practices that are slowed down, not linear, and contending with gaps in information, sometimes until later in the chapter or in subsequent chapters. I don’t take the shortest route from ‘data’ to analysis, nor do I see them as being disparate. Sometimes I dwell in stories and other times in faint memories, absences or forced forgettings. Sometimes I refuse to tell. Not everything belongs in or to the academy (Simpson, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2017). Following Avery Gordon (1997), I wanted to afford the people in this research the right to complexity, beauty and care rather than attempting to sum up their lives in the service of academic knowledge production. This was slow and difficult work but I was much less lonely doing it. The things that matter to us, protecting and sharing them, wondering about and writing them, were nourishing and sustaining. And it remains unfinished. I am certain that the participants in this study are not done teaching me. But this is not a success story. The defence of this work never ends and each project has its own struggles and learnings, stalls and sticking points, that require time and thought. Academics invested in keeping racism intact and unnameable are everywhere in the university in great supply. To return to M. Jacqui Alexander’s insight, the ‘enclosure of the academy’ is certainly powerful but it is not inevitable or unchanging (2005: 320). And while we are all differently bound up in the contradictions and complexities of the university, it is surely worth considering all that we have to gain
when we turn away from white audiences, priorities, questions, investments and rewards that keep us divided, lonely and misguidedly ambitious.

Acknowledgements
The author wishes to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their generous feedback and the guest editors of this special collection, Shoshana Magnet and Celeste Orr, for their support and commitment in pulling this issue together in difficult circumstances. The author is profoundly grateful to the Black and racialised women who made this study possible through their participation and also expresses gratitude to Ruthann Lee, R. Cassandra Lord and Gada Mahrouse who dwelled with her, so lovingly and patiently, in stuck and lonely places.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Gulzar R. Charania https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3019-2448

Note
1. Used with permission of the author.

References
Alcoff, Linda (1991) ‘The Problem of Speaking for Others’. Cultural Critique, 20: 5–32. https://doi.org/10.2307/1354221
Alexander, M. Jacqui (2005) Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Bilge, Sirma (2013) ‘Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality From Feminist Intersectionality Studies’. Du Bois Review, 10(2): 405–424. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000283
Boler, Megan (2008) ‘The Politics of Making Claims: Challenges of Qualitative Web-Based Research’. In: Kathleen Gallagher (ed.) The Methodological Dilemma: Creative, Critical and Collaborative Approaches to Qualitative Research. New York: Routledge, pp. 11–33.
Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo and Tukufu, Zuberi (2008) ‘Toward a Definition of White Logics and White Methods’. In: Zuberi Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (eds) White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, pp. 3–27.
Charania, Gulzar R. (2015) Fighting Feelings: Racial Violence in Everyday Life. Toronto: University of Toronto.
Charania, Gulzar R. (2019) ‘Revolutionary Love and States of Pain: the Politics of Remembering and Almost Forgetting Racism’. Women’s Studies International Forum, 73: 8–15. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2019.01.004
Christian, Barbara (1988) ‘The Race for Theory’. Feminist Studies, 14(1): 67–79.
Dillard, Cynthia B. (2000) ‘The Substance of Things Hoped for, the Evidence of Things Not Seen: Examining an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research and Leadership’. Qualitative Studies in Education, 13(6): 661–681. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390050211565
Dumas, Michael J. (2014) ‘Losing an Arm: Schooling as Site of Black Suffering’. Race Ethnicity and Education, 17(1): 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.850412
Ferguson, Roderick A. (2012) *The Reorder of Things: the University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Gordon, Avery F. (1997) *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Gould, Deborah B. (2009) *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up’s Fight Against Aids*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Hartman, Saidiya V. (1997) *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

hooks, bell (1990) *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Toronto: Between the Lines.

King, Tiffany Lethabo (2015) ‘Post-Identitarian and Post-Intersectional Anxiety in the Neoliberal Corporate University’. *Feminist Formations*, 27(3): 114–138. https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2016.0002

Lamott, Anne (1995) *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Lather, Patti (2000) ‘Drawing the Line at Angels: Working the Ruins of Feminist Ethnography’. In: Elizabeth A. St. Pierre and Wanda S. Pillow (eds) *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*. New York: Routledge, pp. 284–311.

Million, Dian (2014) ‘There Is a River in Me: Theory From Life’. In: Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (eds) *Theorizing Native Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 31–42.

Mills, Charles W. (1997) *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Patel, Leigh (2016) *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability*. New York: Routledge.

Pillow, Wanda (2003) ‘Race-Based Methodologies: Multicultural Methods or Epistemological Shifts?’. *Counterpoints*, 195: 181–202.

Razack, Sherene (1998) *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Simpson, Audra (2014) *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake (2017) *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Smart, Carol (2010) ‘Disciplined Writing: On the Problem of Writing Sociologically’. *Realities Working Paper*, 13: 1–13.

Steedman, Carolyn Kay (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman: Story of Two Lives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Tomlinson, Barbara and George Lipsitz (2013) ‘American Studies as Accompaniment’. *American Quarterly*, 65(1): 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2013.0009

Tuck, Eve (2009) ‘Suspending Damage: a Letter to Communities’. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3): 409–427. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15

Tuck, Eve and Wayne K. Yang (2017) ‘Late Identity’. *Critical Ethnic Studies*, 3(1): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.3.1.0001

Twine, France Winddance (2004) ‘A White Side of Black Britain: the Concept of Racial Literacy’. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(6): 878–907. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000268512

Twine, France Winddance (2010) *A White Side of Black Britain*. Durham, NV: Duke University Press.

Williams, Patricia J. (1991) *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.