

JOLLE@UGA[®]

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

“It is the innocence which constitutes the crime”: Interrogating Whiteness in a predominately White high school English classroom

Karla M. Zaccor and Jake C. Thurman

Abstract: We are living through a historical moment that is marked by a protracted struggle for systemic changes in the United States as demanded by the broader Movement for Black Lives, as well as a visible increase in White supremacist violence. Although studying race and racism should have always been part of the kindergarten through twelfth-grade curriculum, it is seen as a more imperative need in our current climate. We argue that White students in particular, as the beneficiaries of White privilege, need opportunities to discuss racism in the classroom. Using Critical Whiteness Studies and antiracist teaching as analytical lenses, this article uses qualitative, ethnographic methods to analyze classroom discussions about racism in a predominantly White high school English/history class in a suburban, private school. Our findings describe the ways the (White) teacher explicitly encouraged White students to interrogate the sources of their discomfort when talking about race and racism, as well as intentionally disrupted White epistemologies through his choice of texts and accompanying discussions. This work serves as an example of the ways Whiteness can be interrogated in literacy instruction, thus equipping White students with the tools to take antiracist action in their lives.

Keywords: antiracist teaching, Critical Whiteness Studies, racial literacy, White students, White teachers



Karla Zaccor is an Assistant Professor of language and literacy in the Watson College of Education at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. Prior to working in higher education, she was a 5th -8th grade teacher for 10 years. Her research focuses broadly on educational equity and antiracist teaching practices in the context of the ELA classroom. Contact the author at zaccork@uncw.edu.



Jake Thurman has been a classroom teacher for two decades and is currently the Dean of Students at University High School of Indiana in Carmel, Indiana. While Jake teaches English and film studies, his primary content area is history with courses in both American and World History. His particular focus in his academic work and in his teaching remains on social histories of the 20th century. Contact the author at jthurman@universityhighschool.org.

Introduction

“They want to run from Berkeley to tell us what to do in Mississippi; let them look instead at Berkeley . . . They come to teach me Negro history; let them go to the suburbs and open up freedom schools for Whites.”
—Stokely Carmichael

The first day Karla visited Jake’s classroom to “case the joint” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 19), she observed students talking about racism in a discussion of Dr. King’s (1994) *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and James Baldwin’s 1962 essay *My Dungeon Shook*, from *The Fire Next Time*. Miles¹, a White² male student, commented that Baldwin might make some White people uncomfortable because he is forcing White people to recognize their privilege. During a break, she overheard George, another White male student, discussing the upcoming Grandparents Day at the school. He jokingly said to his classmate that they should all bring in their most Republican grandparent so Jake could teach them that their whole life is a lie. Karla wondered what she had stumbled into—a classroom where White students were acknowledging their race and class privilege (among other kinds of privilege) and discussing—perhaps even learning to interrupt—racism!

In *The Fire Next Time* (1962), James Baldwin talks about his nephew being born with limitations set on him because he was Black. He says, “This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish” (p. 7). Conversely, the same country that created the conditions for Baldwin’s nephew to perish because he was Black created the conditions where White students could flourish because they are White. Therefore, we

believe the context of the study (predominantly White, suburban private school) is important to a discussion of Whiteness and antiracist teaching because these White students are the beneficiaries of White supremacy. White people must recognize the ways they benefit from Whiteness and play a central role in dismantling racism in the United States. However, as Stokely Carmichael explains above, this means White people should be working in their own communities to dismantle White supremacist systems, rather than “[telling Black people] what to do in Mississippi,” or any other spaces where Black people and other people of color are engaged in and leading work for racial justice.

There is a rich history of White abolitionist activism throughout United States history, from John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry (and his subsequent execution for treason) to Anne Braden’s decades of work for racial justice by organizing Southern Whites. As Rogers and Mosley (2006) argued, this history generally does not make it into school curricula or dominant social narratives. It is important to understand histories of resistance so we can see possibilities for action. This is important for all people, but especially for White people who often feel guilty for their privilege and, without models of antiracist action, can get stuck there. In order to see possibilities for action we must also understand how racist systems are operating.

This study looks specifically at a combined sophomore/junior level English/history class (an elective course called *Race in America*) at a predominantly White, private, suburban high school. The semester-long class was designed and taught by Jake. We investigated the ways in which Jake created a context (through his curricular choices and

¹ All student names are self-selected pseudonyms.

² Our thinking on this has evolved, and may change again because language is constantly shifting. Karla used to capitalize Black and not White. We have decided to capitalize both. We

think leaving White lowercase contributes to the idea that White people are the non-racialized norm. (For more discussion on this, see Ewing, 2020.)

teaching practices) for interrogating the privileges of Whiteness and what it means to strive towards antiracism. White students need opportunities to discuss racism in ELA classes in order to reflect on their Whiteness and develop ideas about what antiracist action might look like in their lives. To support the creation of those opportunities, White teachers need models of what antiracist teaching can look like. Specifically, we are asking:

1. How does the classroom teacher (Jake) engage in antiracist teaching in a classroom of predominantly White students?
2. How can educators decenter White epistemologies in the ELA classroom as a step towards antiracist teaching?

First, we will provide background information about ourselves and why we engage in antiracist teaching practices with White students. This study is not autoethnographic but who we are and why we do this work shapes the study nonetheless. Next, we discuss our theoretical frame which provided us with a lens for analysis. We argue in our literature review that the majority of the existing research that informs this study focuses on either 1) critical teaching practices in K-12 classrooms with predominantly students of color or 2) White pre-service teachers if the focus is on White students. We want to add our voice to the small body of research that focuses on antiracist teaching with White teachers and students in K-12 classrooms. To do so, we describe two key moments from Jake's classroom and analyze how those moments illustrate antiracist teaching practices using a Critical Whiteness lens. Finally, we conclude with the importance of practicing antiracist teaching with white students and call for more research which documents what this could look like in various K-12 settings.

How We Came to This Work

Karla

Karla is a White, heterosexual, cis-gender teacher-educator and researcher. She has been interested in issues of race and racism since she can remember. Her parents were (and still are) activists, and often during her childhood she would go to protests or go with her mom canvassing (knocking on doors) about various issues. The protesting and canvassing were for issues both local and global including gentrification, police brutality, apartheid, local electoral politics, immigration, and school policies. She grew up in Chicago, which is a very segregated city, but the neighborhood in which she grew up was extremely diverse. She went to her neighborhood schools from pre-K through 8th grade. The schools she attended were predominantly Black, but she also had classmates who were Mexican, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese, Laotian, and White. She considers these things foundational to her identity today (see also Morris, 2006). She strives for antiracist action in her personal and professional life, which, for her, means in part amplifying the voices of people of color around her, and decentering herself and her own experiences in the spaces she occupies. She has learned a lot about what it means to be developing antiracist practices, but she is definitely still learning. Karla works in education because she believes we live in a deeply unequal society. While she does not believe education can solve the problems of society, she does believe schooling should serve as a site where those inequalities are interrogated and critiqued, and where students of all ages develop the tools to transform our existing conditions.

Prior to becoming a teacher educator, she was a classroom teacher for ten years. When Karla was a classroom teacher, she primarily taught in schools whose student populations were predominantly Black. Her journey from classroom teacher to teacher

education and research was done partly because she understands that the problem is not with the kids (as dominant narratives would have us believe we need to “fix” Black students or “catch them up” to their White peers); the problem is systemic racism. And it is White people who lack an understanding of the ways racism operates in our society and White people who should be responsible for doing antiracist work. This is also why she was drawn to the work Jake was doing in his classroom.

Jake

Jake is a White, cisgender, heterosexual male who, at the time of the study, was in his sixteenth year as a classroom teacher. Jake views the work of antiracist teaching to be an important part of what it means to teach the humanities. Much of his passion derives from the lack of education he received in this area growing up in predominately White schools. Both his home and school life sheltered him from the realities of living in a nation founded on the principles and systemic practices of White supremacy. History classes in his high school rarely consisted of anything outside of the textbook, so his understanding of the nature of American history, in particular, was steeped in mythology. As such, he moved through the world largely unaware of the ways in which he was benefitting from a fundamentally corrupt system due to his race, gender, class, and sexual identity.

In college at Indiana University, Jake became more interested and well versed in the topic of race in the United States context through study and through life in a much more diverse community. As he left Indiana University and embarked on a teaching career in the same middle school he’d once attended, an urgency to expose students to these topics and this

history became important. His career has since taken him to a graduate history program at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and a job teaching at a college preparatory high school in Central Indiana. Both of these steps in his life coincided with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the more visible and vocal resistance to long-standing oppressive forces in our nation. It has also coincided with the doubling down of those opposed to the changes necessary to bring about a more equitable United States.

The confluence of all of this has invigorated his own continued, and still very much incomplete, education and his deep desire to help his students develop their ideas so they can be part of the external force used to

“History is the tool we have been given, and his job as a teacher is to train students to use it and to feel empowered to wield it against the present.”

arrest the momentum of White supremacy built up over centuries in our country. A fundamental part of this exposure is for them to go through as teenagers what he went through as an adult, which is to wrestle with what it means to be White in America, to become conscious of the

systemic injustices around them, and to equip them with the tools to overcome any fragility within to move through life with an antiracist mindset. These three things, more simply stated as identity, consciousness, and antiracism, provided the framework and the cornerstone to his own growth in the quest to unravel injustices, and they continue to guide the way he works with students toward their own antiracist futures. The goal of learning history is not the oft-cited desire to prevent the mistakes from repeating themselves. For Jake, the goal in this work of studying history is to use our collective experience to actively combat the specters of the past in whatever form they currently haunt our society. History is the tool we have been given, and his job as a teacher is to train students to use it and to feel

empowered to wield it against the present. Only then will they be able to do their small part to cease living in the country they have been handed and start moving toward living in the country they have been promised.

For both of us, we have been thinking about this process of becoming coconspirators (Love, 2019). Love (and many others) have criticized ally-ship as performative, with many White “allies” refusing to decenter themselves or interrogate their Whiteness. Love quotes Whitney Dow, the creator of The Whiteness Project: “Until you can recognize that you are living a racialized life and you’re having racialized experiences every moment of every day, you can’t actually engage people of other races around the idea of justice” (Chiariello, 2016, as cited in Love, 2019, p. 119). We think becoming coconspirators is always a matter of working towards, rather than having arrived. This work of learning and practicing antiracism is full of missteps—missteps which we view as necessary to growth, as risk-taking is an important part of learning, but still important and worth those risks.

Theoretical Frame

Theory is a tool, or a lens. Carruthers (2018) talked about how the lenses through which we look at the world “are crucial, having the power to magnify, create better focus, and correct our vision” (p. 8). In the context of this study, theory helps to focus on the ways systems of oppression function in our society and how those things can be taken up in the classroom. Theory is especially useful here considering the invisible ways these systems operate (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). We are using Critical Whiteness Studies (Giroux, 1997; Roediger, 1991) and racial literacy/antiracist teaching (Guinier, 2004; Kailin, 2002; Mosley, 2010; Rogers & Mosley, 2006) as lenses by which to view the happenings in Jake’s classroom.

Critical Whiteness Studies

Whiteness does not exist outside of the context of oppression (Roediger, 1991). To be White means to be a member of the group who has been responsible for the oppression of those constructed as non-White in order to justify their continued oppression. Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) calls for an analysis of Whiteness as a social and historical construction. Critical Whiteness, taken together across disciplines, aim to “deconstruct Whiteness as a category, delegitimize its neutrality, and reveal ways it operates as an ideology tied to material privilege” (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 410). As Matias (2013a) implores, we cannot solely focus our analysis of race and racism on people of color; White people “need to first learn about their white selves” (p. 78). Multi-disciplinary scholarship in CWS seeks to reveal the ways “Whiteness is both invented and used to mask its power and privilege” (Giroux, 1997, p. 292). Simply stated, CWS seeks to make plain what Whiteness works to keep veiled.

Scheurich and Young (1997) argued that epistemological racism dominates academic research. A basic definition of epistemology is “the nature of knowledge, and the way we acquire it, and most importantly in the process of acquiring knowledge, some of it becomes as a strong true belief” (Labbas, 2013, p. 2). Scheurich and Young (1997) explained, “epistemologies . . . arise out of the social history of a particular social group. Different social groups, races, cultures, societies, or civilizations evolve different epistemologies . . . no epistemology is context-free” (p. 8). Because we live in a society where Whiteness dominates, the dominant epistemologies also stem from White people. Understanding dominant epistemologies as situated in Whiteness is important in K-12 contexts where decisions are made about what is worth knowing, and those decisions are rooted in White epistemologies. An obvious illustration of this is looking at the most

commonly taught texts in high school English classrooms in the United States. In research from 2006, the top ten books taught were all written by White authors, nine of those ten written by White men (Stallworth et al., 2006). Here we argue that the *Race in America* class also worked to decenter White epistemologies.

Giroux (1997) talked about creating spaces “for White students to recognize their own agency and legitimate place with the struggle for social change and an anti-racist society” (p. 285). Although we agree with scholars like Roediger (1991) and Ignatiev and Garvey (1996) that Whiteness is not a neutral category (i.e., Whiteness does not exist separately from oppression), we also agree with Giroux (1997) that the White abolitionist tradition should be considered a touchstone by which White students can imagine their own antiracist actions in our present-day White supremacist society. Although Giroux critiques the notion that Whiteness only exists as a position of domination, we believe these two ideas can coexist. Critical Whiteness Studies is fundamentally important to this work, as it calls for an interrogation of the ways Whiteness is reproduced and contested in everyday life. Although Whiteness and White supremacy are upheld by multiple structures, we are looking here at the ways Whiteness is reconstructed and interrogated in classroom conversation (Rogers & Mosley, 2006).

Racial Literacy and Antiracist Teaching

Mosley (2010) described antiracist teaching as a tool “to practice racial literacy in school settings with children, peers, colleagues, and so forth” (p. 449). In terms of teaching White students, a specific goal of antiracist teaching is disrupting Whiteness (Borsheim-Black, 2015). Guinier (2004) described racial literacy, in contrast with racial liberalism, as requiring us to “rethink race as an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control of both

whites and blacks. Racial literacy offers a more dynamic framework for understanding American racism” (p. 114). Racial literacy is about understanding the ways powerful Whites have used race(ism) as a way to maintain power in American society; antiracist teaching is a tool by which to practice becoming more racially literate.

An important aspect of racial literacy is what Sealy-Ruiz (Future for Learning, 2018) described as the archaeology of the self. Sealy-Ruiz explained that teachers (pre- and in- service) need to interrogate the self in order to think about how issues such as race, class, sexuality, and religion “live in them” (Future for Learning, 2018, 1:13). She asserted that in order for teachers to be open to students’ stories, they must know their own stories. In addition, she noted, “You have to be aware of who you are, what you bring to the classroom . . . if you do not think deeply about how these issues live in you, you will just exact harm . . . particularly if you’re White” (Future for Learning, 2018, 2:12). We must understand how our beliefs and our experiences are shaped by, and shape, our socio-political contexts.

The belief that White teachers need to be better equipped to teach students of color undergirds Kailin’s (2002) antiracist education framework. Kailin (2002), Sealy-Ruiz (2018) and other researchers believed teacher education ought to be restructured so that White pre-service teachers engage in extensive reflection on their own positioning as racialized beings (see also Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2013a; Matias, 2013b; Matias & Mackey, 2016), as well as study the origins and current manifestations of structural racism in the United States. Kailin and others are primarily focused on antiracist teaching for preservice teachers with the thought that we cannot send White teachers out to teach students of color without them having learned about racism and Whiteness. Antiracist teaching is not just about doing right by the students of color in

the room (although that is certainly necessary), however. If the room is all White, antiracist teaching is still needed.

Antiracist education should create the context and knowledge so that students can “reflect upon their own racial positioning and personal experience” (Kailin, 2002, pp. 75-76) and “provide them with the larger societal and historical context of the nature and origins of racism” (Kailin, 2002, pp. 75-76). This is reflected in two of the aims of the class studied here: identity and social consciousness, which should then lead to a third: antiracist action.

Literature Review

We think about antiracist teaching as a kind of critical ELA practice that focuses on understanding the roots of our racist society, so our review of the literature looks at critical ELA practices, also called critical English education in some of the literature. Gordon (2019) described critical English education as a pedagogy that “provides students opportunities to explore diverse perspectives and knowledge forms and to produce critical texts that may potentially enact positive social change in their communities” (p. 4). We are looking here at different classroom practices that fall under this umbrella of critical ELA practices. Our literature review answers our question of what other kind of critical, antiracist teaching practices have already been documented in ELA classrooms?

Importantly, much of the literature we review on critical ELA practices focuses on the literacy lives of students of color, especially Black students, and we are centering the work of Black scholars. This is an intentional choice. Although increasing numbers of White scholars are writing about Whiteness and racism, we know Black scholars have been doing this work for decades. In acknowledgement of this, the majority of the texts the students read in the Race in

America class were also written by Black authors. Black people are the experts in the study of racism in the United States. Also, we live in a racist society where the literacy practices of middle-class White people are held up as the standard, and education as a field (research and teaching) centers Whiteness as the norm. Scheurich and Young (1997) define this as epistemological racism—where what counts as worth knowing is defined by Whiteness. Even though our study is focused on a White teacher and predominantly White students, we are building on the work of Black scholars as a way to push back against epistemological racism and because they are the experts on understanding, living with, and disrupting racism.

Critical ELA Practices in K-12 Schooling

Critical ELA practices aim to foster in students the beliefs and abilities to become change agents. Much of the existing research on critical ELA practices pushed back on the definition of literacy as a collection of skills or an individual practice, which is the way it is taught in many schools in the United States (especially schools attended by predominantly Black and Latinx students in urban areas). Critical ELA practices also involve decentering Whiteness, that is, decentering White ways of knowing and being as normative. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) pointed out that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) do not focus on students’ lived experiences but rather emphasize cognitive perspectives. Acquiring literacy is not a goal in and of itself but rather teachers should focus on how literacy can be used as a tool—including as a tool to enact change.

One of the major areas of research looks at the study of poetry in the classroom as a vehicle for critical ELA practices (e.g., Fisher, 2007; Gibbs Grey, 2020; Jocson, 2006; Kinloch, 2005; Machado, et al., 2017). Researchers have written about slam poetry as a genre and the ways it promotes flexible linguistic

practices (Alim, 2005; Machado, et al., 2017; Muhammad & Gonzalez, 2016). These studies describe instances where teachers create space for students of color to center their languages, literacies, and experiences in the classroom, as well as opportunities to position themselves as agents in their social worlds. In this research, similar to our study, teachers and students are co-constructing environments where White epistemologies are decentered and where developing critiques of inequalities in society are a central focus. We have a rich and growing body of research that documents the ways teachers create these spaces for students of color, and we entered into this project to document what it could look like for White students.

There is a small, but growing, body of research that looks at critical, antiracist teaching in predominantly White, K-12 contexts. Much of this research highlights the multitude of ways White students resist (Nurenberg, 2011; Washington & Humphries, 2011). Other studies examine the more nuanced ways White students engage. For example, Borsheim-Black (2015) described the ways the White high school students and their White teacher both reinforced and challenged Whiteness in their study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960).

Rogers and Mosley (2006) looked at conversations about race and racism in a second-grade classroom—specifically in an all-White guided reading group. Similar to Borsheim-Black (2015), they described nuanced ways second graders disrupted and upheld Whiteness in their small group discussions. For example, in some instances, students “replicated the pattern of the text in terms of not naming whiteness but naming people of color” (Rogers & Mosley, 2006,

p. 476) and in other instances the students made conversational moves in order to position themselves as allies. We are doing this work in order to contribute to the body of research that investigates what antiracist teaching practices looks like in predominantly White, K-12 classrooms. Multiple narratives help other White teachers see possibilities for their own practice—this is our goal in this work.

Antiracist Teaching with Pre-Service Teachers

As mentioned earlier, the majority of research on antiracist teaching with White students has focused on work with pre-service teachers (PSTs), the underlying philosophy being White teachers need to

learn about their own Whiteness and the ways racism operates in our society before they go teach students of color (Matias & Mackey, 2016). New teachers are overwhelmingly White, middle class women (Milner & Laughter, 2015), which indicates a clear need to address racism in pre-service courses.

We understand why there is so much focus on antiracist education for pre-service teachers. Given the Whiteness of teacher education and the increasingly diverse schools they will go teach in, it is imperative PSTs develop an understanding of their own racial identity and the ways racial identity (and other dimensions of identity) play a role in teaching and learning (Sealy-Ruiz, 2017). We also believe that if more White students talked about racism in K-12 schools there wouldn't be so much resistance when PSTs talk about race in their educator preparation programs. And, importantly, we believe White people need to develop a better understanding of racism whether they are going to be teachers or not.

“We also believe that if more White students talked about racism in K-12 schools there wouldn't be so much resistance when PSTs talk about race in their educator preparation programs.”

Mosley (2010) used racial literacy and sociocritical literacy as frames to analyze one preservice teacher's development towards recognizing antiracism as an active (rather than passive) stance. Importantly, Mosley looked across a period of two years and thus was able to see how her participating PST's language and teaching practices shifted over time. Mosley reminds us that we cannot just decide whether someone is or is not antiracist—we need to examine more carefully the learning trajectories of PSTs (and the ways PSTs enact antiracist practices in their placements). As with all learning, learning to be antiracist is not a linear process.

Shah and Coles (2020) argued that focusing on awareness of racism and identity development for pre-service teachers are not enough. They argued that teacher educators also need to focus on “preparing PSTs to identify and address racial phenomena at the level of everyday teaching and learning interactions” (p. 584). Shah and Coles contend that focusing on action will give PSTs concrete tools for disrupting racism in their everyday practice as teachers. Similarly focused on equipping students with concrete tools, Vetter et al. (2018) examined the discourse strategies PSTs used to talk about how their different identity markers (e.g., race and gender) shaped their teaching. In their study, PSTs watched videotapes of their own teaching and discussed them in small groups, thereby explicitly focusing on how these issues connect to their actual (student) teaching practice.

As these studies indicate, White students need critical, antiracist pedagogy. White students are entering into pre-service teaching programs having never critically examined their Whiteness or the ways racism functions in our society. We are glad there is a trend of antiracist teaching developing in teacher education programs. If more K-12 teachers engaged in antiracist teaching practices then teacher educators would not have to start from square one.

What this study adds to the existing body of literature, then, is highlighting the teaching practices of a White teacher with predominantly White, suburban students in an English/history class designed to investigate issues of racism in the United States through the lenses of identity, consciousness, and social justice. This work focuses the importance of not only an antiracist curriculum for White students but also the ways the teacher creates the instructional context for the curriculum to be taken up in meaningful ways. Teacher educators and K-12 educators need portraits of practice for what this looks like in classrooms that are predominantly students of color and classrooms that are predominantly White. We do not want White people (researchers, teachers, K-12 students, pre-service teachers, or anyone else) to think that focusing on issues of race and racism are only important in schools where non-White students are the majority.

Method

This project uses ethnographic case study methodology (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Stake, 1995). Ethnography “involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 1). Notably, ethnographic research involves the systematic collection of data (through participant observation) and a focus on participants' perspectives and context (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997; Emerson et al., 1995). We took up ethnographic methods because we were interested in examining the students' interactions in response to curricular moments rather than an autoethnographic approach, which would have focused more on analyzing Jake's reflective experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997; Emerson et al., 1995).

Karla chose Jake's classroom as the case after meeting at a university-sponsored event and learning about the class he was teaching, *Race in America*. Karla was interested in doing research on antiracist pedagogy in

predominantly White classrooms partly because of her role as a teacher-educator and hearing repeatedly from her White students that they never talked about race prior to coming to college. Karla visited Jake's classroom in order "to transform general questions and interests about the phenomena . . . into particular and answerable questions" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 19). Then we jointly agreed on this project.

Setting

University High School³ is a private high school located in a suburb of a midwestern city. The suburb in which University High School is located is considered affluent. Looking at a discussion of Whiteness and White privilege at a private school in a wealthy suburban community is very different than if this study examined conversations about race in a class of predominantly White students in a poor, rural area, for example.

Students do not have to live in the suburb to attend University High School, but many do. University High School's core values are: diversity, commitment to excellence, commitment to personal responsibility, creativity, stewardship, and mutual respect, support, and trust. University High School is one of the only private high schools in the area not associated with a religious institution, and was also a comparatively new school (founded in 2000). They pride themselves on emphasizing their core values and school community as much as their academics. It is well known in the school community that the curriculum at University High School has a bend towards social justice (particularly in the humanities), so families self-selected to be part of this more progressive school model as opposed to attending one of the more traditional private schools. This means the students (and/or their families) in the

Race in America class self-selected to attend a more progressively-minded school and self-selected to be in this class, an elective. This may be why, in contrast to other studies where White students talked about racism in class (Nurenberg, 2011; Washington & Humphries, 2011), there was not any observable resistance from the students in the *Race in America* class.

According to the school's website, at the time of the study, one-third of the student body of the school was non-White. The *Race in America* class had 17 students, 11 girls and 6 boys. Based on the ways the students self-identified on a survey, 12 of the students were White, 2 were Asian, 2 were Black, and 1 was bi-racial (Black and White). Fourteen of the students were juniors and 3 were sophomores. Karla began data collection at the very end of April, so this paper describes students (and their teacher) at the point in the semester where they had already developed an identity as a class as well as a collection of shared knowledge (e.g., "remember when we read A Case for Reparations at the beginning of the semester.").

This manuscript focuses mostly on Jake's instructional decisions and the environment he co-created with his students in order to have conversations about racism and Whiteness. In highlighting these classroom interactions, we focused on the contributions of three students: George (White male), Alexis (White female), and Hollis (White female). Because we are looking at the ways White students interrogated Whiteness and racism, we focused on the contributions of these White students.

³ University High School is NOT a pseudonym. The second author and the head of school agreed that they wanted the real name of the school used. We confirmed this with IRB.

The *Race in America* Class

The *Race in America* course was co-created by Jake and an English teacher at the school and was co-taught by the two of them the first time it was offered. The course was refined by Jake and taught solely by him the second time, which was the semester data was collected for this project. Jake and the teacher who co-created the class wanted to offer a co-curricular class that would satisfy junior-level requirements for history and English. Both of them were teaching similar content in their separate courses (US history and English), so it seemed like a natural fit to merge them. The creation of the course also aligned with their desire to push the curriculum towards antiracist practices. At the time of this writing, the course has only been offered two times, but it has been favorably received by the school community both times (students elected to enroll in the class, there was a book club that spun off the course and included other students who did not take the class, and several of the class topics have now been incorporated into the 9th grade English curriculum and the 10th grade US history curriculum).

Jake set out to teach the *Race in America* course with a couple of broader goals in mind. The first goal was to make the students more comfortable discussing issues of race, particularly the White students who might be confronted with things that typically cause some White people to become defensive. In order to do this, students not only had to be comfortable with the classroom setting, but they also had to come to a place where they were comfortable with their own authentic reactions to the things they were discussing in class.

To establish this, they spent a lot of time at the beginning of the class discussing the notion of race itself and gave voice to insecurities about these discussions. The exercises they did illuminated for the White students how they are able to turn their back on thinking about issues of race if they choose to, which was useful framing for the rest of the class. They wrote a lot about their relationship to their own race and the notion of race more broadly. Part of this process required Jake to be open to being vulnerable and uncomfortable with the students, to be able to recount his still-incomplete journey to understanding the implications of living in a society founded in the supremacy of the group(s) he counts himself a part of (White, male, cisgender, heterosexual).

“Students not only have to be comfortable with the classroom setting, but they also had to come to a place where they were comfortable with their own authentic reactions to the things they were discussing in class.”

In addition to many supplementary texts, the main texts the students read over the course of the semester were *Homegoing* (Gyasi, 2016), *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1947), *The Fire Next Time* (Baldwin, 1963) and *Between the World and Me* (Coates, 2015). *Homegoing* is a novel that traces the history of

two families from Western Africa during the slave trade to the contemporary United States. *Invisible Man* is centered on a nameless narrator in the 1920s and 30s, a Black man who migrates from the Deep South to New York, who is rendered invisible due to the refusal of White America to see him. *The Fire Next Time* consists of two essays, both addressing racism in the United States and critiquing the ways we think about race and power. It is in the first essay, *My Dungeon Shook*, where Baldwin says, “But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime,” which we have used as the title for this article (p. 5-6). *Between the World and*

Me is written in the form of a letter to Coates's teenage son about the realities (and dangers) of being Black in the United States. The texts were selected because of their direct connections to the topic of race in the United States, and the history of the United States more broadly. Additionally, the texts were chosen to represent different time periods. Jake came up with a longlist, and students spent a few days researching those texts and also adding to the list. The students ultimately voted on which texts to use (via Google Form), with the requirement being to choose at least one book from each designated time period.

Data Collection

Karla attended Jake's class 2-4 times a week for a month (mostly the month of May), for 90 minutes each time ($n = 12$). Karla sat at a table where no students sat and took notes, audio-recorded, and sometimes participated in class. The notes and audio-recordings were later used to construct field notes, focusing primarily on whole class discussions. Students also talked at their tables regularly, but Karla was not a part of and did not record those table-based conversations. Rather, Karla paid attention (in note-taking as well as writing field notes) to the conversations between the teacher and students that occurred in the whole-class setting, which aligned with our research questions. Additional data sources include class readings and other handouts, students' end-of-course written reflections, and a series of conversations Karla and Jake had about particular moments that happened in the classroom where there was evidence of students' grappling with issues of race and racism. Those conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Although our research questions focused on the class discussions, which informed our data collection choices, other student work included running notes on the readings (in Google classroom so Jake could

check them regularly). Importantly, these running notes were also a space for students to pose questions that Jake could then use during class. The students knew Jake would pose the questions for the class without revealing who asked them, which was helpful for quieter students. In addition, students also wrote analytic papers throughout the semester and presented projects that drew on primary and secondary historical sources.

Data Analysis

Karla did initial coding of the field notes and the conversation transcriptions using process coding (Saldaña, 2013). Process coding (i.e., codes that end in -ing) was thought to be a useful tool for coding because our aim was to look at the ways understandings about race and racism were being constructed in class. Process coding names actions, and we were looking for active moments where these understandings were being constructed in the conversations. Examples from this first round of coding were things like "using himself as an example," "making connections across class content," and "using analogies." Included in this first round of coding were also a series of ambiguous, yet related, codes on Whiteness and White privilege. One of the major goals of second round coding, therefore, was to think more carefully about what was going on in those instances and how they were different from and similar to each other, as well as to the other codes.

During second-round coding we narrowed the codes down to those that seemed most connected to the research questions and the theoretical frame. For this paper, we focused on two key moments where Jake and his students were talking through what the privileges of Whiteness mean for them and how they can work towards antiracism. We found these two moments to be rich in terms of looking at how Jake and his students constructed understandings of racism and Whiteness in classroom conversation.

Findings

Our findings are organized around two key classroom conversations. We found these conversations to be good illustrations of disrupting White epistemologies as well as reflecting on Whiteness and thinking about what it means to strive toward antiracist action. These two discussions allow us to analyze 1) an opportunity to further engage with curriculum that is consistent with antiracist practices and 2) how students worked to make sense of their own Whiteness.

Disrupting White Epistemologies: Decentering White Ways of Knowing

In an antiracist classroom, the texts teachers choose are important, but the ways they take up those texts in the classroom are equally important. Here we focus on an example of how Jake used an assigned text to disrupt White ways of knowing and being as normal. For Jake, decentering White epistemologies (Scheurich & Young, 1997) meant centering the work of Black authors writing about their experiences with race and racism. Skerrett (2011) unequivocally states: “Racial literacy instruction requires the use of curricular texts in which race and racism are the focus” (p. 321). As mentioned earlier, the four main texts the students read in the class were written by Black authors. Since the central aim of the class was to understand the nature of racism in the United States, learning *from* Black people was key (this is in contrast to a typical high school classroom, where the main text read about racism in the United States is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written by a White woman, with a White main character). It is also important to have critical conversations about the texts (Schieble et al., 2020).

During one of the class periods Karla was present for, the students were discussing *Between the World and Me*. They were specifically talking about the ways

Coates (2015) described his schooling experiences in Baltimore. Jake hoped a book written fairly recently would illuminate the ways racism operates in present-day society (i.e., not just something that existed prior to the Civil Rights Act being passed). Jake asked students to reflect on the ways Coates’s experience was similar to or different from their own.

Jake: What about the way he described school? You obviously didn’t go to school in Baltimore, but, at some point, most of you attended a larger school than University [their school name]. Okay, let’s start off with what did he say about school.

Alexis: (reading from Coates, p. 26) ‘When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing.’

Jake: Okay, (pause) I wouldn’t think that part would be relevant to [the public high school in the affluent suburb in which their school is located], but do you?

George: It feels relevant to [the public high school], I think so. We talked about that.

Jake: So, your parents told you that school was a place to escape death and jail?

George: No. But like, okay, okay—

Jake: Maybe the sentences before that?

George: Which ones?

Jake: (reading from Coates, page 26) ‘I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see’ . . . so for those things—

George: Yeah!

Jake: I think maybe the question is different. For most of us in the room who are White, I would imagine that question of assault on your body is not one you regularly face. Perhaps it's different for women and other aspects of your identity, but not your Whiteness.

Alexis: But when it says, on page 27 he says (reading from Coates) 'schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them.' So, like a big public school is going to have to be more strict on ways they teach things. Unlike here where we have more freedom.

As a way to respond to the students' surface-level connections (e.g., stating that their experiences in affluent suburban public schools as White students were similar to Coates's experiences with schooling in Baltimore Public Schools), Jake went on to share with the class about how the world Coates is describing is unknown to him, because he grew up in a world "that was directly opposed and, in some ways, may be responsible for the experiences [Coates] is having." He then talked to the whole class about his own teenage experience in a neighboring suburb (and Karla jumped in):

Jake: For me, when I read this, I think about all the times where I did dumb stuff and I never had to think about or worry about consequences for it. One, because of the geographic isolation of living in the suburbs and having the space to be dumb without raising suspicions of anyone. I think about the dumb stuff I would do in high school, with no thought of, I could not come home. The way we would drive around at night, play music loud—we would do all those things. We would have bottle rocket wars in the middle

of the street. Out on the golf course behind one of his friend's houses. The fact that there was a golf course.

Karla: People can't do that in heavily policed neighborhoods.

Jake: Right, where the houses are on top of each other and police are on every corner, I probably wouldn't have even thought to do some of those things. But aside from the stupid stuff there are some other freedoms that I don't think about. Like I remember the moment we were shooting Roman candles at each other. But I don't remember all the moments I was free to do "normal" things which also operated under that same currency of freedom because I was White. I wasn't wealthy but I had wealthy friends. And I think that makes me think of the freedoms and leeway many of us in this room are afforded. These are things Coates didn't have in Baltimore.

Jake often made little "speeches" like this to the class, where he was using his own experiences as a way to model thinking through the ways the class texts were connected (and disconnected) to his own life. This instructional strategy is one of the ones described by Schieble et al. (2020) as a way to practice racial literacy: autobiographical storytelling. They describe the purpose of autobiographical storytelling as "a useful tool for . . . mak[ing] sense of and articulat[ing] how they have experienced various forms of privilege" (p. 47). In this instance, Jake used autobiographical storytelling to illustrate how his childhood was very different from the childhood Coates described. This teaching move was partly a push-back to the connections White students were making with Coates, connections which concealed the racialized differences in their schooling experiences. Jake stressed that he was free to do all of

these things without ever considering any consequences—even to the extent where he does not even remember some of the things he did because it was so “normal” and uneventful.

In this discussion and others, Jake encouraged the students to think not just about their connections with the text, which is a common practice in literacy instruction, but also about the ways many of their experiences *differed* starkly from Coates’s and other Black authors’ experiences. This is aligned with a strategy Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) label racialized reader response. They explain that the traditional practice of reader response asks readers to “focus on universal themes and personal connections in ways that gloss over or distort racial and cultural differences” (p. 46). Instead, racialized reader response calls for students to ask themselves a range of questions, including, “Are there aspects of the text that you find unfamiliar, uncertain, or challenging? What might those aspects reveal to you about your own racial assumptions and perspectives?” (p. 47). Jake was pushing his students to consider how Coates’s description of his schooling differed from their own, more privileged experiences. Jake is also making clear in his example that he experienced freedoms as a teenager *because* he was White in direct contrast to the experiences of Coates, providing a model of this kind of thinking for his White students.

“But Does That Make Us Racist?”: Interrogating Sources of Discomfort

One of the goals of the class was to develop an understanding of the ways racism operates in often hidden ways in our society, which, for the White students, included interrogating the sources of their

discomfort (in relationship to ideas they discussed in class). Rather than getting uncomfortable and disengaging, White students need to see how their discomfort is wrapped up in the hidden privileges of Whiteness.

One of the ways Jake did this was by pushing his White students to sit with their discomfort and think about how that discomfort is shaped by their Whiteness. For example, during one class period, Jake and the students were talking about Dr. King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1963/1994). Jake highlighted Dr. King’s critique of White moderates and, to illustrate present-day examples, he showed a tweet professional football player Drew Brees posted where he said “I agree with the protest, I just don’t agree

with the methods,” in regards to NFL players kneeling during the national anthem. About a week later, the students were in small groups discussing a document called “*What the Muslims Want*” (Muhammad, 1965). One of the things Elijah Muhammad states in this document as an answer to the question of “what do Muslims want?” is that the descendants of slaves should “be allowed to establish a separate state or territory of their own” (Muhammad, 1965, para. 4). While the groups were discussing the document, Jake walked between the groups, listening in on the discussions. At some point, George called Jake over and asked him, “Is saying ‘I understand why you feel that way but I don’t think this is the way to achieve it,’ is that—” George got cut off by Jake’s laughter. George immediately exclaimed, “Oh my God! I’m being just like Drew Brees.” George then added, “I know, I’m being a dumb White person.”

While it was good George had made this connection between his and others’ problematic behavior, Jake’s response encouraged deeper reflection on this

moment and the discomfort it caused. Rather than immediately moving on, Jake encouraged George to think more about his reaction, which then also opened up further conversation among the whole class. When Jake pointed out that James Baldwin also had a critique of what the Nation of Islam wanted, Hollis wondered, “do we [White people] like it coming from James Baldwin better because it’s a softer message?” Then she asked, “Do we have to agree with all of it?” Jake laughed a little and told her she didn’t have to agree with any of it. Hollis responded, “But does that make us racist?” We both laughed. Jake said, “Here’s what you need to get over. And maybe this is too bold. But, we’re all racist. That’s what Kendi was trying to tell us in the opening of that book [*Stamped from the Beginning*].” Jake went on to explain that because we’ve all grown up in a racist society there’s no way for it to not affect us in some way because, in paraphrasing Kendi (2016), “racist ideologies have done their job on us.” Jake continued to explain, “so the question is not whether you’re racist or not.” Kendi explained in the introduction that in order to be antiracist you have to be able to ask these kinds of questions of yourself. Jake then said, “You have to ask yourself where your biases are—does this make me uncomfortable or is this a human rights issue that isn’t pushing us towards an antiracist policy?” Jake’s willingness to delve deeper into his students’ reactions and allow them to think through their misconceptions helped his students understand the pervasiveness of the White moderate position King discussed (and Drew Brees exemplified). It also created space for students to be able to develop their critiques of the readings (and the world) so they could better work towards antiracism.

In this exchange, Jake tried to make sure the White students in the room did not get stuck at worrying about whether or not they look racist. This would be a distraction from deeper reflection. He told them instead they need to do some reflecting when they

realize they come across something that makes them uncomfortable and try to figure out the source of this discomfort. Leonardo and Porter (2010) discussed this as well; they said often in teacher education “the higher goal of understanding and fighting racism is exchanged for creating a space where whites can avoid publicly ‘looking racist’ (p. 139). This is aligned with Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) in that Jake was encouraging students not to retreat back to the safety of not appearing racist but rather interrogate how their racial position informs their discomfort. This is the kind of intellectual work White students (and White teachers) need to engage in in order to work towards antiracist practice. Jake was explicit about his pedagogical choices and how they would lead to that kind of interrogation when he discussed this incident with Karla:

Jake: I think that’s one of those things I’ve thought about a lot when I started the class. And I’m not trying to trick them, so I’m pretty honest with them. I told them, there’s gonna be some things you’re gonna read and you’re gonna have a choice. Are you going to be defensive about it or are you going to actually reflect on it and think about it . . . so I told them they have to be in tune with their own reactions. You hear people say blah blah blah about soccer players and you’re a soccer player, or blah blah blah about White people and you’re White, is your reaction a justified reaction because someone is talking about you and offending you or is your reaction just a gut reaction based on your biases and defensiveness and insecurity about being a part of that group? So, when we started the class and talked about race generally, we talked about that.

Karla: Yeah, I thought it was really interesting what she [Hollis] said. When she said she wants to figure out how to criticize ideas in a

way that's different from what Drew Brees is doing.

Jake: Yeah! And I think that's where working on an antiracist lens—I mean, nobody has perfected it—and then thinking, is my critique antiracist or is my critique racist? And I think being okay identifying and calling yourself a racist is an important step to be able to then figure out how to move on from there.

Karla: Right. When I was sitting in class on this day and I was listening to this conversation, and later when it went to the whole class and pretty much everyone thought that having a separate nation—I can't remember how they worded it—pretty much everyone decided that was unreasonable. I was thinking that I wanted them to interrogate that even more. I think it's because it reminded me of myself. Young Karla would have bristled at that plan because it would have affected me negatively. I would have been like “Wait! I'm one of the good White people! I don't want to lose my Black friends!” and those type of things. Like, I would have been thinking about how it would have affected my life if Black people were like “we just don't wanna f—k with y'all no more, we're done with this.” And I think of this idea from my younger life of wanting to be the exception. And I just wondered if it made them so uncomfortable because they couldn't imagine a world—

Jake: Yeah, it would be like if that actually happened would they feel guilty? Like they were culpable.

In this conversation, Jake discussed how he talked to the students from the beginning of their semester

together about reflecting on their reactions to things, especially when they get defensive. He connected this back to an understanding of identity and being able to question why they might have a reaction to critique of a group they are part of. Karla reflected on her own younger thinking where she would have wanted to be seen as an exception rather than lumped in with “racist White people.” This is critical work for White people engaged in antiracist work to do. This means, in part, that White people need to move past feeling guilty (Matias, 2016) or feeling exceptional (Hayes & Juarez, 2009). This internal work is what Sealy-Ruiz referred to when talking about the archaeology of the self (Future for Learning, 2018). Matias (2013a) also talked about how White people need to “investigate their Whiteness,” because not doing so is how racism/white supremacy get reproduced in our society (p. 68). Although Matias is specifically speaking about White pre-service teachers, we believe this applies to all White people. Jake's insistence that Hollis (and other students) interrogate the sources of their discomfort is a step towards investigating their Whiteness, and also helps create a classroom space where they (students and teacher) are working towards antiracist practice.

Discussion and Conclusion

Jake practiced antiracist teaching in his *Race in America* class by making systemic racism the focus of the course. Importantly, the texts he chose decentered Whiteness and White ways of knowing as normal. He used the central texts to help students develop an understanding of the way racism functions in our society, as explained by Black authors. This focus on unmasking the complex and hidden nature of racism is consistent with our definition of antiracist teaching. He also encouraged the exploration of those texts in ways that encouraged White students to notice the disconnections between the texts and their own lived

experiences, and supported deeper explorations of any personal discomfort the texts raised.

In a predominantly White classroom, antiracist teaching also necessarily involves pushing White students to think and talk about their own Whiteness, which is something White people can always opt out of. Although, as mentioned earlier, there is no such thing as “arriving” at antiracism, the students talked about racism in ways that showed they were trying to learn ways to critique these issues that moved them beyond typical White liberalism, including trying to hold themselves accountable. The students reflected on how the *Race in America* class impacted them at the end of the semester. Alexis wrote:

This class has been one of the most meaningful learning experiences of my life. I have never had to consciously think about race until I took this class and that makes me uncomfortable, because I feel like I’ve been living my life unaware of what’s going on in the world around me. Of course, I had seen reports of police brutality on T.V., but I had always simply blown it off with the mindset that it didn’t/wouldn’t affect me in my “suburban bubble.” Having grown up in a predominantly White neighborhood, I could probably get by, if I had chosen to do so, without having to question my racial identity. Most of my classmates and even some of my best friends will probably live most of their lives without acknowledging the privileges that come with being White. They will probably think, as I did, that because they are not being overtly

racist, they are not being racist at all. The reality is that they will either unknowingly or knowingly hold prejudice views or racial biases. Over the course of this class, I have recalled some of my experiences that exhibit racism in our society . . . Before I took this class, when I would hear teammates or friends make racist remarks or jokes, I would usually not react because I didn’t want to encourage them to continue making jokes, but I also didn’t want to intervene and cause conflict. Now, I feel prepared to explain why I believe their jokes and remarks are wrong in a way that won’t cause them to get defensive but

will get my message across. This class has taught me to become aware of my Whiteness, get rid of the guilt that comes with awareness, and learn how to feel good about it- not like a White supremacist would feel good about their Whiteness- rather in a way that will allow me to help society provide equal opportunities for everybody.

Alexis’s reflection demonstrated she was beginning to think about how her Whiteness impacts her

identity and how she can take action in her own life (e.g., speaking up when people in her social circle say racist things). While it is impossible to “prove” how this course impacted the students, that is also not the goal of this work. Courses like Jake’s *Race in America* class are necessary in all schools, and critically important in schools with predominantly White students who, without this kind of consciousness-raising, could otherwise move around the world without having to consider the ways racism structures our everyday lives. Jake’s teaching practices in the *Race in America* class were a way of continuously poking at the White innocence Baldwin

“We can think about his work with his White students as akin to aerating soil—creating the conditions so roots can grow. Aerating the soil does not mean the work is complete, but it lays the groundwork for things to grow.”

wrote of in 1963. We can think about his work with his White students as akin to aerating soil—creating the conditions so roots can grow. Aerating the soil does not mean the work is complete, but it lays the groundwork for things to grow. We hope that by sharing these stories about Jake’s classroom, other White teachers can see possibilities for enacting antiracist practices in their own classrooms.

Implications

There is a need for more of this kind of work: both teachers in classrooms and research documenting these practices. As we were doing research for the literature review, we found very little research that focused on White teachers, White K-12 students, and antiracist teaching. The studies that exist primarily focus on the resistance of White students in talking about race and racism, the experiences of students of color in predominantly White schooling contexts, or the experiences of White teachers in urban schools teaching predominantly students of color. As the Stokely Carmichael quote at the beginning of this paper suggests, this is work that needs to be taken up by White teachers and researchers in classrooms with predominantly White students. The work documented in this paper is not meant to serve as a recipe, but rather one story of how antiracist teaching can be taken up in a high school English class. We want White educators—researchers and teachers—to see what kind of conversations are possible when racism is centered in an English class. We need more examples of what it means for White teachers to do the work of antiracist teaching in K-12 classrooms.

That being said, looking back through the data it is clear there were also missed opportunities where Jake could have more explicitly encouraged this type of reflection on students’ own racialized experiences. During the discussions in class, the students did not dig deeper to think about the ways their racial identities affected their interpretations of and

responses to the text (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). Jake modeled some of this in his own discourse, but giving students explicit language to help frame the discussion could have helped them engage in a deeper interrogation of their own positionalities in relationship to the text. In other words, while they engaged in thought-provoking discussions about the texts, they did not always explicitly attend to how their racialized experiences positioned them as readers. The discussion of Coates’s schooling experience in public schools in Baltimore would have been a great opportunity to practice this type of self-reflection. Centering the perspectives of Black people through text choices is important for disrupting White epistemologies, but then we have to be conscious of the ways White teachers and students can end up recentering Whiteness in their responses to those texts. It is necessary to continuously interrogate how White ideologies inform reading and responses to reading as part of engaging in the practice of racial literacy (Guinier, 2004).

Although the central texts in the *Race in America* course were written by Black authors and this article focuses primarily on the Black-White binary, which is the foundation for the racial hierarchy in the United States, we do not believe that racism is strictly an issue of Black and White. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic there has also been an uptick in violence against Asian Americans in the United States, specifically Asian American women. An (2020) examined the ways her Asian American child learned about racism in United States history in her social studies class. She found that the elementary social studies curriculum depicted Asian Americans as either invisible in United States history or perpetual foreigners (see also Tuan, 1998), and promoted “hegemonic whiteness” (An, 2020, p. 177). White supremacy and White supremacist violence takes many forms and research on students’ and teachers’ racial literacy development that highlights these complexities is much-needed.

White teachers and researchers who are engaged in antiracist work also need to be continuously reflective. As Jake mentioned to his students, part of what being White in the United States means is that there is no impetus for change or growth; this must be something we do purposefully and voluntarily. White teachers need to consciously work to decenter Whiteness in their courses. This means not only making purposeful selections about what readings we

select, but also how we take them up with our students. Johnson and his colleagues (2017) argued, “ELA classrooms must become revolutionary sites for racial justice by shedding light on Black lives and creating classrooms where Black youth are empowered through Black literacies and tools that uplift and support the humanity of Black people” (p. 62). As our findings indicate, this needs to happen in all classrooms, not just those made up of predominantly Black students.

References

- Alim, H. S. (2005). Critical language awareness in the United States: Revisiting issues and revising pedagogies in a resegregated society. *Educational Researcher*, 34(7), 24-31.
- An, S. (2020). Learning racial literacy while navigating White social studies. *The Social Studies*, 111(4), 174-181.
- Baldwin, J. (1963). *The fire next time*. Dial Press.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1997). *Qualitative research for education*. Allyn & Bacon.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Borsheim-Black, C. (2015). "It's pretty much white": Challenges and opportunities of an antiracist approach to literature instruction in a multilayered white context. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 407-429.
- Borsheim-Black, C. & Sarigianides, S. T. (2019). *Letting go of literary Whiteness: Antiracist literature instruction for White students*. Teachers College Press.
- Carruthers, C. (2018). *Unapologetic: A Black, queer, and feminist mandate for radical movements*. Beacon Press.
- Chiariello, E. (Summer 2016). Why talk about whiteness? Retrieved from:
<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2016/why-talk-about-whiteness>.
- Coates, T. N. (2015). *Between the world and me*. Spiegel and Grau.
- Dyson, A. H., & Genishi, C. (2005). *On the case* (Vol. 76). Teachers College Press.
- Ellison, R. (1947). *Invisible man*. Vintage Books.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ewing, E. L. (2020, July 2). *I'm a Black scholar who studies race. Here's why I capitalize 'White.'* Zora.
<https://zora.medium.com/im-a-black-scholar-who-studies-race-here-s-why-i-capitalize-white-f94883aa2dd3>.
- Fisher, M. T. (2007). *Writing in rhythm: Spoken word poetry in urban classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Future for Learning. (2018). *Yolanda Sealy-Ruiz: The archaeology of the self* [Video]. Vimeo.

<https://vimeo.com/299137829?ref=tw-share>

Gibbs Grey, T. M. (2020). Putting on our pedagogical love vests to affirm the poetic literacies & lives of Black high school students. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 16(2), 1-26.

Giroux, H. (1997). Rewriting the discourse of racial identity: Towards a pedagogy and politics of whiteness. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(2), 285-321.

Gordon, C. T. (2019). Trusting students' voices in critical English education. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 15(1), 1-32.

Guinier, L. (2004). From racial liberalism to racial literacy: Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-divergence dilemma. *Journal of American History*, 91(1), 92-118.

Gyasi, Y. (2016). *Homegoing*. Vintage Books.

Hayes, C., & Juárez, B. G. (2009). You showed your Whiteness: You don't get a 'good' White people's medal. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(6), 729-744.

Ignatiev, N., & Garvey, J. (Eds.). (1996). *Race traitor* (No. 4). Psychology Press.

Jocson, K. M. (2006). "There's a better word": Urban youth rewriting their social worlds through poetry. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 49(8), 700-707.

Johnson, L. L., Jackson, J., Stovall, D. O., & Baszile, D. T. (2017). "Loving Blackness to death": (Re) Imagining ELA classrooms in a time of racial chaos. *English Journal*, 106(4), 60-66.

Kailin, J. (2002). *Antiracist education: From theory to practice*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Kendi, I. X. (2016). *Stamped from the beginning: The definitive history of racist ideas in America*. New York, NY: Bold Type Books.

King, M. L. (1994). *Letter from a Birmingham jail*. Harper San Francisco.

Kinloch, V. F. (2005). Poetry, literacy, and creativity: Fostering effective learning strategies in an urban classroom. *English Education*, 37(2), 96-114.

- Labbas, R. (2013). Epistemology in Education: Epistemological Development Trajectory. *Journal of International Education and Leadership*, 3(2), n2.
- Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. J. B. Lippincott & Co.
- Leonardo, Z., & Porter, R. K. (2010). Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of 'safety' in race dialogue. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(2), 139-157.
- Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Machado, E., Vaughan, A., Coppola, R., & Woodard, R. (2017). "Lived life through a colored lens": Culturally sustaining poetry in an urban literacy classroom. *Language Arts*, 94(6), 367-381.
- Matias, C. E. (2013a). Check Yo'self before You Wreck Yo'self and Our Kids: Counterstories from Culturally Responsive White Teachers?... To Culturally Responsive White Teachers!. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2), 68-81.
- Matias, C. E. (2013b). On the "flip" side: A teacher educator of color unveiling the dangerous minds of white teacher candidates. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 40(2), 53-73.
- Matias, C. E. (2016). "Why do you make me hate myself?": Re-teaching Whiteness, abuse, and love in urban teacher education. *Teaching Education*, 27(2), 194-211.
- Matias, C. E., & Mackey, J. (2016). Breakin' down whiteness in antiracist teaching: Introducing critical whiteness pedagogy. *The Urban Review*, 48(1), 32-50.
- Milner, H. R., & Laughter, J. C. (2015). But good intentions are not enough: Preparing teachers to center race and poverty. *The Urban Review*, 47(2), 341-363.
- Morris, E. (2006). *An unexpected minority: White kids in an urban school*. Rutgers University Press.
- Mosley, M. (2010). "That really hit me hard": moving beyond passive anti-racism to engage with critical race literacy pedagogy. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(4), 449-471.

- Muhammad, E. (1965). What the Muslims want. Excerpted from *Message to the Blackman in America*. Retrieved from <https://www.noi.org/muslim-program/>.
- Muhammad, G. G., & Gonzalez, L. (2016). Slam Poetry: An Artistic Resistance Toward Identity, Agency, and Activism. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 49*(4), 440-453.
- Muhammad, G. E., & Haddix, M. (2016). Centering Black girls' literacies: A review of literature on the multiple ways of knowing of Black girls. *English Education, 48*(4), 299-336.
- Nurenberg, D. (2011). What does injustice have to do with me? A pedagogy of the privileged. *Harvard Educational Review, 81*(1), 50-64.
- Roediger, D. R. (1991). *The wages of Whiteness: Race and the making of the American working class*. Verso.
- Rogers, R., & Mosley, M. (2006). Racial literacy in a second-grade classroom: Critical race theory, whiteness studies, and literacy research. *Reading Research Quarterly, 41*(4), 462-495.
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd edition). Sage.
- Scheurich, J. J., & Young, M. D. (1997). Coloring epistemologies: Are our research epistemologies racially biased?. *Educational Researcher, 26*(4), 4-16.
- Schieble, M., Vetter, A., & Martin, K. M. (2020). *Classroom talk for social change: Critical conversations in English language arts*. Teachers College Press.
- Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2017). Talking race, delving deeper: The racial literacy roundtable series at Teachers College, Columbia University. *Confronting racism in teacher education: Counternarratives of critical practice, 127-132*.
- Skerrett, A. (2011). English teachers' racial literacy knowledge and practice. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 14*(3), 313-330.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Stallworth, B. J., Gibbons, L., & Fauber, L. (2006). It's not on the list: An exploration of teachers' perspectives on using multicultural literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 49*(6), 478-489.

- Tuan, M. (1998). *Forever foreigners or honorary Whites?: the Asian ethnic experience today*. Rutgers University Press.
- Vetter, A., Schieble, M., & Meacham, M. (2018). Critical conversations in English education: Discursive strategies for examining how teacher and student identities shape classroom discourse. *English Education, 50*(3), 255-282.
- Washington, E. Y., & Humphries, E. K. (2011). A social studies teacher's sense making of controversial issues discussions of race in a predominantly white, rural high school classroom. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 39*(1), 92-114.