

“Race Is Not Really a Thing”: Race Talk Dilemmas in Predominantly White Classrooms

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This study is about a seventh-grade classroom in a predominantly White region in the rural northwestern United States where a White teacher led an interdisciplinary unit on African American narratives of enslavement and freedom fighting. Through the lenses of racial literacy, critical Whiteness studies, and discourse studies, authors use data from a co-ethnographic classroom research project to examine how students grappled in talk and written assignments with tensions around how to understand race and racism in the past and present. Findings present three race talk dilemmas—race is not really a thing (but it is), just tell us the right words (but the right words aren’t enough), and we can stop racism before it starts (but can we?)—and offer windows into the tensions present in building racial literacy in predominantly White spaces as a contradictory process, not linear or one-size-fits-all. Discussion suggests that engagement with race talk dilemmas must make space for racial literacy to be seen as a relational process grounded in place and the inclusion of local experiences and histories with race.

Scholarship reveals that conversations about race, racism, and the systems of racial privilege and exclusion foundational to U.S. society are rarely taken up within K–12 classroom contexts (Duncan, 2020; Epstein et al., 2011; Hawkman & Shear, 2020; Howard, 2004; King, 2016; Pollock, 2008; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; San Pedro, 2015; Schultz et al., 2005). If and when topics of race and racism are taught in the classroom, curricular choices

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frequently lack the critical inquiry needed to support youth in understanding the complex role of race in U.S. society (King, 2019). Research on the perceptions of a predominantly White teacher workforce finds that fear, discomfort, and a preoccupation with carefully controlled boundaries and limited treatment of race constrain teachers’ ability to teach about race in the classroom (Brown et al., 2017). The presidency of Donald J. Trump, the 2020 racial justice protests ignited by the police murder of George Floyd, the amplification of rural-urban binaries on race discourses, the 2021 mob insurrection on the U.S. Capitol, and the passing of laws to restrict or ban the teaching of race and racism in public schools are urgent examples of ways race has deep social signification in the United States, even as public discourse seeks to deny the role of racism in U.S. institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Howley & Howley, 2018; Joubert & Lensmire, 2021; Kendi, 2019). It is exceedingly important to understand how students *do* engage with discussions of race when issues of race and racism are approached in purposeful ways. This phenomenon needs to be studied in rural and predominantly White regions where rural populations are blanketly coded as “White” (Lichter, 2012; Petrone & Olsen, 2021) and homogenous (Corbett, 2015), although they are neither. Recent conflict campaigns that have sought to censor teaching about race, racism, and diversity in public schools have heightened the importance of discussing race, especially as many rural schools are

serving students of rapidly diversifying demographics (Pollock et al., 2022).

In this article, we examine how seventh-grade students discussed race in the United States during a 12-week humanities unit. Looking through the theoretical lenses of racial literacy, critical Whiteness studies, and discourse studies, we use data from year one of a multi-year co-ethnographic classroom research project in a rural, predominantly White region of the northwestern United States to illuminate three entangled dilemmas students experienced in understanding how race matters in American life (locally and broadly). We argue that the tensions and contradictions that occurred in the classroom must be wrestled with to develop racial literacies that enable youth to “read race in its psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions” (Guinier, 2004, p. 115). We conclude with recommendations for educators to recognize the pervasiveness of Whiteness as decontextualized ambiguity, attend to diversity in rurality, and expand pedagogical engagement with place-based racial literacies.

Talk About Race in Predominantly White and Rural Classrooms

Research that examines race talk in predominantly White and rural contexts, among students, teachers, and teacher educators alike, highlights considerable complexity in rurality. By rurality, we mean the socially situated nature of human cultural practice in the “sensing of place” (Feld & Basso, 1996), including sociological factors—e.g., low population density, geography, and economic activities such as agriculture and mining—that intertwine to form a dynamic relationship between people and place (Cloe, 2006). For many regions of the United States, rurality has a racially coded meaning that implies White, such as “the real Americans”—i.e., people of European descent who possess conservative Christian values (Lichter, 2012). This discourse normalizes the erasure of people of color and associates property with Whiteness (Chang, 2017). In these regions, White teachers, students, and parents may not see themselves as racialized (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Winans, 2005) and may express beliefs that race holds “little relevance to their daily lives and experiences” (Tieken, 2008, p. 200). White residents’ rural nostalgia statements such as “we want a simpler life” or “our town doesn’t have *that* problem” (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2017, p. 9) are ways of speaking about rural identity that other communities of color and conflate the White settler experience with wholesomeness and White safety. Everyday talk about rurality can function to justify ideological, emotional, and physical distance between White people and people/communities of color (Lensmire, 2017), and it can mask

histories of racism and inequality in rural areas (Tieken, 2014). In other words, the conflation of rurality, nationhood, and Whiteness (Chang, 2017) has powerful reverberations in framing the White imaginary of rural America.

Studies within schools and classrooms in predominantly White, rural places find that race-evasive discourses and White comfort influence how race is and is not talked about in the classroom. C. Lewis et al. (2001) found that White, rural teachers in the Midwest fear that race talk might incite racial conflict or single out the few—sometimes the only—child(ren) of color in their predominantly White classrooms. Lee-Nichols and Tierney (2018) found that White teachers in the Midwest developed White racial identities invested in colorblind discourses. Practices of “not seeing” race even when race was apparent guided behaviors of avoiding conflict with other White people and helped to preserve White social safety. In their study of race talk among rural White students in a southeastern language arts classroom, Groenke and Nesper (2010) found that rural identity binaries associated with race—Black/White, urban/rural—appeared in everyday racial insults, even when White students had little interaction with communities of color. A high school English teacher in rural Montana found that White students experienced emotional and cognitive dissonance when asked to read and analyze texts by rural, American authors of color, and they expressed White guilt and disbelief as they studied the experiences of people of color in the United States (Horner et al., 2021).

Research that documents the experiences of students of color in heavily White and rural spaces reveals that people of color experience rurality in significantly different ways than do Whites (Chang, 2017; Sierk, 2017; Tieken, 2014). Students of color reported everyday interactions in which they were marked as different or “the only” (Ruggiano, 2022), labeled as “un-American” regardless of birthplace and citizenship (Chang, 2017), and “othered” in the social imaginary of rurality (Horner et al., 2021). In their research with Latinx youth in Idaho, Call-Cummings and Martinez (2017) documented Latinx students’ consistently bearing witness to White teachers’ discursive reframing of racial micro-aggressions as “misunderstandings” in school. In her research on the school experiences of youth of color in predominantly White rural contexts, Ruggiano (2022) found that parents of color teach their children strategic individual and familial adaptations to navigate the phenomenon of “onlyness,” an experience that is especially painful and confounding for youth of color who do not live near communities that reflect their racial identity. Studies of Indigenous youth who attend schools in predominantly White towns document the colonial discourses which frame “goodness” as “Whiteness” by teachers and school curriculum (Deyhle, 1998; Sabzalian, 2019). The divergent

experiences of youth and families of color in predominantly White and rural spaces underscore the social-spatial construction of assumed Whiteness at work in the historic and contemporary marginalization of people of color from the rural frame (Tieken, 2014).

To be clear, we do not believe White *and* rural are simply synonymous with racist (Howley & Howley, 2018). Rural, suburban, and urban geographies across the United States commonly promote discourses of colorblindness and “nice talk.” These practices, frequently enacted by Whites, reframe any talk about inequities related to race and racism (past or present) in ways that can be nice—more soothing, avoiding conflict, and/or maintaining the status quo (Castagno, 2019). While we recognize White racial identity is complex (Lensmire, 2017; Tanner 2022), silencing race talk is a problem of White supremacy’s malleability across geographies and U.S. institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). But just how rural youth in a dynamic world, where rural lives are increasingly inseparable from broader networks of power and globalization (Schafft & Youngblood Jackson, 2010), interpret the meaning of race and racism in their lives is little studied.

Theoretical Framework: Racial Literacy, Critical Whiteness, and Discourse Studies

We examine race talk in the classroom first through the framework of racial literacy. The term racial literacy was coined by legal scholar and critical race theorist Lani Guinier (2004). Guinier argued that the discourse surrounding the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision mischaracterized the lexicon of race and racism, rendering racism as a symptom of psychological and interpersonal maladjustment visible through extreme notions of individual prejudices. Through a racial liberal prism, an end to racial segregation and the adoption of colorblind rhetoric should have addressed racial exclusion and ended racism. In effect, this simplistic explanation of race and racism reified systemic structures of racism, while obfuscating how they are recognizable in the public sphere. Guinier offered the notion of racial literacy to provide language that more accurately explains the *complexity* of the social construct of race and racism, not only alive in the American White imaginary, but also in the ideological foundations of legal and economic structures.

In the application of racial literacy to teacher education, Sealey-Ruiz and Green (2015) described racial literacy as a “skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotyping” (p. 60). King (2016) explicated, “racially-literate people can discern how racism, both subtle and overt, influences the way we read the world and identify racist structures,

examine and critique racial hierarchies, and give voice to the experiences of people of color” (p. 1304). Racial literacy as a practice offers tools to interpret and interrupt racism in structuring social, political, and economic opportunity in the United States.

We couple racial literacy development alongside critical Whiteness studies (CWS). CWS provides a framework to examine why White people often believe they are not a part of race when they actively invest in White racial production (Lipsitz, 2006; Tanner, 2022). CWS can enable Whites to examine the ways in which racism has shaped the places and spaces White people access from day to day and the role internalized superiority plays in perpetuating racist values and beliefs (Cabrera et al., 2017), intentionally and unintentionally. For studying race in predominantly White and rural spaces, racial literacy coupled with CWS helps us to critique and challenge prevailing notions of colorblindness and power neutrality in curriculum and classroom dialogues.

Lastly, we used the lens of language and discourse to examine how communicative exchanges, expressed in actions, symbols, texts, and minute-to-minute interactions, reflected distinctive ways of thinking and making sense of our social existence in relationship to others (Gee, 2014). Building from the work of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and educational anthropology, we accept everyday dilemmas of race talk as not “just talk.” As Bucholtz (2011) indicated in her sociolinguistic research on language and race among White youth, “race is not imposed by some invisible power but rather is built moment to moment through social—and particularly linguistic—interaction” (p. 239). Both talk and silence about race are entangled in ideological narratives saturated with political and economic interests (Hill, 2008) and are situated in everyday disputes, tensions, and controversies (Pollock, 2004). To understand how students struggled with multiple meanings of how race mattered/s in the past/present, we used Pollock’s (2004) concept of everyday dilemmas of race talk. Treating classroom conversations over time as part of ongoing, everyday race dilemmas helped us to see and “analyze moments when youth and adults (of all ‘races’) understand and navigate their own issues of racial diversity and inequality” (Pollock, 2004, p. 27) as important processes for imagining a society beyond racism.

The Context

Idaho became a state in 1889, following a steady 19th-century encroachment on Indigenous territories and a cascade of treaty making and treaty breaking with the Tribal nations of the rich Columbia River Basin, the Columbia Plateau, and the Great Basin. Early statehood history of racist politics primarily targeted Indigenous peoples and

Chinese immigrants (Sowards, 2014), as Idaho's African American population was very small during early White settler expansion and post-Civil War reconstruction. Fast forward 90 years, and Idaho was among the last states in the union to adopt Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a national holiday. Idaho's association with an Aryan Nation White supremacist compound drew national attention from 1980 through the 2000s (Gill, 2011). Idaho is demographically among the Whitest and most rural states in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

A state that was rarely mentioned in the national news was increasingly featured during the Trump era, a trend that has continued since the 2020 election. For example, in 2018, images of southern Idaho elementary teachers dressed up as caricatures of Mexican people and as sections of a border wall on which "Make America Great Again" was written made headlines (Rosenberg, 2018). Multiple stories about White people's decisions to relocate to Idaho from multiracial urban areas and about extreme right organizing in Idaho have aired on national broadcasts (Geranios, 2019; Siegler, 2020).

The study took place at Wheatfield K–8 School,¹ a public charter school which was in its ninth year of operation during this study. Wheatfield serves a population of roughly 180 students. Wheatfield adheres to an expeditionary learning (EL) model and is one of three public school options for students in grades 6–8 in a town of roughly 23,000 people. Wheatfield's community is home to the state's land-grant public university. Surrounding Wheatfield are smaller towns, ranging in population from 100 to 1,000 people, which are associated with grain farming, wood harvesting, and Christian conservatism. Based on federal/state reporting categories for 2017, Wheatfield's student demographics were 79% White, 8% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 6% Hispanic, 4% Black or African American, and 3% Asian. Twenty-seven percent of students qualified for free and reduced lunch, and 16% of students received special education services. Wheatfield teaching staff reflected national teacher demographic trends (Irwin et al., 2021): four-fifths of the teaching staff identified as White and female, and one-fifth identified as White and male. The school's demographics included a greater percentage of racial diversity than many schools in Idaho, but the school population remained overwhelmingly White.

Methodologies

Research on classroom race talk emerged through conversation between a teacher, Rebekka, and scholar-educator, Vanessa, in response to curricular tension that Rebekka experienced. During the 2015–2016 school year, Rebekka, a middle school humanities teacher, facilitated

a new interdisciplinary unit designed by Expeditionary Learning for EngageNY, which used poetry, voice, and persuasive language to examine historic freedom fighting in the pre- and post-Civil War periods. After teaching the unit, Rebekka observed that her students seemed shocked to learn that race-based enslavement had ever been institutionally possible in the United States. Rebekka approached Vanessa for curricular suggestions as she grappled with ways to increase students' (lack of) critical historical awareness. At the time, Vanessa was a newly hired professor, and she was restructuring her teacher education programs' engagement with diversity and race in the region. She was struggling to gain buy-in from her teacher education colleagues and pre-service teachers to make racial equity a central part of teacher development. Vanessa was excited by the possibility of engaging middle school students in conversations about race to gain insights and learn from the experiences of local classrooms, which in turn could inform attention to racial equity in teacher education.

Vanessa and Rebekka began planning curricular revisions for the following year's unit to include pedagogical modules on the colonial roots of race and racism, foundations of racist laws in colonial America, primary resource study with the Library of Congress, and contemporary struggles for racial equity. Upon implementing the revised unit in 2016–2017, Rebekka observed that, compared to the previous year, the new content increased complex discussions of enslavement and race in American history. Vanessa proposed collaborative research to continue curricular modifications and to learn from how the classroom community, including us as teachers, grappled with tensions in racial literacy development.²

Committed to research relationships of respect and care with each other and our students (Paris & Winn, 2013), we took what Erickson (2006) described as a collaborative action ethnographic approach as two-way dialogues between teacher-researcher roles. We were not merely trying to "test a case" (e.g., did students learn to describe racism in its many forms?). Instead, we were grounded in a belief that research transforms our lives through negotiation, power sharing, and joint decision making (Schensul et al., 1999). Collaborative ethnography privileged process and offered a long-term view of a local phenomenon to address "specific action-oriented tasks and desired outcomes" (Schensul & LeCompte, 2016, p. 4). In other words, we wanted to carefully learn from what students said, and we wanted to work to improve our ability to desettle White racialized imaginaries in our teaching. This process was

¹ The school name is a pseudonym.

² These data are part of a multiyear dataset which documents student learning. Since the 2017–2018 cycle, two more cycles (2018–2019 and 2019–2020) have been documented and continue to inform the teaching, learning, and social change associated with the unit.

uncomfortable and pushed us in a shared space where we too had to wrestle with how we see, hear, and feel race inequalities in our midst.

Vanessa is a White woman, educational anthropologist, and former K–8 teacher of Indigenous and multilingual youth. She moved to the region with her racially diverse family in 2015. Her two children and husband are citizens of a federally recognized Tribal Nation of the United States. Rebekka is a White woman, mother, and K–8 teacher (and was in her 10th year of teaching at the time of the study). She was born and raised in the Inland Northwest in a family of educators and public servants, earned her bachelor of science degree in geography at Portland State University, and taught in New York City and Los Angeles before returning to the region in 2003. Ben is a White man, was raised in the Pacific Northwest, and was recruited to Idaho as a student athlete. He was completing his undergraduate degree in secondary social studies teaching at the time of this research. Both Vanessa and Rebekka had children who were attending Wheatfield during the time of this data collection, although they were not in the focal classroom.

Doing work in small communities is intimately relational, occurs within power structures, and does not allow for invisibility (White & Corbett, 2014). Vanessa and her partner are academics who regularly speak and taught about racial inequalities in their university courses and statewide forums, yet race remained infrequently discussed in the local K–12 schools. With Rebekka's leadership, we understood that race talk in the classroom could be seen as controversial by both school leaders and parents. Rebekka used her established relationships with Wheatfield families, as a parent and previous K–5 reading teacher, and her habit of regular communication with families to facilitate fluid communication between the classroom and students' homes and herself and the school's director. Families were regularly invited to attend special events related to the class and field trips, an invitation accepted by about a half dozen parents throughout the unit.

As a research team, we also formed close relationships through this process. Rebekka enrolled in graduate school following our first year of research and completed her master's degree in education. She is now a doctoral candidate and has left the classroom to mentor future teachers. Ben completed student teaching at Wheatfield, began and finished his master's degree in education, and is now the humanities teacher at Wheatfield in Rebekka's previous classroom. Vanessa served as major professor to both Rebekka and Ben and continues to collaborate with Wheatfield teachers.

Our relationships also kept us in close contact with many of our study's participants, particularly students of color. Vanessa and Rebekka co-presented with four students at a regional education conference in 2020, and each of us

maintains contact with various students, who are now in high school, through individualized mentorship and involvement with high school clubs. The relationships formed through this research have continued to push each of us to critically read and interrupt how Whiteness silences the importance of race in our environment and our pedagogy.

Participants

The primary participants of this study were students at Wheatfield. All 18 students from the 2017–2018 seventh grade class consented/assented (in accordance with IRB approval) to participate in the research. All the students were between the ages of 12 and 14 at the time of this research. Most had attended school together in the same class since kindergarten. Students self-reported identity categories, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and social class, at the onset of the research. Student descriptors are reported as recorded by them on two in-class surveys (Table 1).

Twelve students in the class identified as White or European, one as African American, three as mixed race/biracial, and one as Native American. Two students did not identify a race or ethnicity. Ten students identified as male and seven as female; one student did not identify their gender. Students included other identity markers, such as *gamer*, *swimmer*, *able*, *middle-class*, *feminist*, *short*, *Jewish*, *kinda poor*, *citizen*, etc. White and middle class were predominant identity markers within the group. Of the 18 students, three consistently identified as people of color in classroom discussions and writing.

Data Collection

Data collection followed the three-month timeline of the unit: November 2017 to March 2018. Data included fieldnotes from classroom observations, student artifacts, pre- and post-unit student surveys, and audio transcripts of class conversations during the unit. Rebekka was the classroom teacher, and Vanessa attended class as a co-teacher and observant participant one or two times per week for 12 weeks. In addition to Vanessa and Rebekka's fieldnotes, Rebekka collected student artifacts at the end of each week. Ben, a secondary education student in Vanessa's teacher education class, was assigned to Rebekka's classroom for a practicum internship during the unit and joined the data collection process during weeks 4 through 12.

Unit Design

The curriculum was built around the essential idea of story as a compelling tool of social change. Students read from texts such as Virginia Hamilton's 1995 collection of Black folktales, *The People Could Fly*, and Frederick

Table 1
Student Participant Demographics

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Additional social categories
Ainsley	Female	Italian, British	
Carl	Male	White	Able, middle class, atheist, straight
Channing	Male	White, Canadian, Australian, American	
Devon	Male	White	
Ember	Female	German, Scottish, Irish, French, English, White	
Ethan	Male	White, secular Jewish	
Flora	Female	African American	
Grayson	Male	White	Sports
Luke	Boy	Italian, WASP	
Madison	Female	Northern European descent	Middle class
Mark	Male	Euro-American	Middle class
Mason	Male		Not rich, gamer
Nate	Male	Native American, White, American	
Nora	Female	Mixed, American	Smart, mid-class, citizen
Parker	Female	Native American	Feminist, all-around activist
Spring			Feminism, LGBT
Stephanie	Girl	“White”	Queer, short, creativity
Stewart	Male	White	Swimmer, able

Douglass’s 1845 memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and they studied written and visual texts of modern-day slavery, abolition, and antiracism. Each aspect of the unit was aligned to state content standards. Organized around a central question—What makes stories powerful?—students analyzed how authors used figurative language, poetic tools, word choice, and persuasive argumentation to convey meaning through three case studies of social change spread over 12 weeks.

1. Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* introduced topic of slavery and abolition through African American personal narratives and poetry.
2. Students read and analyzed excerpts of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick*

Douglass and engaged with primary source documents from the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives (FDI) and the Library of Congress. These materials provided context for Douglass’s life and the abolition movement, including maps, an excerpt from the first book Douglass owned, and letters to subscribers to *The North Star* and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, both newspapers written by Douglass before and after the Civil War.

3. Students focused on the impacts of human trafficking and the work of modern-day abolitionists/activists around the globe, with links to contemporary racial justice movements primarily in the United States.

Rebekka built upon the EngageNY unit through connections with the local university and national experts including FDFI and the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University in Washington, DC. In addition to regular analysis of narrative, poetic, and expository texts, student products included co-authored biographies of modern-day abolitionists/activists nominated by FDFI, a student-designed and -led professional development session for Wheatfield staff on antiracism, and essays about their personal learning growth during the unit. At the time of this data collection (2017–2018), we were all bombarded with images about race—from the tweets of President Trump; the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement; White supremacists marching in Charlottesville, VA; to the demonization of Colin Kaepernick for taking a knee on NFL PrimeTime. Even as we were physically distant from many of the stories flashing across the television, social media, and the radio, the fluidity of rural places and their inseparability from broader networks of power felt palpable and urgent to the unit.

Data Analysis

Transcripts of classroom conversations, text from students' weekly assignments, and fieldnotes were coded using grounded theory coding. We searched for cross-cutting themes that emerged from the data, and we aimed to remain open to all possible theoretical understanding (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). We paired grounded theory with a recursive analysis described by LeCompte and Schensul (2016) that consists of a three-stage analytic process where analysis is done (a) in the field while involved in the data collection process, (b) away from the field soon after completing data collection, and (c) after work in the field is completed and with time away from data collection. For stage one coding, we met weekly throughout the unit to analyze fieldnotes and student artifacts to inform plans for the following week's teaching. Stage two coding involved analyzing transcriptions of classroom conversations, student surveys, fieldnotes, and students' artifacts. At this stage we were able to study all the data in chronological order parallel to the timeline of the unit, scrutinize our initial codes, and raise new questions beyond the ones guiding the initial inquiry. In stage two, we noted codes deemed marginal in initial coding and merged some codes, noting their redundancy (Saldaña, 2021). For example, "uncomfortable," "never seen racism," and "unsafe" were three different initial codes associated with race talk which we combined into the first race talk dilemmas in second stage coding. The recursive process with different stages of coding (inductive and deductive) helped us to collaboratively scrutinize our own assumptions about the data during and after data collection. After concluding the unit, we allowed space between ourselves, our second

stage coding, and the data. This approach led to stage three coding, months removed, when we took a finer comb to focus on discourse patterns within our themes. Third stage analysis gave us a sense of thematic unity in cross-cutting paradoxes in terms of how students talked about race across the unit. During this stage we engaged in member checks, when we consulted with participants and invited their input, particularly from participants whose quotes are featured in this article. We additionally shared a white paper with the Wheatfield principal. These validity checks invited negotiation and helped us to clarify the translatability of our data to community members, practitioners, and existing theory (Schensul et al., 1999).

Findings

Race Dilemma 1: Race Is Not Really a Thing (But It Is)

"Everybody Gets Defensive": Colorblindness or Violence

On the first day of the unit in November 2017 students were given a written survey and asked to discuss the question, "What experiences do you have talking about race (at home and at school)?" Most students self-reported they "don't talk about race" at home or in school and offered explanations such as, "I was taught everyone is equal," and "[Race] is not really a thing growing up." When asked to identify where race did show up in their lives, many students, including students of color, shared that they had not personally experienced racism ("I haven't seen it directly"), but they had seen examples or heard stories ("I have heard some racist jokes on TV shows, but most of the time it's just joking"). A few White students mentioned in writing that they associated racism with specific individuals with remarks such as, "our President is racist," or they named race by stating that they had friends who were upset that Black football players would not stand for the national anthem. Scattered comments and mixed messages about race not really being a thing provided examples of ways race and racism were salient in students' lives.

For example, at the beginning of the unit in November 2017, one White, male student expressed that he did not really want to learn about race because he felt "there should be no different treatment of people based on race." He shared an observation of what he called witnessing racism:

I was walking downtown with 4 friends and one of them was black and this car passed by us and said, 'What's up black bi**h?' and they laughed but they were all mean adults and we didn't care.

During an early unit lesson on the history of oppressive racial terminology led by Vanessa, two White students

shared stories of family members or close friends of color who experienced negative stereotyping because of race: “People say things [about my Black cousins] like, black people steal, or they can’t be trusted.”

White students expressed, mostly in writing, fears associated with talking about race, citing concerns “that people will assume that most white people are racist” (Ethan, White), and “that people will hold grudges because someone said something they didn’t mean” (Channing, White). White students’ frequent ambivalence about the relevance of race was contradicted by their familiarity with race as a marker of difference, which in each case shared was presented as a negative trait or cause for “othering” (Lensmire, 2017). The act of naming race presented as divisive—“everybody gets defensive”—or described as slurs and insults—“What’s up black bi**h?”—connected race talk within conflict, an either-or binary where colormuteness allowed for casualness and acknowledgment that race was combative and conflictive.

The Risky Business of Race Talk

Of the three students who identified as persons of color race was “a thing,” expressed through both silence and contested storytelling in initial discussions and coursework. Flora (African American) wrote she “had never witnessed racism” and would be unsure what to do if she had. However, when she was asked to write what fears or excitement she associated with learning about race and racism in the classroom, Flora shared, “I fear being in an uncomfortable position and feeling vulnerable.” Nora (African American/European American) wrote about multiple examples with race labeling throughout her school experiences. She described “being bullied for [being mixed]” or being assumed to be “related to every black/mixed person I know even if they are a different ethnicity.” Nora was expressive in written and oral assignments and shared early in the unit that talking about race at school makes her very emotional. She wrote, “I feel like I will be judged” when showing too much emotion about race when others (assumed to be White peers) did not agree with her. Parker (Native American) explained that White people were often viewed as more intelligent than Indigenous people. Learning about the pseudoscience of race and eugenics in the first week of the unit resonated with her. Parker shared in an exit ticket the first week of class, “race doesn’t determine my IQ.” Flora’s silence and sense of vulnerability when talking about race, Nora’s experiences of misrepresentation and emotional associations with race talk, and Parker’s detaching of her own intelligence from White supremacist ideologies

highlighted the precarity of race talk for students of color. These three students expressed personal and emotional connections to race talk and a sense of hypervisibility being among “the only” persons marked by race in a context of normative Whiteness (Ruggiano, 2022).

Race Dilemma 2: Just Teach Us the Right Words (But the Right Words Aren’t Enough)

“Just Teach Us the Right Words”

Many White students were quick to denounce “inappropriate use of words” as an expression of disgust toward racial bias (Matias et al., 2014) and were eager to express that they “got it” with regard to navigating racially charged language. Through written and oral reflections, White students repeatedly referenced the importance of having class conversations where they could (in their words) “learn about what words we should and shouldn’t use” so that they would not offend anyone in public. Yet with belief that some words were good and others bad—i.e., some words were racist and others were not—many White students wrestled to make sense of the dynamic relationship between words, power, and interaction. Stewart (White), for example, expressed disappointment in what he saw as a lack of concreteness in learning about language and racism. He shared in a mid-unit journal reflection that being asked to think about race may be a double-edged sword:

[This learning] will let me know when to stop a [racist] situation. But I also think it might have a negative impact on me because I think about race too much and now that I know some of the [racial] stereotypes, I think [about] that more.

A month later, in his end-of-unit written reflection, Stewart also wrote he was disappointed overall in the unit because no one actually “taught us the right words to use” when discussing race, a reflection he voiced during a whole-class debrief on the last day of the unit. The recurring preoccupation among White students like Stewart *not* to use words that were “racist” echoed what Hill (2008) identified as the ubiquitous folk theory of racism, which holds that the most important linguistic meaning of words comes from their link to the beliefs and intentions of the speaker. Stewart’s frustrations also highlight how beginning to *see* race complicated the tranquility in his social and physical landscape and introduced an upsetting possibility that maybe just thinking about race makes Whites not “nice” people (Castagno, 2019).

Not Just the Words: “I Am Feeling Very Heated Because It’s Painful”

In many instances students contemplated the simplicity of race words by connecting words to emotions, ideologies, and contextual relationships. The long-reaching impacts of racist ideologies in the legacies of words was evident with the example of the N-word.³ In a class study session of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Rebekka’s students reread passages from the *Narrative* that contained quotes from Hugh Auld, Douglass’s enslaver in Baltimore. While preparing to teach this lesson Rebekka grappled with whether to use an edition of the text in which the N-word had been replaced and decided to bring to the students the complexities of deciding whether to maintain the author’s words or modify them. In the passage, Douglass describes a powerful scene where Auld uses the N-word to refer to Douglass as Auld chastises his wife about the dangers of teaching Douglass to read. The scene is pivotal in the *Narrative*. Douglass used to call out the denial of literacy to Blacks as a strategy used by Whites to maintain enslavement. Rebekka first read the passage to the class as it was originally written—with the word *ni***r*. The next class meeting, Rebekka reread the section and replaced *ni***r* with the N-word and asked students to consider “if the two versions felt different.” As students shared their thoughts, many expressed they gained deep insight from knowing the original language used in Douglass’s text. Spring (White) shared “[the N-word] is important to understand *and* it makes me uncomfortable ... [but] it’s different to read than to call someone that name.” Two students mentioned they heard the N-word from the mouths of people in their family and “hate it.” During the whole class discussion, Nora (African American/European American) shared:

I don’t like that word and I would not use it ...
[and] ... I disagree with reading the word out loud. I am feeling very heated because that is a painful word and I choose not to hear it or use it.

When Nora became visibly upset during the discussion, Rebekka paused. Rebekka, who had known Nora since kindergarten, privately offered Nora time and space to leave the classroom. After 10 minutes, Nora rejoined the class conversation, which was examining evidence from

³ Given the problematic history of racism in language in the United States and the authors’ positionality as White, European-Americans, we choose to use the expression *N-word*. When using language in context, such as quoting from *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*, we substituted the actual writing of the word with other characters. We concur with other scholars who assert that the N-word is among the most divisive words in American history (Low, 2007).

the *Narrative* to support abolition. What felt abstract and educational to White students felt violent and painful to Nora, one of two students of African descent in the class. A month later, while her mostly White classmates continued to point to the importance of learning in a classroom context to understand the horrific intent of the N-word in its historical context, Nora continued to call out the N-word’s immediate and contemporary impacts on her. In February 2018 she said, “I think it was a painful experience no matter what the word was or no matter how it was.” Nora’s testimonies brought focus on ways language itself carries profoundly painful history not to be easily dismissed by White silence or replacement alone (Love, 2019; Pollock, 2004). Listening to Nora, and learning from her, led Rebekka to reconsider and abandon the practice of reading the N-word, as written in the original text, out loud.

Intersectionality: “People Perceive Words Differently”

As students studied Douglass’s use of the term *freedom seeker* rather than *fugitive slave* in his writing about slavery, they were asked to consider the social and cultural relationship of language to political interests (Irvine, 1992) by applying Douglass’s logic to the present. In a classroom activity, students examined a contemporary Texas textbook that described enslaved captives from Africa as having been brought to America as “immigrant workers” (Fernandez & Hauser, 2015). Students read a short blog post titled “Slave vs. Enslaved People: The Subtle, Strong Power of Words” (Cumbo-Floyd, 2011), and Rebekka distributed an exit slip for students to write their responses to arguments about word choice using the prompt: “What do you think? Are we too careful about our choices of words? Not careful enough? What’s a person’s (a writer’s) responsibility about the choice of words?” Student responses were peppered with disagreement and complexity in how to interpret race representation in language. Devon (White) wrote, “Yah, anybody could get offended these days on any subject. The majority of people know not to use the N-word and they don’t.” Stephanie (White) wrote, “We should be careful, but sometimes offensive words slip out.” And Parker (Native American) wrote, “You should use the words you think are most comfortable but keep it realistic. People need to be able to face uncomfortable words...people perceive words differently, audience matters.” Parker’s comments followed an oral discussion the previous day during which she shared that she hated the word “Indian” but recognized it was a term of identity preferred by her Native American grandmother. The coexistence of her comments—“facing uncomfortable words” and “people perceive words differently”—placed race talk as multilayered in social interaction. This insight, when voiced by Parker, invited Vanessa to highlight how

identity and power matter in the ways people use language as weapons to oppress, or tools reclaim power, an interaction that can depend on who is speaking and in what context. While many White students expressed an ambivalence to intension, Parker presented language as personal, variable, and interactive, and with accountability for dealing with harm.

Race Dilemma 3: We Can Stop Racism Before It Starts (But Can We?)

“I Can Stop Racism Before It Starts”: The Self in Education

In February 2018, the final month of the unit, students created two final products—a written biography of a contemporary change maker nominated for the Frederick Douglass 200 Award, which they researched and wrote in pairs, and the collective planning and facilitation of a one-hour professional development session on antiracism for schoolteachers and staff. In these final products, students repeatedly talked about education as a primary remedy to racism and a way to help those ignorant about racism become more knowledgeable of their actions, thereby changing them. In written reflections, students described the personal value of learning about race for future action. Madison (White) summarized this view in her reflection: “now that I am more educated [from this unit] ... I can stop racism before it starts.”

In students’ biographies of contemporary activists and educators who were nominated for the Frederick Douglass 200 Award (including but not limited to Justice Sonya Sotomayor, activist Patrisse Cullors, and historian David Blight) the power of individual education was a central theme of antiracism. Mark (White) echoed the beliefs of many of his peers regarding the enduring lessons of race awareness. In his final unit reflection in March 2018, Mark wrote:

What I learned in this class will help me later in life ... by trying to remove stereotypes about race from my mind as well as help me try to remove my bias and try to stop doing actions that may harm the community like microaggressions and I will encourage others to do the same. I will try to use my knowledge to my advantage and help others later in life bullied about race by co-workers or co-workers teased to the point of where they’re uncomfortable. I will use my knowledge to help them and try to use my knowledge to prove the oppressors wrong.

While we see Mark acknowledged his bias and imagined how he will interrupt individual racist actions toward “others” (presumed to be people of color) by future coworkers (presumed to be White), Mark’s text did not connect racism to the collective structural and cultural dimensions that maintain material patterns of racism in everyday spaces (racist policies or hiring practices), most of which will favor White men such as him. Further, Mark struggled to break from coded discourses of color-muteness (Pollock, 2004) which obscured race-related inequities, such as naming “them” and “they”—the racial other—to refer to people of color without writing or speaking of Whiteness directly. Mark’s language, like that of many students in the class, reflected racially liberal stances to racism which favored microanalysis of the individual and prejudiced behavior (King & Chandler, 2016) over structures and conditions.

Deeper Than Individual Education: “All the People That They Enslaved Basically Built This Country”

In class discussion at the end of the unit during which students were asked to make connections between enslavement in the past and present, Ember (White), Nora (African American/European American), and Mason (White) dovetailed on a comment initiated by Spring’s (White) reflection that slavery was “a very terrible thing that our ancestors chose.”

Ember (White): We made laws against [enslavement], and it’s still going on, that’s terrifying because...it almost shows that making laws didn’t stop it, but just...I don’t wanna say encourage but, like—almost made *some* people... want to break those laws, just because...

Nora (African American/European American): So, um, me and my mom were literally just talking about that question the other day about, like, where would we be, what is happening today and where would we be without slavery *today*? And I just thought, “I don’t think we’d be anywhere. I don’t even think America would exist [without] slavery.” I feel like...the African Americans and the Native Americans and all the people that *they* enslaved basically built this country. I mean, yes, all these other people are just like, “Yeah, I founded it. Yeah, I did this,” but *you* used slaves to help you do that, so...And why it’s also still happening today, is because people are a little too lazy to do things themselves.

Mason (White): Uh, the reason that [slavery is] still happening today is so that you can get really low prices on things...

This exchange connected the discursive dots between racial hierarchies, cheap labor, property, and ownership. In some ways, it opened space, albeit fragmented, to name and analyze structures that have proven foundations for systems of White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Ember's comment on the social malleability of White supremacy in legal structures—"it almost shows that making laws didn't stop it"—presented enslavement as a complex structure of oppression with ideologically deeper roots than top-down changes to policy. Mason built on Ember's comment "so that you can get really low prices on things," referring to his knowledge of the continuance of modern-day slavery (domestically and globally), which highlighted contemporary capitalism and its reliance on exploitative economics. Yet he also maintained ambiguity toward the role of race in institutionalized and patterned global exploitation. Both Mason and Ember muted race and elevated the concept of oppression in their analysis of how enslavement impacts the world today. Nora, in contrast, named *race* when she reframed the economic and political prosperity of the United States as foundationally dependent on rendering Black and Brown human beings as chattel. She brought White claims of ownership, and the ideologies manifest in everyday White talk, into play—"Yeah, I founded it." Nora, who emphasized "*you* used slaves to help you do that," distanced herself from the "our ancestors" statement made by Spring. Nora's shift in pronoun use indexed White supremacy's ability to continually hide and fortify itself in the moving objects within the master narratives of U.S. history. The exchange pushed against the elevation of self-education as a generic panacea to address all forms of racism as Nora challenged the classroom to see the lasting material consequences of racial inequality hidden in the everyday talk of American exceptionalism.

Discussion: Confronting Race Talk Dilemmas in Predominantly White and Rural Classrooms

In this rural classroom led by a classroom teacher who was committed to grappling with the messiness of history as raced (Takaki, 1993), students discussed race's relevance in the past—through historical Black narratives—and in the present—through personal testimonies and study of contemporary race issues. Like King's (2018) study of racial literacy among pre-service teachers, we found that the moment-to-moment interactions in an active classroom where racial issues were discussed helped shape "an interactive process where support for, challenges against, and multiple perspectives between" (p. 1304)

provided students with a space to grapple with dilemmas of race and racism in America. From the data, we saw that classroom race talk both reflected and challenged what is frequently characterized as "White talk"—avoidance and denial of race's significance (A. Lewis, 2001; Rogers & Mosely, 2008)—and reflected and challenged what CWS scholars call White emotional disinvestment in issues of race, racism, and Whiteness (Matias et al., 2014). The dualities in racial dialogue presented moments of White fear and levels of ambiguity in terms of the consequences of racism and what antiracist change entailed, while also opening opportunities to invest emotionally in antiracism even as students experienced different connections to racial oppression based on their own identities.

The contradictory tensions in how students expressed understanding of race supports evidence that in predominantly White contexts people become racially literate through literacy practices that can develop both racist and antiracist ideas (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, 2008). White ambiguity in processing situations of perceived racial conflict, e.g., "you get in trouble just for saying anything," in which Whites could feel unclear on how race mattered at all, coexisted with comments like, "I can stop racism before it starts," where White youth described their desire to learn to be allies and to interrupt racism locally and globally. The both-and nature of our three overlapping race talk dilemmas represents tensions which we believe are pervasive across the United States and, when seen, can help educators anticipate contradiction as a normative White social construct. As students shared at the onset of this unit, this course was their first opportunity to grapple with the complex contours of race in a classroom or group forum. Recognizing this reality heightens the importance of understanding current tensions in race talk to make possible deeper, and more arduous, engagements in racial literacy—if continually supported. Acknowledging the everyday dilemmas of race talk in predominantly White communities suggests that similar to Pollock et al.'s (2010) finding on teacher professional development, intentional and thoughtful study of race perhaps does not alleviate tensions but can explicitly identify them and prepare students (and teachers) to navigate and grapple with them as a core tension of democratic civic engagement.

Attention to our three students of color in the classroom, their verbal and written expressions, as well as their silences, told us race *did* matter in daily life at Wheatfield and in the region in general, despite White ambivalence. Nora's persistent counter-storytelling, Flora's silence, and Parker's reflections on intersectionality all troubled race as binary categories experienced homogeneously in rural identities (Groenke & Nesper, 2010). Their voices shifted the frame of "race wasn't really at thing growing up" toward a more accurate conceptualization of diverse rurality, a lens to

acknowledge and *see* rural places as never just consisting of homogenous communities or devoid of contested identities and power relations (Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2020). The counter-stories communicated uniquely by each young woman challenged the White imagination (Matias et al., 2014) and pushed the development of racial literacy to zoom in on racism as embodied emotion and experienced dynamically in context. Talk about race also entailed enduring the emotional labor of navigating layers of epistemic racism inherent in being one of few persons of color in a predominantly White space. In particular, Nora's reflections interrupted classroom norms of niceness as she refused to silence her experiences of discomfort with relational and material elements of racial inequities (Castagno, 2019).

The emotional and mental labor required of students of color to express themselves in the classroom presented another inequity between Whites and people of color, even when the intention was to dismantle racism. Through this process we, as teachers, grappled with how teaching racial literacy in predominantly White classrooms should justly occur. As Lensmire (2017) wrote about Whiteness, White people have "exploited people of color not only by stealing their land and labor, but by using them symbolically, ritually, in order to work out who we are" (pp. 67–68), and we wondered in what ways we made curricular choices based on how White students reacted to voices of color. For the many White students in this study, such as Mark and Stewart, articulated commitments to checking their own racial biases and those of others developed at least in part from hearing the stories of racial microaggressions experienced by their peers and other people of color. But for Nora, Parker, and Flora, grappling with local discourses about race and race evasiveness presented acutely high stakes, involving interactions they did not always have the choice to avoid. From this initial study, it is clear to us that grappling with Whiteness is a problem of the White imagination and requires explicit engagement with the tensions of race talk dilemmas to disrupt White discourses of ambivalence and abstraction.

How does rural matter in how this classroom wrestled with race? Critical place theorists see places as interactive and dynamic, where disparate realities determine differences in how place is experienced, understood, and practiced in relation to race, age, gender, geography, etc. (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Contexts of rurality influence racial identity formation, attitudes, and understandings about race (Azano et al., 2020; Lee-Nichols & Tierney, 2018), but to what extent those influences are distinguishable from urban or suburban wrestling with race in predominantly White classrooms was not entirely clear. Our findings do support the claims that in predominantly White towns and schools,

race is of course never absent (Chang, 2017; Horner et al., 2021; A. Lewis, 2001; Roediger, 1991). The White students in this classroom reflected many of the processes documented in studies of White teachers, both rural and urban, such as the dominance of colorblind discourse (Lee-Nichols & Tierney, 2018), race-evasive identities (Jupp et al., 2016), niceness (Castagno, 2019), and desires to proclaim racial bias as wrong yet without doing the deep work of identifying how Whiteness shapes biases in one's personal life (Matias et al., 2014).

Recognizing the depth of Whiteness as material and social practice in Idaho, one of the Whitest and least populated states in the United States, is important, but greater curricular attention to the actual local histories that created ideas of universal Whiteness is needed to engage students in unpacking the specific and nuanced relationship between place, identity, and power. To continue to build racial literacy, our findings suggest that making race matter locally requires place-based pedagogical attention (Azano et al., 2020; Tieken, 2008). Study of enslavement and abolition in the eastern United States should be coupled with parallel local histories, such as Indigenous land dispossession, colonial conquest of West, minoritized immigrant laborers, and the evolution of U.S. citizenship through a racialized lens. Specific to the Northwest, the impacts of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Oregon Territory's Black exclusion laws of the 1800s, the Federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the undermining of Indigenous Treaties by the Dawes Act of 1887 should be examined alongside the 13th Amendment. Localizing race will help close the gap between broad abstractions and local nuances about race and racism in the United States and create space for racial literacy to take shape in local both-and, three-dimensional relief.

In the four years since this data collection, we have used our understandings of race talk dilemmas to revise our curriculum to include increased attention to race and the Northwest. Rebekka developed partnerships with Idaho's Black History Museum, University of Idaho Library Special Collections, and the county historical society to increase the voices of local communities of color in the unit. As White educators, studying how wrestling with race occurred across 12 weeks has been vital to helping us become more knowledgeable and experienced in challenging simplistic ideas about race in our region while also supporting White students and student of color to navigate uncertain tensions in our understandings of race in U.S. history. Repeated documentation of future classes who experienced revised implementations of this curriculum and Rebekka's current dissertation work on the impacts of having space to talk and learn about race with former students (now in high school) are all ongoing efforts that tell us many in our context *do*

have a desire for ongoing inquiry about racial inequality in the United States.

Final Thoughts

In 2021, Idaho's governor signed into law a bill titled *Dignity and Anti-Discrimination in Public Education*, becoming one of many White-dominated state governments in the United States to attempt to formally codify teaching about America's history with race as un-American. At the time of this publication, 42 states have introduced or passed anti-critical race theory (CRT) legislation. Research has shown the initial impact of such legislation as having a chilling effect on educators and an emboldening of White supremacist ideologies (Pollock et al., 2022). Wrestling with how and when race matters in our society holds an urgent place, particularly for White teachers and White students. Research on race in rural geographies that highlights the messiness of teachers' and students' struggling openly, angrily, or only subterraneously with the consequences of both race talk and colormuteness (Pollock 2004) changes the terms of engagement with race, a critical juncture toward possible futures beyond the singularity of Whiteness.

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