Excavation, Emotionality, and Evasion: Examining Racial Literacy Development in Elementary Teacher Education

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The literature calling for a focus on racial literacy development among teachers and teacher candidates continues to grow. Racial literacies involve the skills, consciousness, and understandings necessary to navigate race and racism in society, including those required for questioning assumptions, engaging in critical conversations, and engaging in deep, reflexive thinking. As these calls continue to evolve, literature examining how teachers and teacher candidates develop their racial literacies remains underexplored. In this critical qualitative study, I examine the experiences of three white teacher candidates navigating their racial literacy development in an elementary methods course. As a critical study of whiteness, I consider the ways through which whiteness works to maintain its supremacy through the responses and reflections of these teacher candidates as they engage in learning experiences designed to support their racial literacy development. Findings point to the affective and race-evasive responses that emerged as they began to develop these literacies. To re-center this critical study of whiteness on the impact of these findings on people of Color, I conclude by discussing implications for this critical pedagogical work for teacher educators.

Keywords: literacy, teacher education, critical race theory

"The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power...In the American caste system, the signal of rank is what we call race. The division of humans on the basis of their appearance. In America, race is the primary tool and the visible decoy, the front man, for caste."

Isabel Wilkerson

Introduction

Wilkerson's (2020) description of the American caste system speaks to the social construction of human hierarchy that is race in the United States. It speaks to the role of power and resource allocation defined by a socially constructed human hierarchy based on perceptions of appearance. It is reproduced and maintained through our institutions, our policies, and our practices. Disrupting it requires the literacies that white supremacy works to erase–literacies we must develop. Racial literacies involve the skills, consciousness, and understandings necessary to navigate race and racism in society, including those required for questioning assumptions, engaging in critical conversations, and engaging in deep, reflexive thinking (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Attending to the ways these literacies are nurtured and/or avoided in schools is necessary. In this critical qualitative article, I examine how

white teacher candidates grapple with their own personal histories, subjectivities, and identities as they engage in learning experiences designed to support their racial literacy development. Their responses to these learning experiences highlight how whiteness constrains them, revealing technologies of emotionality and evasion that complicate their racial literacy development.

Theoretical Orientation

Critical race theory in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; 2021) recognizes race as a significant factor in educational inequity, that the role of property rights in the United States play a foundational role in this inequity, and that the intersections of race and property produce and sustain inequities in American life. As a critical a critical study of whiteness (Matias & Boucher, 2021), I consider the ways through which whiteness functions to maintain its positional authority when engaged in processes designed to disrupt it. I recognize whiteness as "a social construction that embraces white culture, ideology, racialization, expressions and experiences, epistemology, emotions, and behaviors" (Matias et al., 2014, p. 290). 'Being white' is positioned as property, with the right to that property foundational in American life (Harris, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). It is normalized as the right to material, institutional,

and societal benefits at the expense of people of Color (Lipsitz, 2006). This normalization involves the use of various technologies. That is, the productive assemblages of knowledge, practices, techniques, and discourses involved in disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). These include whiteness as a technology of affect (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013) which shapes and activates emotions, perceptions, and behaviors. By employing technologies to preserve a right to property, whiteness is foundational to the (re)production and sustainability of the American caste system (Wilkerson, 2020).

In this study, I examine racial literacy development among white teacher candidates by tuning into the technologies they enact as the engage in learning experiences related to race and racism. I examine how these technologies work to maintain white supremacy where whiteness becomes property itself. The intersections between these technologies and efforts to hold onto the privileges associated with whiteness, including emotionality and evasion, become key sites of investigation. To study racial literacy development is to study whiteness. Within teacher education, there is a need to counter the normative culture of whiteness that is both oppressive and debilitating (Andrews, 2021). While the field of teacher education continues to evolve in relation to social justice, much more work is needed. I recognize that in attempting to disrupt whiteness, it may further center it (Matias & Boucher, 2021). However, my aim is to move this critical study of whiteness beyond white racial epiphanies. Informed by literature from scholars of Color and employing methods where I engage in reflexive thinking and action related to my own positionalities (see positionality discussion in the methods section), I consider how the racial literacy development of teacher candidates may impact those most vulnerable to the effects of ongoing policies, procedures, and practices that seek to manage, deny, and erase them.

Literature Review

Culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive (Gay, 2018), and culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) pedagogical frameworks offer important avenues for pursuing antiracist (Galligan & Miller, 2022; Kishimoto, 2018) and anti-oppressive (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2021) approaches to teaching and learning. It is through these frameworks that racial literacies can thrive. These antiracist and anti-oppressive approaches involve: (1) the content related to race and racism in the curriculum; (2) teaching toward the development of critical consciousness; and (3) commitment to activism in relation to racism (Kishimoto, 2018). Teacher engagement in critical reflection on their socialized and racialized positions becomes a critical component of such pedagogical approaches, requiring the development of the racial literacies necessary for engaging in such reflexive practice. In education, race matters (Souto-Manning, 2021). Since Guinier's (2004) call for moving beyond symbolic actions toward the development of a racially literate society, scholars across several fields, including teacher edu-

cation, have sought to conceptualize racial literacy (Laughter et al., 2023). Early examinations of racial literacy worked to interpret the intersections of race, class, and geography (Guinier, 2004, p. 114), including a focus on resisting racism (Twine, 2004). As racial literacy continued to gain attention and study across disciplines (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), including teacher education (Lammert et al., 2024; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021), a more dynamic positioning of the concept began to take shape.

Racial literacy involves the skills, consciousness, and understandings necessary to navigate race and racism in society, including those required for questioning assumptions, engaging in critical conversations, and engaging in deep, reflexive thinking (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Adopting a multiliteracies view of literacy (New London Group, 1996), current understandings of racial literacy recognize the multiple modes of communication and interpretation necessary for developing critical-racial consciousness. That is, the awareness of and active pursuit of identifying racial inequities and resisting hegemonic ideas and practices (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). As educators, racial literacy development must involve examinations of constructions of race and racism within and across the institutions that affect their own experiences and those of the students the teach (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021).

However, it is not enough to define an individual as racially literate or illiterate. Such a positioning is rooted in hegemonic conceptions of power. Rather, tuning into critical-racial consciousness allows for a more dynamic view of racial literacy development. Doing so requires recognizing literacy practices that support meaning making of race and racism in ways that preserve inequity (hegemonic racial literacies) and focusing on those practices that oppose hegemonic logics of power, language, and race (counterhegemonic racial literacies). These practices that oppose hegemonic logics are viewed as antiracist (Galligan & Miller, 2022; Kishimoto, 2018) or critical racial literacy (Gardner, 2017; Nash et al., 2017). This continuum of hegemonic and counterhegemonic racial literacies offer opportunities for developing critical-racial consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022).

Sustained self-work is an essential component of the process needed for developing critical racial literacies. That is, a critical step in racial literacy development must involve a cyclical process of (re)examining perceptions, beliefs, and actions related to race and racism. This critical examination involves opportunities for interruption, deep excavation and exploration of the self, historical literacy, critical reflection, critical humility, and critical love (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Yet, as Lammert and colleagues (2024) highlight, more attention is needed to examine how educators are prepared to engage in this work. To do so, teacher educators must move beyond pathologizing individuals and attend to the systems of oppression that continue to complicate this development. In this study, I examine what is revealed when three white teacher candidates engage

in learning experiences designed to support their sustained self-work in developing their critical-racial consciousness.

Method

In this study, I examine racial literacy development among teacher candidates in one elementary methods course. I ask: When teacher candidates engage in learning experiences designed to support their racial literacy development: 1.) How do teacher candidates grapple with their personal histories and professional aspirations as they engage in racial literacy learning experiences? 2.) What do teacher candidate reflections and responses throughout these processes reveal about their racial literacy development?

Participants

Drawn from a larger qualitative study where all teacher candidates (university juniors) enrolled in a social studies methods course were invited to participate in a study examining racial literacy, 14 participants consented to participate. Using purposeful case sampling (Glesne, 2011) to identify cases in which those participants selected would offer information-rich cases for analysis, the current study includes data collected from three participants: Susanna, Theresa, and Marcus (pseudonyms). The data collected from these three participants, those whose data most saliently applied to the identified research questions, are included in the current study. Early in the study, when asked to self-identify, Susanna identified as a "white female who grew up in a predominately white upper-class community." Theresa chose not to self-identify, though later in the study she chose to identify as "white racially." Marcus, a white man, also chose not to self-identify racially upon initial enrollment in the study. Each participant was enrolled in the same section of the methods course where I served as the instructor.

Conditions

The current study was conducted in a methods course that included learning experiences related to racial literacy development. The course outcomes centered around social studies methods while offering opportunities for engaging with critical components of racial literacy development. The course outcomes included:

- Teacher candidates will describe and apply theories, research, and practices of social studies teaching and learning to instructional planning, assessment, and instruction.
- Teacher candidates will recognize and value the importance of multiple perspectives in planning for and responding to individual learner's strengths and needs.
- Teacher candidates will embrace linguistically and culturally responsive teaching and learning.

- Teacher candidates will reflect on experiences and interactions through careful consideration of professional literature, collaboration with colleagues, and other resources as both a teacher and learner.

The main course text included Rodriguez and Swalwell's (2021) *Teaching Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators.* Across the semester, teacher candidates engaged in learning experiences related to racial literacy development, including identity explorations, interactive read alouds, inquiry projects, classroom observations and scenario reflections with ongoing reflections kept in a reflection journal. While addressing key areas of social studies methods, a focus on the tenets of racial literacy development (questioning assumptions, engaging in critical discussions, and practicing reflexivity) were key threads across all learning experiences. As an IRB-approved study with protections in place around participant information, I, as the instructor and researcher in the study, invited all teacher candidates in the course to participate, but I did not know who had opted to participate until after the course was closed.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources for the study included entrance survey responses, ongoing reflections collected in a reflection journal, transcriptions of the individual exit interview, and my researcher's journal. At the beginning of the semester, all enrolled teacher candidates were invited to participate by completing an initial survey. The survey included questions related to demographic information, three open-response questions to collect information about participant identity, understandings of race and racism, and the connections participant's recognized between their identities and their role as a future teacher, and a consent to participate. Throughout the semester, all enrolled teacher candidates engaged in reflections in a reflection journal. After the course concluded, I met with each consenting participant for a 30-60-minute semi-structured interview (Glesne, 2011). Questions involved reflections about their racial literacy development and experiences across the semester, including a focus on excavating their identities, histories, perspectives, experiences, and biases related to race and racism.

Analysis involved recursive readings of the data through an iterative process of cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016). I applied attribute and descriptive codes to the data. On subsequent cycles, I coded places in the data where emotions emerged, specific quotes from participants stood out as tied to the research questions, codes related to narrative elements, patterns (i.e., race avoidance, emotion/affect), and theoretical coding. I analyzed codes through the lens of my research questions to develop findings (see Table 1).

Positionality

For the current study, it is critical to engage in ongoing reflexivity of my own position, including my socialized and racialized

position in this work and in the socially and racially strati-fied society in which this work is enacted. As a queer, white man, I recognize the intersections of privilege that afford me the properties of whiteness and influence my decision-making throughout the research processes involved in this study. As such, I employed specific, ongoing approaches to engage in the reflexive practices necessary to avoid centering whiteness in a study made up of white participants and a white researcher, examining whiteness, in a predominantly white context.

While identifying the limitations related to my own position within this study, more important was ensuring my purposeful actions in navigating these limitations. Among these included a focus on scholarly literature written by scholars of Color to balance my own white gaze, ongoing reflective action on the potential consequences of each instructional activity built into

the course and how that might impact the lives of people of Color, and by working to bracket my own subjectivities (Kim, 2016), including my own racial literacies, feelings of marginal-ization and privilege, and levels of care based on participant experiences. My researcher's journal became a place for crit-ically reflecting on this positionality throughout the research process. Throughout this work, I consciously made efforts to avoid celebrations of white epiphanies and engaged in ongoing reflections to remained committed to the purpose of the study, working to avoid any tendencies toward saviorism in my work as a teacher and researcher. Rather, I engaged in iterative pro-cesses of analysis, critical self-reflection, and attentively worked to re-center this study in the effects of whiteness (re)production on the lives of people of Color.

Table 1

Example of Coded Data

Code	Participant	Data Source	Data Snippet
Race Evasion	Susanna	Reflection Journal	I want to be somewhere that makes me happy and I want to be someone who truly loves myself, inside and out. I want to be the best version of myself. (RJ: 8/28)
	Susanna	Exit Interview	So, it's just like, I guess it's just you can't. I mean, you can't base people off of looks, but it's just like sometimes, as a teacher, you're just an outsider, you just never know what someone's life is. All you do is you know, see them for a couple hours in the school day. (EI)

Findings

As participants engaged in racial literacy learning experiences, they grappled with their personal histories and professional aspirations. Each of the three teacher candidates discussed their personal histories as they related to race and racism while also reflecting on their professional aspirations as future teachers. These responses and reflections involved sustained, self-work (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021), but the levels of that work varied across participant responses. Further, participant responses in-tersected with technologies of power (Foucault, 1977; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013), where emotionality and evasion (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013) were used in ways to maintain their owner-ship (e.g., whiteness-as-property) of material, institutional, and societal benefits (Lipsitz, 2006). While moments of potential movement in racial literacy development emerged, highlight-ing the continuum through which these literacies are enacted (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), the right to property remained a con-sistent barrier for these three teacher candidates. Looking to the responses and reflections of each participant individually offers opportunities to see what was revealed through each teacher candidate's responses and reflections.

Susanna

Susanna's reflections began with her personal goals. She self-identified as a white female who grew up in a predominately white upper-class community on the entrance survey. In de-scribing herself through early reflections in her reflection jour-nal, she shared, "I want to be somewhere that makes me happy and I want to be someone who truly loves myself, inside and out. I want to be the best version of myself." Her attention to her goals for happiness here were positioned through a feeling of comfort (emotionality). Happiness, an affective position, was her aim, to be the "best version of herself." Who was she? She was white and upper-class. Happiness was her right. While her initial identity enactments within the study acknowledged her whiteness, they did not directly indicate reflection on any racial or economic privilege or the relationship between her racial and economic identity and her right to that happiness.

When challenged to consider what was missing from early reflections on identity and community memberships, Susanna identified as a white female who grew up in a predominantly white upper-class community,

> In my reflection I did not include the type of community I am from. I grew up in a predomi-nantly white upper-class community. My graduat-

ing class was about 275 people and there were less than 15-20 students of Color in my grade. After learning about dominate and counter narratives it makes me think more about the community I grew up in.

Her attention to numbers emerged. While she was acknowledging dominant and counter narratives in relation to community, she clung to the comfort afforded her as a member of the dominant experience within that community (emotionality). She was a part of the 275 (minus the 15-20 people of Color) in her community (which she identified as her grade), not part of the other. Exploring concepts of dominant and counternarrative invited Susanna to "think more about the community" she grew up in. However, that thinking remained very close to the surface.

In a subsequent reflection after challenging teacher candidates to dig deeper, to reflect more specifically on the communities not reflected in earlier reflections, Susanna explained:

I am white, I have always identified that way, along with most of the people I am surrounded by. Truthfully, growing up, I wasn't typically around many people of color. I grew up in a mainly white community and my school and graduating class was 95% white. One of the first times I really recall having a memory involving race was probably when I was about ten. My cousin came over so we could meet her new boyfriend and he was black. Color does not affect our family, and we love all no matter what, but I guess it was just something I wasn't quite expecting at such a young age.

Again, Susanna relied on the safety of the numbers (emotionality). Further, Susanna's use of colorblindness (race avoidance) emerged. She claimed comfort in experiences through which she highlighted that "Color does not affect our family, and we love all no matter what." She hid in the colorblindness safety net, allowing her to exist in a space where facing the realities of power and privilege was something she could avoid, race avoidance, a very example of the benefits she absorbed. Given opportunities to interrupt racism, she clung to this comfort.

Susanna, a teacher candidate from Minnesota who graduated from high school and entered college at around the same time George Floyd was murdered by police, reflected on that experience:

When I found out about the murder of George Floyd, I remember I was out on the lake with some friends in the boat. At around the same time all of our parents had called us to see what we were doing and make sure we weren't in the

city. I remember my mom telling me to stay out [of the city] because she thought it was safest out there. I live pretty close to Minneapolis, so when the riots started there was [sic] some pretty close to home...The whole situation was just scary because no one knew what was going to happen. I think most peoples' views changed that day.

Through this narrative, safety emerged as a key theme for Susanna. As the community of Minneapolis (and beyond) started to dig into the interruption of excavating itself, the status quo of privilege for a white, upper-class family was interrupted. "Stay out because she thought it was the safest." This safety theme became the key defense. Further, in acknowledging that "most peoples' views changed that day," what became visible was how she was describing people. All people or white people? Was it most peoples' views who changed that day in her mind, or was she communicating that she felt the views of white people had changed that day? Technologies of whiteness emerged through her narrative, from the affective comfort/discomfort response to clinging to right to safety as a benefit, a property, of whiteness.

When I met with Susanna to explore some of these ideas, she elaborated on her limited interactions with people of color:

I never, never, ever experienced growing up with people of Color and just how they experienced life. I guess I'd had never really, like processed and understood, like how all those people felt. And then I even, I did some volunteer work at [community center] and even there too, I was just like, wow. I really never, I just never experienced life in a different way, as like other people do. I grew up, like, with a happy family in a nice neighborhood, like went to a nice school, but I never, you know, like I had always thought about the people who like didn't have it as good as I did. But it wasn't until...we started talking about it, and then it started relating back to education and their education. And I thought I just was like, dang.

Like her previous reflections, she continued to other people of Color. "All of those people..." as she put it. Susanna exhibited potentially performative saviorism in her description of volunteer work at a local community center. Whiteness worked as a technology, a tool, of affect (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Young, 2025). Susanna struggled to dig into interruption here, a critical step of racial literacy development. She saw herself as having a happy family in a nice neighborhood and the other as not that. While she started to consider the role education might play, for Susanna, this was largely a natural way of things. It wasn't necessarily about her role in the institutional and societal hierarchy.

During the exit interview, I asked Susanna to connect her experiences in the course to her work as a future teacher,

> So, it's just, I guess it's just you can't. I mean, you can't base people off of looks, but it's just sometimes, as a teacher, you're just an outsider, you just never know what someone's life is. All you do is, you know, see them for a couple hours in the school day.

Susanna clung to the comfort of not needing to take responsibility or accountability for, "it's just sometimes, as a teacher, you're just an outsider, you just never know what someone's life is. All you do is, you know, see them for a couple hours in the school day." In working to excavate some of her experiences, she struggled to engage reflexively, resisting to see how whiteness worked in her own life, the ways she othered, or the levels of responsibility she would take up as a teacher. Through Susanna's responses and reflections, technologies of emotionality and evasion emerged as key hurdles for deep, reflexive engagement with race and racism.

Theresa

Theresa opted not to share her racial identity when agreeing to participate in the study. Instead, she focused on her familial relationships, hobbies, and commitment to teach:

> I am an only child from a very loving family. I enjoy spending time with my parents and my immediate family. I love hiking and being outdoors. I love painting and anything crafty. I am big into animals. I love dogs and I want like two or three golden retrievers when I'm older...My parents and family and friends inspire and drive me. My love of becoming a teacher inspires and drives me. I am so excited to become a teacher.

When I challenged to specifically reflect on her racial identity in a subsequent in-class reflection, Theresa spoke to race being something that wasn't actively discussed in her life:

> I identify as white racially. As a child, I didn't have too much exposure to children of other races. I went to a Catholic private elementary school, and I remember all of my classmates being white like myself. I think the earliest interaction I can remember that I had with others who identify with different racial groups was fourth grade when a new kid joined our class. He was a person of Color, but I don't remember anyone treating him differently. We were all friends with him and with each other. He ended up transferring schools at the end of the school year.

When asked to identify herself racially, she did so, speaking further of limited exposure to interactions with children of Color. She reflected briefly about an experience from her childhood when a new kid joined her fourth-grade class. This tokenized experience was safe for Theresa to discuss (emotionality), complete with the brief reflection on this experience. However, she avoided truly engaging in this experience and its influence in her lived experience (race evasion). During my interview with Theresa, she spoke about this experience again, but the evasion of the details of these experiences remained missing.

> I don't really know the only, like, I had 18 kids in my 18 it was like 18 to like 23 kids in my elementary class, and we, like, we were together kindergarten through fifth grade, and we only added a couple kids, like every grade, every other grade, and then they would leave after a grade, so they would move okay. And we had, I remember one African American student in my fourth-grade class, and then he left after fourth grade. So, like, we only had one year with him, and that was like, I feel like our first exposure, kind of to someone of a different race. We're all friends with him.

When I asked Theresa to expand on this and other experiences, she struggled to offer much more. Her reflections stayed close to the surface, having trouble in digging into what these experiences meant for her. Although she reported comfortability in engaging in critical conversations, she struggled to engage the reflexive skillset to explore these experiences and their impact on her identity and interactions in her communities.

Marcus

Marcus, a white man, offered this introduction to his identity on the entrance survey, avoiding race or ethnicity:

> I choose to identify with factors that do not relate to the vast majority of the population while not actively identifying with some of the characteristics of mine that contribute to the majority or dominant group. These different characteristics are usually taken for granted by me.

When I asked Marcus about this during his interview, he spoke about not claiming a white identity because it is something he felt people could see by looking at his appearance. Race, for Marcus, was about appearance, not connecting race to the categories, stereotypes, privileges, and oppressions affiliated with racialized identities. Moreover, the language used in response to questions of identity worked to evade racial identifiers. For these reasons, he spoke to his interests instead. It was an identity proclamation rooted in comfort. In

his reflection journal, however, Marcus identified as a white man from southern Minnesota (his self-identification). The bulk of his identity statement referred to familial relationships and his parents' identities as educators. When challenged to go deeper, Marcus reiterated his points about race being tied to appearance:

> The narrative I chose to portray in my first writing was my thought process as to the most notable things in my life as well as things that are evidence from my appearance alone. There are many different communities that I am a part of and if you heard those things alone and first you would have a completely different notion about me. And, I guess, that's the point of this writing, to see that in history if we only listen to a singular side of a story, then we can believe whoever's agenda the author is trying to push. Hearing every side and angle to all stories gives us a better and well-rounded view of what really occurred.

As he put it, "as evident from my appearance alone." He acknowledged his membership in several communities. This attention to identity highlights the salience in identity work, recognizing that those identities claimed and/or enacted are often those most foregrounded in our experience. For Marcus, race did not emerge as salient, a privilege, a benefit, that he held as a property owner of whiteness. In this reflection, Marcus went further, recognizing that "this is the point of this writing... to see that in history if we only listen to a singular side of a story, then we can believe whoever's agenda the author is trying to push." He was tuning into the danger of the single story.

In his reflection journal, Marcus was able to dig deeper into his racial identity and thinking about that identity in relation to his ethnicity, a level to which Susanna and Theresa didn't reach. However, in thinking about this, he doesn't quite yet see that relevance, still connecting race not to the intersections of race and institutional hierarchies tied to power and privilege, but to the physical attributes of how it appears through skin color. He shared:

> My racial identity is that I am white/Caucasian. I see racial identity as a describing factor about a person but doesn't go as deep into your background as your ethnicity. It doesn't make sense to talk about my ethnicity when discussing race because people don't look at me and think of me as Italian or Irish they just think white. Other people may think differently than this but that is my thought at least, the noticeable factors/features... Not only is this great background knowledge for us to learn and to be able to teach our students but also gives us less bias hopefully

and can truly understand all of our students and their specific needs. This is also important because this is the part of history that is usually left to the dominant narrative to explain so finally hearing a counter narrative is good to help balance all of the things we've learned leading to this.

Yet, he was starting to acknowledge the relevance of this examination of racial identity in thinking about his work as a teacher: "Not only is this great background knowledge for us to learn and to be able to teach our students, but also gives us less bias hopefully and can truly understand all of our students and their specific needs." While this statement is helpful on the surface, it raises questions about the depth of Marcus' reflexivity on bias.

Across the semester-long course, Marcus began to address some experiences through consideration for literature as windows and mirrors. This attention to windows and mirrors, which he acknowledged was not a new idea for him, also remained relatively safe. He recognized the value of including literature that allowed students to see themselves reflected in the texts and seeing the experiences of others. He returned to the danger of the single story here. However, this attention was rooted in comfort:

> The key takeaways we took from the readings and discussed in our group was this idea of literature bringing to light ideas of social justice and one another's struggles. This reoccurring theme of windows and mirrors keeps getting brought to the forefront of our conversations and this goes to show the significance of opening our children up to these. They're able to get a deeper look and truly understand perspectives that may differ from them and build knowledge and empathy for those people different from them. Potentially more significant is letting some children who aren't always seen be seen in different context that may be relatable for them.

Through this response, Marcus spoke to the concept of windows and mirrors, an idea related to the use of literature in teaching where readers have opportunities to see themselves reflected in text (mirrors) while also being able to see into the experiences of others (windows) (Bishop, 1990). For Marcus, it was enough to include texts for representations of race. However, he didn't quite go as far as to recognize that race and racialized experiences of characters and figures in texts is much more dynamic than the appearance of skin pigmentation. Yet, Marcus starts to point to the role of social justice and the struggle of others in this conversation. However, getting into that struggle remained a bit out of his reach. It was still about representation of struggle rather than critical examinations of

that struggle itself. It was better to maintain comfort (as property) even as he dug in. Further, Marcus held onto his power in discussing "his students" and "letting some children who aren't always seen be seen." Marcus takes up the colonizing role of the colonizer, an ownership over students, what they can handle, and allowing some things to begin to evolve. The power dynamic here is important to note, as it is language that many educators, especially white educators, grasp onto. It also spoke to the affective or emotive tool of whiteness here, which further emerged in discussing his response to the murder of George Floyd.

> I remember hearing about George Floyd being killed with my mom and brother in the car driving home from my grandma's house. I remember hearing the story unfold and getting more information and seeing the video and hearing people recount what happened and interviews and it being all over the news. I remember hearing him try to tell the officer to get off of him. It was overwhelmingly sad to see and knowing that it happened so close to where I live made me rethink some assumptions I had made about where I lived based off of us being a fairly liberal midwestern state that is known for being nice.

In reflecting on his memories from learning about the murder of George Floyd, Marcus spoke to a cultural phenomenon common across the Midwestern region of the United States, especially in the state of Minnesota*Minnesota Nice.* Minnesota Nice is the common notion that the people of Minnesota, or the Midwest when referred to more widely, tend to be kind and welcoming as a part of their social identities. Marcus was starting to see something different here about that niceness. Was it indeed a social identity rooted in kindness and community, or was it a tool for maintaining white supremacy? Marcus was digging in, being reflexive.

When I met with Marcus for his interview following the close of the course, he was able to speak to privilege of race that he had resisted months before.

> I think the biggest privilege, like, the way people think about privilege, in my opinion, is they think it's like something that you can feel and see and like understand. But the thing is, it's so much deeper than that. It's more of the things that you aren't exposed to because of your race. So, you don't even understand it. You don't even understand like that you are, that you are privileged because you don't see the things that other people do, so you don't even know they exist. So, like, again, like the things like systematic racism, with the redlining and all those other things that, yeah, allow, allow me to live in a good neighborhood while somebody could of the same race

and same in the same town could live in a bad neighborhood.

Through this exchange, Marcus was beginning tqo dig in by referring to systemic racism directly, connecting to the historical literacies he was developing through comments about redlining, highlighting a connection made to one of the many historical inquiries we engaged in during the course. Marcus' view of privilege was muddy, complicated. He was drawing on good versus bad in thinking about neighborhoods, but he was drawing on his evolving historical literacy around issues like redlining, a topic explored as part of the excavations in our work together. When I asked him to connect this to his future work as a teacher, Marcus, although still tuning into problematic and oversimplified good versus bad positioning, was talking about privilege as something that needs to be spent, what Dr. Bettina Love (2019) calls on those with privilege to do. Use it. Spend it. Marcus was on a path, a complicated one. He was digging in and, although he clung to affective and race evasive technologies of whiteness in similar and differing was as Susanna and Theresa, he was starting to think about race, and especially whiteness, as more complicated than appearance.

While it can be easy for me, as a white researcher studying whiteness, to celebrate what Marcus shared across his experiences, doing so lends itself to maintaining white supremacy in this work. Celebrating the race epiphanies of white people abandons the true purpose of a critical study of whiteness (Matias & Boucher, 2021), and, in effect, recenters whiteness. Rather, it becomes important to look to the technologies employed, what they worked to do, and consider the impact of how those technologies of whiteness impact the lived experiences of people of Color and further compound the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Souto-Manning, 2021).

Discussion

I opened this article by recognizing the role of power in (re)producing and maintaining an American caste system where race serves as the visible "front man" for a socially and racially stratified society. This system is maintained through a culture of whiteness that procures material, institutional, and societal benefits as property. It is this culture of whiteness that is maintained through ideology, racialization, expressions and experiences, epistemology, emotions, and behaviors. This culture (re)produces curriculum violence in schools and across all aspects of life in the United States, further escalated by the erasure being manifested through the federal government's attempts to banish diversity, equity, inclusion, and access across all areas of American life.

The current study focuses on examining the ways white teacher candidates grapple with their personal histories and professional aspirations as they engage in racial literacy learning experiences. Further, I studied what these teacher candidates' reflections and responses revealed about their racial lit-

eracy development and, by extension, intersections with whiteness, power, and privilege. Tuning into these reflections offers implications for thinking about how whiteness works to maintain its supremacy through emotionality and evasion.

Susana's attention to feeling happy, a position of comfort for her, was an exercise of affect. For her, she had the *right* to be happy. This was an affective position, reminiscent of Leonardo & Zembylas (2013) discussion of whiteness as a technology of affect, where emotion is used as a technology for maintaining access to privilege. While one could argue everyone holds a right to happiness, it is when threats to ownership of that *right* emerge that we see how that *right* is actually *privilege,* connected to ownership through whiteness as property. While her initial identity enactments within the study acknowledged her whiteness, they did not directly indicate reflection on any racial or economic privilege or the relationship between her racial and economic identity and her right to that happiness.

Additionally, Susana used emotion (comfort) and evasion when challenged to consider what was missing from early reflections on identity and community memberships. By clinging to the comfort of being a member of the majority (from a primarily white community) she employed an us stance. This stance created an other position for people from other racialized groups. It was them who were raced, but not the majority, in this positioning. There was comfort in being an us. However, Susana was also the use of evasion. By clinging to majority status, she could avoid conversations of race and racism because she was a member of the *us* group. In describing an experience where a family member was dating a person of color, she engaged a colorblind approach: "Color does not affect our family, and we love all no matter what." This positioning is one of affect where happiness (comfort/affect) can be maintained by avoiding (evasion) the realities of what the denial (erasure and oppression) of the structures and impacts of racism in institutions (e.g., families and schools) and society.

Theresa did not share her racial identity when the study began. Rather, she focused on her identity related to her familial relationships, hobbies, and commitment to teach. When I specifically encouraged her (and others in the study) to think more explicitly about their racial identities, she identified as white but did so along with the statement that she "didn't have too much exposure to children of other races." In this statement, she employed emotion (comfort) and evasion in maintaining that it was okay that she didn't think about race because it was just the environment she was in. Not having to think about race and racism is a privilege. Excusing that as the environment ("not having too much exposure to children of other races") is evasion. How so? It ignores the long history of structures and policies (e.g., redlining) that made such environments possible.

Similarly, Marcus chose not to identify racially at the beginning of the study. When I asked him about this during his interview, he shared that he felt people could see by looking at his appearance. Marcus tied race to appearance, avoiding connections of race to the categories, stereotypes, privileges, and oppressions. By speaking only to interests, Marcus worked to evade racial identifiers, an evasion rooted in comfort (affect). In his reflection journal, Marcus was able to dig deeper into his racial identity and thinking about that identity in relation to his ethnicity, a level to which Susanna and Theresa didn't reach.

Across the semester-long course, however, Marcus began to share his thinking that started to move away from evasion. In discussing representation in literature, for example, Marcus spoke to the importance of racial representation in texts. However, this recognition focused on characters and figures in texts as appearance without really addressing dynamic representations of race and racialized experiences that go beyond skin pigmentation. However, by the end of the study, Marcus was beginning to think more about systemic racism directly, connecting to the historical literacies he was developing through comments about redlining, highlighting a connection made to one of the many historical inquiries we engaged in during the course.

Through this study, I observed participants employ technologies of whiteness, including affective and race evasiveness technologies, in ways to protect their propertythe social, institutional, and societal benefits they held because of whiteness. Protected by the security blanket of privilege, a blanket unseen by many white people, they enacted technologies of whiteness to cling to this comfort. From enacting emotional responses, avoiding discussions of race, and even hiding in the protection of their limited exposure to people of Color in (as if such an experience should excuse any sort of accountability for maintaining oppression), the teacher candidates clung to whiteness as property.

Each of these teacher candidates offered a glimpse into the reality that sustained self-work (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021), truly excavating the layers of power and privilege, identity and experience, is not a destination, but a path. For these participants, it may have been an entry point, but an important one. The technologies of power (Foucault, 1977; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013) that emerged through emotionality and evasion that emerged in this study offer important considerations for the critical work necessary for disrupting systems of oppression that we and many students experience in classrooms and communities. Racial literacy development, including the development of critical-racial consciousness (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), is not a destination, but a journey, and one we must be prepared to take up in teacher education.

Implications

Through this study, I observed as three teacher candidates grappled with their personal histories and professional aspirations as they engaged with learning experiences designed to support their racial literacy development. Grounded in cultur-

ally responsive, relevant, sustaining, and antiracist and anti-oppressive pedagogies, this study highlights the urgent need for ongoing work around racial literacy development in the preparation of teachers. Through racial literacy development, teachers and teacher educators can work to make visible the ways through which whiteness and its associated technologies (e.g., affect and evasion) can influence not only our teaching practices, but also the way we see and interact with the world.

Whiteness is a culture, a culture that must be made visible and understood. Teachers go into the field with limited understandings of the children they teach and the ways schools and educators have and continue to fail them in many respects. While no single pedagogy can single-handedly abolish the culture of whiteness maintaining its hold over American life (Love, 2019), it can offer avenues for making visible the technologies and discourses, language and behaviors, ideologies and knowledge construction that result in the violence carried out through curriculum. Looking inward at the pedagogies we construct and enact in teacher education and the literacies our pedagogies foster is our responsibility. In this study, I examined racial literacy development through a critical sociocultural lens (Lewis et al., 2007), one that did not discount cognitive approaches to literacy but also valued its interdisciplinary qualities. Literacy is liberation (Parker, 2022). Literacy can liberate when we let it and when we leverage it to do so. Lessons from this study remind us: the internal work is important. It is important because it is through sustained, self-work that we begin to make visible and make new constructions of what it means to belong in classrooms and communities. To excavate requires attention to the technologies of emotionality and evasion that oppress, harm, and maintain oppression, marginalization, and harm. We must examine our pedagogies and consider who and what they serve.

Engaging antiracist and anti-oppressive pedagogies requires teacher educators to consider the implications for the research we consume and produce. How we define literacy through our scholarship become critical. For it is through these definitions that we can begin to leverage literacy, including racial literacy, as the skills, consciousness, and understandings with the power to transform. Literacy is cognitive and sociocultural (Muhammad, 2023). Engaging in scholarship that honors these qualities is important. Yet, to what end do the literacies we cultivate in teacher education address equity and social justice? For the teacher candidates in this study, developing racial consciousness itself became a challenge. Sociocultural scholarship does not often explicitly address issues of power to the level necessary (Lewis et al., 2007). As a result, drawing on knowledge construction through poststructural, cultural, discourse, feminist, critical race, critical whiteness, and queer orientations and methodologies can offer understandings of the literacies we must enact to abolish systems of oppression. Is this something we do in teacher education? How? When?

On the surface, the findings from this study highlight that developing racial literacies takes focused attention and time. The teacher candidates in this study, for example, each entered a journey of sustained, self-work. For that self-work to be fruitful, however, it must be sustained. It cannot be a one-and-done. On a deeper level, however, they highlight that the needs go beyond pedagogical change. Teacher education cannot be divorced from the larger institutional and societal structures of oppression that challenge pursuits of equity and social justice in teacher education. What does this mean for teacher education? From considerations of the structures of our programs, entrance requirements, dispositional components, standards and outcomes, assessments, reviews of program quality, and yes, even faculty review processes, all aspects of our teacher education system require scrutiny.

Teacher education produces a mostly white teaching force for a profession where curriculum violence is perpetrated on students of Color, (re)producing a culture of whiteness. We must excavate our approaches and systems, including how we define the literacies and competencies of those entering the profession. The changes needed are diverse, multi-faceted, and the technologies of whiteness designed to maintain them will work to keep them in place. We must embrace the pedagogical, scholarship, and systems level changes needed if we are to truly serve the profession and the learners in our schools, classrooms, and communities.

Conclusion

Teacher educators must recognize the importance of racial literacy development in all aspects of our work (Lammert et al., 2024). Through this study, I sought to examine what would emerge as white teacher candidates grappled with their personal histories and professional aspirations as they engaged with learning experiences designed to support their racial literacy development. Indeed, much was revealed. Whiteness, as a culture, is produced socially and systematically. White supremacy is going to white supremacy. It is going to hold on. It is going to fight, kicking and screaming, to hold its power, its position, its privilege. How we respond matters. We must be prepared to go for broke to end the culture of curriculum violence that it produces.

Centering racial literacy development in our practice and preparing ourselves to address the technologies of whiteness that will be employed is incumbent on all teacher educators. It can offer an entry point, a path, or sometimes just a step toward a more just world through a journey of self and community discovery. As the forces of white supremacy through discourse, legislation, or executive order seek to limit the resources through which we, in community, engage through our literacies, we must find ways to navigate the deep, reflexive work needed to construct realities of healing. Whether it is a place to start, a place to continue, or a place to grow, engaging in this self-discovery, this community discovery, is vital

to developing the critical love of, in, and through our work as teachers, as learners, as people, in community.

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