

Who We Are and How We Do:  
Portraits of Pedagogical Process and Possibility When Teaching and Learning About  
Race and Racism in Social Studies Classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

### Who We Are and How We Do: Portraits of Pedagogical Process and Possibility When Teaching and Learning About Race and Racism in Social Studies Classrooms

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This dissertation study documented and analyzed the key curricular and pedagogical features of three secondary social studies teachers who center issues of race and racism in their classrooms by examining their decision-making processes and the impact of relevant lived experiences on their practice. I utilized portraiture methodology, which included ethnographic field notes, document analysis, interviews, and impressionistic records to document and analyze the key curricular and pedagogical features of each teacher. Data were collected during the 2016-2017 school year across three racially diverse social studies classrooms located in southern New England. My findings were that each teacher treated race and racism as central objects of historical inquiry and enacted a set of curricular and pedagogical moves that were guided by a combination of what they know (technical pedagogy) and who they are (relational pedagogy). I refer to the relevant lived experiences that give shape and form to each teacher's practice as their pedagogical origin stories. This study has implications for teacher education and underscores the importance of focusing on technical and relational curricular and pedagogical development in novice and veteran social studies teachers. Teacher education programs need to focus on preparing preservice teachers to recognize and, at times, reconcile the relationships between our respective origin stories and the curricular and pedagogical decisions and moves that we make in classrooms when we teach about issues of race and racism.

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Dedication

To

Maryori Conde

May you rest, rise, and dance in power, peace, and paradise.

*¡Aquí se respira lucha!*

## Chapter 1 – INTRODUCTION

“Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country.” Baldwin’s 1963 talk to teachers continues to resonate in painfully poignant and salient ways over five decades later. Contending that the renewal of our past horrors can only occur in the present, Trouillot (2012) reminded us, “Thus, even in relation to The Past our authenticity resides in the struggles of our present. Only in the present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge” (p. 151). Baldwin’s and Trouillot’s insights shed light on the ways in which social and political forces in the present, including teachers’ curricular choices, inform the teaching of social studies in secondary classrooms.

Navigating the contours of the teaching and learning of our collective past and present remains an urgent and daily challenge for social studies educators. This challenge is further exacerbated and complicated by the dehumanizing sociohistorical and systemic realities deeply woven into the field of social studies education. Though over 50% of the young people in schools are students of color, the dominance of Eurocentric curricular frameworks and content in social studies classes remains the norm, marginalizing the lives, histories, and experiences of the majority of students sitting in classrooms across the United States. Camangian (2015) described the curricula and policies in urban schools as persistently “irrelevant and culturally hostile,” thus failing to provide “critical spaces where young people of color can deconstruct racialized identities and historically oppressive relationships” (p. 39). Nelson and Pang (2006) discussed the ways in which dominant forms of social studies teaching and curricula have worked to uphold and perpetuate oppressive institutional and ideological systems, such as racism, within

the United States. Furthermore, various populations across the United States are struggling every single day to navigate the shifting realities following the 2016 presidential election and the persistent assaults upon the bodies, psyches, and livelihoods of historically targeted and marginalized populations. Meanwhile, many social studies teachers in particular have been scrambling with how to address these structural and material realities both affectively and effectively in their classrooms.

The United States is a nation that was developed through explicit acts of dehumanization. From the violent displacement and dispossession of Indigenous lands to the legally sanctioned enslavement and lynching of African human bodies to the strict legal boundaries of American citizenship and subsequent rights, including but not limited to the creation of the border between the United States and Mexico, the persistent struggle for various populations of color to exist as humans in the United States remains deeply interwoven with racially disproportionate federal, state, and local-level policies, practices, and beliefs (Alexander, 2012; López, 1997; Takaki, 2008). Given the present political and racial climate in the United States, there is a moral imperative for social studies teachers to engage these histories actively in their classrooms.

Long before the election, but in increasingly acute ways following the election, emerge questions around how to engage issues of race and racism within social studies curriculum. The racial demographic realities among student and teacher populations across the nation further underscore the urgent need for novice and veteran social studies teachers to develop positions of informed empathy, as well as their capacities to navigate curricular and pedagogical engagements with race.

## Problem Statement

Understanding the roles that race and racism have played during formative moments throughout U.S. history is necessary for contextualizing the racial politics and climate of the present, yet numerous studies of social studies curricula and pedagogy have revealed that explicit treatments of race and racism continue to be superficial or completely absent (Brown & Brown, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Sleeter, 2011; Vasquez-Heilig, Brown, & Brown, 2012). While Howard (2004) has repeatedly named social studies as the “ideal” subject area to “engage students in debate about race and racism” (p. 485), teacher education programs, along with ongoing teacher support and development, remain inconsistent in how they prepare and sustain teachers to confront and navigate issues of race and racism in their daily practice. Preparing teachers to center and engage issues of race and racism actively in their classrooms requires what Ginwright (2015) referred to as a “dramatic shift in thinking from *technical pedagogy*, which focuses on what teachers should know and what teachers should do, to *relational pedagogy*, which focuses on who teacher should be” (p. 89).

By virtue of the subject matter that they teach, the preparation of social studies teachers is especially urgent. Social studies teachers must develop a working knowledge of both systems of racism and how these systems influence policies, practices, and beliefs about youth of color in schools. Additionally, social studies teachers must develop an acceptance of and compassionate sensibility about the ways in which race and racism impact the lives of their students. As such, teachers must work to develop quality relationships with their students and enact curricula that actively engage the expertise of students’ lived experiences with an analysis of the historical and contemporary functions of race and racism. Social studies classrooms offer a unique and optimal space for teachers to develop meaningful relationships with students and collectively work to

historicize, analyze, interrogate, and contextualize the aforementioned historical and contemporary racial realities, but such classrooms continue to exist as the exception rather than the rule.

Consequently, deeply tied to the problem of dehumanizing curricula and practices in social studies classrooms and schools is the problematic dearth of research on social studies teachers who actively work to navigate, challenge, and transform historically racist and dehumanizing conditions and practices through their curriculum and pedagogy. Educational researchers have well documented the wounds and lacerations inflicted by dehumanizing and racist practices in schools (Olson, 2015), and have also documented and studied the limitations in teacher education that have contributed to the persistence of these instances of structural violence. While such documentation, analyses, and interrogation of these dehumanizing systems and practices are certainly necessary in the ongoing struggles to interrupt and dismantle them, focusing on the problems alone is insufficient in efforts to address and heal the historical and contemporary wounds in social studies education.

What we need is increased documentation and analyses of social studies teachers who are effectively and affectively navigating and resisting dehumanizing and racist conditions through their daily curricular and pedagogical practices, in order to examine the features of their curriculum and pedagogical praxis, especially around issues of race and racism. While such teachers and practices certainly exist, only scant empirical research has studied their practice. We need to inquire about what informs and influences their curricular and pedagogical decisions. This type of documentation, analysis, examination, and inquiry is important in efforts to challenge and interrupt what Bartolome (1994) has referred to as the methods fetish in educational research and practice that seeks to produce “how-to’s” and allows us to develop

deeper understandings of teachers' "how comes" (Catone, 2017). A "how-to" far too often leads to implementation without analysis; a "how come" offers an authentic opportunity for reflection, inquiry, critique, and engagement. The experiences of such teachers are undoubtedly filled with moments of both struggle and possibility, and part of understanding the features of their respective approaches lies in our ability to capture rich and textured descriptions, explanations, and analyses of "what they do, why they do it, and how they do it" (Duncan-Andrade, 2007, p. 621).

### **Research Questions**

This dissertation offers three portraits of secondary social studies teachers who actively center issues of race and racism in their curriculum. My study of these three teachers, their curriculum, and their pedagogy was guided by the following research questions:

- How do three secondary social studies teachers enact lessons about issues of race and racism in their classrooms?
- What are the key features of their practice?
- What informs their curricular and pedagogical decisions around issues of race and racism?

### **Theoretical Framework**

I utilized a combined framework of humanizing pedagogies (Bartolome, 1994; Camangian, 2015; Freire, 1979; del Carmen Salazar, 2013), racial literacy (Guinier, 2004; Stevenson, 2014; Twine, 2010), and radical healing (Ginwright, 2015) to explore and analyze the curricular and pedagogical practices and decisions, as well as relevant lived experiences, of three social studies teachers who intentionally center issues of race and racism in their curriculum. Combining these three frameworks provided an analytic lens to guide my observations, inquiries,

ruminations, and analyses within and across these three classrooms with a focus on analyzing the relationship between treatments of race and racism in their curriculum and the respective teacher thinking that takes place before, during, and after the lessons.

### **Humanizing Pedagogies**

Current conceptualizations of humanizing pedagogies continue to draw heavily from Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire's seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1979). Freire's notion of humanization is inextricably linked to the struggle for liberation in the context of persistent forms of oppression. Vital to the process of humanization is the struggle for the liberation of one's mind and the development of one's critical consciousness, which are tied to the ability to read, reflect upon, pose problems against, and ultimately transform oppressive conditions on behalf of collective humanity. In educational spaces, Freire posited that humanizing pedagogy can only occur through authentic dialogue and communication and that knowledge and liberation are not gifts bestowed upon students, but rather co-constructions between students and teachers that involve a "constant unveiling of reality" that is tied to "critical intervention in reality" (p. 81).

Bartolome (1994) conceptualized humanizing pedagogy as a politically and historically conscious disposition toward the educational enterprise that involves "teachers' understandings of the political nature of education, the reproductive nature of schools, and the schools' continued (yet unspoken) deficit views of subordinated students" (p. 176), along with an approach to teaching that "values the students' background knowledge, culture, and life experiences, and creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers" (p. 190). Bartolome implored teachers to move beyond a focus on methods and, instead,



recognize the necessity of an orientation that is rooted in one's ability to recognize, honor, and draw upon the humanity of students, while co-constructing knowledge in solidarity with them.

Upon reviewing the works of both Freire (1979) and Bartolome (1994), among other humanizing pedagogues, del Carmen Salazar (2013) identified and synthesized key principles and practices of humanizing pedagogies, which the act of centering, honoring, and valuing students' sociocultural resources, prior knowledge, and ideas through the development of relationships based on trust and care (p. 138). Camangian (2015) conceptualized humanizing pedagogy as follows:

Humanizing pedagogies provide a humanizing education that helps historically dispossessed children study as a means to radically heal (Ginwright, 2010) from their suffering. It also allows young people to explore the depths of their "unresolved historical grief" while helping to cultivate a deeper knowledge of and compassion for self, mobilizing efforts to develop a deeper sense of control over their collective lives. According to Freire, "Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization...as [a] historical reality: and take on "humanization [as] a viable possibility" (p. 43). This requires cultivating "critical hope, which rejects the despair of hopelessness" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 5). Humanizing education is complex because it tries to move, in beautifully contested ways, children and communities to where they want to go while grappling with the painful pasts that they have had to confront to get there. (pp. 3, 4)

Camangian argued that recognizing oppressive realities rooted in historical processes of dispossession and structural inequities is a necessary and vital requisite in the practice of humanizing pedagogies. These theorists note that the commitment to struggle in solidarity alongside historically marginalized student populations, while recognizing and honoring their humanity through daily pedagogical and curricular practices, is another necessary component of humanizing pedagogies. Considering the possibilities of humanizing pedagogies in U.S. urban schooling contexts is invariably linked to a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding about the embedded nature of race and racism in schools and curricula. Racial literacy offers a vital component to enactments of humanizing pedagogies in urban educational spaces.

## **Racial Literacy**

Racial literacy has currently been developed and conceptualized across three fields: legal scholarship, sociology, and educational psychology. The most frequently cited conceptualization of racial literacy is that of legal scholar and American civil rights theorist Lani Guinier (2004), which offers a macropolitical, structural, and historical context for conceptualizing racial literacy. Guinier conceived of racial literacy as a purposeful paradigm shift from racial liberalism that is more focused on the ability to learn rather than simply know. Guinier defined racial literacy as follows:

Racial literacy is an interactive process in which race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback and assessment. Second, racial literacy emphasizes the relationship between race and power. Racial literacy reads race in its psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions. It acknowledges the importance of individual agency but refuses to lose sight of institutional and environmental forces that both shape and reflect that agency.... Third, while racial literacy never loses sight of race, it does not focus exclusively on race. It constantly interrogates the dynamic relationship among race, class, geography, gender, and other explanatory variables. It sees the danger of basing a strategy for monumental social change on assumptions about individual prejudice and individual victims. (p. 115)

Racially literate persons, regardless of their racial background and/or social standpoint, thus recognize racism as an institutional force, rather than reducing it to individual acts of bigotry and hate. Racial literacy also enables one to read the various dimensions of race as an organizing, hegemonic principle in U.S. daily life and to recognize how institutional racism influences the belief systems and behaviors of various individuals, including but not limited to teachers (Guinier & Torres, 2009). Central to combating White supremacy is the very recognition of the proprietary nature of whiteness; however, this singular conceptualization of racial literacy does little to address the psychosocial and emotional impacts of race and racism upon both White and non-White human populations.

In this regard, sociologist France Winddance Twine's (2010) conceptualization of racial literacy offers a more humanizing component to the framework. Twine developed her conceptualization of racial literacy in the book *A White Side of Black Britain: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy*, which she published based on a study that sought to investigate the various ways that White women who had children with Black men of African Caribbean descent in the United Kingdom negotiated issues of race and racism in their childrearing practices. Specifically, Twine was interested in examining how "white members of transracial families translate, transmit, and transform the meanings of race, racism, and their own whiteness in postcolonial Britain" (p. 5). Twine conceptualized racial literacy as both an "analytical orientation," along with "a set of practices that reflect shifts in perceptions of race, racism and whiteness," that enables one to both perceive and respond to racism based on an inventory of "discursive and material practices" (p. 92). Twine illustrated the key components of racial literacy through a series of case study excerpts and portraits from her research. For instance, Twine shared the following quote from one of her key White female participants, Chelsea:

I think racism in this country is very insidious... compared with some European countries where it's very overt.... I think here there is a traditional English hypocrisy that you don't actually say things openly. It's always behind the scenes, and I realized how closely [this hypocrisy] is woven into the English psyche, both gender phobia and racism.... I've learned about racism—that it's an insidious thing. That it's so much a part of all our traditions and ways of thinking. That it's something you have to be aware of all the time. It's almost made [me] much more critical, I think, of white liberal thinking because that can be, in a sense, more dangerous racism. You know, the so-called color-blind approach to things.... I'm very suspicious of white people. I notice how easy it is for me to be part of that community. And yet, I feel like I'm not part of it and can't be part of it because it's always going to, in some sense, reject my [biracial] daughter.... It's a culture that doesn't readily accept black people. (pp. 105, 106)

Twine contended that Chelsea's "awareness of everyday racism is astute" (p. 104) and "Chelsea has worked very hard to understand racism as a complex structure in which she is always embedded and implicated" (p. 105). Chelsea's recognition of the current "insidious" nature of

racism demonstrated that she recognized the contemporary problems posed by its existence; thus, Chelsea demonstrated a racial literacy that aligned with Guinier's (2004) conceptualization. Where Chelsea's racial literacy differed was in her impetus for recognizing racism in this way: her role as a parent to a biracial child, a complex relationship rooted in unconditional love and fear for the survival and well-being of her child (Twine, 2010). Chelsea's awareness of how "racial identities" are learned informed the various ways that she sought to equip her daughter with a set of survival skills necessary to navigate a racist society. In her conclusion, Twine discussed the potential for White parents to learn to "decode, recognize, evaluate, and counter the racist climate in their communities" and that acquiring racial literacy for the participants in her study was a "demanding process that required transracial parents to shift their perspective and to learn a number of significant new skills" (p. 259). In this way, Twine expanded the structural analysis provided by Guinier's conceptualization of racial literacy to an analysis that included considerations of roles that relationships, motivations, and desire play in racially contentious spaces, such as urban public school classrooms.

The most recent conceptualization of racial literacy was put forth by educational psychologist Howard Stevenson (2014), in his book *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools: Differences That Make a Difference*. In this book, Stevenson developed a hybridized concept of racial literacy through a purposeful engagement of both Twine's and Guinier's concepts and, thus, further expanded the reach of this framework as an analytic lens and tool. Stevenson wrote: "Although my definition of racial literacy is similar to Guinier's (2004) focus on balancing individual and systemic racial politics that intersect with other diversity politics, it is more similar to Twine's (2010) definition as focused on relational dynamics where skill sets are taught" (p. 19). The skill set that Stevenson referred to is based on the ability to engage in what

he called “competent dialogue on racial politics” (p. 27) within the contexts of schools, but the critical engagement of said dialogue is deeply hindered by the presence of racial tensions, fears, and stress, most often tied to the fear of being labeled as “racist” or the stress of feeling inadequate when attempting to navigate racial conflicts in schools. The detrimental consequence, Stevenson argued, is intentional avoidance as the dominant coping mechanism. Stevenson’s conceptualization expanded upon Twine’s and Guinier’s conceptualizations and added a textured dimension of examining and explicitly engaging the psychosocial implications of race and racism within schooling contexts. Stevenson’s integration of both Twine’s and Guinier’s concepts of racial literacy provided an additional level of focus to my lens for analyzing the curriculum and pedagogy of three social studies teachers who actively center issues of race and racism.

### **Radical Healing**

Radical healing rounded out the framework by providing a model that engaged and complemented aspects of humanizing pedagogies and racial literacy, while also providing an action-oriented analytic tool to recognize examples of and possibilities for healing from the socially toxic effects of living in historically oppressive conditions. Embracing the affective dimensions of teaching and relational pedagogy is a necessary step towards promoting radical healing (Ginwright, 2010, 2015) in social studies classrooms. Ginwright (2010) defined radical healing as follows:

Radical healing involves building the capacity of young people to act upon their environment in order to create the type of communities in which they want to live. By integrating issues of power, history, self-identity, and the possibility of collective agency and struggle, radical healing rebuilds communities, to foster hope and political possibilities for young people. (p. 12)

Ginwright's framework of radical healing is explicitly focused on practices that produce and sustain hope and healing as political acts. Ginwright conceptualized racism, fear, shame, and violence as some of the key social toxins that youth of color living in dense urban poverty are forced to confront. The process of radical healing helps youth to develop a critical awareness and historical knowledge of the various social toxins they encounter so they may better contextualize and analyze their impact upon their lives, in order to engage in collective action to transform the conditions produced by social toxins (Ginwright, 2010).

Ginwright (2015) explained the five features of radical healing: Culture, Agency, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement (CARMA):

- **CULTURE:** Culture serves as an anchor to connect young people to a racial and ethnic identity that is both historically grounded and contemporarily relevant. This view of culture embraces the importance of a healthy ethnic identity for youth of color while at the same time celebrates the vibrancy and ingenuity of urban youth culture.
- **AGENCY:** Agency is the individual and collective ability to act, create, and change external and personal issues. Agency compels youth to explore their personal power to transform problems into possibilities.
- **RELATIONSHIPS:** Relationships are the capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others. Relationships build a deep sense of connection and prepare youth to know themselves as part of a long history of struggle and triumph.
- **MEANING:** Meaning is discovering our purpose and building an awareness of our role in advancing justice. Meaning builds an awareness of the intersections of personal and political life by pushing youth to understand how personal struggles have profound political explanations.
- **ACHIEVEMENT:** Achievement illuminates life's possibilities and acknowledges movement toward explicit goals. Achievement means to understand oppression, but not be defined by it and encourages youth to explore possibilities for their lives, and work toward personal and collective advancement. (pp. 25-26)

The five features of radical healing further informed the analytic lens that I used to study the practice of three social studies teachers, as I sought to also identify examples of potential healing practices in social studies classrooms. For instance, helping students in their journeys toward developing healthy racial and ethnic identities necessitates both a working racial knowledge of how race operates from multiple vantage points, as well as a position of informed empathy toward their daily-lived realities. Engaging the principle of “agency” requires teachers to critically recognize the root causes of structural oppression, such as racism that necessitate transformation. Building opportunities for students to recognize how their personal struggles connect to political life and possibilities for transforming oppressive conditions requires curriculum that teaches the histories and complexities of oppressive systems, such as racism, with the purposeful intention of guiding students toward understanding how these systems were constructed and how they may thereby be deconstructed.

### **Integrating Theories**

My choice to engage humanizing pedagogies, racial literacy, and radical healing as a combined lens is tied to my recognition of public schools as direct extensions of a government power structure that have historically dehumanized people and communities of color, while also recognizing these schools and classrooms as sites of radical possibilities. Numerous teachers in classrooms across various grade levels and disciplines exist as exceptions to the dominant hegemonic power structures. In this vein, I sought to employ a framework that offered a lens to assist in identifying and analyzing curricular and pedagogical practices and moves that the three teachers in my study enacted around issues of race and racism. I refer to the enactments of curricular and pedagogical decisions in social studies classrooms as “moves” to highlight the

significance of numerous decisions and mental calculations that teachers act on in their classrooms every single day.

Seeking to analyze the various features and dimensions of three social studies teachers' practices, moves, and curricula through the combined lens of humanizing pedagogies, racial literacy, and radical healing thus compelled me to conduct a review of the literature on curricular and pedagogical engagements with race and racism in social studies classrooms, on bodies of literature and studies of humanizing and relational pedagogies, and on the role of teacher biography in curricular and pedagogical development.



## Chapter 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

In preparation for undertaking this study, I reviewed literature exploring the themes of curricular and pedagogical engagements with race and racism in social studies classrooms, as well as literature exploring enactments of humanizing and relational pedagogies. Given my focus on studying curricular and pedagogical engagements with race and racism in secondary social studies classrooms, I began with a review of literature within the field of social studies that featured studied engagements of issues of race and racism in social studies classrooms, which helped to focus my inquiries on studying the practices of teachers who explicitly enact lessons about race. However, given the problem of dehumanization in schools that my research aimed to respond to and address, the absence of attention paid to the humanizing prospects of race lessons in social studies, as well as in the pedagogical practices of teachers in this body of literature, led me to also review bodies of literature and studies of enactments of humanizing and relational pedagogies. My review of the literature on enactments of humanizing and relational pedagogies helped to further situate and inform my research inquiries around the relational and humanizing contours of social studies teaching and learning—both with regard to studying the human beings who develop and enact the lessons, as well as the young human beings who engage with those lessons. Much like the literature on race and racism in the social studies curriculum and pedagogy helped to shape my questions around the features of practice, the literature on humanizing pedagogies helped to expand my questions to include the affective dimensions of social studies teaching and learning.

### **Enactments of Social Studies Curriculum and Pedagogies: Struggles and Possibilities**

A number of studies have sought to locate and examine explicit curricular and pedagogical engagements of race and racism in social studies classrooms (Chandler, 2006, 2009,

2010; Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Epstein, 2010; Epstein & Gist, 2015; Hess, 2005; Howard, 2004; King & Brown, 2014; King & Kasun, 2013; Levstik, 2000; Rubin, 2015; Salinas, Blevins, & Sullivan, 2012). While many of these studies illuminated the curricular and pedagogical struggles, fears, and challenges faced by social studies teachers, some focused on studying the curriculum and pedagogy employed by individuals or small groups of social studies teachers and their experiences seeking to employ a curriculum counter to the dominant narrative of American history.

A common finding across research examining attempts to infuse issues of race and racism into the social studies curriculum is that teachers continue to miss the mark, resulting in curricular and pedagogical enactments that fail to disrupt dominant narratives. Findings across these studies indicated that the enacted curriculum in these classrooms continues to subscribe to a Eurocentric framework and lens, even when the narratives of people of color are included in the content by teachers. Additionally, with regard to examinations of pedagogy, the vast majority of study participants are White teachers and interview data revealed a common trend of feelings of fear and anxiety around issues of race heavily influencing their curricular and pedagogical decisions (Chandler, 2009; Chandler & Branscombe, 2015; Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Epstein, 2010; Hess, 2005; Levstik, 2000). What is less clear in the findings across this branch of the literature are the root causes of these continued missed opportunities and persistent feelings of fear and anxiety among the teachers. In his discussion of promoting racial literacy in schools, Stevenson (2014) posited that “racial stress is not about character” and “managing anxiety is a matter of competence, not character” (p. 53). Stevenson’s work around the psychosocial impacts of racism in schools on both teacher and student populations thus offer an important line of

inquiry and analysis toward current and forthcoming bodies of research that seek to understand the impact of race and racism in enacted social studies curriculum and pedagogy.

In his study of two White male teachers' treatment of race in the American history curriculum, Chandler (2009) found that their respective sets of curricula subscribed to a narrative of "incremental progress" and a colorblind ideology, with regard to issues of race and racism in U.S. history. His study employed a critical race theory framework, which was deeply tied to Guinier's framework of racial literacy, both of which critique the dominant narratives of liberal progress in the United States. Chandler also found that the enacted curriculum in both classrooms treated racism as a problem of the past and as a problem reduced to unfortunate acts of flawed individuals rather than a current systemic ill (p. 266). Epstein's (2010) study of students' and teachers' interpretations of national history with regard to issues of race also found that if and when people of color were included in the social studies curriculum, their lives and experiences were reduced to the contributions they have made to the making of America.

With regard to the analysis of the pedagogical approaches of his study participants, Chandler briefly noted their respective positionalities as White, middle-class males and discussed how both teachers were not afraid to teach about issues of race, but were rather afraid of "offending" their students of color. His analysis of these two teachers may have been strengthened by a more in-depth exploration of their respective cultural biographies, beyond their demographic labels as middle-class White males, and how their respective biographies have shaped their approaches to their practices. For instance, in her study of White women, Twine (2010) focused heavily on examining how the biographies and experiences of her White female participants with racism subsequently impacted their daily decisions in raising biracial children, in order to better understand how these women came to demonstrate what Twine conceptualized

as racial literacy. Chandler's findings indicated the presence of genuine concern and care for the well-being of students of color by White male teachers, but we are left wondering what informed that concern and how that concern led to continued misguided efforts to teach about issues of race in social studies contexts. That both teachers expressed a concern for students of color, but not for the role that racism has played throughout American history, illuminates a profound contradiction in social studies education—a detrimental disconnection between the impact of systemic oppression and the daily lived experiences of students of color. Similar to the ways in which both of the teachers in Chandler's study reduced racism to an unfortunate chapter in American history and attributed its impact to the bad decisions of a select few, their concerns about students of color being "offended" by exploring issues of race in the classroom also dissociate the material consequences of racism on the social realities faced by their students. Employing an additional lens of humanizing pedagogies to the practices of these two teachers could also further illuminate the distance between their altruistic, albeit misplaced, intentions and the possibilities for enacting a curriculum and pedagogy that actively recognize the oppressive realities faced by their students, as they are inextricably tied to historical processes of structural inequities such as racism (Bartolome, 1994; Camangian, 2013).

Alternatively, Epstein's (2010) cross-examination of the six teachers in her comparative study of the varied interpretations of U.S. history, and the curriculum that these six teachers respectively implemented, offered a more in-depth explanatory analysis of the predominance of "racial illiteracy" in social studies curriculum and practice. Epstein concluded that "the six teachers' interpretations of race and rights in U.S. history provided mixed messages about the importance of the contributions of people of color, the role of white violence, as an enduring historic theme, and the expansion of rights throughout the nation's history" (p. 59). Epstein

attributed these “mixed messages” to the teachers’ pedagogical and curricular decisions which, on average, treated race relations with emotional trepidation and “conceptualized racism as a tragic, yet sporadic problem which became less problematic as the nation developed” (p. 59). In her explorations of their biographies, Epstein found that

most of the teachers had taken traditional history survey courses in college and used outdated history textbooks which contained little information on the agency of people of color. None had taken courses in their teacher education programs or had had professional development workshops which encouraged them to reflect on the dichotomies between their pedagogical beliefs and practices. (p. 35)

Thus, similar to the teachers in Chandler’s study, the beliefs and practices of these teachers have remained unchallenged in both their teacher preparation and ongoing professional development, with regard to how to center issues of race and racism in their curricular and pedagogical approaches. Twine similarly presented discussions of different women from her study and the ways in which they demonstrated racial literacy in the context of their approaches and orientations toward parenting. She emphasized the fact that she classified less than 20% of the White female participants in her study as “racially literate,” and found that a key catalyst in their racial literacy development was tied to “turning points in their racial consciousness,” such as involvement in antiracist work and/or social justice communities and organizations, as well as certain experiences in higher education (p. 114). Given the continued struggle on the part of teacher education programs to engage issues of race and racism effectively in both content and methods courses (King, 2014), it is not surprising that many social studies teachers continue to grapple with how to confront and integrate issues of race and racism explicitly and intentionally into their curriculum and daily practice.

In a more recent study of three White social studies teachers, Chandler and Branscombe (2015) highlighted a key tension between realizing the power of race, whiteness and its impact

on U.S. history, and a refusal to allow these realizations to enter the pedagogical space in their classrooms. In each case, the teachers did, in fact, actively talk about race in their classrooms; however, the authors classified the nature of the teachers' discourse into a framework of "liberal, incremental progress" (p. 69). Thus, even though race was explicitly integrated into the social studies classroom discourse, it was not done so in a racially literate manner. Similarly, in a self-study of his classroom, Martell (2013) found that even though he was purposeful in working to include narratives about people of color, feedback from his students pushed him to realize that his approach still lacked a critical consideration of his own whiteness. In both of these case studies, issues of race and racial identity were examined by White researchers about White participants. Given the continued predominance of White teachers and researchers in social studies education, critical considerations and reflections on the impact of White racial identity and positionality on studies about issues of race and racism would provide additional insight into and context of the racialized dynamics inherent in social studies classrooms.

Conversely, Twine clarified her researcher positionality as a woman of color seeking to understand the childrearing practices of White women and often intertwined reflections about the ways in which her own identity as a person of color impacts her research. There is less such reflection evident in the aforementioned cases in terms of how the interpretation of the data was impacted by the racial identity of the respective authors. Additionally, in the cases of many of the White teachers in the said studies, issues of White identity and the impact of White supremacy and White guilt on White teachers' pedagogies in social studies classrooms often result in what can be interpreted as racial anxiety, stress, and tension (Stevenson, 2014), which ultimately impede opportunities to enact a humanizing social studies education for young people because

the experiences and feelings of their teachers take precedence over their own and, in the worst cases, result in the perpetuation of “culturally hostile” learning environments (Camangian, 2015).

In addition to learning about the experiences and perceptions of social studies teachers across these various studies, a number of findings have also revealed the impact of enacted curriculum on the students. In terms of students’ perceptions of the enacted social studies curriculum in their classrooms, a number of studies have highlighted the awareness of the curricular silences and incongruence with social realities around racism on the part of young people (Epstein, 2010; Howard, 2004; Levstik, 2000; Rubin, 2015). One of the key findings in Epstein’s study was the stark difference between White students’ and Black students’ conceptions of race and issues of racial inequality. While White students tended to view racism as problem of the past and a problem reduced to individuals rather than systems, Black students tended to conceptualize issues of race and racism as past and present problems. Notably, Epstein’s study also highlighted the ways in which students’ home knowledge from parents and families either corroborated or refuted the curriculum in their social studies classrooms; in nearly all cases, Black students’ understanding of racism as a systemic and pervasive problem in U.S. society is tied to the curriculum they receive from home rather than the curriculum they receive in schools. In Howard’s (2004) study of a single middle school U.S. history classroom with predominantly Black students, a key theme that emerged from his interview data with students further illuminated the observations of young people about the treatment of race in their social studies curriculum. He discussed how most of the students “viewed the social studies as a place where race and race-related issues were not addressed” and described his surprise that the students instead “viewed social studies as subject matter that dealt with historical events, issues, and concepts, but not as subject matter that allowed explorations of race and racism” (p. 493).

While these studies did not focus solely on the voices of students, their findings in terms of student perceptions still serve as an important reflection of the state of social studies curriculum and pedagogy. That the students in Howard's study saw explorations of race and racism as separate from the study of historical events and issues demonstrates the persistent curricular and pedagogical denial that racism has been inextricably woven into the fabric of American history and culture. Continuing to treat issues of race and racism as optional topics, rather than critical components of the study of our past and present, demonstrates not only a lack of racial literacy, but also a denial of a key component of human experiences in local and global contexts.

In a different vein, small number of studies have examined social studies curriculum that is both explicit and deliberate in centering issues of race and racism as a form of curricular and pedagogical resistance to the status quo in social studies education (Branch, 2004; Castro, Hawkman, & Diaz, 2015; Chandler, 2006; Epstein & Gist, 2014; Martell, 2013; Salinas & Castro, 2010). While these studies focused heavily on teacher pedagogy, practice, and reflection, they also took time to discuss the key features of their curriculum. The majority of these studies featured teachers of color (Branch, 2004; Castro et al., 2015; Epstein & Gist, 2014; Salinas & Castro, 2010), while some feature the curricular practices of White teachers (Chandler, 2006; Martell, 2013). The teachers across these studies explicitly engaged and confronted race and racism in both their curriculum and daily practice. In interviews, they spoke explicitly about the systemic nature and impact of racism, and in most cases, shared beliefs around the role of social studies education in equipping young people with the historical and contemporary knowledge necessary to combat and transform oppressive structures in society, thus providing some explicit examples racial literacy and humanizing pedagogies in social studies classrooms.



Some of the key ways the enacted curriculum and pedagogies of the teachers in these respective studies demonstrated examples of racial literacy and humanizing pedagogies were: (a) the conscious and explicit integration of marginalized narratives and topics pertaining the experiences of people of color with racism; (b) alternative approaches to traditionally Eurocentric and mainstream curricular topics that actively sought to decenter the master narrative of White American progress; and (c) an intentional engagement and curricular tie to the lived experiences of the students and, specifically, their experiences with racism and other forms of oppression. One of the teacher participants in a study conducted by Salinas and Castro (2010) was intentional about centering the concepts of “discrimination,” “oppression,” and “racism” in curricular topics such as the Holocaust, despite their absence in the official state standards. Another teacher in the same study implemented a curriculum rooted in presenting counternarratives by “having students analyze primary and secondary sources that illuminated the plight of marginalized groups in history” (p. 443). In this way, the teachers in this study demonstrated both Guinier’s (2004) structurally-based conceptualization of racial literacy as well as Stevenson’s (2014) conceptualization of racial literacy by way of demonstrating what he referred to as “racial self-efficacy”—the ability to navigate racially stressful encounters with curriculum and people in ways that demonstrate an acceptance and comfortable discomfort with the existence of racism in schools. Similarly, Chandler’s (2006) self-study examined his experiences when implementing a social studies curriculum that actively included “radical, revisionist versions of American history” (p. 354). Chandler’s pedagogical approach and stance in his self-study may arguably be interpreted as racially literate; however, what is lacking in his self-analysis is a tie to the ways in which one’s biography informs one’s actions with regard to issues of race and racism. In his self-study, Chandler provided a powerful outline, map, and

testimony of his curricular enactments and his experiences with teaching counternarratives; however, he did not provide the background of his own exposure to counternarratives or how he came to decide to teach in racially literate ways. In another study, Branch (2004) examined the curriculum and pedagogy of a Japanese American social studies teacher and focused heavily on her conceptions of respect and how that was tied to her understandings of racism and oppression. In addition to providing examples of how her pedagogy affirmed and honored the lived experiences of her students, Branch outlined the ways in which this teacher chose to center her curriculum on student-driven research projects that enabled students to tie their learning to their social realities. In this way, the teacher in this study demonstrated both racially literate and humanizing social studies practices in her classroom and offered an example of a study that tied teacher practice to biography in social studies education. Branch indicated how the teacher's conceptualization of respect in her classroom was connected to her own experiences with and understandings of oppression.

Another common theme across these studies was the role that teachers' respective personal and academic biographies played in their curricular and pedagogical development. In the cases of teachers of color, personal experiences with racism and discrimination, as well as exposure to undergraduate coursework that dealt explicitly with issues of race, were found to play heavily into their decisions to integrate issues of race and racism purposefully into their curriculum (Branch, 2004; Epstein & Gist, 2015; Salinas & Castro, 2010). Salinas and Castro (2010) directly tied racially literate curricular practices to the pedagogical practices of teachers and heavily discussed the influence of one's cultural autobiography upon pedagogy and practice. Alternatively, in the studies of White teachers, the connection between curricular topics centering race and personal biographical experiences was less clear and would be strengthened

by including the sources of curricular decisions and covered topics in their classrooms (Chandler, 2006; Martell, 2013). For instance, Chandler (2009) discussed his efforts to implement a curriculum that explicitly centered issues of race, but did not discuss how he arrived at a point in his personal and pedagogical development as a White male social studies teacher that led him to center and teach explicitly about issues of race and racism in his classroom. While the features of Chandler's practice aligned with the key features of racial literacy and humanizing pedagogies, the absence of a critical analysis of key biographical moments in his own racial identity development, as well as moments of exposure to curriculum similar to that which he implemented in his classroom, revealed more questions than answers about how his findings and implications can be translated into social studies teacher education.

### **Enactments of Humanizing and Relational Pedagogies**

A number of studies have sought to document and analyze the key features, practices, and impact of teachers who work to create humanizing spaces for historically marginalized and dispossessed youth and engage in relational pedagogies in their classrooms (Acosta, 2013; Burke, Adler, & Linker, 2008; Camangian, 2015; de los Ríos, 2012, 2013, de los Ríos, López, & Morrell, 2015; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Howard, 2002; Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009; Salazar & Franquiz, 2008; Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2014; Villanueva, 2013). A central theme across these studies was the focus on the role of authentically caring relationships (Valenzuela, 2010) that the teachers featured in the studies actively developed with their students, families, and communities within which they worked. Additionally, while the various studies focused on different disciplines of study, the majority of the studies took place in Ethnic Studies classrooms and discussed the different ways that teachers actively utilized the curriculum as a vehicle to connect classroom learning to the

lived realities of their students as a direct form of resistance toward dehumanizing colonial conditions in schools (Camangian, 2015; de los Ríos, 2012, 2013; de los Ríos et al., 2015; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Howard, 2002; Romero et al., 2009; Villanueva, 2013). The purposeful affirmation of student ideas, experiences, histories, and personhood by each of the teachers also resonated across the studies. As an academic discipline, an ongoing social movement, and a political orientation, Ethnic Studies is grounded in humanizing pedagogies as it actively seeks to restore humanity to historically dehumanized and oppressed communities and populations. As such, empirical studies of Ethnic Studies classrooms provide some concrete examples of curricular and pedagogical enactments of humanizing pedagogies. In addition to learning from the examples of humanizing pedagogies in Ethnic Studies classrooms, I also wanted to understand what humanizing and relational pedagogies might look like in mainstream, compulsory-subject classrooms, given that my study took place in three social studies classrooms.

In his study of African American students' perceptions and descriptions of effective teaching practices across five different urban elementary and secondary schools, Howard (2002) found that students valued and performed better for teachers who "established family, community and home-like environments," as well as those who "established culturally connected caring relationships with students" (p. 15). Culturally connected caring relationships in the study were described as including "explicitly and implicitly showing affective, emotional, and nurturing behavior towards students" (p. 15). Similarly, Duncan-Andrade (2007) identified "trust" as a key pillar of effective practice among urban educators. This conceptualization of trusting relationships between the students and teachers in his study was based on the ability of the teachers to demonstrate an awareness of the dehumanizing conditions their students faced.

Duncan-Andrade wrote, “This awareness...helped them [the teachers] to understand the importance of standing in opposition to school policies that were oppressive, racist, colonialist, and that perpetuate cycles of inequality” (p. 633). The centrality and importance of relationships in enactments of humanizing pedagogies cannot be understated. What studies such as Howard’s and Duncan-Andrade’s have underscored is the necessity of relationships to effective teaching in diverse classrooms.

A number of studies that explored enactments of humanizing pedagogies have taken place in secondary Ethnic Studies classrooms (de los Ríos, 2013; de los Ríos et al., 2015; Romero et al., 2009; Villanueva, 2013), with one study that explored an Ethnic Studies unit that took place in a tenth grade social studies classroom (de los Ríos et al., 2015). In a study of their Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, Arizona prior to its legislative ban in 2010, Romero et al. (2009) presented the humanizing features and dimensions of what they called “Barrio pedagogy,” as it is deeply rooted in engaging the surrounding cultural and community wealth, and “Critically Compassionate Intellectualism (CCI)” (p. 217). Romero et al. outlined the six elements of Critically Compassionate Intellectualism as follows:

- (1) The nurturing of blossoming intellectualism (Xinachtli) through authentic caring,
- (2) Pedagogy de los barrios,
- (3) Students as creators of knowledge,
- (4) Focus on collective and individual agency,
- (5) Organic intellectualism,
- (6) Academic and personal transformation. (p. 220)

Utilizing the CCI framework and approach, Romero et al. explained how “students are moved toward realizing their humanity through self, familial, and community critical reflections. Without their humanity, Chicanas/os struggle to gain a critical consciousness” (p. 221). In order to enact this type of student-centered pedagogy, they wrote about the importance of teacher openness and vulnerability:

Equally important, CCI teachers share their poems with students, which is another opportunity for teachers to reveal their hearts and souls. The reciprocation of thoughts concerns, fears, desires etc., presents an opportunity for both teachers and students to establish greater connections.... If students can see their teachers as human beings, they are more likely to invest their humanistic capital in that teacher. (p. 223)

As such, the concepts and findings offered by this study provide theoretically-rich and tangible examples of humanizing pedagogies in action at the secondary level. While the enactments of humanizing pedagogies in the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson have been studied and documented (Acosta, 2013; Villanueva, 2013) both during and following the dismantling of the program, it is important to note that these pedagogical approaches and frameworks are unique to non-dominant classroom spaces. In considering implications for research in social studies classrooms, this body of scholarship provides one of the few examples of concrete enactments of humanizing pedagogies in secondary classrooms and offers important guidelines for forthcoming studies of humanizing pedagogies in mainstream curricular spaces.

In their chapter “Critical Ethnic Studies in High School Classrooms,” de los Ríos et al. (2015) offered a case study of an Ethnic Studies unit that was implemented by a tenth-grade history teacher at Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles, California. The Community Cultural Treasures Project “brought together teachers and non-profit arts and literacy directors to create project that address the life, culture, local history, and voice of students” (p. 17) and culminated with the students publishing “a book of biographies, poems, narratives, and interviews that challenge racist notions of their neighborhood and shared their work to community member at a local theater arts space” (p. 18). In this case study, the students were supported and centered as “writers, historians, scholars, and authors of community culture” (p. 20). In outlining the explicit humanizing pedagogical components of praxis, de los Ríos et al (2015) wrote:

This project aims at highlighting to educators who are working to create humanizing curriculum the crucial importance to not develop projects in isolation but rather work in

solidarity (Freire, 1998) with the community they serve, including students.... The project also aimed at developing in students a love for their community.... Ethnic Studies curriculum must create avenues for students to see manifestations of love, which humanizes the learning environment and supports student learning and self (Morrell et al., 2013). Teachers must also possess a love for the community they serve if they wish to impart in students this value. (p. 21)

This case study and body of scholarship on Ethnic Studies praxis demonstrated the curricular and pedagogical prospects of implementing humanizing Ethnic Studies pedagogies and frameworks in secondary social studies classrooms. Where this body of scholarship differed from the body of scholarship on curricular enactments of race and racism in social studies classrooms is that scant attention has been paid to the impact of teachers' personal experiences and biography on their curricular and pedagogical development and design. While the literature on treatments of race and racism in social studies classrooms have outlined key features of curriculum and practice, along with supplemental explorations of how teachers' personal and educative experiences have informed their curricular and pedagogical decisions, these studies have not included explicit discussions of how these curricular engagements humanize students. Alternatively, while the literature on enactments of humanizing pedagogies has also documented and outlined key features and dimensions of teacher practice, this body of scholarship has focused less on exploring who the teachers are and how they have come to learn how to enact humanizing pedagogies in their classrooms.

While this dissertation sought to explore the practices of secondary social studies teachers rather than Ethnic Studies teachers, the studies on Ethnic Studies teachers outlined key curricular and pedagogical features of humanizing praxes which this study sought to identify and document in order to expand on and build bridges across these bodies of scholarship. Additionally, this study sought to bridge these bodies of scholarship more purposefully by exploring research questions engendered by the aforementioned studies of social studies and Ethnic Studies teachers

and also by exploring the practices of three social studies teachers through a combined theoretical lens of humanizing pedagogies, racial literacy, and radical healing.



### Chapter 3 – METHODOLOGY

In her open letter to communities, researchers, and educators, Eve Tuck (2009) called for a moratorium on what she referred to as “damage-centered research,” which focuses on documenting “pain” and “brokenness,” and instead implored educational researchers to engage in “desire-based research frameworks,” which are “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416). As such, I chose portraiture as a methodology following a review of the current available literature on curricular and pedagogical engagements with race and racism in social studies classrooms, which revealed an abundant focus on dysfunction and weaknesses. Portraiture’s “concern for health” and a “search for goodness” as a research stance complements both my conceptual framework as well as my intention to expand the scholarship on curricular engagements with race and racism through an asset, rather than deficit-based and damage-centered, lens. Portraiture, a methodology of qualitative research which is designed to “capture the richness, complexity and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3), by drawing upon rigorous empirical research and aesthetic expression to produce narrative research that aims to be accessible to broad audiences. Citing the works of Rousseau, Dewey, Geertz, and DuBois as the “colorful historic canvas” against and upon which she shaped her version of social science portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis explained that “portraiture is a method framed by the traditions and values of the phenomenological paradigm, sharing many of the techniques, standards and goals of ethnography” (p. 13).

Portraiture thus provided the methodological vehicle for my exploration into the classrooms and lives of three social studies teachers who centered issues of race and racism in

their curriculum. Guided by my research questions, I sought to document and understand their curricular and pedagogical decisions and enactments. As a methodology, portraiture offered me an empirically rigorous and aesthetically-driven framework to guide, challenge, and make meaning of my narrative inquiries across these four classrooms.

As method, portraiture focuses on a search for “goodness,” though realizing that goodness is inherently “laced with imperfection” (p. 9). In portraiture, the search for goodness is guided by the five core components of context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and an aesthetic whole. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) further explained the focus on goodness as a “shift of research stance—from focus on weakness to pursuit of strength, from preoccupation with disease to concern for health, from inquiry into dysfunction to examination of productivity—[which] does *not* mean that the former attributes are neglected in favor of elevating the latter” (p. 142). Portraiture is rooted in the assumption that a focused examination on what works will inevitably reveal flaws, weaknesses, and inconsistencies. Consequently, this study sought to excavate and examine the experiences, challenges, ideas, and beliefs that shape the daily curricular and pedagogical decisions and practices of three teachers and resulted in my development of four comparative and complex narratives that aim to expand understandings about the nuanced contours of teaching and learning about race in social studies classrooms.

Portraiture is also a methodology that draws heavily from ethnography, often relying on the use of field notes to place actors within contexts. Specifically, portraiture relies heavily upon Geertz’s (1973) discussion of “thick description...our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to...” (p. 9). In discussing the importance of framing historical context in portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) posited, “the contextual description can weave together the external ecology within the ideological and

developmental odyssey of the place” (p. 52). Thus, while my study explored curricular enactments of race and racism in social studies classrooms by asking similar questions to previous researchers, portraiture provided an alternative methodological approach that offered additional depth and nuanced frames of analysis by blending thin and thick descriptions of lessons and actors in context and, at times, human archeology in service of producing an empirically-rich and informed narrative representation of social studies teaching and reflection in action. Portraiture provided a methodological framework and vehicle to explore my research questions in ways that explicitly required attention to nuances. Portraiture also provided me an opportunity to analyze and present my data and findings in a format that was accessible both within and beyond the academy.

Lastly, portraiture contains an “explicit recognition of the use of self as the primary research instrument for documenting and interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and the cultures being studied” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). The personal and professional perspectives that I have developed as both a former secondary social studies teacher and now a social studies teacher educator offered empathetic and discerning lenses, strengths and insights to my analysis throughout this study.

## **Research Design**

### **Data Sources and Participants**

The portrait subjects for this dissertation were selected utilizing a process coined by Foster (1991) as “community nomination” in her study of African American teachers. Foster developed the community nomination process as an extension of “native anthropology,” positing that it [community nomination] “is an attempt to gain what anthropologists call an ‘emic’ perspective, an insider’s view, in this case the black community’s perspective, of a good teacher”

(p. 240). Given the explicit focus on exploring curricular engagements with race and racism in this study, I employed the community nomination process within southern New England activist organizations that center youth empowerment and anti-oppressive practices to create a purposive sample of three social studies teachers (Maxwell, 2012). Employing the community nomination process provided an opportunity to engage both the voices of the students as well as community workers, fellow teachers, and youth advocates who work for organizations with a stated stance against the dehumanizing and oppressive nature of schooling. As such, the nominations offered by these respective communities yielded a purposive sample that fit the criteria of my research participants.

My personal and professional connections with local, justice-oriented organizations in the New England area provided a starting point for me to gather nominations for participants for my study. I was explicit in asking for nominations of teachers who have garnered reputations in their schools and districts as teachers who explicitly teach about issues of race and racism.

My criteria for candidate nomination were threefold; the social studies teachers (a) had garnered a reputation for explicitly centering issues of race and racism in their curriculum; (b) had at least 5 years of full-time classroom teaching experience and also had reputations for building strong relationships with their students; and (c) worked in schools with predominantly students of color. For the purposes of this dissertation, I wanted to study the practices and relevant lived experiences of veteran social studies teachers (at least 5 years of teaching experience) who work with mostly students of color for two reasons: first, an impetus for my research is to better understand some of the affective and effective approaches to teaching and learning about race and racism in secondary social studies classrooms. While there may certainly be a number of novice social studies teachers who center issues of race and racism in their

curriculum, I wanted to study the practice of teachers who have had some opportunity to develop and refine that practice. Second, given the framing of the problem of persistent dehumanizing practices on students of color, my study needed to include classrooms that serve predominantly students of color.

### **Research Context**

I also opted to focus on secondary social studies teachers located in two southern New England-area cities, given their similar multiracial demographic make-up and historical contexts. I wanted all three of the teachers in my study to come from the same or similar schooling contexts to aid with consistency across the portraits. I opted to select three participants in an effort to balance the need for the development of complex and in-depth portraits of each, while also creating space to study the three teachers comparatively. Lastly, it was important to me that my study relied on the community nomination process to yield participant candidates who had established strong reputations among their students, families, and colleagues. Howard (2002) highlighted the frequent absence of students' opinions and perceptions of effective pedagogy. Choosing to employ the community nomination process through an organization that centers and raises student voice was instrumental in guiding me into the classrooms of teachers who were deemed effective by the students they serve.

I drew heavily on my relationships with members of both organizations to recruit participants for my study. While I currently have access to and the trust of current members of both organizations, I did not want my study to be composed of participants with whom I already had a close relationship in an effort to mitigate further researcher bias. Relationship building is already central to the process and production of portraiture, which Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) described as a “challenging process of negotiating the often-conflicting demands

and responsibilities of ethics, empiricism, and emotion” (p. 158). Once I received nominations, I conducted initial diagnostic classroom observations of their curriculum and pedagogy as guided by my theoretical framework. During these diagnostic observations, I took note of how the nominated teachers engaged and discussed issues of race and racism in their respective classrooms as well as how they interacted with their students (see Appendix A).

### **Data Collection**

The data for this study were collected over the course of the 2017-2018 academic school year, with deep dives into each teacher’s classroom taking place with a series of sustained weekly and biweekly 60- to 90-minute classroom observations over a 3-month period. During these observations, I also collected any classroom handouts, readings, and documents used by the teachers. I then conducted 60- to 90-minute semi-structured, in-depth interviews after every other observation. The interviews were heavily influenced by my observation field notes, with my field notes and Impressionistic Records helping me to generate initial questions, while also aiming to be fluid in order to allow space for the teachers to guide the course of the interviews as I shared my observations with them. Specifically, I focused my questions on asking about the development of the curriculum they taught and why they chose to approach and teach in their respective ways. I also posed questions about the curation and use of any curricular materials and documents.

Following each observation and interview, I also completed written and oral “Impressionistic Records,” which Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explained as “a ruminative, thoughtful piece that identifies emerging hypotheses, suggests interpretations, describes shifts in perspective, points to puzzles and dilemmas (methodological, conceptual, ethical) that need attention, and develops a plan of action for the next visit” (p. 188), reflecting

on and taking note of my immediate thoughts, interpretations, ideas, feelings, and questions engendered by what I was seeing and hearing, especially as informed by my conceptual lens and framework. The data analysis was thus an iterative process, taking place during and following the observation and interview cycles for each teacher.

### **Data Analysis and Narrative Construction**

As I completed data collection for each teacher, I then began a series of comprehensive coding cycles for each teacher that went through three phases. The first phase consisted of me reading through all of my observation field notes, interview transcripts, Impressionistic Records, and analytic memos, working to draw out “repetitive refrains”—words, phrases, actions, or gestures that appeared multiple times across my different data sources (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193). This first phase of coding drew heavily from what the teachers themselves repeated the most across both their interviews and their classrooms. Once I took note of the repetitive refrains and emergent themes, I moved into the second phase of data analysis by combing through every page of data and developing “descriptive codes” based on the units of analysis derived from my research questions (Miles & Huberman, 2002). This yielded 30-40 codes per teacher (see Appendix B). These codes drew heavily from classroom observation data and curricular enactments—what I observed the teachers doing in their classrooms and focused on finding examples of answers to my first research question: “How do three social studies teachers enact lessons about issue of race and racism?” I then sorted the descriptive codes into separate piles. I went through each pile and developed “interpretive codes,” utilizing my conceptual framework and the repetitive refrains as a guide to sort and combine data piles into fewer piles based on how the data were offering different answers to my research questions. For instance, I created a pile for every time “race” or “racism” was mentioned during class; then I

went through that pile and separated based on the type of pedagogical strategy or move that was attached to the explicit engagement with race.

For the third phase, I read through and analyzed each data pile again to develop pattern or meta-codes, based on the themes emerging from the data, and then analyzed these thematic codes alongside the initial repetitive refrains noted during my first phase of analysis. This third phase helped to reveal the curricular and pedagogical moves most frequently employed by each teacher. Following these two stages of data analysis, I utilized the codes and repetitive refrains to draw out and construct three key emergent themes per teacher, based on what appeared most frequently across the various data sources and, most importantly, from the words of the teachers themselves, as portraiture asks us to ground our construction of emergent themes based on the “ways actors illuminate and experience their realities” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193).

The coding schema served as an outline for the narrative construction of each individual portrait and guided my selection of curricular moments from the observations that best captured the three themes for each portrait. The construction of the “aesthetic whole” is driven and shaped by four dimensions: conception, structure, form, and cohesion (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 247). In portraiture, conception refers to the “development of the overarching story,” which is drawn heavily from the emergent themes and “must reflect the weight of empirical evidence, the infusion of emotional meaning, and the aesthetic narrative development” (p. 248). The structure “refers to the sequencing and layering of emergent themes that scaffold the story” (p. 247). The form refers to the “movement of the narrative,” and cohesion refers to the overall “unity and integrity of the piece” (p. 247).



Throughout the data analysis process, I experienced what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) referred to as the

generative tension embraced by portraitists: the tension between organization and classification on one hand and maintaining the rich complexity of human experience on the other—the tension between developing discrete codes and searching for meaning, and the tension between the researcher’s desire for control and coherence and the actors’ reality of incoherence and instability. The portraitist does not try to resolve this tension by choosing one side over the other. Rather she works to maintain the tension and experience the dialectic between these two approaches to thematic development. (p. 192)

I sought to reconcile this tension by engaging in multiple rounds of coding, in which I worked to develop both etic and emic codes; ensure that the final themes were rooted in the patterns, thoughts, feelings, and ideas conveyed by the teachers; and then include data from my descriptive and interpretive piles into the larger three themes as I began to construct the final narrative portraits. The units of analysis provided the skeletal shape and form of each portrait, while the thick descriptions of practice provided the depth during narrative construction.

### **Validity and Ethical Considerations**

The validity and reliability of this study were assessed utilizing a combination of portraiture’s “standard of authenticity” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) as well as through an ongoing series of “validity checks” (Maxwell, 2012). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explained the “standard of authenticity” in portraiture:

In constructing the aesthetic whole, the portraitist seeks a portrayal that is believable, that makes sense, that causes the “click of recognition.” We refer to this “yes, of course” experience as *resonance*, and we see the standard as one of authenticity. The portraitist hopes to develop a rich portrayal that will have resonance (in different ways, from different perspectives) with three audiences: with the actors who will see themselves reflected in the story, with the readers who will see no reason to disbelieve it, and with the portraitist herself, whose deep knowledge of the setting and self-critical stance allow her to see the “truth value” in her work. (p. 247)

I sought to achieve the major components of portraiture’s standard of authenticity through several of what Maxwell (2012) termed “validity tests”: (a) intensive, long-term involvement

with participants that allows for more data and less reliance on inference; (b) rich data that are “detailed and varied enough...to provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (p. 126); (c) respondent validation, or “member checks” with the participants to solicit feedback on my interpretations and emergent themes, including having my participants view interview transcripts and early drafts of my work; (d) searching for discrepant data (or what portraiture terms “dissonant voices”) through my memoing and data analysis coding matrix; (e) triangulation of data from multiple sources; and finally, (f) negotiating relationships, making clear from the outset of the study the reciprocity and boundaries of the research relationship, and being clear and explicit about the ways these relationships develop and shape the research process and conclusions. These levels of validity checks helped to assure that my work was held to a high standard of authenticity. Finally, given the small sample size of the study, my findings are not generalizable to all secondary social studies teachers. Alternatively, my three portraits offer larger, cohesive narratives in which readers can still find different points of resonance and “clicks of recognition.” Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explained that “in the particular lies the general” (p. 189). This in-depth dive into the lives and practices of three teachers thus provides readers with less of a “how to” engage issues of race and racism in secondary social studies classrooms and, instead, more of a “how come” these teachers each approach and navigate their practices in their respective ways (Catone, 2017). In doing so, I hope that these portraits will resonate with the teachers themselves as well as those who read the stories about them.

Chapter 4 – MALCOLM—STRUGGLE, CONNECTIONS, AND HOPE:  
RACISM IN EARLY AMERICA

I'm always trying to help them see the echoes of the things they are seeing  
in history in modern-day, in their lives and in the world around us.  
-Malcolm

**Struggle**

The soft hum of adolescent chatter fills the classroom as Malcolm stands in his corner home base at the front of the room to the left of the Smartboard, which has been mounted over what might to be one of the few remaining traditional chalkboards in today's social studies classrooms. His 6-foot-tall, slender, athletic frame is slightly hunched over his podium as he looks down at his laptop screen. He briefly strokes his beard as he looks out into the sea of mahogany faces, many whose skin tones reflect his own, before he pushes his glasses back with the tip of his index finger and makes his way to the front of the room. The chatter subsides the moment the chalk hits the board. A young man with a warm, caramel complexion and curly brown hair bounces on a yoga ball near the back of the room and cranes his neck to try and see what his teacher is writing. The staccato precision with which Malcolm writes on the board is quick, purposeful, and free from the screeching we all hope to avoid when writing on a chalkboard. He places the chalk down, dusts off his hands, and steps to the side. The room falls silent as we all take few moments to read the question Malcolm has posed on the board:

*What is racism and why does it exist?*

He slowly scans the room as the students read what he has written before reading it out loud and then asks everyone to answer the question. One student immediately raises his hand while calling out, "But I wasn't here yesterday!" Without missing a beat, Malcolm responds, "You weren't here yesterday? That's all good, 'cause racism has been around for at least a year or two." The class releases a mild eruption of laughter before the room falls completely silent of

students' voices and the sound of pencils on desks crescendos like a rainstorm picking up momentum in the middle of the night. Malcolm tilts his head back, closes his eyes, and smiles: "Ahhh, that's such a great sound."

As the raindrops of pencils on desks fill the air, I look around the classroom from my perch in the old, forest-green reading chair against the only wall with windows. The students are seated at tables rather than desks, and on Kore wobble chairs and yoga balls rather than the usual blue plastic classroom chairs. The tables are arranged in a Tetris-like configuration, with the students facing every direction except the back of the room, where there are floor-to-ceiling built-in white bookshelves. The students are clad in red polo shirts with khaki pants. Their school uniforms offer a sharp contrast to the vibrant array of hairstyles and textures and colorful accessories. Student work and posters adorn the walls and hang from clotheslines draped across the various corners of the classroom. A small, yellow couch is nestled near a laptop cart across from Malcolm's perch at the front of the room. Above the chalkboard to the right sits a worn poster against a bright, periwinkle wall that boasts a large James Baldwin poster—photograph taken by Chester Higgins Jr.—with the quote, "Ignorance allied with power is the most ferocious enemy justice can have." Baldwin's intensely pensive gaze focuses on the back-left corner of the classroom where, on one of the lower clotheslines draped across the bookshelves, there is a huge fabric "Black Lives Matter" banner, large enough to wrap around at least three or four students. Nestled between Baldwin and the banner are the students.

As I try to take in all of the vibrant colors, books, and fabrics, I am reminded of coloring books from my childhood. Just like on the pages of my coloring books, there is not a single blank space in Malcolm's classroom. Nothing seems to be without intention, without use, or without meaning. Taking in this attention to detail with my eyes, my ears remind me of the task at hand.

As the students' writing decelerates, Malcolm heads to one of the tables and takes a seat on one of the wobble chairs before asking students to share out their responses. Their eagerness to respond is intense and visible through the 45-degree arms arched towards Malcolm, each reaching for him to call on them next. The verbal volleying across the classroom is rapid and challenging to keep up with, as the students and Malcolm launch into a nearly 20-minute discussion:

Racism is thinking that one race is superior than the other and it exists because White men thought they were superior to Black men and then they created racial slurs and treated them like property.

Well, racism is discrimination and it exists because people want power and control.

And race is sorta imaginary, right? Like, we have skin colors, but it's not something you should be categorized by.

But we are!

Malcolm jumps in: Does it matter?

A few students call out in unison: It shouldn't!

Race is a made-up thing to separate us.

Malcolm throws another question into the mix: Is racism a real thing?

Altogether, the class responds: YEAH.

Watching Malcolm and his students in action, I am instantly brought back to my former classroom in the heart of Deep East Oakland, where I sought to grapple with similar questions with my seventh and eighth grade students. I was endlessly moved by the raw honesty and brilliance with which my students would define and discuss racism. Whether they were posing questions and critiques about the impact of racial stratification as a result of the Casta System or sharing firsthand accounts of police brutality in their neighborhood, their comments were consistently unfiltered, genuine, and firmly rooted in a reality that no history textbooks have ever

come close to capturing. My students would approach conversations about the role of racism in history and contemporary life through a lens shaped by their daily lived experiences as urban youth of color growing up in a community that has been historically targeted and marginalized. While my students did not arrive to my classroom knowing the term *redlining*, many of them shared astute observations and analyses of the effects of exclusionary housing practices in Oakland, often demonstrating extensive awareness and knowledge of racial and economic geographic enclaves and boundaries across their city, and the struggles they faced in their struggles to navigate these historical and contemporary structural realities. Nearly a decade later and 3,000 miles across the country, I witness a similar raw honesty expressed by the seventh graders in Malcolm's class and feel the weight of their lived experiences, as they collectively struggle to define racism and discuss why it exists.

Malcolm glances at the clock and sees that they have 5 minutes left in class before starting to pass out a reading.

I'm not trying to define [racism] completely, but I want us to start to define it within the context of American history and we are going to look at different definitions from different sources. I want to thank you before you go today because what I'm asking you to do is tricky. It's complex and you all provided some deeply complex responses, so this is an ongoing conversation. So, you are going to read over this chapter for homework and we are going to dive in deeper next class.

He hands me a copy and I glance down to see that he has photocopied the second chapter of Howard Zinn's *A Young People's History of the United States*, titled "Black and White." As the students stuff the chapter into their binders and backpacks, I quickly read through the introduction, which sits beside an image of a slave auction in Virginia, 1861. The image depicts a Black family, a man standing next to a woman cradling a baby standing at the top of an auction block labeled with a sign, "Negroes for Sale at Auction this day at 1 O'Clock" and a White, bearded male in a suit standing on the stairs to their right. The chapter begins:

In the history of the world, there is no country where racism has been more important than in the United States. How did this racism start? How might it end? Another way of asking the question might be: Is racism natural?

Maybe history can help answer these questions. If so, then the history of slavery in North America could hold some clues, because we can trace the coming of the first white people and first black people to this continent

Explaining his decision to use this chapter from Zinn's book during his current unit on the colonial period in U.S. history, Malcolm discusses:

We don't talk about U.S. being the leader in racism or, you know, the best at it, but I think we have kind of perfected it here. I can't define it [racism] completely and wouldn't attempt to and that's why I was really heartened by their answers, which were incredibly sincere. I just want to hold on to that and put it in some context that they can understand for the colonial period and carry that forward. You know, so it's more about them understanding that what they see around them now is not an accident, it is.... It's been constructed over decades, over centuries and it's perpetuated by very old ideas that are held on to because they benefit a lot of people; they benefit people with power. So, a lot of my seventh grade is spent talking about power and relationships to power.

Malcolm attributes his willingness to engage in difficult and deeper discussions around race and racism with his seventh graders in part to the fact that he has grown increasingly "bolder and confident" with posing such questions after 8 years of teaching. It is also in part to his recognition and concern for the social realities that his predominantly Black and Brown students are forced to confront.

By the time they're in seventh grade, the world is dealing with them as adults. For boys, a lot of the Black boys especially, they're getting extra attention from the police in the neighborhood and if they don't have an outlet to talk about those things or talk about well, this is where some of this started, it...it's just frustrating. It's just a terrible place to be in and there's a real desire to get out. And like, how to tackle life. Here they can have a taste of the really complex parts before they're really forced to deal with it day-to-day. You know, as an adult.

Malcolm demonstrates a critical recognition of the struggles that many of his students, especially the young Black boys, are forced to confront and explains how his knowledge of what they are forced to experience in the surrounding neighborhood informs the types of individual and whole class discussions that he has with his students. Malcolm speaks of the realities and

struggles that his students are forced to confront with an incredibly calm, but palpable sense of urgency and concern. I realize that I have yet to hear him raise his voice, but instead Malcolm is able to convey strong emotion through subtle inflections, hand gestures, and his eyes. There is a soothing, melodic quality to his voice, and whether he is chatting one-on-one with me or a student during class or with the entire class in front of him, he displays a tempered patience and consistent volume. In some way, his calm temperament lends weight to his words. He maintains his softly urgent tone as he discusses his students' realities, pausing at moments to share individual stories of struggle that some of them are currently grappling with, which include navigating poverty, multiracial identities, and feeling safe walking through their own neighborhoods. He shares how the majority of his students are coming from places that are "largely marginalized" and how many of them "are really one or two things away from really falling apart," so he underscores the determination he feels with being able to "talk to them about their position, but also their power" and how that "drives a lot" of his teaching.

Malcolm's desire for his students to develop the capacity to confront and navigate experiences with racism in their lives may also stem from experiencing his own struggles navigating his racial identity, as well as his encounters with racism throughout his childhood and adolescence. He consistently communicates an interest in supporting his students through their own identity development, especially since he did not receive the same support in his own schooling experiences. He describes his own schooling from elementary through college as "alienating" and a constant "struggle."

Born to a White mother and Black father, both of whom he describes as "struggling artists," Malcolm attributes his earliest lessons in racism to his experiences growing up biracial. I notice how his tone and body language subtly shift when he recalls his own adolescent



experiences; he leans back against one of the tables, resting against his arm and speaks in smaller bursts, pausing between memories. He explains how he spent his childhood in San Francisco until his “family life dissolved” following his father’s struggles with mental illness. He then moved with his mother and younger sister to a predominantly White, working-class mill town in New Hampshire; a rural town “full of ignorance” and home to his “first real experiences with racism.” I can feel the weight of the tension and pain as he explains, “I was basically learning how to negotiate my space in a White world and that’s the basis of my education around racism, and I really didn’t understand it for what it was for a long time.” As he transitioned into middle school, his mother remarried and they moved to Vermont, where Malcolm continued to navigate his mixed-race identity in a predominantly White world.

Malcolm momentarily breaks the tension and pain in the air as he smiles, recollecting his “hyper-Black” phase in high school: “Yeah, I was like fifteen or sixteen and I had the full-on Africa medallion and I was reading Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver and listening to Public Enemy.” I gently question who introduced him to these texts and notice his eyes wander up towards the ceiling as he mines through his memories, and I sense the weight of history descend across his eyes before slowly launching into a story about the unlikely link between Public Enemy and the elderly White high school librarian:

I was completely alienated from everyone. I mean, my friends, especially reading the first half of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is basically like White people are the devil and you need to stay away from them. And that extended to my own mother, like I didn’t feel like I could trust anyone around me. My best friends...I would get into long arguments, they had no context, they just knew I was reading this book and I would start to throw these things at them. So I would say early hip-hop. I knew I had heard Malcolm X, there was no Internet. So I had heard Malcolm X referenced enough times [in songs] that I went to the library. And to her credit, and I actually brought this up with my students, the other day. I had a great librarian in my high school, she gave everybody a hard time and everybody was afraid of her. But she noticed that I was having this issue with alienation. She really noticed that I was taking out books around Black militancy, the fact that they were actually on the shelves in this library in Vermont is kind of mind

blowing. But, so she... I think was in a very bad place my junior year and I think I had detention, I don't know why I was in the library. But she pulled out these audio recordings of Malcolm X at Harvard.... Like, why don't you just listen to these? It was a very rich experience even though I was alone and probably was at the beginning of trying to understand who I am. I will say now, almost at forty-five, I'm still not sure who I am and where I fit into things.

Malcolm briefly pauses, leaning forward as if stepping back into the present from his brief visit with his adolescent self. His tone slightly shifts again and I see the tears slowly collect in the corners of his eyes behind his glasses, his voice softly but distinctly cracking as he connects what he lacked in his past to what he has found in his present:

You know, I spent most of my life seeing people that didn't look like me. And now, in working in this school, and when I walk into the community room downstairs, all those kids could be my kids. They look like me. You know, even the kids that don't look like me really feel like my kids at this point because I've been teaching here for so long, but the kids with the big curls and...excuse me (he pauses briefly to grab a tissue)... I just...I never saw anyone that looked like me...so coming to work here was a kind of gift and it cemented in me a kind of need to figure those things out for myself so I could maybe help kids who were kind of in the same place.

I am temporarily paralyzed by Malcolm's raw vulnerability and deep reflection, as his story triggers my own memories of growing up mixed-race and struggling to find my identity and sense of belonging. I also note his vulnerability in sharing how much of himself he sees in his students, especially his students of mixed racial descent, while also considering the stark differences in their respective contexts. While Malcolm struggled to navigate a predominantly White community, the majority of his students of color are struggling to navigate a more racially diverse community. Malcolm also communicates his frustrations with history classes that focus too much on facts and dates and not enough on the larger "systems" and contexts within which those facts and dates are embedded and how far too often "school doesn't teach people how to do anything." His goal is really "to get them talking about the big things, the big motors that got this

country to where it was,” because those motors, like racism, “still very much exist.” He desperately wants his students to “collaborate, talk, argue, and even cry sometimes.”

Back in Malcolm’s classroom the following week, the students are working in pairs to answer a set of guided reading questions on Zinn’s chapter, “Black and White.” I notice that each pair is sharing a single worksheet with both of their names written across the top, with explicit instructions to answer the questions “in pairs.” While I always enjoy the sight of students working collaboratively on assignments, I also wonder how Malcolm communicates expectations and accountability around such assignments. He later explains that in “partner work, there’s no hiding.” When he asks his students to work in pairs, “they’re usually talking to somebody that they care about and so they feel a responsibility toward each other...so even the goofiest kid in the seventh grade can pull it together for a bit.” I see Malcolm’s rationale play out before me. Most of the pairs are working rather diligently, foreheads nearly touching as they lean toward each other combing through the Zinn chapter, and, in some instances, taking turns with writing down their shared responses to the questions. A couple of pairs seem to struggle with finding their groove in working together; I notice a young girl let out an exasperated sigh as she calls for her partner to return to his wobbly Kore chair from a pencil-sharpening excursion that has clearly taken longer than necessary—but he does, in fact, return and sheepishly grins at her before leaning back into the assignment.

Clutching a stainless-steel coffee mug, Malcolm weaves among and across the pairs, posing questions to students in between sips of his coffee. “Okay, but what does Zinn say about the enslavement of Africans versus the enslavement of Native Americans?” “What does Zinn say caused the rise of slavery?” He briefly glances over in my direction and takes a brief detour to his podium-desk at the front of the room, sifts through the pile of papers sitting underneath his

laptop, and smiles sheepishly as he hands me a copy of the worksheet—“Here’s a copy, complete with typos” —before diving back into the classroom maze of student pairs and informing students that they have 5 minutes to complete the shared worksheet before reviewing as a class. I use the 5 minutes to read over the questions:

*What does Zinn (the writer of the book “Black and White” is excerpted from) the cause of the rise of slavery?*

I stop to reread the first question again. Sensing my confusion, a young, curly-haired boy seated near me leans over on his yoga ball, smirking and matter-of-factly informs me, “It’s supposed to have ‘say’ right there but Mr. [Malcolm] forgot to put that part in. That’s the typo he was telling you about, Miss.” Giggling softly, I thank him, though I am cracking up inside at this brief but important reminder that middle school students rarely miss a beat in their uncanny ability to balance eavesdropping with getting their work done. I quickly read through the remaining four questions:

*What does Zinn say is the definition of racism? How is this similar to the Chapter 11 explanation of racism?*

*Why weren’t the English successful in enslaving the native people in the Americas (the Indians)?*

*What factors made enslavement of Africans easier than enslavement of Native Americans? What does Zinn say drove American slavery, which he describes as “the most cruel form of slavery in history”? There are two reasons he gives—how do they work together? Or, put another way, how do they combine?*

In explaining his choice to use Zinn, Malcolm likes how the book “opens them up” and often destabilizes them. “I want them marginally stressed all year about the stuff they’re doing cause, that’s the condition they’re going to be in as kids of color in this country; you’re constantly uncomfortable...so let’s deal with it. Let’s talk about these things. Let’s get comfortable with being uncomfortable so that we can change it.” Malcolm brings the class back

together by reading directly from Zinn's chapter: "In the history of the world, there is no country where racism has been more important than in the United States." He pauses, pushes his glasses back, and repeats, "In the history of the WORLD," before asking, "How does this chapter start? Do you all know what a hyperbole is? Is this exaggerated?" Even though his introductory questions may be rhetorical, a young boy sitting near the front wearing glasses that are slightly too big for his face does not hesitate to jump in. "I say yes! I mean, there *could* be racism that's worse, right? I don't know. I can't confirm. He could be exaggerating, but maybe not..." He trails off at the end, seemingly losing some of the conviction with which he began his statement and showing signs of "marginal stress" as he struggles to find the words to articulate his thoughts. Malcolm locks eyes with him and then looks up towards the rest of the class: "We are going to see a lot of things in this class. Different texts. My challenge to you is to question everything. Ask yourself, 'Does this make sense to me?' You should approach anything with some skepticism. Because what's the danger of believing everything you read?" One student offers, "Well, there could be fake articles out there?" Malcolm exclaims, "Fake news, baby!" The students erupt into a bout of laughter that also feels like a collective sigh of relief, as the students seem to struggle with this brief but intense line of questioning and challenge.

Malcolm dives right back into the text. "Why turn to slavery? Everything that happened to the first White settlers pushed them toward the enslavement of Blacks." He pauses again, slowly strokes his beard before squinting his eyes and offering, "Hmmm makes it sound like they had no choice." A number of students in unison, "Riiiiiiight." He continues, "So how does Zinn start to define racism? And how does this align with what we read in Chapter Eleven about the English and Indians?" A number of hands go up and he calls on a student seated near the back corner of the room. "He says racism is the combination of ideas about Black inferiority with the

unequal treatment of Black people and that Whites believed they were better than Blacks. Chapter Eleven in the other book said that arrogance causes racism, so it's like they are saying the same thing." Malcolm interjects before calling on a different student: "And what is arrogance again? And this will be our last question before heading to lunch." The student with the oversized glasses is excited to jump back in. "Arrogance is thinking you're better than other people. So, it's about White people thinking they're better than people of color." Malcolm informs the students that they will pick up with the next question and instructs them to hand in their worksheets on their way to lunch. There never seems to be enough time in any given class period or day to cover the material—another struggle that often manifests in Malcolm's classroom.

In reflecting on the respective functions of Zinn's and Hakim's texts in this series of lessons on contextualizing the role of racism during the early colonial period, Malcolm explains:

I like the dissonance between reading Zinn and then looking at a more, sort of traditional textbook. Because I think, more than anything, more than any amount of information I can give them, I need them to understand that there's going to be a bias in everything that they read... I love giving them one text, especially early on and they're like, "Here's the answer! Yessss!" and then they move on and that's when I'm like, but wait, there's this and all of the sudden they know we're not really on stable ground anymore.

I see Malcolm working to set up this "dissonance" in pushing his students to ask themselves: "Does this make sense to me?" and telling them to approach "anything with some skepticism."

On how he approaches, views, and utilizes these two texts in his classroom, Malcolm explains:

So, what we do first is look at a pretty traditional historical text, which attributes racism to arrogance. They [*A History of Us*] do a quick paragraph and say this is why people are racist... then we look at a more complex *Young People's History*, which attributes the issue [racism] to anger, fear and a need for slaves... so all of these things conspired into making a system that we still perpetuate to this day and we hear echoes of it, and by end of the year, we usually have enough talks about things in current events that kids are able to see the roots here and why things are happening. I try to

contextualize it [racism] in early American history as a machine that was created to support this new place, one that is essential to maintaining the status quo we live in today.

As Malcolm explains the function of each book, I am noting that a key feature of his practice involves the simultaneous teaching of both historical and racial literacies to his students. Having his students analyze the treatments of racism in two texts side by side provides his students with an opportunity to analyze multiple texts and perspectives critically, as well as an opportunity to struggle through the “dissonance” they find across two different texts about how racism manifested and functioned in early America. As such, while Malcolm is guiding his students through various authors’ interpretations of the causes of racism, he also clearly states that the end goal is to help students understand how these various processes and subsequent interpretations all “conspired into make a system that we still perpetuate today.” Referring to racism as a “machine” actively centers its systemic nature as a central organizing factor in the early development of the United States, along with its present role in “maintaining the status quo.” Malcolm has also discussed the “echoes” and “roots” that he hopes his students will be able to listen for and identify within “current events,” and the impact of the recent election on his current practice:

I will say that my outlook and my tone changed a lot after the election.... There’s definitely more of an urgency now because I know that some of these kids are going to have to fight like hell not just to get into a good high school, a good college, but to just go out and not be harassed, to go out and be who they want to be without anybody’s rules about how they wear their hair, about how they speak or where they live.... So, it’s made me step back and say this struggle is way bigger than me and my time here. So I’m definitely framing American history differently in that this is a series of continuous struggles that sometimes have great outcomes, but generally, this is constant work and engagement.... We have to make this a constant thing to engage with this oppression as often as we can and for a person of color, it can be every day.

Malcolm is not alone in his sentiments and his worries are not unfounded. A survey of over 10,000 K-12 teachers conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC, 2016)

Teaching Tolerance Project in November of 2016 just days after the presidential election revealed a sharp rise in racially charged incidents of school vandalism and student-to-student harassment and violence. As various populations across the United States have been struggling to navigate the rapidly shifting realities following the presidential election and the subsequent onslaught of everything from discriminatory Executive Orders to vitriolic tweets, many social studies teachers in particular have been scrambling with how to address these structural and material realities both affectively and effectively in their classrooms. One of the reasons that Malcolm chooses to frame U.S. history as a “series of continuous struggles” is because he anticipates the forthcoming struggles and fights that the majority of his students will have to face and seeks to prepare them for this reality by contextualizing the world that surrounds them through a study of America’s troubled past.

Malcolm goes on to describe how “difficult” it has been to teach within the present “political climate” because “they [his students] see how messed up it is.” He laments the fatigue that accompanies having to witness and experience “one crisis after another.” There is an unmistakable anger bubbling beneath his consistently calm voice as he describes his frustration about the various ways in which the “crises” he refers to directly impact and target many of his students and their families. He names healthcare, racial profiling, and immigration issues as frontrunners that have material consequences for a large number of his Afro-Latinx students and how the “blindness and racism of our president and current administration is something they [the students] are feeling.” Malcolm’s heightened sense of urgency following the election has directly impacted his practice. He expresses a tangible fear for the lives of his students and sees the curriculum and conversations he has with his students around racism, along with developing a literacy around how racism operates in their daily lives, as potential life-preserving possibilities.



Camangian (2015) explained the purpose and clarity of humanizing pedagogy as “relevant education [that] confronts oppression, affirms the humanity of the learner, and uses literacy as a tool to transform their realities and subvert subjection” (p. 428). I see the genuine pain in Malcolm’s eyes and wrinkles of stress on his face as he explains the stakes of the conversations he is compelled to have with his students:

You know, at the end of the year, the amount of conversations that I have to have around being safe and making sure that for young Black men especially, for the Brown kids at this school, some of them are as tall as I am by the end of the summer and they’re going out into a world that sees them very differently than we see them and that they see themselves. So, the fact that we have to be that honest with them about the real dangers and risk is sad, but seems essential. We need to get them to have those discussions about the big things like racism earlier, to get them thinking and talking about that.

Malcolm’s experiences underscore a necessary reality that social studies teachers presently working with predominantly Black and Brown students must both confront and navigate. Howard (2010) argued, “educators must be willing to see how race shapes the way in which many young people understand their worlds and how the world shapes understanding of themselves as racial beings” (p. 121). In discussing the institutionalized terror of White supremacy and its impact upon students of color, Matias (2014) wrote:

The terror of racism becomes real in America, and in this terror is real fear. Therefore, it is irresponsible to believe that such terror does not seep into the daily routines of the classroom. For a student of color, terror can exist when traveling to and from school with the surveillance of racial profiling or sitting inside school where one is presumed pathologically deficient. In fact, after the release of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, students can also be deemed “suspect” for something as simple as wearing hoodie. (p. 147)

I see and hear this fear of the “terror of racism” reflected in Malcolm’s eyes and in his voice as he discusses the very real implications of his conversations with students being a matter of life or death. As such, the work in Malcolm’s classroom may also be seen as one way to help students develop what Ginwright (2015) has described as a “psychic armor” against the violence and harm of oppression. Referring again to the present political climate, Malcolm stresses the

necessity of learning how to “protect ourselves.” With conviction, he states, “We have to protect ourselves and our hearts and our minds through this. It has become very clear to me that this is going to be the struggle of my life.”

### **Connections**

“How many of you live in a place where you have stairs?” Malcolm asks, as he slowly paces back and forth across the front of the classroom. A number of hands go up. “Okay, and how many of you, when you’re the last person downstairs at night, get a little freaked out going upstairs?” A brief wave of hesitant nods and giggles ripples across the room. “So, what is that about? What are you afraid of?” A few students call out: “Pennywise the Dancing Clown!” “Ghosts!” “Just being alone!” “No lights!” Malcolm brings them back, “Anyone here that hasn’t been afraid of anything?” Silence. He lets the silence linger and marinate for nearly a minute before sharing his goal for the day, “So *FEAR*. I want to talk about *FEAR* today, which is a very natural thing and also played a big part in what we are studying. So, how can fear be used to control somebody?”

A young girl seated on a yoga ball and wearing a fuchsia-colored hijab raises her hand and proceeds to offer a perfect example of how her older brother utilized fear to establish control in their morning routine. Gesturing with her hands, she explains how her brother’s position as the elder sibling means that he is responsible for ensuring she wakes up on time every morning for school. To the delighted giggles of her classmates, she shares her resistance to his persistent pleas to wake up and his subsequent frustration with her stubborn commitment to snoozing. Pausing briefly, she continues, “If you have something that scares someone, you can use it to control them. So, my brother knows I’m scared of mice. One day, when I refused to wake up to get ready for school, he dangled a *MOUSE* right above my *FACE!!*” A number of students sitting

near her lean back and shriek in horror. Malcolm listens intently, cradling his jaw with his thumb and index finger. She completes her story, smirking and shrugging her shoulders. “So now, I wake up every single time.”

Malcolm picks up where she leaves off. “Everyone’s got fears. Fears can be used to control us.” He briefly turns back to the young girl who just shared her story, cracks a half smile, and asks her to tell her brother that “Mr. [Malcolm] is very pained to hear that story.” Laughing, she nods in agreement. During our conversations, Malcolm and I have discussed the incredible feeling that comes with the privilege of teaching generations of students and getting to work with multiple siblings within the same family over the years, and how one of the most wonderful aspects of this experience is witnessing how different they often are, in spite of their shared phenotypical features. Just as I begin to wonder what connection this “hook” has to the curriculum, Malcolm starts distributing a photocopy of the next section in Zinn’s chapter, titled “Fear and Racism.” “So today, we are going to look at another section in ‘Black and White’ and talk about how fear was and is a big part of racism and how people are controlled.” In discussing the connection between his student’s story about the mouse and Zinn’s chapter, Malcolm explains:

Yeah, I’m interested in looking at fear as a mechanism of control, as a way of motivating people, so that’s another reason why [her] example of the mouse really worked. She gets up now and it’s completely messed up, but it has results and that’s something that I needed them to see because when we look at it in terms of keeping people in bondage or how fear of somebody leads to maltreatment of that group or fear of an uprising...I want them to understand it and make that connection...so that’s my soft entry.

He shares how in past years, class discussions about racism and control have been a “hard shift” for his students, so he wanted to “ease them into and get them talking about themselves first,” which he feels resulted in them being “with” him in a different way than they would have been if

he had just distributed the text and started reading. He explains his desire to push his students to both tap into their emotions and interrogate the dangers of attributing something systemic, like racism, singularly to human emotions, like fear. Grabbing a stool, Malcolm takes a seat near the front of the room, as he directs the students to take turns reading out loud.

A girl seated near me with shoulder-length Senegalese twists begins reading, projecting her voice, pausing strategically after the title, and emphasizing questions with the precocious precision of a seasoned keynote speaker:

Fear and Racism. Were all blacks slaves? Maybe the settlers considered some blacks to be servants not slaves. The settlers had white servants, too. Would they have treated white servants differently from black ones?

Malcolm briefly interjects, “Let’s look at how this section opens. A good writer poses questions and then does what?” “Answerrrrrrs.” “Great, so as we read, don’t just think about the content, but also think about how it’s put together.” Without a word, he subtly nods in the direction of the young, seasoned reader and she continues:

A case from colonial Virginia shows that whites and blacks received very different treatment. In 1640, six white servants and one black started to run away. They were caught. The black man, named Emanuel, in the court record, received thirty blows with a whip. He was also branded on one cheek and sentenced to work in shackles for a year or longer. The whites received lighter sentences.

This unequal treatment was racism, which showed itself in feelings and actions. The whites felt superior to the blacks, and they looked at blacks with contempt. They also treated the blacks more harshly and oppressively than they treated each other. Was this racism “natural”? Did the whites dislike and mistreat blacks because of some instinct born into them? Or was racism the result of certain conditions that can be removed?

Malcolm pauses the reader again. “Okay, do we know what brands are?” “It’s like when they burn something into animals.” “Yes, it’s typically done with animals, but this was also a way to mark human beings because they were considered property.” Malcolm pauses briefly to allow this clarification of what it means to “brand” human beings to sit in the air before asking young

woman to “popcorn” a different reader. A boy bouncing excitedly on a yoga ball in the corner waves his arm to catch her eye before bouncing his way into the next paragraph.

The class continues to make its way through the rest of the reading section in this style. A student reads another paragraph or two out loud, then Malcolm briefly pauses to either pose a couple of quick, close-ended comprehension questions or to define certain concepts embedded within the text. I noticed he does this with “branding,” and then in the next paragraph with “contempt” and “oppressively.” Each interlude takes less than a minute and each time a different student is able to provide the answer. Watching this seemingly mundane classroom scene of reading aloud play out, I begin to take note of Malcolm’s soft challenge to the class before reading: “Don’t just think about the content, but also think about how it’s put together.” He wants them to connect the dots. As I watch them read, annotate out loud, define key terms, and answer brief reading comprehension checks, I note in my margins that they are mostly engaging in “low-level” Bloom’s Taxonomy questioning and reasoning; they are working to identify and name key foundational concepts necessary for engaging in more complex analyses and applications.

I also note the growing sense of confidence as they move further along in the chapter, all while balancing their adolescent bodies on the wobbly chairs and yoga balls. The purpose and nature of the classroom furniture becomes increasingly clearer to me as I witness the connection between the physical and intellectual core-building taking place before me. When I finally take a seat on one of the wobbly, core-strengthening stools later that week, I feel the muscles in my abdomen tighten as I work to find a semi-comfortable balance. The seventh graders make it look much easier than it actually is to sit in on these stools, which serves as a brief but potent

reminder of the various types of muscles they are building and strengthening in Malcolm's classroom.

Malcolm has often referred to seventh grade as a "difficult and challenging year of growth" for many of his students. Explaining his approach to seventh graders, Malcolm shares, "I think it really comes down to recognizing that they are complex individuals that deserve a basic level of respect. Sadly, I don't think many schools offer that out loud. It's a bumpy ride because it's seventh grade, so it's different when you hear somebody say, 'Hey, this is going to be a hard year and I'm here for you.'" As Malcolm guides them into the next section, which discusses the role of fear, terror, and violent tactics of control, I recognize the foundation-building as a warm-up to the more difficult sets of questions they will soon be grappling with. Similar to core workouts that begin with a few basic stretches and poses, the more painful and uncomfortable but transformative core-strengthening exercises take place in the middle of the workout.

They are moving into the last two pages of the section. A young man slowly makes his way through the paragraph, using his index finger to trace each word:

Runaway slaves risked pain and death. If they were caught even planning to escape, they could be punished in terrible ways. Slaves were burned, mutilated, and killed. Whites believed that severe punishments would keep other slaves from becoming rebellious.

Malcolm briefly references the mouse story from earlier: "Let's go back to the example of the mouse...will he have to hold the mouse over her face every morning?" "Noooooo." "It's the thought, the memory of it. This is fear as control. Pay close attention because we have another type of fear in this next paragraph." The same young man continues, tracing each sentence with his finger as he reads the next paragraph:

White settlers were terrified of organized black uprisings. Fear of slave revolts, it seems, was a fact of plantation life. A Virginia planter named William Byrd wrote in 1736 that if a bold slave leader arose, “a man of desperate fortune,” he might start a war that would “tinge our rivers wide as they are with blood.” Such rebellions did take place—not many, but enough to create constant fear among the planters.

This time, Malcolm asks them to turn and talk to a partner. “Why would slaveholders be afraid of uprisings? I want you to turn and talk to a partner next to you about the uprisings. WHY is that *THAT* a FEAR?” The pace and the energy have noticeably increased and risen with each paragraph as the students now talk loudly and excitedly in their pairs. Malcolm makes his way around the room, mostly listening in rather than posing additional questions. Once again, Malcolm builds in an opportunity for the students to process in pairs rather than individually or with him. At times, I notice that Malcolm, like many other teachers who move around the room during pair shares, often repeats the question or poses additional, probing questions. However, today, he seems content to bask in listening to them talk to each other.

Malcolm returns to the front of the room after about 3 minutes. “All right, so whaddya got? Why are they afraid of these people that they’ve enslaved?” A number of students are eager to share.

Because of how we read about how whites thought about slaves. They thought of them as property, like animals, so the idea of slaves being smart and coming up with a plan, that thought scared them because they thought they were superior.

We think whites were afraid black slaves would overthrow them because they are in power, so if they overthrow them, then they could lose that power.

Malcolm seems reluctant to cut the conversation short as he glances at the clock. The remaining students reluctantly drop their arms; they have clearly come to learn that Malcolm’s glances toward the clock indicate the end of class. Malcolm offers some quick, closing thoughts before sending the students to lunch: “Yes, this fear also gets at a quiet recognition that these are human beings, not property, that are being held in bondage. We need to remember that

acknowledgment, that they were treating other human beings this way and it affected those slave owners. It got at their humanity, as well. All right, let's go to lunch!"

As Malcolm walks me through the arc of the lessons, from the worksheet questions which aimed to get students to note "what the texts say" in order to move them toward "trying to synthesize those ideas," before working to recognize the various links and connections across concepts and ideas, he explains:

When we are defining [racism] and when we're talking about racism going forward, we can really see that it is more than bad feelings, or being arrogant, or feeling superior...that there are a lot more forces involved... That, when we go forward, if I say that this is a racist action or how something is based on race, they know that's not just the color of someone's skin or feeling like somebody is not worthy or good enough...that's it's much more complex than that, especially when we are talking about slavery.

He wants his students to develop a more complex understanding of racism than the misconceptions he grew up with:

I mean, we have to be aware of it because I really grew up thinking that racism was White people hating Black people. That's just how it was presented to me in schools and I'd seen enough evidence of White people not liking me. I assumed it was because the color of my skin and as I got older, I saw that it's much more than that...there are larger systems at play that nobody fully addresses. So, there are no easy answers and I don't want easy answers and I definitely don't want the kids looking for easy answers. I want them to understand that there's always more to it.

Malcolm's words strike at the heart of what often cripples potentially meaningful discussions around race and racism. Far too often, students and teachers alike conflate racism with bigotry, in many instances reducing racism to emotionally-driven, individual acts of bigotry and hate. These treatments of racism decouple it from its systemic nature as a prominent, driving force in the everyday lives of various human populations who either benefit from or suffer tremendously, as a result of institutionalized racism. I vividly recall the empowering feeling that accompanied my learning about the various forms of racism—institutional, interpersonal,



ideological and internalized—and how they are not mutually exclusive, but intimately connected and interdependent.

Similar to Malcolm, I, too, spent the majority of my young life solely attributing racism to feelings of hatred, arrogance, and superiority, often internalizing the teasing that I experienced, resulting in my hatred of the epicanthic folds that I inherited from my Chinese mother and longing for the larger, round eyes of so many of my peers. Exposure to lessons in college about racist legislation—the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and exclusionary practices, the detainment of Chinese immigrants on Angel Island, and the proliferation of racialized caricatures of my ancestors in mainstream publications—helped me to develop a fuller, more complex understanding of the pervasive and insidious ways in which racism festers and continues to exist.

Malcolm’s resolve to ensure that his students recognize both the affective and systemic dimensions of racism is firmly rooted in his commitment to providing them with different, more complex lessons about race and racism than the reductive ones he grew up with; he wants to ensure that his students are able to make the connections he was not able to make. While I often dealt with the painful wounds of racism through overt displays of emotion, including but not limited to physical fights, external bursts of anger, confusion, frustration, and crying, Malcolm informs me that he found a different way to cope with navigating and surviving within a racist society. Malcolm attributes many of his feelings of “alienation” and being “on the outside” to his struggles with learning how to navigate his mixed racial identity. He “dealt with being mixed and with being Black” by taking on the role of an “aloof observer” and discusses the connection that he felt with Mr. Spock from *Star Trek*.

As a kid, I was so concerned with how well he hid his emotions, because you knew he had emotions and that was just like me. I just didn’t want to show people that I was upset...that I was mad. I got very good at hiding, like if somebody called me a nigger, I was going to figure out how to laugh it off or make a joke. I developed a sense of humor

to deflect all of the teasing and bullying...to shield myself from all of that. But there was always this desire to hide the emotion. It was like the Spock thing.

Coping with the pain of racism manifests in a variety of ways. Developing the strength and capacity to navigate hostile environments can take on a number of forms. Malcolm found ways to cope with the violence of racism by using humor to deflect and finding solace in a fictional sci-fi character whose backstory also explores the themes of mixed race (Spock was half-Vulcan and half-human) and survival in the often hostile “frontier” of outer space. In his current context, Malcolm describes how important it is for him to be able to be an authentic source of connection, support, and guidance for his students experiencing their own struggles. He underscores his commitment to be as “real with them” as possible and to “not be an aloof, professorial person.” In his self-proclaimed quest to help his students recognize both their “position and their power,” he seems intent on ensuring that their understandings of race and racism move beyond overly simplistic and superficial curricular treatments.

Much of the disconnect that Malcolm experienced in his own learning about the contours of racism seems to inform the intention with which he designs the learning that his current students get to experience. As much as Malcolm wants his students to “get comfortable with being uncomfortable,” it is clear that he also wants to ensure that his classroom is a place where they are comfortable being themselves—he wants them to experience a comfort and connection that he himself did not have the chance to experience at their age. The difficulty that often accompanies the study of racism and its violent manifestations and impact can and should co-exist with learning to be comfortable in one’s own skin. As the yoga balls and wobbly chairs around his classroom work to develop the physical cores of his students, Malcolm’s approach to lessons on race and racism seek to develop their intellectual cores with the intention that they

will be better equipped to “work together around thorny and difficult questions” about race, and to better navigate a persistently racist society.

“Okay, we’re going to try to put all of this into a workable context today. You’re going to use the materials you have and work with your partner to come up with a definition of racism and we are going to use these definitions for the remainder of the year.” Malcolm proceeds to pair his students up. Today is a “free dress day,” providing me with a further glimpse into the styles and some of the musical preferences of both the students and Malcolm. I see at least two young women dressed in Ariana Grande t-shirts, a number of hoodies, choker necklaces, jeans, bright sweaters, and a vast array of colorful shoes. Malcolm is the picture of comfort in dark grey sweat pants, bright tennis shoes, and a light blue t-shirt boasting a large image of Nina Simone in black print. Once the students are paired up, Malcolm reviews the readings and worksheets they should reference as they work to “develop a working definition of racism as it applies to the U.S.” and encourages them one more time to “not just rely on what [they remember], but to turn to the texts [they’ve] read.”

As the pairs dive into their task, Malcolm begins roving around the room, stopping periodically to pose clarifying questions—“What do you mean by feelings of? Be more specific”—to offer affirmations of what he sees as powerful ideas—“So you’re linking at least two things here—profit and fear. That’s impressive”—and every now and again, to take in a spoonful of yogurt. Each time Malcolm stops to check in or pose a question to a pair, I notice that he makes sure to address both students simultaneously. As he has previously shared with me, he likes the accountability and connections that working in pairs can generate for his students. About 10 minutes into the work, Malcolm addresses the whole class. “The one thing I want to press you all on is whether or not you really think these ideas are what folks believed or if they were using

them as excuses. You have a few more minutes and I'll know when pencils and pens are down that you're ready."

For the next 5 minutes, Malcolm zeroes in on a pair seated near the front of the room. The pair is made up of two students whom I have come to look forward to hearing from during my observations of class discussions: the boy with the big glasses and the girl with the seasoned reading voice and Senegalese twists. Malcolm later tells me about this particular boy's journey toward finding his voice within the class. Malcolm informs me that he has been at the school since third grade, awkwardly growing into his body and into a mind that is "wise beyond his years," while also being "self-conscious in a way that most kids his age are, but also becoming aware that people are starting to pay more attention to the things he has to say." This is the first year in which he is demonstrating more confidence in sharing his opinions and ideas, while some of the other young boys are starting to "hit a wall," which tends to happen every winter.

I just think that seventh grade is special in that they recognize that the world is dealing with them differently. They come in aware and sometimes stressed out about the world and I think if you honor that, and you say that we're going to talk about something serious, then they will be with you.

From my vantage point, it appears that the pair has a diagram on their paper. Malcolm asks if they are willing to put their diagram on the board when they come back together as a class to share out before heading over to another pair and leaving them to exchange a subtle, but unmistakably smug glance and smile before heading up and recreating their diagram in chalk on the board.

Rather than heading to the front of the room as he usually does during whole-class discussions, Malcolm grabs a wobbly stool and takes a seat towards the back middle of the room, swinging his ankle on to his right knee and leaning slightly forward before calling on different pairs to share out their definitions.

We said racism is discrimination or hatred against people of color because they are of color.

We talked about racism as being degrading to a group of people based off their skin color, culture and their visible features.

We think racism is like hatred or being unfair towards people because of their skin color or where they come from and that fear can help cause it because people who are scared of people different from them can make them racist because they treat them like they aren't human or as human as them.

And power and money.

Malcolm interjects here: Can you say more about that?

When people got money, they can also want power.

Malcolm responds and takes it up a notch before asking the class to refer to the diagram on the board. "So the drive for profit helped to normalize racism. These are great. All things we've talked about, especially the role of fear. I've heard lots of interesting things, but only saw ONE diagram, so let's briefly turn our attention to the board."

The proud pair are already standing up at the board on either side of their diagram. The young boy pushes his oversized glasses back before beginning his explanation:

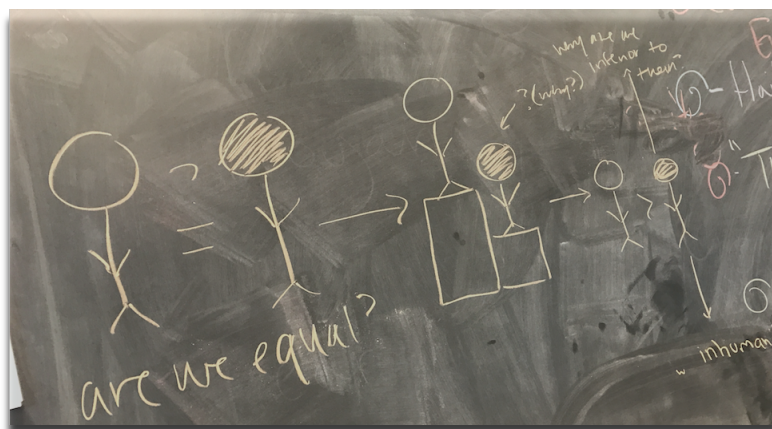


Figure 1. Student diagram

The young boy speaks quickly, with confidence and conviction in every word, pointing to different parts of the diagram as he talks. I have a hard time keeping up and capturing his exact words, but am in awe of witnessing this young seventh grader breaking down the themes of dehumanization, superiority complexes, and a hunger for profit in the unique development of slavery and racism in early America. As he makes his way to the last part of the diagram, I am able to capture some of his words: “Over time, it became clear that Whites were being treated better, so this led Black people to thinking that they were less than. Blacks were confused about why we weren’t equal—that’s the question mark you see right there...” Using simple images, he and his partner are able to connect and explain deeply complex ideas. I am also appreciating the sight of two youngsters leading the class at the front of the room and the difficulty of locating the teacher, who currently blends in with the crowd of students seated near the back with his Nina Simone t-shirt on.

Expressing the pride he felt in watching his students present, alongside his frustration with not having similar conversations when he was growing up, Malcolm shares:

It just makes me upset because I never had a conversation like that in high school. I can remember times when I felt like we were approaching a conversation like that, but most people don’t talk about the link between racism and profit until they’re a freshman in college, so yea, I don’t think I had a conversation like the one I saw happening between [the pair of students who drew the diagram], which was right up there, where I wanted them to be.

He laments again that “half of the things that we teach in college, I feel like we could get to kids in preschool or at least elementary school.” I hear the same urgency that Malcolm has expressed in our earlier conversations around wanting to get his students to think and talk about the “complex parts [of racism] before they’re really forced to deal with it day-to-day.”

Malcolm wants his students to really understand how “racism is absolutely tied to our economy” and systems as well as to our emotions. It is not just one or the other, but a complex,

entangled series of connections that perpetually lead to institutional, interpersonal, and internalized forms of violence that disproportionately impact people of color. He explains:

There is some comfort to be gained from knowing that the system is rigged. It sucks and it brings everybody who has dealt with it to tears at one time or another, but then I think about not knowing that the system is rigged and how people have to walk through life like that...so a lot of my choices are about getting them to understand how things got to the way they are.

Malcolm's words remind me of a question that I often receive from participants when running workshops for in-service teachers about recognizing, confronting, and transforming oppressive practices within their classrooms and schools. I tell Malcolm that I often face an exasperated question along the lines of "Doesn't it get depressing to constantly study and teach about oppression?" to which I immediately respond, "Not as a depressing as suffering from oppression and not being able to name it." Nodding, Malcolm responds:

Yes, not exposing them to this is not giving them a real chance. It's hard for me to be as positive as I'd like to be, especially when we're talking about difficult concepts like racism and history that is bloody and oppressive...to feel like I have nothing to contrast it with and say, "Hey, it gets better," even though it does and it has because we're all proof of it because we're sitting here talking about these things.

He concludes by emphasizing the importance of wanting to teach about "the multiple effects of slavery and what it does not only to the body, but to the spirit," and that "ultimately, [slavery] is a story of survival and resilience."

### **Hope**

"Okay, let's review the numbers again. In 1619, how many Africans are brought into Virginia?" The class responds, "Twenty!" before volleying back to Malcolm. "But before that, we're talking about a hundred years of ships going back and forth to populate the mines and plantation in the Caribbean...so even earlier...this curious trade of human beings had been taking place for a long time." A young girl sitting near the back of the room quietly says, "Wow,

that's sad." Malcolm and his students are reviewing an earlier section of Zinn's chapter and discussing the brutality of slavery, along with the function of hope in both the maintenance of and resistance against slavery. One of the tallest boys in the class with newly bleached hair tips raises his hand to read the next paragraph:

The Africans having been torn from their land and their cultures made enslavement easier. The Indians were on their own land. The whites were in a new continent, but they had brought their English culture with them. But the blacks had been torn from their land and their culture they were forced into a situation where their heritage—language, clothes, customs, and family life—was wiped out bit by bit. Only with amazing strength of will could blacks hold on to pieces of this heritage.

Malcolm pauses, "Let's stop and think about that for a second. What is he saying?" The student reader immediately responds, "It's not their home." Another student jumps in, "Yeah, and it's a new culture and new land." Scanning the room through his glasses, Malcolm begins to speak slowly and purposefully, making his way around the room. The pauses he takes in between ideas lend additional weight to his words.

Slavery. It's brutal...it's also ingenious. It relies on hope. It abuses those characteristics of our humanity, but it also knows what makes them strong. If you remove a people from their culture, it weakens them.... As human organisms, we want to stay alive, but it's HOPE that also keeps us alive...this belief that things will get better.

He peers over the top rim of his glasses as he makes eye contact with a few students before continuing:

I bet there was someone before you who dreamed of this moment...living in filth but wanting you to inherit something different. The sad thing is that we don't always get to know who they were, so we can't thank them directly, but we can honor them and honor ourselves.

Malcolm wants his students to recognize the varied dimensions and functions of hope, especially because he feels that at their age, their

hope muscle and spirit haven't really been tested.... We definitely spend time talking about the abuse of the human quality of hope as pillar of this system [of slavery], and that just as there is fear, there is also the hope that someday you'll be free is what keeps you



going, the hope that your children will be free someday...this hope that somebody will somehow survive. I want them [my students] to understand that they are in this room like a dream for all of the people that came before them.

It is our final interview and the fast-approaching darkness, along with the harsh winter weather outside, reflect my own feelings about the conclusion of my weekly visits and conversations. When I ask him to elaborate, he responds with some specific examples:

For so many of them, hope exists as “I hope we win this game,” or “I hope I get all the presents I want,” and then there’s some that have very private hopes that they share with me in letters that they write to me in the beginning of the year and those are things like “I hope my parents get back together” or “I hope I get to meet my dad someday.”

In addition to framing hope as a mechanism for driving survival and resilience, Malcolm also seeks to provide opportunities for his students to see how “hope can be a cruel thing,” and “how hope can be used against us, that it can sometimes be a carrot that we don’t reach.” While acknowledging the “heaviness” of these questions and ideas, he also believes that his students are not only “ready for it,” but that they “can and want to do it.” Drawing upon and combining the ideas of Cornel West on “Socratic sensibility” and Malcolm X on the pain that accompanies an examination of life, Duncan-Andrade (2009) conceptualized a “Socratic hope [that] requires both teachers and students to painfully examine our lives and actions within an unjust society and to share the sensibility that pain may pave the path to justice” (p. 7). In addition to Malcolm’s thoughts on teaching his students about hope, I have also seen threads of “Socratic hope” present across a number of earlier discussions, as Malcolm refuses to shy away from confronting the “pain” inevitably involved in the study of slavery and racism.

Over the course of our conversations, I have also come to learn about the transformative and healing impact that teaching has on Malcolm. While he sought to channel Mr. Spock’s ability to exist without emotion as an adolescent, he describes the “gift” of coming to work with “people who looked like me, especially when I was in middle school and felt completely

awkward and out of place like everybody else, so yes, it's been a huge gift because it's allowed me to sort of reconnect with that person [younger self], acknowledge the pain and contextualize it... I never felt a connection to anyone until I started teaching." He explains how coming to this understanding really "evolved" from his "personal journey as a learner and trying to figure out who I am," which has culminated in what he believes to be his purpose in teaching

to support and uplift as many of the young people that I can who are in this building, who are dealing with incredibly difficult circumstances and who are coming from places that are largely marginalized...it's about helping them become active participants in their lives and in the world that they're growing into.

In addition to the "energy" and "momentum" that he derives from believing his students are "going to be great and that [they] are going to figure things out," Malcolm reminds me that he is "also driven by a great deal of anger and frustration" about the state of the world we live in and the history that made present injustices possible and how he hopes to adequately equip his students to transform it:

We can see the echoes in so many things and in some cases, it's louder than ever.... I want them to be aware of the inhumanity that they see expressed in Jamestown and in Virginia toward Black human beings and against women and against poor people and I want them to recognize how this is still going on.... Like this tax bill that is soon to be law is something that will affect all of us, so when we're talking about drive for making profit in colonial America, we need to see that there are still people who are putting profit above the basic welfare of other human beings.... And so if you're going to live a meaningful life, you have to resist the entropy of this system and the psychic violence that our country carries out on othered people.... Every day is a potential act of resistance. It has to be...I want to make sure they're equipped, that they can work collaboratively and communicate with people. I want them to be able to resolve conflict. I want them to be aware that they're part of a larger community and a larger wave of history and that their generation can really take this and that's a beautiful thing.

As Malcolm discusses the reverberations of some of history's most painful echoes in our present, alongside his hopes for his students, I am reminded about the competing tensions that also drove my work as a secondary social studies teacher—my anger and frustration with the persistence of oppression and my unwavering belief in my students' capacity to dismantle these

systems. Noting the time and the fact that it is nearly 6 p.m. and completely dark outside, I reluctantly move towards concluding our discussion by directing Malcolm's attention to my observation notes and his words on slavery and hope before reading them out loud to him:

*Slavery. It's brutal...it's also ingenious. It relies on hope. It abuses those characteristics of our humanity, but it also knows what makes them strong. If you remove a people from their culture, it weakens them.... As human organisms, we want to stay alive, but it's HOPE that also keeps us alive...this belief that things will get better. I bet there was someone before you who dreamed of this moment...living in filth but wanting you to inherit something different. The sad thing is that we don't always get to know who they were, so we can't thank them directly, but we can honor them and honor ourselves.*

We both sit in silence after I finish reading for nearly a minute before Malcolm speaks.

Yes, I just need them to be certain that we survive. As hard as it can get, human beings survive and that's really the value of looking at slavery. Like I said, it's a story of survival and everybody in this room has come from somebody who has been in the shit and was almost destroyed. That's our story as human beings and yet here we all are, so I do try to balance the bad news and the sad things with a promise of resiliency.... I try to celebrate the fact that we are here and able to talk about these things and do this work.

I ask if Malcolm has seen the footage of Maya Angelou speaking with Dave Chappelle about her conversation with Tupac Shakur, to which he responds, "No, I missed that one." I'm surprised because the words in his lesson and throughout this interview have continually triggered my memory of her story and her words. Quickly searching for the video clip on my computer, I ask if I can play it for him as we end our interview. As Maya Angelou's face appears on the screen, I cannot help but notice that in the video, she is facing the same direction as James Baldwin in the worn poster at the front of the room. In the short clip, Angelou tells the story of when she was on the set of John Singleton's film *Poetic Justice*, and found herself stepping in to break up a potential fight between the late rapper Tupac Shakur and another young man. She describes how she de-escalates a potentially violent conflict by posing a simple but profound question to him, along with a brief, painful history:

*Do you know how important you are? Do you know that our people slept and lay spoon-fashion in the filthy hatches of slave ships, in their own and in each other's excrements and urine and menstrual flow so that you could live...two hundred years later? Do you know that? Do you know that our people stood on auction blocks...so that you could live? When's the last time anyone told you how important you are?*

She proceeds to detail how Tupac slowly began to cry and how Maya Angelou did not have any tissue, so she used her sleeve to gently wipe his tears away. I stop the video clip at the conclusion of her story, as both Malcolm and I take a moment to wipe away our own tears. Malcolm thanks me for sharing the clip before closing our time with the words: "It's amazing how fast it's lost...that we are important as individuals...that we are the living embodiment of our ancestors' dreams."

### **Conclusions**

During my visits to Malcolm's classroom, I often felt as if I was observing a philosopher in action with his young philosophers in training. Given the centrality of small and whole-class discussions, many of which centered around difficult, complex, still unanswered and ongoing questions around issues of race and racism in U.S. history and contemporary society, there was a Socratic sensibility and commitment to making intellectual, intergenerational, and human connections that felt central to the ecology and ethos of Malcolm's classroom and practice. Malcolm's portrait also offers glimpses into the pedagogical thinking and reasoning that give shape and form to the curricular moments that reveal how Malcolm enacts lessons about issues of race and racism that we witness in the portrait. Key features of Malcolm's practice include whole-class discussion and dialogues that are often open-ended and characterized by more questions than answers. Whether Malcolm and his students were grappling with the question "What is racism and why does it exist?" or discussing the functions of "fear" and "hope" in both the maintenance of and resistance against the institution of slavery, the study of human behaviors

around issues of race and connecting those ideas to personal and present contexts were often at the center. Malcolm rarely provided quick, easy answers and relied very little on strict protocols and structures in his teaching. Instead, Malcolm's curricular moves relied heavily on the challenging questions and ideas that he would pose and then gently guide his students through as they worked in pairs or in discussion as a whole class. Philosophy is all about posing and navigating questions. As such, Malcolm's most salient curricular moves are characterized by the ontological and epistemological questions around the role and function of racism in early America that he posed for his students and the connections that he wanted his students to be able to make within the curriculum and with the world that surrounds them.

Malcolm's portrait opens with his posing an ontological question to his class, "What is racism and why does it exist?" and then working through the question with them. He is clear in communicating that he is "not trying to define racism completely," but rather is seeking to contextualize it in American history and that for his students, "it's more about them understanding that what they see around them now is not an accident..." In this way, Malcolm is posing particular questions that aim to help his students make sense of the world around them so that they may be better equipped to both navigate and change it. How Malcolm himself perceives the world that surrounds his students factors importantly into his curricular decision making. Twine's (2010) conceptualization of racial literacy emerged from her study of interracial families, and specifically of various mothers' commitments to equipping their children with the analytic lenses, tools, and knowledge necessary to navigate a racist society. What distinguished the "racially literate" mothers from the "racially illiterate" mothers in Twine's study was their fundamental view of society as inherently racist. This standpoint is the foundation on which a

parent—or teacher—is prepared to equip the young people in their care with the tools to recognize and navigate their realities.

Malcolm is clear in his perception of “racism in early American history as a machine” that is also “essential to maintaining the status quo we live in today.” He describes the world that surrounds his students, particularly his Black boys, as one that “deals with them as adults” and a world in which they are “getting extra attention from the police.” Malcolm’s recognition of the role that racism plays in the daily lives of his students is both crucial and necessary in informing the ways that he weaves questions about racism into his classroom. As Howard (2010) argued, “educators must be willing to see how race shapes the way in which many young people understand their worlds and how the world shapes understanding of themselves as racial beings” (p. 121). Malcolm’s willingness and ability to recognize how “race shapes” his students’ understanding of their worlds provide a foundation on which he can pose questions like “What is racism and why does it exist?” and “Is racism a real thing?” because it also communicates his belief that they are capable of grappling with these difficult questions.

In Malcolm’s portrait, we also see him posing epistemological questions and challenges for his students. He encourages them to question everything that they read and to “approach anything with some skepticism.” In doing so, Malcolm wants to ensure that his students’ understanding of racism is not reduced to the superficial and overly simplistic definitions and treatments he was exposed to in his own schooling experiences. He prepares his students for this type of thinking by providing his students with two different texts, one that generally follows the dominant narrative, *A History of Us* by Joy Hakim, and one that offers a counternarrative, *A Young People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, about the role of racism in the 13 colonies, and providing students to space and time to grapple with the contradictions and

inconsistencies across the texts and to navigate more than one representation of historical “truths” about the function of racism in early America. In interviews, Malcolm often lamented the absence of explicit treatments of race and critical questions during his own adolescence and expressed his hopes and desires to equip his students with a critical lens to help them better historicize and contextualize the role and function of racism in the world that surrounds them. In this way, Malcolm seeks to develop a racial literacy in his students that equips them to not just intellectually name and engage with issues of race and racism, but instead focuses on a literacy that is deeply bound with their survival (Twine, 2010).

Malcolm also engages in a deep and complex exploration of the function and meaning of hope in both the maintenance of and resistance to the institution of slavery as well as the function of hope in everyday matters of life or death. Malcolm dances between the past and present when he tells his students that “hope” and “this belief that things will get better” is what “keeps us alive,” and then jumps back into the time period they are studying to apply this same conceptualization of hope to the experience of enslaved Africans: “I bet there was someone before you who dreamed of this moment...living in filth but wanting you to inherit something different.” When Malcolm later explains to me that he “wants them [his students] to understand that they are in [his classroom] like a dream for all of the people that came before them,” he is both centering and affirming the humanity of his students and their ancestors as he positions the development and presence as hope as a courageous and defiant response to the institution of slavery. Ginwright (2015) argued that “hope is also a social phenomenon that should be studied through institutions, communities, networks, and social settings” and, as such, hope is thus “shaped by social and environmental systems, institutions, and opportunities” (p. 21). Malcolm’s approach allows students to consider and analyze how the hopes of their ancestors were forged

within and shaped by the experiences of slavery and racism, alongside a “vision of what could be,” referring explicitly to their existence as a testament to that hope.

Additionally, we learn about what informs Malcolm’s teaching when he shares his learning objectives around issues of race and racism. He explains his goal of ensuring that his students are able to name and recognize racism as a “machine” that has been central in the making and maintenance of the United States, and also clearly communicates his hopes for preparing his students, especially his young Black and Brown boys, to better navigate a society that might not honor their humanity in the same way that he does. The authentic care (Valenzuela, 2010) that Malcolm develops for his students in that his curricular and pedagogical approaches to issues of race and racism are both guided by and responsive to the backgrounds and contextual experiences and realities of his students.

Malcolm’s portrait also reveals key moments in his own biography that inform his current praxis. For instance, Malcolm’s story about his high school librarian, who introduced him to the Malcolm X speech recordings during his “hyper-Black phase,” illuminates a formative moment in his own schooling experiences that served as the exception rather than the rule. This was one of the only experiences in his educational biography in which Malcolm was exposed to texts that helped him make sense of his experiences as a young man of color, and thus serves as an example for the types of learning experiences he prepares for the students in his classroom. In more ways than one, Malcolm seeks to provide his students with what he lacked in his own experiences navigating a racist world as a person of mixed racial descent. As he shared his stories of channeling Mr. Spock and turning to humor to deflect painful experiences with racism, he immediately names his desires to “be an authentic source of support and guidance” for his students experiencing their own struggles; he underscores his commitment to be as “real with



them” as possible. Malcolm repeatedly names his numerous experiences with “alienation” as a reference point for how he hopes his students never have to feel. Malcolm critiques the lack of reflection in both the curriculum he experienced as well as in the people who surrounded him.

Malcolm’s personal stories of struggle throughout his own life provide an additional explanatory layer and depth to his various curricular and pedagogical approaches and enactments in that he is often able to both identify and empathize with similar struggles he sees in his students. For Malcolm, preparing his students for the “uncomfortable” and “painful” realities of navigating a deeply racist society often involves posing difficult ontological and epistemological questions that do not necessarily have answers, while also laying a curricular foundation for his students to experience the “comfort to be gained from knowing that the system is rigged.” He explains how he is “definitely framing American history differently in that this is a series of continuous struggles” following the 2016 election. He also explains how he does not want his students to settle for “easy answers,” which is why he purposefully utilizes two different texts that tackle the development of racism in early America from different angles. The thread across Malcolm’s experiences with struggle and discomfort as an adolescent and the experiences he facilitates for his students is firmly held by his recognition of their lived realities as racialized beings (Camangian, 2015) and his commitment to equipping them with the analytic tools and capacity to confront the inevitable struggles and discomforts of navigating a racist society as urban youth of color. In this way, I also see Malcolm as an empathetic philosopher; he is not simply posing painful questions for inquiry’s sake, but he is posing them with an informed understanding that these questions are tied to his students’ survival.

Chapter 5 – GRACE—COMPASSION, CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, AND AGENCY:  
THE LITTLE ROCK CRISIS

The answers are always within us. Deep down, we know what's right for us and it may not be the same for everybody, but we know it and it's there, so when you can just let the dust settle, you can really see, know and act more clearly.

-Grace

**Compassion**

As the passing period ends, the students begin to pour into the classroom like a stream of passengers exiting a crowded subway train in NYC during rush hour. Within seconds, they spread out and fill nearly every inch of the room, their middle school energy rising into the air and jolting the classroom to life. There is no need for the intrusive glare of fluorescent school lighting, as sunlight fills the room from the numerous windows. A delicate, wall chandelier made of soft white paper and thin, twisted threads is draped across the front right corner of the room and hangs above a large, green money tree. A huge map of the world adorns the entire back wall of the classroom, adjacent to the wall of wooden cabinets and small, window nooks, which is where I am currently nestled.

Posted above me in handwritten permanent markers are the class essential questions: *“What is a just society?” “How do societies change?”* and *“How can individuals and groups make a difference in the world?”* The colorful mix of teals, oranges, whites, and reds emits a bright and welcoming vibe. Most of the students head straight to their grey triangle-shaped desks which are mostly arranged into pairs, plopping down loudly into their bright orange plastic chairs. A young boy in a large white hoodie that perfectly complements his smooth, dark skin makes his way to the back of the room and proceeds to inhale a few gulps of water from the fountain attached to the sink. Another group of boys rush back to the only small table in the classroom. A young girl wearing a purple hijab sitting in a mechanical wheelchair is the last

student to enter the room and slowly makes her way to one of the grey desks. The teacher, Grace, quickly pulls away one of the orange chairs with her right arm to make space for the wheelchair, as her left arm stays draped across the shoulders of a skinny boy in large t-shirt and basketball shorts, gently guiding him into one of the desks. Once she gets him seated, she pauses, pushes her glasses up further on the bridge of her nose, and glances around the room before locking eyes with the young man in the hoodie near the water fountain. She breaks into a huge smile before asking him, “Do you have on your history hoodie today?” He tilts his head, cracks a half-smile, and nods before plopping into the nearest desk. Still smiling, she turns her attention to the front of the room where students are picking up handouts from different piles and briefly calls out, “After you grab your handouts, make sure you are set up for Cornell Notes!” The “Do Now” on the Smartboard projects the instructions as the students dance between sitting, grabbing water, picking up the handouts, opening their backpacks, and talking to each other:

*Do Now: Good morning, Historians!  
Please pick up the handouts. Set up new Cornell Notes: “Segregation”  
We are starting a new unit: “Crisis in Little Rock”*

The energy in the room is lively, potent, and hectic. The scattered sound of both loud and soft voices, the mixed scents of perfumes and body sprays, hair products and adolescent body odor sit thickly in the air. It looks, sounds, and feels like a quintessential middle school morning. Through the classroom chaos, I notice a young boy in a Boston Celtics jersey making a beeline toward my perch in the back-left corner of the classroom, a mischievous grin plastered across his light brown-skinned face. He stops abruptly, standing over me, points directly at the Golden State Warriors sticker my laptop, and yells, “Steph Curry sucks!” before pivoting quickly, darting away, and sliding effortlessly into a desk on the other side of the room. I patiently wait to regain eye contact before mirroring his mischievous grin and telling him, “Haters gonna hate!”

and we both burst into laughter. The momentary wave of nostalgia hits me hard as I realize how much I miss both my former classroom—where the friendly banter that inevitably comes with teaching middle schoolers was nonstop and plentiful; and the streets of Oakland—where there is never a shortage of Warriors fans.

Meanwhile, Grace ducks, weaves, hugs, and twirls around students as she makes her way to her desk in the front-left corner of the room. Her petite five-foot-four frame is comfortably draped in a purple, jersey-knit skirt, black V-neck shirt, and strappy flat sandals. A pair of pink Dre Beats headphones sits around her neck, in the company of a lanyard holding a bundle of keys and a thin, delicate gold and jade necklace adorned with the Chinese characters for “good luck” —a family heirloom she inherited from her late grandmother. Her long, black hair is tucked into a messy bun, held up by the combination of a chopstick and ballpoint pen. She peers over a pair of thin, wire-rimmed glasses with almond-shaped eyes that fully light up every time she smiles, which is essentially every few seconds. Her energy level seems to not only match but miraculously somehow surpass that of her students. Every ounce of her energy feels intentional and seasoned, a complementary balance to the scattered and youthful energy of her students.

Once she reaches her desk, Grace briefly sinks into her chair before readjusting her posture and sitting fully upright. She closes her eyes, places her hands on her knees, and takes a deep breath before telling the class to stop for “mindfulness.” The frenzied chatter subsides as Grace begins to slowly and purposefully speak, “Okay, we’re starting mindfulness. Shhhhhh. Feet flat on the floor. Spine straight.” A few students are still quietly chatting. “Shhh. We are focusing on our breath. Remember what I told you: ten deep breaths each day can turn everything around.” Now the room is silent. “Think about yourself as a snow globe. Allow the dust to settle. Breeeeathe. Close your eyes.” The energy in the room begins to shift, slowly

calming down with each deep breath that Grace takes. Grace is the only teacher in the school who starts every day with mindfulness and she explains how her participation in 10-day silent meditation retreats with her husband has taught her the power and purpose of practicing mindfulness in her own life and how she came to use the “snow globe” as the running metaphor for practicing mindfulness in her classroom.

It’s hard because anything that you’ve swallowed or repressed and try not to think about...these things come up. When you take away everything, I mean, this is a snow globe and that’s how I explain it to the kids...it’s really like a snow globe and when you finally sit still, the dust settles and then you’re left to deal with all the issues.... So I think having strategies to deal with life is so important...to think about race and racism and ALL the –isms, empathy and compassion are so important and how do we have that? How do you get it? If you’re like a ball of anger and stress yourself, it’s so hard to stop and think of others, so they go hand in hand.

I glance around the room of nearly 25 students, mostly students of color with a handful of White students. Nearly all of them have their eyes closed, while a few are silently making eyes at each other, stifling giggles. One boy uses one of his handouts to cover his face and goofy smile as his eyes search the room. Grace’s eyes remain closed as she breathes deeply. I turn my gaze to the young Black male in the white hoodie; his eyes are closed, both feet firmly planted on the ground. He slowly takes in each breath, and on the fifth breath, he cracks a half-smile that exudes serenity. After exactly 5 minutes, a girl seated near the front of the room gently taps a singing bowl, signaling the end of mindfulness.

Without missing a beat, Grace jumps right into the lesson. “Okay, so we are going to read about what happens when the rules for the whole country don’t match what certain states want. And this is what happens in Little Rock, Arkansas. We are going to start with the handout 2.1 that says ‘Growing up with segregation,’ by Lisa Delpit. Everyone got it?” My ears immediately perk up the moment I hear her say, “Lisa Delpit,” whose seminal text *Other People’s Children*, has been a central feature across the various syllabi that I have developed in my work with

emerging elementary and secondary teachers. Just as my mind begins to wonder what they are about to read, Grace starts to weave among the desks, stopping briefly to hand me a copy, before she reads the introduction out loud:

*Lisa Delpit is an educator who grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, at a time when police officers patrolled the street that separated the city's black and white residents. Although that time in history has passed, her experiences continue to shape Delpit's views, including her hopes and fears for her child.*

I look down at the handout and immediately note the 2008 Facing History and Ourselves citation. Facing History and Ourselves is a nonprofit educational and professional development organization with a stated mission on their website “to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice and anti-Semitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry.” Though I often used curricular materials from Facing History and Ourselves, I never participated in any of their formal training sessions for teachers, whereas Grace later informs me that she has participated in three of the Facing History trainings and often draws on their materials as a key starting point for much of her curricular development and design.

I turn my attention back to Grace who has paused to check in with the students. “So, segregation, remember? We are talking about the separation of spaces for White people and people of color. Now we are going to read a letter that she wrote for her daughter, Maya.” As she continues to slowly make her way around the room, she reads Lisa Delpit’s letter to her daughter, stopping frequently to pose a series of strategic questions to her students.

*As much as I think of you as my gift to the world, I am constantly made aware that there are those who see you otherwise.*

*Although you don't realize it yet, it is solely because of your color that the police officers in our predominantly white neighborhood stop you to “talk” when you walk our dog. You think they're being friendly, but when you tell me that one of their first questions is always, “Do you live around here?” I know that they question your right to be here, that somehow your being here threatens their sense of security...*

*Figure 2. Excerpt from Delpit’s letter*

Graces stops here and peers over her glasses before asking, “So what do you think is Delpit’s racial background?”

In mostly unison, students call out, “Black!”

Grace immediately responds, “How do you know? Nowhere does it tell us her race.”

A young Black female raises her hand and offers, “Well, I’m assuming she’s Black because she’s being stopped in a White neighborhood.”

Grace nods, “Yes, good inference. Have any of you been stopped and questioned before?”

A wave of nods ripples across the classroom before Grace pauses briefly. She does not ask anyone to share out, but her silent pause before she continues reading seems to signify a painful recognition of a persistent, racialized experience and reality for so many of her students of color—a reality she later tells me is deeply important for her to both acknowledge and incorporate into her teaching in ways that “help them make sense of the racist and gendered society that surrounds them.” Grace’s strategic pauses and questions are often focused on providing her students with an opportunity to connect the material to their lived experiences, as well as their feelings, while also connecting them to the experiences and feelings of the people they are studying. Grace then continues to read.

I did not have to be told much when I was your age. When I was growing up in Louisiana in the 1950s and 1960s, the color lines were very clearly drawn. I followed my mother to the back entrance of the doctor’s office, marked “colored.” I knew which water fountain I was supposed to drink from. On the bus ride to my all-black school, I watched white children walk to schools just two or three blocks from my house.

In large part, my childhood years were wrapped in the warm cocoon of family and community who all knew each other and looked out for one another. However, I remember clearly my racing heart, my sweaty-palmed fear of the white policemen who entered my father’s small restaurant one night and hit him with nightsticks, the helpless terror when there were rumors in our school yard that the Ku Klux Klan would be riding, the anxiety of knowing my college-aged foster sister had joined the civil-rights marchers in a face-off against the white policemen and their dogs. And, I remember, my Maya, the death of your grandfather when I was seven, who died of kidney failure because the “colored” ward wasn’t yet allowed the use of the brand-new dialysis machine.

*Figure 3. Second excerpt from Delpit’s Letter*

Grace pauses and poses another question, “What are some real-life stressors to living with segregation during this time?”

Students begin calling out a few answers:

They can't get healthcare 'cause of their race!  
Getting randomly beaten by the police!  
People dying.  
Not enough medical care.  
She's worried about her sister.

Grace jumps back in to synthesize, placing extra emphasis on certain words.

Exactly. All great examples of the *stressors* of having to live with segregation. It can actually impact your *health*. She's describing things like *police brutality*, just trying to go to the *doctor's* office is *stressful*, her sister participating in *protests* is *stressful* because the people who participate are *at risk*. She also mentions the *KKK*, who pose a threat to *physical safety*, like the possibility of her dad being *lynched and killed*. This kind of *stress* of living can have *physical* effects.

Grace pauses here, pushing her glasses back while a number of students solemnly acknowledge through a series of slow, silent nods before continuing.

Your world is very different, at least on its surface. In many ways now is a more confusing time to live....

As any mother would, I have a great need to protect you, but it is hard to know how. My childhood experience was different from yours....

*Figure 4. Third excerpt from Delpit's letter*

Grace stops, “Who's Lisa Delpit talking to?”

A young girl calls out, “Her daughter!”

Grace responds, “Yes, and why is she saying that NOW is a more confusing time to live?”

Turn and talk in partners and we are going to share out!”

The energy in the room goes from 0 to 60 in seconds as the students start brainstorming loudly in pairs and small groups. Before I can even try to grasp what the students are saying,

Grace brings their attention back. “Okayyyy! So why is NOW a more confusing time to live?”



Grace calls on the young Black male in the white hoodie who quietly but purposefully states, “It’s more confusing now, ‘cause at least back then, things were labeled and things aren’t labeled today, but it’s still mad racist.”

A young girl in a pink shirt with light brown skin and pigtails jumps right in. “Yeah, it was labeled and segregated. Now, it’s just segregated. No labels...but segregated.”

Grace gently probes, “And why is that more confusing?”

Without hesitation, the girl with pigtails responds, “It’s confusing ‘cause there’s not supposed to be segregation, except that there is and we all know it...but it’s like different but the same.”

Grace jumps in. “Yes, it’s confusing because let’s just even look at our city. People argue that we are just as segregated today as we were back then.” She glances quickly at her watch before diving back into the text.

When I was in my segregated, all-black elementary school, we were told by teachers and parents that we had to excel, that we had to “do better than” any white kids because the world was already on their side. When your cousin Joey was in high school, I remember berating him for getting a “D” in chemistry. His response was, “What do you expect of me? The white kids get C’s.” Recently a colleague tried to help an African-American middle-schooler to learn multiplication. The student looked up at the teacher and said, “Why are you trying to teach me this? Black people don’t multiply. Multiplication is for white people.” You know, Maya, I think that may be the biggest challenge you and other brown children will face — not believing the limits that others place upon you.\*

*Figure 5. Fourth excerpt from Delpit’s letter*

Grace stops again before posing a statement instead of a question this time. “I want you to think about expectations and what kind of messages we receive. Think about what kinds of messages Lisa Delpit received and what it was like for her growing up in the segregated South.”

A few days later, Grace and I are sitting at a small round table sharing a nacho salad and pair of refreshing green monster smoothies at her favorite nearby vegan café. Given our shared

love of delicious food and a desire to avoid the endless interruptions that are inevitable whenever Grace remains in her classroom, we have opted to schedule all of our interviews off-campus at Grace's favorite cafes and restaurants. Although it is nearly 5 o'clock after a full day of teaching, Grace's energy is far from dampened and she enthusiastically answers all of my questions about her curriculum and the function of mindfulness in her classroom with an endless series of hand gestures, plenty of smiles, unapologetic mouthfuls of food, and almost zero pauses.

Yeah, so I've done maybe three different trainings with Facing History as part of the eighth grade curriculum, since this was a unit we try to have every teacher take the Crisis in Little Rock training at least. 'Cause I've done the main one on Holocaust and Human Behavior and they actually have one on Race and Membership in American Society which is another great one. And then this one is a whole unit on Little Rock, so it's a lot.... There's not way I could do all of it, so I choose the pieces that I like and that resonate the most...so those excerpts [Lisa Delpit and Danial Dyer] are part of the Facing History Choices excerpts, and I like hers [Lisa Delpit's] and Daniel Dyer's and we read the one from Jesus Colon earlier this year...so yes, I like those pieces a lot and they have been thoughtfully chosen.

Most of Grace's curation is guided by what she believes with "resonate" or "feel relatable" to her students, which was evident through the ways in which they interacted with Delpit's piece.

Grace speaks quickly, purposefully, and passionately about the readings she's selected for her students, often fitting more words into a minute than most of the people I know. As she explains the curricular pieces that she has selected from the Facing History materials, I ask her to elaborate more on her overarching goals for her current unit on Little Rock, a unit that will also include a screening of the Netflix documentary *13th*. She immediately laments the relatable struggle she faces with "breadth versus depth" when it comes to approaching ways to teach about the history of racism in the United States, especially when teaching about the Civil Rights Movement. She discusses how "it's so hard to think about coverage" and how to best "cover this period in history" and explains that she never tries to cover the entire Civil Rights movement, but instead centers the story of Little Rock to ask, "How does this moment in Little Rock reveal so

much about government structure and the choices people can make throughout history?” She further elaborates that she wants them to learn about how “some people had to fight just to have an education,” and that she wants her students to recognize the struggles that came before them because

it’s important to not take it [education] for granted....and the story of Little Rock is so important because of how recent those kinds of behaviors and experiences that they went through...which is unfathomable to my students in some ways...and what’s important is that they realize this wasn’t so long ago.... I also want them to understand the government piece, the tension between state and federal and how that has played out in U.S. history for centuries and continues to play out and we’ve recently seen it with Trump and the travel ban...

I briefly note the comfort with which Grace approaches what can often be painful and difficult conversations about race with her students, including but not limited to the class discussions stemming from the Lisa Delpit reading on growing up with segregation.

The following week, as I make my way up the grey staircase towards Grace’s classroom on the third floor, I note the posters on her door facing the hallway: There is a large “Black Lives Matter” print nestled next to another widely circulating print featuring three women of color against a dark blue backdrop under the phrase, “We all belong here. We will defend each other.” With summer break a little over a month away, the energy of the students grows increasingly frenetic as the air also thickens with humidity. Grace has explained how “things can get loose with less-structured scheduling” during this time of year, especially with state testing, and I can identify with her sense of urgency in struggling to maintain the attention of her students from the moment they come bursting into her room each day. Though she appears slightly tired today, she continues her daily dance around the room working to get students into their seats and settled before leading their daily mindfulness ritual.

Her ever-so-slightly mild disposition today instantly shifts the moment one of her tall, Black male students proudly and gleefully glides into the room with a set of desk chimes tucked under his arm. “Whoa!” Grace exclaims, “Look who came prepared with new stuff for mindfulness today!” As he sets up the chimes at the front of the room and takes a seat on a nearby stool, he smugly gloats at a pair of girls who roll their eyes at him before diving back into their own conversation. Just as it looks as though he will make another play for their attention, Grace’s hands land on his shoulders, a huge smile plastered across her face, as she weaves around him to get to her desk. She calls out, “Alriiiiiight, today is an important learning day because we going to get down further into learning about the Little Rock Nine. So! Feet flat on the floor. Spine straight—remember this is important because it helps the chi flow.” Though there is an audible reluctance from many students to quiet down today, Grace takes a loud, deep breath and continues, “We are observing without judgment how we feel today. Ten deep breaths can make a difference in your entire day. Shhhhh.”

Today, I decide to close my eyes and follow the protocol, so while I cannot actually see the students, I can feel the energy in the room slowly shift by the fifth breath. The young boy rings the chimes, bringing everyone back, grinning from ear to ear as he saunters into an empty seat. Looking refreshed, Grace thanks him for bringing in the new “mindfulness tool” before launching right into today’s lesson, which is centered around a guided viewing of an excerpt from the second part of the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary series titled “Fighting Back: 1957-1962.”

Grace starts with a review question. “What happens in 1896?” A number of students call out in unison, “Separate, but equal!” Grace responds, “Yes, exactly. Now we are going to fast forward to 1954 and *Brown vs. Board* and the opposite is supposed to happen. We are supposed

to turn it around. No more separate, but equal. But what happens when a state governor says, ‘F you! I’m not following your rules!’?’ This draws a few giggles, before she instructs them to keep track of the “choices that the leaders each make” while they watch the film. To assist them, students use a note-taking chart and have a set of comprehension questions on the worksheet, which is Grace’s modified version of a Facing History worksheet they each had to pick up for today’s “Do Now”:

Eyes on the Prize: Part 2  
 “Fighting Back: 1957-1962”

As you watch, keep track of the different choices made by the **state** and **federal** levels of government.

| Choices State Government Made (Governor Faubus) | Choices Federal Govt. Made (President Eisenhower) |
|---|---|
| 1.  | 1.  |
| 2.  | 2.  |
| 3.  | 3.  |

*Figure 6.* “Do Now” worksheet

The chart is followed by a series of comprehension questions:

1. What choice does the Arkansas state governor, Faubus, make before the start of school? (Enter in table above)
2. What does President Eisenhower choose to do? Is doing nothing a choice? How? (Enter in table above)
3. What happened to the Little Rock Nine on the first day of school?
4. Who is Elizabeth Eckford and what happened to her when she went to school on her own?
5. Who was Thurgood Marshall?
6. What was the offer made to Black journalists (newspaper folks) to ensure the safety of students getting to school?
7. What shocking choices were the school officials discussing when deciding how to get the students out of school safely?
8. What happened to the ex-Marine journalist? (Hint: with a brick)
9. What are some examples of harassment experienced by the Little Rock Nine when they were in school?
10. Why did Minnijean Brown leave?

11. What was written on cards and handed out to students following the cafeteria incident?
12. What happened to Ernest Green, the only senior of the Little Rock Nine, at graduation?
13. What happened to Central High School the next school year?

Grace briefly pushes back her glasses, peering across the room at the students before cueing up the video. The grainy, black-and-white footage takes over the Smartboard and stands in sharp contrast to the bright colors of the classroom. The narrator's voice enters the room loudly through the speakers, *"In 1954, the Supreme Court said black children would go to school with white. The South said, never."* Footage of an angry White mob pushing through police barricades takes over the screen and the anxiety-inducing sounds from the chaotic crowd emanate from the speakers before the scene cuts to Governor Faubus and Grace interjects and calls out, "Okay that's Governor Faubus!" A few pick up their pencils and hold them over their assignment as Faubus starts to speak, "In the name of God, whom we all revere, in the name of liberty we hold so dear, in the name of decency, which we all cherish, what is happening in America?" A brief montage of the National Guard running, patrolling, and confronting agitators at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas jumps across the screen as the narrator asks, *"Was this the start of a new Civil War?"* Fade to black and the theme music of the *Eyes on the Prize* series kicks in, briefly yanking me back to my own adolescence when I was first introduced to the documentary series through some of my own secondary social studies classes. *"I know the one thing we did right was the day we started to fight.... Keep your eyes on the prize...hold on...keep your eyes on the prize."* A few of the students bob their heads along to the music, while many just stare blankly at the screen. I recall similar varied reactions to the videos in my own schooling experiences.

I remember sitting in my eleventh grade U.S. history class at Hayward High School, where my favorite history teacher, Mr. Dwyer, would often dig up documentaries for us from his “VHS” collection. He would stand on his tiptoes to pop the VHS cassette into the VCR attached to the television and press “Play,” bringing the histories that were helping us to contextualize our current realities to disturbing life on this grainy, static television screen. The *Eyes on the Prize* footage that resonated most from Mr. Dwyer’s room was the section on Birmingham; I will never forget the rage, pain, and disgust I felt when I saw the violent use of firehoses and dogs against the peaceful protestors. Mr. Dwyer’s class was also the first time I took a history class in which I could place myself and my ancestors, the first time I truly began to critically question the world around me and my place in it. While I do not remember the detail of every piece of history he taught us, I will never forget the spectrum of heavy emotions I experienced in that classroom. As I sit alongside this group of eighth graders watching scenes from the same documentary that I watched as a teenager nearly two decades ago, I wonder what it feels like for them to watch this footage now.

The camera pans across the faces of Melba Pattillo Beals, Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Thelma Mothershed, Terrence Roberts, and Jefferson Thomas standing in front of Central High School, while the narrator discusses the details of their integration and accompanying conditions.

One student calls out, “Hey! Are all of these people still alive?”

Grace responds, “Eight of them are!”

The student’s brows furrow as he turns back to the screen. The next few scenes feature numerous close-ups of police batons and tense glances between Black and White residents and cops. The intense emotions captured by the camera like the faces of White law enforcement

facing off with Black residents in the crowded streets are painfully similar to the more recent video and footage on the streets of Ferguson and Baltimore. A former Central High White male student, Craig Rains, speaks on screen: “You could cut it with a knife, the tension. Outside the school were these people who had come in from other parts of the state, other states. There were license plates from all the other states that were there with people who had come in and were outside our school.” The camera then cuts to footage of Elizabeth Eckford, looking every bit the petite adolescent tower of courageous strength and fear in her white dress and sunglasses, arriving and forced to navigate the enormous, angry White crowd. The narrator explains, “*The eight children and the adults with them were turned away by the National Guard. The ninth student Elizabeth Eckford has missed the call to gather with the others before school. Elizabeth Eckford walked alone and met a mob.*” The news reporter tentatively approaches a frozen Eckford as she sits on the bench surrounded by the mob: “Could you tell me your name please?” She stays silent. A couple of girls sitting near me in the back of the classroom briefly cheer, “Yasssss! That’s right. Don’t tell him shit!” The reporter on screen continues, “Are you going to go to school here at Central High? You don’t care to say anything, is that right?” The reporter backs away from her, puts his hand on his hip, and continues, “This girl here is the first negro, apparently, of high school age to show up at Central High School the day that the Federal Court ordered it integrated. She was followed in front of the school by an angry crowd, many of them shouting epithets at her.”

Without pausing the film, Grace briefly asks, “What happened?”

A few students angrily yell out, “They got mobbed!”

The voice of Ernest Green discussing the same scene begins as the camera stays focused on Eckford’s stoic posture before showing him as an adult recalling that moment. “Well, it has to



be the most frightening thing, I mean, because she had a crowd of White people behind her threatening to kill her. She had nobody. I mean, there was not a Black face in sight anywhere, nobody that she could turn to as a friend, except to this woman [Grace Lorch], came out of the crowd and guided her through the mob and onto the bus and got her home safely.”

Grace pauses the film just as the camera follows Eckford and Lorch navigating the angry mob. Grace quietly poses, “Imagine being alone in this crowd.” She waits for a few moments before repeating, “Imagine what it was like to be in that crowd.” She exchanges a few thoughtful glances with students and then briefly references the final research projects they are each working on, in which they are examining different social movements and their respective tools for change. She asks them to also note “different tools for change” that they see in the film before pressing play again. Because Grace so often multitasks and moves a mile a minute, these moments of silence and pause feel especially heavy, thoughtful, and poignant. Grace does not seem to be practicing “wait time” in order to gain a response; instead, she deliberately inserts a few calculated moments of silence as she asks her students to reflect on what they witness and then asks them to imagine how they might experience these same scenarios.

Grace continues to pause and guide the students through their viewing guide questions over the course of the next 15 minutes. Each time she pauses, she poses questions passionately and purposefully, communicating her sense of urgency and care for this topic. The energy in the classroom also grows increasingly intense, with each additional scene depicting the mob violence against the Little Rock Nine. I also hear a few students sucking their teeth as the narrator explains the meeting between Eisenhower and Faubus as Eisenhower’s “vacation house” in Newport, Rhode Island. By the time the class gets to question six on the guide, Grace is

sweating. “All right, so number six, there are three Black journalists and what’s the offer made to them?”

A young Black girl responds, “They asked them to be a decoy.”

Grace asks, “What would YOU say?”

The students offer mixed responses, most of them saying, “Hell naw!” and few scattered, “Maybe,” “If I wasn’t the only one!” She presses “Play” and the narrator speaks over the infamous scene of the Black journalist, Alex Wilson, getting pushed, attacked, and hit with a brick. “*The crowd turned on Hicks and on his companions, Moses Newsom and Alex Wilson.*” I hear a few students gasp as they watch the White mob attack Alex Wilson. James Hicks appears on the screen. “Somebody had a brick in his hand, and instead of throwing the brick, because he was too close, he hit Alex Wilson up the side of his head with this brick. Of course, Wilson was more than six feet tall, an ex-Marine, and he went down like a tree.” The growing mob violence erupts, juxtaposed with individual interviews with Ernest Green and Melba Beals. Grace continues her action narration, guidance, and pausing to ensure that the students are jotting down all of the answers on their sheets, taking extra care to make sure the students note the difference between Governor Faubus’ initial use of troops (to keep the Black students OUT of Central High) and President Eisenhower’s eventual decision to use troops to escort and protect the Little Rock Nine.

Grace takes a long pause for question nine. “What are some examples of harassment experienced by the Little Rock Nine when they were in school?”

Throwing bottles at them.  
Tripping her in the gym.  
Following them into the bathroom.

I can feel the exasperation in the air, and then a young Latinx girl seated near me calls out, “Umm, why weren’t these students getting suspended!?” Grace locks eyes with her and then looks around. “Good question, why do you think these kids weren’t suspended?”

“Because they’re White?” The response is cynically asked, as Grace jumps back in, “It’s great that you ask because when we see the performance at the end of the year, we will see this addressed again. We are going to see what actually happens to one of the Little Rock Nine when one of them chooses to fight back.” Glancing at her watch, Grace fast-forwards to the part focusing on Minnijean Brown and the chili incident in the cafeteria. The camera jumps between Ernest Green and Melba Beals as they recount the incident:

ERNEST GREEN: For a couple of weeks, there had been a number of White kids following us. A series of hassles, continuous—Calling us niggers. “Nigger, nigger, nigger,” one right after the other. And Minnie was—Minnijean Brown was in the lunch line with me. And I was in front of Minnie, and Minnie was behind me. And there was this White kid—fella—who was much shorter than Minnie—Minnie was about five foot ten. And this fella couldn’t have been more than five—five, five—four. And he reminded me of a small dog, yelping at somebody’s leg. And Minnie had just picked up her chili.

MELBA BEALS: I could just see her little head click. She consciously said to herself, “No, Minnijean, if you do this, you know you won’t be here.” But then, this was the time of the year when we all didn’t want to be there.

ERNEST GREEN: And before I could even say, “You know, Minnie, why don’t you tell him to shut up?” Minnie had taken this chili, dumped it on this dude’s head. It was just absolute silence in the place. And then the help—all Black—broke into applause. And the White kids—the other White kids there—didn’t know what to do. It was the first time that anybody, I’m sure, had seen somebody Black retaliate in that sense.

The camera then cuts to Craig Rains, the White male student who was interviewed earlier:

CRAIG RAINS: When Minnijean was kicked out of school following the chili incident, maybe fifteen, twenty students brought cards and gave them out that said, “One down, eight to go.” When school was out in May, they still hadn’t given up the fight. They came out with a two-colored card that said, “Ike(?), go home, liberation day May 29, 1958,” which was graduation day. They were still fighting the battle even then.

Grace pauses right as the screen shows Craig holding the cards.



*Figure 7. “One down...eight to go”*

“So what happened to Minnijean?”

A student quietly answers, “She got expelled.”

Grace repeats loudly and purposefully, “Yes, she gets EXPELLED and then after she gets expelled, some of the White students make these cards that say, ‘One down...eight to go.’ So, please make sure to write these down.”

I notice they have less than 5 minutes of class left, but Grace seems determined to get through the last two questions. Ernest Green returns to the screen to recount what happens when he walks the stage at graduation.

There were a lot of claps for the students. You know, they talked about who had received scholarships, who was an honor student and all that as they called their names up. When they called my name, there was nothing. Just a name. And there was this eerie silence. Nobody clapped. But I figured they didn't have to, because after I got that diploma, that was it. I had accomplished what I had come there for.

Grace immediately pauses.

What happens to Ernest Green? It's complete SILENCE when he walks across the stage. Imagine what that might have felt like for him. Okay, so that's for number twelve and I'm just going to give you the last answer since we are almost at time. So LAST decision, the final decision by Governor Faubus. Are y'all ready for this? After that school year, rather than continue to let more Black students attend schools, he decided to shut down ALL of the schools in Little Rock the following year.

A few students respond, “Whhhhatttt?!” as they scramble to write down the answers on their guides before handing them in on their way out. Grace shoots me a quick glance, her forehead gleaming with sweat, shrugs her shoulders, and flashes a huge smile before letting out a huge sigh, expressing I can only imagine to be tremendous relief.

When I ask her to share more about her approach to such a structured, guided viewing of *Eyes on the Prize*, she explains that the lesson I recently observed was also based on Facing History materials. The viewing guide she developed is a derivative of the Facing History guide focused on the same episode of the documentary—minus the “Eisenhower and Faubus segregationist and integrationist continuum.” Over the course of her 14 years of teaching, Grace “never teaches the exact same lesson twice” and she “does things differently every single year.” In the case of the Facing History materials, she recalls how she “always tries out the curriculum if it’s there, but then tweaks it based on what [she] thinks developmentally kids may need.” The differences between Grace’s viewing guide and Facing History original are actually significant, especially with what each worksheet asks students to focus on.

To the left is Facing History’s version of the viewing guide for the same episode, “Fighting Back” from *Eyes on the Prize*; to the right, Grace’s most recent version. In “Identifying Decisions,” the guide asks students to focus completely on identifying the “pressures” faced by Eisenhower and Faubus and to then place each of them on a continuum of integration to segregation. Grace explains that she took the continuum off her version mostly because students did not fully understand it, especially given that the documentary itself does not focus on these terms explicitly. Additionally, it is important to Grace that her students take the time to consider the “choices,” “pressures,” and “challenges” faced by everyone involved—not just the two White men in positions of power—most especially and importantly, the members of

### Identifying Decisions

#### 1. Spring and summer 1957

Based on what you saw in *Eyes on the Prize*, what pressures do President Eisenhower and governors like Orval Faubus of Arkansas face as school boards across the nation carry out the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*? List the pressures on each man in the space below or on a separate sheet of paper.

| Eisenhower | Faubus |
|------------|--------|
| _____      | _____  |
| _____      | _____  |
| _____      | _____  |

Based on what you saw and heard in the video, where on the line below would you place President Eisenhower on September 1, 1957? Where would you place Governor Faubus?

Integration \_\_\_\_\_ Segregation

#### 2. September 2-4, 1957

Based on what you saw in the news clips from *Eyes on the Prize*, what pressures does each leader face after the speech Faubus gave on the night of September 2, 1957? List them in the space below or on a separate sheet of paper.

| Eisenhower | Faubus |
|------------|--------|
| _____      | _____  |
| _____      | _____  |
| _____      | _____  |

CONTINUED

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ SS, 8- \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Eyes on the Prize: Part 2 "Fighting Back: 1957-1962"

As you watch, keep track of the different choices made by the **state** and **federal** levels of government.

| Choices State Government Made (Governor Faubus) | Choices Federal Govt. Made (President Eisenhower) |
|---|---|
| 1. _____  | 1. _____  |
| 2. _____  | 2. _____  |
| 3. _____  | 3. _____  |

1. What choice does the Arkansas state governor, Faubus, make before the start of school? (Enter in table above)

\_\_\_\_\_

2. What does President Eisenhower choose to do? Is doing nothing a choice? How? (Enter in table above)

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What happened to the Little Rock Nine on the first day of school?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Who is Elizabeth Eckford and what happened to her when she went to school on her own?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Who was Thurgood Marshall?

Figure 8. Viewing guide

the Little Rock Nine. Grace's viewing guide asks students to identify and list a number of incidents and choices of the Little Rock Nine, the journalists, the president, the governor, and the lawyers. The questions included on Grace's sheet are fairly straightforward, basic comprehension questions that can be answered directly from simply viewing the film. When she pauses the film, she not only provides a chance for students to complete their viewing guides, but she also uses these moments as opportunities to engage the affective dimensions of learning about the crisis in Little Rock: "How do you think it felt to be there?" "What would you have done in that situation?" While Grace asks her students to take note of the choices made by Eisenhower and Faubus because she wants her students to understand "how the government operates at different levels," the majority of her questions revolve around the personal

experiences of the Little Rock Nine and wanting to nurture compassion in her students. As such, she also poses many questions asking students to imagine or consider the feelings of those at the center of the narrative. For Grace, providing opportunities to ensure that the lesson and content are “relatable” and conducive to critical thought and reflection for her students plays heavily into her decision-making process. She elaborates:

What I’m thinking about and what I want them thinking about is that this is just one moment in history and I want them thinking about choices that people made. It doesn’t matter which moment in history it is, choices are constantly being made. The choice to do anything, the choice to do something...and I think it’s so relatable for kids. They’re all choices, so looking at Little Rock, it’s like...one moment but it’s an important moment in history because the whole world is watching, the world is looking at the United States and its proposed ideals of like freedom and equality and how are these kids like not being able to go to school, in this country that exposing this, in the middle of the Cold War, so you got...we’re looked at as hypocrites... so it’s relatable for kids to see, even as students in the halls and to think about the bullying and harassment...especially the cards...one down, eight to go? I just want them thinking about that.

The importance of making sure that material is relatable to her students is also reflected in the change in lesson plans next week. In light of the recent NFL decision to punish players who choose to take a knee on the field during the national anthem, Grace plans to schedule in a class discussion on the topic, which she hopes can serve as a “bridge” between the history they are currently learning through the Little Rock materials and the content they will soon learn through their guided viewing of Ava Duvernay’s documentary *13th*. The students have been focusing on “this one particular moment in Little Rock,” but she wants to get them thinking about “bigger systems,” especially “systemic racism” and how that relates to the levels and systems of government they have been studying. Including a discussion on the recent NFL decision can provide “a good bridge for them to think more about systemic racism, which is what we will be focusing on when we watch *13th* next week...plus, I’ve heard so many of them talking about it [the NFL decision] so I thought it would be a good opportunity to bring in what

they are seeing.” Her eyes light up and her speech quickens with excitement as she discusses these upcoming lessons.

Grace’s passion for the topics she teaches is unmistakable. I ask her about the roots of her interest in equity and justice. Cracking a smile, she responds, “My mom.” Grace was raised by a single mother who divorced her dad when Grace was 2 years old. In addition to teaching Grace to not waste money or clothes and to always pose questions to the world around her, Grace also attributes her approach to people, and especially her students, to her mother. Grace traces her first lesson in “compassion” to the Chinese name her mother chose for her, *Tianxin*, which translates to “heavenly heart.” She explains how her mother would often draw upon her name to “bring everything back to compassion.” She shakes her head and laughs as she recalls,

Any time I would get frustrated with so-and-so and they were mean to me and I would come home, she [mom] would say, ‘[Grace], your heart is as big as the sky and that person actually needs more love and your heart is big enough to give them that love.’ And I would be like, ‘I don’t wanna give them love!’ And she’s like, ‘But your heart is big enough, so you have to.’ So, whenever I was frustrated, she’d just say that just means they need an extra hug.

Grace pauses and starts to make a twisting motion in the air as she speaks. “My mom had the ability to twist *everything* to compassion, to compassion, to compassion! So, I think about that whenever I hear or learn about any kind of injustice in the world. I learned that from her and not just that, but also how to be strong.” I realize that what I have witnessed and will continue to observe in Grace’s teaching inevitably includes traces of her mother.

### **Critical Consciousness**

Grace is doing her usual morning dance with, around, and through her students during passing period. On the Smartboard next to her, the “Do Now” instructs: “Good Morning, Thinkers! Please pick up a handout and find a seat in the circle.” To the left of the Smartboard reads today’s learning objective: *Analyze the differences between interpersonal and structural*



*racism by discussing the treatment of different NFL players engaging in protest in order to understand how institutional and systemic racism works.* Grace bounces past the board on her way to her desk and jumps into mindfulness. “All right, feet flat on the floor. Spine straight.” The room falls silent more quickly than usual; the silence and stillness help to make the room feel slightly cooler despite the humidity fighting to take over the air. The silence is momentarily broken by a group of boys’ laughter and giggles. Grace quietly but firmly addresses them, “Gentlemen, you need to split up.” One immediately whines, “It wasn’t even me!” The interaction makes me slightly cringe; this is the first time I have seen mindfulness blatantly interrupted and I recognize the look of exhausted defeat that briefly washes over Grace’s face. Grace closes her eyes and continues to breathe. The boys do not split up, but they stop laughing and talking. As soon as the girl taps the singing bowl, Grace projects the next slide while briefly reminding everyone to please share their consent forms for the upcoming viewing of *13th*:



*Figure 9. Kaepernick kneeling*

Grace takes a seat at a desk near the door and reads the first question out loud, “Who is this?”

A scattered “Colin Kaepernick” ripples across half of the circle.

Grace then asks, “And why is he kneeling?”

The same young girl who helped with mindfulness today asks, “Wasn’t this for Black Lives Matter?”

Grace responds, “Yes, he did this in solidarity with Black Lives Matter.”

An Indian boy seated next to the only three White males in the classroom yells out, “Yo, he sucks!” causing a wave of frustrated and angry glares, along with a few stifled giggles.

Grace’s face goes cold as she tells them to remember the “norms of being in a circle” in a tone that is barely above a whisper but lands heavily around the circle. Grace continues, “What were the consequences of his kneeling?”

A student timidly offers, “Wasn’t he fired?”

Another chimes in, “Yeah, and now no one will sign him?”

Grace responds, “Yes, he was let go and is currently a free agent, but no one has signed him.”

A tall young girl with dark skin jumps in. “Isn’t this like what we were talking about earlier with, like freedom of speech?”

A young White girl asks, “Yeah, why would they kick him off the team if he has the right to protest?”

One of the few White male students in the room confidently raises his hand and jumps in, matter-of-factly stating, “I got this. It’s because he’s representing a *brand*. He works for *them*, so that’s why he’s not allowed to do this.” His statement causes a mild eruption of responses, some attempting to respond directly to him, some speaking out loud and into the circle.

Just as the noise starts to rise, Grace brings it back, “Okaaaayy. So, what I heard is that he was on work time and if you represent a brand, then you should have certain responsibilities?”

The young White student immediately responds, “What I’m saying is that he can do this on his own time. Like, what if Ms. [Grace] got a DUI?” This causes another eruption of responses.

One student calls out, “What?! That doesn’t even make sense?”

Another student calls out, “Umm, what Kaepernick is doing isn’t dangerous!” I look around to see if anyone else caught this important distinction, but they are mostly talking over each other. I can see the combination of frustration and determination in Grace’s face as she continues to push forward and projects the next slide:

With a partner, discuss:

- 1. WHO IS THIS?**
- 2. WHY IS HE KNEELING?**
- 3. WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS KNEELING?**



*Figure 10. Tebow kneeling*

Grace jumps in, “Okay! Here’s the next image, “Broncos player. Same questions. Tim Tebow. Turn and talk to a partner first!” Grace appears to quietly collect herself, taking a few deep breaths as the students discuss loudly in pairs and triads. After about 2 minutes, Grace asks a few students to share out.

A second White male student immediately calls, “That’s different! He’s praying. The other one was during the National Anthem!”

A young Black boy immediately responds, “Okay, so couldn’t we say the same thing about the brand and religion?”

Another counters, “Yeah, but one of them is a protest.”

Grace jumps in. “Okay, let’s remember. WHY does Kaepernick kneel? He says he’s kneeling to bring awareness to the racial violence that is happening in this country.” She then explains the new NFL policy. “The new policy states that if you are on the field, you must stand for the National Anthem or you will be fined. You can stay in the locker room if you want, but think about that. The whole point of Kaepernick kneeling is due to his visibility. We never get to see the locker rooms during the National Anthem.” A number of nods ripple around the circle.

The White male then asks, “Yeah, but isn’t it disrespectful to the flag?”

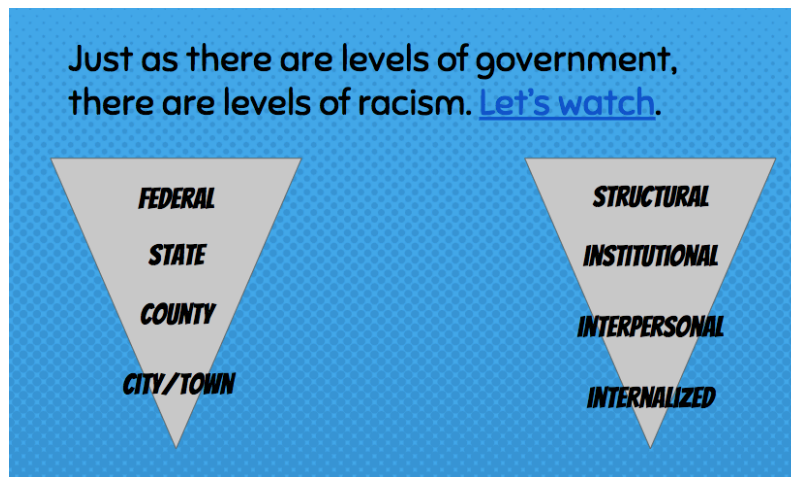
Grace immediately responds, “Well, we make bikinis out of the flag and people buy beer during the national anthem? Is *that* disrespectful to the flag?” Silence.

She breaks the silence by comparing the different standpoints of the players: “Tim Tebow is also sharing his views. He is openly anti-abortion. Kaepernick is also sharing his views. He wants to draw attention to racial injustices.”

The same White male student looks exasperated, but also confused, “Ugh, yeah, but praying is different!”

Grace nods. “Okay, so then let’s think about this country. Every president has been Christian, so look at the holidays. In our city, we now have Ramadan off, but that’s only because Muslim students protested for this.” More silence.

As I glance around, I can see the confusion, frustration, anger, defeat, and curiosity from the varied expressions across their faces. Grace starts talking as she switches the slide again. “Remember how we’ve been looking at the different levels of government? Well, just like there are levels of government, there are levels of racism”:



*Figure 11. Levels of racism*

She recreates the same triangles on the whiteboard to the left of the Smartboard as she reads through both diagrams before clicking on the link to Jay Smooth’s short “Moving the Race Conversation Forward Race Forward” video clip on systemic racism. A close-up of Jay Smooth’s face takes over the screen, his voice booming through the speakers. The 4½-minute video features Jay Smooth identifying and explaining the different levels of racism and how they each function. As soon as the video ends, Grace asks, “So, what’s he saying is missing from the conversations?”

In almost perfect unison, a bunch of students respond, “Systemic racismmm!” “Remember that when we are talking about racism, it’s so prevalent, it’s all around us like smog,” continues Grace. “Remember the Daniel Dyer story we read? It’s like poison in the air. Today we talked about the NFL. Next time, we will talk about incarceration. We will look at it

systemically. So that's what the film we are watching next week is about. *13th*." A few students rush to gather around their teacher, as the rest jump up to move into the next passing period as Grace and Jay Smooth's words seem to linger in the air.

As Grace reflects on the challenges that she often faces when facilitating conversations on race and racism with a multiracial group of students and her desire to ensure that all of her students develop an analysis and a critique of systemic racism through this current series of lessons, I also learn more about some of her undergraduate experiences and how courses on race relations in the United States were formative in the development of both her own racial identity and critical consciousness about the embedded nature of racism in U.S. society. She also mentions selecting the NFL decision as the case study because she had heard numerous students talking about it, but not demonstrating an understanding or awareness of "the role of racism in the decision," which she explains also led her to use both the images of Colin Kaepernick and Tim Tebow kneeling.

I just wanted to get the students thinking about how the NFL's decision was racist because immediately, many of them would say "no" and focus on it being about the kneeling. So that's also why I chose to have images of a Black male and a White male doing the exact same thing...even though it's not at the same time and it's not during the National Anthem, but they're both in uniform and they're both on the field and they're both kneeling! There wasn't this huge response to Tebow like there was to Kaepernick, so let's start to ask why that is and in asking why, could one of the possibilities be racism? So, it's tied to getting them thinking about racism as a system.

Laughing, Grace shares that she was not sure exactly how the discussion would play out or "what was going to come of it," but she was certainly sure there would be "a variety of opinions within each class, so hopefully it would be lively." I both identify with and deeply appreciate Grace's approach to engaging in discussion about race and racism in her classroom. As with most topics and lessons in social studies classrooms, there is no one perfect formula. She embraces the discomfort that often arises with the "variety of opinions" that are expressed in her

classroom. Grace's stance, however, is not to be conflated with the neoliberal notion that all opinions are and should be treated as equal.

The tensions and discomfort triggered by some of her White students were both undeniable and palpable. Grace recognizes this reality and shares some of the challenges she has faced over the years while actively teaching about oppression to classrooms filled with mostly students of color and a few White students. She explains that the young White male who spoke the most during the NFL discussion comes from a family of Trump supporters and she has spent time over the course of the school year trying to get him, along with other resistant White male students, to recognize and confront their White privilege. She references the "I Wish" identity projects with which she started the school year again and cites that as her starting place for trying to prepare her students to enter into difficult dialogues.

I mean, if my purpose [in doing the identity projects] is that I value what you bring to the table and we're all going to have different experiences, how do we acknowledge and appreciate that? We have Trump supporters at our school who have said things that were racist to other students and they had fights in sixth and seventh grade, so my challenge in bringing them into this space [eighth grade history] is to say, we don't have to always agree in this space and that may be uncomfortable, but we are going to talk about things...

I can see the fatigue and genuine stress of taking on such a task in Grace's furrowed brows and pursed lips. She is trying to tackle the challenge of teaching her students how racism functions in society against the backdrop of blatantly racist tweets, statements, and actions from the president of the United States and a room of students who represent vastly different backgrounds, needs, and interests.

Grace's eyebrows and face relax when she begins to say how much she appreciated seeing the ways in which many of her Black female students pushed back against what she saw to be attempts at "White male domination" during the NFL discussion and why having her

students sit in a circle was necessary for that discussion. She purposefully designed a “freer” structure for this discussion, as opposed to the more structured Socratic Seminars that they previously participated in because

in a Socratic Seminar, everyone has to speak so there’s this awareness with their notes, while this one was more free for different voices to come to the forefront. That’s why I built in the images, the turn and talks...there wasn’t an assignment to be collected, it was more about trying to provide a space for the balance of voices and I love the circle because everyone can see each other have a stronger sense of community, especially for a more difficult conversation.

Grace also expresses a firm stance on her approach to providing a space where various opinions can be expressed, but “if your opinion is one that results in the loss of millions of lives, then we need to rethink this.” Returning to the vocal White male student, Grace shares her anticipation for how a guided viewing of *13th* might influence his thinking. Describing her hopes for both him and her other students in using both the NFL images and the Jay Smooth video, Grace explains, “At the end of the day, I wanted them to have this discussion and to watch this video and think about systemic racism. I love that video because it’s short, succinct and it has the visuals which can help for different types of learners.”

I notice that Grace consistently refers to racism as systemic, rather than individual—a critically consciousness orientation that aligns with the Jay Smooth video that she showed in class—and I ask her how she first came to learn about the embedded nature of racism. Grace’s eyes light up with excitement and I can practically see the wave of memory and nostalgia wash over her face. “I had this amazing class in college—I forget what it was called, but it was part history, part sociology, part anthropology—and it was about the history of race relations in the United States and I just remember my mind being blown!” She emphasizes her last statement with “mind blown” hand gestures as she launches into a deeper description about this and other courses she took during her undergraduate years at Pomona College in Claremont, California,



and how that coursework laid the foundation for her initial pursuit of graduate-level work in Race and Ethnic Studies in Education at UCLA, which preceded her eventual decision to teach.

Yes, the course was taught by a Black female professor and I remember she had us keep a journal on everyday racial micro-aggressions that we saw. So, she really had us thinking about the ways in which race plays out in all these different ways that sometimes you don't always notice.... I would say that was like a great turning point. I mean, I had great professors at Pomona, even like a psychology professor who was also in Chicano Studies who taught us about the psychology of IQ testing and learning about the eugenics movement.... By the time I had taken some of these courses I knew I wanted to study race and ethnic studies and education.... So, I went to UCLA for grad school to their school of education. But it wasn't their teacher education program. It was like their academic "let's research race and ethnic studies in education."

I am momentarily shocked to learn that teaching was not Grace's initial career choice; this is currently her 14th year of teaching and it is hard to imagine her doing anything else. She laughs, "I know, right? I mean, I always worked with teenagers, middle schoolers during my summers, but actually didn't think I'd end up in the classroom!" She moves into a fast-paced and brief story about how she actually started working as a Human Relations Specialist in Southern California before moving to the East Coast with her then-boyfriend. It was then that she finally decided to try teaching because she began thinking "more about having depth of impact." Her first job did not allow her to "get to know the students that well" and that she "didn't get to have relationships with kids," which made her realize that she "had to be in the classroom." Once she started, she knew that was where she belonged.

Back in Grace's classroom the following week, the students are setting up to take Cornell Notes: The New Jim Crow, while they view the documentary *13th*. She later explains her decision in having her students take Cornell Notes, as opposed to the more guided worksheets that they completed for *Eyes on the Prize*: "it's different with *13th*. Part of what I'm trying to do is get them thinking about, 'how can notes really be your notes?' and not just something you copy from the board? How can they work for you?" She explains that with *13th*, she really wants

them to write down anything that “pops up for them” or what they find relevant. As she makes her way around the classroom, Grace starts quickly reviewing the lesson from last week on the different levels of racism. With less than 4 weeks left in the school year, I can hear the urgency in Grace’s voice—she is speaking more quickly than usual. She launches in, “Okay! So last time we were talking about the different levels of racism and we watched a video by Jay Smooth. What’s the level of racism that is NOT often discussed?”

A majority of the students call out in unison, “SYSTEMIC!”

Grace responds, “And what is systemic racism?”

A young woman calls out from one of the back corners. “It’s like how the U.S. operates. Our society, you know?”

Grace jumps back in.

Okay, yes, so more than just one individual act. Systemic racism is referring to and addressing what happens across institutions. Some examples are the school to prison pipeline, voting suppression and the movie we are about to watch is focused on the system of mass incarceration. So, you don’t have a worksheet this time and I want you to be able to write down your own notes and questions, especially if it relates to your final research project and then I’ll also ask you write down some numbers throughout the film.

I notice the beads of sweat that have, once again, collected on Grace’s forehead as she bends down to press “Play” on the documentary.

Similar to the guided viewing of *Eyes on the Prize* a couple of weeks ago, Grace pauses every 5 minutes or so to check for students’ understanding of key ideas and concepts related to systems, to provide opportunities for students to track the growing rate of prison populations in the United States, and to connect key ideas discussed in the film that directly relate to various students’ research topics. At times, she does not pause, but strategically talks over portions of the film while it continues to play. For instance, when Jelani Cobb breaks down the cultural impact of D.W. Griffith’s, *Birth of a Nation*, Grace calls out over the rapid montage of racialized

caricatures and images. “I want you all to think about where stereotypes come from!” When grainy video footage of a burning cross takes over the screen, she asks, “Isn’t one of you researching hate groups in our state?” I notice students jotting down notes at different points throughout the film. A few students do not take any notes and keep their eyes on the screen. However, a number of students cover their eyes or turn away from photos of lynchings and White mob terror. One young, light-skinned girl sitting near the front narrates what she has learned about Emmett Till’s story while she continues to watch through her fingers covering half of her face. “Yeah, I remember learning about him. His mom wanted people to see his body like that and how they messed him up.”

By 10 minutes into the documentary, students are increasingly vocal and reactive to what they see on screen, most especially when they see the exact same footage from *Eyes on the Prize*. As the film jumps across black-and-white footage of the lunch counter sit-ins, Martin Luther King Jr.’s voice echoes through the speakers—“And I think we should start now preparing for the inevitable. And let us, when that moment comes, go into the situation that we confront with a great deal of dignity, sanity and reasonableness”—as the footage of Alex Wilson being attacked by the White mob outside of Central High School in Arkansas plays out on screen.

One student enthusiastically yells out, “Yo! It’s the dude that gets hit with the brick!”

Grace briefly interjects, “Yes, and where is that?”

A choral response, “Arkansas!”

As more familiar footage from Arkansas plasters the screen, juxtaposed with speech footage from the Ku Klux Klan, students continue to react.

“Oh my gahhh, look! It’s Ruby Bridges!”

Between the students' reactions and Grace's strategic pausing, questioning, and clarifying, I am exhausted just watching it all play out, while also heartened by watching the students' excitement when they recognize pieces of history they have already been exposed to. Grace appears unphased as she urgently but patiently guides her students through the documentary in between sips of her lemonade. She pauses for the day as the film gets to Reagan's "War on Drugs" before telling students to put away their Cornell Notes and bring them back when they continue the film on Monday. As the students pack up their bags and make their way towards the door, I hear a few students utter "This is depressing" on their way out of the classroom.

Recalling the first time she read *The New Jim Crow* and watched *13th*, Grace explains how she immediately knew that she wanted to incorporate the documentary into her teaching. She read *The New Jim Crow*, during one of her summer breaks and saw the documentary on Netflix soon after, and instantly thought, "Wow this is everything I want to do and teach." Her eyes lighting up, she continues, "I remember being riveted and thinking that my middle schoolers would be riveted too—with the imagery, the music, the pace."

When I share observations about how fast-paced her lessons often feel, Grace agrees.

Yes, especially at this time of year and the challenges with scheduling. But we have to make time, especially with the world that they [the students] are experiencing daily. I want them to understand that experience and not just in an individual way, but to understand how things operate within larger systems.... I want them to think critically, to be systemically aware...because, how can we not, you know?

She acknowledges that her students might not catch or retain the numerous complex ideas and concepts discussed in *13th*, but she is very clear in celebrating the bridges and connections that she is able to build across the different curricular materials and experiences that she prepares for her students. She is excited when she sees her students "express their ideas and emotions" while

watching the documentaries. The pacing necessary for including so much at this time of the school year can be incredibly challenging and exhausting, but it is rewarding to see how the “seeds” she planted back in September come to the surface in June. This is the second year she has shown *13th* right after *Eyes on the Prize*, and right before the culminating eighth grade field trip to the play *The Nine Who Dared*—an interactive play that engages the audience as active participants in both their learning and re-imagining of alternate possibilities for the Little Rock Nine.

### **Agency**

For my final observation of Grace’s class, I am meeting them at the nearby high school for their end-of-year field trip to see *The Nine Who Dared: Courage in Little Rock* by Wendy Lement, Derek Nelson, and Cliff Odle. The 10 actors in the play reenact a number of the experiences of the Little Rock Nine and the daily harassment they faced during their months at Central High, including Minnijean Brown’s resistance through the “chili incident” in the cafeteria. The actors portray a number of characters, which concludes with a town hall meeting in which the audience members participate as “citizens of 1957 Little Rock, Arkansas” and are invited to “advise, question, and debate” with the characters and with each other. Grace has informed me that the audience is limited to 150 participants in order to ensure a greater sense of intimacy and audience interaction—a “breaking the fourth wall kind of thing” that provides an opportunity for her students to not just see a “live version” of what they saw in *Eyes on the Prize*, but to also “step in and briefly participate and experience it.” She is taking the entire eighth grade and will be sharing the space with another eighth grade class whose school has helped split the cost of the play.

I hear them before I see them—a combination of adolescent shrieks, laughter, and conversations several octaves higher than the ones they use for “pair shares” in Grace’s classroom. It is a sound deeply familiar to me as a former middle school teacher who organized many a field trip that involved taking over 100 students to local colleges and events; an eighth grade field trip at the end of the school year is definitely in full frenetic effect. Grace’s loud voice emanates from the middle of the fray as I approach. Today, she is clad in a backpack and sneakers and sporting a brand new haircut that falls just past her shoulders. She is engaged in a lively conversation with her fellow chaperones and cackling hysterically as I approach. Two of the students run up and throw their arms around me, while one of them shouts, “Hey, Miss! I’m still gonna hug you even though you’re a Warriors fan!” before laughing and darting back into a circle with his friends. Grace’s face lights up when she sees me and she, too, runs over to give me a huge, welcoming hug. For a moment, I forget I am a researcher and briefly relish feeling welcomed and included in this beloved community before also feeling the sadness in remembering this will be my final observation. I compliment Grace’s new haircut to which she enthusiastically exclaims, “Thank you! I feel SOOOO much freer and lighter!” as she vigorously tousles her hair before bouncing away toward the approaching administrator who lets us into the auditorium.

The other middle schoolers are already seated, as Grace and the other teachers quickly usher the students in, filling up the rows, wrangling students who attempt to head up the amphitheater style seating to the top back rows. The students appear extra young and tiny in the auditorium that appears to have a capacity of well over 2,000. I watch as Grace and the other chaperones strategically seat themselves throughout the audience at the ends of every other row. The waves of adolescent chatter crashing up and down the rows immediately subside and fade to

silence as the lights dim and the stage light draw our eyes to focus on two actors stage left. They are arguing loudly about the fate of Minnijean; one is portraying the principal of Central High and the other is the president of the NAACP. As the argument continues but at a lower volume, another stage light shifts our attention to a third actor slowly making his way to the edge of the stage, narrating to the audience: “Minnijean has been expelled. Should the other eight students return to Central High School?” He introduces the play and warns the audience that the actors will be using some language that may feel offensive, but explains that they “want to present an honest picture of what happened” in Little Rock, Arkansas.

For the next 50 or so minutes, the 10 actors take turns portraying different characters, using different voices, props, and costumes. At times, they change character right on stage, simply turning around, adding a hat or glasses, and returning within seconds using a different voice. Nearly every student in the audience intently watches each scene play out, and many are leaning forward in their seats. They seem just as enthralled by the multiple character shifts as they are with the familiar story unfolding before them. The reenactments include: Elizabeth Eckford’s powerful silence toward the repeated attempts by the journalist to get a statement when she arrives for the first day of school alone; the meeting between Governor Faubus and President Eisenhower; Alex Wilson being physically harassed and hit with a brick outside of Central High (a scene that draws an audible gasp and wave of teeth-sucking from the area where Grace’s students are seated); and a reenactment of the cafeteria scene that includes the White actors yelling a series of racial epithets and slurs at Minnijean. The students watch this part in complete silence and then break into cheers along with the applauding cafeteria workers when Minnijean pours the chili over the White student’s head. The play is exactly as Grace described, a chance for her students to see a “live” version of some of the scenes from *Eyes on the Prize*.

By the time the play reaches the interactive town hall portion, the energy in the audience is palpable. Once the students are directed to start asking questions, a number of arms shoot into the air.

A White female student from the other middle school poses the first question: “Were there any instances where you felt like life was actually threatened?”

The actress portraying Melba Patillo Beals responds, staying in full character, “Absolutely. Even though we had the soldier escorts and bodyguards, sometimes other students would try to kick us down the stairs or would also follow me into the bathroom and set notebook pages on fire and throw it into my bathroom stall.”

The second question comes from one of Grace’s Black male students: “Did you guys ever just want to leave?” This draws multiple head nods and whispers from some of his classmates, “Riiiiight?”

The actor portraying Ernest Green waits for the whispers to subside, while empathetically locking eyes with the student and some of his impassioned classmates. “We asked ourselves that question every day. We were never threatened like this at our old school. But so many times, parents and letters from across the country would support and encourage us.”

After a few more questions, one of the actors gently reminds the students that they are now in the role of citizens of Little Rock and can continue to ask questions as well as offer some suggestions. More hands reach for the ceiling.

One of Grace’s White female students leans forward with her question directed at the White actress portraying Vice Principal, Mrs. Huckaby. “If you can expel Minnijean, then why not also expel the White students that bullied her?” Applause and snaps follow.



Mrs. Huckaby responds, “We are doing what we can to hold all of the perpetrators of violence responsible.”

Another student calls out from the audience, “How about instead of punishing the White kids, y’all actually teach them?” More applause.

One of Grace’s students whom I recognize as one of the key leaders of mindfulness is on the edge of her seat, reaching her hand toward the stage. The actor portraying Thurgood Marshall makes eye contact with her, smiles, and calls on her, “I think y’all need to assign some colored people [sic] to your school board!”

Smiling, Marshall gently corrects her use of the term *colored people*. “So more diversity and people of color on our school board?” She nods enthusiastically.

Another student calls out, “Yeah, and why not have like twenty-five Black students instead of just nine?”

There are a few more impassioned exchanges between audience members and the actors staying in character. The students pose numerous suggestions around increasing the number of Black students attending Central High, so that the remaining eight students might “feel more support.” While some students in the audience advocate for punitive measures to be taken against the White students perpetrating violence and the passive adult bystanders, more students strongly advocate for “more teaching” and “workshops” for the teachers to help them better support the Black students and educate their White students. The audience seems to overwhelmingly support a model of disciplining to teach rather than disciplining to punish.

One of Grace’s most vocal and energetic light-skinned Black male students exclaims, “You keep saying that you want to help, so just do it! Stop talking about it! Show us! Actions speak louder than words!” This draws loud applause and cheers.

Thurgood Marshall looks proud as he smiles and waits for the cheers to subside. “All right, we have come to the end of our town hall and now let’s put it to a vote. Raise your hand if you think we should hold off until September to have the remaining eight students return.” I count three hands raised. “Okay, now raise your hands for having them return now.” Nearly every hand in the crowd flies up.” The students applaud as the actors take hands and bow.

Now the actors shift out of character and remain on stage to take any final questions from the students. For a few seconds, no one seems to have any questions and then the same young Black girl who suggested adding more representatives of color to the school board directs her question to the White actors. “I was wondering if it was uncomfortable for you to say the word ‘nigger.’” The audience momentarily loses it. One of the White male actors responds, “It’s extremely uncomfortable and, to be honest, sometimes it’s hard to break out of that. It stays with me.” After a fairly uncomfortable silence, another student calls out, “So how did you all prepare for this?” Many of the actors release what sounds like relieved laughter. “We were given LOTS of historical documents. Lots of reading!” One student calls out, “Did y’all watch *Eyes on the Prize*?” A few students laugh and the actors all nod enthusiastically. One actor shares, “Yes, we all did a ton of reading and watched a lot of footage from that time period. We also spent months rehearsing and working with dialect coaches.” As the actors stand up, signaling the closing, the students start to clap and cheer, many screaming out, “Thank youuuuuu!” “Byeeee!” as they begin to crowd the aisles and bustle out of the auditorium and back outside.

During our final interview, Grace is updating me on how excited she is to be reading her students’ names at the eighth grade graduation and why she chooses to end the school year with this play. “Yeah, I realize I don’t get to say their last names that often! So I really want to get it right and they [the students] keep teasing me for taking it so seriously, but I’m like ‘No!!’

Nobody should say your name wrong and it shouldn't just be like, let's accept this Americanization of your name! So yea, any time I see them in the hallway, I totally practice announcing their full name!" She then launches into a number of reasons why she chooses to bring her students to this play year after year:

I think that so much of [their] learning actually happens outside of the classroom, like learning happens everywhere and that there are different types of learners. It's not that you're not interested and curious, but for many students there need to be different ways to access ideas. So, the theater and the live performance is such a great way to help reinforce the content because...and learning the stories of the Little Rock Nine.... I also just think that the actors are great, I love the way that they involve the audience.... Breaking the fourth wall kind of thing and I think that's nice about their piece. I haven't seen the other pieces because this piece just ties so well with the curriculum.... I mean *Eyes on the Prize* is a great primary source, right? But with this play, you actually get to see it and live it. Especially the chili incident, there's just so much to talk about with Little Rock and this particular moment in history. Like, what role should journalists play? What about the choice that students made to go to Central High and even the students at Central High, the choices that they made to be an ally, to help them, to do nothing? All of these! What are choices that different people made? What are choices that the media made? Do you step in and help out? And the choices that leaders made. I think it was good to hear the actors reinforce some of the same language that they had seen on *Eyes on the Prize* and it just brings it to life in a way that also gets the students involved and pushing them to take on the roles of having a say and making choices.

Grace is explicit in conceptualizing the function of taking her students to this play at the end of every school year, an experience that runs parallel with their final projects on various social movements. She expresses her desire to ensure that eighth grade ends on a note of possibility and change, especially following the heavy topics that are explored during the school year. It is important that her students develop a critical awareness of things like systemic racism and the role that these systems play in impacting the lived experiences of "students who were their same age" at a different point in history and how these systems continue to play out today, which is why she included the discussion on Kaepernick.

Grace's emphasis on critically examining the choices and their impacts is clear. Her "greatest hope" and "learning objective" are to offer ways for her students to "make sense of

their various experiences.” She offers an example of how students will often tell stories about being followed in stores and how she wants them to think about what these experiences actually say about our society. “I want them to understand the history of where these dangerous stereotypes come from and that you can name it, define it and how in doing that, there is power in identifying that and not losing hope.” She then recounts the story from 2 years ago about her eighth grade cohort who was responsible for making the school district change Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day. She shares how they teamed up with Indigenous activists from the United American Indians of New England who have long been engaged in the struggle to change the name of the holiday. The organized action took place during her curricular unit entitled “Encounters,” in which she teaches about the initial encounters, invasions, and genocide of Indigenous populations by European colonizers, and she recalls how enraged and passionate her students became. Her students wrote numerous letters to City Council, which led to them presenting before the City Council. Grace tears up as she recalls having one of her few Indigenous students read her letter to the City Council with her classmates standing in solidarity behind her. She smiles proudly saying:

I think experiences like that prove that learning doesn’t only happen in the classroom, but the classroom can be a place that prepares you to identify an issue in your community and then ask “How can we change it?” Like if you can see and affect change, why just read about it? I loved to see that group of students develop such an awareness of City Council and now they’re not afraid to go to City Hall. It’s great to see them empowered and take charge of decisions...so yeah, that’s the stuff I always try to look for.

Grace’s determination to awaken and instill agency in her students is fueled by a sense of courage and fearlessness that I want to learn more about. Appearing somewhat surprised, Grace asks, “Wait, have I not told you about my experience being at the finish line during the Boston Marathon bombing?” I feel my heart stop. For the first time, Grace speaks quietly and slowly as

she recounts the events of that day and the impact that experience has had upon her classroom practice:

Yeah, so I wasn't actually in the race, but was at the finish line for a friend. I was actually there with my best friend who was [pregnant] at the time, so I remember being very concerned about her, which really speaks to that "fight or flight," "friend or befriend" type of thing. I was worried about her when she was the one who actually found me. I know there's video footage of that moment, but I won't watch it. Anyway, she found me and told me to get up and was like "We gotta get out of here!" It was all kind of a blur, but we make it back to the house and I remember looking down and being mad that my favorite jacket was ruined. (now she briefly laughs) And that's when our other friend came up and saw all the blood and realized I had shrapnel in my chest, like you could see the white! It was pretty deep...so they took me to the hospital and I had surgery that evening to remove it...so it [the experience] just pushed me to think about how precious and fragile life can be and forced me to think about timing and urgency in a different way. Like, you make time for the things that are important—like we are making time to show *13th* and I don't if there is pushback. Sure, the field trip is a lot of work and time, but it's worth it... I mean, when it comes to my teaching, I switch things up every year. I never teach anything the same way...but since then [the bombing] I have definitely had a more brazen attitude towards my teaching... There were definitely times before when I would sometimes be like an ostrich in my corner, but now, and especially as a veteran teacher, I realize I have a different voice and a different role that has made me feel more courageous to speak out against things and especially for younger teachers and for my students.

I quietly nod and listen as Grace ends her story of finding her own courage, voice, and agency following her traumatic experience. I listen to her explain how the experience gave her a new sense of purpose, urgency, and fearlessness around her curricular endeavors, as well as her agency as a veteran teacher of color, and her hopes for instilling a similar sense of power and purpose in her students and younger teachers. As we near the end of our time together, Grace reflects:

Yeah, so that is how I try to end each school year. Getting them to think about what the tools for change are because I think it can get really depressing to develop a critical awareness of a society that is so incredibly racist and sexist and violent...so how do we take the time to pause and deal with that? Which is why I have them each choose and study a movement for change as a final project. I want them to identify different approaches and tools for change, so that we can end [the school year] with the idea that YOU can be an agent for change; you use tools for change to make a better world. This is your future. You're in it. You're part of it. So make it happen."

I hold on to Grace a little longer than usual when we say goodbye, thankful for the life she has experienced, the classroom she has cultivated, and her willingness to share so much of it with me.

### **Conclusions**

Visits to Grace’s classroom felt like trips to an interactive history museum that had been carefully curated and guided by an energetic, patient, and compassionate docent. Every stop on Grace’s tours offered highly scaffolded and structured learning opportunities to witness, analyze, and, at times, experience the everyday impacts of structural oppression on human lives. Grace’s curricular moves focused on remixing, restructuring, and remodeling common classroom practices, protocols, and pre-packaged curriculum materials.

Grace assumes the role of a guide, facilitator, and active participant in the constant action that characterizes her classroom. She does not simply recognize the frenzied, scattered energy that her middle school students exude; she engages and leverages it in her curricular endeavors, and often reciprocates their energy with her seasoned, grown-up-but-still-young-at-heart, seemingly boundless levels of enthusiasm. Grace guides her students towards compassion, critical consciousness, and agency through carefully curated materials and strategic, structured moves. Grace’s pedagogical moves and enactments of compassion serve as an important foundation for the authentically caring relationships that she develops with her students. Valenzuela (2010) explicated how “authentic caring” is rooted in relational reciprocity between teachers and students, and a genuine acceptance of students’ backgrounds, values, and contextual experiences. Grace’s demonstrates her care for her students through the curriculum that she enacts—constantly building in opportunities for students to connect what they are studying to their lived experiences and through a number of daily interactions that demonstrate her

willingness to meet her students where they are; affirm their ideas, thoughts, and feelings; and “show them that [she] values what they bring to the table,” which often includes a young lifetime of many painful experiences with various forms of oppression. The daily practice of mindfulness in Grace’s classroom lays an important foundation in developing the capacity to practice compassion for self and for others, as Grace explained its function in her classroom. Grace’s structured and strategic pauses and questions during guided readings and viewings also underscore Grace’s compassion towards her students, as well as her commitment to nurturing compassion within them. Grace moves beyond checking for understanding; she also checks in on students’ emotions, feelings, and reactions to what they are learning along the way. Thus, ensuring a relationship between the curricular content and her students’ lives is an important driver of Grace’s decisions and moves.

Grace is just as purposeful in guiding her students toward critical consciousness. She expresses a fierce commitment to helping her students develop a critical awareness and consciousness of “the embedded nature of racism,” while also awakening and nurturing their agency to transform it. While Grace continues to lead fairly structured learning activities in the lessons that highlight critical consciousness, it is important to note the shifts in Grace’s moves. For instance, the NFL discussion was more student-centered, and while she provided carefully curated images of football players and prompts, she clearly articulated her goal of “providing a space for the balance of voices” to get them “thinking about racism as a system.” Similarly, there was a shift between the viewings of *Eyes on the Prize* and *13th*; rather than having students complete a guided viewing sheet, Grace had them complete self-guided Cornell Notes for *13th* because she wanted them to take ownership of what “pop[ped] up for them” as they watched. Grace thus demonstrates recognition that critical consciousness cannot be taught or given; it

must be awakened and nurtured. The culminating experience of the interactive play *The Nine Who Dared* provided students an opportunity to apply what they had been learning in their classroom, while also exercising agency by having a chance to intervene and participate in the act of social change by offering ideas and solutions.

Grace's curricular and pedagogical moves are shaped by a number of key personal and educative experiences—experiences that have shaped who she is as a person and teacher and, thus, to the lessons she teaches to her students. Grace's stories about the role that key college courses played in nurturing her own critical consciousness about structural racism and oppression are reflected in the documentaries she purposefully curates and the series of questions she thoughtfully prepares for her students. Grace's compassionate sensibility, as well as how compassion manifests through mindfulness and guided questions, are shaped by lessons from her mother. Grace's own sense of agency has been informed in large part by her experience being at the finish line during the Boston Marathon bombing. She cites that experience as a tangible “before” and “after” in her life: her “ostrich in the sand” approach to teaching before with her more recent “brazen” approach to confronting issues of oppression in her curriculum, her school community, and society writ large. Ginwright (2016) defined agency in the context of his radical healing framework as “the individual and collective ability to act, create, and change external and personal issues” (p. 25). With specific regard to young people, Ginwright explicated how “agency compels youth to explore their personal power to transform problems into possibilities” (p. 25). This agency plays out in Grace's classroom through her focus on providing multiple opportunities during her final curricular unit of the school year, which focuses heavily on guiding her students to identify various “tools for change” in both the past and the present, in



order for them to consciously utilize those tools to act upon their world and transform it (Freire, 1979).

Chapter 6 – JAMES—EACH ONE. TEACH ONE. REACH ONE:  
INVESTIGATING AMERICAN IDENTITY AND  
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF LLOYD L. GAINES

I know my students are frustrated, that they are getting sick and tired of it and that's what I wanted—for them to see that racism in our country is stupid, frustrating, and annoying. You never want a topic, especially as serious as racism to feel easy.

-James

**(Im)patience**

The last handful of students trickle into the classroom, the door closing behind them as the slightly muffled bell signals the start of class. The racially diverse—Black, White, Asian and Latinx—mix of students slowly makes their way to their desks, which are arranged in groups of four. Their calm, eleventh grade leisurely energy offers a sharp contrast to the hyper eighth grade exuberance that I observed earlier that day. Their wide array of fashion choices—bright yellow Black Student Union hoodies, short tight skirts over bright leggings, skinny jeans, baggy jeans, piercings, meticulous make-up, school logo sweatpants—exude both an individual and collective sense of comfort and confidence.

The mid-May sunshine pours into the far-right side of the classroom through the wall of windows; the light is uneven due to the trapezoid shape and layout of the room. Below the windows near the back of the room sits a cluster of accent pillows where a student is nestled and asleep. Also, near the back of the room and on the wall opposite the windows, is a long table equipped with four desktop computers, where I am seated with a full view of the classroom. To the right of the computers along the burnt, red-orange cinderblock wall that perfectly matches the floor tiles is a “flag mural.” The mural consists of nearly a hundred 8x11 photos of different people kneeling and raising their fists—the top left corner of the “flag” are nine identical black-and-white photos of Colin Kaepernick.

The front of the classroom houses a large screen against a white cinderblock wall, nestled between two square-shaped whiteboards. On the left whiteboard sits a side profile of an angry-looking Trump facing a sideways-draped American flag. On the second whiteboard sits a pink heart bearing an equal sign against a rainbow backdrop, which sits below a poster of a bright, colorful painting depicting the lynching of a Black man, hanging from a tree surrounded by a group of White men in blue overalls. The explicit use of mainstream U.S. symbols in the décor of the classroom, such as the flag, is peppered with sharp critiques of some of America's most profound contradictions around issues of race and racism: the remixed American "flag mural" with Kaepernick's face replacing the stars and the picture of Trump facing an actual American flag, then a painting of a lynching taking place seem to highlight the persistent racial tensions in the present political climate. Adjacent to the wall where the screen meets the whiteboard is the teacher's desk, which is completely covered with a large printer, piles of books, papers, and laptop. The teacher, James, is seated at the desk, huddled over his laptop as the students start pulling out documents from their backpacks and binders. He perks up at the sound of the rustling papers, smiles, and informs the class that they have 10 minutes before they "share out." The rustling of papers, chairs moving, and chorus of voices both speed up and rise as the groups huddle together in focused preparation.

James makes his way to the middle of the classroom a few minutes later, his energy simultaneously calm and commanding, his walk both light and purposeful. He is comfortably dressed in Nike Cortez shoes, dark blue jeans, and a grey t-shirt with white block letters reading:

First  
I run  
The miles  
Then I teach  
The kids.

He was recently featured in a number of local news stories for his participation in the Boston Marathon alongside a group of 16 other teachers. One of the articles highlighted his love and appreciation for his wife and dog and his affinity for social justice projects and fruit snacks, a fact that I immediately noticed as he is often seen with a light blue pack of Welch's fruit snacks in his hand, while moving around his classroom helping students. Another article featured an interview with James in which he shared his belief that running and history go "hand-in-hand," as he discussed his recognition of a time where he "couldn't jog freely, let alone participate in competitive races" as a Black man—another subtle but potent jab at the racial inequalities and contradictions embedded in U.S. history. The article also highlights James's recent "History Teacher of the Year" award and the fact that he was the "first African American" in the state to ever receive the award.

Although he is in his late 20s, James exudes the wisdom and patience of a seasoned elder. He stands at nearly six feet tall with a medium-length black beard that is just a couple of shades darker than his smooth, deep-brown complexion. He often strokes or scratches his beard when contemplating the answer to a question or gathering his thoughts, a move that further underscores his elder energy wisdom. However, whenever he smiles or laughs, his entire face and being light up, projecting a contagious, youthful energy that is clearly appreciated by the many students who stop by his classroom throughout every single school day to simply say hello, crack a joke, or share a dap and a hug. I can see the exhaustion from both the physical and proverbial marathon that nearly every teacher experiences during this final stretch of the school year quietly hiding behind his eyes. Like all marathons, making it to the finish line requires a delicate balance of both knowing and pushing the limits of one's body's. The marathon of teaching requires the additional step of getting to know and thus being able to push the limits of

one's students, in addition to one's own limits—an important facet of teaching that requires a constant balance of patience and impatience. As James heads into the final lap of the school day, the tone of his voice is soft, urgent, and energetic as he kicks off the “group share-outs” with the question, “Okay, let's start with number two from yesterday: ‘Was this act of imprisoning Japanese Americans a surprising or unsurprising American act?’”

A White male student with long blond hair pulled into a floppy bun immediately responds, “It was totally American.”

James tilts his head as he makes eye contact with this student and asks, “Why was it an American act?”

The student continues:

Because America from the beginning has been pro-White and when it comes to dealing with things that scare them or things that they don't respect, the way they tried to justify this sound a lot like an American decision, like the way they tried to justify slavery. You know, they were saying things like “Oh, the internment camps aren't that bad, they're actually kinda nice, it didn't cost too much money”...so yeah, sounds like an American decision to me.

James nods and looks out across the room. “Anyone disagree?”

An Asian American girl with short hair seated in a group near the back of the room slowly raises her hand. “I would disagree and say that it was un-American, but also unsurprising because this act just goes against America's stated ideals, like America being the land of the free. But it's also not surprising, because it's not like America usually holds to those ideals.”

Crossing his arms and cradling his jaw in the palm of his right hand, James take a few steps towards her group, while asking her to take a few quick intellectual steps back to fill in the background on her reasoning. “What ideals are you talking about?”

She responds, “Like everybody being equal and having equal opportunities and being free to do what you want to.”

James looks around the room before posing. “Where does it say that everyone’s equal?”

A student offers from the front of the room, “Umm. All men are created equal?”

James helps him out a little. “So, Declaration of Independence?”

A few students chime in “Yeah.”

James then pivots back to the content focus. “So how did this legalization of Japanese internment play out? How did it happen? What did you all read about?”

Another White male student seated near the window calls out, “It was an Executive Order by the President.” He looks down at his stack of papers. “President Roosevelt.”

Nodding, James responds, “So Roosevelt made this happen. What wording did he use to justify this imprisonment? What did he use in his Executive Order to describe why this was necessary for our country?”

A few students shuffle through their papers, others look over their peers’ shoulders, while some slouch slightly in their seats waiting for their classmates to respond—a classic high school move. I notice that every time the students answer James’ questions quickly, he responds with additional questions to push their thinking and, at times, around facts and ideas around the contours of American identity and citizenship that are often taken for granted. In this way, his questioning technique doesn’t feel linear; he will push back when needed to make sure that his students fill in the background and blanks on the claims they are making before he moves the conversation forward.

An Indian boy seated in the same group as the Asian American girl who just spoke raises his hand. “He didn’t know to what extent the Japanese were loyal to Japan. So, if they had to pick between Japan and America, they would pick Japan.”

Nodding and then looking around the room, James asks, “So, what’s a loyal American in your opinion? How can someone prove that they are loyal to America? Any examples?” James uses air quotes every time he says the word “loyal.”

After a few seconds, a handful of students call out, “Pledge of Allegiance!”

Glancing quickly at the U.S. flag hanging in the front of the classroom and then back at his students, James responds, “Yes, that’s something that should feel familiar to most of you in this room. Think of the times when you have had to pledge allegiance to a flag? Any other ways of demonstrating your loyalty?”

A Black male seated near the left front of the room smirks and offers, “Standing up for the National Anthem.”

A White girl seated across the room adds, “Following the law and paying taxes.”

There is a prolonged moment of silence as students try to think of additional examples. Standing calmly in the sea of multiracial faces, wrinkled foreheads, and furrowed eyebrows, is James - cool and collected - cradling his jaw in the palm of his hand, as he patiently creates the space for students to process, while simultaneously preparing his next move. As I wait to see where James takes the conversation next, I wonder how each of them have come to understand the making and meaning of American identity and citizenship up until this moment, especially given that they are living and learning in one of the original 13 colonies.

James then offers a different example. “Here’s one many of you have probably heard before...learning English, especially in terms of showing loyalty to a country where English is the dominant language.” A ripple of nods, but no more hands or responses, before James continues, “Here’s another example that I’ve come across in my years of teaching. Having names that people can easily pronounce.”

I notice some students squirming and tilting their heads as James shares this example. I cannot tell if their head tilts indicate curiosity, skepticism, or both, but it is clear that this example has their attention, as most of the previous slouchers are now more alert and sitting up straighter.

There have been many times when I have students from other countries where I look at my roster the first week of class and see their names as something different than what they actually go by. For instance, one kid will go by Alex...or Jake or Lisa. Is it nickname? A middle name? And each of these students, as long as I have been teaching has said, "No, my parents just wanted something easier for people and something that sounded more American." And even when I would try to ask them to teach me how to pronounce the name that's on their birth certificate, they will often just shake their heads and say, "Nah, don't bother. This is easier and it sounds more American." So we have a history in this country of certain guidelines on what it means to be American and then what it means to be a loyal American and folks who stray from that receive judgment... repercussions.

The classroom is momentarily silent again, as James simply looks around the room.

Though James does not pose an explicit question to the class this time, his story highlights the complexity of what it means to be an American. While James is not racing or competing against his students, he is constantly seeking ways to be "one step ahead of them," especially when it comes to the examples that he draws on, many of which he later informs me, he has to "come up with in the moment" based on "where the kids seem to taking the conversation." Thus, while he patiently listens to the ideas and responses offered by his students during whole class discussions like this one, he is also racking his brain in those same moments of silence for a fresh angle or take on the topic that can push his students' limits, thinking and understanding. It is a combination that invokes Freire's (2005) discussion of the necessary tension between patience and impatience as a necessary "fundamental quality" in effective educators. While there are only so many minutes in a class period and sense of painful urgency in the current conversation, I also



notice that James does not rush through the ideas or questions, especially when it seems like his students feel overly confident in providing answers.

James waits a few more seconds before redirecting back to the topic of Japanese American incarceration. “So, this brings us back to what we are focusing on. Why internment camps? Why would we decide to put individuals inside camps during the same war that we were fighting against another country who were doing their own imprisonment, which we refer to as concentration camps? Why would we have internment camps for these Japanese Americans?” More silence from the students before James pushes the questions a bit further. “Why not just prisons? Or why didn’t the U.S. government kill them?”

A White male student immediately jumps in, “Well, they’re still American citizens, so maybe they didn’t want to murder their own kind?” He trails off towards the end as his statement becomes a question.

James responds, “Okay. Let’s turn back to your documents. How did they describe these internment camps?”

The same student responds, “It’s like they were trying to make them sound like they were comfortable...baseball fields and good food. Things like that.”

Nodding, James responds, “Okay, yeah, that sounds somewhat relaxing...making racism relaxing.” His sarcasm draws a few nervous giggles.

An Indian student jumps in. “It’s like they were trying to show the general population that they weren’t doing anything really bad to the people in the camps and that they had to do this for the general safety of the country.”

A Latinx girl seated in a group near the front looks up from her documents and offers, “Yeah, one document even compared the internment camps to the concentration camps and list

specific comparisons and says they [Japanese internment camps] were in ‘nice wooden buildings’ with ‘plenty of food.’ It’s like the camps here were good in comparison to the Nazi camps.”

Glancing at the clock, James poses another question:

What’s the point in understanding and learning about this right now? Because I’ve said this so many times in a history class: that it’s very easy to teach students anything in a history textbook to do well on a multiple-choice test, to do well on a DBQ, so you can get through your MCAS...so what’s the point? Why is it helpful for you all, as teenagers, to know what exactly the U.S. did to its own citizens during war time? How is that helpful to anyone in this room?

The same young Black male who spoke earlier about the National Anthem quietly but immediately responds, “Umm, ‘cause it can happen today. It already has. Right after 9/11. The Patriot Act. Muslims were taken out of their homes without any warning, just like the Japanese.” Nodding, James adds, “And that was legalized. The Patriot Act. It stretched the powers of the government. Great. Why else is this relevant in terms of understanding what happened to Japanese Americans?”

The young White male with the floppy bun raises his hand and shares, “I mean, it’s just genuinely good to know what we did to one group of people so we can see when it starts to happen again. Like when Trump says he’s going to mark all Muslims. That seems pretty close... So hopefully we can choose a better option than internment camps.”

Shaking his head, the same Black male jumps right back in, this time in a more exasperated tone:

Except that when it comes to these things...it just seems like each time, it keeps happening, but under a different name until people say it’s horrible. So then it just changes names and then...more horrible, heinous things. I feel like this country keeps trying to one up itself on these things that we do to people in our country each time, just under different names.

James explains that he sees his history classroom as a place to “provide the historical contexts of a different era” and works to have his students “apply what they are learning to the current moment,” and that he has “been very intentional about focusing on elements of race as backdrop” following the election of Trump. He also expresses the increased sense of urgency he has felt in having “race a backdrop” for a study of the past since the election. James looks around the room before throwing in the next question, “So I’m going to pose one last question and this time, I just want to see a show of hands. And I want you to think about it before you respond. Is racism illegal in this country? If you think racism is illegal in this country, raise your hand.”

No one raises their hand. I notice a wave of perplexed glances and looks across the students’ faces.

James poses the question again, “Is racism illegal in this country?”

A young White male seated near the middle of the room asks, “Well, what do you qualify as racism?”

Shaking his head, James responds, “If you are not sure how to respond, do not raise your hand. If you’re stuck on definition, don’t raise your hand. I’m asking twenty-three young people: Is racism illegal in this country?”

Students look around the room at each other, at me, and then back James, as if they are searching for clues as to how to respond, but no one raises a hand.

James lets the silence fester a bit before switching gears, “Okay, second question: Is racism LEGAL in this country? Raise your hand if you think racism IS legal in this country.” He places extra emphasis on “legal” each time he says it.

This time, six hands slowly go up. James counts them out loud while asking everyone to look around. He thanks the students before wrapping up class.

So let me put this in context. I asked two questions in 2018 about racism in a country that is so connected to racism and that even teaches about racism in elementary schools. Two questions. What does it say when I pose these two questions and we couldn't get everyone to agree? What does that say about our country?

I see a glimmer flash across James' eyes as he scans the room of perplexed, frustrated, somber and curious faces. Whether his final questions are meant to be rhetorical, they are met with a palpably uncomfortable silence.

In contrast to the current student teachers with whom I work, who often refer back to a lesson plan covered in notes, highlights, and post-its while teaching, I observe James respond directly to each student's idea and, at times, pause before guiding the conversation in a different direction with examples or questions that are connected to or inspired by what he learns through student responses. Once James steps away from his desk, he rarely returns until the class is over. He has described his pedagogy as very "anti-checklist" because he feels that is what many of his students have become accustomed to, and views that as especially detrimental to the ways in which they think they understand or "already know" about issues of race and racism. Instead, James explains his approach as always "looking for a way to present the material differently, rather than following a checklist."

In his approach to teaching about issues of race and racism through U.S. history, James has often alluded to what he calls a "trend" or "pattern" that he has encountered in this part of New England among multiracial student populations, and many of his White students in particular, with whom he has worked over the past 7 years. He explains how many of them feel like they "already get it" and that many of them have learned about things like "White privilege" and "race," in ways that lead them to immediately view topics of race as "repetitive." As such, James has described that his challenge is to "figure out how to approach these topics in a way that makes them [his students] feel like they're learning something new and that what they think

they already know and the skills that they come with are being challenged.” Most importantly for James, he wants them to develop an “empathetic lens” about the very issues that he feels so many of them have “become numb to.” While this is an issue he explains he mostly faces with his White students, he shares that some of his students of color have also shown signs of “fatigue” and “numbness” with engaging topics of race and racism in his classroom.

James reiterates his constant quest to approach topics of race differently because he says that “some students feel like the content is repetitive” and while “they [his students] may not always know a particular date or person or event...many of them feel like they can say a lot about race or class.” While James has noticed that many of his students have alluded to previous learning on issues of race, he feels strongly that much of their knowledge is “shallow” and barely scratches the surface of the deeper roots of structural inequities that he seeks to interrogate in his classroom. As such, James expresses:

I’ve always believed as educators, if we want to teach something, we need embed our conversations and learning into the environment that we’re in, so that maybe then we can all learn something new...that their knowledge and skill set is being challenged...and in order to prevent that numbness, it has to be analyzed and dissected, there has to be agency because the moment you ignore agency, then it’s just another school shooting, it’s just another Black person shot on video...just another then another, as opposed to being part of a longer narrative of who we are as a country, who we are as people...still dealing with the sins and systems and if we can just figure out how to dissect it and empathize with it, maybe these conversations wouldn’t be repeated, but I don’t think we are there yet.

Moreover, while I have observed James exercise a tempered patience with his individual students as they work to think through, question, and grapple with difficult questions about race and racism within their society, especially with his questioning technique, he also demonstrates a strong stance of impatience toward the dominant curricular approaches to issues of race among his fellow secondary social studies and other humanities teachers.

In reflecting on some of his faculty meetings during the fall semester, James expresses the frustration he felt in discussing curricular approaches to teaching about Charlottesville following the 2017 killing of Heather Heyer at the counter-protest against the Unite the Right rallies that were taking place in Charlottesville, Virginia. He recalls the district response following the events that transpired in Charlottesville over the summer; there was a request for sixth to twelfth grade social studies teachers to implement lessons from the Facing History curriculum about the Confederate statues and how there were a “bunch of guided questions” and what James perceived to be “roundabout ways” of teaching young people to historicize and contextualize the events that unfolded in Charlottesville over the summer.

James shakes his head vehemently as he reenacts his response at the meeting:

I remember just looking around (he dramatically turns his body in several directions as he tells the story) and just feeling so confused! And finally I just couldn't take it anymore. I raised my hand said, “Why are we spending so much time on this when we know what it is! Why not just say in the first two minutes that this is White supremacy? And then we can spend the next of our seventy-eight minutes trying to figure out ways to prevent this from happening again.” But hey, it was just a microcosm of what this country does so well.... So that first meeting just really threw me off and just set the tone. I knew I was going to do things [in my classroom] that may go against the grain.

The “grain” in this case was the school district asking social studies teachers to implement lessons about Charlottesville, but through a “roundabout” approach, while James was adamant about taking a direct approach that explicitly named and interrogated the historic and contemporary function and embedded nature of White supremacy in Charlottesville specifically and the United States at large.

There is a tangible combination of frustration and resolve in James's voice as he speaks; he never raises his voice but he speeds up, acts out scenes, and gestures with his hands when emphasizing key words or points. In this case, he was clear and assertive when discussing the importance of naming “White supremacy” explicitly. He is also alluding to a problematic trend

across secondary social studies classrooms: the persistent avoidance on the part of a predominantly White secondary social studies teaching force to teach and speak explicitly about issues of race and racism with an increasingly diverse population of students. James is also explicit in naming the ways in which his positionality and experiences as a Black man bearing witness to the profound levels of state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies fuel his pedagogical approach. In particular, he expresses the visceral pain and fear he experienced during the week in which both Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were murdered by the police:

I can't quite pinpoint it and it was just scary more so than anything in my life...with those two [Sterling and Castile] in particular, so since then I've just felt this sense of urgency to teach as long and as fast as possible...before...because...there's a chance that my time might be done. So, I want help young people and adults to create an empathetic place...and I think the best way to do that is to confront the patterns, confront the pain and work collectively towards fixing that...because nothing else makes sense outside of doing that.

James's reflections about the impact of Sterling's and Castile's death upon his own approach to life and teaching offer a sobering context to what I see, hear, feel, and sense during my observations of and interviews with him. He has the ability to teach and speak about some of the most atrocious violences against humanity in a consistently, soft, soothing tone, while conveying the terror of the topics through carefully chosen words, phrases, and sharp glances laced with unmistakable flashes of resistance in his eyes. Freire (1998) argued that "patience alone may bring the educator to a position of resignation, of permissiveness, that denies the educator's democratic dream," while "impatience alone may lead the educator to blind activism, to action for its own sake, to a practice that does not respect the necessary relationship between tactics and strategy" (p. 80). He asserted that effective educators "must live and work impatiently patiently, never surrendering entirely to either" (p. 81). James's impatience with the injustices that permeate U.S. history and contemporary society inform the types of curricular topics and

questions that James puts before his students. While it rarely feels like he is rushing his students, there is also an unmistakable underlying urgent current that drives the teaching and learning taking place in James's classroom. In sharing some of his key learning and life objectives for his students, James explains:

As their teacher, I'm trying to figure out how to instill a sense of urgency in them and then as adults to create an environment where complacency is no longer an option and to realize that even the progress that has taken place in our country, well, it should have never happened the way that it did. My hope is for them to realize that these injustices shouldn't even be issues in the first place. So how do I instill in my students that sense of equity? A huge role that I have is teaching them about history and the patterns that exist, teaching them why it's important to reverse things like racism and not just tolerate it, but to actually eradicate it forever.

James speaks of the necessary eradication of racism with a combined sense of matter-of-fact calmness and terrified, unsure urgency. As he seeks to "instill a sense of urgency" in his students so that they might "create an environment where complacency is no longer an option," he is also teaching his students the importance of being impatient with injustice, an impatience that fuels an urgency towards action and change.

### **Informed Empathy**

The following Friday, James is introducing the final "Cold Case" project that his eleventh grade U.S. history class will be working on for the last month of school. He sees this cold case investigation as an opportunity to develop a deeper "empathy" in his students "towards the Civil Rights Movement," which he feels is often "watered down" and "reduced" to what he describes as superficial curricular treatments that fail to address how "far back" the "systemic issues in our country go." It is the Friday before prom and while the dominant energy in the air is excited anticipation, there is also a solid dose of mild irritation and apathy. James navigates the pre-prom energy and works to bridge what they have been learning about various policies, events, and changes over the course of the 1930s and 1940s to his project introduction. Today, he is dressed



in a bright red Black Lives Matter hoodie, dark blue jeans, and his usual Nike Cortez sneakers. He informs his students that they will start working on their cold case project starting on Monday. Then, he asks his students to take out their cell phones and proceeds to take them through an interesting “hook” for this final project kick-off.

“Folks, I want you to take out your cell phones and Google image search ‘Frederick Douglass’.”

Most of the students take less than 15 seconds to complete the task.

James continues, “Cool. After you have searched Frederick Douglass, I want you to now look up ‘Nat Turner.’ Same thing. Google image search.”

Another 15 seconds go by. This time, there are a few scattered “Whoa’s” throughout the room and a few students raise their hands. Shaking his head, James says, “In a minute. One more. All right, lastly I want you to look up this man, Denmark Vesey,” and proceeds to write “Denmark Vesey” on the whiteboard.

This time, more ripples of reactions from students. “Wait, what?!” “No. How?” “What the hell?” “Whoa.” In a Google image search for each of these men, the following image appears within the top few images of each:



*Figure 12.* Frederick Douglass

James jumps right in.

Three individuals. No relation. All African American. But, as you have seen, when you conduct a Google image search, you probably noticed a picture that they share. How is that possible? Last year, my U.S. history class made a research documentary where we tried to figure out how it was possible that these three Black men with no relation to one another, who never met each other, but still often share the same picture. And not just in articles, but on websites, tour sites, publications and so forth without anyone realizing it. So I'm going to show you their final product and tell you how this ties into your cold case. The only difference between what they did and what you are going to do is that *YOURS* is centered on a case that hasn't been solved yet, not even by the FBI and theirs was really just people essentially being lazy.

The interest and curiosity in the air has all but replaced, at least for the moment, the previous and seemingly impenetrable pre-prom fog.

The 13-minute documentary features students contacting a number of websites that utilize the image to portray Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, or Denmark Vesey, peppered with clips of Obama speaking, Ted Talks about the humanity necessary for truth seeking, film clips, images of primary sources, and numerous clips of interviews and research conducted by the students. The editing and quality are both engaging and impressive. Nearly every student is watching intently. The documentary concludes with examples of websites that have either taken down the image completely or include the image with the caption "May or may not be Denmark Vesey. Some sources say yes and some sources assert that this is Frederick Douglass. This author does not know which is correct." As I watch the documentary alongside the class, I watch their interest grow. I also notice that the students on the screen are both relatable and reflective of the students watching; they are racially diverse, many of them are wearing New England sports team hats and hoodies and working with the same teacher standing before them.

Teachers often save the work of previous students to offer as "exemplars" for their current students on how the task or assignment at hand can be completed. James is taking this strategy up a notch by introducing this year's final project with an original documentary completed exactly a year before. Similar to last year's project, this cold case investigation will

also culminate with the making of a short documentary featuring their work. Once the documentary concludes, James spends very little time going in depth about the previous project; he focuses on how incredibly proud he is of what his students were able to accomplish and reviews they were able to get websites to pull the photo or make corrections.

Next, James dives into the focus of this year's final project: the disappearance of Lloyd L. Gaines. He pulls up a photo of Lloyd Gaines on the screen as he begins to provide the background story. He tells his students:

Gaines was an individual who wanted to go to law school, but couldn't because his race, racism and Jim Crow prevented him from being able to do so. He applied to the law school at the University of Missouri and was denied because he was Black. So, he took his case all the way to the Supreme Court and argued that it was illegal to not offer him an alternative for school. He won. And then, in those few weeks in 1939, he disappeared. We don't know what happened to him. FBI tried to investigate, but ended up closing the case. A few years ago, the University of Missouri offered to give Mr. Gaines his degree. So, as a class, you are going to somehow figure out or come close to figuring out what happened to this man and how his race, the politics of this country, all played a role in having this man disappear without anyone knowing what happened to him.

A few students jump right in with questions and thoughts, "So, did they uphold his case?"

Another student looks up from his phone, "Well according to Google, it says he died on March 29th."

James responds, "March 29th is the day he disappeared. They never found a body." He looks at the clock and sees that they only have a few minutes left.

All right, so on Monday, you all will receive your lovely packets. You'll also get a media release form because I'm going to be documenting what you are saying and doing. And remember! All of this is tied to our understanding of how race, how politics and how education play a role in stopping injustices that should never take place in this country. Why are we doing this? Aside from the fact that it will be fascinating and exciting if we can pull this off, but more importantly it's for you, as students to add context as to who we are as a country...with the hope that if we can make more people aware of who we are, then we can reverse, change, stop certain elements that you all have identified as continuing to repeat in our country. So, that's what we are going to be working on.

I see the fatigue cascade down James's face and body as we sit down for his weekly interview on a late Friday afternoon. It usually takes us about 15 minutes to fully dive into our conversations due to the endless parade of students who stop by his classroom with everything from questions to quick hugs and also plates of food and baked goods. I watch as James reluctantly locks and closes his door and then breathes a sigh of relief while he takes a few minutes to devour the slices of pizza one of his students has just dropped off. James's fatigue is a familiar one among many teachers who invest in the lives of their students beyond the curriculum they enact. Cultivating and sustaining relationships with young people require a tremendous amount of emotional labor, a key facet of teachers' work that is rarely recognized in formal evaluations of teacher practice. For teachers of color specifically, this fatigue becomes more acute. Pour-Khorshid's (2018) research highlighted the added stresses and burdens experienced by teachers of color seeking to engage in humanizing praxes within a historically White dominant system that not only privileges White, middle-class, and capitalist values, but actively denigrates the lives, literacies, and community cultural wealth being brought into schools by critically conscious educators of color, and specifically educators of color who center issues of oppression within their curriculum—a pedagogical feature that often leads to the cultivation of trust among vulnerable student populations.

Between bites of pizza, James perks up as he discusses his goals for the Lloyd Gaines project. James smiles as he describes noticing the immediate “frustration” expressed by his students as they began to learn about the case, especially since it is a case that has never been solved. He explains how he wants them to experience having to “dig and dig and dig and question and annotate” and to realize that “sometimes you're working without as many resources in the first place so that makes it tricky and when you have racism involved, it just makes it even

more frustrating because some of the students already said they don't have enough information." Building frustration in his students is an important step in interrupting the "numbness" he has often alluded to noticing in their affect towards lessons on race, as well as an intentional move on his part towards cultivating empathy in his students. James provides additional context and some of his key learning objectives for the final cold case project on the disappearance of Lloyd Gaines.

This project has them focused on the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s whether it's the actual...or various components. Whether it's the FBI, Jim Crow...um, so try to understand what the American climate was during those decades while looking through all of that in a 21st century modern lens. And it was important to put all that and the context and also the way that especially in American schools that the Civil Rights Movement is confined to like the 30s to 60s, and trying for them to understand that...so I try to break it down for them that the Civil Rights Movement probably started the first time a Black toe stepped foot onto this soil or the first time they went to the African countries and...touched a Black body or was trying to figure out...or the moment someone thought that this was a good idea to enslave humans, that's when the Civil Rights Movement happened. And it's important for them to realize that that case embodies that systemic narrative. That is not just something that happened in 1939, it's something that fits with the 40s, 50s, 60s. It's kind of...a global thing. So I think, for them, it's showing that race and racism does not have a timestamp.

His brow furrows as he explains the importance of what this case can represent and teach his students. "We should never accept any cold cases tied to Civil Rights, regardless of how it ended, they should always be pursued.... We should always be furious about our past, so it was great to see their [initial] frustrations because already this case doesn't make sense to them and really, it shouldn't make sense to anybody and that's the real problem." For James, while their frustration towards the case is not the same as his own, their initial feelings of frustration offer a foundation on which James can begin to nurture a deeper understanding of the frustration fueled and informed the Civil Rights Movement. Ladson-Billings (2006) describes informed empathy as a position that moves beyond sympathy in that it is an ability to feel with, rather than feel for. While she is referring to the position of teachers, I see James planting seeds of informed empathy

in that he wants his students to experience the frustration that living with racism engenders, and in this specific instance, he wants them expose them to that frustration through the story of an individual.

James also sees this project as an opportunity for his students to feel the weight and importance of personal narratives and specifically, Black narratives within the context of U.S. history. James's approach to this final project provides an opportunity for his students to learn about larger historical phenomena and events through the experiences of an individual and how that individual confronted, navigated, and responded to systems of oppression, power, and privilege. He wants his students to learn "that the benefit of the doubt is not given to Black people, especially in a historical context." In this way, James is providing a face, a life, a struggle and a story against the backdrop of historical oppression in America in his efforts to nurture a more informed empathy in his students. For James, he hopes that studying the Lloyd Gaines story will help his students develop an understanding of "how important it is for folks who are part of a marginalized group to have their story...because one of the worst things that can happen in history is if the story is erased or falsely remembered."

In the introduction to *A Different Mirror*, Takaki (2008) explained the significance and "worthiness" of centering stories of the people of multicultural America: "Indeed, the accounts given by the people in this book vibrantly recreate moments in history, capturing the complexity of human emotions and thoughts. They also provide the authenticity of experience" (p. 18). James's curricular decision to study the systemic impacts of racism through the story of Lloyd Gaines offers the "authenticity" of one's direct experience with systemic racism in his quest to attend law school. While many of my own former middle and high school students were often able to learn, memorize, and/or grasp conceptual knowledge related to issue of racism,

segregation, and oppression throughout history, it was most often the exposure to personal stories via journal entries, diaries, poems, letters, or biographies that resonated most deeply with their learning and allowed them to opportunity to feel a connection to past and present lived experiences. After all, studying systems, policies and practices absent of the humans who create, inhabit, challenge and destroy them, distances the humanity, and chance to empathize, from the course of study. Empathy is difficult to experience without human connection; thus, I see James's approach with centering Lloyd Gaines' narrative as an opportunity to connect with his story and perhaps, consider and feel the impact of racism through a different lens.

When explaining how he came to choose to focus on Lloyd Gaines, James references his work on last year's research project on Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and Denmark Vesey and discusses his hopes that his students could "dive into a mystery centered on race so that they could learn to humanize individuals worthy of being distinguished." Recalling the experience of last year's project, James's facial expression falls slightly and his voice lowers, "It was just so troubling to think about how many individuals left this earth or even continue to walk amongst us with false knowledge and that these men never got to have their own profile because they were Black, so I just knew in planning for this school year that I wanted my students to have an experience like that again." He wants his students this year to have a similar experience of recognizing the impact of silencing or erasing one's story and feeling committed to transforming the practices that make this type of dehumanization possible.

The following Monday, James distributes the packet of documents that he has curated for his students, which features a photo of Lloyd L. Gaines on the cover page, followed by his words on the back, "I didn't start the noise. The University officials started it. If they had admitted me, no one would have known about it. There would have been no worldwide publicity attached to

my name.” The next page features the following “Message to Students” which James begins to read out loud as he slowly paces around the room. As he reads aloud, most, though not all, of the students are following along. Some have already begun flipping through the packet. There is a mix of facial expressions around the room as he continues to read, expressions that range from curiosity and exasperation to excitement and interest to apathy. As if sensing or tuning into the waning energy he notices, James stops pacing and reads the last few lines with a stronger tone, inflection, and long pauses in between sentences. Now, all eyes leave the packet and fixate on James standing in the middle of the room.

“His story illustrates the psychology and rewards, but also the costs—in inciting hatred and violence—of fighting racism. The battle against Jim Crow has still not been won, which makes it critical that the full history of segregation and the Great Migration be told.” He pauses to look around the room before continuing. “Those stories are crucial for moving toward a more racially just America. What happened to Lloyd Gaines is a mystery worth resolving. And in the meantime, his memory should be revived.... And that is where you all come in.” James takes his time as he reads, conveying a strong sense of painful emotion. As he has explained to me before and continues to share in our subsequent conversations, “one of the most challenging roadblocks for a history teacher is helping individuals empathize with certain elements from the past because we can’t recreate what happened, so finding ways to help them empathize with what we are studying and being able to connect to the present day is always the huge goal.” In some sense, James’s tone and tenor makes the story of Lloyd Gaines feel deeply personal to him. In this way, James is doing more than demonstrating a passion for the subject that he teaches; he is expressing and modeling his concern and care for the humanity of the person they are studying.



## MESSAGE TO STUDENTS

This investigation centers on resolving the end story of Lloyd Gaines.

Did he vanish because he and his family were threatened?  
Was he bribed to abandon his plans?  
Did the pressures of fighting his case overwhelm him?  
Was he so traumatized that he committed suicide?  
Did racists murder him?  
Was he murdered due to an unrelated reason from the case/his race?  
Did he die via natural causes, or accident?  
Did he go into hiding in (or out) of this country?  
...is he, perhaps, an 107 year-old-man living today?

There is evidence for all these theories, but the case has never been solved, or even seriously investigated, despite occasional pleas to the FBI by the NAACP and others. Not only did this legal trailblazer vanish, but the extraordinary story of his life and groundbreaking efforts also have been largely overlooked.

During the Great Depression, African Americans were hit particularly hard. The United States was gripped by economic destitution and Jim Crow policies that reflected the nation's apartheid system. Sanctioned by the Supreme Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, blacks endured a renewed servitude where separate facilities rarely existed and certainly were not equal. Seeking relief, many African Americans in the South joined the Great Migration north. Many held out great hopes but also suffered great disappointments.

*Plessy's* official segregation was eventually overruled by the 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. But that dramatic reversal was not imposed overnight. Rather, it was the result of a long-term legal strategy launched in the 1930s by the brilliant NAACP attorney Charles Houston and the attorney (and future Supreme Court justice) Thurgood Marshall. They sought to wear down segregation by making it too expensive to provide even the semblance of real equality.

The story of *Brown* is well known. But it has overshadowed the pioneering cases and actors that were its indispensable precursors. Lloyd Gaines was essential to the legal strategy launched nearly 20 years earlier that targeted higher education overall and legal education in particular.

The 2007 *Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act* asked the FBI to investigate unsolved civil rights era crimes and held out hopes of justice for past victims of racial violence.

Is his fate also being overlooked? Or will authorities finally launch a serious investigation?

His story illustrates the psychology and rewards but also the costs — in inciting hatred and violence — of fighting racism. The battle against Jim Crow has still not been won, which makes it critical that the full history of segregation and the Great Migration be told.

Those stories are crucial for moving toward a more racially just America.

What happened to Lloyd Gaines is a mystery worth resolving.

And in the meantime, his memory should be revived.

And that is where you all come in.

Figure 13. Message to students

For James, helping his students develop empathy relies heavily on his ability as their history teacher to provide the “background, history and context” of these “systemic layers and divisions” in order to help them better understand the various forms of “violence and suffering” that result from these divisions. James attributes his learning, beliefs, and approaches to developing empathy in both himself and his students to his family and specifically his parents. He explains how his parents “always taught us to try to be good people, to help each other, to

help individuals and to just be grateful.” Both of his parents immigrated from Ghana and James shares about his experiences growing up in a “lower middle-class household in Alexandria, Virginia,” where “everyone [referring to his siblings] worked and there weren’t gender roles, so we all cleaned, so that played a huge role in how I came to understand things like equality or inequity.” He explains how it felt “strange” when he began to encounter the enactment and imposition of “gender roles and expectations” outside of the house where he grew up. He also attributes his lessons in empathy to the Christian faith within which he and his siblings were raised, which taught him to “see and seek the goodness in people,” within and in spite of the “layers upon layers of systems and divisions.”

James wants to support his students in “trying to understand why people are the way they are,” especially in the present political context, by being intentional in “focusing on elements of race as a backdrop.” Investigating the disappearance of Lloyd Gaines within and against this historical racial backdrop offers his students an opportunity to pose and grapple with questions about the role and function of racism in the known experiences and mysterious disappearance of Lloyd Gaines. As such, he uses the following “Focus Questions” to guide his students’ investigation and work for the final project:

1. *How does Lloyd L. Gaines story (Supreme Court case, and cold case) offer an important piece in educating on American racism?*
2. *Why should this specific cold case be officially reopened?*

The following week, the students are working in small groups of four or five and making their way through the packet of sources, which include a few news articles providing details about Lloyd Gaines's background, court case, disappearance, and then petitions to reopen his case, his final letter to his mother, his case file, details about the honorary law degree that he received posthumously in 2006 from the University of Missouri, a source about the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crimes Reauthorization Act that was first passed in 2007, and a timeline of "Milestones in African American Education" that does not include the Lloyd Gaines landmark case. The students are tasked with "annotating each document," which James views as one of their most "meaningful" assignments because it gives him an opportunity to "see what they were thinking as they read and what kinds of questions were going through their heads." Students are also encouraged to engage in further research via the internet and school library. Each student will ultimately submit a 3- to 4-page analysis in response to the two focus questions and complete a final reflection. As a class, the students are responsible for submitting a letter to the FBI and filing a "Missing Persons Report" for Lloyd L. Gaines. James also notes "participation in the class documentary" as part of their final "class grade."

The energy in the room is high as James makes his way to each group, often pulling out his iPhone to film, take photos, and zoom into their annotations. One of the groups is developing a theory that the University of Missouri played a significant role in his disappearance. The group seated nearest to me feels strongly that the public nature and pressure of the case caused significant mental health issues that led Lloyd Gaines to commit suicide. Another group believes that he "ran away to Mexico" to escape the pressure of the case. One group is noting all of his

last-known locations and plugging them into Google maps on their phones to trace his final steps. The one thing I hear James repeat at least five times to more than one group is the fact that Lloyd Gaines was Black. Each time he reminds a student or a group of students of this fact, both he and students share a moment of visible frustration. Another source of frustration for the students is the “lack” of additional sources of information—that what they have in their packets and what they have found online are still insufficient.

In reflecting on the progress of the project, James expresses the satisfaction he is experiencing with his students’ various feelings of “frustration.” He explains how many of his students have approached him saying “they don’t have enough information” and how he reminds them that their “job” as “scholars and historians is to dig and dig and dig, then question, annotate more and keep digging.” In explaining the difference between his frustration and that of his students, James explains how he has had to remind some of his students more than once of the implications of Lloyd Gaines’s race when they were positing theories about his “running away to New York or to Mexico City.” He recalls how some of his students were failing to “factor in his race and the fact that he was Black” and, as such, “traveling was actually incredibly dangerous for him in 1939.” I can see the frustration brewing in James again as he struggles to reflect on how he might go about helping young people not only simply be able to identify and regurgitate the racialized realities that Lloyd Gaines was forced to confront and navigate, but also “empathize” with the consequences of those realities upon his lived experience. He continues:

I think this case highlights just how systemic and embedded racism has been and continues to be...and I know they’re getting frustrated, at times they just feel sick and tired of it and that’s what I wanted. I wanted them to see that racism in our country is stupid, frustrating and annoying. You never want a topic, especially as serious as racism to feel easy. So I think it’s been helpful for their learning to pursue it in this way because the truth is, I don’t have the answer! So, if they don’t find it, I can’t just reveal something at the end for them. There’s no credit roll or big reveal at the end of this. Maybe there’s

not a happy ending or maybe there's no ending at all and that's frustrating... and that, right there, in many ways is how racism works in this country. It just won't go away.

The building of the students' frustration with this project continues to play an important role in the development of their empathy for the realities with which Lloyd Gaines was forced to contend. As James mentioned numerous times, he wants his students to develop an understanding and critique of racism that extends beyond the superficial definitions and treatments that many of his students arrive with in his classroom; he wants them to recognize and experience the frustration that accompanies the experience of racism. It is significant that James purposefully selected an unsolved cold case for his final project; he is literally running alongside his students toward an unpredictable conclusion, and they experience different types of frustration along the way. In this way, the case itself, and the frustration it engenders, function as a powerful metaphors for the proverbial cold case of racism in the United States.

The ways that James describes both his and his students' sentiments and experiences throughout the project aligns with Ladson-Billings' (2008) discussion of how culturally relevant teachers think about social contexts and about their students and communicate the possibilities they see in them. With regard to how teachers recognize social contexts, Ladson-Billings explained how culturally relevant teachers recognize the deeply embedded "inequities" in society and view their work as equipping students to combat that inequity while they view their students in relationship to a "continuum of struggle—past, present and future" (p. 30). When James first introduced the project, he immediately received some pushback from his students. He had students ask, "Well, if the FBI couldn't solve it, then why would we?" Without hesitation, James expressed his belief in their capacity as critical thinkers to approach this cold case with "fresh eyes" and possibly catch something "they might have missed," but he does not paint a false picture of the structural realities and inequities surrounding the case. He repeatedly makes it a

point to remind his students about the racial climate of the United States in 1939, and specifically in a state like Missouri. As such, he is excited to have a historian and professor at Washington University in St. Louis, Dr. Vernon Mitchell, Skype into his class the following week in the hope that he can provide additional details, background, and context for the Lloyd Gaines case and story. Finally, James does not shy away from expressing his own emotions and frustrations with the case—and encourages his students to do and feel the same, thus embodying a position of informed empathy in which he feels *with*, rather than feels *for*, his students.

### **Each One, Teach One.**

James is light on his feet today as he records updates from each group’s findings thus far on the white board in the front of the room with a bright orange dry-erase marker. Dressed in a baby-blue “Love is Legal” t-shirt and brown pants, the colors of James’s outfit complement the splashes of sunshine pouring into the room as we inch towards summer. I can sense his excitement for today’s virtual guest lecture from Dr. Vernon Mitchell, as James has expressed his beliefs in “expanding the lessons and learning outside of the classroom” and “making history feel more relevant,” and how having Dr. Mitchell join the class might inspire “additional motivation” and lend “even more credibility” to the important work in which they are collectively engaging. One of the key overarching goals of James’s work is to always engage in the application, sharing, and dissemination of education and knowledge beyond the walls of his classroom, and this ethos deeply informs the lessons he develops and enacts in his classroom. He explains that as being the key reason why he “didn’t want to just have his students complete an eight- to ten-page research paper to just submit and be done with it.” Instead, he conveys an unwavering belief that “there is so much power in being able to share information, in being able to fact check with experts [like Dr. Mitchell], to be able to gain credibility in our research and to

encourage others to follow suit.” Little wonder, then, that I have yet to observe James’s students engaging in individual work.

The desks in his classroom are always arranged in small groups or concentric semi-circles, but never in rows. Small-group and whole-class discussions are staples in this classroom, and while each student is responsible for submitting individual, annotated packets and analyses, all of the work is being completed in small groups. James is a “huge fan of telling students that when you learn something new and powerful that could be helpful for other individuals, don’t just hold that in your heads to get a good grade and move forward. Use it to help and make change. Create something and share it out to the world.” James’s belief in the responsibility of teachers and students to ensure that the learning is shared beyond the classroom informs another key feature of his practice that mirrors the African American proverb “Each one, teach one,” which originated in the antebellum period of the United States in response to the anti-literacy laws directed at enslaved people of African descent. The phrase referred to the responsibility of enslaved Africans who learned to read and write to then teach someone else. This responsibility also required creativity in finding ways to teach within and in spite of a system that criminalized the teaching, learning, and liberation of Black bodies and minds. James’s commitment to turning his final research projects that center around the counternarratives of Black lives into documentaries that can be shared widely on social media is a modern-day manifestation of this practice.

Back in his classroom, James continues to record notes from each of the groups so that everyone can gain a “big-picture view” of the different angles that each group is taking towards this investigation. The group seated near the front of the room is sharing their findings from the admissions office at the University of Missouri. A young Latinx girl with dark brown hair shares,

“So far, we were able to trace the last name of the registrar, Mr. Canada, and we found out that he was not the individual responsible for refusing Gaines’s admission. It was the board.”

After jotting down their ideas, James responds, “Great. So this taps into how other individuals may have played a role in that decision, but that the decision itself was not ONE individual’s doing. Okay, next group!”

The White male student with the signature blond samurai bun share on behalf of his group. “We learned that the FBI had a lot of connections to the events that happened around Mr. Gaines and his family and friends. They contacted Lorenzo Green to speak with him about other Black activists after Gaines’s disappearance.”

James simultaneously glances at the clock while jotting down their ideas before jumping to another group, who jump right in. “We are seeing how this university has a history of being racist, and even recently in 2015 with all the protests. And then we read about how in 2010, students threw cotton balls at the student center that’s named after Gaines. We also learned that another Black woman wasn’t accepted because of her race. Lucille Blueford.”

James writes with his right hand and points behind him with his left to the next group, who share their belief that “mental health” played a role in his disappearance. “We did some research on Mexico City, not in Mexico, but a Mexico City that’s located two hours outside of Missouri. We think that J. Edgar Hoover tapped his phone and we also found out that Gaines spoke with Lorenzo Green, who was a professor in Mexico City. And we also found out he was admitted to a mental health institute.” An Asian American girl seated in this group jumps in to reiterate an earlier conversation they had with James about the impact of racism on the mental health of people of color in America and how this could be a case of “racism” being the culprit in Gaines’s disappearance and/or death in the event that he did take his own life.



James steps away from the board and take a few moments to let the students read over what they have just built together. Each group has contributed a different angle and ideas about the case, and James is purposeful in building in an opportunity for them to teach each other what they've developed within their smaller groups. James then poses, "So this brings us back to the larger question of why this case should be re-opened?" A tall, white male student seated near the front of the room calls out, "Because he was a person!" The same Asian American student also responds, "Because pursuing this case shows that America can put its energy not to normalize this." The satisfaction in the quiet smile across James's face is unmistakable, as he has shared on numerous occasions that one of his deepest hopes was that this case would enable his students to recognize the impact that systemic racism can have on one young person's relatable desire to simply attend school and that he [Gaines] should "never have been a stepping stone" and how "lost cases [like Gaines'] should never be the norm."

Cuing up his laptop, he prepares to transition into Dr. Mitchell's guest lecture. He reminds his students to take notes and "jot down anything of significance" and that Dr. Mitchell is "not just a professor teaching you, but also someone who is close to this who wants to join your efforts." The students applaud when Dr. Mitchell appears on the large screen, flanked by the prototypical professorial backdrop of seemingly endless shelves of books, sprinkled with *Star Wars* and *Black Panther* memorabilia, as he also serves a Curator of Popular Culture and Arts for the college. After reading through his bio, James "passes the mic" to Professor Mitchell, who smiles widely as the students wave enthusiastically at the screen. I take a moment to marvel at how teachers have been able to leverage technology to enhance and transform classroom experiences in recent years. Although Dr. Mitchell is sitting in his office at a university in Missouri, it feels like he is with us in this southern New England classroom.

Dr. Mitchell begins with sharing a little more about his academic background and research interest, which “focus on African American religious and political thought.” When he hears one of the kids say, “Huh?” he laughs and responds, “What does that mean? Well, I’m enamored with how oppressed people have utilized faith to survive and thrive within oftentimes deplorable and dehumanizing conditions...and I’m also really into pop culture!” He pans his camera up to his Legos *Star Wars* and *Black Panther* figures atop his loaded bookshelves. “I also teach a class called ‘Don’t Believe the Hype: Race, Media and Social Movements in America,’ where I try to get my students to think critically about issues from *Birth of a Nation* to the Ferguson uprising.” Within his first 3 minutes of speaking, he has nearly all of the students and James completely captivated.

Dr. Mitchell then moves into sharing about his experiences as an undergraduate student of color at the “U of M and in the BSU.” He sits up a little straighter as he fervently launches in:

Now I need y’all to know that I’m actually *FROM* St. Louis. I’m a Cardinals fan. [*He mischievously scans the room for Red Sox swag before slightly lowering his voice to continue.*] Here in St. Louis, the issue of race and space is something that’s very close to me and learning about Lloyd Gaines just adds another layer to my work with issues of white supremacy. The Plessy case undergirds everything with folks who can’t be categorized as white. So LG’s case is an understudied, but integral case to study and understand how American democracy is laid out. You don’t have Japanese Internment camps without the 1857 Dred Scott case, which stated that the ‘negro has no rights the white man is bound to respect.’ If you can’t be a citizen, can you be human? So this dehumanization piece has always been at play in very basic ways...so you have to understand the role that race plays in Lloyd Gaines’ life and his access to opportunity. That he was able to graduate from high school was in many ways a miracle and when he got to Lincoln University, he got a scholarship for \$250, which is laughable now, but back then, rounded out to about \$3200 bucks now, which still seems laughable. Then he graduates there and law school becomes his goal and that’s where the story gets complicated. Now I believe you all found in your research that he joined the Alphas while at Lincoln? [*there is a ripple of enthusiastic nods around the room*] Well that decision becomes monumental because it’s a significant networking opportunity, especially for Black folks who seek to fight systems and I’m not just talking about a few folks burning crosses, but sophisticated systems that are facilitating inequity at a scale you could hardly imagine that result in denial of access to basic things. [*He pauses to glance around the classroom at the sea of students’ faces.*] Yeah. Your classroom would

not look the way it does without Lloyd Gaines' case. So the folklore of Lloyd Gaines is part and parcel the experience of students at U of M. What happened? Was he murdered? Went into obscurity? Mexico? Just remember this takeaway: understand that Lloyd Gaines was like you. Don't just see him as a historical figure. See him as a newly graduating college senior who wanted to go to law school.

As Dr. Mitchell wraps up his short but powerful lecture, James and I exchange a quick glance as he works to continue filming everything on his iPhone. We both have visible tears in our eyes; I am deeply moved by Dr. Mitchell's humanization of Lloyd Gaines and reminder that "Lloyd Gaines was like you" to James's students – a powerful extension of James's lessons on empathy. James later shares that his tears were inspired by the presence of another Black male educator at the front of his classroom, something he never gets to experience, and a painful reminder of the isolation he often experiences as one of the only teachers of color at his school. The students remain captivated and are eager to move into sharing their findings with Dr. Mitchell and getting some of his feedback. In the span of about 10 minutes, a professor sitting in an office over a thousand miles away was able to both strengthen and echo the key themes that James wanted his students to garner from this cold case investigation: the structural inequities that were present both then and now, the centrality of racism to the case, the persistent dehumanization of Black people throughout U.S. history, and the humanity of Lloyd Gaines. James continues to film as the same groups from earlier take turns sharing their updates with Dr. Mitchell, a process that no doubt runs quite smoothly due to the dry run earlier that day. The students beam with pride as Dr. Mitchell offers enthusiastic feedback, responses, and additional information, "Wow! I'm so impressed you all know so much about Lorenzo Green!" "Yes! And do y'all know who the FBI building is named after?" "Yes, I agree with your group that the FBI was likely involved in his disappearance and have files that could give us more answers."

As the students take turns interacting with Dr. Mitchell, I notice the slight but visible release in James's posture and gleam of pride in his eyes as he watches and films. Later, James expressed his heartfelt gratitude and excitement for being able to expose his diverse group of students to "two Black educators," during what James describes as the "perfect storm" right before the end of the school year, to have his students

focus on this topic related to Civil Rights, education, and race, and having two Black educators from the same generation at the forefront while they are focusing on a Black individual who wanted to pursue his own education...there's just something beautiful about that, that even the best curriculum planner couldn't have imagined.

Smiling, James says he feels like Dr. Mitchell's guest lecture "added a second wind into this project," especially in terms of "helping my students learn and appreciate the power of their voice." He explains how he wants his students to remember that "history is something that is fluid and alive" and that his job is to help them see that

with proper formatting, preparation, skills and toolsets...they are able to become the educators, which is more powerful than getting an 'A' or a 'B,' that they are actually helping not just themselves, not just their group members, but putting into motion something that could really help other individuals, communities or even a country's understandings about race.

As Dr. Mitchell contributed and shared ground-level knowledge and narratives surrounding the case from Missouri through a projector screen to a room full of teenagers in New England, James is hopeful that his students will further embrace their responsibility to learn from this and then pass on this knowledge through their completion of the project. Each one, teach one is driven by sense of responsibility that is also made more real and possible through the documentary that James is making as a vehicle for impact.

Though he knows it will require hours upon hours of editing and formatting, James is fully committed to seeing the completion of this year's documentary through. Similar to how last year's documentary about the misuse of Douglass, Turner's, and Vesey's faces led to tangible

change with websites modifying their approaches and adding disclaimers to their use of the image, James wholeheartedly believes that this year's documentary "will play even a minor role in getting this back on to the radar of a law student, a historian or a firm or agency" and that the work of his students has the potential to "teach others about both Lloyd Gaines's story and the story of race in this country." Ensuring "access to information" and the "sharing of that information," especially around issues of race, is a non-negotiable responsibility for James. He explains that his responsibility as a history teacher is to figure out how to leverage "all the resources needed to educate as many minds as possible about how dangerous White supremacy is" by presenting his students with "facts that can help them understand how other people have distorted or ignored or undermined these same facts." He reiterates his firm belief that "there is so much power in being able to share information...to learn and re-educate and encourage others to follow suit." James remains firm in his conviction that both he and his students have a responsibility to ensure that the learning taking place extends well beyond the walls of his classroom and his students have a chance to feel empowered by the process.

My objective is for them to realize that their voice can be heard and that someone can feel empowered to add on or run with that. Do I believe that the majority of them will get an "A" on this project? Yes! Do I think this will get a lot of views and shares on social media? Yes! Do I think that this case will ever be solved? I don't know. What I do know is that this story is so relevant because it's about race and it's being explored by young people.... It is story worthy of exploring and of teaching others to do the same.

In this way, James's enactment of "Each one, teach one" extends beyond the dissemination of knowledge gained from reading the word; he seeks to also spread lessons about what it means to read and be in the world (Freire & Macedo, 2005).

Seeking to better understand what informs James's ambitious approach to his teaching, I ask about his own experiences with history classes in school. Taking a moment to briefly scratch and tug at his beard before lighting up, he shakes his head and smiles widely before launching

into the story of how his third grade teacher was the one “responsible for teaching [him] to always be creative and think outside of the box” through a book report assignment on the woolly mammoth:

I remember we had to do a report on any animal of our choice and I did it on the woolly mammoth. I had a notebook paper and pencil and I did a report. I didn't have a computer at home. I did what was presented to me. And I remember I turned it in before the due date and my teacher said I'm not going to accept this, and she said something along the lines of, she knows I can do more because of who I was. And she told me to think outside of the box. It was the first time any teacher said that to me. And I remember going home, we lived in a small apartment, I shared a bedroom with my brother, we were lower middle-class, so we made things work. But I remember that all I had were these toys. Maybe toys that I got from the dollar store...from McDonald's happy meals or like, when Toys R Us cost like \$4 bucks each. And...I had this packet of dollar store toys. And I was like I don't have, a toy of a woolly mammoth. But I had an elephant, a small little elephant. It was blue and I was like, okay, I guess this is the closest. What can I do with this? Well, we had Ziplock bags. And I was like, I have an idea... 'cause of the ice age. So I remember putting the woolly and filling it with water and I froze it overnight so the next day I took my report and carried an ice block to school and that ice block became my visual. So everyone got to hear my report while seeing, essentially, an artifact. And I remember my teacher just smiling and nodding like, “There you go...you took this assignment and now it stands out.” Because who would think of freezing a dollar store toy to resemble a frozen woolly mammoth? I was like, oh...so for me that was the first time that I was like, yeah, there are benefits in thinking outside of the box in order to engage in something. So yeah, I think...I would say everything that I've done in my life or career has been centered on categorized as different, unique, controversial...and all of that I attribute to that third grade assignment. Just always trying to make learning fun and different. So yeah, that woolly mammoth was the template.

James's story of his third grade teacher offers context for why he goes out of his way to spend hours upon hours developing, editing, and completing audacious projects and documentaries with his students every single year. His outside-of-the-box approach to teaching allows him to realize and release his capacity to enact creative and unconventional lessons on issue of race and racism. As he heads into his ninth year of teaching, James reflects:

History has shown us that the best way to move mountains is prep as many people as possible, so they can be on deck. And in order to do that, you have to decide if you're willing to nurture that environment to pass along knowledge and skills and pay it forward.... Just like the flaws of history can repeat themselves, the successes of history

can repeat themselves as well...you just have to decide if you're willing to pay it forward.

### **Conclusions**

Visits to James's classroom felt like stepping into the kitchen of an Iron Chef. The ingredients and recipes that James curates and develops for his students are fresh and creative approaches that venture away from the mainstream menu of social studies curriculum. He moves through his classroom like a seasoned chef in a kitchen. No chef cooks an entire meal alone; the meals are co-constructed under the direction of a head chef and rely upon the skilled contributions of sous chefs, line cooks, and plating experts. Similar to the collective responsibility that characterizes the co-construction of a meal in a kitchen, there is a collective responsibility that James works to cultivate in his classroom through the co-construction of knowledge and understanding of the systemic nature and consequences of racism.

James is anything but prescriptive in his enactments of lessons and projects that center issues of race and racism in his classroom. Like a chef who does not need to have a recipe on hand, I never saw James refer to notes or a lesson plan once he stepped away from his desk. Grounded in his own lessons on "goodness" and "hope" from his parents and Christian upbringing, and fueled by a persistent desire to constantly "think outside of the box" thanks to his third grade teacher, James's pedagogy is characterized by his ability to exercise patience and impatience when engaging challenging questions like "Is racism illegal in this country?"; his goal of instilling a sense of "empathy" in his students through his approach to topics that many of them have grown "numb" to; and his commitment to cultivating a classroom space where critically conscious knowledge is co-constructed for the specific purposes of ensuring that the knowledge is then shared beyond the classroom. James exercises a genuine patience with the process of learning, a willingness to listen to and lean towards both the voices and silences in his classroom, while

never betraying the impatience he feels toward racism. His disposition is impatient, but his practice is patient and this lays a foundation for the type of empathy-building that James seeks to engage.

From James's portrait, we learn about an approach to teaching and learning about racism through his lesson that contextualizes the dominant perceptions of American identity, loyalty and citizenship during his lesson on Japanese American Incarceration and his lessons on the cold case featuring the narrative of Lloyd L. Gaines. James teaches us a way to develop a literacy about racism through the humanizing study of one person's experience. Guinier (2004) discussed how racial literacy can enable one to read the various dimensions of race as a key hegemonic principle in U.S. daily life and recognize how institutional racism influences the belief systems and behaviors of various individuals. The Lloyd Gaines cold case investigation with which James's students engaged enabled them to learn about the impact of institutional racism through the study of one person's experience. While James demonstrates a deep understanding of these structures, he more importantly seeks to find ways to ensure that his students understand them deeply as well. The curricular choice to focus on Lloyd Gaines also provided an opportunity for the students to humanize Gaines's lived experiences with racism. As one of the groups investigated the potential impact of racism on Gaines's mental health, they concluded that if he did commit suicide, then "it was racism that killed him, not himself."

Choosing to investigate a cold case that has not been solved led to frequent feelings of frustration on the part of both James and his students. Though James expressed their "frustration" as one of his goals, there were clear moments that he himself experienced frustration when students "overlooked" the role that race played in the disappearance of Lloyd Gaines. James welcomes his feelings and those of his students; he encourages the active presence



and impact of humanity in his classroom. James is also clear in leveraging the building of frustration as a necessary ingredient to nurturing an informed empathy in his students; he likens the “frustration” that his students experience to the constant frustration of living with racism. In this way, James develops a curricular recipe that provides his students with a taste of the frustrating persistence of racism.

Also central to James’s pedagogical core is his commitment to disseminating the knowledge that is cultivated in his classroom with a year-end documentary as his medium of choice, given the recent rise and popularity of social media. As such, the manifestation of the proverb “Each one, teach one” emerges as a central feature of James’s practice and approach. He is the epitome of “go hard or go home” when it comes to his teaching, and what fuels his relentless approach is his firm belief in the collective responsibility to “pay it forward” by positioning his students as the stewards of that knowledge. He works to facilitate critical learning opportunities for his students to instill a strong sense of empathy in them and encourage them to take seriously their responsibility to educate everyone around them. James sees possibilities before limitations and allows this approach to guide his discussions with students and the development of the curriculum that he enacts.

One of the most salient features of James’s teaching is his willingness to lean into the inevitably unpredictable nature of conversations on race and racism with his students. In this way, James demonstrates what Stevenson (2014) referred to as “competent dialogue on racial politics” (p. 27) in his discussion of racial literacy in schools, a competence that is less about knowing everything there is to know about issues of race and more about a willingness to embrace the discomfort and stress that often accompanies discussions of race and racism.

## Chapter 7 – DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Most of the time, as teachers, you'll be seduced to believe that the most important thing that you do, or that your effectiveness, comes from your books, comes from your curriculum, comes from your tools...and that's a false assumption...your teaching is much more about your humanity showing up than the kind of curriculum that you use.

-Shawn Ginwright

Dr. Ginwright's words lingered in the air as my cohort of emerging preservice social studies teachers immediately paused from taking copious notes, and expressions of fear, excitement, concern, curiosity, inspiration, discomfort, and hope rippled across their faces. As a teacher educator, I often struggle with finding ways to ensure that my students prioritize their own humanity and the humanity of their students, alongside the responsibility of equipping them with pedagogical strategies, curricular frameworks and resources, unfiltered knowledge of the exhausting albeit fulfilling arena they are entering, critical understandings of the social and structural realities embedded in schooling, and, of course, the capacity to nurture meaningful relationships with their students. Catone (2017) reminded us that "attempts to codify teaching practices into step-by-step methodologies oversimplify the nuanced work of education," and that "searching for technical solutions to the challenges of education look for methodological approaches that prescribe particular, often rigid, teaching practices, overlooking the routinely ambiguous and dialectical nature of human action" (p. 130). The portraits of Malcolm, Grace, and James move beyond providing overly technical strategies and approaches to teaching about issues of race and racism. Instead, they offer textured representations of the nuanced curricular and pedagogical enactments that take place in each of their classrooms and the learning between the students and their teachers that bring the curriculum to life.

While much of the empirical literature on social studies classrooms has focused on and revealed the struggles and shortcomings around lessons of race and racism (Chandler, 2006,

2009, 2010; Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Epstein, 2010; King & Brown, 2014; Levstik, 2000), the portraits of Malcolm, Grace, and James offer possibilities on how to critically engage issues of race and racism as central objects of curricular inquiry. The portraits offer us curricular moments across three classrooms to analyze and learn from a series of decisions and moves that provide opportunities for young people to grapple with, pose questions, analyze, struggle through, and navigate complex questions and issues about the role and function of institutionalized racism throughout history in ways that allow them to contextualize the world that surrounds them and their lived experiences within it. While the curricular content featured in each portrait, with the exception of James's curriculum on Lloyd Gaines' Cold Case, is both common and standard across mainstream secondary U.S. history classrooms, the nuanced approaches and moves are not, and thus offer new ways to think about how to teach and learn about issues of race and racism. I am conceptualizing the types of curricular and pedagogical moves that I observed across all three classrooms as "humanizing," "racially literate," and "radical healing," as informed by my theoretical framework.

Humanizing moves refer to the curricular and pedagogical enactments that actively affirm the ideas, experiences, histories, and personhood of students and teachers (Camangian, 2015; de los Ríos, 2012, 2013; de los Ríos et al., 2015; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Romero et al., 2009; Villanueva, 2013). For instance, Malcolm's choice to position hope as an anchor in his discussion of the institution of slavery functioned as a humanizing move to help his students envision themselves as the living embodiment of their ancestors' dreams. Far too often, social studies curriculum reduces enslaved Africans to faceless, nameless victims, further reinforcing the dehumanizing dimension of the institution of slavery. Conversely, Malcolm's move affirms the humanity and agency of enslaved people whose dreams of freedom engendered journeys of

survival and resilience so that they could live. Grace's modification of the Facing History worksheet functioned as a humanizing move in that her version centered the narratives and experiences of all actors, rather than simply those of the White male politicians in power. I find it painfully ironic to have classrooms full of racially diverse children watching a documentary about the experiences of the Little Rock Nine completing a worksheet that only has them focus and record the choices of two White men in power. Not only does this particular assignment decenter the experiences of the Little Rock Nine, but it also reinforces messages of position, power, and privilege and whose stories matter. By modifying the worksheet to include questions about numerous Black and White actors' experiences during the Little Rock Crisis, Grace affirms the histories of the Little Rock Nine.

Racially literate moves refer to enactments that treat race and racism as institutional organizing and hegemonic principles in the United States, as well as enactments aimed to equip young people with analytic tools and skills to navigate and combat racism (Guinier, 2004; Twine, 2010). James's decision to end his school year with a cold case investigation on Lloyd Gaines's disappearance represents a racially literate move, as he is explicit in naming his choice to center the case because it "highlights just how systemic and embedded racism has been and continues to be." Rather than teaching his students the definitions of race and racism, James's move offers an alternate route to teaching about race and racism through the story of one young man's experience with racism. This is representative of both James's approach and many of the moves we see him making in the classroom. Given his disposition and goals around wanting his students to grapple with the systemic nature of racism, he puts different case studies and examples in front of his students that provide them with opportunities to grapple with not just questions of racism, but also with the impacts of racism on human bodies and lives. Conversely,

Grace's move represents a more structured and straightforward example. Embedded within a unit that centers around the Little Rock Crisis, Grace purposefully brings in a short, contemporary tutorial that breaks down the definition and impact of institutional racism for her students. Similar to James, Grace often dances between past and present examples and materials as she describes wanting to provide opportunities to help her students "bridge" understandings about systemic racism and its impacts on U.S. society across time. These enactments of racial literacy in the classrooms stem from the disposition of each teacher. Another key theme across the curricular and pedagogical moves in Malcolm's, Grace's, and James's classrooms was their consistent treatment of racism as a central object of curricular inquiry. Despite different curricular and pedagogical approaches and content eras across these three classrooms, there was a clear and thorough treatment of the embedded and systemic nature of racism in U.S. history and contemporary society.

Additionally, whether the content focus was situated in the 1600s, the 1940s, or the 1960s, all three teachers took various opportunities to connect lessons on the past to present-day circumstances. In these three classrooms, racism is not treated like aberration of the past, but rather a central object of curricular inquiry, which I argue is an important curricular and pedagogical enactment of racial literacy. Both Malcolm's and James's portraits begin with them posing explicit, open-ended questions about racism. Malcolm asks, "What is racism and why does it exist?" and James asks, "Is racism illegal in this country?" Meanwhile, Grace's portrait opens with a guided reading and discussion of Lisa Delpit's experiences living in the racially segregated South and with Grace posing strategic questions about the "stressors" and "consequences" of living with segregation, which I raise as important examples in her portrait of affective curricular engagements with issues of race. While Grace's approach is more structured

and guided than Malcolm's and James's, it too places race issues at the center of inquiry with students.

In interviews, all three teachers repeatedly referred to racism as a system and institution that was and remains central to U.S. society. In this way, all three teachers in this study demonstrated racial literacy, which refers to both an ability and a skill set around recognizing and navigating race, a skill set that is needed among social studies teachers working in diverse classroom spaces and seeking to enact curriculum that is relevant and responsive to the histories and lives of the young people they serve. Racially literate persons, regardless of their racial background and/or social standpoint, recognize and, in the case of these three teachers, actively teach about racism as an institutional force. Racial literacy thus enables one to read the various dimensions of race as an organizing, hegemonic principle in U.S. daily life and recognize how institutional racism influences the belief systems and behaviors of various individuals—another central feature across all three classrooms (Guinier, 2004).

Radical healing moves refer to what I saw across the three classrooms as enactments of the CARMA (Ginwright, 2015) principles. Malcolm's portrait illuminates a number of the ways in which he seeks to build and nurture relationships with and among his students. Pair work is a common and prominent feature across nearly every secondary classroom; what distinguishes pair work in Malcolm's classroom is in how he views and describes its purpose. For Malcolm, the intellectual task or assignment at hand is just one function of having them work in pairs; he also shares his goals of having them "connect" with one another, and he likes how pairs can challenge even his "silliest students to pull it together," as they are now accountable to another person. Within the radical healing model, Ginwright (2015) described relationships as having "the capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others. Relationships build a deep

sense of connection and prepare youth to know themselves as part of a long history of struggle and triumph” (p. 26). As such, I see the connections and pair work in Malcolm’s classrooms as purposeful opportunities for the students to build relationships that allow them to learn beyond the content and engage in shared humanity with one another. In Grace’s classroom, she makes a number of moves around the CARMA principle of agency in that she is constantly creating space for youth voice and encouraging political reflections. Grace moves beyond just asking students what they think and feel; her portrait reveals a number of moments when Grace asks students what they would have or might currently do in the face of the oppression they are studying. By doing this, Grace is purposeful in nurturing their “ability to act in order to create desired outcomes and transform external conditions” (Ginwright, 2015, p. 25). For James, I see some of his moves as opportunities to nurture the CARMA principle of “meaning” in his students. According to Ginwright, “meaning is discovering our purpose, and building an awareness of our role in advancing justice” (p. 25). I see James doing this through the documentary projects through which he carefully and purposefully guides his students. He is explicit in naming that he does not want his students simply to engage in historical inquiry and investigation to meet the criteria of an assignment; when he states that he seeks to put something “into motion that could really help other individuals, communities or even a country’s understandings about race,” he is envisioning the role of his classroom and students in the advancement of racial justice.

These examples of moves are by no means exhaustive or fixed. I drew out and highlighted them in an effort to underscore the nuanced complexities that undergird and guide every moment that passes in classrooms each day. In addition to offering answers to my research question around how these three teachers enact lessons about issues of race and racism, I also sought to learn about what informs the curricular and pedagogical moves we see across the three

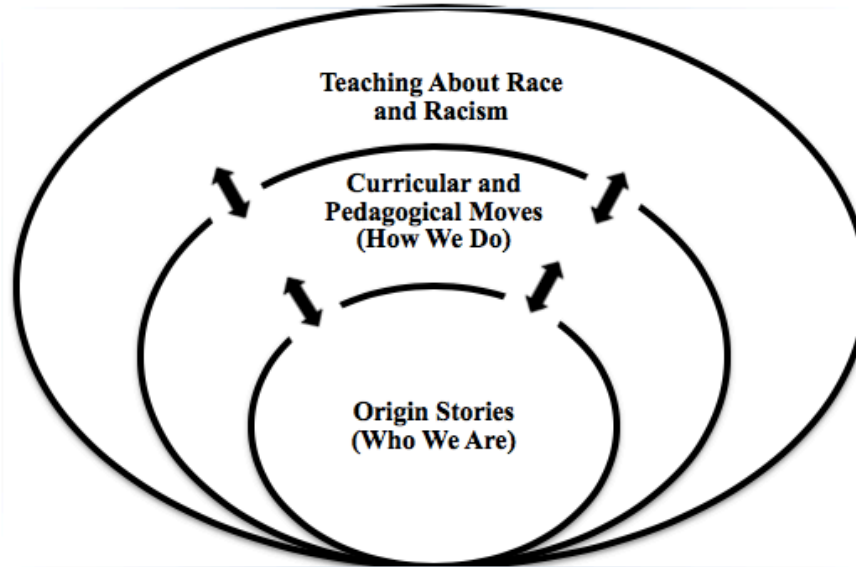
classrooms. Thus, while we can learn much from the lessons that Malcolm, Grace, and James enact in their classrooms, as well as the various types of curricular and pedagogical moves they make around issues of race and racism, we importantly also learn about what informs their decisions, which is much more a function of who they are rather than what they simply know.

It is not just about what these teachers know with regard to the content and strategies; it is, more importantly, about how they come to know based on what they have learned and who they are. These moves are not just about content and not just about ways of teaching; they are deeply informed by key moments and experiences in the lives of these teachers. Each teacher had a specific story, an origin story that helps us to better understand who they are, the roots of their current pedagogical approaches and their general ways of being. As such, these origin stories help us understand more about what informs the moves that each teacher makes and how who they are influences how they do. For some, it was a moment. For others, it was a seed that was nurtured over time—catalysts that give shape and form to who they are, the key features of their practice, and how they move through this world and their classrooms. Their origin stories reveal some of the social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of teaching and learning that matter and make a difference in how we engage issues of race and racism in social studies classrooms.

The pedagogical origin stories in each of the portraits help us to better understand the ways in which our varied biographies inform the curricular and pedagogical moves we make in classrooms in ways that can lead to various opportunities to teach and learn about issues of race and racism. As such, the portraits also elucidate the relationship between the teachers' respective origin stories (who they are) and the curricular and pedagogical moves they make (how they do), which lead to the types of learning experiences about race and racism that we witness across the



portraits. It is important to note that the relationships are not linear but rather dialogical in nature (see Figure 14).



*Figure 14.* Relationships between origin stories, curricular and pedagogical moves, and teaching about race and racism

For instance, Grace’s origin story about being raised by a single mom and the Chinese name that her mother chose for her—a heart bigger than the sky—helped to contextualize the origins of mindfulness and content lessons focused on teaching compassion in her classroom. The connection between Grace’s lessons from her mother and the current lessons she enacts with her students can be seen in her discussion of the function of mindfulness in her classroom when she explains wanting to equip her students with “strategies to deal with life...race and racism and all the -isms” and how important is it to have “compassion” to deal with all of that. Starting each and every day of her class with 5 minutes of mindfulness represents both a humanizing and a healing move, and also communicates her care and compassion for the humanity of her students in that she wants them to not only be ready to learn, but also be ready to live.

Malcolm's stories of struggle and the alienation that he experienced growing up mixed race in rural New England inform his approach in a different way; he often referenced a painful recognition and empathy for what many of his young students of color are forced to confront and thus sees his classroom and lessons as opportunities to equip them with the tools necessary to navigate through their lives as racialized beings.

James's current approach to never accepting anything at face value and always seeking an "outside-of-the-box" approach to his lessons takes us back to an important lesson from his third grade teacher. The moment she refused to accept his paper on the woolly mammoth, she compelled him to return home and "think outside of the box" of the assignment she gave, resulting in his creation of an artifact using a dollar store toy frozen into a ziplock bag of water to enhance what would have been an otherwise mundane book report. The woolly mammoth origin story gives context to James's creative and often unconventional moves and approaches in his lessons on race and racism. James rarely follows a structured plan; he instead ensures that all of the required ingredients are present in his classroom and proceeds to co-construct the learning alongside his students.

These origin stories thus remind us that curricular and pedagogical decisions and enactments do not exist in isolation, nor stem purely from what we know; the decisions we make and the ways in which we act upon those decisions are extensions of who we are, what we value, and what we believe.

## **Implications**

### **Teacher Education**

This study's findings underscore the importance of focusing on technical and relational curricular and pedagogical development in novice and veteran social studies teachers. The

teachers in this study demonstrated a strong grasp of the content knowledge and pedagogies to teach that content, as well as a racial literacy about the role and function of racism with their respective units of study. While the systemic nature of racism is well documented and painfully experienced by many of the students sitting in social studies classrooms, the subject of racism is often still reduced to individual acts of bigotry and hate, or simply avoided altogether in what Levstik (2000) has referred to as “curricular silences” around difficult topics in social studies classrooms. The variability in curricular treatments of race and racism in these classrooms manifested with ways in which each teacher went about building and nurturing a literacy about these constants. While this is not a novel finding, I argue that it raises important issues and questions to consider in discussions around how we prepare and support both novice and veteran social studies educators to teach and learn about racism in their classrooms. Viewing this finding through the lens of radical healing also reveals that these curricular treatments of race and racism, while culturally responsive and racially literate, are only half of the equation. Ginwright (2015) posited that “knowledge alone (culturally relevant, critical, political), however, is simply not enough to rupture normative practices in schools in ways that can usher healing to young people,” and that we must move beyond just focusing on the cognitive qualities and processes towards understanding the “affective processes that effective adults possess (care, love, hope, joy, humility, faith, courage, forgiveness) that are equally as important in effective teaching and learning” (p. 89). The portraits of Malcolm, Grace, and James both illuminate and demonstrate the significance of these affective processes in shaping who they are as people and teachers, and how they develop and enact lessons on race and racism in their classrooms.

Teacher education programs need to focus on preparing preservice teachers to recognize and, at times, reconcile the relationships between our respective origin stories and the curricular

and pedagogical decisions and moves that we make in classrooms. Developing a working knowledge of the history of race and racism is a necessary step in developing racially literate teaching practices in social studies education, but requires the additional step of engaging in critical reflection about one's relationships to and experiences with systems of racism, as well as reflection of formative experiences that give shape and form to who we are and how we move through this world. No two people will ever share the exact same origin story, just as no two teachers can truly enact the exact same lesson about the role of racism at any given point in history—even if they are using the exact same materials. Teaching teachers to reflect on their own origin stories and recognize the role they play in shaping their curriculum and pedagogy thus requires a humanizing approach to teacher education. Teacher educators must be prepared to reflect on and share their own origin stories and highlight the key threads between their biographies and key features of their practice.

The portraits in this dissertation can also serve as reflexive tools for pre- and in-service practitioners. Similar to the ways in which teacher education programs often require observations of practice, portraits of teachers in action—like Malcolm, Grace, and James—offer an additional opportunity for preservice teachers to observe, learn from, critique, build upon, reflect, and learn from veteran teachers. How might we use Malcolm's portrait to prepare social studies teachers to develop units and lessons on slavery in the early America? How might Grace's origin story about her mother and her early lessons on compassion prepare us to reflect on what we each prioritize and center on our syllabi and classroom practices? In what ways might James push us to develop new and creative approaches to age-old questions and curriculum on issues of race and racism? While social studies teachers may certainly borrow from the curricular enactments and pedagogical moves embedded in the portraits, it is important to note that these portraits are not

written as “how-to’s” on teaching about racism in social studies classrooms, but rather as “how comes” and how Malcolm, Grace, and James come to teach in the ways they do (Catone, 2017).

### **Future Research**

Building on this study, future research should focus on developing additional studies that provide textured representations of lessons in action and curricular moments that expose teachers’ curricular and pedagogical moves across multiple grade levels and disciplines. Portraiture offers a unique methodological vehicle for educational researchers to document, explore, and examine the nuanced world of classroom teaching. In a similar vein, future studies might also take up the application of portraiture to study the curriculum and pedagogy of effective teacher educators, especially those that center issues of race and racism in their classrooms, as this remains a well-publicized area of growth in teacher education programs across the United States.

Finally, this study sets the stage for further collaboration and co-authorship opportunities with the participants in this study. While I brought nearly a decade of secondary classroom teaching experience to my study of these three teachers, I am not currently teaching a secondary social studies classroom. We have much to learn from Malcolm, Grace, and James when it comes to teaching about issues of race and racism in social studies, and developing further opportunities to partner with them in the preparation of preservice social studies teachers could offer tremendous benefits to teacher education spaces.

Among the key challenges and limitations of this study were timing, editing and critical considerations of the types of questions that I posed during interviews. While we are able to learn much from the data I gathered and shared about Malcolm, Grace and James, the portraits only focus on a few lessons. Future studies might address this limitation by extending the scope

of the study. For instance, I observed some lessons in each of the classrooms that focused on additional forms of oppression such as homophobia, patriarchy and toxic masculinity and ultimately did not include them in the portraits because they were not directly related to my guiding research questions. Additionally, as I completed each portrait, I struggled with how to best represent interactions between the students and teachers that I perceived to be disrespectful, such as one instance in which a group of students were talking and goofing off during mindfulness in Grace's classroom. It is important to find ways to include such moments in future portraits, as these challenges are relatable for many teachers and can offer further opportunities for reflection and learning.

### **Conclusion**

The data collection for this study took place in the sociopolitical context of the 2016-2017 academic year, a year fraught with the political chaos following the 2016 presidential election. This study concludes on the heels of teacher strikes in Los Angeles, Denver, West Virginia, and Oakland. Running parallel to this historic wave of teacher strikes is admissions season for the next generation of incoming teachers, many of whom prepare personal statements declaring commitments to wanting to teach for social justice, enact culturally relevant curriculum, and work in urban communities of color. As a social studies teacher educator and researcher of social studies teachers and their teaching, I wanted to engage in a research project that had tangible implications and utility for the teachers standing on the picket lines and the preservice teachers sitting in my classrooms.

My hope is that the pedagogical origin stories within the portraits compel my current student teachers, as well as all of us, to reflect on our own key defining moments and origin stories, while also engaging in the critical reflection that Ginwright (2015) argued is necessary in

establishing healthy relationships with young people. Specifically, he referred to “critical reflection as the process of careful consideration of the spiritual, social and political forces that shape our decisions,” with spiritual referring the “ability to consistently act from a place of humility, faith and love,” which he importantly reminds us “are not cognitive processes, but rather ethical, moral, and emotional aspects of relational pedagogy” (p. 96). These moments first and foremost shape who we are, as they did for Malcolm, Grace, and James, and inevitably inform the ways that we teach. We often forget that teachers are more than their titles—that our lives, like those of our beloved students, are rife and rich with personal and educative experiences that shape who we are and how we do, the ways in which we see and move through the world, and thus how we seek to teach about this world in hopes of radically re-imagining and transforming it.

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Appendix A

Observation Protocol

| <b>Time</b> | <b>Description of Activity/Physical Setting/People</b>  | <b>Impressions/Comments/Questions</b> |
|-------------|---|---------------------------------------|
|             | <p>What is happening here?</p> <p>Description and details of surroundings and context</p> <p>Scripting of conversations</p> |                                       |

| <b>Relational Pedagogy</b> | <b>Authentic Relationships</b> | <b>Student-Teacher Dialogues</b> | <b>Affirmations of students' lives and experiences</b> |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
|                            |                                |                                  |  |

| <b>Notes about treatments of race and racism in the curriculum</b> |
|--|
|  |

## Appendix B

### Teacher Code Samples

#### **Descriptive Codes:**

- Lesson enactments
  - Defining and understanding racism
  - Questions about race and racism
  - Discussions of emotions and race
  - Interactions with students
  - Affirmations of students' identities
  - Curricular materials/documents
  - Pedagogical strategies and moves
  - Guided viewing
  - Guided reading/image analysis
  - Defining key concepts/terms related to content
  - Connecting past and present
- Influence on practice (from teacher interviews)
  - Curricular curation
  - Academic experiences
  - Personal experiences with racism
  - Personal experiences with teachers
  - Philosophy of teaching/disposition
  - Impact of election
  - Pedagogical decisions
  - Curricular decisions
  - Influence of family on teaching
  - Influence of key events/experiences on teaching

#### **Interpretive Codes:**

- Enactments of racial literacy
  - References to racism as systemic
  - Equipping young people with survival and navigational tools
  - Navigating racial conversations
- Enactments of humanizing pedagogies
  - Affirmations of students' lived experiences
  - Drawing on students' funds of knowledge
  - Loving relationships and interactions
  - Examples of authentic care
- Enactments of radical healing
  - Examples of CARMA principles in action
  - References to oppression/racism as trauma