

Reconceptualizing Whiteness in English Education: Failure, Fraughtness, and Accounting for Context

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This article focuses on Mr. Kurt, a white, first-year English teacher in an all-white context who has chosen to teach his students about whiteness, white supremacy, white privilege, and the many ways institutionalized racism is enacted in daily life. I center this article on classroom scenarios that highlight the challenges embedded in dealing with race and whiteness in curriculum and classroom discussion. I conclude with a discussion of how possibilities for antiracist and social justice pedagogies in English education rely on the field's willingness to embrace a more nuanced conversation, and I offer implications for classroom practice at the K–12 and teacher education levels.

This article focuses on Mr. Kurt,¹ a white, first-year English teacher in an all-white context who has chosen to teach his students about whiteness, white supremacy, white privilege, and the many ways institutionalized racism is enacted in daily life. His story fleshes out the strikingly limited scholarship in the field of English education about the complex work of white antiracist teachers in predominantly white contexts (Borsheim-Black, 2015, 2018; Johnson, 2015; Thomas, 2015).

Moreover, the dominant framework for understanding white teacher identity almost invariably situates white teachers' work and development as the embodiment of unadulterated racialized privilege—that is, white teacher as problem to overcome (Berchini, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017; Laughter, 2011; Lensmire et al., 2013; Lowenstein, 2009). In this study, I borrow from Johnson (2015) to argue at the outset that “[t]his is not an article about a racist white teacher or a white teacher unaware of [his] whiteness” (p. 5). Rather, this is an article about a teacher who is well-aware of his whiteness and the existence of (his) racialized privilege; a teacher with a desire to “talk about the real stuff” (Mr. Kurt, interview)—defining “real stuff” as white privilege and other topics that make his white students uncomfortable. In

this article, I draw from qualitative case-study data from Mr. Kurt's classroom—where I spent almost one academic year—to illustrate the contexts, tensions, opportunities, and challenges that shaped and reshaped how Mr. Kurt taught about race and white privilege in an all-white classroom. This article builds on existing research by paying close attention to the *contexts* within which beginning English teachers work. The broadest frame for my writing, here, is situated in studies of white teacher identity and whiteness studies in education (Borsheim-Black, 2015, 2018; Castagno, 2008; Haviland, 2008; Picower, 2009) and also critiques of this same field (Berchini, 2017; Lensmire, 2017; Lensmire et al., 2013; Lowenstein, 2009; Trainor, 2002). I draw from these fields to offer careful descriptions and theorizing of how institutional contexts influence and interact with the racial identities and the commitments of white antiracist teachers. I then offer implications for classroom practice at the K-12 and teacher education levels.

Whiteness in English Education: What Students Do and Do Not Learn about Racism

I center this article on classroom scenarios that highlight the challenges embedded in dealing with race and whiteness in curriculum and classroom discussion. There is currently little context—in English and literacy education—that deals with how teachers “handle conflicts and disconnections about race that emerge from English curricular content and classroom discussions” (Thomas, 2015, p. 155). Borsheim-Black's (2015) investigation of how a white teacher taught *To Kill a Mockingbird* (*TKAM*) in her predominantly white English classroom speaks to this dearth in the field. In her study, Borsheim-Black illustrates how whiteness operated and was maintained “at the individual, institutional, societal, and epistemological levels throughout the [*TKAM*] unit” (p. 424) and in the teacher's teaching of it. As one example of how whiteness operated in this classroom, teachers and students use “White talk” (p. 417) when discussing literature. Borsheim-Black defines white talk as the subtle ways teachers and students used language that ultimately “contributed to the normalcy and centrality of Whiteness” (p. 417) in the classroom and curriculum. The author cites the teacher's and students' use of pronouns (e.g., *we*, *us*, *our*, and *my* [p. 417]) in classroom discussion as an example of white talk, in that these parts of speech subtly function to exclude children of color who do not share in the same experiences of race, racism, and privilege. Pronoun use is one way by which Borsheim-Black describes how whiteness was assumed to be normal and maintained its centrality during classroom discussion of *TKAM*.

That whiteness was normalized and maintained its centrality in the classroom is a trite interpretation of how some teachers try—and fail—to accomplish antiracist goals. Instead, Borsheim-Black (2015) works to provide a nuanced discussion of how Ms. Allen (the teacher at the heart of the study) also took advantage of curricular challenges and opportunities to confront the topic of racism. The transcript reveals how Ms. Allen later calls into question students' pronoun use by asking them: "Who is 'they'?" and "'We'?" (p. 418). This discursive tactic, for Borsheim-Black, evidenced how the teacher *also* challenged students' frames of reference, thereby making "their familiar language choices strange" (p. 418). Providing a nuanced account of how a teacher simultaneously enacts and disrupts whiteness, through literature study, Borsheim-Black illustrates why the complexities of antiracist teaching is important. The author argues, "Whether and how English teachers navigate the topic of racism in literature study has long-lasting implications for what students do or do not learn about racism" (p. 426).

Research accounting for the complex work of white English teachers is unusual—dominant research on white teacher identity spanning several decades (much of which falls within the field of critical whiteness studies) often draws from the tenets of McIntosh's (1988) popular white privilege/invisible knapsack activity and highlights how preservice and inservice teachers actively evade, deflect, resist, or remain silent about race, racism, and white supremacy (Berchini, 2016a, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Castagno, 2008; Haviland, 2008; King, 1991; Picower, 2009). White privilege frameworks are often at the core of how whiteness and inequities get enacted and reinscribed in classrooms and schools—a problem that seems situated squarely in the work teachers do (or do not do). Castagno's (2008) study of how teachers respond to topics such as diversity and dominance is illustrative of this problem—the author argues that white educators silence and ignore topics related to race, diversity, and oppression out of discomfort and a desire to maintain "the established order" (p. 315). Drawing on ethnographic data from two schools, Castagno noted and analyzed "racially coded language" (p. 321) to illustrate how teachers were silent about race and racism and demanded silence from their students. Teachers, she argued, "exhibit an overwhelming aversion to acknowledgements that race exists or matters" (p. 329). Castagno found that, whether intentional or not, teachers' silence and evasion "result[s] in the legitimation of Whiteness" (p. 319) by ultimately reinforcing the idea "that race either doesn't matter or doesn't really exist" (p. 315). Clearly, perpetuating—through teaching—the idea that race doesn't matter or doesn't exist has major implications for what students do and do not learn about racism (see also Borsheim-Black, 2015).

Castagno's classroom study of inservice teachers resonates with research conducted in preservice teacher education and is a body of scholarship that has saturated the field for more than two decades (e.g., Haviland, 2008; Picower, 2009; Marx, 2006; McIntosh, 2008; McIntyre, 1997). For one example, Haviland (2008) developed the construct of *white educational discourse* to illustrate how the preservice teachers selectively enrolled in a multicultural education course made discursive moves during classroom discussion about racism and white privilege (e.g., avoiding words, false starts, and remaining silent). These moves, from the author's perspective, "enabled us to shift focus away from the fact that our Whiteness gave us unearned power and dominance" (p. 44). However, the students' failure to focus on their race-based privileges and dominant social locations was not for lack of trying. Rather, their efforts to recognize and take up their "complicity in racism and White supremacy and enact anti-racist pedagogies" (p. 52)—no matter what they said or did—simply did not go far enough. As a result of students' "glossing over" (p. 40) what Haviland describes as white teachers' responsibility to "disown [their] unearned privileges" (p. 44), students and teachers lose opportunities to dismantle and transform historically white supremacist institutions (such as schools). Here again, the work teachers—and those preparing to teach—do or do not do seems to be at the center of influential research and frameworks informing discussions about white teacher identity development and preparing teachers for the work of antiracism.

Reconceptualizing Whiteness in English Education: Paving the Way for Nuance

I would be remiss if I did not emphasize that the work with white teachers I address above is profoundly important. Studies exploring how whiteness and privilege play out in classrooms have initiated desperately needed conversations about teachers' complicity in maintaining racist structures that entrench schools, classrooms, and communities. However, my professional and personal experiences put me at odds with the deficit perspectives that have dominated the literature in teacher education about what white teachers bring—and do not bring—to the profession. Having explored, in my own work (2016a, 2016b, 2017), how whiteness is operationalized in classrooms, I agree with Johnson (2015) who argues that deficit "readings [of teachers and their work] lacked nuance and foreclosed more possibilities than they offered" (p. 10). Moreover, she argues that "such [reductive] analyses seemed too easily arrived at, redundant in the current context of

research on white teaching identities, and, frankly, dishonest” (pp. 9–10). With this critique in mind, I am frustrated with how the dominant research on white inservice and preservice teachers has centered owning up to, and eventually “disown[ing]” (Haviland, 2008, p. 44), race-based privilege as the catch-all for all of the antiracist work to be done in education (Lensmire et al., 2015)—as though it is even possible to “disown” race-based privilege (see Berchini, 2017).

A second wave of whiteness scholarship in education has worked to address reductive conceptions of white racial identity development (Berchini, 2016a, 2017; Borsheim-Black, 2018; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Laughter, 2011; Lensmire, 2017; Lowenstein, 2009). For example, my work (2016a) with Ms. T, a white, first-year high school English teacher in a multicultural setting, has contributed to a growing body of scholarship that has critiqued whiteness and multicultural education scholarship for failing to account for how contexts structure teachers’ racial identities. Ms. T entered her context with stated commitments to teaching students for social justice (her words). In my investigation, I note how her teaching of her school’s Holocaust literature curriculum (a curriculum she described as serving her social justice-oriented goals) failed her students of color—students who attempted, during class discussion, to draw connections between the Holocaust and racial segregation—the history of which has shaped the geography of, and institutions in, the United States. Ms. T categorically dismissed such connections in favor of focusing on the “scale” (p. 1040) of the Holocaust—an atrocity that has been narrated as larger in scope and thus far more devastating than any other government-sanctioned act of violence against a minoritized group (Novick, 2000).

Holocaust studies have been cited for their potential to “contribute to anti-racist goals by helping students to understand that ethnic and cultural prejudice and discrimination can take diverse forms” (Carrington & Short, 1997, p. 271). My work with Ms. T, however, is not a simple story of a teacher who irresponsibly taught a curriculum that otherwise held tremendous potential for achieving antiracist goals. Rather, the curriculum, as developed and mandated by her English department before Ms. T arrived, was situated within broader themes of “incomparability” and “self-reliance.” The context that structured the curriculum (established by veteran teachers, English department supervisors, and approved by the district) pitted Ms. T against students of color who attempted to draw connections between the Holocaust and other government-sanctioned human rights violations (e.g., slavery and segregation in the United States). Ms. T became positioned “as dismissive of, ignorant to, and defensive about issues surrounding racial

segregation” (Berchini, 2016a, p. 1041) given that she ignored the constellations of circumstance that narrate victims’ experiences and minimized the existence of—and connections to—other human rights crimes and atrocities.

My exploration of Ms. T’s work reveals problems with the essentializing tendencies brought about by dominant *white privilege* frameworks and discourses for theorizing white racial identity and for understanding the work teachers do and do not do. It also reflects, as Lensmire (2017) contends, that “[w]ork grounded in [a white privilege] framework has paid scant attention to intersectionality and tends to conceptualize white people as little more than the smooth embodiment of racism and privilege” (p. 2).

This discussion is not to suggest that the work white teachers do around race should not be critiqued. Rather, I follow Lensmire (2010) and

others by illustrating how the role contexts play in shaping teachers’ work might help to reimagine the damning interpretations that have long narrated white teachers’ identity development and their teaching. Such interpretations have stymied the potential for teacher educators to work with white antiracist teachers on what might ultimately be shared goals for educational transformation (Lensmire, 2010). My purpose,

then, is to advance this discussion in English teacher education, with and through the work of Mr. Kurt. My goal is to show how Mr. Kurt organically seizes opportunities inside and outside of assigned curriculum to achieve his goals for teaching about race, racism, and white privilege in a predominantly white context. And while this discussion is certainly about Mr. Kurt’s teaching, it is threaded with attention to structures and context: That is, *how* Mr. Kurt teaches for educational transformation is not *just* about Mr. Kurt’s teaching. His teaching is structured and narrated by the contexts within which he attempts to carry out this work.

Background and Methods

My work with Mr. Kurt emerged from a larger qualitative study in which I explore white teacher identity development (see Berchini, 2014). There were three main questions that framed data collection: (1) How do teachers conceptualize their racialized identities? (2) In what ways do teachers reproduce whiteness? (3) How does whiteness *shape* English teachers’ practices? During my time working with Mr. Kurt, I was particularly drawn to the contexts and situations that informed the third question and focused on

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classroom discourse, curriculum, and interview data to illustrate how his institutional context(s) influenced and interacted with his commitments to antiracism and the work he ultimately carried out.

Mr. Kurt was formerly a teacher education student enrolled in English methods courses that I taught at a large, Midwestern university. At the time of this study, he was a first-year teacher who was critically aware of his whiteness, an awareness that came through in our work together. I approached Mr. Kurt to participate in my research because of the social justice-minded goals he established for his teaching and his students' learning. I was interested in understanding what it meant to facilitate work toward these goals in his particular context.

Mr. Kurt taught 9th- and 10th-grade English at Hidden Creek High School, where over 96 percent² of the students were white; it was no surprise that Mr. Kurt's classroom reflected this statistic. Although I knew the demographic makeup of his school, and particularly his classes, going into my study, I remained struck by the lack of racial diversity in this school; it was completely strange to my sensibilities as a former K-12 student in the New York City public school system, as a middle school English language arts teacher in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse community, and as a teacher educator and field instructor/supervisor of English teacher candidates who, more often than not, were placed in racially and culturally rich contexts. Understanding what it meant to be a white teacher in a school such as Hidden Creek High School, for me, was territory uncharted.

I collected data for this study during a unit designated as "multicultural" by the English department in this school. I drew from qualitative case study methodology to inform my data collection and analyses, and I relied on two main sources to inform this work: individual interviews with Mr. Kurt and classroom observations. In this study, I focused specifically on "finding good moments to reveal the unique complexity of the case" (Stake, 1995, p. 65). As my work with Mr. Kurt progressed, I began to define "good moments" as occasions where Mr. Kurt's teaching and interview data presented opportunities to note where racism and whiteness are left unchallenged, thereby maintaining their centrality in Mr. Kurt's all-white classroom (see Borsheim-Black, 2015). However, locating "good moments" also allowed me to note complexity and nuance in Mr. Kurt's teaching, leading to interpretations that allow for a *counter-analysis* (I explain my use of this construct below).

For this discussion, I used open-coding techniques (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) to locate several good moments that illustrate a contoured, nuanced, and at times alternative perspective of Mr. Kurt's practices. For one example, I identified the following interview excerpt as a "good moment," given the

opportunities for analysis (and counter-analysis) that it presents. Mr. Kurt was a socially conscious teacher, and he openly talked about the problems he faced in a predominantly white setting when using curriculum to facilitate discussion about multiculturalism and structural inequities. According to Mr. Kurt,

The reason I know my students have white privilege? Is because I remembered that I had white privilege. You know what I mean? So I'm like, well, I know that I have it, so these kids definitely have it, and they don't know anything about it, so—We're reading *The Mississippi Trial* right now. They didn't seem to understand the *problem*—They're like, “yeah, race is still a problem today but I think they [people of color] need to get over it” is what they say.

Mr. Kurt was frustrated with how his white students take up (or refuse to take up) social issues, and racism in particular. By exploring whiteness and privilege, he hoped to instill in his students an understanding of their complicity in the institutions (e.g., media) and contexts (e.g., schools) that allow racism to flourish. For Johnson (2013), “conversations about whiteness in teacher education must illustrate teacher efforts to teach and live against whiteness. Teacher educators and researchers must depict the sociopolitical power teachers have to counter and reinscribe what it means to be a ‘white teacher’” (p. 9). With this argument in mind, coding provided a helpful point of departure that allowed me to conduct a *counter-analysis*.

To accomplish a counter perspective of Mr. Kurt and his work, I was inclined toward a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2005; van Dijk, 2001) of codes and themes, applying features and tenets that “[deal] with whose ‘interests’ are represented, helped, or harmed as people speak[,] write” (Gee, 2005, p. 204), and work. I was predisposed to an analysis that allowed me to offer a discussion that went *beyond* redundant interpretations of ignorance, privilege, and failure. I first made note of codes and themes that I found perplexing and/or discouraging (as with Mr. Kurt’s seemingly obsequious use of a required curriculum). I then situated the data in the more damning and stereotypical interpretations for exploring the work of teachers who attempt to teach about race and racism. This analytic move was intentional—with this approach, I was able to consider more nuanced interpretations for what might seem like a teacher’s silence and/or pedagogical failures by digging deeper into the contexts that structured his teaching: a teacher devoted to providing a more complex education about racism than his white students had received previously, while, at times, seeming to fall short of—and even fail at—his own goals.

In what follows, I begin with a brief discussion of how Mr. Kurt describes the challenges and opportunities he has experienced while teaching about racism and whiteness to an all-white student population. Following this, I present the case in two main episodes: The first episode illustrates how Mr. Kurt essentially abandons his required curriculum to teach in ways he feels are most purposeful. In the second episode, I offer a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2005; van Dijk, 2001) of the moment-to-moment interactions to illustrate small but meaningful shifts in student resistance toward discussions about race and white privilege. These shifts seem to occur only after Mr. Kurt redirects the discussion away from racism as an interpersonal failing and toward contexts that allow institutionalized racism to flourish. I initially situate both of these episodes in what I refer to as “convenient” interpretations. That is, by over-focusing on Mr. Kurt’s errors, participation, and complicity in racism and white supremacy because of how he does *not* respond and what he does *not* accomplish (a hallmark of the dominant literature for understanding white identity), his work appears to be “business as usual” (Sleeter, 2001). By first applying a more conventional (i.e., “redundant” [Johnson, 2013]) analysis of his work, my goal is to set the stage for a counter-analysis: a more nuanced analysis that goes against the grain of conventional descriptions of ignorant white teachers who fail (or refuse) to check their whiteness in the name of dismantling institutions of education with their bare hands.

Mr. Kurt’s Work as “Failing” (at) Antiracism: Possibilities for a More Nuanced Interpretation

Mr. Kurt attempts to teach about whiteness and race-based privilege with literature, but he does not rely solely on literature to achieve these ends. I witnessed him seize several unscripted opportunities to address institutionalized racism in classroom discussions, curriculum, and students’ larger social worlds using cultural artifacts such as Band-Aids and Disney films. As Mr. Kurt explains:

A problem that I think I just realized that I have with this district is, since they talk about racism so much, 8th, 9th, 10th grade, the students hear it every year. Through the books they read, the topic is always brought up. So my *worry*³ is that when we talk about it, like [he mocks an irritated grunt], I get the eye-roll. And it’s like, “Here we go again.” And they might check out, because it’s like, “we’ve heard this a million times.” So I think that what needs to happen, or what *should* happen, is, we need to talk about racism, and it needs to be in a meaningful way, instead of like, this on the surface [in a singsong voice], “Don’t be mean to black people” type of

thing. Because *that's* when you get the eye-roll, and it's like, "Alright, I get it, I'm not going to be mean to a black person. I'm not part of the KKK"; that's what they're all gonna think. Whereas, to toot my own horn, if we talk about white privilege, and we talk about how it's in Disney movies, they get *mad*, and they get *riled up*. *That's* like a meaningful, productive discussion. Even if they don't start thinking differently right *now*, that's *productive*, because they've had an emotional attachment to it, and they got into it. But if like, since 8th grade, they hear the same old, same old, they're gonna be checking out by the time they get to 10th grade.

I want to honor the reality that many teachers fear, dismiss, silence, or simply do not know how to talk about race with students (Castagno, 2008; Milner, 2017). For Castagno (2008), "[t]he general belief is that talking about race is simply too conflict laden, tense, and hurtful and, perhaps more importantly, implies that one is racist" (p. 329). Mr. Kurt, however, is motivated by the challenges, conflicts, and tensions that might come along with teaching about race ("they get *mad*, and they get *riled up*. *That's* like a meaningful, productive, discussion").

In the above interview excerpt, Mr. Kurt also clues into the larger context within which discussions about racism take place in his district. Although he does not say so explicitly, his critique is suggestive of districtwide expectations for teachings and discussions that center racism as a personal failing rather than an institutionalized reality ("And they might check out, because it's like, 'we've heard this a million times'"). For these reasons, he introduces his students to the concept of white privilege. Discussions about how whiteness and white privilege narrate their daily experiences, and critically analyzing media and cultural artifacts to which they might have an "emotional attachment," provide entrée into "productive" and "meaningful" engagements with race and racism.

Episode 1: Struggling to Teach about Racism

This discussion centers on a classroom episode during which Mr. Kurt is teaching about race, racism, and white privilege, using Chris Crowe's (2002) *Mississippi Trial, 1955*—a historical fiction novel centered on the death of Emmett Till. Till's violent death at the hands of at least two white men (both of whom were acquitted) is said to have sparked the Civil Rights Movement. This novel was written by a white male author and was the only text designated for use by Mr. Kurt's administrators as "multicultural." As class began, Mr. Kurt recapped themes from the novel (e.g., "courage") and opened a class discussion by offering an off-the-cuff definition of the term **hate crime**:

MR. KURT: A hate crime is when you do something out of hatred toward a different group.

JAY: There was much more racism in Emmett Till's time.

MEG: I don't think it has to do with race or what color you are, I think it has to do with social status.

JAMIE: I hate the way the media makes fun of red heads. South Park does this all the time.

MR. KURT: If there are people at our school who are racist, what can we do, as the next generation, to change that?

MEG: If they think we're racist, they just shouldn't come here. Not all of us are racist.

CABE: My grandpa on my mom's side was in the KKK. But I didn't grow up hating black people.

MEG: In my opinion, if you're racist, you're racist, that's just the way you are. If that's how they choose to live, then that's just who they are.

Haviland (2008) might interpret the above interaction and students' responses as representative of white educational discourses. Borsheim-Black (2015), who draws from Haviland's work, also investigates how similar responses might represent "White talk" as a "Discourse of Whiteness" that "present[s] a pedagogical challenge" (p. 417) for teachers attempting to teach about race and racism to their predominantly white students. Furthermore, Mr. Kurt might be interpreted as complicit in his students' responses. In other words, when racism is re/presented as an inter/personal failing (*If there are people at our school who are racist, what can we do, as the next generation, to change that?*), and devoid of the institutional structures that allow racism to persist and flourish, distant, dismissive, and dissociated responses dominate the discussion in predictable ways. For Borsheim-Black (2015), Haviland (2008), and Picower (2009), such moves "allow White people to simultaneously engage in talk about race and insulate themselves from being implicated in racism" (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 416).

I argue, however, that such an interpretation of how students respond to the class discussion about hate crimes, as lead by Mr. Kurt, is uncomfortably convenient—and a little too "easily arrived at" (Johnson, 2015, p. 9). When interpretations of teaching about racism are limited to (and *by*) white privilege frameworks, Mr. Kurt can easily be interpreted as deficient in his approach, in that he does little to challenge and probe students' responses.

In other words, convenient interpretations might hold that he ultimately fails to “[disrupt] Whiteness” (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 410) by remaining virtually silent (Castagno, 2008) as his students attempt to dismiss, deflect, and dissociate from the discussion. I draw from the second episode, below, to complicate these possible interpretations of Mr. Kurt’s teaching.

In looking at both episodes one (above) and two (below) together, I offer an alternative interpretation of Mr. Kurt’s practices that demonstrates how he moves into a discussion of institutionalized racism. In so doing, he and his students read an op-ed by Leonard Pitts Jr. (2012),⁴ a renowned journalist and novelist. In the op-ed, Pitts critiques a race-based education policy that was playing out in Florida and Virginia at the time. In addition to a discussion of Pitts’s op-ed, Mr. Kurt also draws on a discussion of Band-Aids and Disney films as cultural artifacts to, as he put it, have a meaningful and productive discussion about racism and white privilege.

Episode 2: Shifting toward Institutionalized Understandings of Racism

In this episode, students have just finished reading Pitts’s article. Mr. Kurt has not yet asked a question or made a comment. He rereads the latter half of the op-ed for emphasis. To offer a brief recap, Pitts’s coverage is as follows:

Last month, for example, Florida set a goal of having 86 percent of white kids at or above grade level in math by 2018. For black kids, the goal is 74 percent. Virginia is wrestling with similar standards.

One student, Adam, reflects on the article without being prompted:

ADAM: Isn’t that kind of a bit racist? Making the goal lower because the person’s black?

MR. KURT: What makes you say so?

SHANE: Racism is pretty much discriminating against you because of the color of your skin, and this is exactly that. They are setting different goals for kids based on race . . .

MR. KURT: What do you guys think of that, is that OK?

[A few students chime in with a choral, drawn out “Nooooo.”]

MEG: It also said that they have different goals for kids with disabilities, because they have problems that prevent them from learning.

MR. KURT: So you’re saying that it’s tougher for kids who may have a disability.

[There is a brief lull in the discussion.]

MR. KURT: Do you know what the term *white privilege* means?

[Students collectively indicate that they are not familiar with this term.]

MR. KURT: I can give you a very small example: What color are flesh-colored Band-Aids?

CABE: [incredulous] You're comparing this to *Band-Aids*!?

[Other students say "ohhhh yeaaaaaaa."]

JAY: We weren't the slaves, so white people aren't going to think . . .

[Cabe, from across the room, yells *Wowwww, Jayyyyy* in a criticizing tone.]

JAY: Nobody says "is it because I'm white," but people do say "is it because I'm black."

MR. KURT: What color skin does every Disney character have, except for one?

CABE: [Dramatically slams both fists on his desk and leans forward indignantly] Now you're comparing it to *Disney*!?

ADAM: The thing about Disney, I honestly—like—Mr. Kurt, you're an awesome teacher, but I don't think Disney has anything to do with it.

MR. KURT: Really? Did you notice how every evil character has darker skin? Did you notice how the crows sound black? The hyenas [in *The Lion King*] sound black?

[Another student sitting across the room laughs heartily.]

MR. KURT: Before you say that my Disney references are not valid, you should educate yourself.

[Mr. Kurt is catching tons of flack over the Disney film references. According to cultural studies, this is to be expected—you don't mess with Disney. Ever.⁵ Students are not buying it, but he continues to push.]

MR. KURT: We said yesterday that racism is learned, right? It's not something you're born with. We said that racism is learned. For people who grow up and watch TV dominated by white people, now we have *B.E.T.*—

CABE: Well why isn't there *W.E.T.*?

MR. KURT: BECAUSE EVERY *OTHER* CHANNEL IS W.E.T. [He leans forward for emphasis.]

MEG: I have a lot of friends who are Black. I am not racist toward them at all. I think it's strange that they have the BET channel. . . . I think it's stupid how certain people think that certain shows are for certain races.

[Students start calling out TV shows with predominantly black casts (e.g., *The Fresh Prince* and *Family Matters*, two popular sitcoms from the '90s).]

CABE: There is a black history month, why is there no *white* history month?

MR. KURT: Because every *other* month is white history month?

BRYAN: I always thought that, you know how kids are afraid of the dark, they make characters darker so people would be afraid of them

CORINNE: Black has always been associated with scary things, for me. Like EMO, Goth. I always thought that darkness was evil, they're the bad guys.

CABE: I think the Band-Aid thing is stupid. If it really matters that much, send a letter. And Disney? Really? It's a cartoon.

CASS: The thing about the Band-Aids, I think they're over thinking it, because I never thought . . .

MR. KURT: [Dramatically leans toward Cass and responds to her in a mock whisper] Psssst . . . Because you're white!

MR. KURT: What if the Band-Aids were black, and we called them "flesh colored Band-Aids"?

CASS: Well yea, then we would think about it.

CORINNE: The whole thing about evil is darkness, and blackness, and I'm gonna jump out on you and kill you.

MR. KURT: I wonder why certain characters often have a black dialect—do you not learn something about people who are darker if [such imagery is] what you're brought up with?

CASS: Maybe [Disney wasn't] thinking about it, it wasn't intentional.

MR. KURT: It's easy for a group of white kids to say this. If we were in Detroit, they might say, "Yeah, I know what you're saying."

MEG: In this one Crest toothpaste commercial, they're checking people's mouths for germs. The black girl's mouth is dirtier than the white person's mouth.

JAY: [Finds a Band-Aid and holds it up] To me, that's not flesh colored.

CABE: [Runs over to the teacher, Band-Aid in hand] Mr. Kurt, can I see your skin for a minute?

[Mr. Kurt allows Cabe to hold the Band-Aid to his wrist; Mr. Kurt's facial expression exudes defeat—or possibly exhaustion.]

VITO: Now it's gonna bug me any time I put on a Band-Aid.

MR. KURT: For homework, finish Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

Several students outwardly reject Mr. Kurt's attempts to facilitate critical discussion about race and racism—discussion that he hoped would go beyond what he previously described as “the same old, same old” content about racism that students have received in years past. Instead, Mr. Kurt asks his students questions that center on white privilege and racial representation as embodied by cultural artifacts with which they are intimately familiar (e.g., “What color are flesh-colored Band-Aids?” “I wonder why certain [Disney] characters often have a black dialect . . . do you not learn something about people who are darker if [such imagery is] what you're brought up with?”). When several students outwardly resist his efforts (e.g., “You're comparing this to Band-Aids?!”), he further challenges them with follow-up questions (“Did you notice how every evil [Disney] character has darker skin?”); reminders of prior content and knowledge (“We said yesterday that racism is learned, right?”); and off-the-cuff remarks that might be construed by some outsiders as sarcastic and others as perhaps courageous, risky, and/or emblematic of the close and trusting relationship he has forged with many of his students (“Pssst . . . Because you're white!”).

A convenient interpretation of this episode might be one that illustrates how Mr. Kurt challenges his students to think about their white identities, their race-based privileges, and their complicity in racism while *also* accepting the status quo of racism and white supremacy. His work, then, would seem to represent the classic paradox: The double-binds of whiteness (Berchini, 2017; Ellsworth, 1997; Levine-Rasky, 2000) embedded in teachings that

both “extend and support racist dynamics and interests” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 260) despite one’s stated antiracist intentions. Dominant frameworks for

You are damned if you do attempt to deal critically with race and whiteness in the classroom (however imperfectly), and you are damned if you don’t.

theorizing white teacher identity have done little to take up these paradoxes beyond illustrating that they exist, ultimately chiding teachers for mishandling opportunities to disrupt whiteness in their classroom practices. The classic paradox that narrates and constrains the work of white teachers thus introduces a contradiction of its

own—in other words, you are damned if you do attempt to deal critically with race and whiteness in the classroom (however imperfectly), and you are damned if you don’t.

Such interpretations of the work of white teachers who try—and fail—to enact antiracist pedagogies, to my mind, are trite and futile. For instance, Mr. Kurt, rather than taking on individual students and individual comments, seems to (mostly) evade resistance by instead offering questions for whole-class consideration, and to no one in particular. Furthermore, by the end of class, Mr. Kurt seems to have run out of steam. He allows Cabe to split hairs over the precise hue of a “flesh-colored” Band-Aid when he holds it against Mr. Kurt’s white skin for examination—a textbook deflection technique (Haviland, 2008), as if to prove Mr. Kurt wrong by saying, *See? This Band-Aid isn’t “flesh-colored” after all.* In response, Mr. Kurt only assigns Chapters 2 and 3 of Crowe’s *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, leaving Cabe’s resistance and defiance unchallenged. It might be said that Mr. Kurt is—here again—complicit in preserving and maintaining students’ hegemonic understandings of, and participation in, racism and white supremacy because of how he does *not* respond and what he does *not* accomplish. Students resist; Mr. Kurt assigns homework; the bell rings. As students leave for the day, Mr. Kurt retreats to his desk for a swig of soda and to organize his lessons for the next day. It appears to be “business as usual” (Sleeter, 2001) in every possible way.

An Alternative Interpretation of Mr. Kurt’s Work

A closer look at the classroom dialogue and exchanges between Mr. Kurt and his students might reveal the sort of progress that can—in small ways—inform the work of antiracist pedagogy in English classrooms. When Mr. Kurt shifts the discussion toward racism as an institutionalized phenomenon—drawing from Pitts’s article and also a general critique of popular cultural artifacts—it seems that several students make this shift with him. For example, Adam challenges the new education policy playing out in Florida and Virginia by critiquing it as “kind of a bit racist”; Mr. Kurt pushes Adam to elaborate on

his response, and Adam then recaps the policy in his own words (“Making the goal lower because the person’s black?”). Shane, also without being prompted, offers an interpretation of the policy and equates it with racism. Mr. Kurt then guides the students toward a discussion about the definition of white privilege and provides examples. Meg eventually offers an interpretation of how race is represented in something as seemingly innocuous as a toothpaste commercial.

A critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2005; van Dijk, 2001) of the moment-to-moment interactions, after about 45 minutes of whole-class discussion, shows stark differences in some students’ responses by the time we arrive to the end of the episode. Meg’s contributions help to illustrate some of these differences. Her first three responses to the class discussion occurred in the first episode—during which Mr. Kurt facilitated a discussion about hate crimes—and are as follows:

1. **Meg:** I don’t think it has to do with race or what color you are, I think it has to do with social status.
2. **Meg:** If they think we’re racist, they just shouldn’t come here. Not all of us are racist.
3. **Meg:** In my opinion, if you’re racist, you’re racist, that’s just the way you are. If that’s how they choose to live, then that’s just who they are.

In the first episode, Mr. Kurt asks his students to consider how they might intervene in racism “as the next generation” charged with the task of enacting social change. Meg’s first three responses represent the predictable deflections, dismissals, resistance, and hopelessness when confronted with discussion prompts that encourage white students to engage with racism at the level of the “individual” (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Haviland, 2008).

In the second episode—during which Mr. Kurt shifts toward a discussion of institutionalized racism—Meg’s responses appear to be both dismissive and productive:

4. **Meg:** I have a lot of friends who are black. I am not racist toward them at all. I think it’s strange that they have the BET channel. . . . I think it’s stupid how certain people think that certain shows are for certain races.
5. **Meg:** In this one Crest toothpaste commercial, they’re checking peoples’ mouths for germs. The black girl’s mouth is dirtier than the white person’s mouth.

Meg's first response in this episode seems to represent a discursive move long theorized as a colorblind tactic that whites use to dismiss their complicity with racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Frankenberg, 1995; Picower, 2009)—the *I have black friends* trope that has become “standard fare of post-civil rights racial discourse” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 81). While Mr. Kurt does not specifically respond to this remark—or any of Meg's other remarks—he does encourage his whole class to consider their beliefs about popular culture (e.g., Black Entertainment Television [BET]), history (e.g., Black History Month), and racial representation in Disney films. It is only after a whole-class discussion of these examples—narrated by both student resistance and Mr. Kurt's persistence—that Meg eventually offers her example of media complicity in racial representation by critiquing a commercial for a popular brand of toothpaste for its portrayal of a black child. Mr. Kurt's moves as a teacher seemed to facilitate Meg's shifting responses. It is a small shift, but a meaningful one, in the context of her otherwise resistant contributions to the class discussion.

Accounting for Context in English Education

Mr. Kurt often used themes in literature to teach his students about white privilege, race, and social issues. In his words, “literature [provided] the best segue for that.” Perhaps predictably, his curriculum did not always serve his larger goals (teaching about racism and white privilege) well. He describes how he often had to deviate from the curriculum to address issues related to white privilege and institutionalized racism. As Mr. Kurt explains,

I feel like the social justice stuff really comes in handy when we go off on a tangent and we just forget about the book for an hour. And in the last five minutes, I'd say, “Oh! Uh, see how this connects to our book?” [Laughter] and they say, “Oh yeah!” So when you forget about the book, I feel like that is probably a good sign. As long as you're forgetting it for the right reasons.

For Mr. Kurt to carry out “the social justice stuff” (his words), he found it necessary to put the curriculum aside, perhaps so that the purposeful teaching and learning can begin. It seems that Mr. Kurt's desire to “forget about the book” and “go off on a tangent” was in response to a required curriculum that did little to support his larger goals. It is also necessary to understand that *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, was the ninth-grade multicultural curriculum—it was the only text designated as multicultural that was approved by the district for use in the ninth grade. Furthermore, it is a historical fiction text that focuses on the experiences of a white boy who encounters racism in Mississippi. That Mr. Kurt had to “forget about” the required curriculum

to achieve his larger goals for teaching about institutionalized racism and white privilege reveals the dissonance between district mandates, approved curricula, and the kind of teaching and learning he thought was meaningful.

This pedagogical dissonance was reinscribed in the local context of Mr. Kurt's English department. During our discussions, he openly critiqued his curriculum and colleagues' attempts to prescribe his educational practices and explained how senior colleagues in his English department assigned him to teach *Mississippi Trial, 1955*:

I just don't understand. It was my second day there [at school], or first day because I got hired a week before school started. And it was the first day I sat down with my department. And they gave me the directions [and said] "this is the book, and this is what we talk about in the book," to help me out, and I didn't say anything, because I haven't read the book. And as I was reading it, I was like, *I'm not gonna talk about "courage."* Like, what am I *doing*? So, no, I much would rather talk about—white privilege just seems so much more important.

To be sure, Mr. Kurt's critique is not of the novel, *per se*, but of the way the novel was prescribed by his department. The novel itself holds potential for white children to have an antiracist hero to admire; that is, there is nothing inherently wrong with a book about racism written by a white author who centers the experiences of a white child in the dawn of the Civil Rights era. The problem, here, exists in how the English curriculum as prescribed by Mr. Kurt's ninth-grade team did not expose students to other books or texts that might center people of color in the struggle for antiracism. It was the only book available in the ninth grade, at this school, with which to take up racism. That this novel was the only text available in the curriculum with which to take up racism in an all-white rural context is a subtle way by which whiteness was assumed normal and maintained itself in school structures (see Borsheim-Black, 2015).

A prescribed practice included how the assigned theme of "courage" centered on (white) fictional Hiram Hillburn's courage in the face of the racism he encountered in 1955 Money, Mississippi. Mr. Kurt often seemed incredulous and resentful toward the ways that his English department handed down thematic requirements. The thematic focus on the "courage" of a white youth in a novel detailing the murder of Emmett Till—a hate crime that marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement—was something Mr. Kurt simply could not wrap his mind around ("I just don't understand"). Using literature as a vehicle with which to discuss white privilege and institutionalized racism was, from his perspective, "much more important" than the ideas his department attempted to prescribe under the guise of

being helpful. Mr. Kurt therefore took surreptitious liberties with the curriculum by taking advantage of vague curriculum standards or conducting frequent classroom discussions about race and white privilege, as he had in the above episode.

Deviating from the curriculum in the privacy of his classroom, however, was not always simple. Mr. Kurt was required to use a common unit exam with his students—an exam that was developed by the English team several years before he began teaching at Hidden Creek, administered to all ninth-grade students. At the conclusion of his unit, I asked Mr. Kurt to reflect on his teaching of *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Did he achieve his objectives? What was difficult about it, if anything? Overall, Mr. Kurt felt as though his students “walked away” with an understanding of white privilege, even if some of them may have resisted this new idea.

However, during this same conversation, Mr. Kurt’s tone took a turn. He suddenly seemed less excited about his work as he began to describe the final unit assessment (again, an inherited and required exam developed before he was hired). The exam was a compilation of short-answer and multiple-choice questions and concluded with an essay question. In our conversation Mr. Kurt specifically focused on the essay question:

I hated the [essay] question, but since it was part of the *final*, all of the ninth grade teachers needed to have it the same. It was supposed to be an argument paper. We spend a lot of time writing argument. And, um, what the other teachers came up with was this question about, it’s like a line or a quote from [*Mississippi Trial, 1955*] where Hiram says something like, “What they did in the south to the blacks was not the same as what the Nazis did to the Jews” type of thing. It was like, not as harmful as what they did to the Jews, it was just a way of life, just the way things are, type of thing. And so then they [students] had to write whether or not [they agreed] with Hiram or not. And, uh, it just kind of became a compare and contrast essay, instead of an argument essay. Because all they did was compare Nazi Germany to 1950s South. So, I was kind of disappointed in the question. And I should have read it or said something before I gave it to my kids.

The above explanation illustrates a common dilemma for both novice and veteran teachers in today’s schools: For one, there is often the departmental expectation that teachers will share a common assessment with little to no regard for differences between teachers, students, and classroom dynamics. Also, it reveals the expectation that materials are to be used as given.

I am in no way suggesting that common assessments and expectations that materials be taught as prescribed automatically preclude teachers from doing the necessary work of engaging students with difficult conversations

and learning about race, racism, privilege, and whiteness. Mr. Kurt picked and chose where, when, and how to do the work he thought was most meaningful for his students. However, an analysis of Mr. Kurt’s work reveals how school structures position him to teach (and assess) in specific ways. The passage that the “other teachers” chose for analysis—the passage with which students were prompted to take a stand, in essay form—is as follows:

Hiram states: “I can see where segregation wasn’t very fair, but it wasn’t the same as something like the Nazis killing all those Jews. It seemed to me that Negroes weren’t really being hurt; it was just the way things were, and I couldn’t see why people like dad or Mr. Paul got so worked up over it, especially when it had nothing to do with them.” (Crowe, 2002, p. 76)

[*Essay question*]: Is the racism in Mississippi the same as the Nazis killing Jewish people?

To be sure, this quote represents Hiram’s perspective early on in the novel. Later, when he lives through Emmett Till’s murder trial, discovers his grandfather’s complicity in the crime (by providing one of the getaway cars), and is made incredulous by the jury’s not-guilty verdict handed down to the white men whom “everybody in that courtroom knew” (p. 220) had murdered Emmett, Hiram’s perspective on racism becomes more nuanced. He realizes how racism, before Emmett’s trial, simply never “registered” (p. 228) with him: “[I]t took me awhile to notice [racism]. I guess when I was a little kid, that was all going on over my head. At least it never registered with me” (p. 228).

This sort of personal growth and evolution—as displayed by Hiram’s character—presents an opportunity for teachers and students to critically reflect on how white people become conscious of racism, and perhaps even develop antiracist identities over time. Instead, with this essay question, Mr. Kurt is required to ask his predominantly white students in this rural school district to take a stand and, in effect, *measure* human rights violations against each other in terms of which is more “harmful.”

On one hand, the exam seems to highlight how racism is understood in and by the larger English department: as a minimized, organize-able (“The Nazi slaughter of the Jews, that seemed *different—and worse*”), and ultimately debatable concept (“so then they had to write whether or not [they agreed] with Hiram or not”). On the other, and as I have analyzed elsewhere (Berchini, 2016a), the national discourse on the Holocaust and how it is treated in U.S. schools has undermined work on U.S. racism. For example, Novick (2000) explains how the discourse of uniqueness and incomparability embedded in the Holocaust promote

evasion of moral and historical responsibility. The repeated assertion that whatever the United States has done to blacks, Native Americans, Vietnamese, or others pales in comparison to the Holocaust is true—and evasive. And whereas a serious and sustained encounter with the history of hundreds of years of enslavement and oppression of blacks might imply costly demands on Americans to redress the wrongs of the past, contemplating the Holocaust is virtually cost-free: a few cheap tears . . . It leads to the shirking of those responsibilities that do belong to Americans as they confront their past, their present, and their future. (p. 15)

Novick paints a grim picture of how the Holocaust has been narrated, with implications for how it is taught: So long as other (American) historical events are interpreted to pale in comparison to the Holocaust, Americans are given a free pass of sorts—an invitation to “shirk” their responsibility to confront the events that comprise their past, present, and future. As with Ms. T’s context (discussed in the theoretical framework), work on racism remains undermined by the discourse of incomparability.

Mr. Kurt’s work with racism is undermined similarly: (1) his more senior colleagues’ interpretations of the way that themes about racism and injustice should be taught (e.g., as measurable and debatable), and (2) a larger, more pervasive national discourse that has essentially promoted the “incomparability” of the Holocaust at the expense of studying, understanding, and coming to terms with racism in schools—and is a discourse that likely influenced his department’s curriculum and expectations.

My concern, at this juncture, is that I’ve made Mr. Kurt out to seem as though he teaches without agency—just another un/willing, un/conscious cog in the institutionalized structures that allow racism to maintain itself. Perhaps it also seems that I’ve made excuses for him. In other words, why couldn’t Mr. Kurt just buck up and administer his own exam? Mr. Kurt, like other teachers featured in whiteness studies (e.g., Berchini, 2016a; Borsheim-Black, 2015), expressed a commitment to doing the work of antiracism. That said, Haviland (2008) has long illustrated how “[c]ritical studies of Whiteness have detailed myriad techniques employed [by teachers] to maintain rather than disrupt the power of Whiteness” (p. 47). This interpretation, however, is no longer a sufficient theorization of the work that antiracist white teachers attempt—and fail—to do. Such paradoxes will likely prove to be true (Berchini, 2017)—the field of whiteness studies is saturated with caricatures of white teachers who fail to practice what they preach. Not only do we not need any more of these illustrations—if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all—but the question, for me, has become: Is there another way to think about the fraught work of antiracist white teachers?

Antiracism, Whiteness, and English Education

The context of the required curriculum provides entrée into this question. Much like Mr. Kurt had to deviate from the prescribed curriculum (where possible) to accomplish his larger, critical goals, he sometimes interpreted his efficacy in terms of whether his students also defied the curriculum. He described how several students did not respond to the essay question as instructed:

But some people, for the essay portion of their test? Instead of answering the question, they talked about white privilege. So, that's kind of a personal victory, I guess, that they can sit there and write something about it [even though they did not answer the test question]. It's cool that [white privilege, and talking about white privilege] must be a big thing that they took away from the unit.

Some of Mr. Kurt's students deviated from the purpose of the original test question and instead "talked about white privilege." For him, this was a personal victory in the face of having to administer an exam with which he was disappointed. Even though "all of the ninth grade teachers needed to have it the same," Mr. Kurt explained that he did not mark students "down" for failing to answer the question as written. Rather, it was a "personal victory" that students chose to write about white privilege instead of the assigned question.

This assessment is not the only example of how Mr. Kurt and his students were directed to engage race in the curriculum (when they were not being structured to ignore it). For another example in relation to this specific unit, students were asked on a quiz (of his department's design) to "Give three examples that show the reader how different Emmett is from other black people in the south. (3 points)." In other words, with this quiz question, white students are required to compare people of color with and against each other, potentially leading to the perpetuation of "good black/bad black" stereotypes, implicit biases, and racist attitudes (see Barrett, 1999). However, that the question itself is shockingly problematic and holds potential to perpetuate racism is not entirely the point of this discussion: As I explained above, the materials shared between the English teachers in this department were developed without Mr. Kurt's input and expected to be administered as given. Sometimes Mr. Kurt edited the materials for his students' use, but the freedom to do so did not apply to all curricular artifacts. Teachers were not permitted to alter summative assessments, such as final unit exams. As a former English teacher once subjected to the same policy, I have yet to be convinced of a reason for this policy that makes justifiable

sense to students and teachers. Instead, it often felt like a mind-numbingly arbitrary practice, but with real consequences (the worst of which was akin to accusations of insubordination) for those who decided to defy it. Moreover, while Mr. Kurt worked to teach in ways he found more purposeful than his colleagues' recommendations, he still struggled to be collegial and to fit in to his department's culture. This need is a powerful contextual motivator that often goes unrecognized in the dominant discourse about how teachers become (and do not become) teachers who teach for antiracism and social justice.

The question, then, remains: If Mr. Kurt knew that his curriculum materials were problematic, is it not then his responsibility to address this issue by taking on his department? He later revealed how it was almost necessary to teach under the radar (my metaphor) for fear of being reprimanded:

Most of my colleagues, I don't share much of anything with. I don't want to step on any toes. I don't want to get in trouble. If I do mention to someone, "Oh yeah, I'm talking about white privilege in my classroom," and then I hear them say, "Uh, you really shouldn't do that." Then I start thinking, "Wow, should I really not do this?" If my mentor teacher says, "Wow, don't do that," it's harder for me to then rebel. Once I know [that he shouldn't talk about it], I can't un-know it.

Mr. Kurt seemed to enact, for his own purposes, a personal policy in teaching about white privilege and institutionalized racism in which he acts now and apologizes later ("It's harder for me to then rebel. Once I know [that I shouldn't talk about it], I can't un-know it"). I take this concern seriously. It was not the first time he expressed to me his trepidation about turning to his colleagues for assistance or even initiating a simple conversation about issues important to him. To be sure, he forged ahead with the kinds of critical discussions he felt were important in his classroom—I have witnessed this practice a number of times. But he did not go "public" about those discussions with his colleagues, for fear of repercussions. As a new, untenured teacher, the stakes were high. He was, in a sense, on his own.

I am not attempting to paint a portrait of Mr. Kurt as heroic in this study. It is to illustrate the constellation of structures and circumstances that imposed a shelf-life on Mr. Kurt's pedagogical goals. Somewhere along the way, Mr. Kurt was taught that he had to remain silent about his critical goals with his colleagues. Research on whiteness and antiracist teaching (e.g., Borsheim, 2015; Picower, 2009) has long encouraged preservice and inservice teachers to seek out like-minded colleagues, which inspires the question: *What if there do not happen to be any?*

Discussion and Implications

The analyses I present here go against the grain of conventional descriptions of ignorant white teachers who fail (or refuse) to check their whiteness in the name of dismantling institutions of education with their bare hands. In this study I argue that the work that Mr. Kurt accomplished (or did not) in his classroom is only a part of the story. Mr. Kurt entered his teaching context with critical, antiracist goals, however partially articulated. In practice, he tried hard and seemed to fail harder at executing these goals. The field of English education has remained largely reticent about the challenges of this work (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Thomas, 2015). I conclude this discussion with implications for K–12 and English teacher education.

Building On and Moving Beyond the Dominant Discourse of “White Privilege”: Implications for Teaching

On one hand, I am critical of the ways by which the dominant discourse of white privilege has positioned white teachers and narrated the work of teacher education toward antiracism. On the other hand, it might seem that I—at times—accept and even congratulate a teacher who seems predominantly focused on encouraging students to recognize (their) racial privileges. This tension warrants further explanation.

In part, and as I have argued, it is the dominant discourse of white privilege as it has narrated white teacher identity studies and whiteness studies in education that sets up Mr. Kurt for (perceived) failure: his failure to dismantle the classroom, students, colleagues, and larger institution that contribute to his pedagogical difficulties. But Mr. Kurt openly talked about how he used what he knew were his racial advantages to facilitate difficult conversations with his white students, however imperfectly. In other words, rather than relying on his white privilege to avoid “touchy” (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 422) subjects, he used his whiteness and privilege as entrée into what he described as deeper, more productive discussions about race in his specific context. He pursues this goal, in part, by introducing his students to the language of “white privilege”—language and ideas that were new to them. The point is, unlike much of the extant research that relies on white privilege frameworks to interpret white teacher identity, Mr. Kurt did not stop there. He uses discourses of white privilege to pursue deeper, more nuanced conversations about race and institutionalized racism, and seeks curricular opportunities to support his goals.

Moreover, a critical discourse analysis of the moment-to-moment interactions between Mr. Kurt and his students reveals a concrete way forward:

that is, in English education, we need to move *beyond* the paradox of white privilege to prepare teachers to engage in more critical analyses of context and power (Berchini, 2017). Mr. Kurt's use of a carefully chosen op-ed in tandem with an off-the-cuff discussion about cultural artifacts with which his students are intimately familiar provided entrée into more complex conversations about racism and whiteness—the kinds of discussions that a required, thematic focus on a white fictional character's "courage" in the face of racism might forestall. Moreover, an examination of his English department's hand-me-down curriculum materials also reveals how Mr. Kurt was positioned to undermine his goals in favor of compliance. When dealing with inherited curriculum (as with the exam and quiz I describe above), teachers might question what the implications are for teaching when a teacher is required to use materials that ultimately undermine their work and antiracist stances. They might also wonder about the larger implications of inheriting a specific curriculum that prevents them from teaching in ways and in spaces that are not harmful.

Although Mr. Kurt was not permitted to alter the final unit exam, he witnessed the ways in which his students defied expectations for compliance by writing about white privilege—a move that he described as "a personal victory." To the extent possible, it might be necessary for teachers to consider how "forgetting about the curriculum" might assist them in achieving their goals for transformative teaching and learning, whether in classroom discussion or in curriculum development, particularly when contexts pose a threat to antiracist practices.

The Power of Context: Implications for Teacher Education

The episodes, problems, analyses, and questions I discuss here illustrate the role and power of *context*. There is no question: The work that Mr. Kurt is attempting to carry out with his students is complicated and challenging, perhaps made doubly so by student, colleague, and institutional resistance. The work of enacting antiracist pedagogy is fraught and imperfect. Mr. Kurt seizes some opportunities to challenge students' beliefs about racism and whiteness and seems to relinquish others. It is difficult to observe how or even when progress is made, and some might hesitate to call it "progress" in the first place. His work represents precisely the tensions and obstacles with which those in English education must learn to contend, embrace, and build on. Trainor (2002) has long argued that critical researchers and teachers "have to find ways, paradoxically, to embrace discourses" (p. 648) with which we disagree, discourses and practices that, perhaps, do not seem to go

far enough in achieving antiracist goals. Moving forward, understanding the complex work of white antiracist early-career teachers requires accounting for the contexts within which their work takes place. I therefore encourage teacher educators to examine the classroom episodes I feature in this discussion with their preservice teachers, and to ask the following questions:

- › What are the structures—such as school discourses, curricular demands, and interactions with colleagues and students—that circumscribe the work of teachers who attempt to teach with antiracist and social justice–centric goals?
- › How can teacher education continue to support new teachers in their goals, particularly when schools do not necessarily have an inbuilt support structure? When the structures that *do* exist forestall the work of racial justice and social transformation?
- › While research on whiteness and antiracist teaching has long encouraged preservice and inservice teachers to seek out like-minded colleagues, my experiences with Mr. Kurt suggest that such potential might not exist in their immediate contexts. What can teachers and teacher educators do to help teachers (and especially novice teachers) connect with a like-minded community beyond their building?

This article will do little to assuage those committed to placing teachers, their white skin, and their work at the *center* of the whiteness problem that infects English education and institutions of education writ large; they are perhaps not the ideal audience for work that is beginning to shed light on the need for a more nuanced conversation. I wrote this article because—in many ways—*white people are the problem*. White people have not understood the nuances of how whiteness is a problem for English teaching and learning, and how we might act toward the change that is desperately needed in our field. Past work done in this realm has wanted to blame relatively less powerful white actors (i.e., young, novice teachers) for the whiteness problem(s) that saturate teaching and learning at the expense of what students do and do not learn about racism. To this end, Lensmire (2010) was among the first of the critical whiteness scholars to point to how “[c]ritical educators have begun to worry that the very way that we have imagined and conceptualized white people and their racial identities is contributing to our critical education failures with them” (p. 169). These concerns have emerged, in part, because scholarship on preparing teachers for the work of antiracist and social justice education has failed to account for the role of

context in structuring the work that teachers do—as though defying district, school, department, and colleague expectations for curricular and pedagogical compliance are risks to be minimized or dismissed, and as though we do not need to account for these risks in our work with teachers. Instead,

I am angered by the discourse that has framed and scapegoated the teachers we have failed to prepare—as though antiracist teacher education is somehow not complicit in the contradictory work that has long been interpreted as “failure.”

the work of English teacher education has long ignored the need to come to terms with the professional and personal ramifications new teachers face when they take (our) rallying cries for antiracist and social justice education seriously, instead tending to interpret fraughtness as failure. These judgments are made too easily, from our work and/or home offices, with the support of tenure, intellectual freedom, and likeminded colleagues, and are—in most cases—unfettered

by parental intervention and social ostracism. Like Lensmire (2017), I am angered by the discourse that has framed and scapegoated the teachers we have failed to prepare—as though antiracist teacher education is somehow *not* complicit in the contradictory work that has long been interpreted as “failure.” It is high time for a more complex interpretation of the work that teachers try—and fail—to accomplish. Possibilities for antiracist and social justice pedagogies in English education rely on the field’s willingness to embrace a more nuanced conversation.

Notes

1. All names of all people and places are pseudonyms.
2. The school principal provided this demographic data during an interview.
3. I italicize the words Mr. Kurt emphasizes in his discussions with me.
4. Due to journal space constraints, text has not been included. Readers are invited to review the piece here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/leonard-pitts-jr/article1944854.html>
5. For another interpretation of this classroom episode, see Berchini (2016c).

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