

# Whiteness Is a White Problem: Whiteness in English Education

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This article relies on methods of racial storytelling to provoke the field of English education (and teacher education more generally) to see how race is a white problem. Specifically, I tell and make sense of stories from my experiences as a white high school English teacher and English education scholar to wonder about the potential work white people might engage to contribute to better understandings of whiteness and, perhaps, antiracism. I argue that it is time for white people to worry about how mediating race through people of color affects engagement with race, racism, and antiracism in the field of English education.

## A White Problem

**A** French reporter asked Richard Wright for his opinion about “the Negro problem” in the United States after World War II.

“There isn’t any Negro Problem,” Wright told the reporter, “only a white problem.”<sup>1</sup>

In a context in which *race* usually refers to people of color, this article aims to provoke the field of English education to think of white people as having a race. Further, this piece is written in agreement with Richard Wright. Race is *a white problem*.

I’m white and it feels like my responsibility to grapple with the problem of my race.

Yes, my whiteness grants me sociocultural privileges and creates devastation and death for people of color. But, and I’m inspired by writing in the African American tradition here, my whiteness may actually cause me great harm too. Indeed, Ralph Ellison (1953/1995) finished an essay about twentieth-century fiction by assuring his white reader that it was “meant as no plea for white writers to define Negro humanity, but to recognize the

broader aspects of their own” (pp. 98–99). For Ellison, there is a need to understand that white supremacy dehumanizes white people as well as people of color. There’s a cost to the privileges granted to whites in a white supremacist society that we need to better understand to grapple with *our*<sup>2</sup> problem.

Overt white supremacist violence is an obvious expression of the problem of the white race. This explicit violence is easy to denounce. But, I wonder if something more subtle is already happening with those of us who have been made white in a white supremacist society. Part of the white problem might be that, and I’m guided by Lensmire’s (2017) work to better understand whiteness here, white racial identity is unconsciously mediated by stereotypes of people of color.

To mediate is to intervene in a dispute to bring about reconciliation. Mediation is about settling conflict. *Mediate* feels like the right word to use here. Certainly, white supremacist narratives of race were intended to create conflict by separating people into two groups—white and nonwhite. And many white folks who espouse antiracism seem intent on reconciling the dispute inherent in white supremacist societies. Still, I worry that white folks, with eagerness to reconcile race, ignore or look past the *internal* conflict at the core of white racial identity. Thandeka (1999) worried that people made white in a white supremacist society are always engaged in an eternal “battle by a self against itself in order to stop feeling what it is not supposed to feel: forbidden desires and prohibited feelings that render one different” (p. 12). Looking past this divided self to people of color as though they are always the *only subjects* in matters of race might be a way for white people to avoid reckoning with a white racial identity. This behavior places the burden (and promise) of disrupting white supremacy solely on people of color. If race is *always about* people of color, and white people express affirmation for people of color, then it might feel as though antiracism has been achieved. However, white people might only be reconciling internal feelings toward internal stereotypes of people of color, without ever encountering the white problem. White people might avoid grappling with the internal battle of a self that is set against itself in this way—Thandeka describes this state as a “hidden civil war” (p. 12). White people affirm a conception of people of color, identify as antiracist, and no longer have to work to understand white identity in relationship with a white supremacist reality. I fear this process might make white people more of a burden than an asset in the project to undermine white supremacy. White people are so quick to support or look

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to people of color in issues of race that we don't work to better understand ourselves. This is what I mean when I suggest that it is a problem for white people to mediate race through stereotypes of people of color, rather than grapple with our whiteness.

I wonder if white people should stop *always and only* looking to people of color in our learning or thinking about race. Yes, it is important to join with and follow the lead of people of color in their work against white supremacy. Certainly, it is mostly people of color who inspire my writing in this article and my thinking against white supremacy. Still, I'm convinced that white people *also* need to better understand white racial identity to engage anti-racism. I fear white supremacy is exacerbated when the problem of being white in a white supremacist society as being both connected *and separate* from the issues of people of color is not encountered.

I suspect that it is exhausting for scholars of color to shoulder the weight of reckoning with race in English education, while also suffering at the hands of white supremacy. Indeed, I've spent nearly 15 years as a high school English teacher and 3 more as a scholar of English education. In that time, I've watched as my white colleagues, more often than not, looked to people of color to handle matters of race. Indeed, Baker-Bell, Butler, and Johnson's (2017) recent important special issue in *English Education* is just another example of scholars of color confronting white supremacy in our field. My intention is that this article be a signal to our field that white folks ought to more deliberately wrestle with whiteness, without making race always and only *about* people of color. In this way, white people might begin to better shoulder some of the work of disrupting white supremacy.

I use racial storytelling to proceed with this exploration of how white folks mediate racial identity through people of color. First, I explain racial storytelling as a methodological choice. Next, I briefly describe the second wave of critical whiteness studies. Then, I tell and interpret racial stories from my career as a high school English teacher and an English education scholar. Ultimately, this article aims to illustrate how mediating whiteness through people of color creates a complex problem for white people, English education, and the larger project of undermining white supremacy.

## **Racial Storytelling**

Johnson's (2017) method of racial storytelling cues this piece. For Johnson, racial storytelling is a research method that highlights the racial experience of people of color. I explore the utility of using racial storytelling as a white person here, albeit with some hesitation. Certainly, as a white person I'm

mindful of the potential for me to exploit a methodology designed by people of color to disrupt white supremacy. I follow the lead of scholars of color to engage with racial storytelling to resist white supremacy, even as I'm wary of reaffirming whiteness.

My racial experience is shared and interpreted through the act of storytelling so that it might continue to haunt the teller (and, perhaps, the listener as well) in the present. Indeed, Johnson's (2017) work draws on Gordon's (1997) notion of haunting to suggest the past always shapes the present. The relationship between what is and what was informs what might (or might not) be. This, for Gordon, is haunting.

We are haunted by white supremacy.

White supremacy devastates Black and Brown people in the United States (and across the globe) every day. And white supremacy exists and, perhaps, thrives in our schools. Indeed, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, acts of overt white supremacy are on the rise in the aftermath of the violence in Charlottesville (Potok, 2017). *The New York Times* has also documented this trend (Astor, Caron, & Victor, 2017). English language arts classrooms are not safe from white supremacy. The field of English education is, like anything else in our contemporary moment, rooted in logics of white supremacy. Storytelling is, perhaps, an acutely useful tool for disrupting those logics.

According to Johnson (2017), racial storytelling is appropriate for people of color as they make sense of the ways that white supremacy haunts them. White people are haunted by race, too, whether it is recognized or not. Therefore, inspired by Johnson's (2017) important work, I aim to tell honest, racial stories to grapple with the specters of my own racial hauntings, especially in relationship to my career in English education. Indeed, Dillard and Bell (2011) contend that "it is our *duty*—our responsibility—to *remember*" (p. 347).

Remembering my experience as a white teacher and scholar, through racial storytelling, has helped me to think through some of the ways white people grow into whiteness. Recall my earlier reference to what Ellison (1953/1995) described as the cost of whiteness. I rely on the second wave of critical whiteness studies to explore that cost in more detail, before moving on to the stories I share in this article.

## Critical Whiteness Studies in English Education

Recently, critical whiteness studies in education has become an increasingly accepted field (see Jupp, Berry, & Lensmire, 2016, for an exhaustive review

of whiteness scholarship in education over the last 20 years). Still, there is a need for English education to better understand the second wave of this body of research.

Much of what has been written about whiteness and white identities in English education over-relies on McIntosh's (1988) white privilege framework, an approach that tends to document white colorblind identities (see Levine-Rasky, 2000; McIntyre, 1997; and Sleeter, 1993, for examples and discussions of this approach). Lensmire et al. (2015) have worried that this focus on white privilege in education has led to a confessional framework that actually impedes the efforts of antiracism work with white people. White people seek absolution without engaging the work of understanding the complexity of whiteness in relation to white supremacy. Jupp (2015) has since called for (and identified emergent examples of) a second wave of white teacher identity studies. For Jupp et al. (2016), a second wave of critical whiteness studies understands that whiteness is a hegemonic racial structure, and white identity is intersectional "and often privileged," but "a second-wave approach does not totalize, reduce, or essentialize white identities to these important, however partial, understandings" (p. 5).

For the purposes of this work, a second wave of critical whiteness studies lends itself to better understanding whiteness as a complicated problem for white people in the field of English education. In this article, I'm especially inspired by the work of Thandeka—a scholar of color interested in better understanding how white people learn to be white in a white supremacist society. Indeed, Matias et al. (2014) have relied on Thandeka's (1999) work to make sense of why "the behaviors of white teacher candidates" are "not always captured in the words they say" (p. 292). I also want to better understand how whiteness works in teaching and learning contexts, namely English education, and turn to Thandeka to frame the stories I share below.

Thandeka's (1999) research was "in sum" a "primer of psychological concepts" that worked to "examine the structure of a Euro-American's white racial identity as an impaired sense of a core self" (p. 26). Thandeka argued that awareness of this conditional state of whiteness must be pushed out of the active consciousness of white people to cope with the contradictory, ambivalent nature of white being. This creates what Thandeka described as a vanishing point—whites learn to avoid thinking about whiteness, thereby making it extremely difficult for us to consider white supremacy without first confronting the conditional nature of this racial identity. Thandeka described this as a "socialization process" led by a "white community of caretakers, legislators, and police force" (p. 85) that polices white behavior. Indeed, Lensmire's (2017) work to explore how internal (and often imagi-

nary) stereotypes of people of color mediate white people's understanding of race is helpful here. It might be easier for white people to see race in people of color because doing so—that is, mediating whiteness through people of color—gives white people a way out of confronting race and racism.

To explore some of the ways that white people mediate race through people of color, I now turn to moments of my own racial story. These moments, or stories, focus on experiences from my time as a high school English teacher and now as an English education scholar.

## A Story about Our White Problem

My first teaching job forced me to grapple with my whiteness.

I was hired to teach English and drama at a large, urban high school in a major city in the Midwest. It was 2003, and I was 23 years old. Cardinal's<sup>3</sup> students were predominantly Black—Black students made up 65 percent of the overall school's population.

My experience as a teacher at Cardinal forced me to account for my whiteness. In my first year of teaching, students constantly reminded me that I was, in fact, white.

"You racist, Mr. Tanner?" Black students asked me daily. "You coming at me because you're white?"

"No," I responded automatically.

"You dress like a white person, Mr. Tanner," another student told me. "You talk so white."

I shrugged. I didn't know how to respond to these questions and statements. I began to sift through childhood memories. Why *did* I act white?

My father was a first-generation, Russian Jewish immigrant. Dad was called a "Christ-killer" or a "greedy Jew" by his white peers as a child. The people in our family pictures didn't look particularly white to me. These immigrants had long beards and wore traditional Jewish yarmulkes or tefillin. Still, over time, Dad distanced himself from his family. He became a born-again Christian—a Jew for Jesus. Dad became a successful life insurance agent. I was born in an affluent, white neighborhood in 1980. When race came up in our family discussions—which it almost never did—I was told I was white. So I was white. Though I grew up in an affluent neighborhood, my father was not good with money. We lost our house after my parents were divorced in 1987, and I spent the rest of my childhood worrying about whether or not Dad could pay our mortgage. Still, by the time I became a high school teacher, I was used to being in predominately white, affluent spaces.

Teaching at Cardinal challenged me. I was a racial minority in this

context, and my whiteness was called out every day. Black students were often in the racial majority in my classrooms. I was well-aware that they spoke, dressed, and behaved *differently* from me. Doing my job as an English teacher required me to understand that difference, which required me to better understand myself. How had I learned to be white? What did this whiteness mean in and for my teaching?

I won't pretend that I was strategic in my teaching about race and white supremacy at Cardinal. Still, after four years at Cardinal, I grew accustomed to having frank discussions about my whiteness. I took my students seriously when they questioned my whiteness, and I talked openly with them about their Blackness. My experience as a teacher might have caused me to participate in what Thandeka (1999) described as the "race game." This game requires white people to explicitly name themselves as white in everyday situations. As described above, Thandeka thought there were complex reasons for white people *not* to confront their whiteness. Indeed, her research showed the extreme social discomfort that comes from white people talking openly about their whiteness. At Cardinal, I learned to grow comfortable with talking about race.

I was recruited to teach English and drama at Primville Area High School (PAHS) four years after being hired by Cardinal. I was excited about working in a more robust theater program. PAHS was a suburban high school across town from Cardinal. PAHS had a predominately white student population.

During my interview for this position, I was assured that PAHS was committed to racial equity. A poster with a mission statement hung in every classroom in the school district. This mission statement promised that people would be treated fairly regardless of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. After taking the job at PAHS, I quickly grew frustrated. It was so difficult to have open discussions of whiteness with students, teachers, and administrators at PAHS. It seemed like the school district was expressing a commitment to racial diversity, but not really doing anything to disrupt white supremacy.

Later, I began to see the difficulty of having open discussions about whiteness as part of a larger, systemic problem. Recall my earlier reference to Matias et al. (2014), and their reliance on Thandeka's (1999) work to think through how the words of white teacher candidates don't always capture their behaviors. Here I was in a predominantly white school district, being assured that it was committed to antiracism. Still, nobody seemed to actually want to talk about whiteness. Race always seemed to be about students of color, not about the white supremacist structuring of school. Ultimately, administrators, colleagues, and even students seemed to do what Matias et

al.'s teacher candidates had done. They said that they were committed to antiracism. They were quick to admit their white privilege, but, to me, they didn't seem to behave as though they actually wanted to engage race. These teachers and administrators loudly stated their support for students of color but avoided playing Thandeka's "race game." I watched as my white colleagues mostly failed in their attempts to connect meaningfully with students of color. This was the same problem I noticed during my first interactions with my mentor in the English department at PAHS.

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My white mentor met with me during the summer of 2008, before I started at PAHS. I was excited to see that *Black Boy* by Richard Wright was included in the curriculum for 11th-grade English. I shared my excitement with my mentor, a veteran English teacher.

"Richard Wright does such a good job of writing about whiteness," I told my mentor excitedly. "I learned so much about being a white teacher at my previous high school. This book will be a great way to engage race, especially with white students."

My colleague seemed taken aback by my comment.

"You have to be careful, Sam," he warned me. "Race is difficult to teach about. I only teach *Black Boy* if I have Black students in my sections of American literature. I make sure to ask Black students how they feel during our discussions. You should do the same thing."

Like the rest of my colleagues, my mentor had expressed a commitment to antiracist teaching equity when we first met. Still, he reacted with aversion to the idea that I might use *Black Boy* to provoke an exploration of white supremacy with my white students in 11th-grade English. It seemed that he thought race was a problem that only concerned people of color—according to him, Black students in his class. He mentored me to think the same. I remember being frustrated after our conversation, but not being able to articulate why.

Against my mentor's advice, I chose to make reading *Black Boy* with white students a central part of my 11th-grade curriculum. I used the text to prompt white students to think and write about the ways they learned to be white, and how that affected their lives. We discussed conditions of white supremacy in the book and in our daily lives as well. My mentor, perhaps,

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thought he was being racially conscious by deferring to people of color—Black students in this case—when issues of race came up. In some ways, this does honor that people of color often have a visceral experience with white supremacy and do *know something* that white people might not. But it also lets white people avoid thinking about their own whiteness and places the burden of understanding race *only* on people of color. Later, I came to believe that white supremacy is affirmed when white people don't speak up and actively make better sense of the problem of our own whiteness, albeit with humility and deference to the suffering that people of color continue to experience at the hands of white supremacy. Indeed, I came to think that white people have work to do to grapple with our whiteness—we have stories to tell and to understand.

My understanding of whiteness as my problem became clearer to me as my career in English education continued.

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I enrolled in a doctoral program in English education four years after taking the teaching position at PAHS. I remained a high school English and drama teacher but also began teaching English education classes, taking courses, and thinking about potential research projects. I had what was to me a profound encounter with a Black scholar who visited a class I was taking on race during the fall of 2012. I described my interest in better understanding whiteness to Mahmoud El Kati, and he shared a story about growing up.<sup>4</sup>

El Kati was Black and grew up in the segregated South. There was only one white-owned shop on the main street in his hometown in Georgia. This shop was a bakery. One morning El Kati—he was 8 at the time—caught the scent of fresh-glazed donuts. He innocently approached the bakery. As El Kati admired the donuts through the store's window, the white baker calmly stopped what he was doing and walked outside to where El Kati was standing. This baker kicked El Kati as hard as he could. The white baker returned to what he had been doing without saying a word. El Kati didn't tell his parents what had happened. The memory stayed with him and came out in his storytelling nearly 60 years later. Here is a transcript of what El Kati said to me about the story in class that night:

It is just something that stuck with me. You know, kick me, why'd he kick me? (*laughs*) And I was able to answer it years later. Richard Wright helped me understand it. Somewhere in his *Black Boy* he described, you know that man, when that elevator driver guy, had the guy kick him every day, and I thought about that, before I was able to figure out the compulsiveness, what Blacks do to people's senses, you know, you know, it's not, nobody I

know, nobody's born that way, you know, it's a release, it becomes a part of people's emotional life. It is a part of emotional life, you know, emotional lives are warped and they don't even know that they are that way. This is what Black people should say more of. You know, there is another kind of, another kind of vocabulary we need to develop, you know, you know it's not just protest, you know, you see the old people used to say that white people are like little bad children because of the way they behave towards them you know like children could be very kind and mean at the same time, that's like white grown people, they're children, you know what I mean? (personal communication, 2012)

I found El Kati's words both profound and disconcerting. The white baker's reaction to El Kati's Blackness was compulsive. El Kati credited this compulsive reaction to Blackness as a symptom of the baker's whiteness. For El Kati, whiteness created a problem for white people. Their emotional lives are warped, and they don't even know why.

According to Thandeka (1999), white people have a problem that is often expressed in compulsive reactions to people of color. Yes, these expressions can be and often are overtly violent, as El Kati's story of the white baker indicates. But the expressions can be subtle too. My mentor, intending to be racially conscious, reacted to race by compulsively turning to his students of color. His whiteness, perhaps, was made invisible to him in this way. Instead of grappling with his own race, my mentor, through his teaching in an English classroom, served to affirm that race is always and only about people of color. Perhaps my mentor was *mediating* race through his internalized conception of Blackness and, in this way, avoided encountering the problem at the core of his being—his whiteness. I wonder how many other white English teachers, often in the name of racial justice, make race *only* about people of color through choosing and teaching texts that do celebrate multiculturalism, but leave white supremacy undisturbed. It's important to include diverse authors and voices, but white people also have to critically encounter our race, too, if we hope to better understand ongoing conditions of white supremacy and engage antiracism.

The problem of whiteness continued to haunt me as I dreamed up a dissertation project. Ultimately, I chose to design a teacher-researcher project that would use theater to engage white students in making better sense of whiteness.

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I met with my high school's white principal in her office after school in the spring of 2012. It was the end of May, and I was seeking permission to conduct *The Whiteness Project* in our theater program the following year.

I intended to create a yearlong, extracurricular teacher-researcher project. Student participation would be voluntary. They would participate in Youth Participatory Action Research in the fall, write a play inspired by their findings in the winter, and produce the work as the school's spring play. I would facilitate this process, direct the play, and capture the teaching projects as an ethnographic researcher (see Tanner, 2018, for an exhaustive telling of *The Whiteness Project*).

I worried my principal wouldn't support my project. She invited the district's head of equity and integration to attend our meeting. Joan was one of the few Black employees in the district, and her job was to promote racial justice in the district's schools. I gave each person in the meeting a handout that described *The Whiteness Project*. I spoke about my vision for the project and talked about whiteness in terms of the conceptual framework mentioned above. Everybody was silent when I finished speaking. My principal turned to look at Joan.

"What do you think of Sam's idea, Joan?" my principal asked.

My principal's reaction reminded me of my mentor. My principal couldn't react to my project without first measuring the response of the only Black person in the room. Here was another instance of a white colleague mediating her understanding of race through a person of color. Yes, it seemed fair to evoke Joan's reaction to my proposal. Still, my principal turned to Joan almost compulsively. My principal placed the burden of approving or rejecting my project about whiteness on a Black person, even though it was my principal's job to sign off on the work.

"I think this is a great project, Sam," Joan told us politely.

My principal seemed relieved by Joan's statement.

"Yes, Sam," my principal quickly added, "I think this is an important project. You'll want to make sure that you get students of color involved, but you have my permission to conduct this study. Just make sure that you try and show our school in a good light."

I walked out of my principal's office with relief. My study was approved. Still, I was somewhat perplexed by her response. I was curious why my principal immediately asked me to recruit students of color. I was trying to create a project for *white people* to analyze *their whiteness*. Still, like my mentor, my principal assumed that any investigation of race required people of color in order to be legitimate. Again, I understood that the experience and stories of people of color are important if white people are to better grapple with race. But what would happen if white people stopped always and only looking to people of color to tell us how to understand white racial identity?

What if white people also worked to better understand what it means to be made white in a white supremacist society?

I attempted to answer that question with *The Whiteness Project* and received my PhD in the summer of 2014. I took a job as a college professor in the fall of 2015. My research and teaching continued the work of making better sense of my whiteness and white supremacy. I continued to watch as white colleagues compulsively turned to people of color when issues of race arose. White people, manuscript reviewers, conference attendees, colleagues, etc., often tried to understand my work in terms of its significance for people of color, even though I was purposely trying to provoke considerations of whiteness in relationship to white supremacy.

Discussions of race continued to happen around me, but they rarely centered the emotionally warped lives white people live and the failed self at the core of white racial identities. The conversation about whiteness in my field didn't seem to expose the problem of whiteness for white people and this, to me, felt like a problem.

### **What Do We Do with This White Problem?**

Collins's (2002) work to reclaim the two dimensions of Black women's activist traditions might be helpful in conceptualizing the possibility of white people not always looking to people of color to provide answers as to the problem of white racial identity in antiracism work. Collins argued that action from this tradition is designed to create social change along "two primary dimensions," the first being "the struggle for group survival" that creates "Black female spheres" to "resist oppressive structures by undermining them" (p. 141). The second dimension of this work directly challenges "the legal and customary rules governing" white supremacy (p. 142). Ultimately, Collins (2002) argued that it was important for Black women activists to sustain "an independent consciousness as a sphere of freedom [which] enables African-American women to engage in additional forms of resistance" (p. 143) and that "this autonomy provides the foundation for the principled coalitions with other groups that are essential for institutional transformation" (p. 145).

I'm leery of suggesting that white people need to appropriate Black women's activism to create spheres in which to resist oppressive structures. However, it seems right that white people are in need of communal spaces to work toward racial consciousness that is *independent* from dominating logics of white supremacy. Perhaps following the lead of Black women activists might help white people imagine such spaces in the work to resist white supremacy. These spheres could be helpful in the work to create coalitions

with people of color that, for Collins, are essential for institutional transformation and undermining white supremacy. Specifically, I'm thinking of my participation in the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective (see Lensmire et al., 2015, for a description of this group). We are a group of nine white scholars, teachers, administrators, and activists who come together to resist the dominating logic of white supremacy in our lives through storytelling, talking, sharing, interpreting, etc. Certainly, that work over the last five years has deeply informed my teaching and writing against white supremacy. Collins argues for a "both, and" approach to activism. White folks should both

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work to create openings to resist white supremacy and forge coalitions with others, people of color especially, to resist white supremacy.

Yes, I've written this article to suggest that white people should stop only and always looking to people of color in matters of race. This is a complicated move. Throughout this article, I've highlighted the gifts people of color have given me. The thinking of Ralph Ellison, Mahmoud El Kati, Toni Morrison, Thandeka, and Richard Wright is central to my learning about whiteness. Indeed, I've spent years turning to people of color and, in doing so, learned much about my whiteness. I've also learned that people of color don't have any clearly defined solution for the problem of my whiteness. I've come to think that it's unfair of me to look to people of color and ask them to teach me everything about whiteness at every moment, especially as they continue to suffer at the hands of white supremacy. It may not be to the same degree, but I've come to see that I suffer too. I turn to myself, here, to better understand how I might better work with and against the dehumanizing weight of my whiteness.

The problem of whiteness lives and breathes in our English classrooms and the field of English education. Whiteness is alive and well, even for those of us who have spent years teaching, learning, and writing about what it means to be white. I can be quick to admit my white privilege, nod vigorously when people of color talk about the devastating effects of white supremacy, and loudly identify as an ally to people of color. I can disavow the actions of white police officers when they kill Black and Brown people. I can feel a real aversion to the violence, visceral and subtle, acted out on Black and Brown bodies by white people. I can denounce the alt-right and condemn the white people that marched in Charlottesville. I can scoff as I pass a truck displaying the Confederate flag on my way to campus in central Pennsylvania. I can post in solidarity on Facebook, speak up about the importance of hiring people of color on search committees, and talk about being

*woke*. I can cite scholars of color and make it clear that I *get it*—people of color suffer because of white supremacy. The intentions of these actions are real. I *do* care about racial justice. Still, I worry none of these actions listed above actually help me figure out *my problem*. I continue to be white and continue to live and work in schools and a society that, whether we white people realize it or not, produce white supremacy. I'm complicit and will never be absolved. So what else can we white people do?

I don't have a simple answer to my question. I've written at length about the ways I've learned to be white. I've worked to grow smarter about how my whiteness has affected my work as a high school English and drama teacher, an English education scholar, and how I live in the world (see Tanner, 2016a, and Tanner & Berchini, 2017). I've designed teaching projects for white elementary and high school students to engage them in making better sense of their whiteness (see Tanner, 2016b, 2017; Tanner & Miller, 2018). I don't share this work to pretend at some sort of superior, racialized consciousness. I refer to it because I've spent years grappling with the question of what white people can do to resist white supremacy. Ultimately, I can imagine three general responses to this question that might inform English classrooms and the field of English education as a whole.

First, it is offensive and unhelpful for white people to ask people of color to shoulder the work of antiracism. People of color have suffered for generations at the hands of white supremacy. It is important for white people to engage this work as well but, to do so, we may need to realize that whiteness interferes with our ability to connect with others regardless of the impact it has on people of color. White people need to stop being silent about white racial experiences, even if that silence is borne out of a desire to make room for the voices of people of color. Yes, scholars of color have been doing this work for generations. White people *do* need to honor and value voices of color, and there is need for white people to begin speaking honestly about whiteness too. White teachers and white students have stories to tell, and to make sense of, even if they are heavy with the hauntings of white supremacy. I'm not calling for a ban against centering the stories and experiences of color. We need to center the work of people of color and we also need to better and more critically deal with the hauntings of whiteness and white supremacy. Yes, white supremacy has centered whiteness for generations, but it has also disguised and repressed the nature of white supremacy. White people need to be honest now, and honest in a way that doesn't erase the work of scholars of color who have led in this area. I fear the silence of white people represses the real, complex weight of whiteness.

Next, white people have a responsibility to better engage race and

whiteness in English education, without always looking for affirmation, absolution, or approval from people of color (real or imaginary). Please let me be clear, I do think it is important for white folks and people of color to dialogue and work together. It is problematic, however, when white folks are not continually making sense of the ways whiteness colors interactions with people of color. I wonder what teaching, learning, and research in the field of English education might emerge if white people began to seriously explore the ways whiteness continues to be made, and how those investments inform ongoing conditions of white supremacy.

Finally, engaging whiteness is an endless process. And it is a process, if we take Thandeka seriously, that will inevitably lead to white rage. White people have been damaged in becoming white, and this damage informs the ways white people move through the world. White people must be ready to work with that wreckage as we seek out better, more human ways to be in relationship to white supremacy.

If white people do reckon with our whiteness, white folks can engage discussions of race in our field with the complexity required. White people can better understand who and what we are. White folks may, in fact, have important contributions to make in better understanding what whiteness is, how it works, and how white supremacy might be dismantled through teaching, learning, and scholarship. If white people don't do this work, I worry that we will continue to live in a world that is devastated by white supremacy and mediate our antiracist intention through real and imaginary impressions of people of color. I worry white people will build real (or imaginary) walls, or fetishize people of color as something they aren't, without first wondering how our whiteness colors our ability to grapple with white supremacy and racism, on the one hand, and to more openly and honestly relate to people of color with integrity, on the other.

At the end of his memoir *Black Boy*, Richard Wright (1945/1998) wrote that both white people and people of color will be destroyed by the problem of white supremacy:

Yes, the whites were as miserable as their black victims, I thought. If this country can't find its way to a human path, if it can't inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, black as well as white, are going down the same drain. (p. 385)

White supremacy is a problem, but it is not a problem that *only* concerns people of color. Discovering a more human path for white people requires us to begin making serious sense of who we are and how race informs the ways we live. White people must engage the field of English education with

a better understanding of how white supremacy has situated reality.

White people have a problem. There is work to do.

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## Notes

1. This exchange is documented in Lipsitz's (1995) important essay about the possessive investment in whiteness.

2. I have trepidation about my use of *we* and *our* in this article. I use possessive plural pronouns in this piece to remind the reader of my own whiteness as well as to provoke white readers to consider their race. Still, I do not assume all readers of this work are white.

3. The names of people and schools in this article have been disguised.

4. El Kati gave me permission to record this conversation during class.

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