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BETWEEN SILENCE AND CHEER: ILLUMINATING THE FREEDOMS AND FRICTIONS OF YOUTH READING ACROSS DIFFERENCE IN A MIDDLE GRADE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Between silence and cheer: Illuminating the freedoms and frictions of youth reading across difference in a middle grade classroom

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Book banning has exploded in recent years. Conflicts over what texts belong in schools and libraries have caused rifts in communities around the nation. Within English language arts (ELA) classrooms specifically, many teachers have been under scrutiny with local groups and national organizations demanding that some teachers be monitored, fired, or even arrested. Backdropped by this socio-historical moment wherein calls for book censorship and attacks against school teachers are commonplace, this three-article dissertation joins the growing scholarship that explores the challenges that arise when teachers and students dare to address topics of race, racism, gender, and sexuality in the ELA classroom.

Designed as an ethnographic case study, this dissertation explores how one White ELA teacher and her sixth-grade students engaged with two regularly banned novels in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse classroom. The first paper employs critical Whiteness theory to examine the challenges, opportunities, and contextual factors that one White novice teacher encountered as she employed an antiracist approach to

literature instruction. It offers a structural understanding of why so many White teachers attempt but fall short of delivering antiracist pedagogy effectively. The second paper traces how three students of Color in the class negotiated their emotions during conversations about race as it emerged within a literature unit. Using critical discourse analysis, I examine how language was mobilized to invite some emotions (e.g., surprise) and inhibit others (e.g., anger), manifesting as "emotional rules" that regulated students' responses to texts. The third paper examines how two LGBTQ+ youths engaged in literacy not only as a medium for identity work, but as a way to speak back to the social, political, and institutional contexts of their schooling. Placing the theatrical performances that queer youth wrote and directed at the center of my analysis, I submit that these literacy activities are a means of understanding how youth see themselves in the world. Taken together, these articles extend the scholarship on how teachers engage their students on issues of difference through literature, raising important questions about how sociopolitical tensions take shape through moments of silence and cheer in the ELA classroom.

Dedicated to my brilliant students who
guide my work to center love and liberation.

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I once told my children that I was a phoenix. It was bedtime, and they were scared, so I decided to calm their nerves by convincing them that I turned into a mythical bird that would protect them through the night. From that point on, my children begged me to reassure them that I would transform into a phoenix and watch over them as they slept. In Ancient Egypt, the phoenix was believed to be an immortal creature related to the sun because it rose each morning from the east. Legend has it that the bird died each day in a show of flames, and then rose from the ashes to be born again the very next morning. I thought my alter ego as a phoenix was a fitting metaphor for all those who have pushed and inspired me to rise up in the darkest of moments when I could not muster the strength on my own to forge ahead in the doctoral program. I have been supported and loved by so many that there is no way to thank everyone who has shaped my journey. This next section, therefore, will forever be imperfect.

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Chapter 1— Introduction

Book banning has exploded in recent years. Conflicts over what texts belong in classrooms and libraries have caused rifts in communities around the nation. According to the American Library Association, efforts to censor literature in schools and libraries in 2023 reached record levels since the Association began compiling data on censorship more than twenty years ago (ALA, 2023a). Fueled by the country's intensely polarized political environment, book banning continues to surge, wherein lists of books—some flagged as inappropriate for children—circulate rapidly and widely by local groups and national organizations such as Moms for Liberty or US Parents Involved in Education (Alter & Harris, 2023; Borsheim-Black, 2024). Although this is not a distinctly American concern—efforts to censor teaching and learning in Australia and England are also prevalent—a PEN America report warns that in the USA, the scope of book banning since 2021 has been unprecedented (Borsheim-Black, 2024; Friedman and Johnson, 2022).

With campaigns led by parents and politicians demanding to remove titles and topics from the curriculum, book contestation has become a proxy in a culture war over issues of personhood such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) rights and racial equality. A vast majority of the 2,571 unique titles that were targeted for removal in 2022 were books by or about people of Color or LGBTQ+ individuals (ALA, 2023a). Even secondary school classics such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is getting cut from school curricula and libraries. Such censorship is alarming for educators and librarians who have been accused of promoting obscenity and sharing

"pornographic" materials with children (Harris & Alter, 2022; Pollock et al., 2023). Within English language arts (ELA) classrooms specifically, many teachers have been under a considerable amount of scrutiny, with campaigns led by local and national groups of mostly parents for some teachers to be monitored, fired, or even arrested (Borsheim-Black, 2024). Now, more than ever, English educators need to be clear about *what* they are teaching, *why* they are teaching it, and for *whom* they are teaching.

Backdropped by this socio-historical moment wherein calls for book censorship and attacks against school teachers are commonplace, this three-article dissertation joins the growing scholarship that explores the multi-layered challenges that arise when teachers and students dare to address topics of race, gender, and sexuality in the ELA classroom. Whereas research documenting the external pressures that influence classrooms in today's political climate is limited, the research exploring the internal challenges that teachers face when engaging their students on questions of personhood is robust. For instance, one line of scholarship identifies that the racial and cultural mismatch between teachers and their students functions as a barrier to discussing topics about difference (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013). The majority of teachers (80%) remain White[1], monolingual, and women-identifying, while today's classrooms are increasingly multilingual and multiethnic communities (Matias, 2015). This research illustrates how

[1] In this paper, I intentionally capitalize White/Whiteness in reference to race to make Whiteness known as a real phenomenon, a proper noun, that needs to be spotlighted. As Ewing (2020) argues, "When we ignore the specificity and significance of Whiteness—the things that it is, the things that it does—we contribute to its seeming neutrality and thereby grant it power to maintain its invisibility." I also consciously capitalize Black, Brown, Asian, and students of Color throughout the article so that I can invite readers to consider the ways that racial ideologies survive explicitly and implicitly in a world wherein White people are considered the default, and everyone else gets tagged with racialized labels.

some teachers are under-equipped to navigate student differences and broach sensitive topics about personhood in the classroom given their predominantly White identities.

Recent work in English education has advanced that one way to ameliorate the racial, cultural, and linguistic mismatch between teachers and their students, and to talk across these differences in the classroom, is by including diverse young adult literature (Paris & Alim, 2017). From conversations ranging from disability (Donovan & Weber, 2021), and religion (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2020; Wargo & Smith, 2023) to social class (Sarigianides & Thein, 2022), literature, it is widely believed, has the power to build empathy and bridge differences among diverse students and teachers. Finally, researchers have explored effective practices of antibias, antiracist (ABAR) pedagogy such as introducing specific language and setting norms for talking about controversial issues and systems of oppression (Kleinrock, 2021), framing racism, homophobia, and cisheterosexism as structural, not interpersonal (Picower, 2021), and exploring how Whiteness and White privilege are reinforced and interrupted in mundane ways (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Lensmire et al., 2013). Independently, each of these lines of inquiry reveal the complexity of teaching about difference in the ELA classroom. Of critical importance, both in this moment and in this dissertation, I join the scholarly conversation that examines how teachers and students use texts to talk about controversial issues of difference.

Overview of Dissertation and Research Questions

Collectively, the three articles of my dissertation seek to understand how one White ELA teacher and her sixth-grade students discussed two regularly banned young

adult novels in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse middle grades classroom committed to social justice. I detail each paper below.

The first paper, “Too close to the sun: An examination of a White novice teacher’s approach to antiracist literature instruction” interrogates the challenges, opportunities, and contextual factors that one White ELA teacher encounters as she employs an antiracist approach to literature instruction in a diverse classroom. Through a critical Whiteness lens, I investigate how the institution of the school works through the teacher to reinforce and disrupt White racial ideologies during a literature unit. This paper offers a critique against flattened ways of understanding why even the most well-intentioned White teachers so often fall short of delivering antiracist literature instruction and puts forward considerations for the design of professional development.

The second paper traces how three students of Color negotiated their emotions during race talk as it emerged from a literature unit. The central question I focus on in this paper is: *How do three youth of Color position themselves within the emotional rules of a classroom when responding to diverse literature?* Using methods of critical discourse analysis, I examine how language is mobilized to invite some emotions (e.g., surprise, empathy) and inhibit others (e.g., anger), manifesting as “emotional rules” that regulate students' emotional responses to texts. In particular, this study demonstrates how emotional rules were discerned, taken up, and challenged by three youth of Color when participating in discussions about racism that emerged from *Ghost Boys.* This study illuminates how critical pedagogies can be used with the best of intentions, and still reproduce existing racial dynamics that silence children of Color.

The third paper examines how two LGBTQ+ youths restory themselves and build allyship through playwriting and performance. In it, I ask, *How do two LGBTQ+ youths restory and rehearse possible selves through the metaphorical stage of the classroom? In what ways, if any, does dramatic performance create an affinity space for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies in the ELA classroom?* Through a restorying framework, I explore how two LGBTQ+ youths engaged in literacies not only as a mechanism for personal and collective identity work, but as a way to speak back to layers of the social, political, and institutional contexts of their schooling. Centering the scripts that youth write and adapt for the stage in my analysis, I submit that these literacy activities open up possibilities for educators to understand how youth see themselves in the world.

Taken together, these articles extend the scholarship on how teachers engage their students on issues of difference through literature, raising important questions about how sociopolitical tensions take shape in the ELA classroom.

Positionality

As a former teacher and researcher, I situated myself as a coach, curriculum designer, and participant observer at various points in data collection. At the start of the project, I acknowledged to the focal teacher, Ms. Murphy, and the families that my interests in conversations about race, racism, and LGBTQ+ topics stemmed, in part, from my longstanding awareness that as a White, heterosexual ELA teacher, I was not doing enough to support my own middle school students through contentious conversations. Despite a commitment to social justice issues, I struggled to facilitate conversations, particularly surrounding race and racism, in my own classroom. I often felt confused

about what my role should be in those discussions with predominantly Black and Latinx students. And yet, to ignore questions of race in the literature seemed even more precarious. My pre- and in- service training had not equipped me for such conversations and I felt unsure of terms such as "systemic racism" and "heteronormativity." I worried about the unpredictability and heightened emotions that might surface when broaching controversial issues in class. I remember one time when a student handed me a note with strict instructions from her parents that she was not to partake in the literature unit about LGBTQ+ youth. She then handed me a plastic bag with a ripped up copy of our class text, *Being Jazz: My life as a (transgender) teen.* Rather than addressing her parents' concerns head on, I quickly found her an alternative book to read alongside the class. When I began a doctoral program, I sifted through the scholarship to find answers to my own challenges in the classroom, only to find that my experiences were not unlike many White teachers attempting antibias, antiracist (ABAR) work. Many teachers were left to take it upon themselves if they intended to move racial, gender, and sexuality literacy learning beyond surface understandings (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). Thus, my experiences with my own students and immersion in the scholarship propelled the research questions undergirding this dissertation.

There is no doubt that many aspects of my identity made it possible for me to embark on this dissertation research in a Catholic independent school. In fact, the principal, focal teacher, and I leaned on my roles— as an ELA educator of 10 years, as a mother of three and soon to be four children, and as a doctoral student at a Jesuit institution— to obtain permission from the school community and Archdiocese to engage

in two potentially controversial book units. What was not said explicitly was how my Whiteness and cisgender orientation were identity markers that made families feel safe and open to my potentially controversial work with Ms. Murphy. These aspects of my identity, however, served as a disadvantage at times too. I recognize that in my analysis of data that the teacher and I participated in White talk (Haviland, 2008; McIntyre, 1997), which at times resulted in shallow discussions as we, two White women, pardoned one another for missteps, changed the subject, exchanged niceties or engaged in politeness to circumvent discomfort or awkwardness, despite our intentions of holding one another accountable (Lewis et al., 2001).

Indeed, I am used to a certain amount of privilege that makes engaging with ABAR work possible and optional for me. I continue to be on my own path toward racial awareness where I reach epiphanic moments and then realize how much I still do not know. Through this study, I have reflected on the ways I benefit from a focus on Whiteness and antiracism for my own professional gain by asking myself the questions Thompson (2003) poses and that Borsheim-Black (2018) adopts– *Have you read the work of scholars of Color for what it could give you, or did you hunt though only to find words that would legitimize your own claims about race and racism? Is this study making a contribution or is it another way to make White people, including you, feel better (less guilty) about being White?* (p. 235) These questions urged me to face my own biases and privileges as a White cisgender woman in my inquiry and analysis.

Chapter 2— Too Close to the Sun: An Examination of a White Novice Teacher's Approach to Antiracist Literature Instruction

"I just launched myself into the sun," asserted Ms. Murphy, a White novice teacher. "It was insane. Like Icarus flying straight for the sun," she explained in an attempt to illustrate how difficult it felt to teach about racism in her sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Here, Ms. Murphy compares herself to the Greek mythological figure of Icarus who, despite many warnings from his father, flew too near the sun with waxen wings and perished. Like Icarus, Ms. Murphy was sensitive to her delicate role as a White woman facilitating race talk with her racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students amid mounting tensions with colleagues, parents, and administrators outside of the classroom. Nonetheless, she persisted in her efforts to teach the novel *Ghost Boys* and address issues about racism, an act she perceived as so precarious, it was like flying too close to the sun.

In her first year of teaching at St. Joseph's, Ms. Murphy felt unsatisfied with the curriculum. She worried that it reinforced shallow notions of race and racism and did not honor the experiences of her diverse students. In response, she applied principles of antiracist pedagogy to center the voices of authors of Color and prioritize a focus on structural racism in her curriculum. Throughout her book units, she confronted many obstacles for teaching literature in the form of pushback from colleagues and caregivers, alongside her own uncertainty and ingrained biases about race as a White woman. For twelve weeks, I observed the freedoms and frictions Ms. Murphy encountered while implementing an antiracist approach to a book unit in her sixth grade classroom.

Like other English educators (e.g., Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Johnson et al., 2017), I view ELA classrooms as powerful sites for working toward racial justice, and believe that literature instruction can be an important tool for social change. To be clear, Ms. Murphy was not an exemplary antiracist educator, and thus, I focus here on her attempt, at best, to do justice-oriented work as a novice teacher working within a system that oftentimes constrained her efforts. The purpose of this inquiry, however, is *not* to identify all the instances of racism in Ms. Murphy's lessons nor is it to applaud Ms. Murphy for taking on an antiracist approach. Indeed, my goal is not to let her off the hook when she advances White racial ideology just because the work she was doing was hard. Rather, the purpose of this article is to interrogate how the system of schooling, one entrenched in White racial ideology, worked through Ms. Murphy at times and may have influenced and undermined her attempts to teach about racism. Specifically, I ask, *What challenges, opportunities, and contextual factors did one White ELA teacher encounter as she employed an antiracist approach to literature instruction in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse classroom?*

Theoretical Perspective: Critical Whiteness Studies

This paper is theoretically informed by critical Whiteness studies to understand how Whiteness shifts and mutates in different contexts (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Dyches, 2017; Matias & Grosland, 2016). Illuminating the ways in which even the most determined, social justice oriented teachers can maintain White supremacist thinking in their lessons, I join this theoretical perspective to showcase the possibilities and pitfalls encountered by one White teacher in her ELA classroom. Critical Whiteness

studies are steeped in the assumption that Whiteness maintains its power, in part, through invisibility and silence (Borsheim-Black, 2015). Critical Whiteness scholars, therefore, aim to contribute to an antiracist agenda by making visible how Whiteness operates systemically and sometimes tacitly "to privilege White people at the expense of people of Color" (p. 410).

Whiteness

Critical Whiteness scholars conceptualize *Whiteness* as a socially constructed category that has been used "to justify and legally defend social inequality based on race" (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 411). Whiteness as a construct has changed over time, and is therefore, contextual, not objective or biological (e.g., Roediger, 1999). It can also be defined as a racial ideology, that is continually maintained by means of speaking, thinking, and interacting, and reinscribed through institutional policies, societal norms, and epistemological values (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Gee, 2008). Whiteness is upheld through various mechanisms such as colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), White racialization (Thandeka, 1999), White racial identity (Helms, 1990; Jupp et al., 2016), White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), and White privilege (McIntosh, 2001; Lensmire et al., 2013). These theorizations provide individual and systematic analyses of enactments of Whiteness, all of which, when enacted, maintain a White supremacist society.

Antiracist Literature instruction

I draw on Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides's (2019) antiracist literature instruction as a Critical Whiteness framework that English teachers can use to make teaching race and racism a deliberate part of literature-based units in White-dominant

schools. As English teachers themselves, they looked across resource based pedagogies such as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), critical race English education (Johnson, 2018), translanguaging continuum (Parra & Proctor, 2023) and schooling for critical consciousness (Seider & Graves, 2020). While these approaches aimed at curriculum and instruction that were "affirming*"* for students of Color and multilingual learners, what Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides needed was an approach aimed at "disrupting*"* traditional curriculum and instruction for predominantly White and monolingual contexts (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 4). As DiAngelo (2016) asserts, "Most White people have never been given direct or complex information about racism before, and often cannot consciously recognize, understand, or articulate much about it" (p. 16). As a result, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) constructed a pedagogy that required White students to identify examples of racism in literature and the world as operating on individual and structural levels. The goal was to dialogue openly about race and racism, even when it feels uncomfortable. I employ their framework as a lens into the pedagogical approach Ms. Murphy was attempting to adopt and adapt in her classroom, though she never explicitly used the language of the framework itself.

Antiracist pedagogies have long been on the professional development docket for teachers given the field's disproportionately White K–12 teachers educating predominantly students of Color (NCES, 2021). Leading the charge, Critical Whiteness scholars Casey and McManimon (2020) designed and investigated their own professional support group for White teachers committed to antiracist pedagogy. In so doing, they traced the challenges and opportunities of eight White teachers who were engaged in

antiracist praxis. Below, I draw on some of the shared language they employed in their study that arose from dominant ideologies used to discuss— or avoid discussing race and White supremacy. The following concepts highlight discursive mechanisms that cause Whiteness to circulate yet remain invisible in the classroom. 1) *Colorblind* ideologies, an intentional and unintentional profession not to see or notice racial differences (e.g. "We're all the same " or "I don't see race") (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Colorblindness not only denies people of Color a part of their identity connected with their racial, cultural, and linguistic heritage, but it invalidates people's experiences with oppression. 2) *Colormuteness* describes a literal hesitation to label a person or program in racial terms (Pollock, 2004). Prior scholarship on colormuteness explores the consequences of educators "muting" their own language about race (vs. not "seeing" race, as implied in the term colorblindness) (Pollock, 2004). 3) *White privilege* emphasizes the privilege that White people have of not seeing or "dealing with" race (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 6). Picower (2021) points out that race evasive tendencies of White teachers harm students of Color by excluding their identities and making their lived experiences impossible to discuss. 4) *Fear*— namely, fear of harming relationships with school community members, and the fear of "getting it wrong," being called a "racist," or offending people of Color— is an inextricable challenge to antiracist work (Casey & McManimon, 2020). Critical Whiteness scholars who examine fear in race talk underscore how it contributes to rhetorical race-evasive strategies for teachers in the classroom (Pollock, 2004; Berchini, 2019). Through this case study, I identify how Ms. Murphy participated— implicitly and explicitly— in a constellation of pedagogical

practices and discursive mechanisms that upheld Whiteness even as she attempted to disrupt it.

Some critics contend that researchers of Color might be in a better position to study Whiteness because White people often cannot see their own Whiteness (Borsheim-Black, 2012). However, hooks (1994) asserts that racism is a White problem. That is, White people ought to educate themselves and participate in their own antiracist initiatives without leaning on people of Color to do that work for them (Borhseim-Black, 2012; Tanner, 2019). Certainly, as I am a White woman researching issues of race and racism, I run the risk of reproducing and recentering Whiteness. As such, I have studied models of other White women scholars to explore my positionality as a White woman and researcher to understand Whiteness as it exists at both the individual and structural level within the institution of school (e.g., Berchini, 2019; Borsheim-Black, 2015; Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Dyches, 2017; Haviland, 2008).

Literature Review

Given the focus of this article on Ms. Murphy, I locate my inquiry as joining others in White teacher identity studies and The Conflict Campaign research (Borsheim-Black, 2024; Pollock et al., 2023). I begin by providing background information on the first wave of White teacher identity studies and then illustrate how the second wave of scholarship has taken a sociocultural turn. Ultimately, this study's conceptualization of White teacher identity is rooted in the second wave scholarship, as I detail below.

First Wave White Teacher Identity Studies

First wave White teacher identity studies sought to investigate and expose the

ways that White teachers and students explicitly and implicitly evade discussions about race and racism in teaching and learning, often despite their intentions of doing the opposite (Jupp et al., 2016). This scholarship paints a disturbing picture of pre- and in-service teachers who insulate themselves from racial topics through colorblind and colormute approaches (see Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Haviland, 2008; Picower, 2009). English education researchers have long documented the colormute attitudes that even the most well intentioned of White teachers employ to promote White racial ideology that further marginalizes their students of Color (e.g., Haviland, 2008; Segall & Garrett, 2013; Skerrett, 2011; Thomas, 2015). Specifically, Picower (2021) developed a framework of curricular tools to demonstrate how teaching and content choices can serve to maintain White supremacy by hiding the realities of oppression. These first wave studies laid the groundwork for understanding White identities as race-evasive, a term that Jupp et al. (2016) mobilize to showcase how White teachers may take colorblind tactics (e.g., Sleeter, 1993) or participate in White talk by letting racial mistakes slide in conversations (e.g., McIntyre, 1997).

Second Wave White Teacher Identity Studies

Second wave critical Whiteness scholars have called for research that goes beyond what Borsheim-Black (2018) refers to as the "gotcha" approach that hunts and pecks for racial missteps when analyzing White teachers. These scholars criticize first wave work for essentializing White identities as monolithic, static, and decontextualized from institutions and societal norms (Berchini, 2016; Matias, 2016; Trainor, 2008). In response, second-wave White teacher identity studies have conceptualized White

identities as complex and situated, multiple and intersecting, and fluid and flexible (e.g., Berchini, 2016; Borsheim-Black, 2018; Johnson, 2013; Jupp & Slattery, 2010). As Casey and McManimon (2020) articulate, no one is reducible solely to their racial identity; people are never *just* their race, as their identities are made up of thousands of "commitments, positionalities, determinations, performances, behaviors, and habits" (p. 9).

The field has also called for additional research that aims to understand the dynamic between in-service teachers' White racial identities and their antiracist practices (e.g., Borsheim-Black, 2018; Dyches, 2017; Jupp et al., 2016; Skerrett, 2011). For instance, Skerrett (2011), Johnson (2013), and Borsheim-Black (2018) traced White English teachers as they explicitly and implicitly maintained Whiteness through their daily interactions with students around the texts they chose to include. These studies suggest that White teacher identity contains rich "complexities and contradictions" as it simultaneously interrupts and reinscribes Whiteness in the classroom (Skerrett, 2011, p. 319). Existing research also begins to paint a picture of the relationship between in-service teachers' White racial identities, their practice, *and* their school context (Berchini, 2016, 2019; Borsheim-Black, 2015; Pollock & Matschiner, 2022, Tanner, 2019). Berchini (2016, 2019) found that teachers' White identities were constrained by institutional factors including mandated curriculum and assessments with prescribed learning objectives. These curricular requirements, Berchini argued, contributed to the teachers' seemingly dismissive attitudes about race, when in fact, these teachers desired to take an antiracist orientation to the text. Together, these studies, exemplary of second-

wave work, emphasize the importance of research that conceptualizes White teacher racial identities as complex, and steeped in social, cultural, and institutional contexts. In what follows, I build on this body of scholarship to illustrate the role school and community play in shaping how one White teacher reinscribes and disrupts Whiteness in her antiracist approach to literature instruction.

The Conflict Campaign

To understand the broader sociocultural context of Ms. Murphy's White teacher identity, I nest my inquiry within the burgeoning scholarship about The Conflict Campaign— a concept coined by Pollock et al. (2022a,b) to describe the contemporary national and local effort to censor inequality topics in educational settings. The conflict campaign began in the summer of 2020 when nationwide protests against police brutality augmented K-12 education efforts to include questions of race and racism in the curriculum and professional development (Pollock et al., 2023). Starting in January 2021, politicians have filed over 300 bills in 45 states to censor teaching and learning regarding issues of race, racism, LGBTQ+ lives, diversity, and history (Young et al., 2022). During the 2021-2022 school year, and at the time of this study, politicians and local critics across 32 states tried to ban over 2,500 books from libraries or classrooms, often books with protagonists of Color, or with LGBTQ+ characters (Pen America, 2022b). Between 2021 and 2023, Pen America tracked over 4,000 such instances of banned books impacting 182 school districts in 37 states and millions of students (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). Beyond state bills, *local* pressures on schools have amplified since 2020 to censor race and LGBTQ+- related learning. Through survey data, Pollock et al. (2022a) found

patterns across 900 school districts of teacher censorship and self-censorship of race and diversity talk due to heightened “intimidation” and “threats,” fueled by highly vocal parents (such as Moms for Liberty or US Parents Involved in Education) and sometimes by politicians. Within schools specifically, many English teachers have faced a considerable amount of pushback. Borsheim-Black (2024) explored the effects of far-right conservative pushback on individual English teachers and their classroom practice. Her study reports on data collected from 15 semi-structured interviews with English teachers from a variety of teaching contexts across the USA. Participants reported self-censoring their book selections and classroom talk around race and LGBTQ+ related issues to avoid potential pushback. Finally, participants describe a range of strategies for protecting themselves and defending their practice. To date, however, few analysts have explored in detail educators’ lived experiences during the conflict campaign. In this article, I offer an analysis of one ELA teacher’s challenges, opportunities, and contextual factors that shaped her approach to antiracist pedagogy during the 2021-2022 conflict campaign, with an eye to the effects on her students' learning.

Methods

To make sense of the challenges, successes, and contextual factors impacting Ms. Murphy, a White teacher’s ability to deliver antiracist ELA instruction, I applied an ethnographic case study methodology (Stake, 2004). This approach to data collection allowed for a deep exploration of Ms. Murphy’s attitudes, emotions, and beliefs that shaped her teaching practices over the course of three months from January to April, 2022. Below, I detail the study context and methods for data generation and analyses.

School Context

The study was conducted in a northeastern city in Saint Joseph's Catholic school (all names of institutions and participants are pseudonyms). At the time of the study, 408 PreK-8th grade students were enrolled in the school. The students and staff alike were predominantly White, and approximately 15% of students received free or reduced-price lunch, a statistic commonly used as an indicator of economically disadvantaged students. Importantly, many of the Irish Catholic students at the school were related to police officers, an anecdotal detail that surfaced during the study. While my choice to focus on a Catholic school may constrain the generalizability of my data in some ways, it is important to note that this school demographically and instructionally resembled many of the public schools in surrounding towns, and culturally mirrors the national social movement of book censorship that is often rooted in White Christian nationalist ideology (Borsheim-Black, 2024; Burke et al., 2023).

Typical of many northeastern Catholic schools, St. Joseph's struggled with student enrollment before the COVID-19 pandemic and then experienced a surge of matriculation during the pandemic due to their commitment to keeping their building open. During my time there, they were eagerly working to retain families while simultaneously trying to recruit new ones. I detail this here as issues of curricular controversy were sometimes skirted as a means to appease a broad range of families in order to secure their matriculation the following year. Teachers were, in short, ambassadors of the school product, and required to behave as such in family facing interactions.

Nora Murphy (Teacher)

Nora Murphy was a White, twenty-six year old, second-year teacher at St. Joseph's at the time of the study. I first met her while working as a research assistant with a multi-year research-practice partnership dedicated to antibias, antiracist (ABAR) professional development at St. Joseph's in the fall of 2021. Enthusiastic about promoting social justice through her ELA curriculum, she was an active member of the community of practice. At the time of the study, Nora was participating in *three* ongoing professional development programs organized by Ignatian College and geared toward racially responsive pedagogy. Ultimately, I selected Ms. Murphy as my focal teacher because she seemed like a committed teacher, had some demonstrated awareness of how Whiteness operated, and expressed an eagerness to participate.

Class Context

During the time of the study, Ms. Murphy taught ELA, Religion, and Social Studies every day across two sections of 6th grade. She also ran a homeroom of sixteen students. Each of her two classes of ELA met four times a week, with the last day of each week being an extended double-block period. Of her thirty-three sixth graders, thirty students (11-12 years) agreed to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Fifteen of the participating students identified as White, eleven identified as Latinx, two identified as Biracial (Black/White and Asian/White), one identified as Black, and one identified as Asian.

Curriculum

Ms. Murphy and I organized the curriculum into two units that spanned 12 weeks.

Each unit included different focal texts, articles, multimedia, and compositions. Focal texts included two novels, *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018) and *The Best at it* by Maulik Pancholy (2019), which served as anchor texts that guided conversations. This study focuses primarily on the unit on *Ghost Boys,* as tensions surrounding the racial topic of police violence soared in and outside of the classroom. In contrast, tensions were relatively nonexistent during the subsequent unit on *The Best at it*, despite its potentially controversial LGBTQ+-theme.

Ghost Boys is a novel loosely based on the murder of Tamir Rice in 2014, and tells the story of a twelve-year-old Black boy, Jerome Rogers, killed by a White police officer who confuses his toy gun for a real threat. As a ghost, Jerome meets another "ghost boy," Emmett Till— a boy who was abducted, tortured, and lynched by two White men in Mississippi in 1955—who takes Jerome on a journey to recognize how historical racism contributed to the violence that ended his life. Jerome also meets Sarah, the daughter of the police officer who shot him, and the only living character in the novel who can communicate with Jerome's ghost. Together, Jerome and Sarah work to transform Office Moore so that he can recognize his own racial biases. Rhodes sends the message that fear and stereotypes don't make the world safe, but empathy and forgiveness have the power to create change in the world. At the time of the study, *Ghost Boys* was banned in districts across New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Florida, California, and Texas (Pen America, 2022a) after a surge of community complaints that it was "anti-police propaganda" (Dellinger & Serrano, 2022) or could cause White children to feel "ashamed based on the color of their skin" (Hixenbaugh, 2022).

Our Partnership, My Positionality

Significant to this ethnographic approach was my immersion in the school context. My three months of sustained work as a participant-observer were essential (Brewer, 2000). Being "White" and "cisgendered" seemed to make me a more natural confidant of Ms. Murphy, and being a former ELA teacher, coach, doctoral student, and mother positioned me as a comrade and "expert" in children and pedagogy within the school community. Nora, who had practically no coaching support from her school saw something mutually beneficial in working with me on my research. She agreed to allow me access to her classroom for my inquiry under the condition that I provide daily instructional feedback to her as well as collaborate on developing a new antibias, antiracist (ABAR) curricular scope and sequence.

At the start of the study, I gave Nora a range of feedback from on-the-fly comments to written observations about her lessons. My feedback focused mostly on supporting her pedagogical skills (e.g., facilitating discussions, giving instructions, assessing student comprehension during class time). In our weekly meetings, we mapped out and adjusted the large scope and sequence of the unit. Ms. Murphy then used our meetings to write daily lesson plans which I did not see in advance of her lessons. Within a few weeks, however, my coaching role slowed as tensions in the community spiked. I began to serve more as her sounding board, thought partner, and "backup" (Pollock et al., 2022a) in navigating tensions during our time together. I worked behind the scenes to garner support from the principal, Ms. Kalvin, and the families. Through frequent emails, I outlined weekly activities, provided student quotes and questions, and attached

photographs in an effort to appeal to and include the community in the social justice work we were trying to accomplish. As Ms. Kalvin was also new to her leadership role and to the school itself, I wrote these emails with the hope that they would help to protect our work by equipping her with concrete examples of the antiracist teaching and learning we were engaged in as she too encountered frequent criticism. These immersive measures positioned me, a novice researcher myself, to better understand the context of the study and subsequently, illustrate a vibrant portrait of Nora's realities as she worked to teach from an antiracist perspective.

We were an awkward team—Ms. Kalvin, Ms. Murphy, and I— all White cisgender women and novices in our respective roles in leadership, teaching, and research eager to engage in antiracist work while tensions from the community ballooned. Therefore, the examples I share below are not representations of perfect pedagogy nor of brave responses in the face of local pushback. Rather, they are reflective of how teaching and learning are shaped by countless and conflicting emotions, pressures, and decisions made in the moment, by the very fallible stakeholders involved within the constraints of an intensely political school context.

I'd be remiss if I did not convey the close-knit partnership that Nora and I developed in the field. In other words, I was too near to this "data" to write from a position of disinterested academician. At the time of data collection, I was in my first trimester of pregnancy and she was newly engaged and planning a wedding. Both of us heading into new chapters of our lives, we spent time in between class sessions conversing passionately about personal and professional topics. After analyzing the data,

I disclosed the findings to Nora. Recognizing that we continued to work in interconnected and adjacent communities, I wanted her to review the findings before possible publication to affirm that they would in no way jeopardize her teaching position, even if her identity was anonymized. Though it was hard at points for Nora to read about some of her missteps, she did not sense that the data presented was potentially harmful. I know that Nora's blessing of the findings creates the illusion that I engaged in a participatory approach to analysis, but truthfully this dialogical process was prompted by my commitment to portray Nora in responsible ways more than a desire to negotiate the accuracy of the research results. Though I offered for Nora to review the dissertation in its entirety, she declined due to time constraints. She also explained that she entrusted me to interpret the data given my immersion in the scholarship and theory. In so doing, she insisted that I maintain "epistemic authority" in my analysis of the findings (Caretta & Pérez, 2019). I add these descriptions here not only to humanize our interactions but to underscore the relational aspect of our researcher-participant dynamic that stretched beyond the parameters of the study and invariably shaped my analysis below (Patel, 2016).

Research Design

In the larger study, I used an ethnographic case study design (Stake, 2004) to understand Ms. Murphy and her students' experiences across two sections of 6th grade through a) 79 hours of class observations over twelve weeks (42 occasions); b) 62 semi-structured interviews with the principal, teacher and her students; c) 13 hours of weekly reflection meetings with the teacher; and, d) artifact collection (4 anchor charts, 42 days

of google slides, 30 students journals, and 30 final projects) across the two units. The many forms of data collection serve as a means by which to triangulate the data, further establishing the credibility of the study's findings. For the purposes of this article, I draw on single case study design to illustrate one focal participant, Ms. Murphy (Stake, 2004). While I worked to understand the realities specific to the case, I did not wish to generalize to the teaching population. Instead, I offer the findings as theoretical propositions (Creswell, 2009) that can help stakeholders more fully understand the nuances between teachers, antiracist pedagogy, and their school contexts specifically.

Data Sources

Given the large scope of data collection, I identify below which data sources were central to pursue the research question.

Classroom Observations

This study stems from data collected over 26 consecutive school days, across a six week period, totaling 39 hours. Observations occurred during class times, lasting between 1.5 to 4 hours in length. Data were recorded using a video camera and three audio recording devices. In addition, I took photographs, wrote jottings and fieldnotes, and audio-recorded daily voice memos (Emerson et al., 2011). Emphasis was placed on capturing the participating teacher and students' interactions during race talk, particularly in student journals and in literature circles. I converted the video and audio recordings into transcripts for subsequent analysis.

1:1 Interviews

The interview with Ms. Murphy occurred once at the end of the two book units, and lasted 2 hours. The 30 participating students were interviewed on two distinct occasions (totaling 60 interviews). These interviews were semi-structured, lasting approximately 15 to 45 minutes in length. All student and teacher interviews involved "video playback protocols," asking participants to reflect on predetermined points in the video recording and to describe their thinking and feeling (Juzwick, 2003). The interviews were video recorded and transcribed. In this study, I draw on the one interview with Ms. Murphy, and six interviews from peripheral student participants.

Student Journals and Google Slides

Throughout the two literature units, students reflected in journals through writing and drawing usually with a prompt from the teacher. The goal of these journals was to provide a private space for students' visceral responses to the texts, promote teacher-student dialogue, and strengthen teacher-student interpersonal relationships (Werderich, 2010). I photocopied 1,740 pages of journal writing (approximately 58 pages per student). In this study, I examined the journals of all thirty student participants, looking specifically at the teacher's responses. In addition, Ms. Murphy presented some of her lessons in the form Google slides to help detail activities and assignments. I reviewed all 18 of these Google slide presentations to understand the scope and sequence of her book unit.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative and ongoing process (Emerson et al., 2011), with

findings based on a case analysis of the focal participant. The organizing structure for the singular case narrative included references to Ms. Murphy's lived experiences, affordances, and challenges to the unit as they occurred in (a) the classroom, (b) the interview, and (c) the community. I looked for recurring themes across the data to build an overall understanding of her case.

Coding

To understand the factors that contributed to Ms. Murphy's antiracist instruction, I applied multiple layers of inductive and deductive coding. The first pass at the data allowed me to minimize the data set. I watched and listened to 70 hours of video and audio recordings of my class observations and student interviews, noting any striking elements that pertained to my research question. I identified 12 specific days of class observations and 6 student interviews that I then transcribed. Then, I selected significant and theoretically rich episodes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) from a deductive pass throughout the broader corpus wherein I looked for moments when White racial ideology was foregrounded and antiracist pedagogy was hindered or supported. Reading through the transcripts, I identified 24 episodes from class observations, 7 episodes from student interviews, and 56 episodes from Ms. Murphy's interview. Reading through the written documentation from the class, I selected 10 episodes from student journals, 14 episodes from Google slides, and 18 episodes from my field notes. With focal episodes selected, another layer of inductive coding then allowed me to develop emerging codes around the moments that constrained or supported Ms. Murphy's instructional practices.

Next, I re-read the focal episodes, and drew on a priori codes (Saldaña, 2016) stemming from Pollock et al.'s (2023) typology of four educator talk experiences during the conflict campaign. Some educators described 1) being *supported* by education leaders and communities to engage in conversations about race; 2) being *silenced* into ending or omitting talk about race; 3) being *subdued* into muting such talk, and 4) being moved to *speak up* to insist on talking about race. Pollock et al. also noted that educators were not confined to a single type of talk experience. While Pollock et al.'s analytic framework focuses on educator experiences amid multi-level local, state, and national pressures, I applied and extended their typology to hone in on the local level in one independent Catholic school context. In so doing, I examined how Nora encountered pressure from her school community, and in response, applied similar types of pressure on her students in her ELA classroom. In short, I coded whether and how Ms. Murphy was silenced, subdued, supported, or moved to speak up, and then how she participated in these categories herself (see Table 1).

I further categorized these codes to understand how Whiteness was braided into each of Pollock's four talk experiences. As Whiteness often operates in covert ways, I coded not only what appeared in the data but what did not appear, including hesitations, omissions, politeness, and missed opportunities (Borsheim-Black, 2015, Picower, 2021). For example, I coded when Ms. Murphy averted questions about Emmett Till as the "White out tool." Therefore, it was just as important to analyze which texts and topics were not explored to better understand how Whiteness circulated.

Table 1

Sample Deductive Codes for Data Analysis

Category	Codes and subcodes	Examples
Silenced	• Local pushback	• An administrator pulled down her word-wall.
Silencing	• The White out tool, colormuteness	• Ms. Murphy omitted topics (e.g., Emmett Till) from the curriculum.
Subdued	• The chilling effect	• Ms. Murphy received mixed-messaging from the principal about whether she supported the *Ghost Boys* unit.
Subduing	• Colorblindness, fear of getting it wrong, fear of harming relationships, uncertainty	• Ms. Murphy agreed with a student who asserted that "we're all just the same egg."
Supported	• Local back up	• Parents bought *Ghost Boys* to read along with their children in class. One parent sent an email of gratitude to Ms. Murphy.
Supporting	• Centering BIPOC students experiences and expertise • Listening	• Ms. Murphy facilitated a conversation about racial representation in movies and listened intently to students' insights and experiences.
Speaking up	. Organizing, advocating	• No evidence of this.

**Note*: Adapted from Pollock et al., 2023

A back-and-forth approach between inductive and deductive codes during data analysis, and a search for discrepancies, helped me to refine themes in the data (Ragan & Amoroso, 2019). Throughout this iterative analytic process, I continued memo writing to facilitate sense-making within the case as coding took place (Miles et al., 2014). After rereading, I realized that several of the initial codes were repetitive; therefore, I removed some and collapsed others (e.g. "collegial-" and "family criticism" became "local pushback"). After several rounds of coding and recoding, the five most recurring codes were White out Tool, colormuting, fear of getting it wrong, fear of harming relationships, and uncertainty. These codes were then categorized into three categories— silenced and silencing, subdued and subduing, supported and supporting—that I will discuss in the findings.

Findings

I have organized this section into two parts. First, I present a brief portrait of Ms. Murphy's White teacher identity, which includes her self-identification as a "small-town girl," "a White immigrant," and a "novice teacher." Second, following Pollock et al. (2023), I examine the relationship between her multifaceted racial teacher identity and her antiracist praxis through an analysis of the challenges, opportunities, and contextual factors she encountered in the unit.

Ms. Murphy's White Teacher Identity

A Small-Town Girl, a White Immigrant

Born in a small town outside of Cork, Ireland, Ms. Murphy perceived her upbringing to be different from those of her students because her community was so

homogeneously White. She also believed that her experiences in school were different than those of her students' because she was typically taught by nuns. As a young person, she wrestled with her own sexual identity, and looked to the internet to better understand herself and find community. She soon discovered a vast world of difference online and became impassioned by social justice topics. When Nora entered university in Cork, she majored in education but was disappointed to not find a community of social justice oriented scholars. As a result, she left for the U.S. to pursue a graduate degree in theology where professors were more "committed to social justice" at Ignatian College (Interview, April 12, 2022). Still, however, Nora yearned to follow in the path of her parents who were both teachers back in Cork. As a teacher, she was determined to provide students with texts outside of the British canonical literature she encountered as a student. Nora was soon hired at St. Joseph's and began teaching in person during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms. Murphy was aware, to some extent, of the ways her experiences as a White immigrant might shape her antiracist approach. For example, she expressed concern that her own Whiteness could create unconscious biases in her pedagogy. Similarly, her foreign background made her less familiar with the contemporary and historical racial dynamics in America. Nora was constantly worried that she might inadvertently say something racist or use the wrong terms despite her goals to do the opposite. Nonetheless, she was committed to the work and advancing justice in ways she rendered—at the time—possible.

A Novice Teacher

Ms. Murphy's first year as a classroom teacher—the 2020-2021 school year—coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak, and subsequent bouts of remote schooling. During the study, Ms. Murphy was technically in her second year in the profession, though she claimed that "this basically has been my first year" given the turbulent nature of the previous year with COVID (Interview, April 12, 2022). As a novice teacher hired to teach ELA, Religion, *and* Social Studies during COVID-19, Ms. Murphy had absolutely no coaching support in the classroom due to teacher shortages in St. Joseph's. Nobody observed her, provided feedback, or approved her lesson plans. She felt completely alone, but also free to shape the curriculum and instruction to her liking. With a Master's degree in theology, but no formal educator preparation, Ms. Murphy hungered for opportunities to build her teaching practice. She enrolled in three professional development series. At times, she enlisted feedback from colleagues. She reflected on these interactions. "They would say, 'You've got great classroom management.' Classroom management is kind of the baseline. I wanna be a *good* teacher. I don't wanna just babysit 33 students (Interview, April 20, 2022). Acknowledging her limitations as a novice, Ms. Murphy made clear that she would not have included the *Ghost Boys* novel without me, a university resource and colleague, there. She admitted that she probably would have done something easier like *The Hunger Games.*

Through talking to Nora, I realized her orientation to antiracist pedagogy was rooted in her racial, immigrant, and novice identities. Labeling Ms. Murphy as simply "White" barely captures the complexity of her teacher identity. As she described growing

up in a homogenously small-town, she demonstrated awareness of her Whiteness and the ways Whiteness shaped her perspectives and fears— evidence of a "race-visible" identity (Jupp et al., 2016). Her experiences in the University and in three professional development programs opened up opportunities for her to engage in a reflexive antiracist praxis, though she recognized that her own pedagogical skillset was still developing.

Antiracist praxis

In this section, I turn to the relationship between Ms. Murphy's White teacher identity and her antiracist praxis— specifically, her attempts to include *Ghost Boys* and address questions about contemporary racism. I detail Ms. Murphy's realities alongside instantiations of Whiteness across three forms of experiences including silenced and silencing, subdued and subduing, and supported and supporting. I do not include Pollock et al.'s final form of "speaking up" because I did not find sufficient evidence of this in analyzing the data.

Silenced and Silencing

I open with "silenced and silencing" to more meaningfully situate her experiences in the larger context of the school.

Silenced. Ms. Murphy felt silenced by some colleagues and caretakers and then enacted silencing around certain race-related topics in her classroom. At the start of the unit, a White mother called the principal to demand an end to what she named as an "anti-police book." The mother felt that her husband, an officer himself, was under attack. When the book unit continued, this parent rallied together a group of three mothers and notified the superintendent of the archdiocese who consequently came and

audited the school, days after the unit had already ended. This pushback, however, was not unique. Another parent emailed Ms. Murphy to tell her that children should simply not talk about so-called "adult" problems. Around the same time, another very upset White parent emailed Ms. Murphy with the concern that she was teaching an anti-police book to the children of police officers. She argued that her son's two older, biracial (Black/White) brothers worked hard as local officers to protect their neighborhoods. This parent also accused Ms. Murphy of being "racist" herself *against* police officers. According to Ms. Murphy, the parent felt unsatisfied when Ms. Murphy tried to explain that she was teaching about racial biases that existed within all people, not just police officers. Still, this parent remained outraged, and announced that she would pull her son from the school the following year, and she did. When some of the fifth grade parents became aware of the *Ghost Boys* unit in the sixth grade, they too threatened to pull their children if Ms. Murphy dared to teach this book to their children the following year. Despite this criticism, Ms. Murphy continued with her unit. She recognized that these parents' responses reflected an all too familiar concept, Picower's (2021) notion of "White Out," a curricular tool used to cement Whiteness as normal and innocent that was centered in our larger ABAR work (p. 27).

Ms. Murphy's unit on *Ghost Boys* also stirred tensions with her colleagues. At one point, two senior colleagues showed up at Ms. Murphy's door as she was packing up to leave for the day to persuade her to stop the unit. In retelling this interaction to me, Ms. Murphy described how she had braced herself for a lecture about the excessive violence in *Ghost Boys.* But her colleagues never even mentioned the fact that a Black child was

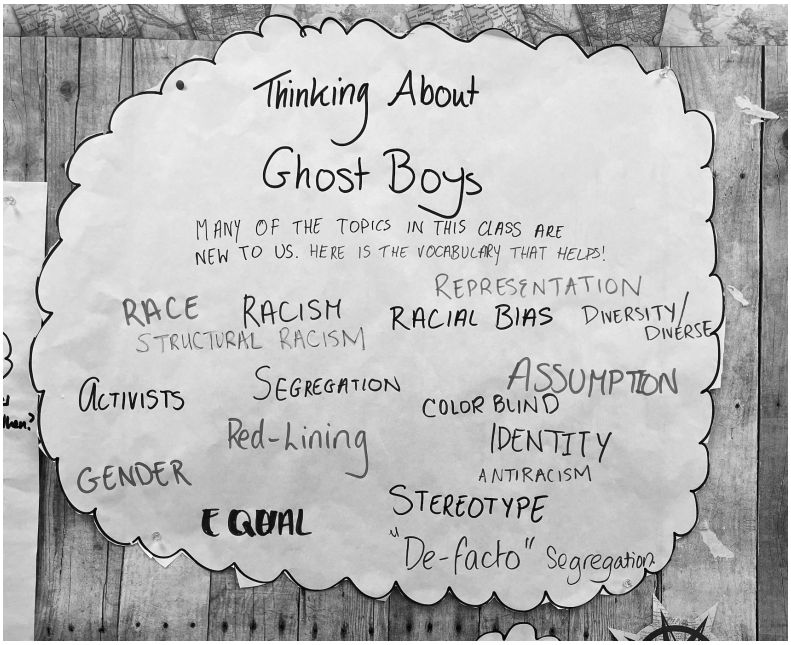
shot on the first page of the book. Instead, they argued, from a religious perspective, that the ghosts in the story were going to scare the children and further confuse them about how people ascended to heaven. When that did not seem to work, her colleagues took a disciplinary perspective. They argued that Ms. Murphy was not properly teaching literary genres since *Ghost Boys* included fictional and nonfictional characters. In short, these colleagues tried from multiple angles to get Ms. Murphy to back down, but she did not. These attempts to censor *Ghost Boys* in the spirit of preserving White innocence (e.g., scaring the children, confusing them about heaven) or in the name of advancing their education (e.g. teaching literary genres) function to avoid racial discourse completely. They are glaring examples of colormute rhetorical strategies or coded language that aim to silence meaningful conversations about race and racism, leaving Whiteness itself unexamined and thus unknowable to many White students (Casey & McManimon, 2020).

Similarly, on a different occasion, before a schoolwide event welcoming potential new families, the chief enrollment officer—a long term administrator at the school—went into Ms. Murphy's classroom and took down her antiracist word wall (see Figure 4). She claimed that this sensitive topic would deter families from matriculating their children. Again, the mechanism of colormuteness (Pollock, 2004) was at play. By literally removing the language around race and racism from the walls of Ms. Murphy's classroom, the enrollment officer— a representative of the school— attempted to silence racial discourse, and thus, block avenues to build the children's critical consciousness. As for the community-wide event, she sent clear messages about which families were in fact welcomed, and deemed valuable or expendable at the school, reinforcing racial

hierarchies with Whiteness at the top. This example reveals how a member of the administration, a powerful symbol of the institution, supressed Ms. Murphy's individual agency to mobilize antiracist pedagogy.

Figure 1

Word Wall from Ghost Boys



The local backlash that Ms. Murphy encountered created what Pollock et al. (2023) call, "a chilling effect" that thwarted her efforts to engage in racial discourse (p. 46). Though Nora did not fully concede to the silencing efforts, she felt drained by the persistence of the criticism. On one occasion, I found Ms. Murphy weeping out of frustration at her desk after an angry parent confronted her in the hallway. She felt alone in facing the pushback, and was confused by the mixed-messaging from Ms. Kalvin, her principal, who was initially quite supportive but then relatively absent for the remainder of the unit. Recognizing that this book unit was causing Ms. Murphy so much duress and

possibly jeopardizing her job, I offered to pause or stop the project altogether to which she responded vehemently, “No. I don't want to teach at all if I can't teach like this, for social justice. You can't have a school and brag about 50% diversity and then not talk about race!” (Field notes, March 8, 2022). Here, Ms. Murphy highlighted her commitment to move forward with the unit despite the persistent local acts of intimidation from her community. It was in this conversation that she also requested a day off from the observations and video recording, which I immediately granted.

Outside of the external pressures from colleagues and caretakers, Ms. Murphy also had internal imaginary fears that silenced her. For instance, she feared “getting it wrong,” or possibly inflaming families of Color by saying something offensive, and being accused of being “racist” (Casey & McNaminon, 2020, p. 70). Ms. Murphy reflected,

> What if a Black parent had emailed me and said, "You're using all the wrong words and you're not helping at all!"? I had to check myself every so often. Kind of think like, how is Jahir's family thinking about this?... I think a challenge of this work is families of Color are in a position where they can't demand this work. And I worry that those families felt like they couldn't reach out and correct me on anything because I was [at least] doing something at all. (Interview, April 12, 2022)

From one perspective, this reflection shows Ms. Murphy’s apprehension of “disappointing” the families of Color (Skerrett, 2011). Her comments also echo Tatum’s (1994) claim that White people feel they are breaking a social taboo by talking about race and racism so much so that they fear being perceived as racist themselves. She acknowledges how Whiteness circulates tacitly in a school community where White families could claim rights over her curriculum, but families of Color could not. From a

different angle, however, this reflection highlights Ms. Murphy's belief that her *Ghost Boys* unit was a study about Black people, and not an investigation of White people. In her imagined conversation with a Black parent, she feared being reprimanded for using the wrong language and "not helping at all," as if "helping" people of Color is the goal, rather than the goal being to put Whiteness under the limelight. This finding underscores a longstanding practice wherein White English teachers, in the name of racial justice, make race *only* about studying and affirming people of Color, not about examining White people, as if Whiteness is not a race to be understood and scutinized (Tanner, 2019). Thus, one obstacle for Ms. Murphy was that she understood the significance of her antiracist work only in terms of "helping" people of Color, a goal that she believed she may not achieve without input from her families of Color to help guide her. This fear of "getting it wrong," in turn, contributed to her own self-silencing (colormuteness) around racial topics.

Silencing. Ms. Murphy also participated in silencing by omitting certain race-related topics from the curriculum. Most evident, she refused to include information about Emmett Till, despite the fact that Till was a major character in the novel. Ironically, in the actual plot of *Ghost Boys*, Jerome becomes furious when he learns that his middle school teachers omitted the story of Emmett Till from the curriculum. Recognizing the importance of including supplemental texts about Till and others, I encouraged Ms. Murphy on three distinct occasions to broach these difficult topics, but she insisted that they would either cause too much anxiety in the children or stir up more commotion among the parents (Fieldnotes, February 8, 10, and 22, 2022). In her final interview, I

asked her more about these significant omissions from her *Ghost Boys* unit. Ms. Murphy reflected:

> I was terrified there would be backlash. And I was terrified that the more I pushed, the more it would be [another parent or colleague] that would snap…I'm always terrified that's going to be the breaking point. And, like, that's going to affect [my job] or that I'm doing something wrong…It's intimidating to try something new…It felt like a lot of people were complaining. And everybody had an opinion about what was going on in my class. It felt like I was being *watched* at all times. And to suddenly step out and do something that felt like too much would damage [the whole unit]. (Interview, April 12, 2022)

Here, Ms. Murphy made a conscious effort to avoid these supplemental texts because she felt "like she was being *watched* at all times" and "terrified" that they would be the "breaking point" that would risk the unit and possibly her job. Acknowledging Ms. Murphy's real experiences of fear and exhaustion as a novice teacher, there is still no question that her decision to omit texts about Emmett Till was another example of her exercising her own White privilege of when she chose to opt in and out of antiracist work. Through silencing the story of Emmett Till, Ms. Murphy propagated a false narrative of what it meant to live under oppressive circumstances, constraining her students' opportunities to understand current inequality. This is another example of Picower's (2021) "The White Out" tool which functions to avoid teaching about histories of oppression that Black people have faced at the hands of White people and advances White supremacy by maintaining the illusion of White innocence.

At the same time, Ms. Murphy's decision to avoid certain topics was influenced by external pressures that made her antiracist approach precarious as a novice teacher working in a hostile school community. As Lensmire (2012) observed, "white racial identities are multifarious messes of thought and feeling, and . . . resistance to antiracist

and social justice efforts is not always a straightforward defense of white privilege" (p. 170). In other words, silencing and avoidance tactics for Ms. Murphy were a response to very real and imagined fears, and served as an important function to protect herself and her new job. In Thandeka's (1999) powerful work, she argues that stories about White racial identity formation are not strictly stories about white racism, privilege, or race pride.

> They are stories about children and adults who learned how to think of themselves as White in order to stay out of trouble and in the good graces of their peers of the enforcers of community racial standards. . . they simply [want] to remain within their own community—or at least not to be abandoned by it (p. 20).

Thandeka (1999) describes here how silence acts on those White individuals who yearn for the support and acceptance of their communities. Though Ms. Murphy was not a child who strived to "stay out of trouble," her emotional and economic livelihood as a novice and immigrant teacher relied on the positive relationships within her school community. Silencing the topic of Emmett Till was not a choice Ms. Murphy made in a vacuum. To render Ms. Murphy complicit in maintaining White supremacy by opting into her White privilege is certainly an appealing interpretation of her White racial identity, but it is also insufficient and oversimplified (Berchini, 2018).

Recognizing the contextual factors that contributed to Ms. Murphy's pedagogy does not mean that her silencing went without consequences for her sixth graders. One student, Penelope (Latina) reported that she was so curious about Emmett Till that she googled him at home and found images of his body. "It came as a shock for me. I really couldn't sleep for a few nights because of that…But I couldn't resist. So I kept doing my research, and I kept not being able to sleep" (Interview, March 30, 2022). She reported

that she did not tell her parents about her investigations. When certain topics were silenced, some students, like Penelope, resorted to finding out the information on their own, which entailed learning about racial violence without a safe space to process the information with others. Although I do not have the evidence to substantiate the exact reasons why Penelope googled Emmett Till, I interpret Penelope's actions as motivated by the silence around this essential character in the plot of *Ghost Boys*. I contend that Ms. Murphy's pedagogical choice to omit the topic of Emmett Till from the curriculum potentially sent messages to Penelope that the classroom was not a place for discomfort about the reality of how White people inflicted racial violence on Black people. This pedagogical move to center feelings of comfort by silencing people of Color's histories is one example of how the school community and their fear tactics worked through Ms. Murphy to advance White racial ideology in the curriculum (Kumashiro, 2009).

In the ultimate silencing, Ms. Murphy disclosed in her interview that she would not be teaching this unit on *Ghost Boys* again the following year. Through silence, Ms. Murphy capitulated to the vocal *minority* of White individuals who were "frequent" and "loud," and subsequently, suppressed her antiracist approach (Pollock et al., 2023, p. 32). In this way, the systems and structures that sought to preserve the status quo at St. Joseph's ultimately won, and the *majority* of community members, who potentially supported her antiracist efforts, failed to shield Ms. Murphy by remaining dangerously silent. Ms. Murphy's self-censorship in her classroom highlights the important role that context plays in structuring her antiracist goals *against* her teaching practices (Berchini, 2016).

Subdued and subduing

At times, Ms. Murphy felt subdued in her antiracist efforts, and in turn, participated in subduing race talk in the classroom. In this section, I examine the tension between Ms. Murphy's complex White teacher identity as a novice and her antiracist goals.

Subdued. Ms. Murphy felt subdued by her principal's unclear messaging about what she could or could not say in class. She knew that her principal supported her at the start of the unit, as I detail in the next section, but Ms. Kalvin was fairly absent from the daily acts of intimidation Ms. Murphy experienced. Notably, Ms. Kalvin was working through the same systemic pushback that Ms. Murphy experienced but at a higher level within the Archdiocese. Ms. Kalvin also feared for her job. Moreover, Ms. Murphy felt subdued by the families who neither vocalized resistance nor support for her unit on *Ghost Boys.* These dynamics marked by silence and invisibility within her school community had serious ramifications for how she oriented to her antiracist work. In many instances, Ms. Murphy felt alone in defending her unit, and consequently, resorted to a subdued or diluted approach to antiracist pedagogy. On one occasion, Ms. Murphy described that if she just "reacted" to student-initiated race talk, then she would preempt the criticism. This way, if anyone complained about her unit, she could say that a child brought up the topic and she was merely responding to the student-led question. In the last few weeks of the unit, Ms. Murphy took this approach of waiting for students to start dialogue about race instead of starting it herself as a protective measure from local resistance.

However, in analyzing the written documentation of Ms. Murphy's book unit, I found that her materials were bold, not subdued nor reactive. Her assignments and activities as outlined in the Google slides asked poignant questions about structural racism. For instance, in one lesson, Ms. Murphy assigned each literature circle to become "experts" on an aspect of structural racism by reading informational texts ranging from banking policies, redlining, de facto segregation in schools, Tamir Rice, forms of everyday racism, and police violence. Each group was required to use their text to create a poster that they would then present to the class the following day. After a series of five thoughtful presentations, she directed students back to their desks to answer the following journal prompts silently as detailed on a Google slide:

1) We use the term structural racism to capture the biases against people of color baked into American culture and systems. Racism is not just about mindsets or a few individuals (like the KKK or the Nazis). Based on these posters, what are some examples of structural racism that you see?
2) While Officer Moore pulled the trigger, who else contributed to the system of racism that we see here? Use the word structural racism in your answer. Explain your answer in (at least) 5-10 sentences (Artifact, February 10, 2022)

Despite these thought provoking prompts, Ms. Murphy never reconvened the group to debrief about the presentations or their journal responses. As I looked across the data, I noticed this very same pattern—many of the written activities were provocative, and the students were eager and excited to participate, but they rarely had opportunities to test out their ideas verbally in the larger classroom context. In fact, throughout her 26 day unit, Ms. Murphy organized her lessons into silent journal writing (15 times), silent gallery walks (3 times), and quiet ("soft voices") literature circles (17 times). On two occasions, children presented information to the class, but even then the classwide question and

answer time was limited. On *two* different occasions, Ms. Murphy did facilitate class-wide discussions, both of which were impromptu. In this way, Ms. Murphy subdued her own voice in race talk by hiding behind activities that did not require her to facilitate large discussions where she could possibly err or be vulnerable to criticism. This example here of hiding, or what Pollock et al. (2023) call "going underground" to self protect, highlights the situatedness of Ms. Murphy's complex White teacher identity. This finding exposes the limitations of her individual action when shrouded by a system committed to upholding the status quo at St. Joseph's.

Subduing. Ms. Murphy's own efforts to subdue were, in part, rooted in her own uncertainty about racialized language and confusion over the concept of structural racism. For instance, she explained, "I wrote 'Black' on the board. I was almost like, is it 'African-American'?...I was like [in my head], 'I'm not sure I'm right. I'm a little worried that I'm doing the wrong thing' (Interview, April 12, 2022). Here, Ms. Murphy once again captures her fear of "getting it wrong" which resulted in her fumbling through racial labels, a common "colormute" tendency for White teachers (Pollock, 2004). But there were consequences to Ms. Murphy's hesitations around race talk. In fact, three students of Color reported in their interviews that they held back their questions in class because they were not sure if they were "polite." Acknowledging the challenges Ms. Murphy faced, I remain curious why Ms. Murphy felt she had not entered into the unit with a prepared sense of which racialized labels to employ, a seemingly fundamental part of any antiracist unit, and one that was modeled in her professional development series.

Moreover, Ms. Murphy's subduing of racial discourse was also rooted in her own uncertainty about the concept of structural racism. Her interactions with students from the classroom transcripts reveal an underlying misunderstanding. In one lesson, she commented "Remember when you were little and someone said, your actions affect others...This is structural racism" (Classroom transcript, February 11, 2022). This comment reinforces the false idea that racism is an individual issue rather than a systematic one, a problem rooted in a few "bad apples" that need to be set straight, rather than a pervasive problem within the structures at large (Kendi, 2019; Picower, 2021). Similarly, Ms. Murphy was not able to dispute one student's colorblind depiction of racial differences. Consider her interaction with Nina (Latina) below:

Nina (Latina): I saw this picture of two eggs, one was white and one was brown. And then the egg cracked and it's like, we're all just one egg. We're all just the same egg, guys.

Ms. Murphy: So maybe we are more alike than we are different but we still can be different. That's what makes us really interesting.

Nina: Yeah, they're two different colored eggs but when you crack them, they look exactly the same on the inside.

Ms. Murphy: Okay, interesting. So that is more about how we are more alike than we are different. That's really good.

(Classroom Transcript, February 1, 2022)

Here, Ms. Murphy did not trouble Nina's notion of "We're all just the same egg," revealing what Skerrett (2011) determines as "lacking substantive knowledge and skills for sustained racial literacy instruction" (p. 323). This moment provided a ripe opportunity for Ms. Murphy to spotlight a pervasive and damaging mechanism of White

racial ideology, that is colorblindness, but instead she takes an "ambivalent" approach conveying "you could argue it either way" (Borsheim-Black, 2018, p. 229). In Ms. Murphy's first response, she asserts "but we still can be different…" a slight move to challenge Nina. In her second response, however, she backs down from the interaction and concludes, "That's really good," and affirms a colorblind interpretation of racial differences. In this example, Ms. Murphy's vacillation between "We're more alike than we're different" and "We're still different" reflects a limited understanding of racism. Or, scholars of race evasive language may recognize this as evidence of White talk, ways White people let others off the hook, even Latina students like Nina, for racist comments, and sometimes for the purposes of coming off as relatable and nonthreatening to their students (e.g., Haviland, 2008). In addressing White-ness, Berchini (2018) aptly comments "there is only walking on eggshells" to capture how difficult race talk can be for White people.

While these interpretations are important, I also want to understand Ms. Murphy's ambivalent response to Nina by examining her White racial identity as intersecting with her novice teacher identity. According to a body of teacher learning research, the practice of "learning to listen to what students say and to construct appropriate responses on a moment to moment is a challenging task for new teachers," especially if they also conceptually struggle to understand the content (Feimen-Nemser, 2001, p. 1028). This example of ambivalence here captures competing discourses associated with different aspects of her complex White racial identity. It also highlights Ms. Murphy's lack of readiness both in terms of her depth of understanding White racial

ideologies and in terms of her inability to bring forth and process students' ideas in the moment and then generate the pedagogical moves to respond effectively.

In addition, Ms. Murphy subdued conversations about race and racism through attempts to foster personal connections to the text. For instance, on one occasion, the students read a chapter in *Ghost Boys* describing the devastation experienced by Jerome's family after the judge decided not to charge Officer Moore due to insufficient evidence. As a journal prompt, Ms Murphy asked students to reflect on a time they too experienced disappointment (Fieldnotes, February 16, 2022). In response, students wrote about when their favorite team lost the Superbowl, the band One Direction broke up, or how their parents forgot to pick them up from school. These journal prompts echo what Picower (2021) terms the "Not so bad" tool, a pedagogical move that distorts and trivializes the inhumanity of police violence against Black youth and systemic oppression. As a result, and perhaps unknowingly, Ms. Murphy's efforts to promote empathy uncritically reinforced notions of White innocence by downplaying the violence of Jerome's murder at the hands of a White police officer (Picower, 2021). Instead, these prompts promote a "false empathy" and subdue conversations about the reality of how structural racism operated to maintain Black suffering while masking her students' ability to understand current inequality (Falter, 2022).

At times, Ms. Murphy, like most novice White teachers, stood in her own way of antiracist teaching and learning in her classroom. Ms. Murphy did find opportunities to interrupt Whiteness by including quiet and written assignments and activities such as journal prompts, literature circles, and gallery walks that made Whiteness visible, and no

longer neutral. At the same time, however, her own uncertainty about racial concepts (e.g., structural racism, colorblindness), and limited pedagogical skills, operated to subdue classroom talk about racism, that not only reinforced problematic racial ideologies, but put more burden on the students to determine *how* to talk about and understand these sensitive topics on their own in silent writing activities and small literature circles.

Supported and supporting

Ms. Murphy's realities of feeling silenced and subdued alongside her participation in silencing and subduing pervaded the data. Certainly, Ms. Murphy also felt supported at times throughout the unit, and participated in supporting her students, but these experiences were far more limited. Below, I detail those few examples that reveal how aspects of her White racial identity served as opportunities to support her antiracist pedagogy and disrupt Whiteness in her classroom.

Supported. Ms. Murphy reported that she experienced some support from families, her principal (albeit limited), her students, and me during her unit on *Ghost Boys.* For instance, a White mother thanked Ms. Murphy in an email for finally providing space for her son to talk about diversity, build his empathy, and develop new perspective taking. In another instance, during a Zoom night to which we invited all of the sixth grade parents before the start of the unit, one White father asked how he could support his son at home to engage more deeply on race-related topics. Like Ms. Murphy, he did not know the right words to use and did not want to "get it wrong." Other parents nodded their heads in agreement. In response, Ms. Murphy and I committed to send frequent emails to

families with questions discussed in class and antiracist themed vocabulary from our growing word wall. This way, families could pull from class materials to catalyze conversations with their children at home. In these moments, Ms. Murphy's Whiteness served as an asset in garnering support from other White parents who felt they could risk possibly "getting it wrong" in front of her, that they were not being evaluated by an audience that held "personal stakes in their response" (Skerrett, 2011, p. 318).

Though Ms. Murphy did not specifically hear from most parents about their support for the unit, she did hear from the students about their families' involvement at home. Twelve of the thirty students reported in interviews that their parents had either purchased *Ghost Boys* themselves or had engaged their children at home about racism as it occurred in *Ghost Boys*. Support from White families in the unit may seem surprising, given that research often emphasizes White individuals' lack of racial awareness, resistance to antiracist pedagogy, or investment in maintaining White privilege (Lensmire & Snaza, 2010; Lowestein, 2009). The underlying reasons for parents' participation in the *Ghost Boys* unit are beyond the scope of this paper, though the varied forms of their involvement point to the complex racial dynamics within the school community and reinforces the notion that Whiteness and White contexts are not monolithic (Borsheim-Black, 2015).

The principal's support fluctuated according to Ms. Murphy. At the start of the unit, Ms. Kalvin sent clear messages that Ms. Murphy's work was sanctioned at St. Joseph's, but Ms. Murphy felt that her support dissipated as criticism against *Ghost Boys* mounted. For instance, during the initial 6th grade parent Zoom night, Ms. Kalvin helped

to introduce Ms. Murphy's new units and emphasized how books like *Ghost Boys* aligned with the Jesuit values at the school. Additionally, Ms. Kalvin participated in class one day during the first of the two classwide conversations during the unit. She even sat down at a student desk, and spoke about the de facto segregation she observed when living in Chicago where the events in *Ghost Boys* unfolded (Fieldnotes, February 1, 2022). As the unit progressed and tensions surged in the community, however, Ms. Murphy felt unclear about Ms. Kalvin's support as she remained relatively quiet when Ms. Murphy faced frequent pushback.

In her interview, Ms. Murphy frequently referenced *our* partnership as a source of support. She repeatedly mentioned that she would not have done this unit at all if it were not for my presence in the classroom. She referenced the importance of my support in the context of her nagging feeling that the parents were angry with her given her novice and immigrant identity. She stated, "If I had been on my own doing [the *Ghost Boys* unit], parents would have been like, 'She's a maverick, and she's doing something crazy, and she's again, not even from here…Like people when they see me, they just see an Irish teacher…and some have negative associations" (Interview, April 12, 2024). Ms. Murphy perceived that my status as an American, middle-aged educator, and mother qualified me as a "real adult" ready to support her through a difficult unit, In contrast, she described her 26 year old, foreign self as too green, too maverick, too Irish to attempt it alone. Entangled, yet unspoken, in Ms. Murphy's descriptions of me was my Whiteness. My Whiteness, more than any other aspect of my identity, made other White parents and school personnel believe that I was one of them, and therefore, safe and trustworthy. As

such, Ms. Murphy and I hid behind my Whiteness. We did not dare disclose my Jewish faith to the community, lest it discredit my Whiteness, and risk the protection of Ms. Murphy and the *Ghost Boys* unit for the students. Thus, my Whiteness served as an important and necessary support to Ms. Murphy's approach to antiracist pedagogy.

More than support deriving from the families, the principal or myself, however, was the support generated from the students' enthusiasm. In interviews, all 30 students in this study felt strongly that reading *Ghost Boys* was important precisely because they had never really talked about contemporary racism before at St. Joseph's. Laila's (White) comments reflected a general sentiment of relief among the students to "finally have a teacher who did not baby" them with regards to race (Fieldnotes, Feburary 2, 2022). Even the sixth grade math teacher complained that students were not paying attention in her class because they were "sneak" reading *Ghost Boys* under their desks during her lessons (Fieldnotes, February 11, 2022). These affirming student responses to the *Ghost Boys* unit provided a layer of support within her classroom that propelled Ms. Murphy to forge ahead.

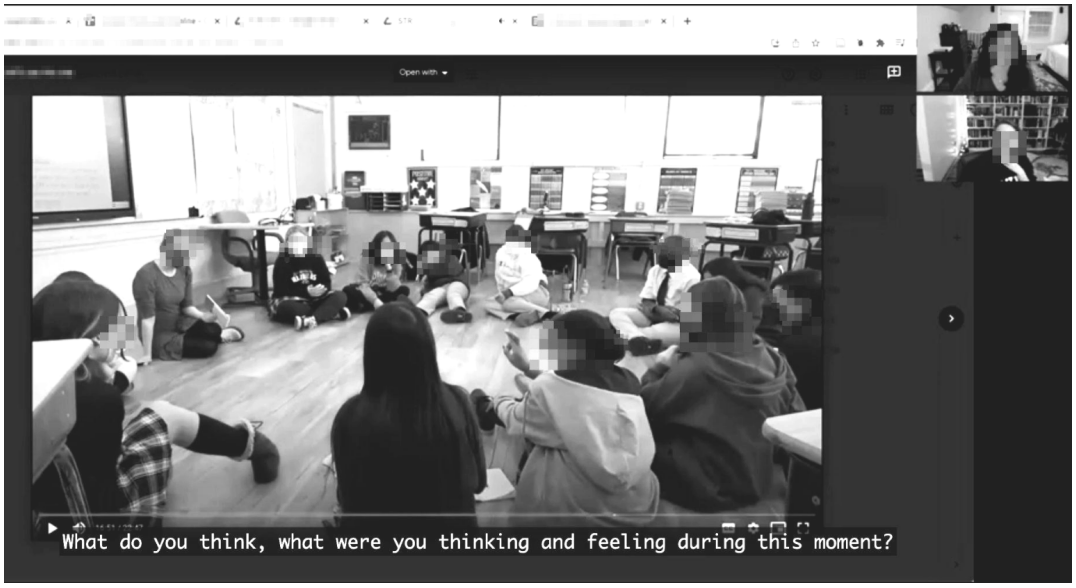
Supporting. Ms. Murphy also engaged in supporting her students during the book unit. During the second of her two classwide discussions about structural racism, the students brought up racial representation in Disney movies. Seeing the excitement across her room, Ms. Murphy pivoted her lesson plan for that day, and said, "Can we push back all of the tables and sit in a circle on the floor?" In this discussion on the floor, students shared their reflections on Whiteness. Hazel (White) remarked, "I had tons of princesses to relate to because I'm White…" Cora (Asian) asserted 'The White princesses, they

didn't do anything. Some of them just slept. Some ate a bad apple…" Sophia (Biracial Black/White) relayed her experiences as a child, "I asked my mom, "Where are the biracial princesses?... I grew up loving the movie Frozen, but there's no Black characters in that movie" (Classroom transcript, February 11, 2022). In this conversation that occurred nearly half way into the unit, I observed Ms. Murphy's focused and earnest listening to her students' stories, a far cry from her ambivalent responses to Nina's aforementioned colorblind claims. Her line of unhurried questioning here ensured to the students that she was listening (e.g. "Are you saying that princesses of Color have a much higher standard that they have to reach?") while also serving to cement the connection between racial representation in Disney and structural racism. Critical Whiteness Scholar Audrey Lensmire (2012) reminds scholars that "stories" and 'listening" are essential in antiracist praxis (p. 67). In this class-wide discussion, Ms. Murphy listened and honored her students' stories, and especially those perspectives that challenged her own.

In a journal prompt asking students to recall the most eye-opening moment in the book unit, nearly every student across the sixth grade cited this particular lesson. As such, I used this very excerpt from the video footage to replay for all 30 students and Ms. Murphy during their 1:1 interviews (see Figure 1). Beaming with pride, Ms. Murphy responded to this video playback,

> That was the moment when it clicked for them right there on the floor with me…I remember at that moment, talking about structural racism and I was [feeling] like, "They don't get this…What have I done [wrong]?" But then suddenly, the key was Disney. (Interview, April 12, 2022)

Figure 2
Nora's Zoom interview: Video playback of Disney conversation in 6A
(Interview, April 12, 2022)



This Disney conversation and Ms. Murphy's reflections in her interview highlight a powerful moment of a novice teacher learning in and from practice. As Ms. Murphy explained, this conversation prompted deep thinking about the racial messages that children received through Disney movies. Yes, this conversation was much safer than what Ms. Murphy later called "trigger button" topics in her community such as police brutality, but this discussion made Whiteness, a topic not typically discussed at St. Joseph's, more visible, and less neutral.

Discussion and Implications

According to the myth, flying was a new opportunity that made Icarus feel like he could actually be something great, even if for a brief moment before the sun's heat melted his makeshift wings of wax and feathers. More famous than the flight of Icarus, however, is his fall. Indeed, it is what most remember. Icarus's plummet into the sea became a forewarning for those whose ambitions burned all too close to the sun. Here, in the discussion, I examine how Ms. Murphy's new opportunity to take an antiracist approach to literature instruction "burned all too close to the sun." As I illustrate, Ms. Murphy's case is a cautionary tale about the systemic and contextual factors that constrain a White teacher's attempts at antiracist pedagogy. Unlike popular interpretations of Icarus, though, Ms. Murphy's ultimate plunge cannot be attributed to her hubris, but in the ways she was positioned to fall with flimsy wings not sturdy enough to sustain her antiracist flight. Below, I describe the theoretical and pragmatic contributors to Ms. Murphy's downfall.

Considerations for the field

Theoretically, this paper highlights how White teacher identity is shaped by both individual and contextual factors. It asks future researchers "to decenter the teacher as solely complicit in their racialized privilege" (e.g., the privilege to silence or subdue issues of racism in the curriculum), and instead to consider how external forces impact school structures, and influence teachers' reproductions of Whiteness (Berchini, 2016, p. 1035). The field of Critical Whiteness studies is replete with depictions of White teachers just like Ms. Murphy who, through their fears, uncertainty, and biases, fail to follow

through on antiracist work, perpetuate racist stereotypes or promote colorblind interpretations of racism (Picower, 2021). I agree with Berchini (2019) that these studies place the blame on relatively less powerful White actors for the Whiteness pervading antiracist literature instruction. Ms. Murphy's case is a reminder to scholars of how the contextual factors of a school community— including its social expectations and consequences for becoming a "race traitor" or someone who sheds light on structural racism and exposes Whiteness in institutions (Trainor, 2002, p. 633)— shape a teacher's pedagogical decision making. Following Thandeka's (1999) argument that one "learns [to be White] as a self-protection against racial abuse from its own community" (p. 137), Ms. Murphy reinforced Whiteness as a function to shield herself from symbolic "racial abuse" from colleagues and caretakers. The success of her new job and reputation in the community was predicated on her acts of silencing and subduing about particular topics related to Whiteness, racism, and social justice.

It is high time for more research that looks across scale to understand the antiracist work that teachers, like Ms. Murphy, attempt, and often fail, to deliver. That is, how does school culture or policy impact administrators who then create conditions for their teachers to teach in justice-oriented ways? Without research that investigates the multi-tiered forces that contribute to a teacher's attempts at antiracism, educators will continue to locate the problem in the individual and reduce in-service teacher learning to topics surrounding White privilege. Recall that Ms. Murphy's *three* professional development opportunities focused solely on building her racial literacy. But racial literacy was only one part of the larger puzzle that would have positioned Ms. Murphy to

succeed. Ms. Murphy also needed pedagogical tools and concrete strategies to navigate the tensions in her school context, as I will discuss more in the next section.

Considerations for the practice

Building on scholarship positioning antiracist work as the unarguable task of schools, this study contends that Ms. Murphy would have benefitted from a more multi-pronged approach to antiracist teacher learning, including opportunities to develop and sustain antiracist readiness, pedagogical tools, and strategies to navigate tensions.

Antiracist readiness

Ms. Murphy's lack of antiracist readiness— her own White racial awareness and knowledge of antiracist concepts and language— contributed to her failure to enact antiracist pedagogy. Sure, she had specific moments of successfully supporting her students by providing a novel by an author of Color, journal prompts and (two) conversations about contemporary racism. By and large, however, her approach was marked by limited readiness as showcased in her uncertainty about antiracist concepts, reluctance to employ racialized labels, and trivializing of unjust events in the novel. As such, Ms. Murphy sometimes made problematic choices that circulated Whiteness when deciding what and how to teach. Whether she hid behind silent activities or evaded certain topics altogether, she participated in the silencing and subduing of race talk in her classroom, making some conversations taboo and transferring messages about colorblindness to her sixth grade students. These pedagogical moves, however conscious or unconscious, reinforced Whiteness by making it harder for some students to talk candidly about race or racism for fear of appearing impolite or broaching something

taboo. Ms. Murphy's case reminds teacher educators that providing diverse materials to the ELA classroom is *not* antiracist literature instruction. Without modeling race talk, and actively engaging students in critical thinking about difference, Ms. Murphy's attempts do not equate to an antiracist praxis that promotes inclusivity, advocates for equity and justice, and loves and respects people of Color. Instead, it reinforces, rather than disrupts, White racial ideologies through race-evasive mechanisms.

Pragmatically, this paper urges educators to notice how even the most justice-oriented teacher engaged in a series of antiracist professional developments can promote White racial ideologies in the classroom. Importantly, Ms. Murphy was not a tiki torch carrying White nationalist (Picower, 2021), a common icon of the White supremacist, though she held longstanding fears and uncertainties that shaped her teaching and advanced Whiteness in her classroom. Picower (2021) underscores the profound need for teachers to engage in ongoing self-examination on questions of race— what Sealey-Ruiz (2022) refers to as the "archeology of the self." Ladson-Billings (2006) cautions that a premature attempt to move a teacher to antiracist "action" in the classroom can hinder her antiracist development, and risk shallow and harmful changes to include students of Color in the classroom (p. 30). Despite the field of antiracism's push to have White teachers translate their racial epiphanies in PD to concrete actions steps in the classroom (Pollock & Matschiner, 2022), Ms. Murphy's case highlights that there is a threshold of racial literacy that ELA teachers need in order to embark on antiracist literature instruction because surface-level understandings will reinforce problematic thinking (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019).

Pedagogical Skills

It is not possible to divorce Ms. Murphy's lack of antiracist readiness from her novice status in the profession. Unsurprisingly, Ms. Murphy— with no educator preparation— struggled with certain foundational skills rendered necessary to deliver antiracist literature instruction. For instance, her hiding behind silent activities and her inability to challenge Nina's colorblind comments might be interpreted holistically from a teacher development standpoint and a Critical Whiteness lens. Still, I contend that Ms. Murphy's limited foundational and antiracist knowledge contributed to her making pedagogical choices (silencing, subduing race talk) that were harmful to her students of Color.

Researchers characterize the first years of teaching as a time of "survival, discovery, adaptation, and learning" (Feimen-Nemser, 2001, p. 1027). Feimen-Nemster (2001) explains that new teachers must demonstrate skills that they do not have, and can only acquire by beginning to do what they do not yet understand. This puts beginning teachers in a "vulnerable position" (p. 1027). The problems with Ms. Murphy's "sink or swim" induction to teaching at St. Joseph's are well documented. Ms. Murphy did get some coaching from me at the start of the unit, but this kind of informal coaching system hardly represents a dignified response to nurture the practices of a new teacher. I argue that even if Ms. Murphy had all the antiracist readiness in the world, she still would *not* have been effective in delivering this unit due to her novice pedagogical repertoire. Put differently, it's an insult to the profession of teaching to claim— as much of the Critical White scholarship on pre- and in-service teaching does— that Ms. Murphy only had to

change her beliefs and unpack her racial biases in order to execute antiracist literature instruction. Teaching is a highly complex practice that must be studied, learned, and constructed by confronting the situative and contextual daily challenges (Feimen-Nemser, 2001). To create a responsive practice, Ms. Murphy needed to bring together her knowledge of content, students, and context in making decisions about what and how to teach and then make momentary adjustments in response to what happened. I do not contend that Ms. Murphy should not have attempted this unit altogether due to a lack of skills or readiness. Instead, I believe that antiracist instruction, like any aspect of teaching, takes time to learn and can only be learned in the context of teaching, through trial and error, and by reflecting on daily challenges again and again.

The greatest tragedy, in Ms. Murphy's case, is not defined by the specific instances when she makes harmful pedagogical choices in the classroom, but in her refusal to teach *Ghost Boys* the following year. It is only this kind of commitment to antiracism that will deepen her long-term antiracist praxis. I highlight this here because my message is *not* that novice teachers attempting antiracist work must do it perfectly. Problematic mistakes and biases will surface invariably as White teachers can never be "done" excavating how their Whiteness oppresses certain groups in invisible and silent ways (Sealey-Ruiz, 2022). Integral to antiracist pedagogy, I believe, is an ongoing commitment to move forward while committing to take critical and reflexive perspectives on their praxis, ideally with a coach and in professional inquiry communities (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Practically, we can learn much from Nora. Because Ms. Murphy did not graduate from a teacher education program, I focus my suggestions here on in-service teacher learning opportunities, and not on formal English education programming. Taking these ideas forward, I urge teacher educators committed to antiracism to consider their teachers' pedagogical foundation when designing professional development. Without an emphasis on pedagogical skills within antiracist preparation, White novice teachers are likely to continue making problematic choices in the classroom that further silence and subdue students of Color. Surely, antiracist teaching involves much personal groundwork, but specific techniques alongside consistent coaching within literature study in secondary ELA classrooms could provide support to compensate for inexperience and uncertainty.

Navigating tensions

Of course, to continue with the Icarus story, Ms. Murphy's wings would have been flexed and fortified with adequate support in antiracist and pedagogical praxis. However, no amount of professional development could have buoyed her from the local restriction efforts by a subset of highly vocal critics from the community. These caretakers and colleagues appeared much larger in numbers than they actually were due to their consistent fear tactics of stopping Ms. Murphy in the hallway, sending emails, showing up at her door, and taking down her word wall. There is no question that they thwarted her antiracist work. While Ms. Murphy did not acquiesce to their call to remove *Ghost Boys*, the onslaught of complaints made her feel afraid, as if she were constantly being surveilled, and further constrained her freedom to engage in conversations about

race and racism with her students. Consequently, as we saw, she hid behind silent activities, censored her own race talk, and omitted important topics from her curriculum in fear of further inflaming more parents and losing her job. As yet another reminder, Ms. Murphy participated in *three* ongoing professional service series during the time of our study, which did little to support her when navigating her novice status and the restriction efforts posed by the few (yet fierce) colleagues and caretakers.

As illustrated here, this work can be challenging for beginning White teachers who may operate from a limited antiracist and pedagogical foundation and face criticism in their schools. As such, teacher educators must bolster novice teachers to navigate the treacherous and shifting political landscape that threatens antiracist work—not to fly so high all alone that they burn, and not to fly so low that they submit to complacency. Surely, the perils of teaching for justice is nothing new, but teachers need more robust wings for constructing their antiracist praxis and handling heightened and heated versions of such pushback today, more than ever.

Conclusion

We live in a nation with an intensely polarized political environment. With book banning and censorship on the rise, teachers and students encounter real consequences in their attempts to engage in critical conversations. The ELA classroom is an important space in schools to understand contemporary racism, imagine a more just world, and learn ways to take action. English teachers play a powerful part in fostering the next generation of justice-minded citizens through literature instruction. Yet, no teacher can

weather the sociopolitical tensions around censorship alone. And if they try, as Ms. Murphy did, they most likely will be silenced and subdued by the vocal minority.

To conclude, I argue that educators must organize the quiet majority within the school community to be just as persistent, loud, and organized. They must "wrap" themselves around teachers doing this work and act as buffers from local challenges (Pollock et al., 2023, p. 28). Without such vocal support, classroom opportunities for children to dialogue about their differences, understand structures of Whiteness, and feel affirmed in their identities will continue to be threatened. Today, as censorship looms, the fate of antiracist pedagogy relies on the systemic and structural forces— district leaders, administrators, teacher educators, researchers, and full communities— to speak up, support, and shield their teachers from pressures to restrict talking and learning about systems of oppression through literature in the classroom.

Chapter 3 — In Silence and in Laughter: Exploring How Students of Color Position Their Emotions Through Stancetaking During Race Talk in the ELA Classroom

"It's like, they're just realizing that [racism] is actually going on! [...] Everyone's still learning about it. I didn't want to hurt someone and say, 'This is America. It's not as perfect as you think it is'" (Interview, February 17, 2022). Here, Sophia, a biracial (Black/White) sixth grader, conveys her exasperation with her White classmates during discussions about race and racism in class. Sophia also highlights her perception that she must silence her emotional responses to the text so as to not "hurt someone" who may be learning about racism for the first time (DiAngelo, 2018). For six weeks, I observed Sophia's English Language Arts (ELA) class as they read Rhodes' *Ghost Boys* (2018), a novel loosely based on the story of Tamir Rice, a twelve year old Black boy killed by a police officer in 2014. I became interested in Sophia's markedly different emotional responses to questions of racism in public settings like class conversations and in private spaces like journal entries and interviews, wondering how these responses might be guided by unspoken emotional expectations or rules that circulated in her ELA classroom.

As research suggests, emotion permeates all aspects of classroom life (Thein et al., 2015). It is everywhere, every day, in silence and in laughter. Nonetheless, the view of emotion most commonly held in education is in opposition to reason and thus, often associated with negative behavior (Lewis & Tierney, 2013). Given that educators are taught to discipline behaviors considered to be inappropriate, it is not surprising that emotion is constructed in "teacher education as a behavior to manage rather than an

intellectual and analytic resource" (p. 289). However, despite these efforts to regulate emotions, they are particularly heightened in class discussions about race and racism as students and teachers of all backgrounds grapple with discomfort, fear, denial and guilt, albeit for different reasons (Lewis & Crampton, 2016; Sue, 2015). As the literature highlights, to be racialized in this country is a deeply emotional experience (Matias, 2015; Thomas, 2015). Thus, Bucholtz et al. (2018) assert that racialized youth bring unrecognized yet significant "funds of feeling" to the classroom, a form of knowledge they conceptualized based on Gonzalez et al.'s (2005) notion of "funds of knowledge." In this study, I examine the ways youth of Color adhere to and resist these often subtle, slippery and ambiguous rules about *which* emotions and *whose* emotions are valued in conversations about race and racism in the classroom.

One solution educators have promoted to open up dialogue about sensitive racial topics among students is to use literature in the ELA classroom. Falter (2016), for instance, asserts that teachers have long used books to encourage their students to talk openly about race and racism. For generations, secondary teachers across districts have incorporated numerous literary texts like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and poetry by Langston Hughes in their curricula. Oftentimes, teachers include these texts under the assumption that studying works of art by artists of Color or having characters of Color in books will naturally make race talk less contentious for teachers to facilitate by building empathy toward others (Scarry, 1998). But even then, the content may be lackluster, and teachers may resort to silence and evasion, avoiding fraught conversations or promoting shallow responses about

contemporary racism.

Moreover, researchers have documented how some emotions in conversations about race as they emerge from the literature are viewed as acceptable (e.g., passion, empathy, enthusiasm) whereas others are censored (e.g., anger) (Boldt et al., 2015). In this sense, emotional responses to topics of race and racism are surveilled with texts used to evoke the correct, desirable emotions that serve as a sign of refinement (Thein, 2018). Examining how teachers attempt to regulate students' emotions and subsequently how students experience emotion is one important way to understand how opportunities for responding to texts can be limited in the ELA classroom (Boldt et al., 2015). Building on continued conversations in the field of English education on how best to prepare new teachers for working effectively with diverse student populations, this paper urges educators committed to critical pedagogies to think about the emotional dispositions that their pedagogies require of students. This study takes up this task and traces the experiences of how three students of Color grappled with their feelings[2] during race talk in an ELA classroom committed to antiracism. Specifically, I ask, *how do three youth of Color position themselves within the emotional rules of a classroom when responding to diverse literature?*

Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretically, this paper is informed by reader response theory, critical emotion studies, and sociocultural stancetaking. Highlighting how individuals' identities and prior histories of participation come to shape and form responses to and through text, I braid

[2] Feelings and emotions are used synonymously here.

them here to highlight how the response is always already imbued by and with emotion and stance.

Reader-Response Theory

Reader-response theorists emphasize the reader's role in making meaning of a text. From prior histories of participation to the many identities a reader may hold, reader response acknowledges the importance of individuals' lived experiences, sociocultural identities, and abilities in such meaning-making (Rosenblatt, 1978). Rosenblatt (1978), for instance, emphasized the symbiotic relationship between text and reader wherein both are impacted by the other, thus giving rise to a new complex meaning that she refers to as a "poem." ELA teachers, like Ms. Murphy in this study, use response-based approaches in their classrooms such as literature circles and journal writing. In response-based approaches to teaching literature, the teacher's role is to encourage students to share their personal reactions and interpretations to texts (Werderich, 2010). The social, cultural, and emotional perspective of the reader, therefore, is seen as essential to the response process and the construction of meaning. Hence, understanding the role of the three students' responses in literature circles, interviews, and journal writing may provide a glimpse into how to enhance students of Color's literary experiences in the ELA classroom.

Critical Emotion Studies

The definition of emotion I use in this paper is grounded in the field of critical emotion studies (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Boler, 1999; Trainor, 2006), a lens that holds the following suppositions – emotions are not distinct from reason; emotions are not private experiences but are socially experienced and constructed. By conceptualizing emotion

this way, I examine how emotion always already shapes students' literary responses, and, therefore, regulates the kinds of literary and racial learning that occurs in the ELA classroom (Thein et al., 2015).

Emotional Rules

This work is guided by Zembylas's (2002) notion of *emotional rules* to conceptualize how emotions move among bodies and texts and stick or become sedimented in social spaces (Ahmed, 2004). Zembylas (2002) defines emotional rules as norms for emotional displays or expressions that are considered appropriate in specific contexts. He contends that emotional rules govern the curriculum and instruction for teachers, who are taught to express empathy, patience and equanimity, and in turn teach students to hold similar dispositions. In the ELA classroom, teachers often (and sometimes unknowingly) set up emotional rules for how students should act, think, and feel in their responses to literature (Thein et al., 2015). Teachers set up these rules in all sorts of ways through everyday decision-making about how to teach literature. For instance, emotional rules are established when teachers choose to sit in a circle with students rather than standing in front of the classroom and when teachers provide opportunities for dialogue among students rather than insisting that students direct their responses to the instructor. Yet, scholarship on the relationship between student emotion and their literary responses is limited. In this paper, I examine how the emotional rules circulate and settle in the ELA classroom, however tacitly, through typical approaches to the literary response.

Sociocultural Stancetaking

In examining how these youths position themselves within the emotional rules of the classroom, I turn to stancetaking. Stancetaking refers to the speakers' positioning toward a topic in a discourse that indexes their social and cultural identity (Jaffe, 2009, Ochs, 1996). Stancetaking provides a way of characterizing some of the interactional elements that contribute to a student's expression of emotion during race talk. Stancetaking for students is particularly embedded within the social and cultural dimensions of the setting, as it may index identities, social boundaries, and hierarchies which are imposed by the behavioral and emotional norms of a classroom (Jaffe, 2009). Below, I describe two types of stances— epistemic and affective (Ochs, 1996). *Epistemic stance* refers to the particular ways that speakers draw on language to express relative certainty or uncertainty. *Affective stance* refers to the particular ways that speakers employ language to show emotionality or lack of emotion.

I employ this distinction between epistemic and affective stance as a productive analytic for reading the transcripts. In so doing, I do not suggest that knowledge and emotion exist separately in the world. Rather, the point is that every utterance has elements of both epistemic and affective stances. Because I am concerned with how students of Color position themselves– their lived experiences and emotions– in connection with topics of race and racism, epistemic and affective stance are particularly important to my analysis, especially as their stancetaking shifts in private contexts (e.g., interviews, student journals) versus classroom discourse (e.g., literature circles).

Literature Review: Emotions in ELA Classrooms and School Contexts

This study is situated at the nexus of two strands of scholarship: race talk in literature instruction and emotions in race talk. Below, I detail the two independently and then fuse them together to showcase how youth of Color have been documented to discursively manage their emotions during fraught conversations about race and racism in the ELA classroom.

Race Talk in ELA

Race talk refers to dialogue that addresses the topics of race, racism, Whiteness, and White privilege (Sue, 2015). A body of literature underscores the belief that encountering diverse racial points of view, learning to engage in racial conversations, and successfully recognizing and integrating differing perspectives lead to an expansion of critical consciousness (Jayakumar, 2008; Seider & Graves, 2020). Opportunities for racial discourse in the classroom also help to dispel stereotypes (Pollock, 2004), and build a greater sense of belonging and connectedness with all groups (Bell, 2002; Sue, 2015). Sue (2015) contends that race talk is often silenced, ignored, or discussed in superficial ways for fear of offending others, pushing emotional “hot buttons” and creating explosive situations (p.11).

The novelist Toni Morrison (1992) noted that "in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse" (p. 9). Discursive silence and evasion can indicate race without actually naming it, thereby circumventing debate (Thomas, 2015). Some decades later, studies continue to show how White ELA teachers are reluctant to engage in race talk. Leer (2010) and Thomas (2015), for instance, trace how

White ELA teachers hesitate to broach the topic of race because they feel as though it is too political and want to protect students' feelings of comfort in the classroom. Similarly, Borsheim-Black (2015, 2018) observed White teachers who circumvented race talk in a literature unit in an attempt to preserve the emotional safety of their students without considering the experiences of their students of Color. Within literary studies, Morrison (1992) calls attention to the ways that race and racism are woven into the fabric of literature– George and Lennie, for instance, are depicted in contrast to Crooks in Steinback's (1937) *Of Mice and Men*, yet most teachers do not foreground this character in their instruction. Building on Morrison's point, I contend that engaging with the topic of racism may be perceived as a political choice, but *not* engaging directly with the topic of racism when it is already an inherent part of the literature is also a political choice. In short, the topics that English teachers address and do not address teach students lessons about whose lives and which topics matter in literary study (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019).

Race talk, alongside its displays of intense emotions, is often silenced in the classroom, a space that has historically been characterized by objectivity and rational discourse (Bell, 2003; Sue, 2015). Empirical reality is valued over experiential reality (hooks, 1994). Many educators, thus, view emotions as distinct from reason and conduct their classes according to this "implicit academic protocol" (Sue, 2015, p. 25). Race talk on the part of students of Color is about "bearing witness to their lived realities," their personal and collective experiences, and their stories of navigating racism (Sue, 2015, p. 26). For some students of Color, however, they may feel reluctant to talk candidly about

their feelings or experiences with racism in a predominantly White context (Matias, 2015). Typically, Sue asserts that the academic protocol deters these sources of information and considers such anecdotal contributions as opinion and less legitimate facts to be explored, thereby deterring students of Color to participate in race talk at all (Lewis & Tierney, 2013).

Emotions during Race Talk

Because race talk can feel emotional, unpredictable, and explosive, a second strand of literature reveals how many ELA teachers feel they need to patrol the conversation by encouraging what Ellsworth (1989) called the "right and tasteful emotions." Recently, scholars have argued that teachers may promote some students' emotions (e.g., empathy, enthusiasm) while silencing others (e.g., anger) in classroom talk (e.g., Boldt et al., 2015; Coleman, 2021; Dutro, 2019; Thein et al., 2015). Thein (2018), for instance, reflected that she was quick to correct her own students' outbursts in the conclusion of *Of Mice and Men* to guide them to more rational forms of empathy when they had broken her inexplicit "emotional rules." Lewis and Tierney (2013) observed how one White teacher required passion from her students as she pushed them to critique a text about Blackface, but then how she and the rest of the class censored that passion when it reached the intensity of anger for one student of Color. Sue (2015) provided a vignette of one White teacher who described his experiences as "pulling teeth" as he tried to engage his diverse class of students in race talk as it emerged from a biography about a Black-American. When students finally joined in the conversation, a firestorm of anger set in, and the teacher reminded everyone "to calm down and not to let

their emotions interfere with their learning" (p. 18). Neville (2018) traced three students of Color as they used what Lorde (1984) referred to as "outlaw emotions" including anger and disgust, to resist White normed ways of responding to texts with analyses of literary devices. Conversely, Seider and Graves (2020) documented 9th grade students of Color who experienced frustration and inundation when their Black English teacher seemed to focus excessively on racial injustice, rather than on the strategies to cope with racial injustice. When students expressed annoyance during race talk, the teacher chastised them by reminding her students how their ancestors risked their lives to learn to read, and emphasizing how they were going to have to confront racism out in the real world. Taken together, the literature reveals that teachers' efforts to patrol emotion in the ELA classroom do not always result in emotions that are regulated because emotion is always in motion (Boldt et al., 2015). It cannot be policed, welcomed in, or dismissed.

While these strands of scholarship provide insight into important aspects of how ELA teachers navigate race talk and regulate emotions, there still remain significant gaps in understanding how youth of Color negotiate their own emotions in conversations about racism. Refracted through this study, I contribute to the scholarly conversation by focusing on students' experiences of race talk, rather than teachers' practices. This study illustrates how emotional rules played a vital role in students' literacy learning even in a classroom committed to antiracist pedagogy in which emotional reactions were seemingly encouraged and less overtly policed. Underscoring how emotion came to shape the encounter of response, this study provides a more nuanced interpretation of how youth of Color navigated the classroom space. In so doing, I acknowledge both the

racial and the emotional dynamics at play as children index themselves in alignment with or in opposition to their teachers, texts, and peers in the ELA classroom.

Method

This paper draws on data generated from January to April 2022 to understand how three youth of Color positioned themselves within the emotional rules of a classroom when responding to diverse literature. In what follows, I detail the study context, and methods for data generation and cross-case analyses. Given the large scope of data collection, I highlight below which data sources were central to pursue the research question in this study.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in a northeastern city in Saint Joseph's Catholic school (all names of institutions and participants are pseudonyms). At the time of the study, 408 PreK-8th grade students were enrolled in the school. The students and staff alike were predominantly White, and approximately 15% of students received free or reduced-price lunch, a statistic commonly used as an indicator of economically disadvantaged students.

Participants

Students. Of the thirty-three sixth graders, thirty students (11-12 years) agreed to participate in the study across two sections of sixth grade (see Appendix A). Fifteen of the participating students identified as White, eleven identified as Latinx, two identified as Biracial (Black/White and Asian/White), one identified as Black, and one identified as Asian. Through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), I selected three focal participants by identifying students of Color who foregrounded their own experiences with race or talked

explicitly about their emotional reactions during class conversations in their interviews. Sophia and Jahir were in one section of sixth grade. Penelope was in the other section. I paint a fuller picture of each of these students below.

Sophia. Sophia was a precocious eleven year old, lean with black curly hair pulled tightly back into a bun. In her interview, she explained proudly, "I'm biracial, I'm White and Black, but I mostly think of myself as Black." Sophia was energetic. Determined to be a civil rights lawyer one day, Sophia was well versed in discourses about racism referencing "colorblindness," "blackface" and "Jim Crow laws" in her journal entries. She was also passionate about watching professional women's basketball and listening to the boy band One Direction as evidenced in stickers and labels on her journal cover. Sophia was a straight-A student, revered by her teachers and peers, with interests in a range of reading activities (e.g., school and leisure reading). As I observed Sophia during the study, I became interested in her markedly different responses to literature in class conversations compared with journal entries and interviews, wondering how these responses might be guided by different emotional rules.

Penelope. Penelope was a quiet twelve-year-old girl who physically towered over her teacher and peers. Penelope's parents, originating from Colombia and Puerto Rico, were newly divorced and lived in separate homes about an hour away from the school. As such, Penelope spent a long time commuting each day, often showing up late and frazzled to class, with missing homework assignments and lost forms. At times, Ms. Murphy worried that Penelope did not have friends and struggled to complete schoolwork, as she was often found sitting alone and doodling images of horses, reptiles, and medicinal

plants rather than completing her assignments. One morning, when I asked about her drawings, Penelope excitedly explained her life goal of becoming an apothecary due to her knack for healing and passion for nature. I was immediately magnetized to Penelope for her quiet quirkiness. She was ultimately selected as an example of a student who seemed unfamiliar with racial topics during the unit on *Ghost Boys.* As I observed Penelope, I was struck by the juxtaposition between her reluctance to talk about race in class compared to her thoughtful reflections in our interviews. In foregrounding Penelope as a focal participant, I questioned how these distinct responses to texts were regulated by her perception of which emotional rules were considered acceptable in each context.

Jahir. Jahir was an outgoing boy beloved by his peers and teachers for his wide eyed grin and eccentricity. He and Sophia were the only two Black presenting students across the sixth grade. Born in Uganda, Jahir was fluent in Luganda and English, and often referenced Ugandan food in his writing and interactions with classmates. Jahir was passionate about R&B and Hip Hop and drew musical notes and frequency waves around the margins of his schoolwork. He dreamed about being a disc jockey one day. According to Ms. Murphy, before the unit on *Ghost Boys*, Jahir's attentiveness for school related literacy tasks was highly dependent on the amount of personal attention he received from the teacher in the room. I was drawn to Jahir from the start because he was so candid about his experiences with race and racism and critiqued the school for only including Black people during Black History Month in his first interview. I was interested early on in the study by Jahir's connection to *Ghost Boys,* and the ways he wove in race-related personal narratives, song lyrics, and quotes in his journal reflections.

Nora Murphy (Teacher). Nora Murphy was a White, twenty-six year old, novice teacher at St. Joseph's at the time of the study. I first met Nora Murphy while working as a research assistant with a multi-year research-practice partnership dedicated to antibias, antiracist (ABAR) professional development. I selected Ms. Murphy as my focal teacher because she seemed like a committed teacher, had some demonstrated awareness of how Whiteness operated, and expressed an eagerness to participate. Though the cases of students constitute my unit of analyses, I draw on some moments of interaction with Ms. Murphy to understand how she conveyed the emotional rules to her students.

Curriculum

Ms. Murphy and I organized the curriculum into two units that spanned 12 weeks, each with different focal texts, articles, multimedia, and compositions. Focal texts included two novels, *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018) and *The Best at it* by Maulik Pancholy (2019), which served as anchor texts that guided conversations. This study focuses on students' responses to *Ghost Boys* as conversations about racism arose more frequently with this text. Significantly, *Ghost Boys* has been banned in districts across New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Florida and California after a surge in parental complaints that the novel could cause White children to feel "ashamed" of their skin color (Pen America, 2022a).

Data Generation and Procedures

Using an ethnographic case study design (Stake, 2004), I explored participating student and teacher interactions across two sections of 6th grade through a) 79 hours of class observations over twelve weeks (42 occasions); b) 62 semi-structured interviews

with the principal, teacher and her students; c) 13 hours of weekly reflection meetings with the teacher; and, d) artifact collection (4 anchor charts, 42 days of google slides, 30 students journals, and 30 final projects) across the two units. A variety of data from differing perspectives and sources were collected to understand students' grasp of the novels and reflections on their emotions during particular conversations about race. The many forms of data collection serve as a means by which to triangulate the data, further establishing the credibility of the study's findings.

Classroom Observations

This paper draws on observations during the *Ghost Boys* unit, occurring over 26 consecutive school days, across a six week period, totaling 39 hours. Observations occurred during class times, lasting between 1.5 to 4 hours in length. Data was recorded using a video camera and three audio recording devices. In addition, I took photographs, wrote jottings and fieldnotes, and audio-recorded daily voice memos (Emerson et al., 2011). Emphasis was placed on capturing the participating teacher and students' interactions during race talk, particularly in literature circles.

Literature Circles. Literature circles were small autonomous groups of students discussing a common text (Pierce and Gilles, 2021). According to Ms. Murphy, she took up literature circles in her classroom to give more opportunities for participation to students, and to create spaces for exploration of issues that students raise. Throughout the unit on *Ghost Boys*, students met daily in groups of 3 for 30 minutes per meeting. Students were assigned their literature circles to help them collaborate on projects and respond to the texts in more intimate groups. The groups were selected based on student

histories, learning preferences, and dispositions in the classroom. As a participant observer, I frequently listened to small group discussions and asked clarifying questions. On the whole, however, these discussions were student-facilitated and minimally monitored. I converted the audio recordings into transcripts for subsequent analysis.

1:1 Interviews

The 30 participating students were interviewed on two distinct occasions (totaling 60). These interviews were semi-structured, lasting approximately 15 to 45 minutes in length. The interview with Ms. Murphy occurred once at the end of the two book units, and lasted 2 hours. All student and teacher interviews involved "video playback protocols," asking participants to reflect on predetermined points in the video recording and to describe their thinking and feeling (Juzwick, 2003). The interviews were video recorded and transcribed. In this study, I draw on the six interviews with the three focal students.

Student Journals

Throughout the two literature units, students reflected in journals through writing and drawing usually with a prompt from the teacher. The goal of these journals was to provide a private space for students' visceral responses to the texts, promote teacher-student dialogue, and strengthen teacher-student interpersonal relationships (Werderich, 2010). I photocopied 1,740 pages of journal writing (approximately 58 pages per student). In this study, I examine the journals of the three focal students consisting of 172 pages of writing and drawing–Sophia (60 pages), Jahir (64 pages), Penelope (48 pages).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative and ongoing process (Emerson et al., 2011), with findings based on cross-case analysis of the cases of student participants. Within-case analyses identified salient deductive themes that characterize each case narrative. The organizing structure for each within-case narrative included emotions as they occur in race talk (a) between peers, (b) between student and teacher, (c) in interpersonal reactions to the texts, and (d) in personal experiences. The overall understanding of each case helped to contextualize the students' responses to texts and race talk in the classroom. After identifying key elements of the cases, I explored how each participant's experiences compare across cases. My intention is to bring into view both the particular attributes of the single case and patterns across the cases. To do this, I looked for recurring themes across the data (Emerson et al., 2011).

Coding

I began coding by dividing the students' journals and the transcripts from interviews and literature circles into "episodes"– what Lewis and Ketter (2004) define as "series of turns that all relate to the same topic or theme." Specifically, I analyzed episodes within the literature circles in which focal students participated to some degree in race talk. Drawing on the data that centered race talk from the three focal students, I identified 25 episodes from their interviews, 13 episodes from their literature circles, and 11 episodes from student journals. Based on my focal student selection criteria— of being particularly vocal about race in the interviews— it is perhaps not suprising that focal students participated in every identified episode of race talk.

Following Thein and colleagues (2015), I paired critical emotion studies with critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA provided the tools to examine how emotional rules come to stick and are disrupted via matrices of language and social interaction while taking into account dimensions of power, social status, gender, and race. Useful in this regard is Fairclough's (2003) concept of *style* or the linguistic and nonlinguistic features used by people in social contexts to position themselves in relation to others in a particular context—features such as distancing language (e.g., pronouns shifts), modality (e.g., should, could, would), register (e.g., polite or academic register), questioning (e.g., probing or asking for elaboration), silence (e.g., moments when students felt censored), humor (e.g., laughter), epistemic and affective stances (e.g., displays of certainty or emotionality). I worked to pinpoint how these features of style, my initial codes, illuminated the role of emotion in how students positioned themselves. For example, I found that Sophia's quick pacing and lack of polite register (e.g., no hedging, please, thanks you's, or turn allocations) positioned her as a leader in some instances and a more distanced participant in various others.

Applying my theory of sociocultural stancetaking, in a second round of coding, I noticed how frequently students leveraged epistemic and affective stance in order to tactfully follow or flout the emotional expectations of the particular discursive context (be it a literature circle, student journal, or interview). Thus, stancetaking became a particularly salient marker in analysis. That is, a speaker's display of a position relative to the truth and or emotional content of a situation (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Stance, as I came to see it, was often reflected through paralinguistic features such as repetition, speed,

questioning, interruptions, tone, volume, hedging, politeness, and other aspects of prosody (Rymes et al., 2008; Stoica, 2022; Whitehead, 2017). Consider the statements from the focal students below, “Officer Moore made a mistake.” This example uses direct language to express certainty about Officer Moore’s actions; “that's kind of- well, I mean, it was a mistake of some sort,” on the other hand, uses hedges (kinda, I mean, some sort) to express doubt and uncertainty (Rymes et al., 2008). While epistemic stance centers on knowledge state, affective stance centers on emotion. Statements like, “How is it a mistake to shoot a 12-year-old?" and “Can you please help me understand why you think Office Moore made a mistake?” represents a range of affective stance displays from heightened affect (with speed and tone) to minimal affect expressed (with politeness and questioning). In the section that follows, I present representative excerpts from my analyses of episodes that illustrate my findings. Each excerpt is marked by Jeffersonian transcription symbols, a coding system that allows for analysis of linguistic (e.g., volume, pace) and non-linguistic (e.g., silence, laughter) features in speech (Jefferson, 2004). Looking at the convergence of style and stance in race talk, I focused my analysis on how students’ emotions were mediated through language to comply with, resist, and transform the emotional rules of the classroom. See Appendix B for transcription notation.

Positionality

My interest in understanding how race was discussed among racially diverse students arose largely from my experience as an ELA teacher in a predominantly Black and Latinx community. As a White teacher, I frequently found myself discussing race and racism as it emerged from the literature, and felt confused about what my role should

be in those discussions. And yet, to ignore questions of race in the literature, seemed even more precarious. Thus, my challenges in teaching about racism in a racially diverse class propelled the research question undergirding this study.

Moreover, my identity as a White, cisgendered woman functioned both as a resource and a constraint. In the field, my Whiteness provided Ms. Murphy with a level of safety in talking about race. It also provided me a sense of safety as I hid behind my Whiteness when I did not disclose my Jewish faith in fear that it would discredit my position as Ms. Murphy's teaching coach and as a researcher in a Catholic school. I am also aware that my perspective as an outsider is a constraint in this study in that I cannot ever fully apprehend the full range of emotions that the youth of Color experienced in race talk. I recognize that the students tailored their interactions with me in ways that would have been different if I were a researcher of Color.

Nonetheless, I write as a mother and former English teacher who cares deeply about the children in this study, having built relationships with them over several months and beyond the parameters of my fieldwork. Regardless, I realize that despite my best intentions, I make mistakes and reproduce oppression due to my limited perspective and experiences (Schey, 2021). To speak to these limitations, I consulted with colleagues of Color to analyze the data and engaged with the work of diverse education scholars (Matias, 2015; Sue, 2015; Thomas, 2015). The next section explores the complex ways that the students discursively navigate the emotional norms that circulated in their ELA classroom.

Findings

Through an analysis of student discourse, this section traces the unfolding interaction through which youth of Color position themselves–their emotions and lived experiences— in race talk through epistemic and affective stancetaking. Concentrating my analysis on three focal students – Sophia, Jahir and Penelope– during a six-week unit on *Ghost Boys*, I present episodes from literature circles, interviews, and journal entries that reveal three distinct ways that the focal participants navigated interactional and ideological challenges in their classroom— by positioning themselves as knowers, by silencing themselves, and by playing with the construct of race. The episodes that follow reveal the high affective stakes involved in the expression of emotion for students of Color during race talk, though not all three focal students are present in each of the findings sections below.

Positioning Oneself as a Knower– Rejecting and Manipulating the Emotional Rules

In this subsection, I illuminate how Sophia and Jahir discursively positioned themselves as knowers during the unit on *Ghost Boys.* Having long been educated at home by family members, these students highlight their background knowledge, racial literacy (Skerrett, 2011), and personal connections to the text.

Sophia

Sophia, as recounted in interviews, positioned herself as a knower having read *Ghost Boys* multiple times alongside other nonfictional texts about race and racism in U.S. history. Throughout her journal entries, Sophia incorporated language like "colorblindness" and "Jim Crow Laws" indexing her expertise in racial discourse

(Journal, January 27 and February 2, 2022). Additionally, Sophia reported in her interview and journal entries that she had long been socialized by her grandmother in the ways of living as a Black woman. In one entry, Sophia captured an example of her grandmother's messaging about race, "My grandmother told me that as a Black girl, I have to work twice as hard to get half as far" (Journal, March 28, 2022). Determined to work hard and eager to deepen the conversations about race and racism, Sophia brought Ms. Murphy a photocopied chapter from Emmanuel Acho's (2021) *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Boy*. This chapter, she believed, was a helpful way to consider the varying degrees of racism using the visual metaphor of a three-tiered building. See Appendix C.

Ms. Murphy was so captivated by this chapter that she organized a class activity around it the following week. In a jigsaw puzzle activity, she assigned each literature circle to an informational text about a topic related to *Ghost Boys*. Sophia's group was assigned this chapter by Acho. Other groups were responsible for topics that arose in the novel such as Tamir Rice, Day of the Dead, and Red Lining. Each group negotiated an overall summary of its text and then worked to depict the main points in a poster that was displayed in the classroom for a presentation the following day.

Sophia discursively positioned herself as an expert in preparation for her literature circle's poster presentation of the Acho chapter. To Sophia, this presentation was an opportunity for her classmates to think about racism beyond the Civil Rights Movement. In her first interview, she commented, "We don't read about race a lot…Every Black history month, we learn about the same people— it's Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa

Parks…In this unit, we get to actually see racism in the real world, not learn about past historical figures" (Interview, Feb. 17, 2022). In Wissman's (2011) work with a group of Black adolescent female writers, she noted that literacies, experiences, and identities were intertwined in their lives. This was true for Sophia, who talked in her interviews about her expertise in race and racism in addition to the power of her lived experiences.

Consider the expert role Sophia takes through her interactions with her two Latinx and White-presenting classmates as they rush to finish their poster featuring Acho's metaphor of a 3-tiered building with moveable flaps for their classmates to interact with. See Figure 3.

Excerpt 1

"Work harder than you've ever worked in your life." (Literature circle, Feb. 9, 2022)

1	Sophia:	We don't have enough ti:me.
2	Kayla:	=Yeah(.) We don't have enough time.
3	Ben:	Oh, I guess I will <u>try</u> to do something.
4	Sophia:	Come on, Ben. <u>You</u> can do it. (40) ((Sounds of markers drawing on the paper))
5	Kayla:	Can we like not illustrate stuff right here? Can we just write like third, second, first?[…]
6	Sophia:	What do you mean?
7	Ben:	I don't think the—
8	Kayla:	First, second, third…
9	Sophia:	WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
10	Kayla:	Like, on the flap, because we don't have enough time to do this. Couldn't we just do–
11	Sophia:	>Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah<. But make sure you write it nice.
12	Kayla:	Yeah.
13	Sophia:	Maybe just do a couple of details. Just the windows, just the stairs.

14 Ben: Wait–

15 Sophia: >Tape tape tape< where's the tape?

16 Ben: [We're going to cover it up?]

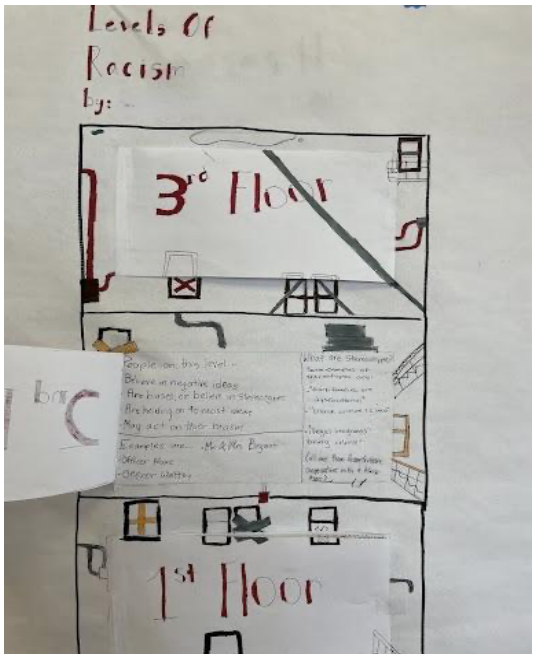
[It's on her desk.] [...]

17 Sophia: No, I asked [Bobby] to do it because we don't have enough time, and I'll help you with the flaps.

[...] Okay guys (.) Work harder than you've ever worked in your li:fe.

Figure 3

Sophia, Kayla, and Ben's poster entitled, "Levels of Racism"



Sophia, here, positions herself as an expert and a leader, as displayed by her relatively certain epistemic stance. Through utterances marked by speed, questions, and interruptions, Sophia makes discursive moves to attempt to control the flow of movement and participation patterns during the poster creation. Her initial utterance of "We don't have enough time" sets the tone and pace for the interactions that follow. Kayla immediately takes her up on this claim by repeating Sophia's words back to her. On line 4, Sophia also positions herself as the motivator when she urges Ben to "Come on…You can do it." There's a long silent pause after this comment as the group is hastily working, and thus, complying with Sophia's expectations of urgency. Kayla and Ben consistently defer to Sophia as the leader when they ask her permission on how to proceed ("Can we like not illustrate stuff right here?"). On line 5, Kayla asks a question to Sophia about the flap. Ben tries to interject his thoughts only to be interrupted by Kayla. Unclear about her question, Sophia responds, "What do you mean?" When Ben tries to interject, Sophia repeats her question louder, ignoring Ben, and determined to gain clarity. Her tone is serious, but not disrespectful. Eventually on line 11, Sophia shows understanding with six fast paced "yeah's" in which she demands that Kayla does it "nice," meaning not sloppily even though they are rushing. Her speed (lines 10, 15), serious tone (lines 1, 17) and interruptions (lines 10, 14) are the most notable features in this segment indicating her heightened affective stance around the poster, a text symbolizing an "object of feeling" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 91). For instance, Ben asks that the group "Wait" but it is clear Sophia will *not* wait as she interrupts him with a quick paced and urgent question about the whereabouts of the tape, ignoring him once again. Ben's slower speed in the poster

construction is not adhered to as Sophia is the leader who sets the pace, not Ben, during their poster construction.

Sophia's strong epistemic stance is marked by the unmitigated statements in interactions with her peers. Without faltering, she assigns tasks to Kayla and Ben such as asking Kayla to add details to the windows and stairs (line 13) or asking Ben to trace (line 17). Even without the hedging, or the politeness (e.g., please, thank you's) (Brown & Levinson, 1987), or the required sentence starters ("I agree with you because…" and "I respectfully disagree with you because…") as outlined on their laminated, pocket-sized guide as distributed by Ms. Murphy for literature circle discussions, Kayla and Ben do not seem insulted as they take her up on requests for tape and assignment of roles without resistance. In an earnest and motivational tone, Sophia concludes the segment with an emphatic statement, "Okay guys, work harder than you've ever worked in your life," thereby highlighting the importance of delivering a well ("nice") designed poster presentation about a topic that felt personal to her. In this interaction, Sophia rejects the emotional rules as set up by Ms. Murphy by refusing the more democratic approach of turn taking in the literature circle, rejecting politeness for socially acceptable ways to collaborate with peers, and abandoning the sentence starters as a school sanctioned way to voice disagreement. Within Sophia's register of efficiency, her hastened talk and questioning, Sophia's positions herself as a knower and leader in their poster presentation about racism.

Unlike the intensely monitored speech often associated with women and people of Color (Corella, 2018; Reyes, 2011), Sophia abandons social etiquette (of hedging and

politeness) and instead, leverages discursive strategies of tone, interruptions and haste to position herself as a knower and leader on the poster creation, a text she felt passionate about. Whether Sophia knew more about the study of racism than Kayla and Ben or was simply more vocal about it, the construction of the poster during class, further crystalized her identity in class as someone strident and knowledgeable about race and racism (Lewis & Tierney, 2013). Sophia increased speed, raised volume, interruptions worked to mobilize emotion so that her group members understood her feelings of urgency and need for efficiency. This example highlights an instance when emotional rules became "unstuck," and how it opened up a different leadership position for Sophia to inhabit.

Jahir

Jahir also positioned himself as a knower during the unit of *Ghost Boys.* For Jahir, his conversations at home made race monumental to him and an expert on the topic. Like Sophia, he developed a racial fluency from his family who had long informed him about racial inequality, equipping him with the knowledge necessary to interact with the police. Consider in the example below how Jahir enacts a strong epistemic stance and sobering affective stance in his first interview.

Excerpt 2

"You either listen to the police officer and do what he says, or you don't go back home" (Interview, Feb. 15, 2022)

1	Jahir	I think I had a talk with my dad for the first time in 2016. So I was like six, seven, (.) and he basically told me how to deal with police officers.
2		"↑Show your hands ((holds hands up)). ↑Don't make any sudden movement." If they ask for your ID (.) and then you go reach for your ID (.) and they think you're going to reach for something else (.) °like a gun.° So, that's what usually makes those things <u>happen.</u>
3		But then, when George Floyd died, I learned a lot more about what really happens (.) and how I can try to avoid it. And what my dad said, I'm going to quote him on this, is he sa:id, "You either (.) listen to the police officer and do what he says, or >you don't go back home<" I (.) I cri:ed a bit because I thought that was really ↑sad. And I was like, "°<u>Dad,</u> why would you say th:at?°" (.) But then I grew up a bit, and I realized he was <u>right.</u>(.)

Here, Jahir projects a strong epistemic stance employing a serious affect, inclusive of contrasting speeds and volumes to describe the racial education from his father. By ventriloquizing his father's words and using choppy sentences— "Show your hands. Don't make any sudden movement" (line 2)— Jahir underscores the gravitas of the conversation. On line 3, Jahir voices his father again, leveraging speed and emphatic stress to index his father's sobering affect when explaining to his son that he must listen to the police officer or he will not come home. In response, Jahir recalls crying a little bit but then realizing his father was ultimately right (line 3). In this moment of admitting vulnerability, Jahir slows down his speech on the word "cries" and then lowers his volume almost down to a whisper to index a dismayed affect, "Dad why would you say

that?" In recounting this sentimental story, Jahir projects a strong epistemic stance as indexed through unwavering statements about his emotions by manipulating volume, speed, and sentence length. Jahir's frequent pauses and high to low volume shifts are not signs of his uncertainty, as they are often understood within dominant ideologies about linguistic practices of people of Color (Corella, 2018). Rather, people of Color may feel obliged to take such discursive mitigations in interactions with White people so as to counter the widespread beliefs that they are "angry," "imprecise," or rude (Reyes, 2011, p. 463).

As the only Black boy in his sixth grade, Jahir's experience during the unit of *Ghost Boys* was rife with personal connection and emotion. Later in this same interview, Jahir commented, "I enjoyed *Ghost Boys* because I related to the character, the main character…it's like when I see a Black character in a book, I think, "Oh, this story is telling me what not to do." Comparatively, Jahir explains how his classmates did not feel personal connection but shock about the topic of racial violence. He states, "I think more people were more surprised about it than I was, because I already knew kind of what happens and more about the system." Jahir mitigates his knowledge claims using hedges such as "I think" and "kind of" when, in fact, he is knowledgeable and passionate about racial inequality. Again, Jahir's weakened epistemic stance does not indicate uncertainty but suggests a discursive social strategy. He also hedges when making claims about what his classmates' knew and felt, which is aligned with the fact that he did not have epistemic authority to speak about others' thoughts and feelings. In contrast, his epistemic stance is strong when he discusses his own knowledge ("I already knew").

Whereas Sophia rejected the emotional norms of interactions within her group, Jahir positions himself as a knower on the topic of racism by adhering to the norms. By leveraging a more mitigated epistemic stance (through slower pacing, lower volume, and hedging), he maneuvers himself discursively in a way that he believes will more effectively narrate his story to me, a White researcher, adult, and presumed authority figure.

Examining how Jahir and Sophia leveraged their stancetaking shows how they performed "expertise" or knowledge via matrices of language and social interaction. To these students, their funds of feeling and racial literacy as developed outside of the classroom positioned them as knowers in the context of race talk in the classroom. In the next two subsections, it is important to note how Sophia and Jahir's affective and epistemic stance lessen in a classroom context in front of their peers.

Feeling Silenced – Complying With the Emotional Rules

At times, the three focal participants felt they had no choice but to remain silent and patiently await the reckoning of their White classmates who typically were unaware of issues about racial (in)justice. In this subsection, I showcase excerpts wherein this occurred across all three focal students.

Sophia

Sophia withheld her excitement for the topic of racial justice in order to show patience for her White peers, many of whom were learning about racism for the first time. During a gallery walk with student-made posters featuring newspaper clippings and illustrations on topics related to *Ghost Boys* such as the murder of Tamir Rice and

Redlining, students were required to walk around silently, leaving comments and reactions on post it notes around each poster. Sophia describes this lesson as particularly frustrating as she watched some of her White, Asian, and Latinx peers express feelings of surprise as they learned about violence against Black and Brown people during the gallery walk.

Excerpt 3

"I didn't want to hurt someone…" (Interview, April 1, 2022)

1	Sophia:	Because (.) Maddie, for example, when we did those poster projects, sh:e put a comment that said > "It's interesting to see how racism is still going on today." < And I thought she would already know that because it's [racism] (.) sometimes at this <u>school</u>, stuff like that hap:pens (.) And it's like, they're just realizing that [racism] is actually going on!
2	Marisa:	Yeah. How did you respond?
3	Sophia:	I didn't want to say anything to offend them, but (.) I already knew that for a while (laughs)... It's like when George Floyd died (.), everyone was in shock and I was like, (.) this has already been happening. °So many people have been killed and they didn't realize that.°
4	Marisa:	Why didn't you say that in class? Why didn't you say something like, "For all of you, (.) this may be a new unit or a new topic, >but this isn't new to me"<?
5	Sophia:	=Because everyone's still learning about it. >I didn't want to hurt someone and say, "<u>This</u> is America. It's not as perfect as you think it is."

In this excerpt from Sophia's interview, she highlights the ways she needs to handle race talk delicately with peers who may "still be learning about it." From the previous excerpt,

we know that Sophia is passionate about the topic of racial justice and goes so far as to bring in an article for the class to read. Despite Sophia's eagerness to engage on a deeper level and passion for racial justice, Sophia felt she needed to constrain both her passion for the topic and her frustration with her peers in order to show patience for the growing racial awareness of her White counterparts. While she feels disappointed that her peers are learning about this for the first time since racism occurs within their very school, she feels she cannot "offend" her classmates by expressing her annoyance with their surprise. Sophia's pronoun use of "I" versus "they" and "them," and "you" signals how distant she feels from her peers' emotional experiences in class. Her shift from talking about Maddie, one girl, to a plural "they're realizing" shows how she experiences her classmates as all thinking monolithically like Maddie. Her shift in pronoun use signals that Sophia feels lonely or isolated in her emotional experiences during this unit.

What resonates in this excerpt is the way Sophia takes on the burden of her classmates' racial ignorance. She patiently keeps quiet while her peers have their racial epiphanies about contemporary racism in an effort not to "offend" or "hurt someone" despite her disappointment that they're not more aware and her desire to engage on a deeper level. In Sophia's estimation, the rules for responding to texts in her ELA classroom required her to swallow her feelings and connections to the topic in order to make room for her classmates' feelings of surprise. The absence of Sophia's strong epistemic stance is rendered all the more noticeable through its juxtaposition with her stance in Excerpt 1. In this Excerpt, Sophia chose a path of silence in order to avoid conflict in her class. Silence does not necessarily signify a weakened epistemic stance, in

Sophia's case, but a compliance with her perceived sense of the emotional rules in the classroom, that is to be patient and respectful during race talk. Like Rys (2018) found in her study, Sophia constructed her emotion as personal and private, not as something to be expressed publicly, in order to distance herself from uncomfortable conversations. When Sophia silences her emotional response to prioritize the comfort of Maddie, she subscribes to the norm that emotional expression in the classroom is reserved for some students, and not others. When emotions remain personalized and privatized, they get depoliticized. When they are depoliticized, they get easily dismissed as personal and disconnected from broader struggles for justice (Rys, 2018). In these subtle ways, emotional rules become sedimented in the classroom, and personal reactions to race talk by students of Color, like Sophia, remain apolitical and dehistoricized.

Penelope

Penelope also felt she had to swallow her emotional responses to texts. Despite Ms. Murphy's goals of dialogism in the literature circles, Penelope wrote in a journal that she did not agree with some of the dominant "trains of thought [they] were taught" about race (Journal, March 29, 2022). When I followed up about her journal entry in an interview, she explained how her classroom and the literature circles, on the whole, were laden with rigid norms of expression and interpretation. The following interview example shows how Penelope felt limited in her reactions to the text by Callie, a White peer.

Excerpt 4

"I chickened out" (Interview, March 30, 2022)

1	Marisa:	So you empathized a little bit with Officer Moore?
2	Penelope:	Yeah, because I mean (.) it's not his fault that his parents didn't bring him up with a lot of diversity. And, it's kinda his fault he let (.)some racial biases and stereotypes to get into his head >but then at the same time< he didn't notice it.
3	Marisa:	Yeah. (.) So, why didn't you say <u>that</u> in class?
4	Penelope:	We:ll, I mean, one time I kinda started to say ↑it. I was started kinda quoting the last pages of the book (.) because that's kinda of- well, I mean, it <u>was</u> a mistake of some sort, and then Callie was kind of- >"HOW is it a mistake< to shoot a 12-year-old?" And I'm kinda, °Oh yeah° [...]
5	Marisa:	She said, she just sorta snapped at you? She said, "<u>How</u> is it a mistake?"
6	Penelope:	Well, I mean, not really sna:pped, but I mean, kin:da (.) You know, it was a little bit quick kinda, "<u>How</u> is it- how is that a mistake?" >I mean<she let me kind of fin:ish.
7	Marisa:	Yeah.
8	Penelope:	But- But, I finish it because I finished it to se:e how everyone would react. And she was kinda like, "<u>How</u> was it a mistake?" kinda she couldn't understand. I was kinda- "O:kay, how am I gonna explain this?" Because, at that moment, I chickened out ((laugh)).

9	Marisa:	You chickened out.
10	Penelope:	Yeah ((laugh)). I literally went, ↑"Oh, nevermind" ((laugh))

Certainly, Penelope's talk does not reflect the gravity of Officer Moore's murder through her affective claims of White innocence (lines 2-3), perpetuating a kind of no-fault white supremacy (Bucholtz, 2019). By referring to Officer Moore's aggression as a "mistake," she exculpates him for the atrocity of shooting a child. Bucholtz (2019) describes this disavowal of personal racist intent as a discursive strategy that perpetuates the illusion of White innocence.

Penelope takes up the task of challenging her White classmate Callie's position, one that reflected the dominant ideology of the classroom. She does so in face-saving ways by hedging (Goffman, 2014). In fact, Penelope says "kinda" eleven times throughout this segment suggesting an anxiety or nervousness about her social position in her literature circle. Through Penelope's vacillation between, "It's not his fault" and then a line below, "it's kind of his fault" along with her repeated use of "kinda," "well," and "I mean" she indexes a weakened epistemic stance, which in turn, helps her to avoid aligning directly with racial hegemonic ideology and further protects herself from possibly being seen as a racist. Her hedging in the classroom context, however, are not signs of uncertainty or imprecision (Corella, 2018). Rather, Penelope may feel compelled to undertake such discursive mitigations in a White dominated space so as to not threaten

Callie's knowledge claims or disrupt dominant taken for granted emotional rules about how to engage in race talk in the classroom (Reyes, 2011).

Despite Penelope's outward appearance of uncertainty, it is clear through her determination to finish her argument (line 8) in her literature circle combined with her reflections about this very same conversation in her journal entry, that Penelope feels deep empathy for Officer Moore. Penelope's journal entry takes a stronger affective stance by expressing shame about being a person of Color and empathizing with Officer Moore. She writes,

> I heard some really harsh feelings towards white police officers in general and I felt that since I am Latina, I should have been at the head of that parade, but I wasn't. I was thinking of how it was all because he wasn't raised with much diversity and had unknowingly gotten racist ideas into his head. (Journal, March 29, 2022)

Penelope highlights her affective stance with a blunt "but I wasn't" to index that although she was Latina, and felt an obligation to lead the charges against Officer Moore, she did not agree with the"harsh feelings" expressed in her literature circle. Moreover, she employs deracialized nouns such as "diversity" in place of "Black people" in both her interview and journal entry, another discursive strategy that Bucholtz (2019) and Ahmed (2012) describe as sidestepping race talk by replacing the language of race with the language of "diversity" and its accompanying "happy" affects (Ahmed, 2012). Between her word choices ("mistake," "diversity," "unknowingly") across both her entry and her interview, Penelope conveys empathy toward Officer Moore, but does so by enacting an anxious, and sometimes shameful, affective stance that works to protect herself as a good, not racist person.

Penelope's strong epistemic and affective stancetaking in the private context of her journal juxtaposed to her seemingly weak epistemic stance and anxious affective stance in her discussion with Callie reveal how she mitigated her knowledge claims in a public setting to comply with the perceived emotional rule in literary response— that feelings of empathy are a zero-sum game, and that by expressing empathy toward one character meant that empathy was withheld from another. For instance, Penelope recounted how Callie "snapped" at her in a questioning discursive style, "How is it a mistake to shoot a 12-year-old?" and then a few lines later with roughly the same question, "How's it a mistake?" thereby quickly shutting down any alternative interpretation of the antagonist, Officer Moore's actions. Rather than hedging her own claims, as Penelope did, Callie persistently challenged Penelope until, ultimately, she backed down. By probing Penelope with repeated questioning, and thus, projecting a strong epistemic stance, Callie dismissed Penelope's reasoning altogether, emphasizing what she perceived to be the only "correct" response to the text– that Officer Moore is a murderer, and not deserving of empathy. Adding complexity, Penelope's unpopular status in her sixth grade class also shaped the silencing she experienced in this interaction. In the literature circle, Callie typically claimed the floor and initiated topics that others took up in conversation. Like Pierce and Guilles (2019), I found that Callie asserted her dominance by interrupting and dismissing Penelope's ideas. Thus, Penelope's mitigated stancetaking served three purposes– to signal that she was not a threat to Callie, to protect her from accusations of racism, and to acknowledge her position in the social hierarchy of the classroom.

In some ways, Penelope's empathy for Officer Moore demonstrates a sophisticated awareness that racism is embedded in the messy web of social policies, laws and cultural practices where a person is socialized (Seider & Graves, 2020, p. 21). As Kendi (2019) asserts, "This is the consistent function of racist ideas…to manipulate us into seeing people as the problem, instead of the policies that ensnare them" (p. 8). However, Penelope, feeling reluctant to "explain this" complexity without being dubbed a racist, a slur that can "freeze us into inaction" (Kendi, 2019, p. 9), quickly backs out of the conversation or "chickens out." Ultimately, Penelope's fear of being labeled a racist in her literature circle leads her to swallow her emotions and remain silent. This silencing, in turn, precludes the group from an opportunity to delve into a rich conversation highlighting the complexity of racism as entangled in both the individual and society. There is no opportunity for the literature circle to shift beyond blaming the individual to understanding the insidious ways racist thinking is interwoven in society. Instead, Callie's perceived strong epistemic stance as indexed by repetition and questioning conveys one opinion, the dominant opinion in the class, and Penelope's open struggle to see the complexity is silenced. A shift to antiracist thinking–holding both truths to exist– is thwarted.

According to Penelope, the rules for responding to texts in literature discussion included suppressing her feelings of empathy, and acquiescing to her White peer's moral and emotional agenda for learning. Falter (2022) asks, "Who deserves our empathy and, ultimately, who gets to make those decisions…Does a Nazi officer deserve empathy or only the persecuted Jews? Does a white police officer who shoots an innocent young

Black man deserve empathy?" (p. 20). I do not dare give answers to Falter's rhetorical questions, but it is evident in Penelope's case, that she is not positioned in her literature circle to apply empathy openly, for it is reserved for only some characters and not others. Penelope's capitulation illustrates how emotional rules (such as who deserves empathy in a novel) block particular interpretations in favor of others, and become sedimented as they are repeated through questioning in particular kinds of contexts. The emotional rules to which Penelope adhered in the literature circle were based not only on the conventions of race talk as established by her peers, but on the politics of emotions as established in the classroom in general.

Jahir

Like Sophia and Penelope, Jahir felt he needed to silence his emotions in class. In his first interview, Jahir reflected on how much he appreciated the private correspondence with Ms. Murphy through student journals, a space he could emote more freely. Consider how Jahir's epistemic stance shifts from lines 1 to 2.

Excerpt 5

"Because it would be irrelevant." (Interview, Feb.15, 2022)

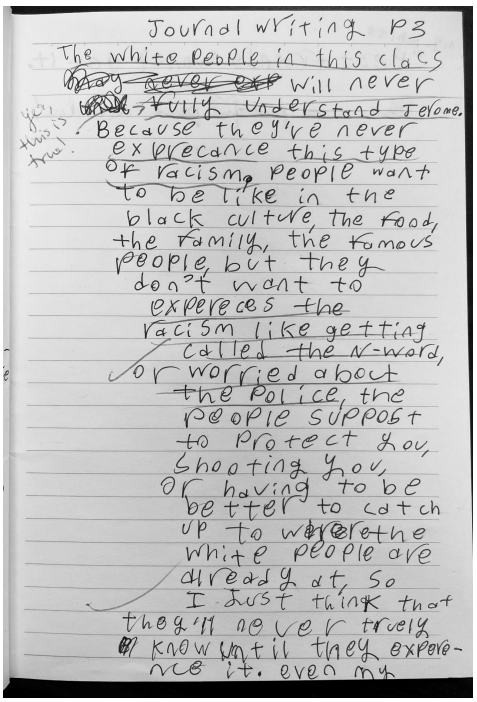
1	Jahir:	I think my [relationship with Ms. Murphy] has gotten clo:ser because this unit talks about a lot of things that I've learned (.) throughout my life being a Black male…And I've learned a bunch of things about myself and through a lot of things that I've wrote in the journal. [...]
2		Yeah. There were a lot of things that, like, on an average day, I probably couldn't go up [in front of the class] and be like, ↑"Oh" like say (.) because it would be <u>irrelevant</u> to that cla:ss.

On line 1, Jahir projects a strong epistemic stance, indexing himself as a knower ("this unit talks about a lot of things that I've learned") as also discussed in the previous section. By line 2, however, Jahir explains how he mitigates his background knowledge as a "Black male" in front of the class because it would be too "irrelevant" for his predominantly White peers. The juxtaposition of how Jahir can express his feelings in an interview or a journal with what he felt he could say "on an average day in class" exemplifies the ways he centered the interests and comfort of his peers by withholding his knowledge, emotions, and lived experiences, and thus, complied with the emotional rules of the classroom.

Regardless of Jahir's perception of increased closeness with Ms. Murphy (line 1), his journal entries do not reveal a deep connection between student and teacher. In the example below, consider the contrast between Jahir's strong affective and epistemic stances in his writing with his teacher's perfunctory responses in the margins.

Excerpt 6

Jahir's Journal Entry (Journal, March 29, 2022)


Journal writing P3
The white people in this class
~~may never~~ will never
~~fully~~ understand Jerome.
yes this is true.
Because they've never
exprecance this type
of racism, people want
to be like in the
black culture, the food,
the family, the famous
people but they
don't want to
experiences the
racism like getting
called the N-word,
or worried about
the police, the
people suppost
to protect you,
shooting you,
or having to be
better to catch
up to where the
white people are
already at, so
I just think that
they'll never truely
know until they experience it. even my

1. The White people in this class ~~may never~~ will never fully understand Jerome.
2. Because they've never exprecance [sic] this type of racism.
3. People want to be like in the black culture, the food, the family, the famous people, but they don't want to experiences the racism like getting called the N-word, or worried about the police, the people suppose to protect you, shooting you, or having to be better to catch up to where the White people are already at.
4. So I just think that they'll never truly know until they experence [sic] it. Even my (*texts moves on to the next page*) White best friends won't get it.

Here, Jahir's utterances convey how he resists and adheres to the emotional rules of his classroom. In this correspondence with his teacher, he employs overt racial categories (Whitehead & Lerner, 2009)— labels like White, Black, and N-word that typically make White people feel uneasy (Bucholtz, 2011). As such, he challenges common "race evasive"norms that skirt around race talk and threaten the comfort or safety of White people (Borhseim-Black & Sarigianides, 2018). On line 1, Jahir crosses out and revises his initial weakened epistemic stance ("*may* never") to a stronger assertion that his White classmates "*will* never fully understand Jerome." As Jahir argues on line 2, those who have not been targets of racism or cultural appropriation, and other forms of racializing

and racist discourse "will never truly know until they experience it" (line 3). Simultaneously, Jahir adheres to the emotional expectation that he soften his assertions in an attempt to maintain a level of appropriateness in correspondence with a White teacher (Love-Nichols, 2018). Jahir's use of "People" and "they" rather than "White people" and his politically correct use of "N-word" reveal how he mitigates his claims in order to insulate Ms. Murphy from feeling "ashamed" as a White person (McIntyre, 1997). Like Sophia in the introduction did not want to "hurt" her classmates' feelings, Jahir employs discursive strategies to not hurt his teacher's feelings. By espousing linguistic appropriateness (Love-Nichols, 2018) in his entry, Jahir allows Ms. Murphy to save face as a White person. This speech style allows Jahir to express his thoughts in a way that Ms. Murphy will potentially hear them without feeling insulted. In his last line, Jahir projects a heightened affective stance that even his White best friends "won't get it." Perhaps Jahir is expressing loneliness or frustration about being the only one who truly "gets it" during *Ghost Boys.* In this entry, Jahir discursively constructs his strong knowledge claims– that White people just won't understand Jerome's position– in a way that he knows will allow him to be understood by his White teacher.

However, Ms. Murphy does not engage deeply with Jahir's poignant reflection in his journal entry. By using check marks in the margins and two short side comments, she mostly draws attention to the completion of his entry rather than the content of his remarks. Both of her comments employ exclamation marks which is a perfunctory way to show heightened affect, without actually engaging specifically in a conversation about Jahir's insights about the unit. Twice in the entry, Ms. Murphy uses "this" (lines 1 and 4)

opting for generalized demonstrative nouns, which obscures the issue of race and emotion making it unclear which parts resonated with her. Her checkmarks and comments “this is a powerful piece” and “well done” (line 4) gloss over Jahir’s heightened affective remarks about how his White friends will not be able empathize with his experience by drawing attention to the completion of an assignment rather the content at hand. Because Ms. Murphy does not expand on precisely what is so “powerful” about the piece, the emotions expressed by Jahir go unaffirmed, and the emotional rules that she advances center her White comfort by skirting direct conversation about the racializing effects of *Ghost Boys* on Jahir. Ms. Murphy’s comments are an example of how circumlocution of feelings related to race and racism are notable in the journal, a space that was allegedly designated for personal and emotional connections to the text. This avoidance of mentioning race by focusing on the safer topic of task completion (through her check marks and last comment of “Well done”) is characteristic of “race evasive” discourse (Jupp et al., 2016). When considering why Jahir would feel that his personal experiences are “irrelevant” to his class as expressed in his interview (Excerpt 5), it is important to examine the discursive moves Ms. Murphy makes, however unconsciously, to affirm some emotions, but not others.

Across the cases, Sophia, Penelope and Jahir demonstrated strong epistemic and affective stances in the private context of their journals and interviews, but then felt they needed to censor themselves in the race talk of the classroom context. This privatized framing of emotion in Ms. Murphy’s classroom authorized these three youth of Color to silence their emotions as they were inappropriate in public spaces like their literature

circles– even when their emotions directly related to an issue they otherwise spoke passionately about in private spaces.

When feelings were framed as individual, or dubbed as more appropriate for private spaces like a journal or an interview, it limited all three focal students' contribution to the conversation, and subsequently, shielded White classmates from potential discomfort. Conversely, some students felt quite safe emoting in class, as was Maddie, in Sophia's example, who voiced her sense of surprise as she learned about racial violence against Black youth for the first time. Surprise was an emotion that was sanctioned in the classroom, but emotions such as frustration, annoyance, loneliness, or particular kinds of empathy were not. As Jahir's interview comments suggest about which emotions he perceived to be "irrelevant" in the classroom, we can more fully understand how an individual view of emotion privatizes and depoliticizes the social relation of injustice, foreclosing any discussion of emotion as contextually situated and collaboratively constructed (Rys, 2018). In other words, Jahir, Penelope and Sophia's seemingly neutral affective stance in class were tied to what they perceived would not offend or be "irrelevant," and would be considered appropriate for literary discussion. In these ways, Jahir, Sophia and Penelope shouldered the additional emotional burden of race talk because they felt they had to swallow their feelings, personal connections, and expertise in order to comply with the emotional rules that served to avoid overly personalized race talk and protect the comfort of classmates and teacher.

Feeling Playful— Transforming Emotional Rules

In this section, I provide a distinct example of how Jahir projects a playful affective stance in his literature circle discussions about racial identity. Unlike Sophia and Penelope's groups whose discussions were marked by seriousness, Jahir's literature circle more frequently abandoned Ms. Murphy's expectation of turn-taking and formal conversation starters in favor of spontaneous and playful discussions. The disruption of turn-taking allocation, especially combined with round robin reporting from journal entries, made it difficult for Jahir to claim a full turn and assert his voice in his literature circle discussions. In the next example, Jahir and his two White peers discuss each other's identity maps, an assignment they completed in their journals in which they charted all the important attributes of their personhood. See Appendix D. Consider Jahir's lighthearted tone as he reflects on Laila's identity map.

Excerpt 7
"I learned that you're African American" (Literature Circle, Feb. 3, 2022)

1	Laila (White, girl):	What did you learn about <u>me</u>?
2	Jahir (Black, boy):	(making donkey noises)
3	Ava (White, girl):	I learned that you are (.) a person.
4	Jahir:	[I learned that the [inaudible]]. I learned that you are °African American°
5	Laila:	That's (.) <u>Bro!</u> (laughter) Do I look African American to you, Jahir?
6	Ava:	(laughter)
7	Jahir:	[laughter] My bad.
		[...]
9	Jahir:	I learned that (.)↑you're <u>loud</u>.
10	Laila:	Point? We're all loud (.)

Jahir sets a lighthearted tone about race in this segment when he brays like a donkey, an ongoing jest in their group (line 2), and then jokes that she is African American (line 4). Moreover, the humor permeating each turn conveys a silliness about race talk. On line 4, Jahir lowers his volume when he plays with Laila's racial identity. Sometimes, lowering volume can mean timidness or reluctance (as is the case with Penelope in Excerpt 4), but I read it here to mean that the speaker is assigning affect (say, cheekiness) to what he is saying. Here, Jahir projects a strong epistemic stance by taking a topic such as racial identity that was otherwise fraught with serious and sensitive emotions in class and making it playful. On line 9, Jahir projects his epistemic stance

through his lighthearted tone and emphatic stress on “loud.” In response, Laila subverts what would have been a criticism of her by asking about the “point” and then claiming that they were all loud, and therefore “loud” was not a signifier of her identity specifically (line 10). This back and forth about who claims knowledge about one’s personhood contests Ms. Murphy’s expectation that each person has the epistemic right to mark his own private identity on a personalized map. In this way, through playfulness, Laila, Jahir, and Ava co-construct Laila’s identity, and together they transform the established emotional rules that race talk ought to be attended to seriously and respectfully. Specifically, Jahir’s two utterances (“I learned that you’re African American” and “You’re loud”) set the tone for the conversation moving forward. Consider how the playful tone continues and shifts into this next segment of the conversation as Laila reads aloud from her identity map.

Excerpt 8

"I'm Black. OMG." (Literature Circle, Feb. 3, 2022)

11	Laila:	First of all, >twelve, pale, E-N-T-J, white, sarcastic, Irish American, not responsible.< Just fully remembering that because [Ms. Murphy] said, "Put responsible because you helped clean up the mess that your dog made," but I'm very ↑irresponsible. >Messy, unorganized. An ADHD, dog owner, loud, artist, Catholic Volleyball player< uh (.)tall. Did I already say tall? No. Girl, nerd, virgin, minor, girly (laughs)
12	Jahir:	[Ok]
13	Laila:	[Older sister]
14	Jahir:	I want to say mine too–
15	Laila:	Misophobic…[1:48]
16	Jahir:	Don't be so <u>mean.</u>
17	Laila:	And twelve.
18	Jahir:	=Perfect.Okay. >I love Ugandan food. [1:57]. I love music, I'm Christian< my [inaudible]... in question. I like [inaudible] (.) I don't want a conversation, yup-
19	Laila:	[My life was never EA:ZY!] ((singing to tune of the chorus in Kanye West song "Eazy" and laughing))
20	Jahir:	Um. I'm twelve in a day. I know English, I'm learning Spanish, <like you and you>. I don't know [inaudible]—and I'm 5'2" and I'm just built different. I'm creative and I'm <u>BLA:CK</u>. OM<u>G.</u>
21	Laila:	Since when?
22	Jahir:	I know [laughing]! Right, boo? I forgot like (.) I didn't even know, bro. It just (.) I don't know.
23	Ava:	It just happened one day. (laughing).
24	Laila:	[laughing] Yeah. One day like 10 years ↑ago.

In this segment, Jahir's literature circle conveys once again that identity is discursively constructed through a playful affect and questioning that reveal strong epistemic stances from all speakers. By line 14, Jahir is eager for his turn in this round robin of reading aloud their journals. He softens his epistemic stance by saying, " I want to read mine too." When Laila ignores this request and continues to finish her turn, he takes a stronger epistemic stance and more firmly asserts, "Don't be so mean," emphasizing "mean" in an attempt to secure his turn. Finally, Jahir begins his turn (line 18) and demands that he does not want a "conversation" about it (line 18) demanding that his identity was not up for debate. Despite Laila's background singing of a Kanye West song, an artist they both had previously connected over, Jahir makes sure to continue his turn (line 20) and ignores Laila's attempts at distraction. In describing his identity, his voice gets low down to a whisper and his pace gets slow again to add dramatic effect to the fact that he is Black. He further enhances the importance of his race by adding "OMG" (Oh my God) in the same whisper voice and humorous exaggeration. This last part of his utterance reveals a playful affective stance. Thus, through speed, volume, and affect, Jahir makes the knowledge claim about his racial identity.

However, with Laila's joke ("Since when?") on line 21, the discourse shifts in ways that are more complex than unequal turn taking allocation in a literature circle. Here, Laila ratifies Jahir's previous joke from line 4 when Jahir jokingly calls her "African American." She takes this joke and recycles it on line 21 by asking "Since when?" meaning "Since when have you been Black" as if his Blackness were not something that was phenotypically visible to everyone. Refusing to be the butt of a joke,

Jahir plays along on line 22 with a question, “Right, boo? I forgot like. I didn't even know, bro.” Through a humorous tone and labels like “boo” and “bro”, he projects a strong epistemic stance through his joke about his racial identity. In this way, Jahir contests the norms about race talk in the classroom by using humor to assert strong knowledge claims about his identity, indexed through a smiling voice quality that implies the absurdity of her question.

Yet, Jahir’s joking tone may belie an anxious affect, which is also evidenced in the way he repeats “I didn’t know” (line 22) and does not fight to finish his turn allocation (Corella, 2018). Laila and Ava’s “humorous” utterances close off the opportunity for Jahir to finish his turn. Ava’s penultimate line in the segment “It just happened one day” followed by laughter (line 23) further cement a non-serious frame wherein anyone who dares to resist this assertion or return to the teacher’s assigned task would risk being accused of having no sense of humor— “an accusation that is an important weapon in the hands of dominant groups (Corella, 2018, p. 120; Hill, 1998). Given the real social dangers, especially in middle school, of being perceived as lacking a sense of humor or being viewed as an “angry” person of Color (Reyes, 2011), people of Color may participate in moments of “White laughter” (Corella, 2018). Previously, when Jahir was weighing-in on Laila’s identity (in lines 1-9), Laila still got to finish her turn. Jahir, however, did not. Laila and Ava’s jokes are indicative of White privilege insofar as it assumes that they have the authority to evaluate the accuracy of Jahir’s racial identity construction to the point of usurping the rest of his turn, and shutting him down.

Reading across Sophia, Jahir and Penelope's cases, these findings illustrate how differences in racial awareness, experiences, and emotions create deep rifts in diverse groups of students during discussions of race and racism. By analyzing how students leverage stance in the classroom through talk, silence, and laughter in race talk, these findings contribute to the emerging body of research in these areas and to the overall project of advancing social justice pedagogies by disrupting the problematic marginalizing of students' emotions that occurred throughout the unit of *Ghost Boys*.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore how three students of Color discursively positioned themselves through stancetaking within the emotional rules of a classroom when responding to Rhodes's (2018) *Ghost Boys*. Interactions with Ms. Murphy and peers reveal the emotional complexities and challenges Sophia, Jahir and Penelope navigated through race talk in their ELA classroom. In this section, I talk across the findings to highlight patterns of silence and laughter that permeated the excerpts.

In silence

Drawing on a range of data sources from literature circles, interviews, and journal entries, I revealed larger patterns of silencing as a result of student perceptions of the emotional rules. Sophia, Jahir and Penelope revealed expertise about race and racism, and despite their insightful reflections in the interview and journal entries, they censored their knowledge, emotions, and personal connections to the text in their literature circles for fear of offending, saying something that may "hurt someone" or seeming "irrelevant." This withdrawal from participation in classroom contexts shows how these three students

acquiesced to the emotional rules– tacit norms that messaged to them that White emotional responses and interpretations ought to be prioritized– even at the detriment of their own emotional responses to the texts. As such, Sophia, Jahir and Penelope positioned themselves as practical leaders, playful jokesters, or patient observers while swallowing their emotions of passion, frustration, annoyance, and empathy. In these ways, emotions may be personally felt, but they are expressed through and shaped by social interactions, cultural values, and dominant ideologies in the classroom (Ahmed, 2004).

Indeed, Sophia, Jahir, and Penelope affectively resisted the emotional norms of race talk as upheld by Ms. Murphy and the class by mitigating or strengthening their epistemic and affective stances based on the discursive context. However, they ultimately experienced marginalization within the classroom as the race talk was consistently organized around racial ignorance and perceived comfort levels. As such, scholars, educators and students who seek to advance social justice pedagogy must also enact affective justice in the classroom (Bucholtz et al., 2018).

In laughter

Laughter and its associated genre of humor were discursive strategies indexed in Jahir's literature circle as a way to play with race and racism, and transform the otherwise sedimented emotional rule that race talk ought to be handled with extreme sobriety. However, laughter and humor were also discursive strategies employed by Jahir's peers to silence him from finishing his turn. While laughter may sometimes fade into the background as talk gets the spotlight, this paper highlights how White laughter is not

simply something to be ignored, but rather a form of discourse that further cements the centering of White emotions, particularly of comfort, in the classroom (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016). As in Jahir's group, racial humor can further marginalize students of Color during race talk by urging them to comply with a non-serious frame and position themselves as jokesters, or risk being accused of being too serious or angry which can take a social toll on adolescents. For researchers interested in discourse analysis methods, they must attempt to discern between "transformative laughter" from "oppressive" forms of laughter (Lewis, 2010).

The many reverberations of silence and laughter throughout the *Ghost Boys* unit remind researchers and educators alike that inclusive antiracist curriculum and instruction requires not only literature about racial topics, but also a responsibility to listening closely to all aspects of classroom discourse. This paper extends the discussion by considering how young people's emotions enable them to shape and make sense of their racialized educational experiences. Emotions, "as relational encounters with the world," are too important to be minimized in literature instruction (Bucholtz et al., 2018, p. 22). Emotions enable students and teachers to make meaning from texts in a classroom space as whole human beings with distinct life experiences.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper offers theoretical and practical implications that can help educators and researchers understand how classroom discourse around diverse texts creates both freedoms and frictions for students of Color. Theoretically, I argue that a new approach to emotion is required for English teachers. This adds complexity to the theorizing of

González and colleagues' (2005) concept of "funds of knowledge," Paris and Alim's (2017) concept of "culturally sustaining pedagogies," and Seider and Graves's (2020) notion of schooling for "critical consciousness," by including and interrogating emotion as a form of knowledge and site of censorship. By critically analyzing the discursive frameworks that privatize and depoliticize emotion, I hope to move from considering emotion as individual, trivial, or "irrelevant," as Jahir articulates, to thinking about what emotions do and can do in antiracist-oriented and multiracial ELA classrooms. The goal is not to argue that educators should substitute thinking with feeling (Bucholtz et al., 2018). Rather, I advocate braiding emotion into literature discussions to open up literary interpretations and possibilities for students.

Practically, this paper urges English educators to notice the subtle ways that even the most justice-oriented of classrooms can silence children of Color. In my analysis, I found that when students' emotions were managed and restricted, opportunities for youth of Color to participate were limited, and thus, learning about race and racism for all students in the classroom was stymied. Learning how topics around race play out in the classroom informs educators more about how to navigate the discomfort and loss of safety that students of Color experience as they move through contentious conversations (Thomas, 2015). For teachers, student emotions may be a clue that something is not fair or right such as how a character is treated in a book or how they are interacting with a peer (Beach et al., 2023). Thus, emotions can be a pathway for teachers to develop questions around justice and delve into deeper conversations about race and racism. Without in-depth scholarship examining the nuances of classroom discourse and

dynamics around diverse literature, teacher educators cannot prepare teachers to attune to their students' emotions to facilitate racial discourse, and they will continue to simply include authors of Color in their curriculum and mislabel it as antiracist work. In this moment of continued book banning and increased political division over school curriculum, this paper offers hope, tools, and possibilities for building humanizing educational spaces that recognize the complexity of students' thoughts and emotions about their racialized worlds.

Chapter 4— Out of the Closet and on to the Stage: LGBTQ+ Youth Restory and Rehearse Possible Selves

It was not when she found the word "fag" grafittied onto the bathroom walls at school, nor when she heard that the Genders & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) club had been disbanded. It was not even when she overheard the student rumors at recess that those who touched the red ball would immediately turn gay. But it was when Ms. Murphy witnessed her school leaders look away after each and every one of these instances, that she felt in her bones the urgent need to foreground LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) communities within her sixth grade classroom. Certainly, she had observed ignorance among children before, having attended many a Catholic institution like St. Joseph's in her day, but as an adult, she would no longer pretend it was not happening.

For twelve weeks, I observed how Ms. Murphy and her class of sixth graders read and responded to questions about difference in the ELA classroom (all names of participants and institutions are pseudonyms). I watched as Ms. Murphy facilitated conversations about LGBTQ+ topics, not as a tangent because one student was bold enough to ask a question, but as the central focus of the unit. While the events detailed above at St. Joseph's may seem distinct given the Catholic church's reputation for queer intolerance, in many ways, St. Joseph's was not that unique of a school context, as it mirrored a contemporary, national, social movement of homophobia and cisheterosexism. During the time of the study, in the spring of 2022, news coverage about Florida's new "Don't Say Gay Bill" swept across the American media. Still, Ms. Murphy pushed forward with her unit anchored by *The Best at it*, a novel that was simultaneously getting

banned in districts around the nation (Pen America, 2022a).

Against this background wherein books have become battlegrounds in the nation's culture wars, this study joins the growing scholarship that examines what happens when a teacher and her sixth grade students dare to address questions of gender and sexual diversity through literature in the ELA classroom. In recent decades, there has been an increase in literacy research attending to queer inclusive curricula in classrooms. Scholars explain that oftentimes even when teachers *do* incorporate LGBTQ+ themed texts in their curriculum, they do so for purposes of homosexual visibility to expose students *only* to controversial issues pertinent to LGBTQ+ people (e.g., gay marriage, transgender athletes in the Olympics) (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Cart & Jenkins, 2006). This study aims to contribute to the literature to cultivate schools where queer and ally youth[3] can learn and flourish, and LGBTQ+ topics can be addressed without solely centering the controversial issues.

Interested in standing shoulder-to-shoulder with those who examine how youth mobilize literacies to design more just social futures for themselves and their communities (e.g., Blackburn, 2022; Blackburn & Schey, 2018; Schey, 2021; Wargo, 2019), this ethnographic case study zeroed in on queer compositions as a form of resistance. Building on a restorying framework, I explore how two LGBTQ+ youths engaged in literacies not only as a mechanism for personal and collective identity work, but as a way to speak back to layers of the social, political, and institutional contexts of

[3] "Ally" here means a person who takes actions of support ranging from the interpersonal and micro-level (e.g. affirming a peer's identity) to being being increasingly engaged, and politically charged in larger, macro-communities and in ways that dismantle cisheteropatriarchy (Crawley, 2022).

their schooling. In particular, and given how ubiquitously the students in Ms. Murphy's class opted for drama as their final composition, I focus on their playwriting and performance. Placing the scripts that participants write and adapt for the stage at the center of my analysis, alongside their theatrical production and reception, I submit that these narratives represent, repair, and reconstruct youth identities (Halverson, 2005). The literacy activities presented here— from script writing to performing— open up possibilities for educators to understand how youth see themselves in the world. More specifically, this study asks*:*

RQ1: How do two LGBTQ+ youths restory and rehearse possible selves through the metaphorical stage of the classroom?

RQ2: In what ways, if any, does dramatic performance create an affinity space for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies in the ELA classroom?

Theoretical Perspectives

This paper is anchored by critical literacy theory. Following other studies of queer upper elementary and adolescent literacies (Hermann-Wilmarth et al., 2017; Johnson, 2017; Wargo, 2017a, b), I draw on critical perspectives of literacy, which entails a process of naming and renaming the world, seeing its patterns and complexities, and developing the capacity to redesign and reshape it (Luke, 2012). Below, I detail critical literacy, specifically, restorying frameworks, to focus on the literacy performances in a 6th grade ELA classroom.

Critical literacy

Critical literacy is a theoretical and pedagogical stance committed to the goals of critique and transformation– questioning and challenging assumptions, conflicts, and contradictions in texts (Damico et al., 2009; Janks & Vasquez, 2011). As Freire and Macedo (1987) contend, reading the word is simultaneously a project of reading the world. Our grasp of any text, as a result, is mediated by our previous histories of participation, identities, and power (Wargo, 2019). Cultivating critical literacy with adolescents examines how power shapes identities, practices, and the larger communities around them in order to improve the self and society.

Restorying

Restorying is a critical literacy practice in which writers "reshap[e] narratives to better reflect [their] diversity of perspectives and experiences" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 314). Thomas and Stornaiuolo contend that restorying is not an act of mere substitution, of transposing one character for another, but instead a fundamental reformulation of narrative. Their restorying framework outlines six narrative dimensions that writers can use to bend toward narrative justice: time and place (e.g. alternate settings); perspective (e.g. counter-storytelling); mode (e.g. transmedia storytelling); character identities (e.g. genderbending), and; metanarrative (e.g. collective storytelling). To understand my focal participants' restorying practices, I analyzed their data alongside two dimensions of the restorying framework– restorying character identity and collective restorytelling— both of which were resources that focal participants drew on to engage in self-exploration and community building on the stage.

Restorying identity. The restorying of identity dimension consists of the ways that youth change the identities of characters to mirror the diversity of their communities, to break boundaries between traditional categories, or to create characters whose identities better reflect their own. For queer composers, restorying of identity is particularly visible in the fandom practice of *genderbending*. Genderbending occurs when composers create "fanworks about popular characters, but change or embellish certain features of their gender" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 321). For instance, Wargo (2017a) traced a queer youth who engaged in genderbending in online spaces by describing Voldemort from Harry Potter as a "queen" and overlaying a photograph of his own face on top of Voldemort's body. Though Wargo does not use the language of "restorying" per se, he draws on the essence of restorying when he contends that his participants' LGBTQ+ identities were already "a fiction yearning to be played with, reworked and reinvented" (p. 147).

Additionally, the critical literacy practice of restorying identities allows queer individuals to write against hegemonic tropes, specifically "unhappy endings," that render aspects of their identities invisible in so-called realist narratives of queer life (Coleman, 2021). As Ahmed (2010) has argued, queer life is often depicted through personal and community narratives of pain, death, and dying with decisively unhappy endings (e.g. homophobia, bullying, the AIDS crisis, suicide). The activity of restorying identity, according to Coleman (2021), provided nine queer composers with a process and a community for drawing on their own histories, trying on new identities, and confronting tropes with depictions of positive futures. To this end, I extend the literature by

considering the ways that focal youth employed genderbending and challenged queer narrative tropes to represent their life experiences and try on possible selves on the metaphorical stage of the classroom.

Restorying collectively. Identities are built in and through the narratives people tell about themselves and their communities (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 427). However, narratives are not distinctly individual. Each narrative is a retelling, "an act of social interaction" in a given culture (Duggan, 1993, p. 793). Given this, I explore how contemporary youth restoried their identities collectively, patching narratives together with "citationality," or references and gestures to past ideas and texts (Schey, 2021, p. 208), which in turn, fostered a sense of belonging with a shared language and symbols. These collective forms of restorying can challenge metanarratives, or dominant understandings of queer youth, through collective action by offering an alternative reading. For instance, Wargo (2017b) traces how three youth collaboratively remediated, or what I would read as restoried, their identities through composing, creating and curating materials on the online platform of Tumblr, an affinity space for queer youth to be known differently than in offline spaces. While Thomas and Stornaioulo's (2016) conceptual framework takes root in the vast literacy practices of youth engaged in social media and digital tools, I extend it to an analog make-shift theatrical stage within a classroom space where composers were surrounded with a live audience of their peers and teacher. Whereas recent scholarship on restorying has better nuanced its application across media (Coleman, 2021; Corbitt, 2023; Messina, 2019; Wargo, 2017a, b), this present article centers scriptwriting and theatrical performances to illuminate how two

queer youth used creative processes to position themselves "at the center of their literate worlds" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 317).

(Queer) Composition as Literacy Performance

I complement the restorying framework with Blackburn's (2003) concept of "literacy performance." In this view, "literacy is conceived as a series of performances in which people read and write words and worlds…any one performance is situated among innumerable other performances" (Blackburn, 2003, p. 469). Literacy performance, here, foregrounds the agency of the student playwrights themselves as they actively (re)construct words and worlds through their scripts and in communication with their actors, audience, and teacher. Although Blackburn (2003) focused on literacy broadly, her discussion has been taken up by scholars focusing on queerness *as* composition (Schey, 2021; Wallace & Alexander, 2009; Wargo, 2018). I approach this phenomenon of (queer) composition as performance as offering unique affordances for understanding the transformative possibilities of literacies, for disrupting sexualized normalization by reimagining and recomposing narratives of queer life (Coleman, 2021; Muñoz, 2009).

Taken together, restorying and literacy performance comprise the theoretical framework for this study. These theories lay the foundation for examining the values, experiences, and beliefs that participants brought to their final theatrical performances as well as resisting the normative assumptions and understandings of queer lives.

Literature Review

In recent years, scholars and teacher educators have encouraged English language arts teachers to include LGBTQ+ issues and texts in their classrooms. Clark and

Blackburn (2009) argued that "English language arts classrooms can be significant sites for combating homophobia and heterosexism in schools, and that reading LGBTQ+-themed literature is one of the best ways to do that work" (p. 25). Likewise, a variety of articles have been published offering strategies to help elementary students to engage in LGBTQ+ themed literature and to question homophobic and heteronormative discourses in an array of texts (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018; Skrlac Lo, 2019). Additionally, a corpus of scholarship has explored queer representation across various elementary school texts (e.g., Crawley, 2017, 2020; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013; Wargo & Coleman, 2021). However, less is known about how discussions around these texts unfold, what kinds of queer life are represented, and how intersectionality plays a role in classroom discourse (Hermann-Wilmarth et al., 2017). Within this broader body of literature, I concentrate on that featuring middle and high-school students, looking specifically at the work on writing. I am particularly interested in LGBTQ+ themed composition or performance as it is integrated within teacher sanctioned curricula in school. Moreover, I am interested in audience, both within classrooms and beyond. In reviewing the scholarship, I focus largely on LGBTQ+ -themed adolescent composition that asked questions about composer and audience interactions.

Queer Inclusive Curricula

The scholarship on LGBTQ+ adolescents and literacy consists mostly within queer friendly contexts outside of classrooms such as Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSA) or afterschool spaces. For instance, some studies have explored LGBTQ+ adolescents with LGBTQ+-themed literature and composition in queer-friendly contexts

(Blackburn & Schey, 2018; Schey, 2021; Schey & Blackburn, 2019; Johnson, 2017; Wargo, 2020) and some have examined the selection, reading, and discussion of LGBTQ+-themed literature with LGBTQ+ and ally youth in queer-friendly contexts (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Blackburn et al., 2015). My research builds with this scholarship by examining a queer- friendly space in an ELA classroom within a Catholic school.

Although previous discussions of queer inclusive curriculum in school sanctioned curriculum is limited, Blackburn et al. (2018) empirically documented teachers taking three approaches to curriculum inclusive of sexual and gender diversity: stand-alone lessons and units, integrated content across a course, and books on the shelf (meaning books made available to students to choose to read individually). However, across these three approaches, scholars have documented how teachers often use LGTBQ+ texts in their lessons to target a cisgendered, heterosexual body of students, with the assumption that LGBTQ+ youth are not in the classroom itself (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Dinkins & Englert, 2015). In addition, many LGBTQ+ texts are taught in an effort to expose the presumed cisgendered and heterosexual class of students to controversial issues pertinent to LGBTQ+ people (e.g., gay marriage, gender neutral bathrooms, transgender athletes in the Olympics), resulting in classroom texts that may work as windows into the lives of LGBTQ+ people, but do not function as "mirrors"— to use Sims (1990) language— of LGBTQ+ people themselves (Blackburn, 2022). Together, these studies offer insight into inclusive curricula by attending to questions of LGBTQ+ representation but do not capture the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in

classrooms themselves. Notwithstanding, these studies almost exclusively foreground literature and reading in the context of elementary (Hermann-Wilmarth et al., 2017) and high school (Blackburn, 2022; Schey, 2021) curricula. Hence, there is a need to extend the scholarship discussing queer-inclusive curriculum by exploring how middle school children who are already exploring their own sexual and gender orientations read and respond to LGBTQ+-themed texts.

Queer compositions

Few studies exist that focus on how adolescents respond to LGBTQ+ themed texts or topics within a teacher-sanctioned curriculum and pedagogy. This scholarship typically captures how queer students read and compose traditional texts in print form, such as reading a novel or writing an expository journal entry (Blackburn & Schey, 2018; Cruz, 2013; Gonzales, 2010; Helmer, 2016, Schey 2021). As an exception, Michell's (2009) study captures a small group of students who collaborate on multimedia presentation that included role-playing, images, and videos about gay refugees. In other studies, Gonzales (2010) and Helmer (2016) document individual student compositions as presented to an audience of classmates. For instance, Gonzales's case showcases one student who composed and presented a multimedia adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* featuring men kissing men and women kissing women. Blackburn and Schey (2018) examined how one focal student interrogated and reified oppressive values through collaborative writing of book reviews for a public audience with her peers and teachers in an elective LGBTQ+ literature course. Lastly, Schey (2021) traced two literacy events in which students wrote and spoke about queer topics in preparation for a socratic seminar

and composed raps for a hip hop battle only to be met with aggressive anti-queer retorts from the audience. Aside from Blackburn and Schey (2018) and Schey (2021), many of these projects analyze the content of students' compositions rather than the classroom relationships, tensions, and allyship during their composing. Understanding these dynamics is an important but largely overlooked aspect of the work. Thus, this study contributes to the scholarship by showcasing how queer youth use composition to create classroom dynamics and build environments where they can safely explore possibile identities.

Method

This paper draws on comparative case study design (Stake, 2004) to understand how two queer youth restory and rehearse possible selves through the metaphorical stage of the ELA classroom. This paper also investigates how the focal youth use their theatrical performances (if at all) to create an affinity space for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies in their middle school classroom. In what follows, I detail the study context, and methods for data generation and analysis. Given the large scope of data collection, I highlight below which data sources were central in answering the research questions that are the focus of this analysis.

School Context

The study was conducted in a northeastern city in Saint Joseph's Catholic school. At the time of the study, 408 PreK-8th grade students were enrolled in the school. The students and staff alike were predominantly White, and approximately 15% of students received free or reduced-price lunch, a statistic commonly used as an indicator of

economically disadvantaged students.

Culturally, St. Joseph's included a mix of tolerance of queer identities alongside homophobia and transphobia that were steeped in Catholic historic traditions. While the principal encouraged Ms. Murphy to include LGBTQ+ texts in the curriculum, she too was under intense scrutiny by the superintendent of the Archdiocese, and would eventually be audited due to the volume of complaints surrounding the two book units under study and the larger antibias, antiracist (ABAR) work Ms. Murphy and I were engaged in. As such, the principal shut down student efforts to organize a Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSA) club. The school had adopted nondiscrimination and antibullying policies, but Ms. Murphy witnessed homophobic and transphobic actions daily, such as recurring homophobic slurs expressed on the playground and graffitied on the bathroom walls.

Class Context

Nora Murphy (Teacher)

Nora Murphy was a White, twenty-six old, second-year teacher at St. Joseph's at the time of the study. I first met her while working as a research assistant with a multi-year research-practice partnership dedicated to ABAR professional development. Having taught sixth grade ELA for many years myself, I was drawn to her commitment about how to do ABAR work in a school community like St. Joseph's that regularly, however tacitly, circumvented questions of gender and sexual difference. It was not long before we branched off from the PD series, and began to collaborate on two book units, a project that laid the foundation for my dissertation, and ultimately, this study.

Notably, Nora herself was bisexual, but she did not dare tell her students in fear of losing her job (Interview, April 12, 2022). Her employee contract itself forbade her to talk about her sexuality with her students, a mandate for all teachers within the Archdiocese. In short, queer topics in the school remained silenced and contentious. Regardless, Nora had a reputation for welcoming and honoring LGBTQ+ youth. Her classroom became a space where students adorned the walls and windowsills with LGBTQ+ flags and triangles to show off their pride and allyship to the surrounding community. As there was no mention of LGBTQ+ people in the curriculum, Ms. Murphy believed it was imperative to read and write marginalized selfhoods into textual existence.

Curriculum

Ms. Murphy and I organized the curriculum into two units that spanned 12 weeks, each with different focal texts, articles, multimedia, and compositions. Focal texts included two novels, *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018) and *The Best at it* by Maulik Pancholy (2019), which served as anchor texts that guided conversations. This study focuses on students' final compositions that responded specifically to *The Best at it,* a heartfelt, semi-autobiographical, coming-of-age story about an Indian American boy grappling with his sexuality and mental health. On a phone call with the author, Pancholy told me, "I wanted to write the story that I needed as a kid" (Personal Communication, December 22, 2023). The book has been banned in districts across Florida (Pen America, 2022a).

Participants

Of the thirty-three sixth graders, thirty students (11-12 years) agreed to participate in the larger study across the two sections of sixth grade (see Appendix A). This article focuses primarily on 6A, one section of fourteen students, 13 of whom participated in the study. Given my commitment to amplify queer youth voices, I selected 6A of the two 6th grade sections as more than half identified as LGBTQ+. Seven of the thirteen participants in this section identified openly as LGBTQ+ in their interviews, journals, and class discussions, with the others not openly identifying with any sexual orientation. One student was the daughter of lesbian mothers. Racially and ethnically, six of the participating students identified as White, four identified as Latinx, one identified as Black, one identified as Asian, one identified as Biracial (Black/White). On average, 6A met four times each week, with the last day of each week being an extended double-block period.

Through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), I selected focal participants whose compositions best fit the conditions of Blackburn's (2003) concept of literacy performance— illustrating student agency to (re)construct words and worlds— and included director-actor-audience interactions. I then selected the four performances by LGBTQ+ students in the class. I further used the interview data to identify which of those four students spoke about their experiences as a queer youth to provide contextual knowledge for their dramas. As a result, in this paper, I focus only on two LGBTQ+ youth and their literacy performances because of my aim to represent them with nuance. I paint a fuller picture of each of these students below.

Ben. Ben (he, him, his), a Latino twelve year old, was beloved for his open vulnerability and warmth. Ben thought he might be gay, and identified as queer with his friends, but was not totally sure yet. He was also best friends with Hazel who had shielded him from bullying on several occasions in the fourth grade. In his interview, Ben recounted a stressful time during the mandated lockdown of COVID when he felt alone with his family while questioning his gender. Although he finally decided that he was "just a boy who liked girl stuff," he talked candidly about silencing the questioning of his gender identity because he did not want to disappoint his Ecuadoran mother and White father (Interview, February 15, 2022). I quickly became interested in the ways Ben used his performance on the stage as a metaphorical space to try on different identities and reimagine his relationships at home.

Hazel. Hazel (she, her, hers), a White eleven year old, had a school-wide reputation for being a bully. In an interview, Hazel explained that she wanted to be a mortician when she grew up because she did not want to hear boring people talk all day long. Regardless, she carried a lot of sway among her peers who followed her around during recess. In her interview, Hazel also explained that she had come out of the closet in fourth grade as a lesbian to her friends and family after reading about LGBTQ+ youth online. During the time of the study, she identified as pansexual. She was passionate about LGBTQ+ topics, and was one of the most vocal participants in *The Best at it* unit. I was drawn by Hazel's final composition because it detailed a child coming out to her parents. As such, I became curious about how her drama reflected her own experiences at home.

Data Generation and Procedures

In the larger study, I used an ethnographic case study design (Stake, 2004) to explore participating student and teacher interactions across two sections of 6th grade through a) 79 hours of class observations over twelve weeks (42 occasions); b) 62 semi-structured interviews with the principal, teacher and her students; c) 13 hours of weekly reflection meetings with the teacher; and, d) artifact collection (4 anchor charts, 42 days of google slides, 30 students journals, and 30 final projects) across the two units. A variety of data from differing perspectives and sources were collected to understand students' grasp of and reflections on the two novels. The many forms of data collection serve as a means by which to triangulate the data, further establishing the credibility of the study's findings. For the purposes of this article, I draw on comparative case study design, looking at the cases of two focal students and their literacy performances.

Literacy Performances

As a culminating project for both units on *Ghost Boys* and *The Best at it*, Nora wanted her students to compose activist works to teach audiences outside of their classroom about issues of difference. See the assignment in Appendix E. Given the sheer number of students who chose drama as a way to express activism, I became interested in how Ms. Murphy's LGBTQ+ students composed and performed dramas in the classroom as acts of resistance against a school and national culture that threatened to erase queer life. As such, this study focuses on the focal students' literacy performances, specifically their theatrical scripts and performances that emerged from the final project.

The script. Of the thirteen participating students in 6A, seven students selected to

write and perform scripts as their culminating project. All seven scripts consisted of a restorying of the themes in *The Best at it* unit, not in *Ghost Boys*, despite that the assignment was a culmination of both book units. Ms. Murphy emailed me 50 pages of scripts (approximately 7 single-spaced pages of composition per student). In this study, I examined the scripts of the two focal students consisting of 18 pages—Ben (11 pages) and Hazel (7 pages). Using these scripts, I analyzed the content and structure of their stories, especially in contrast to how they were actually performed, to understand the kinds of identity-related issues they tackled through their writing.

The performance. The seven participating students who opted for drama as their final project in 6A directed and performed their plays across three school days on April 7, 8, and 12, 2022 during ELA class. Each play lasted about twelve minutes, totalling approximately 1.5 hours of theatrical performances. This paper draws on observations of the two focal students' final theatrical performances, occurring on April 8th, 2022. Ben's play lasted 18 minutes, and Hazel's play lasted 10 minutes (totalling 28 minutes). Data was recorded using a video camera. In addition, I took photographs, wrote jottings and fieldnotes, and audio-recorded voice memos (Emerson et al., 2011). Emphasis was placed on capturing the performance on the stage itself and the interactions between the student playwright/director, actors, and audience members.

Interviews

The 30 participating students were interviewed on two distinct occasions (totaling 60 interviews). These interviews were semi-structured, lasting approximately 15 to 45 minutes in length. The interview with Ms. Murphy occurred once at the end of the two

book units, and lasted 2 hours. All student and teacher interviews involved "video playback protocols," asking participants to reflect on predetermined points in the video recording and to describe their thinking and feeling (Juzwick, 2003). The interviews were video recorded and transcribed. In this study, I draw on the four interviews with the two focal students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative and ongoing process (Emerson et al., 2011), with findings based on comparative case analysis of the two focal participants and their literacy performances. Within-case analyses identified salient deductive themes that characterized each case narrative. The organizing structure for each within-case narrative included references, however implicit, to lived experiences and efforts to make connections with audience members as they occurred in (a) the script, (b) the performance, and (c) interviews. The overall understanding of each case helped to contextualize the students' final scripts and productions. After identifying key elements of the cases, I explored how each of the two participant's experiences compared. My intention was to bring into view both the particular attributes of the single case and patterns across the cases. To do this, I looked for recurring themes across the data.

Coding

In order to understand how queer youth restoried and rehearsed possible selves on the stage, I applied multiple layers of deductive and inductive coding. First, I read through the two student scripts, two transcripts from observations of the theatrical performances, and four interviews, and selected significant and theoretically rich

episodes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I identified 27 episodes from their scripts, 42 episodes from their theatrical performances, and 17 episodes from interviews. These episodes came from a deductive pass throughout the broader corpus wherein I looked for moments when youth - through their writing and performance - reflected on their agency, lived experiences, rehearsed possible selves, and connected with audience. Concurrently, I looked for moments where peripheral participants - those students who were either cast as characters in the play and/or served as audience members - signaled status as ally or antagonist through vocal participation and reactions.

With focal episodes selected, I drew on a priori codes (Saldaña, 2016) stemming from the scholarship: citing lived experiences (Schey, 2021), restorying identity (Wargo, 2017a, b; Coleman, 2021), showing vulnerability (and emotion) (Blackburn & Schey, 2018), genderbending (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016), interrogating oppressive values (Blackburn & Schey, 2018; Wargo, 2017a), challenging and reinforcing power dynamics within LGBTQ+ communities (Blackburn, 2003), and challenging tropes of pain in queer narratives (Coleman, 2021). After, I looked for moments where these actions lead to potential moves to build solidarity and allyship such as performer-audience interacting (Schey, 2021), restorying collaboratively (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016), breaking the fourth wall (Bell, 2008), citing popular culture (Wargo, 2017a), using the body to express identity (Enriquez et al., 2024), and reifying oppressive values through silences (Schey, 2021).

A back-and-forth approach between inductive and deductive codes during data collection and analysis, and a search for discrepancies, helped me to refine themes in the

data (Ragan & Amoroso, 2019). Throughout this iterative analytic process, I continued memo writing to facilitate sense-making within and among cases as coding took place (Miles et al., 2014). After rereading, I realized that several of the initial codes were repetitive; therefore, I removed some and collapsed others (e.g., connecting with the audience in character vs. out of character became breaking the fourth wall). After several rounds of coding and recoding, the most stable codes were genderbending, challenging queer tropes of pain, casting characters, breaking the fourth wall, and citing popular culture. These stable codes were then categorized into two categories—restorying identity and restorying collaboratively—that I will later discuss in the findings.

Positionality

I came to this project through my efforts to participate in an ABAR professional development series as I strive to support teachers to foster classroom spaces where queer youth can thrive openly. I recognize that the opportunity to do queer literacy research in a Catholic school reflects my privilege as a White, straight, cisgender, Jewish woman, an undertaking that queer—and non-binary—identified researchers have noted is challenging (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2015; Slovin, 2020). At the time of data collection, I was newly pregnant with my fourth child and Nora was recently engaged to a man. Both of us heading into new chapters of our lives, we grew close quickly, chatting in between classes about personal matters. As such, our connection was steeped early on in heteronormative conversations. I was surprised, then, during her final interview when Nora disclosed her own difficult journey as bisexual, an experience which sparked her commitment to our ABAR work together. I became cognizant of the unconscious

assumptions I had made early on about Nora, and wondered how I had potentially limited her comfort or constrained her expression throughout the book units. I add these descriptions to underscore the caring yet messy relational aspect of our researcher-participant dynamic that shaped the data for this study (Patel, 2016).

Therefore, I write as a straight, White, middle-aged woman, aware that I cannot know what it means to live as an adolescent today, let alone an LGBTQ+ teacher or youth attending 6th grade in a Catholic School. I write as a former 6th grade teacher who cares deeply about Nora and the children in this study, having built relationships with them and their families over several months and beyond the parameters of my fieldwork. I also write as an older sister who struggled to nurture her younger sister, as she matured through childhood, during a time when there were no mentors or manuals to draw on as a queer youth. Ultimately, I write as someone who believes that non-LGBTQ+ people must work to make "the world, and particularly schools, safer for and more inclusive of LGBTQ+ folks," just as White people must commit to ending racism and men must advocate for women's rights (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018, p.7).

Regardless of my intentions, I made and continue to make mistakes due to the bounds of my lived experiences and epistemologies (Schey, 2021). As such, I take seriously the advice of Anzaldúa (2012) who emphasized that privileged people, particularly White people, "come to see they are not helping us but following our lead" (p. 107). I try to respect this insight through consulting with and immersing myself in the work of LGBTQ+ literacy and education scholars (Blackburn, 2022; Coleman, 2021; Pritchard, 2013; Johnson, 2017; Wargo, 2017 a, b). The next section explores the

complex ways that the two focal youth restoried and rehearsed new roles for themselves to build community and imagine better futures.

Findings

Drawing from this exploration of youth literacy performances in Ms. Murphy's classroom, here I show the ways in which their reading and writing of words (and worlds) served to restory experiences of cisheterosexism and homophobia. To illustrate these themes, I first provide a brief overview of Ms. Murphy's culminating project assignment for context. Then, I portray two different images of dramas performed by Ben and Hazel, spotlighting how their restorying practices were influenced by their identities and collaboration with their peers. Taken together, these findings reveal two cases that demonstrate the value of restorying for queer youth to narrate themselves into existence while simultaneously constructing allyship in a school sanctioned space.

The Final Project

Ms. Murphy provided the sixth grade with three options for their culminating project after completing the *Ghost Boys* and *The Best at it* book units. The objective was to push students to develop their activist voices by using their knowledge about contemporary controversies to advocate for change. The first of the three options consisted of students writing and directing a play (see Table 2). The second option involved students writing an advocacy letter to a local politician. The third option asked students to design a series of social media posts rooted in activism. Ben and Hazel elected the first option—to write a script and direct a play in response to the themes from *The Best at it.*

Table 2

The final assignment (Artifact, March 28, 2022)

The final assignment: There are many times in *Ghost Boys* or *The Best at it* where characters feel excluded. Write a drama about an imaginary scenario (one YOU make up) in which a student feels like an outsider. How does this person feel? Why? What do the bystanders do? How can people in their community stand up for this person?

In the week leading up to the performance, Ms. Murphy passed out her grading rubric as the students drafted their scripts by hand before typing up their final versions in Google Docs (see Appendix F). They, then, had two class periods (about 100 minutes total) to recruit classmates and rehearse their plays. On the day of the final performances, Ms. Murphy delineated the boundaries of the make-shift "stage" by placing chairs and desks in a semi-circle around the classroom. After reviewing time limitations and behavioral expectations of the viewers, she joined the audience in the back of the room to observe.

The Case of Ben

The first case begins with Ben, who, in restorying time and place, reimagined himself and painful dynamics at home into the characters from *The Best at it*. His dramatic narrative imagines a possible conversation with his father.

Recomposing with Ben

For Ben's final play, he transposed the characters from *The Best at it* into a context that felt familiar to him, a shopping mall. At the start of the play, Rahul—the 12 year old protagonist in *The Best at it*— complains to his best friend, Chelsea, that Brent was bullying him once again at school. Determined to prove his self-worth, Rahul asks Chelsea to accompany him to the mall where he would surely find some hobby or game

in which he could prove to be the "best at it." After some time, the two friends, exhausted from shopping, plop down in a booth and order sodas at their favorite mall restaurant. All of a sudden, Rahul gasps when he catches sight of Brent with his little sister a few tables over. In a humorous scene, Chelsea and Rahul escape surreptitiously, trying to blend into the wall and tip toe their way out, only to both trip over a potted plant. Now, laying flat on the floor, they see Brent towering above them. He immediately begins to tease Rahul by picking at the contents of his shopping bag. Holding up Rahul's new T-shirt featuring Lady Gaga with the lyrics of "Born this way," Brent barks, "What kind of man do you think you are with this?" At this point, Chelsea rises from the floor to position herself face to face with Brent. See Figure 4. Waving a hand in his face, Chelsea scolds Brent about kindness and calls him "a disappointing piece of filth." In a closing monologue, Rahul stands alone on stage and tells the audience that he is finally content and confident.

Restorying Identity

From a restorying perspective, Ben selected and performed the characters from the novel whose identities more closely mirrored aspects of his own (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). At first glance, Ben's play may seem mundane, a narrative, set in a shopping mall, about two best friends who overcome a bully, but by shedding light on Ben's personal journey, it became clearer how his performance was shaped by painful experiences. Consider Ben's first interview:

Ben: But with my dad, it's like, "I wish you were more manly, I wish you were not like that." And I'm a bit mad at him with that, but I know he still loves me.

Marisa: It sounds really stressful.

Ben: It *is* stressful, all the time. And I don't think he knows how stressful it is because I'm thinking about this *every day, every day, every day.* Whenever I'm walking around, I have to think about my actions and what I have to do. And then I can't open up to him about that, but I feel like I should, but also I can't. But also, it's not as much as I think it is, so I should just keep quiet. But also it's really difficult so I should talk to him about it. So I'm trying, and I think I will really soon, but it's a bit stressful, because he's probably the person out there who is really mad that I'm like this. And he's like, "Other people are going to hate you for acting like that. They're going to be like, 'You're not a man. You're dumb and stupid.'" (Interview, February 15, 2022)

Ben's interview excerpt highlights how he vacillated between confronting his father or "staying quiet" about the pressure he experienced to be "manly" ("every day, every day, every day"). In other parts of the interview, he reported feeling so unsettled about his gender identity, that he was not sure what he would even say to his father if given the chance. Later, he adds that he also feels "awkward" around his peers because he was so uncertain about his identity.

A decontextualized interpretation of Ben's literacy performance would fail to convey the affliction Ben vocalized when originally sharing about his family and peer dynamics. From a restoring identity lens, Ben's literacy performance allowed him to write and act his inner torment into existence, and more specifically, to make his quest to find his identity more visible on a stage (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 321). Wright (2017), drawing from Eriksonian theory, asserted that adolescents need to create a space for low-stakes identity exploration, for them to try on possible selves and try out different

identities without lasting consequences. Along these lines, the metaphorical stage of the classroom provided Ben the opportunity to try on different aspects of his identity, without having to censor his "actions" like he did at home. Below, I further describe how Ben employs genderbending to rehearse different questions about his identity, his masculinity, and his social relationships.

Genderbending. One of the ways Ben restoried himself into the narrative was through genderbending himself to play all five of the roles in his play— Rahul, Chelsea, Brent, Brent's little sister, and the narrator. It was an undertaking that made him breathless and sweaty as he toggled quickly between five characters across four scenes in an 18 minute play. For instance, by sweeping his long bangs to the left or right of his forehead, Ben signaled to the audience that he was playing either Chelsea or Rahul. To embody Rahul, specifically, Ben was often hunched over, covering his face, or flat on the floor. See Figure 4. Conversely, to embody Brent, Ben stood up tall and flung a black fleece around his shoulders. To play the role of Brent's little sister, he crouched down and glanced up to indicate a shorter height. There were no elaborate costumes or props to distinguish between the characters.

Figure 4

Ben shifting his body from the character of Chelsea to the character of Rahul

Ben playing the role of Chelsea during her confrontation with Brent

Ben playing the role of Rahul during Chelsea's confrontation with Brent

While multiple interpretations of Ben's choice to cast himself in all five roles are possible, I read Ben's choice to genderbend as an opportunity to explore different facets of his gender identity through role playing, and simultaneously, to test the boundaries of his audience as he tried on new personas. In a sense, Ben's embodiment of Chelsea provided him an opportunity to imagine himself with her confidence and wit, while his performance of Rahul allowed him to represent his raw feelings of stress and helplessness within the metaphorical mask of a character and the safety of a fictional world. Through the character of Brent, who ridiculed Rahul's masculinity for his new Lady Gaga T-shirt, Ben was able to embody his father's nagging criticism about the legitimacy of his

masculinity. Along these same lines, it is possible, then, that in the climactic scene with Chelsea's confrontation with Brent, that Ben allowed himself to rehearse for a future conversation about his gender identity with his own father. Yagelski (2009) notes, "The writing does not create us, but in the act of writing we are; by writing we reaffirm and proclaim our being in the here and now" (p. 17). Through genderbending on a stage, Ben agentively uses his body to play with different aspects of his identity (Enriquez et al., 2024), imagine possible selves, repair relationships with his father, and promote a narrative with queer hope and healing (Coleman, 2021; Wargo, 2017a).

Absent from Ben's performance, however, is the intersectional identity of Rahul from *The Best at it* who was targeted by Brent for his sexuality *and* his ethnicity. Throughout the play, Ben made no citation to Rahul's Indian heritage, despite that it was an underlying component of the novel's plot. By erasing this aspect of Rahul's identity, Ben implicitly elevated White and cis-gendered norms of writing, reading, and knowing (Pritchard, 2013; Schey & Blackburn, 2019). Consequently, Ben– who identified as Latino and sometimes gay– and his audience members, did not have an opportunity to consider how different layers of identities mattered in different contexts. Notwithstanding this missed opportunity to play with intersectionality, Ben's written script allowed him to write aspects of himself into existence, but his actual performance on stage allowed him to carve out space to rehearse different identities with other LGBTQ+ youth and classroom allies in the audience, as I will illustrate more in this next section.

Restorying Collectively

Although Ben single handedly acted out all five roles on stage, his theatrical performance was far from an individual production. Instead, Ben restoried his narrative in a collaborative back and forth with the audience, asking for input on textual and visual components of the drama. Below, I describe how Ben uses his performance to construct an affinity space in 6A by breaking the fourth wall and citing queer youth popular culture to foment allyship among his classmates.

Breaking the fourth wall. Throughout his performance, Ben creates a participatory culture by "breaking the fourth wall," a metatheatrical device in which actors or characters address the audience directly, thereby breaking the invisible, imaginary wall that separates the actors in their fictional world from the audience (Bell, 2008). Breaking the fourth wall, for instance, is common in children's theater where a character might elicit help from the children, as when Peter Pan appeals to the audience to applaud in an effort to revive the fading Tinker Bell ("If you believe in fairies, clap your hands!") (p. 203). On six occasions, Ben broke the fourth wall and went "off" script, not as an actor or the narrator, but as Ben, the student playwright and director, himself. In each of these improvisational moments, Ben restoried with the audience by asking a question, requiring participation in a scene, or giving a compliment. On one occasion, Ben asked the audience to take a sip of the imaginary soda. Thrilled, audience members held pretend sodas in their hands, and shouted out words like "delicious" and "love this flavor." On two occasions, Ben paused, looking for a word in one instance, and then trying to create a name for Brent's little sister's character in a different instance. The

audience quickly provided him with name suggestions of which he took up, and integrated back into his performance. At another point, he said to his audience, "But plot twist, guess who else is there?" The audience, overwhelmed with suspense, peppered him with predictions. In other moments, Ben flattered the audience, "Oh, I knew you guys could. You guys are the best audience." Each time, when Ben addressed the audience directly, his classmates eagerly participated, laughed, sighed, and cheered. The joy and excitement in the room were palpable. With each playwright-actor-audience interaction, the fourth wall became progressively porous, and Ben modulated his performance, increasing his volume, aggrandizing his gestures around their collective responses, signaling to his audience that their input, their reactions were valued.

Citing (Queer) Popular Culture. Another aspect of Ben's collaborative restorying that created intimacy among the group was Ben's use of linguistic and cultural citations in the script. For instance, Ben employed language typically reserved for social media on several occasions. In his opening scene, he commented, "This is not canon," another way to underscore his restorying efforts to alter the storyline from Pancholy's original work. At a different point, his character of Brent asserted, *"L bozo ratio plus shut up plus you're stupid,"* a phrase roughly calling someone a loser ("L") and stupid ("bozo"), and asserting that those who agree with the point of disagreement are also losers and stupid ("ratio"). This language is commonly used to bully people on TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram. In response, Ben's audience laughed because of the absurdity of hearing a digital and informal discourse in a school-sanctioned space. These linguistic citations are signs to his peers that he is targeting them as his primary audience by

including and appealing to them, and not to the teacher who most likely would not understand such language. To this end, Ben integrated colloquial digital language in an offline context as a symbol of membership and belonging for his audience (Underwood & Faris, 2015; Wargo, 2017b).

Similarly, Ben cited the singer and activist, Lady Gaga and her song, "Born this Way," to connect with his predominantly LGBTQ+ classmates over a popular artist and queer icon. His citations prompted several students to cheer in response, indicating their recognition and approval of his symbolic gestures. By mobilizing language and symbols from queer popular culture, Ben's use of citationality functioned as a pathway for intimacy and allyship in his classroom community as they connected over shared symbols while collaboratively restorying Brent's rigid construction of masculinity and more broadly, resisting cisheteronormativity (Schey, 2021). As Ben invited his audience members into his narrative, he created an affinity space in 6A (Gee & Hayes, 2011) or a participatory culture in which audience members felt welcomed "to communicate and circulate their ideas" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 7).

By consistently breaking the fourth wall and making symbolic citations to his audience, Ben agentively tests the boundaries of his environment to create a safe space for identity exploration (Nakkyla & Toshalis, 2006; Wright, 2017). Thus, Ben used his script and his performance to construct himself, untethered to a singular identity, and in collaboration with his audience (Wargo, 2017a). The back and forth between Ben and his audience revealed how the youth in 6A co-constructed a literacy performance that served

to affirm Ben in his identity exploration while also showcasing their commitment to LGBTQ+ justice in a school community that threatened to silence queer life.

The Case of Hazel

Unlike Ben who restoried the time and place in his script, Hazel restoried the themes from *The Best at it* using her own imagined characters. She also drew on her own life in her drama to depict tensions at home and school, and to capture her hope for a brighter future.

Recomposing with Hazel

For Hazel's final assignment, she wrote and directed a play entitled "Freak" with characters of her own creation. In her first scene, entitled "Ex-Besties," Alex (formerly Alexa), announces to his three best girlfriends that he is transgender and now identifies as a boy. At first, his friends laugh it off and demand that he take off his wig and brother's clothing. By the end of the scene, the girlfriends storm away and refuse to take part in Alex's pretend "play," leaving Alex alone and crying. The subsequent scene, entitled "Dead Name," features Alex's parents heatedly discussing their child's new transgender identity at home. Michael, the father, who is marked as an ally from the start with his careful use of he/him pronouns, beams with pride that his son confided in them. Brie, the mother, conversely, insists on using she/her pronouns and attributes Alex's new identity to a passing "tomboy" phase. When Alex returns home from school, Brie asks,"Is this really how you feel, Lexi?" In a fit of tears, Alex pleads with his mother to stop calling him by his "dead name." At this point, Michael, the father, swoops in, wraps his arms around his son, and apologizes for his wife. In the subsequent scenes, Alex begins a

romantic relationship with a boy named Robin, and they attend a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) meeting where they finally feel accepted. In the final scene, Alex invites Robin over to his home to introduce him to his parents. Grasping Robin's hand tightly, Alex nervously faces his mother, and says, "Mom, I'd like you to meet Robin, my boyfriend." And the play ends. Alex's words and body language are neither assertive nor heroic, making the play feel anticlimactic, and leaving the audience desperate to know how the mother will respond.

After a few seconds, realizing that the play has ended, the audience jumps wildly out of their seats, erupting into cheers, and dancing across the room. But, Hazel is not done. She leaps to the front of the stage, faces the audience, and bellows over the noise, "Wait, I am not done yet." The teacher rings her bell feverishly, and the class finally calms. See Figure 5. With friends' extending their arms out to touch her back and huddled around her, Hazel explains her cliffhanger of an ending,

> Everybody, I have the director's note. I know the ending seems like it should have been like the mom's reaction, but the whole point is that like, you know, it doesn't matter the mom's reaction because she's homophobic and transphobic anyways, so we already know that. But like, it was more like about Alex being strong enough to stand up to his mother being like, you know, I'm gay and trans and I don't really care what you think because I know I got people around me who support me. You know? (Observation, April 8, 2022)

Here, Hazel focused her audience's attention on her protagonists' profession of his queerness at the end of the play, and not on the controversy that would have ensued if the scene had continued. By the end of her director's note, the class had once again exploded into cheers.

Figure 5

Hazel's director's note at the end of her play (Observation, April 8, 2022)

Restorying Identity

Like Ben, Hazel read and wrote her characters as mirrors of her lived experiences, particularly with respect to her relationship with her parents. In her interview, Hazel compared herself to Rahul from *The Best at it*. She said, "I mean, obviously, I went through this too. I didn't know that I was gay or whatever, just like Rahul didn't, and then he found someone that he liked, and he was like, *Oh, my God.* And then I went on the internet and I found out what it meant." Here, Hazel jumps between Rahul's experiences and her own, switching off between "he" and "I" pronouns in her response, and showing her personal connection to the text. Hazel further commented on the loneliness she

experienced as she unlearned the assumption of heterosexuality (Herdt & Boxer, 1993) and learned to manage a stigmatized identity (Ryan & Futterman, 1998) for herself by conducting internet research. She later underscored her frustration with her parents with their dismissal of her "coming out" and apathy about the LGBTQ+ movement. She reflected,

> There's people we know. They're non-binary. My parents always mess up their pronouns, and it's so annoying. But anyways, so my parents, they're not homophobic…They don't care that I'm pan, but it's not like they're talking about it. [...] I mean, it's not like they're flaunting it, the fact that their daughter is pan. [...] I don't know if they [believe me] because I'm also not going to tell them I have a crush on a girl or something because, I don't know, I just don't feel comfortable with that. (Interview, March 21, 2022)

Here, Hazel lamented over her parents' inattention to her queer identity. She insisted that they were not homophobic, but that they did not take her coming out in earnest. In an interview with Hazel's close friend, Ava reported that Hazel's parents forbid her to hang the pan flag in her room. It was not surprising, then, that Hazel took great efforts to adorn her spaces outside of home with pansexual flags. Not only did she decorate her ELA classroom windows with PRIDE symbols, but she frequently accessorized her body and materials (clothing, backpack, hockey bag, and student journal) with pins and stickers of the pan flag. Feeling undermined at home herself, Hazel wrote herself into existence through the character of Alex, whose mother did not take their child's coming out seriously, attributed his transgender identity to a passing "tomboy" phase, and even rejected his pronouns.

In Hazel's commentary at the end of her play, she seemed to draw on both her character's experiences and her own, ascribing Alex's experience to his mother's bigotry

("she's homophobic and transphobic anyways"), but also pulling from her own, present experiences at home by shifting from second person when talking about Alex, to first person ("I'm gay and trans and I don't really care what you think"), making it clear that she, too, had been impacted by homophobia (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). In the script itself, Hazel included an author's note after the final act. However, it was only written in second person about her protagonist, Alex. She wrote, "This scene is more about Alex being strong enough to stand up to his mom and say, 'This is me and if you don't like it that's not my problem.' Thus, it is possible that Hazel, like Ben, used the stage as an opportunity to talk through the impact of homophobia in her own life, particularly how she dealt with the loneliness of coming out to family who did not take her seriously, much like the dynamic between her character Brie and her transgendered son.

A Celebratory Ending, Beyond Tropes of Pain. Hazel's script, entitled "Freak," challenged the trope of a queer tragic ending typically attached to realist genres (Coleman, 2021). Hazel's refusal to give her audience the pain trauma or turmoil of homophobia in her conclusion implicitly required the audience to question why they needed that friction to imagine this scenario as a reality. In so doing, she raised her audiences' consciousness by naming the imagined reality that shaped the ending to her drama and, although using a director's note rather than weaving a celebratory ending into the fictional world of the play itself, she faced her audience to rewrite and challenge the trope of queer unhappy endings as the default depiction of queer life. In real time, Hazel rooted her discussion in narratives of "imagined queer futures" (Coleman, 2021) of people who found happiness and community apart from their family with her concluding

commentary, *"It was more like about Alex being strong enough to stand up to his mother…being like I got people around me…"*And like her protagonist Alex experienced with Robin and his newfound GSA community, Hazel experienced the warmth and backing of her community, in that moment of her explaining her director's note to the class, as her actors and audience embraced her and cheered. In this way, the stage became a metaphorical space to try on possible identities, while eliciting affirmation from peers.

Restorying collectively

Hazel also constructed a participatory culture in which the literacy performance belonged not just to Hazel, the playwright and director, but to the collective (Thomas & Storniauolo, 2016). This construction occurred in three ways— carefully casting her characters, breaking the fourth wall, and citing queer popular culture.

Casting characters. Hazel cast ten of her 15 classmates to act in her drama. Hazel casted herself as the narrator, and remained on the stage throughout the performance, in plain view of the audience. She casted her two closest friends— Ben and Jahir— as the stars, Alex and Robin, respectively. Hazel casted Mateo as her protagonist Alex's father, the lead ally in the script. This was an interesting choice given that Hazel had recently slapped Mateo across the face for using homophobic slurs during recess. It is possible, then, that Hazel, a revered leader in their grade, provided Mateo an opportunity to redeem himself and prove his allyship through the compassionate character of Alex's father. In a poignant scene, the protagonist, Alex (played by Ben) glanced up tearfully at his father (played by Mateo), and asked, "Do you think I'm a freak, Dad?" Quietly, the

father wrapped his arms around his transgendered son, assuring him that he was not a freak, and that he would love him "no matter what." See Figure 6.

Figure 6

"Do you think I am freak, Dad?" Father (Mateo) embracing son (Ben).

Mateo, by embodying the character of Alex's father, was able to participate in a significant life event for a transgender youth within the fictional world of the play while also demonstrating his solidarity by hugging an openly gay classmate (Ben) in front of a group of his peers. In so doing, he modeled for the audience that he can embrace, touch, interact with Ben just as he would with any other friend. In this way, Hazel used her composition not just to restory her own identity, but to provide opportunities for the actors to restory their own by rehearsing new roles for themselves as allies within the safety of the stage where there were no real-life consequences.

Breaking the fourth wall. As two thirds of the class were involved in Hazel's production, the students flowed between their roles as actors and then audience members.

Just as Ben repeatedly broke the fourth wall by addressing the audience directly, the actors in "Freak" slipped in and out of their roles, moving through the imaginary divide between the stage and the audience swiftly and seamlessly. At times, the actors broke the fourth wall spontaneously in the reverse direction, reading the narration aloud from an audience's seated position, alongside Hazel who remained on the stage. For instance, at the start of scene five, Hazel and her audience members narrated the line "Meeting the parents" in nearly perfect unison, a moment that caused an otherwise serious Hazel to chuckle in pleasant surprise at how eager her actors (now audience) were to participate in the culminating scene. Perhaps moved by the rare smile across Hazel's face, one actor, turned audience member, shouted, "This is sooooo good, guys" right as the actors were about to begin. At other times, the audience members helped Hazel to direct the actors on the stage. For example, Mateo shouted from the audience to the actors on stage "Get in a circle. Get in a circle. Sit. Sit." At another point, Laila conveyed the importance that the actors transitioned between scenes faster, calling out from the audience, "Come on guys you only have two minutes." In the case of Ben's performance, he explicitly asked the audience to participate by breaking character and addressing the audience directly. However, in Hazel's play, many of the actors *were* the audience, and they participated in co-constructing the performance by acting in the play itself, and then motivating, cheering, and directing, from the audience's seated position. Between the porous nature of the stage and the collaborative directing and narrating of the script itself, Hazel's literacy performance paved a path for her classmates to create an affinity space for

LGBTQ+ youth and their allies to demonstrate solidarity around the character of Alex, a queer middle schooler who bravely "came out" to his family and friends.

Citing popular culture. Hazel also restoried collaboratively with her actors through the written script itself by making popular culture citations. Embedded in the opening scene when Alex's best friends rejected him at school was an image from the movie, Mean Girls (2004), a visual citation intended to explain how the actors needed to abandon Alex on stage. See Figure 7. By citing Mean Girls in her script, Hazel appealed to her classmates by explicitly naming an iconic queer text, citing and thus drawing on shared symbols with her peers. Although Mean Girls was released seven years prior to Hazel's birth, the film continued to represent a cult classic that captured the damaging effects of social cliques and school bullying. Hazel drew on this citation to assist her actors in their roleplaying, but also to foster solidarity in her community using a language, like insider information, that only her friends would understand. Similar to how Ben incorporated language from social media and Lady Gaga in his performance, Hazel's citationality of popular culture functioned as an opportunity to cement membership in their affinity group of LGBTQ+ students and allies.

Figure 7

"Whatever, you can play pretend all you want."

JESSIE: You're not a boy alexa, your being stupid.

ALEX: Yes, I am.

JESSIE: Whatever, you can play pretend all you want Lex, but we're not gonna be a part of it. Let's go girls.

THE THREE GIRLS WALK AWAY LIKE THIS -->

ALEX WALKS AWAY CRYING

Hazel's practice of restorying, of reshaping narratives to reflect her experiences, was an act of asserting the importance of her existence in a school that overlooked her identity. Through her director's notes, she asserted her ownership over what matters in her own story, where she was able to define herself, and not fall victim to other people's accounts, particularly not to her parent's. Though her script was performed by other actors, she had the opportunity to see her story as an independent piece of work, rather than a piece inside her head, and observe from the back of the stage how her narrative was taken up by audience members. Like Ben, she used her literacy performance to write parts of her story into existence, to rehearse the words and the confidence needed for possible confrontations with her parents, and to imagine a happy future for herself

surrounded by an accepting community. In contrast to the research literature, the students in 6A created opportunities for performer-audience interactions that were dynamic, humanizing, and celebratory, a far cry from the polite, schoolish, and aggressive displays of masculinity that Schey (2021) found in the literacy performances of high school sophomores. Through playwriting and performing on a stage, Hazel and Ben alike, alongside their classmates, played with the identities of different people including mother, father, boyfriend, ally, bully, little sister, and narrator. In so doing, they had the opportunity to try on multiple selves through rehearsing without truly taking on all of these identities in their real lives while simultaneously building solidarity around LGBTQ+ justice.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore how two LGBTQ+ youths restoried and rehearsed possible selves through the metaphorical stage of the classroom, and to examine the ways that dramatic performance created affinity spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies. The two cases shed light on the complexity of restorying practices for queer youth. As Anzaldua (1987) explains, “The world I create in writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing, I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it” (p. 319). Below, I explain how the focal youth here used playwriting and performance to try to “put order” in their world by using restorying in two ways— to repair relationships and to resist cisgendered normativity.

Restorying to repair

The two focal youth used the stage to repair relationships with themselves and their families. When Ben and Hazel were invited to restory the world from their own perspectives, they engaged in a new form of becoming by authoring themselves into their compositions to do the reflexive and interpersonal repairing work they could not do at home. Both students used scriptwriting and performance to try on multiple selves through rehearsing without actually taking on all of these identities in their real lives. For Ben, his play became a way for him to engage with genderbending, trying on different versions of himself while working through his anguish caused by pressures at home. Through his composition, he repaired his relationship with his father and rehearsed the words and confidence he needed to assert himself in the same way that his character of Chelsea stood up to Brent. Similarly, Hazel's scriptwriting allowed her to reflect on her own circumstances and repair relationships at home. Through her character of Alex, she imagined the confidence needed to demand that her mother finally take her queer identity seriously. The classroom stage in this way became a metaphorical space that allowed focal youth to reflect on painful lived experiences and explore other possibilities without the grave consequences of real life (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). The youth were able to use writing as an external medium to merge these dimensions together, providing them with an outlet to design and work toward a more confident sense of self (Frankel, 2024). These findings align with Wargo (2017a) and Coleman (2021) who found that queer individuals, albeit in digital and elected spaces, used restorying to heal painful realities by spotlighting an imagined, hoped-for future.

Restorying to resist

Ben and Hazel's literacy performances were more than mere exercises in self-exploration or community building, they were a practice in joint imagining of what could be, resisting default heterosexual ideologies, and restorying pain narratives about queer life (Coleman, 2021). By featuring narratives that embraced queer characters' everyday lives, Ben and Hazel resisted heterosexual practices and ideologies. That is, when heterosexual people typically think about LGBTQ+ people, they think immediately about sex and desire, rather than relationships and communities (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). At the start of *The Best at it* unit, one non-focal student confessed to Hazel that he was homophobic himself, in the literal sense of the word, meaning he was, in fact, *afraid* of queer people, having never really "seen them" before. He even looked away, repulsed, during one activity when Ms. Murphy included an image of two men slow dancing at their wedding in a classroom gallery walk. Surprisingly (to me), Hazel shrugged it off as she felt neither compelled to defend herself nor slap him as she had done with Mateo. For students like this, Ben and Hazel's performances provided humanizing glimpses into the lives and communities of queer youth. Their plays captured their relationships with family and friends, braiding the tears and hope of what it felt like to disclose oneself ("coming out") while continually having to manage a stigmatized identity (Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Halverson, 2005) in a homophobic and transphobic world. Mobilizing literary devices like breaking the fourth wall, genderbending, and citing queer popular culture to subvert, challenge, and overwrite queer representations focused solely on trauma, the focal youth composed new

stories with and for other people like themselves, bending the world to look more like the one they live in and imagine. In this way, Ben and Hazel's restorying contributed to what Coleman (2021) dubbed, "a collective reservoir of dreams" through which others may resist the trope of queer unhappy endings held within the imagination (p. 533). As Coleman (2021) asserts, once queer metanarratives are reimagined, it can incite a process of healing both for self and the community.

Recognizing that this is a case of two, I have no exhaustive remarks about all queer youth. This study can offer an example of what can happen when educators provide a platform for youth to talk about LGBTQ+ lives and communities, without solely focusing on the political controversies and trauma (e.g., gay marriages, transgender athletes in the Olympics, AIDS, bullying, suicide). As neither Ben nor Hazel were able to express themselves at home, their cases highlight how damaging it can be for queer youth who may not find safe spaces for expression at school, an institution where they spend most of their time. It was only within the affinity space of their peer group in Ms. Murphy's classroom that Ben and Hazel were able to reflect on themselves, repair relationships, and resist dominant narratives about queer youth through writing, roleplaying, and rehearsal. Therefore, I submit that an ongoing commitment to queer middle school youth in the English Language arts classroom involves fostering affinity spaces for students to engage in restorying to rehearse and reimagine possible selves.

Conclusion and Implications

Theoretically, Ben and Hazel's literacy performances demonstrate the degree to which literacy is situative and relational (Rosenblatt, 1985). More importantly, however,

these performances illustrate how educators should pay attention to the ways in which young people and LGBTQ+ youth in particular, write themselves into narratives and how they use literacies to construct, repair, and connect to community on their own terms (Thomas & Storniaoulo, 2016). These classroom opportunities of playing with identity, relationship building, and dreaming of new realities are truly the extra-curriculum of literacy learning that *can* and already *do* occur in the classroom, even amid a school climate where queer topics remained taboo.

Outside of its theoretical contributions, this case study highlights the pedagogical possibilities of transforming the everyday school curriculum in ways that render LGBTQ+ voices, identities, and experiences visible, positioning them centrally in curriculum and instruction. As a former teacher, I relish in the imaginative work of teachers who mobilize Wargo's (2020) [q]ulturally sustaining pedagogies, a stance and perspective that reorients resource based pedagogies to center gender and sexual differences and the strategies LGBTQ+ youth employ to write themselves and their world. This approach to teaching and learning focuses on centering the literacies and identity work of youth, moving beyond printed texts to explore the "intersections between identities, contexts, and author/reader/text"— or playwrite/audience/performance— transactions (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 330). Although not named as such by the teacher or participants, Ben and Hazel's cases underscore Wargo's (2020) concept of [q]ulterally sustaining pedagogy by emphasizing how composition can be both a reflexive turn inward as well as an outward form of allyship and resistance.

Certainly, these snapshots and scenes provide rich moments of queer youth's agency and resistance, but these examples were not representative of the larger lingua franca of this school nor of the larger country. Over the past two years, since Ben and Hazel restoried themselves on a makeshift classroom stage while Florida passed into law the "Don't Say Gay" bill that same month, legislative attacks on education about gender identity and sexual orientation have picked up momentum. In 2023, state lawmakers introduced 42 bills across 22 U.S. states restricting discussion and books pertaining to LGBTQ+ identities and same-sex families (Pendharkar, 2023). In fact, in the following 2022-2023 school year, and outside of the scope of this study, Ms. Murphy did not teach *The Best at it*, as she believed it was too controversial, and felt she didn't have enough administrative support to navigate the tensions. When I relayed this detail to Maulik Pancholy, the author of *The Best at it,* he responded,

> One of the questions people ask me all the time in the context of such widespread book banning is what happens if kids *don't* read my book. What impact would that have? And I think about this study and this one group of sixth graders who read it, and then produced their own plays. They made these incredible connections with themselves and their classmates, and I wonder what opportunities the next group of sixth graders missed out on. (Personal communication, December 22, 2023)

To Pancholy's point, when students do not have spaces to build connections personally and communally around LGBTQ+ texts in the classroom, they miss out on opportunities to build identity, empathy, and awareness about issues of difference that they will encounter in their lives.

Indeed, it is a precarious time to be an LGBTQ+ youth, and neither restorying, playwriting nor performing on stage will serve as a panacea to mollify the frictions or provide more freedoms to queer students in school. These literacy practices, however,

invite educators to rethink their pedagogies and classroom cultures, and begin to center the lives and communities of LGBTQ+ youth in the curriculum. Ben and Hazel's literacy performances account for the innovative and inventive ways in which young people use literacy to reconcile, heal, and imagine new realities. Educators may ask how are queer youth re-writing their present reality in which the word and the world are constructed for anticipated positive futures? These kinds of literacy practices are necessary parts of the ELA classroom, and not only reserved for extracurricular spaces. As we saw here, composing scripts and performing drama for queer youth provided spaces for queer youth to stitch together hurt and angst while fomenting deep joy and allyship in the ELA classroom.

Chapter 5— Conclusion

This dissertation is a story about the freedoms and frictions that emerged when one White ELA teacher attempted to address questions of difference through the study of literature in her racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse classroom. My goal was to forward the conversation concerning how we— as educators and researchers—might reimagine how to prepare White ELA teachers committed to critical pedagogies in ways that account for the complexity they encounter in schools. Without empirical work to guide and understand the enactment of justice-oriented curriculum and instruction, ABAR pedagogy is at risk of becoming yet another passing trend, "as fashionable as skinny jeans" (Matias, 2015, p. 1). ELA classrooms, as I advance in and through each of the papers, are fraught socio-political spaces. But they are also spaces of hope, healing, and imagination. More than any other discipline, in ELA, teachers and students can try on new identities, listen to, and attempt to understand the place of others. Literature plays a fundamental role. As such, I contend that White novice teachers hold the potential to amplify ABAR pedagogies in the ELA classroom when they have the proper preparation, ongoing support, and reflexive commitment to their practice.

Summary of Dissertation

In the first paper, I showed how the system of schooling—from the lack of structural teacher support to the cultural norms of the broader community— worked through Ms. Murphy to advance White racial ideology in her literature unit on *Ghost Boys.* Using Critical Whiteness studies as a refractive lens, this paper offered considerations for researchers to expand their theorization of White teachers who often

attempt and fail at antiracist work. A broader lens, I argue, better captures the layered barriers of the school context without placing the blame wholly on the individual teacher. This paper highlights how Ms. Murphy's professional development, which focused solely on developing her racial awareness, was insufficient to support her in the *Ghost Boys* unit. As a novice teacher in a hostile school context, I contend that she also needed pedagogical coaching and wrap-around support from the community to effectively deliver antiracist literature instruction.

While the first paper looks from a wide-angle lens at the structural constraints impeding Ms. Murphy's antiracist instruction, the second paper looks intimately at the emotional experiences of three students of Color. In the second paper, through a cross-case analysis, I showcased the emotional labor required of three students of Color when engaged in conversations about race and racism that emerged from *Ghost Boys*. Findings revealed how youth of Color managed their own feelings discursively while navigating implicit classroom rules about which emotions were deemed acceptable (e.g., surprise) and which ones were condemned (e.g., frustration). Joining others who examine emotional rules of ELA instruction, this study urges English educators and researchers alike to notice and interrogate the subtle and slippery ways that well-intentioned teachers can sometimes silence children of Color, with the hope of reimagining how to include all students– even in the most contentious conversations.

In the third paper, I pivot to a comparative case study in which the students in Ms. Murphy's class broke the silence that pervades the first two papers with loud, clamorous, and unrestrained cheer. Indeed, in this final paper, I showcased how her students became

ABAR changemakers and how her classroom became an affinity space for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies. Specifically, this third paper traced how two queer youth used theatrical performances to engage in healing, self-exploration, and allyship. It presents an example of what can happen when educators provide humanizing spaces for youth to try on possible selves and discuss LGBTQ+ lives and communities without limiting classroom discourse to political controversies (gay marriages, transgender athletes in the Olympics, etc.). Amid debates between conservative proponents of the "Don't Say Gay" laws and liberal advocates for queer inclusive texts in the classroom, this study highlights how important it is to affirm those students, like Ben, who are still questioning their gender and sexual identities during this liminal time between elementary and high school. This paper calls for more research centered on middle-graded LGBTQ+ youth to understand how they leverage texts to try on possible identities and build allyship in the ELA classroom.

I continue to reflect on the specific contextual factors that made Ms. Murphy's second unit on *The Best at It* so filled with cheer, juxtaposed to her first unit on *Ghost Boys* so marked by silence. For one, Ms. Murphy did not encounter *any* local threats to her work during her unit on *The Best at It*. Despite the Catholic church's long history with homophobia and transphobia, and although the school culture was not welcoming to LGBTQ+ youth, this particular topic did not conjure up criticism from her students' families. This finding echoes Pollock et al.'s (2022) and Wargo et al.'s (2024) assertions that within different school ecosystems, there exist particular "third rail" topics. At St. Joseph's, it became clear that police violence against people of Color was the third rail

topic, requiring Ms. Murphy to tread safely in ways she did not have to in the subsequent unit. Another interpretation of the cheer found in her second unit involves her own personal connection to the work as a woman who identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. From this angle, it's likely that Ms. Murphy had a stronger foundation in concepts and language concerning queer topics. This was not the case in conversations about race and racism, where she stumbled through concepts of structural racism and hesitated to use racial labels. Finally, Ms. Murphy theorized that families did not clamp down on *The Best at It* unit because they feared interacting with one of her student's lesbian mother who also worked on the staff at St. Joseph's. Ms. Murphy believed that this mother served as a shield, perhaps unknowingly, to protect the LGBTQ+-themed unit from potential silencing efforts from the community. These findings underscore how teacher learning around ABAR pedagogy must address issues of situational, pedagogical, and interpersonal skills, as I will discuss in the next section.

Study Limitations

Looking across all three papers, I reflect on three limitations in this section. First, ethnographic case studies, while rich in providing complexity, are not generalizable. I recognize that I was in one classroom for a mere twelve weeks, a brief moment in time. I cannot speak to the overall range of instructional practices across the nation. Nonetheless, I present in-depth qualitative data that may offer provocative insight into the contours of several challenges within middle school English education that aims to center marginalized narratives. My claims throughout the dissertation are not exhaustive but

illustrative examples of the promise and precarity of doing this kind of critical work amid a backdrop of political unrest.

Another limitation of this dissertation is my framing of race in Black and White racial terms. The book *Ghost Boys* does include a subplot about the discrimination of Carlos, a Mexican American boy. Similarly, *The Best at It* includes racial slurs that Rahul encountered as an Indian American boy. To be clear, my focus on Blackness and Whiteness is not intended to silence other minoritized groups' experiences with oppression. I acknowledge that this decision reduces questions of race and racism to the Black/White binary. At the same time, my focus on Blackness and Whiteness reflects the most prominent plot in *Ghost Boys* and captures the underlying racial tensions in the school community. Therefore, I opted to focus intensively on race and racism as they applied to Blackness and Whiteness to build an in-depth understanding of the particulars of this school context as opposed to universalizing race and racism as they apply to people of Color more generally.

Another limitation of this dissertation is the deficit-laden language that punctures and punctuates my writing. Scholarship on antiracist and antibias curriculum defaults to (normative) abilities and ableist critiques using constructs— colorblindness, colormuteness, racial dyslexia, etc.— to build curriculum and/or theory by reminding people not to be blind or mute or dyslexic (Agosto et al., 2019). These terms privilege ways of being, learning, and communicating using impaired abilities. While developing a new language to advance racial justice is outside of the scope of this dissertation, I am left wondering what it would mean to shift the semantics around this work and urge

future researchers to pull from scholars who attend to the intersectionality of both antiracist and disabled frameworks.

Implications for Future Research and Continued Teacher Learning

Together, these three articles offer hope, tools, and possibilities. Given that this is an ethnographic case study of one teacher and her thirty 6th graders, I cannot speak to the range of experiences for all White teachers engaging in ABAR literature instruction in their classrooms. What this dissertation can do, however, is paint a picture of the freedoms and frictions that can happen when a beginning White teacher attempts antiracist pedagogy in a middle grade classroom. Below, I discuss implications for research and teacher learning.

Considerations for Research

The goal of this dissertation was to explore the issue of a White teacher engaging in ABAR literature instruction in a diverse classroom context with as much complexity as possible. Collectively, these three papers demonstrate the degree to which relationships matter greatly in understanding how teachers and students respond to texts in the ELA classroom. In the first paper, we saw Ms. Murphy silence and subdue literacy possibilities because she feared harming relationships with families and colleagues at the school. In the second paper, we saw Sophia, Jahir, and Penelope swallow their emotions and censor their own participation during class conversations because they did not want to damage relationships with their peers by "hurt[ing]" their feelings or seeming "irrelevant." In the last paper, we saw Ben and Hazel compose and perform theatrical pieces while solidifying relationships with their audience members. Again and again, this dissertation

reinforces the notion that reading and writing are deeply relational activities that must be studied in the context in which they occur (Rosenblatt, 1985). This dissertation only begins to scratch the surface of the relational factors that shape ABAR teaching and learning. As researchers continue to theorize about literacy practices in the context of ABAR instruction, more attention should be paid to the ways in which they reflect a sense of who teachers and students are in relationship with their classroom, school, and community. The field needs more research exposing the web of social dynamics involved in ABAR work in order to understand the local dispositions and tools necessary for teachers to enact justice-oriented pedagogies effectively and strategically in their particular school contexts.

Considerations for Continued Teacher Learning

In addition to future research, this dissertation highlights that it is a responsibility for school leaders to prioritize teacher professional learning around curricular and instructional inclusion. All students need an environment where they can feel safe to ask questions, express their emotions, share aspects of their identity, and see themselves represented in the texts they read in class. All students, even those not from minoritized and nondominant communities, deserve opportunities to talk across diversities within the world they live in ways that do not undermine anyone's humanity. These are the fundamental skills needed to participate in a democratic society (Dewey, 1916). But too many educators, like Ms. Murphy, it feels as though they are navigating through "a minefield in the dark" (Kleinrock, 2021, p. xxii). For this reason, all teachers, particularly novice teachers, deserve access to *ongoing* professional communities and pedagogical

coaching to advance ABAR curriculum and instruction (Skerrett, 2011). The denial of such professional support, as illustrated in this dissertation, promotes White racial ideologies and causes emotional harm to teachers and ultimately to their students.

As schools have felt more motivated to undertake justice-oriented pedagogies in the wake of the 2020 racial uprisings and the proliferation of the Don't Say Gay bill (Pollock et al., 2023; Villavicencio et al., 2023), I stand alongside other researchers who contend that teachers need spaces to reflect on the emotional aspect of this work and to hold each other accountable (Borsheim-Black, 2024). Because fear— as an emotion expressed through silence— pervaded the pages of this dissertation, one possibility for teacher educators might be to consider how to unearth teacher fears as opportunities to learn more deeply about how White racial ideologies and cisheterosexism circulate quietly in schools. While a number of scholars have called for White teachers to check and deal with their White emotions of guilt, anger, and discomfort (Love, 2019; Matias, 2015), I contend that continued teacher learning ought to focus on fear specifically. Admittedly, at times during my analysis, I asked myself, *Why can't Ms. Murphy just buck up and talk to her class about racism directly? Why can't she just address the history of Emmett Till?* But this line of thinking overlooks the fears and lack of support that Ms. Murphy experienced as a novice and immigrant teacher in the face of many systemic constraints.

Specifically, Ms. Murphy's fears of "getting it wrong" or being called "racist" are well documented challenges to ABAR work (Casey & McNaminon, 2021). Casey and McNaminon (2021) explain that if this desire not to seem "racist" freezes teachers into

inaction, it places them in a series of practices —such as Ms. Murphy's hiding behind quiet activities to avoid whole class discussions, or her regulating emotions by focusing on task completion— that actually *do* work to uphold White supremacy by muting important conversations about race and racism. The point is that there are emotional costs to doing this work for teachers and students (as showcased in Papers 1 and 2), but the anguish and fear of getting it wrong, being called a racist, and harming relationships with colleagues and families are invitations to learn and build professional communities. To be clear, Ms. Murphy did not suffer in the same way as her students of Color, who swallowed their emotions during race talk and felt limited in their participation as a result of Ms. Murphy's real and imagined fears. As White people committed to antiracism, teachers must be willing to embrace these hard feelings to engage in this counter-hegemonic work. Still, Ms. Murphy's case highlights the point that teachers cannot do this work alone without an ongoing professional community to reflect on their ABAR praxis— to learn to cope with their fears of making mistakes, being called a racist, and harming relationships within the school.

With political tensions mounting in the United States, the work will only get harder for teachers and students. This study and others like it (Borsheim-Black, 2024; Pollock, 2022a; Pollock et al., 2022b) suggest that English teachers need to expect pushback as a regular part of their work. For English teachers committed to critical pedagogies, they must see themselves as human rights workers (Kirkland, 2015), activists, disruptors, and intellectuals (Johnson, 2021) and imagine their classrooms as spaces for healing, love, and justice (Baker Bell et al., 2017). Anticipating criticism and

positioning themselves as activists committed to protecting their own and their students' rights to feel included in the classroom may empower English teachers when acts of intimidation do arise. Yes, it is unfair to expect English teachers to shoulder the burden of resisting pushback all alone. Still, school leaders might do more to prepare them with the pedagogical strategies to enhance their teaching, the professional groups to sustain their commitments, and the dispositions to withstand the criticism.

This dissertation shows us that ABAR work in the ELA classroom is never easy nor is it ever finished. But there is no other option for White educators who understand that their humanity is entangled and bound to minoritized people in ways that can subordinate and harm. Indeed, White teachers should prepare for the silences, getting it wrong, and desiring to retreat, but they should also expect the boisterous cheer and activism that occur when students feel seen and understood. And as teachers are inherently imperfect and unfinished beings, it is ultimately in their capacity to build meaning from their experiences, learn with other educators committed to justice, and forge ahead that remains our source of hope for a more humanizing English classroom.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Student Participant Demographics and Self-identification

Participant	Gender	Race/ ethnicity	Family Origin	Languages Spoken at Home
Section: 6A				
Hazel	F	White	Ireland	English
Maddie	F	White	Ireland	English
Emily	F	White	Ireland	English
Sophia	F	Biracial Black/White	Greece, Montserrat	English
Laila	F	White	Ireland	English
Kayla	F	Latina	U.S., Mexico	English
Ian	M	White	U.S., Australia	English
Ben	M	Latino	U.S., El Salvador	English
Jahir	M	Black	Uganda	Luganda, English
Iris	F	Latina	Guatemala	Spanish
Ava	F	White	U.S.	English
Mateo	M	Latino	Mexico, Puerto Rico	Spanish, English
Cora	F	Asian	Korea	English
Section 6B				
Bryce	M	White	Ireland	English
Miles	M	White	U.S.	English
Callie	F	White	U.S.	English

Meleni	F	Latina	Brazil	Portuguese, English
Alma	F	Latina	Dominican	Spanish, English
James	M	White	U.S.	English
Lara	F	Latina	Brazil	Portuguese, English
Gabi	F	Latina	Brazil	Portuguese, English
Eric	M	White	U.S.	English
Nina	F	Latina	Brazil	Portuguese, English
Chloe	F	White	Ireland	English
Nick	M	White	Ireland	English
Grace	F	White	U.S.	English
Garrett	M	Biracial Asian/White	U.S., Philippines	English
Penelope	F	Latina	Columbia	Spanish, English
Noelle	F	White	U.S.	English
Santiago	M	Latino	El Salvador	Spanish

Appendix B

Table 2

Transcription Notation for Paper 2

Notation	Explanation of Notation
Some [talk] [overlap]	Square brackets indicate the beginning ([) and end (]) of overlapping talk
(.)	Less than a 0.2-second pause
(1.2)	Length of pause to the nearest 10th of a second
Bu-	A hyphen indicates a sharp cutoff of speech
Under	Underlining indicates emphasis
CAPITALS	Capitals indicate louder talk
°Soft °	*Degree* signs indicate quieter talk
>Fast< <Slow>	*Less than* and *greater* than signs indicate talk that is slower or faster than other talk
Ho:me	A colon indicates an extension of the sound or syllable that precedes the colon
↑Word ↓Word	*Up* and *down* arrows indicate rising and falling intonation shift
(( ))	Double parentheses enclose transcriber's notes on features of talk
…	Ellipses indicate talk omitted from transcript

Note: Transcription notation conventions were adapted from Jefferson (2004).

Appendix C

Emmanuel Acho's *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Boy* (p. 10-13) for Paper 2

Racism comes in many forms. To understand what I mean, I think it's helpful to imagine racism as a very ugly building with three floors. Enter the building and you're on the first floor, where the white-hood wearing, cross-burning, Confederate-statue defending, tiki-torch-toting, N-word- barking racists hang out. They believe their skin color or DNA makes them superior to others. Think of these people as the type of folks who would join a white supremacist group or attend a hate-filled rally against immigrants. Now run to the elevator, quick, before they see you.

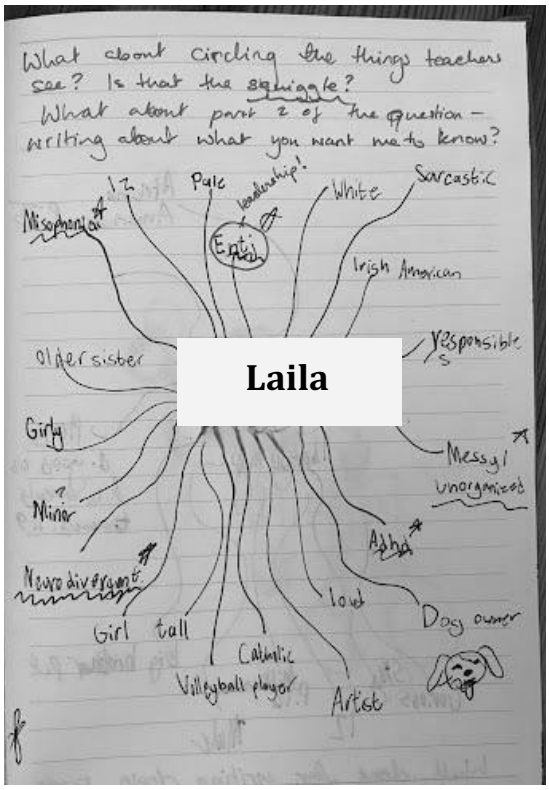
When the elevator door opens to the second floor, things appear a little different. Look around and you won't see Confederate flags waving (more on *that* later), or hear people boasting about the size of their Nazi tattoos. Instead, you see regular folks going about their everyday business. But if you peered insider their minds, you'd see that second-floor racists believe, with their whole hearts, very negative ideas—what folks call *biases*, or as they said back in the day, *stereotypes*—about people from other racial groups or ethnicities. They may condemn organized hate groups like the KKK, but the folks on the second floor are holding on to some of the same ideas that you might hear shouted out at a Klan rally. Sometimes they may act on their racism by refusing to hire or work with people because of their skin color or foreign-sounding accents. They may even believe overly simplistic ideas like "black families are dysfunctional," or "black culture is bad," or even "illegal immigrants bring crime." Applying these stereotypes to entire groups of people—*millions!*—without having any real factual evidence to back them up. I know, these ideas stink. Moving on to the third floor!

Up here reside the people who are not visibly racist or holding on to harsh opinions about other racial groups, yet they're still a little racially insensitive, ignorant, or somewhere in between. In other words, it's usually not their intention to hurt people with their words or actions, but sometimes they do. What they don't realize is that just by living in this culture, they have become fluent in the language of racism. That's because racism has been a part of our country's culture from the very beginning– more on this later. Folks on this floor may say things like, "I don't see color, I just see human" or "Racism isn't a problem anymore, because Dr. King fixed all of that in the sixties." Crazy, right? If Dr. King fixed everything in the sixties, we wouldn't still be having these conversations today.

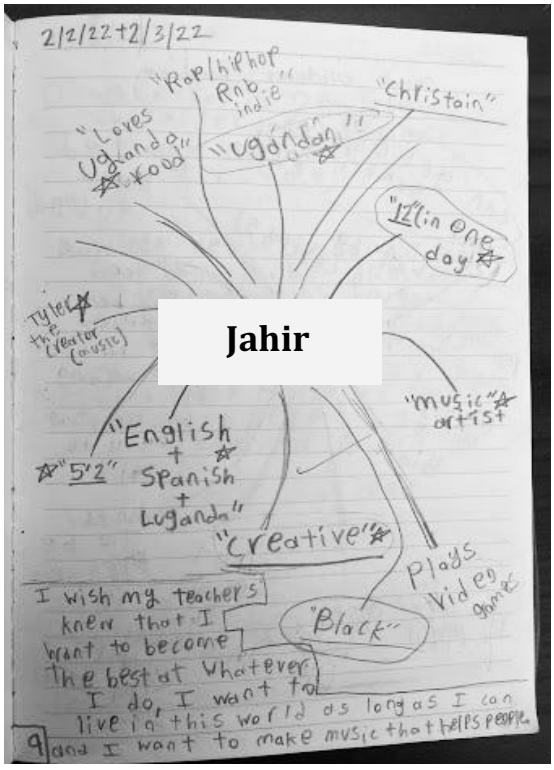
Appendix D

Figure 1
Identity Maps for Paper 2

Laila



Jahir



Appendix E

Table 3

Final Composition Assignment for units on Ghost Boys and The Best at it (March 28, 2022)

1. There are many times in *Ghost Boys* or *The Best at it* where characters feel excluded. Write a drama about an imaginary scenario (one YOU make up) in which a student feels like an outsider. How does this person feel? Why? What do the bystanders do? How can people in their community stand up for this person?

2. There are many times in *Ghost Boys* and *The Best at it* that people in power or systems do not challenge social issues. Imagine you are a character in *Ghost Boys* or *The Best at it*, and write an informed letter to a principal or corporate (business organization) or elected officials, outlining your views on a social issue and calling for specific action.

3. Imagine you are a character in *Ghost Boys* or *The Best at it*. Make a series (5-10) of social media posts (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter etc.) about ways to promote change. Choose one topic and explain why it is important and what you recommend people do to create change in their communities.

Appendix F

Figure 2

Grading Rubric for Final Performance

The point of this assessment is to create a drama or movie that shows the negative effects of exclusion and shows us how we can act.		
Element	**What would a good answer for this element look like?**	**Grade**
Screenwriting	Your script looks like a script, with a title, directions and characters outlined. It is engaging and interesting, and follows the instructions provided!	/5
Clarity and Cohesion	Your plot is clear, with a conflict, climax and resolution. Even if it is humorous and zany, it still makes sense.	/5
Performance	You chose the best five minutes of your screenplay. You supply your actors with props and you are clear with your directions. Actors report that you were considerate and kind!	/5
Grammar and Spelling	A good answer will have very few spelling or grammatical errors, which shows me that the author carefully edited their creation.	/5
		Total: ____/20