Complicity, responsibility and authorization

A praxis of critical questioning for White literacy educators

Julia R. Daniels and Heather Hebard

College of Education, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

Abstract

Purpose – Discourses of racism have always circulated within US classrooms and, in the current sociopolitical climate, they move with a renewed sense of legitimacy, entitlement and violence. This paper aims to engage the consequences of these shifts for the ways that racism works in university-based classrooms and, more specifically, through the authors’ own teaching as White language and literacy educators.

Design/methodology/approach – This teacher narrative reconceptualizes moments of racialized violence in the courses, as constructed via circulating discourses of racism. The authors draw attention to the ways that we, as White educators, authorize and are complicit in this violence.

Findings – This paper explicates a praxis of questioning, developed through efforts to reflect on our complicity in and responsibility for racial violence in our classrooms. The authors offer this praxis of questioning to other White language and literacy teachers as a heuristic for sensemaking with regard to racism in classrooms.

Originality/value – The authors situate this paper within a broader struggle to engage themselves and other White educators in work for racial justice and invite others to take up this praxis of questioning as an initial step toward examining the authors’ complicity in – and authorization of – discourses of racism.

Keywords Racism, Literacy teaching, Whiteness, Critical literacy, Literacy and identity, Reflection

Paper type Viewpoint

It is the middle of the quarter in a small, graduate-level seminar on adolescent literacies. As usual, the instructor invited students to respond to the day’s reading, a study of the literacy practices of Black teenage girls. Alan, a White[1] man in his mid-20s, spoke first: “I was really frustrated by this reading! I don’t see myself in it, so frankly I don’t have much to say about it. I don’t understand why we are reading about the literacies of such a small portion of the population.”

The instructor, a White woman, paused, uncomfortable in the silence that followed and unsure of what to do next. Holding back tears, Marisol (one of three students of color in the seminar) pushed her chair back and left the room.

This scenario is a loose representation of Heather’s (the second author’s) teaching experience. As White women who teach racially heterogeneous university courses rooted in socio-cultural understandings of language and literacy, this scenario reflects many of the perspectives we have heard from White students in our classes. These perspectives are harmful and perpetuate powerful discourses of racism and racialized violence.

In this essay, we explore our complicity in and responsibility for moments of racialized violence that regularly emerge in our classrooms. In focusing on “moments of racialized violence,” we examine instances in which White students vocalize experiences, beliefs or feelings that delegitimize people of colors’ experiences, knowledge and scholarship concerning racism and recenter White perspectives. While these moments raise a number of important questions for us, as White educators who aspire to anti-racist pedagogies – How might we support our students of...
color in the face of such violence (Amos, 2016)? How can we help our White students to more critically engage with Whiteness and racism—what we focus on questions that highlight our own complicity in the construction of racism in our classrooms. We see the work of asking and answering such questions as an essential first step toward reflecting on our practice. Only after considering our own complicity can we fully take up our responsibility to engage with the range of possible responses to racialized violence in our classrooms.

We highlight the White teacher’s role in these moments of racialized violence in response to much of the current research, which focuses on White students’ ignorance and resistance to engaging with racism (Case and Hemmings, 2005; DiAngelo, 2012; DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2012; Dua and Lawrence, 2000; Goodman, 1998; Solomon et al., 2005). As educators, our intent is to disrupt this common narrative in which only individual White students are implicated (Ringrose, 2007). We work to implicate the White educator herself in both the construction of such moments and in the creation of a classroom environment that gives (implicit or explicit) permission or “authorization” (Skerrett, 2011) for such moments to emerge and reverberate.

In this essay, we argue that significant and necessary insights emerge when we, as White educators, position ourselves as authorizing moments of racialized violence and, thus, as complicit in the construction of racism within our classrooms. In the service of developing these insights, we have developed a “praxis of questioning” that implicates White teachers in the racist patterns, dynamics and ideologies that arise in our classes. We offer this praxis of questioning in hopes that it might support other White literacy educators to interrogate moments of racialized violence in their classrooms.

The particular power dynamics at play in racially heterogeneous US higher education language and literacy classes lead by White women instructors are at once unique and broadly relevant. Patterns of racialized domination and hegemony reify themselves in the US classrooms in particular ways—based largely on the US’s unique entangling of race, language and class (Flores and Rosa, 2015). Additionally, the current political climate in the US has clarified, authorized and amplified discourses of racism and racialized violence. At the same time, however, inequitable power dynamics that build on specific historical and institutional lineages replay themselves in classrooms across the world—especially when educators represent and embody the dominant identities and ideologies of those particular contexts.

Given such broader contexts, we understand the “praxis of questioning” that we offer as a “harm reduction” strategy. While essential research examines, critiques and works to shift the overwhelmingly White and female demographics of the teaching force, teacher educators and language and literacy instructors, this project takes such demographic realities as a starting point. This essay does not propose a “solution” to the ways that White teachers perpetuate racialized harm in classrooms. Rather, we follow the public health tradition of harm reduction in which any work meant to reduce harm must first acknowledge that it is incapable of eliminating that harm (Karoll, 2010; Roberts and Marlatt, 1999; Wodak, 2003). Although pedagogical recommendations can offer useful strategies for harm reduction, we maintain that, as White teachers, we cannot simply assure ourselves by taking up specific recommended practices (Sleeter, 2011). Rather, we must continue to interrogate our practice—as well as our very presence—in the classroom. By engaging questions that work to deepen our understanding of our complicity in racialized harm, we argue, White teachers open up the possibility of reducing that harm.

In the following sections, we outline our stance as language and literacy educators—our understandings of the role of discourses, meaning-making, identity, Whiteness, complicity and power in the classroom. Drawing on these understandings, we then offer a variety of reflective questions meant to scaffold our own—and, we hope, other—White educators’ processes of reflection on their own complicity in racialized violence. We rely on the above narrative involving Alan to explicate the affordances of each set of reflective questions. We
then offer another teaching narrative that reflects our own engagement with the reflection questions and further models the potential affordances of this praxis of questioning. We conclude with a reflection on the particular urgency of critical reflection and praxis for White educators in our current socio-political context.

Engaging language and literacy discourses
The saliency of race-based power dynamics is uniquely palpable in the context of our language and literacy courses. These courses are rooted in an understanding of language and literacy as power-laden and fundamentally linked to meaning-making, identity, discourse and power. These courses explicitly draw students' attention to language and literacy practices as powerful discourse tools that have significant consequences in classrooms – for individual students and for the classroom community. As sites of meaning-making and identity construction, language and literacy courses demand significant vulnerability from students, even as they draw students' attention to the potential racialized violence and harm that particular language and literacy practices have the potential to enact.

As language and literacy educators, we use the concept of discourse throughout our praxis. Discourses are “ways of being” that are recognized by and signify membership in a particular group. We are, in many ways, made of the discourses or ways of being into which we have been apprenticed – even as we may also produce new ways of being (Foucault, 1971). We understand classrooms as situated contexts that are themselves responses to and consequences of – as well as producers of – the broader discourses at work in the world (Foucault, 1971). In other words, we argue that classrooms exist within power-laden contexts and that we can never step outside of those contexts, “transcend” (Applebaum, 2013) or neutralize the ways that discourses move in and through them (Applebaum, 2010; Foucault, 1971). Our identities as White academics who speak and use English in ways that further our positions of power, produce classroom dynamics that reify patterns of racial dominance and the entangling of Whiteness, standardized English and knowledge production in the US (Clark, 2013; Flores and Rosa, 2015).

We understand language, literacy and meaning-making as fundamentally bound up with each other – and our language and literacy-based classes reflect this stance. We conceptualize meaning as produced through the interplay of discourse and human agency: negotiated between the discourses of power and the ways in which individuals or communities seek to affect and shift those discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). Based on this understanding, our courses focus on providing opportunities for students to engage the range of their discursive repertoires with current discourses in the fields of language and literacy. For example, our students work to negotiate and reconcile dominant perspectives (for instance, the perspective that there is one correct way to write or speak in English) with their own experiences, personal knowledge, feelings and desires.

The vulnerability required to engage in this meaning-making and identity work is complicated by the workings of race and power. The concept of discourse allows us to name and examine the ways that systems and structures of power enter and affect (and effect) classroom spaces. Discourses of racism, for example, produce the concrete realities of classrooms: the particular racialized bodies that enter our classrooms are, to some extent, the effects of the discourses of racism in the world. Similarly, discourses of racism help to shape – consciously or not – how we see and understand the students in our classes (Solorzano and Yosso, 2001).

Whiteness and complicity
Much literature explores the mechanisms that promote and protect racialized violence in classrooms lead by White teachers. In particular, work often characterized as “first-wave White teacher identity studies” examines White teachers’ refusal or resistance to engage
critical explorations of race and racism (Jupp and Lensmire 2016; Marx, 2004; McIntyre, 2002; Sleeter 1992, 2001). In response, “second-wave White identity studies” explores White teachers who “by degrees recogniz[e] race, class, culture, language, and other differences in students and themselves and under[stand] differences as having potentials for teaching and learning” (Jupp and Lensmire, 2016, p. 1164). This body of work focuses on not only White teachers’ processes of conscientization (Freire, 1970) but also the nuances, complexities, contradictions, contexts and intersections of White teacher identities (Lensmire, 2010; Thandeka, 1999). Across both “waves” of White teacher identity studies, scholars explore how White teachers can educate themselves (or have been educated) into critical consciousness so as to disrupt the effects of their Whiteness (Jupp and Slatterly, 2010; Raible and Irizarry, 2007).

In this essay, we draw from Applebaum’s (2010, 2013) explorations of “White complicity” – sometimes contextualized as within the second wave of White identity studies (Jupp and Lensmire, 2016) – to examine how an understanding of complicity and a praxis of questioning can mitigate (but not absolve) the violent effects of Whiteness. We explicitly center the violence of Whiteness – rather than its complexity or nuance – and understand Whiteness as something that necessarily resists all attempts at “transcendence” (Applebaum, 2013). To do this, we draw on both Applebaum’s (2010, 2013) conception of “White complicity pedagogy” and her understanding of “vigilance”, as well as the opportunities for “vigilance” that teacher reflection affords.

For Applebaum (2010, 2013), White complicity pedagogy foregrounds the ways in which all White people – regardless of their intentional affiliations and allegiances – are necessarily complicit in the workings of racism and White supremacy. Rather than work to develop strategies aimed at abolishing White complicity, Applebaum argues for a White complicity pedagogy that works toward visualizing White complicity and developing a stance of critique. Applebaum’s critique, building on the work of Foucault (1985, 2002) and Butler (2002, 2009), presumes that we cannot move outside of the discourses that constitute us – that White people cannot move outside of the ways in which our Whiteness perpetuates harm. A stance of critique might therefore allow us to understand that White people can never step outside of or avoid the ways in which we are necessarily complicit in racial injustice – while simultaneously working to visualize and seek out “fissures where new possibilities emerge” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 191). In other words, White complicity pedagogy, while imagined as pedagogy for guiding White students toward more critical understandings of race, also opens possibilities for White instructors who want to visualize and interrogate the ways in which we are – always – complicit in racism and racialized violence within classrooms and in the world.

In examining the possibilities offered by White complicity pedagogy, Applebaum (2013) builds on Yancy’s (2008) work to offer the concept of “vigilance” as a potential “response to White complicity.” For Applebaum, vigilance is constituted by a commitment to sit in the “anxiety” of critique, as well as a willingness to be vulnerable and “stay in trouble” (Applebaum, 2013, p. 25). In other words, vigilance requires that White people work doggedly to see discourses of power and domination at work even as we are made profoundly uncomfortable and vulnerable by our ongoing complicity in and responsibility for those discourses. Vigilance demands the uncomfortable work of presuming that we are always within and constituted by – rather than outside of or superior to – discourses of Whiteness and racism.

In building on Applebaum’s (2010, 2013) work, we take a stance of vigilance toward White teacher reflection. Rather than position teacher reflection as only a means to an end – a way to determine “better” or more anti-racist teaching practices, for example – we position White teacher reflection as both a means to an end and an end in itself. White teacher reflection becomes a way to engage in the ongoing and “troubling” work of seeking out “new possibilities” (Applebaum, 2013) even as we acknowledge that we are always complicit in racism.
A praxis of questioning

Like many White people, we often work to distance ourselves from racism and to reassure ourselves that we are “not racist” and are therefore good and morally sound (Thompson 2003; Applebaum, 2010). Our first thoughts in response to racist violence in our classrooms might be to distance ourselves from any responsibility or complicity (e.g. “What Alan said was so unexpected! I certainly didn’t do anything to make him think that such a statement was okay. That was so awful!”). We argue, however, that considering our own complicity in such moments is both necessary and generative (Applebaum, 2010, 2013). Instead of distancing ourselves from Alan’s outburst, we ask questions about our own complicity in such moments. Through these questions, we acknowledge both the power that we wield as educators and the ways that discourses of power move through our classroom.

In developing and situating the questions articulated below, we explicitly engage the idea of praxis. Praxis affords us an understanding of practice (of what educators do) that is explicitly informed and mediated by the theoretical perspectives and ideologies to which we subscribe (Freire, 2005). In this case, the practice of questioning our choices, fears and desires as educators becomes what we call a “praxis of questioning” when we allow our ideological agenda – a desire to interrupt discourses of racism in our classroom, for example – to explicitly inform the questions we ask ourselves. We understand this type of reflection as a necessary and inseparable part of any teaching practice and we acknowledge that such reflection often leads teachers to take up particular teaching practices or pedagogical moves. While our goal is to suggest a praxis of questioning so that teachers can more fully understand the weight of our pedagogical choices and not to make discrete pedagogical recommendations for White teachers, we do hope these questions will lead to pedagogical changes that take stock of and respond to racialized violence and White teachers’ complicity.

The questions below emerged from our own iterative processes of reflection as White language and literacy educators – they reflect our insights, inadequacies, experiences and conflicts. The questions we offer are all ways of asking how we can think about moments of racialized violence without locating problems in individuals and therefore abdicating our responsibilities as educators. After each set of questions, we offer a short reflection on the vignette involving Alan with which we open this essay. These reflective paragraphs are meant to model how other White instructors might use these questions to guide their own critical reflection and engage their own complicity and responsibility.

Q1. How have I framed what counts as knowledge and knowledge creation in this classroom?

In asking this question, we explore the ways in which we have implicitly or explicitly privileged or excluded particular kinds of knowledge and knowledge construction through our curricular and pedagogical choices. This question allows us to examine the conscious and unconscious assumptions we, as White educators, have made about the kinds of knowledge that we expect students to understand, share and produce. For example, this question allows us to examine the ways in which we have marginalized knowledge about languages or literacies that might be constructed as bodily, experiential, spiritual, too emotional or nonacademic (Thein et al., 2015). This question pushes us to consider the ways in which we have assigned responsibility for certain types of knowledge or knowledge construction to particular students: for example, expecting our students of color to share emotionally laden experiences in ways that adhere to traditional academic expectations of objectivity and distance. This question also prompts us to consider how our curriculum, as a mechanism of academic and professional acculturation, is composed of discourses that privilege particular questions, perspectives and forms of knowledge.
As Heather reflected on the classroom moment with which this essay began, she considered the role of the course curriculum (which she had designed) in constructing that moment. Heather realized that this moment occurred during the first week in which Alan did not see his own experiences and literacies – as a White, cis-gendered, heterosexual and middle-class man – explicitly reflected in the readings. Perhaps Alan was not able to make connections, for example, between his own experience and Black young women writing poetry. Heather considered how this insight might inform her curriculum decisions. Perhaps locating this reading – and others that centered the literacies of marginalized students – in the very first week of class would have helped to set the tone for the quarter. Or perhaps she could have provided specific scaffolds for the White students in her class? For instance, she might have explained that, for those of us who are accustomed to discourses that exclusively reflect our own experience, reading scholarship that privileges minoritized perspectives requires a shift in our expectations and rigorous self-reflection.

Q2. How have I authorized particular patterns of communication and ways of communicating?

This question allows us to consider the varied ways students participate in class, the patterns we might notice in this participation, and our roles in constructing those patterns. In this question, we take up an expansive view of participation. Participation might include students’ oral contributions during class discussions and small group work, the ways that students choose to listen and physically represent that listening in class, students’ written work outside of class, students’ side conversations during breaks or the varied ways students respond to peers’ ideas. For example, in considering our own role in authorizing particular forms of oral participation during discussions, we might examine the ways that our facilitation moves constrain who speaks and what they say – as well as who does not speak and how they inhabit that silence. Similarly, this question might allow us to analyze trends in student participation that clue us into the kinds of responses that students of color perceive as sanctioned in class. Are there indications, for example, that students of color experience themselves as authorized to respond in ways that support their psychological and emotional well-being? What might the patterns in White students’ participation tell us about the forms of engagement that White students experience as prioritized? For example, in what ways do White students relate to silence during class discussions (DiAngelo, 2012)?

As Heather considered the patterns of communication in her seminar, she noted that Alan had consistently taken up a disproportionate amount of airtime during discussions. She had tried to interrupt this through indirect means, but had not discussed this with him directly. Perhaps a more direct approach would have helped Alan see how he consistently centered himself in class. She also considered how other students responded to Alan’s outburst. She recalled that Marisol, one of the three people of color in the class, had appeared quite upset before leaving the room. Heather considered the many ways she might interpret and understand Marisol’s choice to leave the room. In some ways, Heather felt relieved that Marisol did not feel pressured to stay in a classroom space that was painful for her. Heather wondered if there were ways in which she had signaled that she valued and prioritized students of color making choices to support their own safety. Heather wondered how Marisol’s choice to leave the room was also a response to the way that she was facilitating the class – and how she had responded to Alan’s comment in that moment. Had Heather interrupted Alan’s outburst, for example, might Marisol have felt more supported and stayed? In considering all of these questions, Heather chose to gently reach out to Marisol to request a meeting.

Q3. How have I framed the differential risks and responsibilities of learning and participation?
In considering the risks of participation in our classrooms, we question the assumptions we make about the different ways in which students must be vulnerable and take risks to participate and learn. In what ways, for example, might a Native American student experience a particular vulnerability during classroom conversations about the marginalization of Native literacy practices? How might our pedagogical moves acknowledge the vulnerability and work to support that student? Focusing on risks and responsibilities allows us to think about the different responsibilities we might implicitly or explicitly ask students to take up in supporting each other through the vulnerable process of learning and participating. Whom have I framed as responsible for educating White students who vocalize racist ideas in class, for example? Have I implicitly assumed that students of color will take up this task, or have I framed White students as responsible for educating each other? Considering differential risks and responsibilities also allows us to examine the ways in which we might expect certain students to share personal or emotional reactions to ideas discussed in class even as we also allow other students to remain detached and distant (allowing White students to marginalize emotionality or personal connection during conversations about racism, for example) (Winans, 2010).

The moment with Alan offered Heather an opportunity to consider how she had framed the risks and responsibilities of participation for the different students in her seminar. Heather considered the ways in which Alan’s learning was in many ways in tension with the safety of the other students in the class – particularly the students of color. Heather thus considered ways she might have engaged Alan in the necessary work of learning and reflecting on his experiences (Thandeka, 1999), while also protecting and prioritizing the learning and experiences of the students of color. Heather considered meeting individually with Alan so as to both differentiate the learning and information that might most meet his needs – and ensure that Alan’s important process of learning did not perpetuate further racialized violence in the classroom for the students of color. While in a more equitable and less racially violent world, all students’ learning could take place in the same classroom without creating unsafe conditions for their peers, Heather acknowledged that such a reality was imagined rather than real.

Q4. What am I communicating to my students about language and how language works in this classroom?

This question allows us to consider the implicit and explicit messages about language that we have communicated to our students. For example, this question asks us to examine how we have framed the effects of language for individuals, communities and the world, as well as the potential of language to further domination and cultivate resistance. In engaging with this question, we pay close attention to the ways that students are using language in the classroom through both their oral and written contributions. How do students approach language that indexes traumatic histories of racism? How do students respond to each other’s language use? What language practices do students take up in the class and in what ways do they feel the need to qualify or contextualize those practices? How do students’ language practices in public contexts – whole-class discussions, for example – differ from their language practices in private communication with each other or the instructor? This category of questioning allows us to examine language ideologies that we have – consciously or unconsciously – taken up and the ways that those ideologies shape language use and the entangling of race and language in our classroom (Flores and Rosa, 2015).

To reflect on Alan’s words, Heather asked herself how she had framed the effects of language within the seminar. Heather recalled the norms for discussion that the class had initially set. Heather remembered that she had explicitly framed discussions as a space for sense-making (rather than as a forum for debate or demonstrating knowledge). Heather had
pointed out that each person came to the seminar with their own experiences, knowledge and assumptions and framed those differences as resources to challenge and extend thinking. She also recalled that they had talked about creating a respectful and supportive space. Through this reflection, Heather acknowledged what she might have missed. She and her students had addressed the ways in which discussions might painfully marginalize individuals, but they had not discussed how students’ identities shaped the consequences of their speech and language. In other words, Heather had not addressed how students’ language might inflict harm in differential ways. Heather considered how having had that conversation might have pushed Alan to more critically consider the effects of his words.

Q5. What are the pedagogies and structures that I take up in this class, and how explicit am I about the ideologies behind those pedagogies and structures?

Through this question, we consider how we have designed and differentiated opportunities for students to process the ideas they encounter through the course and the ideological assumptions and stances behind those pedagogical choices. For example, how do we engage in the process of dividing students into small discussion groups (e.g. via students’ self-selection, by numbering off and grouping by number)? Whose experiences, learning and safety do we consider and prioritize in that process, and what ideologies inform those considerations? How explicit have we been about the ideologies that inform our pedagogical decisions? What do we tell students about why and how we placed students in particular small group configurations? In questioning our choices to be explicit (or not) about our pedagogical decisions – and the ideologies that inform them – we allow ourselves to consider the questions, conversations or exchanges we find ourselves working to avoid in our classes. For example, how comfortable and equipped are we to engage students in a conversation about our own commitments to fighting racism and taking responsibility for the ways that racism is perpetuated in our classrooms?

In reflecting on these questions, Heather considered the pedagogical choices that might have given way to Alan’s words. On many occasions, Heather engaged in formative assessments of students’ understanding of readings before facilitating a whole-class conversation. Typically, the formative assessments (in the form of a short, reflective writing piece, for example) gave Heather a sense of how the students were reacting to the reading as well as the ways they understood the relationship between the reading and the overall course goals. On this day, however, Heather had not conducted such an assessment and so she entered the whole-class discussion not knowing that Alan struggled to understand the relevance of the course reading or that he reacted to the reading with anger. Had Heather known that Alan entered the conversation with such thoughts and feelings, she might have made different choices with regard to the discussion format. Perhaps she would have placed Alan in a small group with other White students (so as to protect the students of color) who could meaningfully and safely challenge and support his thinking.

Reflections on complicity

Heather’s narrative reflection is illustrative of one way in which White educators might engage the above questions. As a second example, the first author, Julia, offers the following narrative to more deeply reflect on how moments of racialized violence are co-constructed in our classrooms – and how a praxis of questioning can draw our attention to our own complicity in that construction.

It was a rainy evening in the middle of the winter quarter. Students begin to shuffle into the undergraduate language and literacy class, unpacking their bags and arranging themselves in a circle as they talked. The instructor, Julia, often gave students a few minutes at the very
beginning of the class to check in with each other, as she thought this time fostered a sense of community and gave students the space to talk about their lives outside of the class.

The class focused a great deal on the concept of literacies and the ways literacy is normatively framed and taught in K-12 public schools – particularly the schools in which many of the students were interning. Anne, a White college sophomore who had an internship in a digital literacies after-school program at a local high school, often recounted generative stories about her internship experiences. As with other students’ narratives, Anne’s stories had provoked important conversations about students’ understandings of the concept of literacy and about the ideologies behind K-12 literacy instruction.

On this particular day, Anne began to talk about her experience the previous week when she had walked past a group of Black teenagers standing in the school hallway. The bell signaling the end of the school day had rung and the students remained clustered together, chatting. Anne began to tell the class how she felt afraid when walking past the group of teenagers: “I didn’t know why they were still standing there! I had to walk past them to get to the classroom where I was teaching and I felt like they were going to jump out at me or something. I didn’t know what to do, so I just walked past them really quickly and didn’t look at them. They were really scary!”

In the moment, Julia was shocked by and angry with Anne’s statement and wondered how Anne could have thought such a statement was appropriate for this class. Julia’s mind moved quickly to concern; however, she wondered about the students of color (and in particular, the one Black student) in her classroom. How did they feel, and how could she at least acknowledge the damage that Anne’s statement had done and the hurt that it had perhaps caused?

After class, Julia was shaky with anger and discomfort. Her anger focused squarely on Anne and the racist obliviousness, ignorance and entitlement that she assumed had cultivated Anne’s statement. As Julia sat in her car on the way home, however, she began to engage in the critical questioning of her own complicity as a White educator: If, as the instructor, Julia imagined herself having authorized, co-constructed or given tacit permission for Anne’s statement, what could she learn about her own teaching?

Julia thought back to the first few class sessions when she had worked hard to establish a classroom community that felt open and accepting – an environment in which students would feel comfortable sharing their own experiences and perspectives and knew that those experiences and perspectives would be valued. How might Julia’s desire for students to feel comfortable sharing have shaped Anne’s belief that her experience with her own racism should be shared so uncritically in class? Had Julia done anything to make clear to White students that she wanted them to share their thinking and learning – but that they need to consider consequences of what they said or shared for the safety of their peers of color? Had Julia communicated to White students that she deeply wanted them to engage with the ways that discourses of racism infiltrated and constituted their experiences – but that they needed to do so in ways that minimized violence toward their peers of color?

As Julia considered her own complicity in Anne’s statement, her anger and discomfort began to shift. She was still worried about how the class could move forward after such a moment of racist violence – but she was also profoundly uncomfortable with and newly conscious of her own role in authorizing Anne’s statement. This is not to say that Julia suddenly knew what to do or how to respond when White students contributed racist comments in class. Rather, she no longer located the problem solely in Anne or in other White students. Julia saw herself and her own teaching practice as complicit and therefore profoundly responsible.

Julia continued to ask herself questions about her own complicity in Anne’s statement: How did other students respond after Anne’s words, and what did those responses tell Julia about the kind of classroom she had constructed and authorized? How did the students of color in her class communicate what they needed – from Julia, from each other, from their White peers – after
Anne’s outburst? and What did that tell Julia about the relationships to language and learning that she had supported in the classroom? The questions with which Julia engaged facilitated a profound and ongoing critique of her teaching and highlighted her own responsibility for the ways that racism functioned – and continues to function – in her classroom.

Conclusion
This essay focuses on the affordances of a praxis of questioning – and in particular, questioning our own complicity – as White language and literacy educators. Our goal has not been to make specific pedagogical recommendations for White instructors. We have not offered – nor do we believe it is possible to offer – a prescription for avoiding or remedying racialized violence in our language and literacy-based classrooms. Rather, we have offered a praxis of questioning that might help White teachers to more fully understand the weight of our pedagogical choices. We hope that these questions lead to pedagogical changes that take stock of and respond to racialized violence.

At the same time, however, the praxis of questioning that we offer is deeply inadequate. The questions that we put forth draw attention acutely to White instructors’ complicity in racism. However, these questions do not specifically draw attention to the consequences of classroom-based racialized violence for students or communities of color. Equally important to considerations of White instructors’ complicity are questions and processes of reflection that push White instructors to see and engage the ongoing costs of racism for students and communities of color. We see this praxis of question as a necessary – and yet profoundly insufficient – component of teacher reflection.

While significant research has, for decades, examined the affordances and necessity of teacher reflection and questions of critical praxis (Zeichner, 1981; Zeichner and Liston, 2014), we see this work as particularly urgent in the current socio-political context (Carter Andrews et al., 2017). Discourses of racism have always circulated within the US public school classrooms, and yet those discourses now move with renewed legitimacy, entitlement, assertiveness, fear and violence. These discourses have emboldened many White students who might previously have been more cautious. At the same time, it is impossible to avoid the ways in which these discourses normalize violent racism and push us, as White educators, to participate in that process of normalization within our own classrooms. Even within our classrooms, we are subject to the new vicissitudes of violent racism. Despite the ways that discourses of racism work through our own teaching and through our White students, we have powerful opportunities to push back against such discourses in our classrooms through unrelenting attention to our own complicity.

Note
1. While there is little consensus regarding capitalization in the fields of Whiteness Studies or Critical Race Theory, we capitalize “White” and “Whiteness” to highlight their (often invisible) role in shaping White individuals’ and communities’ identities – and their profound effects on individuals and communities of color.

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**Corresponding author**
Julia R. Daniels can be contacted at: juliardaniels@gmail.com

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