White Supremacy and Teacher Education:
Balancing Pedagogical Tensions When
Teaching About Race

LISETTE ENUMAH
Independent Researcher

Context: University-based teacher education programs are increasingly committed to teaching about race and racism, but programs continue to face challenges in preparing justice-oriented educators. Critical scholarship on teaching about race and racism has identified some core concepts that teachers should learn, including an understanding of systemic racism. A deeper understanding of the structure and function of White supremacy as a system, specifically as it operates within teacher education as a social institution, can provide insight about the challenges faced by teacher educators (TEs) who teach about race and racism. Drawing from articulations of the characteristics of White supremacy, the author identifies operant mechanisms of White supremacy in teacher education.

Purpose: This article offers a framework for the logic of White supremacy as consisting of three core concepts: (1) the logic of racialized distribution of power; (2) the logic of intentional White ignorance and historical erasure; and (3) the logic of dehumanization of people of color through violence and White cultural hegemony. The study examined the tensions that emerge for teacher educators who aim to teach teachers to disrupt White supremacy but are working from within White supremacist institutions.

Research Design: The theoretical framework was used to examine emerging tensions experienced by TEs in a cross-institutional qualitative study that used phenomenological methods. Data were collected from teacher educators across multiple institutions and included interviews, classroom artifacts, and focus groups.

Findings: Findings aligned to the White supremacy framework. Tensions related to the racial distribution of power focused on differentiated support for teacher candidates (TCs) of color and navigating moments of racial tension. Tensions related to White ignorance and erasure centered on responding to White students’ resistance decentering Whiteness. Finally, tensions related to dehumanization of people of color focused on challenging deficit ideologies.

Recommendations: The findings suggest that being open to and conscious of these tensions through critical reflection can be productive for teacher educators. More research is needed that considers the distinct needs of TCs of color and White TCs when learning about race and racism. In addition, further research can apply the logic of White supremacy in cross-institutional studies and continue to engage TEs as participants to explore linkages between interpersonal and institutional effects of White supremacy in other contexts.
Research on teacher education has uncovered important insights about teaching teachers about race and racism, both how and why (Banks, 2013; Cochran-Smith, 1991, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998; Nieto, 2003). In university-based teacher education (UBTE) programs, teachers learn about core concepts related to race and racism in what are often called “social foundations” or “multicultural education” courses (Gorski, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Milner & Howard, 2013). These programs have been cited as a site of great potential for justice-oriented educational transformation (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Howard, 2003), but, charged with the task of training teachers to understand and address inequity, racism, and oppression in schools, UBTE programs have struggled to meet this potential and have been critiqued as insufficiently preparing teachers as equity- and justice-oriented educators (Cross, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Philip et al., 2017).

In an attempt to identify foundational principles that scaffold teachers’ developing knowledge, critical scholars have developed lists of core concepts related to theories of race and racism (Gay, 2010; Gorski, 2009; Howard, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Across these syntheses, one core understanding is that racism operates at both institutional and interpersonal levels and that these levels of racism are simultaneous and interactive, which is broadly characterized as the political system of White supremacy.

At the same time that research on teacher education has been evolving in its examination of how to teach teachers about White supremacy in schools, a growing body of research on institutions of higher education (IHEs) has explicitly examined IHEs as White supremacist institutions (Hayes & Jauróz, 2012; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Patel, 2015). These institutions maintain racial hierarchies and conceptions of White cultural dominance, sustain the marginalization of racial minorities, and ensure or exacerbate unequal distribution of material resources along racial lines (Hikido & Murray, 2015; Iverson, 2007, 2012; Patel, 2015).

Teacher education is situated at the nexus of these two bodies of research. Particularly for justice-oriented teacher educators (TEs), tension emerges as TEs themselves are working to disrupt social inequity from within White supremacist institutions and under policies and practices that sustain systemic racism. Furthermore, it is within this context that TEs who teach about race and racism support teachers in learning about these very systemic forces. Thus, TEs who teach social foundations courses are uniquely positioned: Tasked to teach teacher candidates (TCs) about White supremacy, they are also working within and navigating the challenges of White supremacist institutions. The aim of this study is to better understand how TEs who teach about race and racism balance these tensions. Here, I propose a framework for the logic of White supremacy and use it to examine the narrated experiences of TEs in a cross-institutional
qualitative study. Note that I use the term “logic” to describe the operant mechanisms of White supremacy because it is often noted that White supremacy persists in patterned ways across physical space and over time, even as the form or function may shift and adapt to particular contexts. Thus, there is an underlying “logic” that sustains the sociopolitical system of White supremacy even as its specific form changes over time. The research questions for this study are:

1. What tensions emerge as TEs teach about White supremacy from within White supremacist institutions?
2. How do TEs navigate such tensions?

Certainly, teacher education research has progressed in its critical attention to the role of Whiteness in shaping teachers’ learning experiences (Hytten & Warren, 2003; Matias et al., 2017; Picower, 2009). However, more work is needed that explicitly examines how White supremacy as a political system influences the experiences of teachers and TEs even as, or perhaps precisely when, TEs aim to disrupt patterns of inequality by building teachers’ racial knowledge. Explorations of the role of individual relationships to Whiteness, divorced from broader systemic forces in teacher education, will benefit from critical evaluation of White supremacy as a sociopolitical force that affects teacher learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

DEFINING WHITE SUPREMACY

In recent years, we have seen a shift in the frequency with which contemporary public discourse makes reference to the broad systemic forces of racism and White supremacy as global, political systems of significance. Indeed, as the term “White supremacy” has entered popular discourse, it has become a useful tool for teachers and TEs to discuss and make sense of race and racism, both broadly and in the specific context of schools. While the term “White supremacy” is used with some frequency in common political analysis, it often lacks deeper meaning in these contexts. Theoretical formulations of White supremacy (e.g., Mills, 1994) offer a political and systemic theory of racial hierarchies as a complement to existing and often vague discourse on racism, but “White supremacy” often now functions as synonymous with “racism,” “discrimination,” “hate crimes,” “bias,” or even simply “Whiteness” (Newkirk, 2017). Given the power and, importantly, the sustenance of this political system over time (Leonardo & Harris, 2013; Mills, 1994), we need to develop a more complex understanding of the term.
This need for greater definitional clarity for the term “White supremacy” is particularly relevant in teacher education, where scholars have called for more shared vocabulary to support novices’ development of professional practices (Grossman et al., 2009), and research on social justice teacher education suggests that lack of shared meaning for “social justice” terminology is a common issue for TEs (Conklin & Hughes, 2016). More research is needed in teacher education that explicitly defines White supremacy and offers clear conceptions of curricular or pedagogical connections to the term for teacher education courses.

Charles Mills is well known for his work in developing a theoretical construction of White supremacy. In his book *Racial Contract* (1997), Mills described White supremacy as a global political system of racism, one in which there is “a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties” (p. 3). Thus, Mills characterized White supremacy as broad, intersectional, and politically significant across a number of social axes and named an explicit connection between race and socioeconomic privilege, which highlights the intersectional complexity of White supremacist mechanisms, subjects, and consequences. In other words, while White supremacy is primarily a racial project, it is also inextricably linked to the distribution of material wealth and power. Mills also highlighted that White supremacy operates both formally and informally; the politics of domination can be both ingrained within a system and also enacted more informally by people within that system. Mills pointed here to White supremacy as a political system that underwrites what Collins (2000) referred to as a “disciplinary” domain of power, which is a form of power sustained through adherence to rules and regulations that are set and enforced by a dominant social group.

Overall, Mills characterized White supremacy as a far-reaching political system with complex and intersectional operant mechanisms, and, in this sense, it is both quite easy to name the many instantiations of White supremacy and quite difficult to articulate its form. Numerous scholars have outlined core features of White supremacy (Gibbons, 2018; Gillborn, 2006, 2016; Leonardo, 2004; Mills, 1997; A. Smith, 2012). In the sections that follow, drawing from and synthesizing a body of critical scholarship that defines and describes characteristics of White supremacy as a sociopolitical system, I propose a framework for the logic of White supremacy as consisting of three core concepts: (1) the logic of *racialized distribution of power* and an unequal distribution of material resources; (2) the logic of *intentional White ignorance and historical erasure*; and (3) the logic of *dehumanization of people of color* through violence and White cultural hegemony.
This logic offers a framework for understanding how White supremacy is sustained, not coincidentally or circumstantially, but rather through pervasive, structured, and deeply rooted social and cultural mechanics that we are able to observe across time, geography, and context. Drawing heavily from critical race scholarship, I propose the logic of White supremacy as a necessary conceptual framework for analyzing the work of teacher education because theories of White supremacy emphasize White racial domination as a political system with self-sustaining mechanisms that make it historically continuous. Understanding the political, systemic, and sustained nature of racism and White supremacy in teacher education is a necessary analytic lens for making sense of the complex work of teaching teachers about race, White supremacy, and social justice in education.

THE LOGIC OF WHITE SUPREMACY

Racialized Distribution of Power

While “White supremacy” describes a political system that prescribes social status explicitly along racial lines, theories of White supremacy quite explicitly engage the interdependence of White supremacy and other systems of social domination, with special emphasis on capitalism, colonialism and slavery, and patriarchy (Paris, 2019; A. Smith, 2012). Thus, recognizing the connections across these systems, while also parsing the underlying logics that distinguish these systems, is important for understanding the deeply rooted and expansive impact of White supremacy as not only a system of racial hierarchy but also one that reinforces domination through classed and gendered power. As we see in the racialized history of the United States, the resulting convergences and divergences of economic interests across racial groups draw out class tensions built into a system that preserves the interests of White elites at the expense of all others (Crenshaw, 1991; Gillborn, 2006; Milner et al., 2013). Understanding the aims, sustenance, and mechanisms of White supremacy requires recognition of this connection between distribution of material resources and the preservation of racial hierarchy (Leonardo, 2004). Its ties to settler colonialism, which Tuck and Yang (2012) described as “appropriation of Indigenous life and land” that “insists on settler sovereignty” (p. 5) over the colonial context, also highlight the relationship between White supremacy and dispossession. Indeed, Patel (2015) wrote that “Whiteness, and more specifically White settler colonialism, is intimately tied to other forms of oppression, in fact is dependent on them” (p. 659). This racialized distribution of power has also been conceptualized as “Whiteness as property,” most famously by Cheryl Harris (1993). Harris and other
critical race scholars have made the argument that White supremacist logic supports White domination through the conferral of property rights to White people and the barring of people of color from property ownership (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2011). In other cases, people of color have themselves been cast as property of White people, the most obvious case being chattel slavery of African-descended people in the Americas. Through these systems of racialized property ownership that reinforced racial hierarchy, a racialized distribution of power was continually reinscribed. This concept of unequal access to power and material resources, and in particular, its persistence even as it changes form over time, is a core component of the logic of White supremacy.

In the context of educational spaces, Whiteness as property has been conceptualized in relation to discursive power and cultural capital because these forms of power are leveraged for access to material resources and physical property. In their study of Whiteness in teacher education, Hytten and Warren (2003) focused on the “political and social power of whiteness” (p. 67). The authors wrote, “Whiteness was a discourse of power that worked to maintain power imbalances” (p. 67) and that this discourse was taken up not only by White students but also by students of color. They argued that they needed an “alternative vocabulary for how whiteness manifests through discourse” to examine the political and social power of Whiteness as it was taken up in their class and used to sustain racial hierarchies. Relatedly, “diversity discourse” in higher education also has been critiqued as a tool used to perpetuate the marginalization of communities of color while sustaining unequal access to material resources and even physical spaces at IHEs (Berrey, 2015; Patel, 2015). While applications of Harris’s conceptualization of Whiteness as property often focus on material stratification of property rights as codified through law, a similar conceptualization of White entitlement emerges in critical analyses of IHEs and the discursive power of Whiteness in these institutions.

Whites’ Intentional Ignorance and Historical Erasure

White supremacy also requires White people to subscribe to “an epistemology of ignorance” (Mills, 1997, p. 18), and this intentional ignorance is a sustaining mechanism for the White domination that also allows for the perpetuation of historical erasure that minimizes both the experiences of people of color and any historical accountability for Whites. In describing the Racial Contract, Mills wrote about this epistemology of ignorance as produced by the Racial Contract, with “the ironic outcome that Whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills, 1997, p. 18). This intentional ignorance makes possible a kind of
innocent subscription to domination and privilege without accountability. Mills suggested that being constructed as White or “achieving Whiteness” requires a kind of cognitive model that “precludes self-transparency and a genuine understanding of social realities” (p. 18). He explained, “One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority” (p. 18). Leonardo (2004) argued that even contemporary discourse about White privilege perpetuates and obscures patterns of White domination. He wrote,

Whites daily recreate [White domination] on a personal and institutional level. . . . Domination is a relation of power that subjects enter into . . . it does not form out of random acts of hatred, although these are condemnable, but rather out of a patterned and enduring treatment of social groups. Ultimately, it is secured by a series of actions. (p. 139)

Briefly, then, White supremacy sustains itself by investing White people in a logic of domination that they do not understand. This ignorance results from patterned engagement in actions of evasion and self-deception that lead to a misinterpretation of the world.

Whites’ intentional ignorance has also been conceptualized in relation to resultant silences and silencing that occur in multiple ways. Picower (2009) described how White people engage in self-silencing as self-protection and that this form of silence is a tool of Whiteness. In his articulation of “White racial knowledge,” Leonardo (2008) described these maneuvers as “invoking race.” He explained, “Whites know when to invoke race in a manner that maintains their ‘innocence.’ In fact, it is at this point when White racial knowledge mysteriously transforms into racial ignorance. Whites suddenly become oblivious to the racial formation” (p. 238). Thus, White silence is theorized as a symptom of intentional ignorance. Garrett and Segall (2013) described White ignorance as “inherently active” and resistance to race talk as a form of defending the self in response to difficult knowledge. The authors argued for the utility of conceptualizing ignorance not as an “empty well” but instead as an active negotiation and defense mechanism by Whites. These critical scholars and others have focused on how White ignorance and silence operate as tools of Whiteness to perpetuate White domination.

Critical race theory (CRT) scholars also point to recurrent silencing of people of color as a consequence of White supremacy and the patterned historical erasure of the narratives of people of color. This erasure is frequently referred to as a “master” or “dominant” narrative that reinforces a skewed version of history, one that excludes not only the voices of
people of color but also the history of White complicity in violence against and exploitation of people of color (Brown & Au, 2014; Chandler, 2015; Huggins, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Stovall, 2005). King (2016) described this erasure in schooling as “marginalizing knowledge,” a process in which “racism through black history is presented as progressive and as a solved problem” (p. 1305), and historical and social realities, including institutional racism, are largely ignored. These types of erasures are widely documented in educational research on K–12 schools but are not limited to schooling (Paris, 2019). In her framework for the “refusals” of White supremacy, Gibbons (2018) named the refusal to listen, resultant silencing, and the refusal to acknowledge history as core features of White supremacy. She described these refusals as underpinning a widespread “lack of empathy and denial of experience and voice” (p. 738). CRT scholars have recommended counternarratives as a way of speaking against the master narrative and resisting this pattern of silence (Esquivel et al., 2002; Milner, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Thus, it is evident that silence and silencing, in ways that deny the experiences of people of color both in the present and through history, are symptoms of White ignorance and historical erasure as a core logic of White supremacy. It is worth noting that ignorance, erasure, and silence operate in complex ways across racial lines. We return, then, to Leonardo’s (2004) argument that domination is recreated through patterned, daily actions and are reminded to consider the ways in which Whites’ intentional ignorance has been theorized as active—as refusal, as invoked, as erasure.

Dehumanization of People of Color

A third organizing logic of White supremacy is dehumanization of people of color. The threat of dehumanization is both violent and cultural. A. Smith (2012), drawing from Said (1978), described this phenomenon as “Orientalism,” which marks the West as superior to an “‘exotic’ but inferior ‘Orient’” (p. 69). Orientalism, A. Smith argued, provides the rationale for marking certain people as inferior, such that they are a “constant threat,” and this threat provides the “anchor for war” (p. 69). Gibbons (2018), drawing from Mills, also named the “refusal of the humanity of the other and a willingness to allow violence” (p. 729) as a core characteristic of White supremacy as one of the five refusals. Often sanctioned by the state or other political structures, the violence of White supremacy can be expansive and extreme. Gibbons explained,

This violence can come whether or not you struggle or stay silent, whether or not you stand or run. . . . It is freedom from this level of violence that separates one race from all the rest, marking how
whiteness gives a kind of freedom, safety anonymity, and comfort unavailable to others. (p. 735)

Gibbons also noted that this violence is connected to other aspects of White supremacy, such as capitalist oppression.

CRT scholarship has examined dehumanization as it has manifested historically as a consequence of White supremacist political and cultural forces, particularly in the U.S. context. For example, Leonardo (2004) referred to the drafting of the Constitution as something that, though touted as offering legal protection for all people created as equal, was informed by the forces of slavery, patriarchy, and industrial capitalism. Under these conditions, he wrote, “‘humanity’ meant male, white, and propertied” (p. 139). Drawing from Bell’s (1992) theory of racial realism, which asserts that racism is endemic in U.S. society, scholars have also shown how “color-blind” approaches to education and social policies have sustained racial inequalities (Alexander, 2010; Gotanda, 1991). This line of research draws linkages between the structural inequalities perpetuated by state policies and the perpetuation of violence against children of color in schools (Dumas, 2018; Gillborn, 2016). This violence against Black children has been linked to teachers’ racial bias and fear, and education researchers have made the case for the need for more humanizing views of children of color (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Huerta, 2011; Matías & Allen, 2016). While these scholars examine a range of both historical and contemporary examples of the consequences of unequal treatment across racial lines, across these examples, we see a consistent pattern of White domination and a devaluing of the lives of people of color. Scholars emphasize the need for a cultural shift, one that values all people as fully human. Ultimately, that shift is needed because without it, dehumanizing views have led to violence and the death of people of color.

The notion of dehumanization remains relevant in contemporary discourse. In a 2018 MSNBC special program on racism in America, Harvard professor Tim Wise situated issues of police violence in a broader discourse around White comfort, violence against Black people, and White supremacist cultural logic. He said, “White America has been raised to believe . . . that Black lives matter less than White comfort” (MSNBC, 2018). He explained that when White Americans call the police on their neighbors for “suspicious” behaviors, “what you are saying is ‘my discomfort with you right now is worth more than the potential that your life could be snuffed in 10 minutes.’ Until that stops, nothing is going to change.” Wise was referencing contemporary tensions related to incidents in which Whites called police officers to investigate Black neighbors for noncriminal behaviors (Molina, 2018; Pager, 2018). The persistence of police violence
against Black people and the notion of White comfort over Black lives describes a contemporary instantiation of violent dehumanization of Black people; while Gibbons used historical examples from the 19th and early 20th centuries to make concrete the conception of violent dehumanization of Black people, we see with these examples how the logic of dehumanization has been sustained over time. Indeed, as Mills (1994) argued, while White supremacy changes form across time and space, its fundamental function does not.

In addition to physical violence against people of color as a foundational tool of White domination, cultural dehumanization of people of color occurs through White cultural hegemony and the projection of White norms as “normal.” These norms are held in contrast to cultural norms of communities of color, which are viewed as deviant, abnormal, or inferior (Gillborn, 2006; Haynes, 2017). Bonilla-Silva (1997) explained how this notion of normalcy is connected to racial hierarchy and described the cultural hegemony of Whiteness as sustained in the racial structure through social privileges. In terms of White cultural hegemony, we see concrete examples of these social boundaries through representations of race and beauty in the media, a recent surge in incidents of Blackface videos and repopularization of minstrelsy, and contemporary and historical critiques of elite social institutions that remain segregated and exclusively White. The reification of the learned cultural value of Whiteness is increasingly contested in popular media but remains a dominant force and a central organizing logic that sustains White supremacy.

PEDAGOGICAL TENSIONS IN WHITE SUPREMACIST INSTITUTIONS

In the context of the ubiquitous sociopolitical forces of White supremacist logic, it is important and ambitious for TEs to teach about White supremacy. It is both ambitious and inherently tense, because TEs teach from within the very system they aim to disrupt. I focus here on IHEs and teacher education as White supremacist institutions to highlight the complex work of pedagogical decision-making in teacher education, particularly for TEs who teach about race and racism. We know that classrooms are spaces that cultivate White supremacist logic, characterized by discourses of normalcy, innocence, advantage and privilege (Haynes, 2017). Hughes and Giles (2010) wrote that much of what is considered “normal” on college campuses involves symptoms of systemic racism and noted that many of the status symbols at “good” institutions also coincide with racism, sexism, and inequity. These critical scholars suggested that disrupting White supremacist logic in higher education is fraught even within classrooms that explicitly aim to engage in antiracist work. Thus, interrupting
expectations of what is “normal” in university classrooms raises questions and dilemmas for TEs. We also know that teaching itself already always involves making complex pedagogical decisions (Clark & Peterson, 1986). In every moment, teachers make decisions: about whom to respond to or not respond to; where to move or not; whether to press forward with a lesson as planned or respond to newly assessed student needs in the moment. Lampert (1985) suggested that we consider these decisions as “dilemmas” and teachers as dilemma managers, acknowledging that there are no easy choices in the work of teaching. Lampert also pointed out that, while teachers’ pedagogical decisions are often viewed as “dichotomous alternatives,” it is more often the case that teaching dilemmas are not easily resolved because they highlight conflict between teachers’ multiple instructional goals. Ball (2018) referred to these in-the-moment decisions as “discretionary spaces,” when teachers decide whether and how to respond to students, both as individuals and as a class. Ball argued that “macro-structures” such as racism and institutional values often play out in the “micro-moments of teaching,” and teachers’ experiences with these broader forces inform their choices in the moment. Thus, these moments are both deeply informed by context and deeply personal. Indeed, Lampert also made the case for decisions in teaching as “deeply personal” not only because teachers must identify and solve problems in their classroom but also because the work of teaching “involves the additional personal burden of doing something about these problems in the classroom and living with the consequences” (p. 180) of these choices over time.

Thus, TEs who teach about race are, like all teachers, faced with pedagogical dilemmas that require them to engage personal understandings of their own classrooms and contextualized relationships to their institutions. We see one example in Hytten and Warren’s (2003) study of Whiteness in their teacher education classroom. They identified “discourses of whiteness” through which their students persisted and resisted further engagement. The authors suggested that TCs’ use of these discourses can be “both enabling and disabling,” walking “the fine line between productivity and resistance” (p. 69). Their work demonstrates how a “discursive perpetuation of whiteness” might occur even for TEs and TCs consciously engaged in an antiracist curriculum. Like Hytten and Warren, Marx (2004) argued for more research in teacher education that engages with these tensions and complexities. Marx agreed that White racism is deeply entrenched in society and in teacher education; while ultimately she was enthusiastic about the progress and insights of her White students, she at times found herself struggling with her own complicity in perpetuating White racism. Marx urged teacher education researchers to continue to
meet the challenge of confronting the effects of racism and Whiteness in our practice. The dilemmas highlighted in these studies offer practitioner perspectives on how daily decisions might contribute to the perpetuation of Whiteness even in spaces that are designed as antiracist, and the authors point to a need for more research that examines these tensions more explicitly.

METHOD

The participants in this study were part of a phenomenological study of TEs who teach about race and racism. The phenomenological lens grounds the study in a “close analysis of lived experience to understand how meaning is created” by participants, exposing assumptions about our ways of knowing (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1373). This qualitative interview study included 16 TEs who were recruited via snowball sampling. For a phenomenological study, it is recommended that purposeful sampling be used to gather data from individuals who can provide a detailed account of their experience and that the sample size remain relatively small, ranging from about 3 to 15 people (Creswell, 1998). I used snowball sampling as a form of purposeful sampling, and through this method, a diverse set of participants were identified who had relevant experience. All TEs had experience teaching about race in predominantly White teacher education programs. To recruit participants, recruitment emails were sent out through education networks in order to solicit initial recommendations, and recommended experts were invited to complete a selection survey and to recommend additional participants. Selection criteria were that TEs must (a) be teacher educators with experience teaching in predominantly White teacher education programs; (b) work with undergraduate, graduate, and/or in-service teachers; (c) support teachers in urban contexts; and (d) hold core instructional goals related to race/racism. Core instructional goals for the course were assessed through self-report using an interest survey. The demographic characteristics of the TEs in this study are summarized in Table 1.

In the final participant pool, 12 of 16 TEs identified as White and four identified as Black (one of whom also identified as biracial Black/White); 10 TEs identified as women and six as men. The average number of years of experience was 10. Twelve of 16 TEs taught at traditional public universities, and four taught at private universities. Three of the 16 TEs for this study were currently teaching at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). This study did not focus on the experiences of TEs who worked at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) because of an assumed difference in institutional history and student demographics, although future studies
Table 1. Participant Demographics

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*All names are pseudonyms.
of this nature might include or exclusively examine this TE population. Across the participant sample, the universities at which they taught varied greatly in program structure, from student demographics to how the programs were structured. The majority of participants taught “diversity and equity” courses. These courses, often titled something related to the “Social Foundations of Education” or “Equity in Schools,” typically covered content related to core equity issues in K–12 schools such as racism, segregation, achievement/opportunity gaps, and school discipline. TEs often also taught about social identities, including race, gender, sexuality, and language, and sometimes including other identities such as religion or nationality. While some TEs described having some course content prescribed by their schools or state, most had autonomy to make decisions about how to structure these courses, what topics to cover, and what curricular materials to use. Almost half of TEs also identified as teaching methods courses in which race and racism were core instructional goals with teachers. Of the six TEs who taught methods courses, three taught both methods courses and diversity & equity courses.

DATA SOURCES

Phenomenological analysis requires the ability to gather data flexibly, and semistructured interviews are recommended as the most useful tool for collecting data that capture robust descriptions of participants’ experiences (J. Smith & Osborn, 2003). All TEs who participated in the study completed two interviews, each approximately 75 minutes. In total, 49 hours of individual interviews were collected and transcribed across 16 TEs. The core content of interviews included a life history narrative, with explicit emphasis on personal racial identity development; discussion of workplace context; and descriptions of classroom experiences, including debriefing specific classroom artifacts and narrated examples of general practice. Classroom artifacts such as course syllabi and assignments were submitted by TEs and used to triangulate data from interviews. Focus groups also were used to examine how interactions between TEs either altered discourse or opened up new conversations. Morgan and Hoffman (2018) described the utility of using individual interviews and focus groups in conjunction to better understand a phenomenon. According to the authors, while individual interviews can offer opportunities for in-depth engagement, focus groups allow the researcher to explore themes that emerge from individual interviews and better understand both convergence and divergence across participant experiences. For this study, focus groups created an ideal opportunity to revisit questions that participants themselves raised during their individual interviews. More specifically,
Morgan and Hoffman (2018) affirmed the utility of the “sharing and comparing” phenomenon that occurs in focus group interactions. In conjunction with interview data, focus group data offer important perspectives on participant experiences; in this sense, focus groups have the potential to be especially useful in addressing the second research question and deepening our understanding of TEs’ abilities to navigate tensions in their teaching. Focus groups were created through criterion-based heterogeneous grouping with the aim of offering diverse perspectives within each group while also being attentive to issues of relational power (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In total, three focus groups were conducted, and each of these groups had three TEs, for a total of nine TEs in the focus groups. A semistructured protocol was used based on themes that emerged from individual interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were coded iteratively during data collection using open analytic coding methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In vivo coding was used for first cycle coding with the intention of prioritizing narrated experiences of participants (Saldaña, 2009) and to “preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). Descriptive codes were also applied to participant narratives for common topics such as “Whiteness,” “racism,” and “White supremacy.” See Table 2 for examples of first cycle codes. During a second round of coding, code categories were finalized through an iterative process (Saldaña, 2009). The final codebook included seven code categories: TEs’ instructional goals, TEs’ pedagogical strategies, theories of teacher learning, vision/purpose, personal histories, racial knowledge, and context. Each code category had subcodes, and there were 74 codes in total (see Table 3). The findings from this study are drawn from the TEs’ pedagogical strategies (TEP) code category generally and to the specific subcodes related to “pedagogical decision making” and to “pedagogical tensions” identified by TEs as they narrated their classroom experiences. Pedagogical tensions were identified as moments when TEs explicitly referenced “tensions” or otherwise identified challenges or uncertainties that signified weighing issues in opposition in their instruction. Examples of such signifiers included discussions about their “struggles,” “limitations,” “hopes,” and/or a sense that their work is “ongoing” or “unfinished.” These codes were reviewed in relation to descriptive codes for Whiteness and White supremacy to identify patterns in TEs’ experiences of pedagogical tensions related to White supremacy. All data were coded using the Atlas.ti software.
### Table 2. Sample First Cycle Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>harm</td>
<td>TE describe schools as sites of harm, hurt, trauma, etc.</td>
<td>“It’s figuring out how to best facilitate within the context of a teacher preparation course. They’re very sensitive things to talk about because these are very central parts of people’s identities that are fundamentally being challenged as historically having inflicted harm.”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“The woman and man who were leading this [PD] kept being like, stop, particularly you White people . . . you’re hurting our kids by not dealing with your own shit. It was very much like, stop hurting our kids. You need to deal with this.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>counternarratives</td>
<td>TE describes using “counternarratives” as a pedagogical strategy or names the importance of counternarratives/counterstories or challenging dominant narratives</td>
<td>“They’re sort of counternarratives that do two things: They show resistance, sort of more violent resistance to struggle, not as much the kind of Civil Rights march . . . and then also the persistence of, here’s essentially a Klan rally in 2017, and here’s a young Black man being essentially strangled by the police, on camera. So just showing that the stuff is still there.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“English language arts is all about sharing and experiencing stories. Right? And so if you can do that and you can experience somebody else’s story, then you can bring counter-stories into the classroom.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>White supremacy</td>
<td>Descriptive; TE discusses “White supremacy”</td>
<td>“Thinking about how White privilege and White supremacy operates in a particular context is also a very important piece of understanding race and racism; it’s not just about how oppression affects people of color, which is really important, but also how White supremacy operates to maintain the system of oppression.”</td>
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<td>“So the student might need a conversation to learn to reflect about how Black Lives Matter isn’t—it’s about the experience of Black people in the context of a racist society suffused with White supremacy, which operates in a way to affect Latino students, Muslim Students, Vietnamese students, and White students, too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code/Code Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Example(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Education Pedagogy (TEP)</td>
<td>Code category for pedagogical strategies identified by TEs as used in teacher education</td>
<td>“We had a Socratic seminar about it. . . . We discussed it afterwards, we found that our residents were still discussing it, because we asked them to make connections to the students they taught over summer, in summer school. And we asked them to make connections, like what, which, how do you see these capitals exhibited by the students that you teach?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEP: Decision-making</td>
<td>Within TEP category, TE references making a decision or describes considerations for making instructional decisions</td>
<td>“So they can be self-aware of their own experience around race and racism to then design or develop lesson plans or establishment [of] instructional strategies that mitigate the ways, the negative ways in which their experiences of race might harm the students that they teach. . . . That involves lots of case studies with students around issues of race; reflective writing about past experiences of their own race-based experiences; it is exposing them to the best of what’s out there on different understandings of race and racism.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEP: Tensions</td>
<td>Within TEP category, TE references tensions or identifies challenges or uncertainties that signify weighing issues in opposition</td>
<td>“I think how I respond to her would depend a lot on my relationship with her and my, just, who she is as a person, because I think that this is a moment that can go towards like defensive and shut down or could be a moment for growth.”</td>
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<td>“As a result of everything that was happening in [our colleague’s] class, we were like, well we don’t know for sure that this is not happening in our class, it just might be that they’re not saying anything. . . . But just because we haven’t heard it doesn’t mean that it’s not occurred. . . . So let’s introduce [a new protocol].”</td>
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<td>“I don’t know—if you push people so hard, are they just like, I’m being judged and shut down? Is it—I don’t know. It’s a constant dilemma in my work that I have not solved and probably will never solve.”</td>
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<td>“How do I do this in a way that’s also engaging for my students, but then also, how am I going to prepare myself for the students that push back? I think those are some of the challenges. And so I think a lot of them are just sort of within me.”</td>
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The findings of this cross-institutional qualitative study offer insight into an important phenomenon through detailed exploration of the narrated experiences of these participants. Trustworthiness of the study was enhanced by having a sample of 16 participants at different institutions that were recommended by other TEs in the field through snowball sampling. Data were triangulated across interviews, focus groups, and classroom artifacts. Analytic memos also were written throughout data collection and analysis as a means of examining data, refining code categories, identifying patterns, and making connections across concepts (Charmaz, 2006). Memoing was used throughout as a tool for bracketing assumptions (Tufford & Newman, 2012) and for intentional engagement with my own researcher positionality and assumptions. Given my racial and professional identities, and recognizing the interactive nature of inquiry and the relationship between a researcher and the phenomenon under study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), I felt it important to continually reflect on how my personal assumptions, perceptions, and experiences related to the data. As a Black woman, researcher, and TE, I have both closely studied the logic of White supremacy within schools as institutions and experienced its impacts in quite personal and intimate ways, and I used memos as a tool for reflection on the linkages between my positionality and the developing concepts in this work.

FINDINGS

The tensions identified by TEs aligned to the logic of White supremacy framework in that they described tensions related to a racialized distribution of power, White ignorance and erasure, and the dehumanization of people of color. Tensions related to the racial distribution of power focused on (a) offering differentiated support for TCs of color and (b) facilitation of classroom discourse during moments of racial tension between White TCs and TCs of color. Tensions related to White ignorance and erasure centered on (a) knowing “when to push” against White students’ resistance and (b) decentering Whiteness and introducing counternarratives. Finally, tensions related to the dehumanization of people of color focused on identifying effective pedagogical strategies for challenging deficit ideologies.

RACIAL DISTRIBUTION OF POWER: EMERGENT TENSIONS IN FACILITATING CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

TEs described racial power dynamics within their classroom in terms of the complexity of interpersonal interactions. They noted multiple axes of social identity that had salience within the classroom and influenced their TCs. Most commonly, the tension identified by TEs for facilitating
classroom discourse was negotiating the differing needs of White TCs and TCS of color, particularly when managing discursive space in moments of racial tension. These points of tension highlighted questions about the racialized distribution of power in their classrooms.

**Different Needs for TCs Along Racial Lines**

Most (75%) TEs in the study identified the different needs of White TCs and TCS of color as a source of tension that came up in their classes. It challenged them in terms of the racial distribution of power because of their views of how Whiteness took up space in the classroom and the resultant decisions they needed to make to support both White TCs and TCS of color. Situating these decisions in an understanding of racial power, TEs viewed the different needs of their TCs as an important instructional consideration in their teaching. They described examples of moments that challenged them and the factors they considered when making decisions during these moments.

In part, differentiation was a concern for TEs in the ways it required a consideration of their own power and positionality in relation to TCs. In some cases, their own identities informed questions about supporting the needs of White TCs and TCS of color. Brian, who had been teaching at a private institution for eight years, reflected on the significance of his racial and professional identities as informing his approach to supporting TCs; he described these identities as intertwined. Brian is White, and he had been teaching as an adjunct in the program while also working at a local public school. Brian explained the significance of his race and role in this context:

> I think some combination of Whiteness and being around for a while—which is maybe also a product of Whiteness—is how I’ve been able to . . . build relationships so that I could keep reflecting and keep getting better. And I think that being a White instructor in the program and also a White currently practicing teacher gets seen certain ways as, for White teacher candidates, like, “here’s someone doing the thing [I’m learning to do].” You know? (Interview #1)

Thus, for Brian, being White and being an adjunct professor with ties to local public schools worked together as a sort of model for his White TCs. But Brian also considered his Whiteness and the Whiteness of his program in relation to his TCS of color; he noted that TCS of color in the program often expressed feelings of isolation and frustration because of the overwhelming Whiteness of his program. He did not feel like he always knew how best to support them, specifically as a White TE. He noted that his
TCs of color did need to develop racial knowledge, but he was not always sure of the best way to support their development as a White TE. Brian described the tension in this way:

I’ve struggled with what it means to be a White teacher educator of aspiring teachers of color—so how to balance having knowledge about race and racism conceptually that not all of the aspiring teachers of color have . . . and also recognizing that they have a knowledge from lived experience that I do not have at all. And finding that balance between how this is mutually reinforcing rather than . . . me being too tentative about sharing what I do know. (Interview #1)

Thus, Brian, like several other White TEs in the study, raised questions about how existing program structures and the teacher–student power relationship between him and his TCs might reify Whiteness, and these TEs grappled with how to support and instruct TCs of color while also disrupting notions of White authority. Brian also shared that a general challenge he was working through in his practice was how to productively use feedback in his course; in responding to his students, he felt that “there are some things you just must know in order to not reproduce inequities with your students” (Interview #2), but he was trying to find the right approach to “critical questioning” that would move beyond just saying “that’s not true” and better support his students in “developing conceptual understanding.” For supporting his TCs of color specifically, he struggled to identify his role in challenging those perspectives.

Other TEs discussed the need for TCs of color to receive development and support related to White supremacy and racism in a way that was distinct from their White peers. This was described at times by TEs as related to “internalized” racism and oppression. Haley, a Black woman who had been teaching for 11 years, said that for her TCs of color, internalized oppression often manifested as some of the same teacher practices as White TCs’ issues of internalized White superiority. Still, she said, White TCs typically need more racial identity development than their peers of color, which necessitated differentiation. Like Haley, Joanne identified internalized oppression as an issue for TCs of color and noted her desire to provide differentiated support for TCs because, as she explained, “the process is not the same for everybody” (Interview #2). Joanne, a White TE working in an urban teacher education program, noted the importance of assessing TCs’ differential needs in general, and she expressed concern about “alienating” TCs of color in teacher education programs that focus primarily on preparing White teachers to teach students of color. She referred several times to the need to differentiate support for White TCs
and TCs of color and said she is still trying to figure out “how we do this” (Joanne, Interview #1). TEs identified engaging TCs of color in recognizing and critically reflecting on internalized racism as a specific form of differentiated support needed in their courses.

**Managing Discursive Space During Moments of Racial Tension**

A majority (12/16) of TEs shared at least one example of a time when they or their students experienced racial stress (Stevenson, 2014) during a classroom discussion. In these moments, TEs had to make decisions about how to facilitate classroom discourse, and they described weighing the consequences of their choices in relation to the racial identities of their students and to discursive power dynamics.

One example came from Terri, a White woman who had been teaching teachers for 17 years. She shared a story about a class when she received pushback from her students for the way she managed racial tension during a discussion. They had been discussing whether or not calling someone by the wrong name was a microaggression, and a White woman in her class said something dismissive: “‘I don’t see why it’s a big deal,’ or something like that,” Terri said (Focus Group). After this comment, a Black woman in the class stood up and left the room, and the White woman “got all teary” and said she didn’t understand her offense. Later, the Black woman and other White TCs in the class criticized Terri for not doing more in the moment to hold the White woman accountable for her dismissive comment.

About the incident, Terri reflected,

> I think it’s a good example of how in that moment, I feel the pull between pushing the White student who says something and holding her hand and walking her along in a direction where she needs to go. . . . The feedback from this woman of color, this Black woman, was, you were holding her hand, like what the heck?! You can’t hold somebody’s hands when they say something like that. I mean she didn’t use that language, but, you know. (Interview #1)

Terri’s role as a facilitator was challenged because her students viewed it as her responsibility to manage the way that White TCs’ discursive engagement affected class dynamics. In terms of a racialized distribution of power, Terri struggled because she felt that this moment required her to balance offering even somewhat passive support for the White student at the expense of other students, and particularly the Black woman in the class. Terri said that she learned from this incident and decided to offer a new set of “ground rules” that might attend more meaningfully to the balance of racialized power in the classroom. She explained,
One of the things that I learned from that is, now when we talk about ground rules and expectations I say, if you need to leave the room, it’s perfectly okay. Quite honestly, I’d rather have a White woman leave and come back than sit there and cry and pull all of us over in that direction, and I certainly want the people of color to be able to leave the room. So I feel like that was a big lesson. (Interview #1)

For Terri, a new set of ground rules both disrupts the discursive power of “White women’s tears” (Accapadi, 2007) and might allow TCs of color to feel validated in their choice to disengage from racially tense moments in a way that classrooms do not often traditionally create space for. Terri also acknowledged that she sometimes felt better equipped to support White teachers and that she worried that her TCs of color were not getting what they needed from her class. She explained, “Talking to mixed groups is challenging” because “I don’t want the people of color to have to listen to the White people, including me sometimes” (Interview #2).

This tension highlights the complexity of navigating racialized power dynamics in the classroom when facilitating discussions. Terri identified these moments as balancing tensions, but in creating a rule that aimed to alleviate future tensions, she inadvertently introduced new issues of access to power for her students. On the one hand, her “ground rules” could be a source of agency for TCs of color, but they also introduce questions about differential access to material and cultural resources for TCs of color, particularly if the result of these new rules would lead to TCs of color more frequently disengaging from class than their White peers. Because Terri and her TCs were negotiating both physical and discursive access to the classroom, this incident recalls critical race scholarship highlighting White entitlement in IHEs and questioning a “discourse of access” (Iverson, 2012) for students of color as one that camouflages the perpetuation of racial hierarchies. Still, Terri’s aim for these new ground rules was to disrupt the discursive power of a White woman being able to cry in class and “pull all of us over in that direction”; her goal was to resist existing racial power dynamics in her class. This incident presents a clear dilemma and demonstrates the complex nature of negotiating racialized power for students in White supremacist IHEs. Considering multiple factors that influence access to power as influential for navigating the racialized distribution of power often left TEs with more questions than answers about how to effectively disrupt existing racial hierarchies while supporting both White TCs and TCs of color in their classes.
TENSIONS RELATED TO THE LOGIC OF WHITE IGNORANCE AND HISTORICAL ERASURE

TEs in this study noted a range of ways that White ignorance manifested in TCs’ behaviors. This assessment of their TCs was evident in the way they described TCs; several TEs used the word “ignorance” to describe teachers, while others referenced ways in which they addressed content or issues that their students “didn’t know.” For TEs, addressing White ignorance created pedagogical tensions because it required balancing both the ways that Whiteness is centered in classrooms and the ways that White silence can be used as a tool to avoid confronting racism and White supremacy. This tension was often framed as “knowing when to ‘push.’” In terms of navigating this tension, TEs described making curricular choices related to decentering Whiteness and using counternarratives of people of color that historically had been erased in dominant narratives (Milner, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). While this tension remained unresolved, TEs described how they made decisions around these tensions.

White Defensiveness: Knowing When to “Push”

TEs described a desire to respond to White students’ defensiveness, increase their critical consciousness, and address White ignorance. They described the challenge of knowing when to “push” White students at the risk of students “shutting down.” These decisions were fraught as TEs described considering issues such as students feeling nervous, fearful, angry, or resistant. Diane was a White TE with six years of experience, and she raised questions about finding a balance:

A lot of White students get super defensive. And they push back a lot. And it takes this balance that I continually struggle to find. Well, there’s a lot of balances. But it’s, you know, how hard do you push people? . . . People are really defensive. A lot of pushback. And knowing that right level of pushing so that they start to think critically versus pushing so hard they shut down. Right? (Interview #1)

The central tension for Diane and others was whether or not pushing is actually productive for White TCs’ learning. The goal is that they begin to “think critically,” but Diane and others described defensiveness as a barrier to learning. However, TEs also were worried that not pushing represented instructional failure. Diane said she also frequently asked herself, “Am I pushing people enough? Is my Whiteness preventing me from pushing people harder in thinking about racism and privilege than I would
otherwise?” (Interview #1). Thus, this feeling of knowing when and how “hard” to push emerged as an important pedagogical tension. Like Diane, Paul, a Black TE with six years of experience, said that it was important for TCs to be pushed but acknowledged that he had not found the balance yet. He explained,

Classes about race and racism in teacher education should be agitating courses; they should be courses where people are a little bit uncomfortable. . . . I think I make my courses around race and racism too comfortable for White people. I can get better at being more disruptive for my White teacher candidates around race and racism. They’re very good at talking about theory; they can report back to me what race and racism is, and what racial identity development is, still leaving my class with some clear biases. (Interview #2)

Paul’s comment suggests that perhaps challenging White ignorance requires not only access to historical racial knowledge and theories of race but also some “agitating” or “disruptive” experiences.

Haley described making decisions about when and why to push students. She remembered a moment in a class discussion about racial identity when one of her students offered what she described as a “color-blind” response, and, she said, “I remember thinking in that moment, ‘This isn’t the moment to push’” (Focus Group). She explained that because she had been building a relationship with the student and would continue working with him for several more weeks, she wanted to leverage their “longer relationship” rather than push in that moment. She then used the time before the next week’s class to reflect and adjust her lesson plan; she said she wanted to think not just about him but to do something that would be “instructive for all of my students” (Focus Group). Haley’s reflection highlights the way that an in-the-moment decision—in this case, Haley’s decision not to push the student—can be part of a broader process of critical reflection and the management of a pedagogical dilemma over time. In this sense, we see Haley using her understanding of White supremacy and a framework of resistance both in a “discretionary moment” (Ball, 2018) and in a more sustained process of “dilemma management” (Lampert, 1985) as she balances the needs of one student’s “color-blind ideology” with the needs of the rest of the class. Her purposeful planning was a response to this emergent tension, and we see both her negotiation of questions about sustaining and disrupting White ignorance and how her critical racial lens informed her decision.

It is also worth noting that deciding when to push was, for some, tied to their professional status within the institution; the relative security of
tenure at times created opportunities to take pedagogical risks within discretionary moments for some, whereas others noted hesitations because of perceived potential for negative consequences. For example, Paul and Diane, who did not have tenure, explained that part of finding the balance was about being sensitive to potential consequences of “agitating” White students. Diane, who had questioned whether she was pushing her White students enough, also noted that she struggled when she received negative course evaluations. She shared that receiving lower reviews after a recent course ended made her think about research showing how teachers of courses about race and equity tend to get lower reviews; she also said that it “made me reflect a lot about how my White privilege perhaps shielded me from more negative course evaluations [in previous years]” (Interview #1). Ultimately, she said, she continued to think about “handling that set of course evaluations going into applying for jobs” (Interview #1). Paul, who was in a tenure-track position, posed the question, “So, trying to hold on to my job, how can I give them what they need but also have them rate me okay in my evaluations?” These examples suggest that while Paul and Diane recognized the linkage between racism, Whiteness, and their own teaching, their professional statuses as adjunct and tenure-track faculty, respectively, were indeed relevant to the pedagogical decisions and tensions they faced.

On the other hand, Frederick, a tenured White male who had been teaching at a public university for 10 years, noted that the combination of his race and tenure status afforded what he called “strategic use of my privilege” to drive difficult conversations. He explained, “Because I’m a cisgender White male with tenure, I can say things and do things that need to be said and done, but I’m never putting my physical body at risk” (Interview #1). He described this dynamic as relevant not only for classroom interactions but even in collegial interactions as well. These reflections suggest that TEs’ decisions to push conversations are informed by their positional- ity not only in terms of race but also in terms of tenure status.

Addressing Historical Erasure Through Curricular Choices

TEs navigated questions about knowing when to push their White students through purposeful planning and curricular choices. In many cases, TEs described these choices in relation to managing this balance of pushing students but keeping them engaged. This attentiveness to White ignorance and defensiveness was an attempt to find this balance, but several TEs raised questions about ways in which White ignorance might be sustained through curricular silences. They considered how Whiteness showed up in their own curricular choices. Even as TEs frequently used texts written
by scholars of color and engaged counternarratives as outlined earlier, several TEs expressed skepticism about the Whiteness of their programs and curricula. Although a critical examination of Whiteness challenges White ignorance, it also recenters Whiteness, perhaps perpetuating the historical erasure of people of color. The move to decenter Whiteness, then, resists this pattern but raises concerns about whether White people will be able to avoid confronting their ignorance through purposeful silence.

Catherine, a White woman who taught in an urban teacher residency program, raised similar questions as she reflected on student feedback at the end of the semester:

Some of the students wrote in their course evaluations that they felt like, even though a lot of what we did was focused on pointing out anti-Black racism . . . in some of the course feedback, students said it still felt like a very White-centered class. So, my colleague who kind of planned this course out, I asked her . . . she was like, “Well, if that’s how they felt, then maybe they’re right.” You know? Maybe it still wasn’t enough; maybe the course still was a little bit aimed towards, okay hey White people, here’s how to not be racist when you’re a teacher. (Interview #2)

The TCs’ critique and Catherine’s reflection point to uncertainty about how course content may have inadvertently sustained White-dominant narratives instead of challenging them. However, it is also worth noting that the TCs’ critique of the course as too “White centered” indicates that Catherine’s TCs’ have a level of critical consciousness that would move them to make such an assessment. In this sense, their critique might also be interpreted as, actually, an indicator of the success of her curriculum. Thus, Catherine’s curricular choices here demonstrate how her pedagogical decisions require her to hold, together and in tension, the instructional utility of decentering Whiteness as a tool of resistance and centering Whiteness as also a practical pedagogical tool.

To navigate these tensions, many TEs described their efforts to decenter Whiteness in terms of teaching historical racial knowledge through counternarratives. They introduced counternarratives both experientially, by exposing TCs to the experiential knowledge of people of color—that is, bringing colleagues and community members in as guests, or bringing TCs to community events—and through secondary sources in their curriculum. Sam described a lesson in which he introduced the concept of racial realism through a group activity where teachers examined and sorted a set of images that presented both a story of racial progress and one of racism unresolved in the history of the United States. Teachers in Joanne’s and Catherine’s classes attended workshops about their local
communities to learn a localized racial history that presented critical perspectives about racial and economic inequality. Catherine described their workshop as addressing issues such as redlining and wealth inequality. In their debrief, she explained, they discussed “what’s our country founded on, what are our schools founded on, and how does that relate particularly to the inherent Whiteness in teaching and to our Black students” (Interview #2). Like Catherine and Joanne, a majority of TEs described engaging outside resources or colleagues to underscore the importance of challenging dominant narratives.

DEHUMANIZING PEOPLE OF COLOR: EMERGENT TENSIONS IN CHALLENGING DEFICIT THINKING AND DEVELOPING COPING STRATEGIES

For the TEs in this study, dehumanization of people of color most commonly manifested through TCs’ deficit ideologies about students and communities of color. TEs identified deficit thinking as a common issue in their classrooms and described it as a “challenge” or “struggle” to know how to challenge TCs’ deficit perspectives of students and communities of color. To navigate this challenge, TEs developed coping strategies to regulate their responses to TCs’ deficit ideologies.

Being Responsive to TCs’ Deficit Thinking

A total of 13 of 16 TEs in the study identified “deficit” thinking as an issue that comes up for their students. Most expressed a degree of uncertainty about how to productively respond to deficit thinking. For these TEs, tensions or challenges typically emerged during lesson implementation as TCs responded differently to curricular activities and resources designed to challenge deficit thinking. For example, Rose and Molly both described doing versions of a “community study” that drew from Moll’s concept of funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). While the specific structure of their assignments was a bit different, both Rose and Molly wanted TCs to develop more asset-based perspectives of students’ communities and see “the richness” that exists already in the neighborhoods of their TCs’ field placements (Rose, Interview #1). Rose said that TCs often “don’t even have that language” to recognize deficit perspectives toward communities of color, and countering those perspectives—particularly because TCs weren’t even aware that they had them—was one of her biggest challenges. Molly described making modifications to her assignment over the years in an effort to address some issues she had identified. One aspect of the assignment she adjusted was how she used a community study of nearby suburban schools in conjunction with community schools’ observations.
Her aim in doing a comparative analysis was for TCs to develop their critical, systemic lens as they learned more about school resource allocation, school segregation, and systemic inequality. However, she worried sometimes that if they didn’t develop a critical perspective, they might simply see assets in the suburbs and deficits in their community. Overall, she found this assignment useful for challenging deficit ideologies but continued to make modifications over time. Joanne also described assignments that she used to try to address TCs’ deficit perspectives of students and families. She said that she “just became kind of sickened by the deficit ways that my students thought about and talked about their students” (Interview #2). She developed an assignment to “try to figure out how to interrupt that,” which required her students to write observations about their students; in its earlier iteration, she said, it was “just a laundry list of deficits.” At first, she felt the assignment was not effective; when TCs submitted their observations, Joanne would return them with critical feedback, and they would be “mad” and “defensive.” She continued modifying the assignment and added components that she felt were more effective in challenging students’ deficit perspectives:

I added the empathy journal component, which is where I have them do the observation and then I have them try to imagine that same period but from the students’ perspective. . . . What might they be thinking? Just to try and empathize with the student a little bit. (Interview #2)

In addition to the empathy journal, Joanne continued to modify the assignment to challenge her TCs’ deficit ideologies through skits and critical reflection. She found these later iterations of the assignment to be more effective. These examples demonstrate that TEs design assignments to challenge deficit thinking but continually modify them as they navigate the difficulty of responding to and resisting dehumanizing perspectives about students and communities of color.

For Paul, leveraging his curricular resources became an important tool for him to be able to manage challenging moments with White students in the classroom. As a Black professor, he thought it was useful to maintain a relatively “neutral” tone and not “exhibit that you’ll go in on a student if they say something crazy” (Interview #2). He explained,

It’s just hard for me to have conversations about race because they’re emotionally triggering. . . . I sometimes, I somehow create a space where I feel like my White students feel like they can say whatever they want to say, however they want to say it. Which you want to create. But then when they say stuff, you got to deal with
it. And that sometimes require you to call them out on something that they say, and I’m not as strong. So what I’ll do is, “How would Omi and Winant respond to this?” (Interview #2)

Having strong curricular content was helpful because he could pull it into a class conversation to respond to White students’ comments in the moment. He gave an example of what that might look like in his class:

You know, they’ll start with, “He’s 4 years old, but he’s so much bigger than all of the other kids in my class, and I have to keep him from the other students, and he thinks I don’t like him—” Or—“I don’t like him.” So they’ll say this about a 4-year-old Black boy . . . then it’s like, oh, I just read this article where we talked about so much of how we perceive Black boys as adult men, and we’re controlling their bodies. (Interview #2)

He shared that prompts such as “How would Omi and Winant respond to this?” or prompts that opened the discussion back to the class (“What do others think about that?”) were sometimes sufficient to push students to rethink their comments, particularly in relation to ideas presented in curricular materials. Across these examples, TEs identified deficit thinking as an issue for their students, and they were able to engage various pedagogical strategies to try to challenge deficit ideas. TEs expressed complex views of the ways in which conceptions of race and racism were relevant for managing these classroom decisions but sometimes struggled to identify an approach that they felt was most effective.

**TEs Develop Coping Strategies for Responding to TCs’ Deficit Ideologies**

In addition to identifying pedagogical strategies to support TCs in shifting to more asset-based orientations toward students and communities of color, TEs described a need to develop their own personal coping strategies for responding to TCs’ deficit ideologies. Most commonly, TEs coped by acknowledging their own emotions as instructionally relevant and by engaging asset-based thinking and humanizing perspectives of White TCs to negotiate the emotional tension that emerged in response to TCs’ deficit ideologies.

Sometimes they were managing their own emotional responses out of a sense of intolerance for TCs’ views. For about one third of TEs (6/16), their own emotionality was part of the challenge of facing TCs’ deficit ideologies in class. Haley, for example, explained,

You’re going to have to be ready for when a White student says some stuff that’s a little out of pocket and it pisses you off. . . . How
are you going to be able to create a space where your emotion is not going to get in the way of the active conversation? Or, are there moments when showing some emotion actually is instructive for your student? (Interview #1)

She shared that these questions had been on her mind for much of her teaching career, particularly in relation to her identity as a Black woman. Like Haley, Catherine said that responding to TCs’ problematic or racist comments was sometimes a challenge for her. When asked about the challenges of teaching courses about race and racism, Catherine said that her “first challenge has just been me” and that she knew that she was “the first filter to anything people might learn” from her (Interview #2). She expressed a desire to “put the emotion to the side, or something—not let that get in the way” (Interview #2). She said that sometimes she got “angry, really angry” and that she didn’t feel she had great strategies for navigating these emotions. She said, “I get angry, and then I have to calm down or I have to figure out a way to work around the anger that I’m feeling.” While she did not name it as such, she seemed to be in search of approaches for a pedagogy of empathy (Lindquist, 2004; Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017) with her TCs.

Joanne also acknowledged that she sometimes responded emotionally to TCs’ comments. She described at times feeling “disgusted” by their deficit thinking and said that, especially early in her career, she would hear comments from students and afterward think, “I can’t believe she said this! Listen to what happened in my class today; can you believe she has the nerve to say that?” (Interview #2). Joanne described these experiences as feeling “caught up” in TCs’ comments. However, Joanne shared that over the years, her experience as an educator and researcher supported her in developing “a schema” for responding to these moments over time and feeling more prepared to engage analytically in these moments at this point in her career. She said she felt she was able to be more analytical now and “hear the comments, not as messed up things people are saying, but to categorize it and analyze it in terms of, this is what they know, this is what they don’t know, this is the strategy to move them on this continuum” (Interview #2).

Some TEs also demonstrated a strong asset-based lens towards TCs—both White TCs and TCs of color. Research on teaching has described “asset-based” approaches as ones in which “teachers concentrate on the assets that students bring into the classroom and build on those assets in the learning contexts” (Milner, 2008, p. 1596). For these TEs, an asset-based orientation toward TCs as learners was similar: It meant that they viewed novice educators, and White teachers in particular, as capable of learning
about race and as bringing relevant skills into the classroom. This mindset was worth noting, given that grappling with White racial knowledge and issues of resistance and denial have been central themes in research on teaching teachers about race (Leonardo, 2008). Furthermore, as Milner (2008) explained, an asset-based view would also suggest that teachers “understand their own assets” (p. 1596) and leverage these capabilities in their work. Here, TEs with an asset-based approach saw their work as moving the needle, even in the face of interpersonal and institutional challenges. This orientation served as a coping strategy in response to TCs’ deficit ideologies. Part of this orientation was informed by an understanding of White supremacy as a violent system that harms both people of color and White people in ways that can be dehumanizing for all. A majority of TEs, almost two thirds, described systemic racism in terms of violence and harm toward students. The specific term “harm” was referenced by half of TEs, and related terms such as “violence,” “damage,” “hurtful”/“hurting,” and “dangerous” were used to describe schooling experiences. TEs categorized harm as occurring at multiple levels and emphasized the interplay between institutional harm and interpersonal harm. This naming operated as a coping strategy because it provided a humanizing view of both White people and people of color in a way that pushed against dehumanizing cultural norms of the logic of White supremacy.

Some TEs focused this description of harm on the impact and violence of White supremacy toward students and communities of color. Other TEs also extended their articulation of violence and harm to an explanation of how White supremacy harms everyone, including White people. Haley explained that she views her work as fighting alongside her White TCs against the violence of a White supremacist system. This orientation toward her students and the impact of the system of White supremacy informed her ability to take a more asset-based view toward White TCs. She said, “[I know I must] brace myself for potential pushback” from TCs, but “[I know] that this is what it’s going to take if I want to develop my students’ socio-political consciousness” (Interview #1). For Haley, even resistant White students are also both hurt by and, she hopes, fighting against the violence of a White supremacist system:

I think that yes, there is resistance [from some White teachers], but I think that I try to frame it for my students—maybe for myself first and then for my students—as, instead of me seeing this as you being a resistant person, I try to frame it as, we’re all in this together to figure out how to fix this racism problem. We’ve all been affected by it, and it has all hurt us in different ways—even White folks, right? So if I get you to believe that racism hurts everyone,
through readings, through conversations, through looking at different data, looking at different pieces—then we’re all fighting this fight. Even though it’s hurting me differently than it’s hurting you, it’s still hurting us in different ways. And so how can we instead all figure out this thing together? And so now I’m no longer fighting you, the resistant student, I’m fighting how you are being affected by this structure. . . . I also think that I’m constantly thinking about the students that they’re going to eventually interact with. And so I think my asset-based thinking is also rooted in my urgency for the experiences that the children in my students’ classroom are going to have. (Focus Group)

Nick also was quite explicit in naming White supremacy as something that affects White people too. Nick explained that teaching about the violent implications of Whiteness for White people was important in his class. He explained,

We have all these White teachers then, who think that to get smarter about race is to get smarter about people of color, right? . . . The real problem is they have to get smarter about themselves . . . and they have to get smarter about the system that we’re in. And so in some ways I’m just doing something very obvious. I’m saying racism is a White problem, and White people take up a social role in our society, and that social role gives them benefits, and it damages them. It really, it hurts, it hurts White people to do this, both on a dehumanization level—that it dehumanizes you to participate in violence against other people—but this system also is not set up actually for most White people either. (Interview #1)

This orientation toward a White supremacist system was significant in not positioning White people and people of color as being in opposition, and in not positioning White people as always the oppressor, or only the oppressor. By framing Whiteness and White supremacy as a broadly oppressive and violent system, these TEs prepare their White teachers to understand their role, as Haley described it, as fighting together against this structure to support the students in their future classrooms. These two orientations together—understanding schools as sites of harm for students of color, and understanding schools as sites of harm for all students, including White students—provide a humanizing view of both White people and people of color in a way that pushes against dehumanizing cultural norms of the logic of White supremacy.
DISCUSSION

The findings in this study enrich our understanding of pedagogical decision-making in the context of teacher education about race and racism. Working simultaneously within and against injustice while aiming to support students in developing critical capacities will always be an aim of justice-oriented teaching and, thus, a core tension of this work. The work of these TEs demonstrates that pedagogical decision-making in teacher education must also consider the ways in which White supremacist institutions operate to inform TEs’ decisions. The logic of White supremacy frames a set of pedagogical tensions that are especially relevant for TEs whose core instructional aims for teachers are related to teaching about race and racism. Specifically, White supremacy is sustained through a logic of racialized power hierarchies, White ignorance and erasure, and dehumanization, and this logic manifests not only in IHEs as politicized institutions but also within individual classrooms. Leonardo (2004) described White domination as recreated through patterned and repeated actions, but just as White supremacy can be sustained through repeated actions, so too can it be resisted. The TEs in this study demonstrated that they balance these tensions in their practice through making principled decisions that take into consideration a framework of resistance and issues of temporality and individuality.

Teaching requires making decisions constantly, and all these decisions have equity implications for teachers and students. Before, during, and after instruction, educators must make choices about how to respond to their students. This study was an attempt to look closely at how TEs make pedagogical decisions and to zoom in on the role of White supremacist logics as a lens through which these educators examine and assess their own pedagogical choices. The TEs in this study grappled with emerging tensions related to racialized power in their own classrooms and raised questions about how to offer differentiated support for White TCs and TCs of color; they engaged with questions about the balance between critically engaging Whiteness while also elevating counternarratives in the curriculum; and, finally, they confronted TCs’ deficit ideologies and developed various coping strategies to manage their own emotions as they developed pedagogical approaches to challenge deficit thinking. Their experiences showed them weighing considerations such as temporality, physical space, and the needs of students as individuals and as a whole group. They faced challenges around notions of comfort and safety in making decisions about their students’ needs, and the tensions highlighted here recall ongoing debates in critical theories of race and Whiteness. Leonardo (2004) wrote,
As long as Whites ultimately feel a sense of comfort with racial analysis, they will not sympathize with the pain and discomfort they have unleashed on racial minorities for centuries. Solidarity between Whites and non-Whites will proceed at the reluctant pace of the White imagination. Insofar as White feelings of safety perpetuate a legacy of White refusal to engage racial domination, or acts of terror toward people of color, such discourses rearticulate the privilege that Whites already enjoy when they are able to evade confronting White supremacy. (p. 150)

This question of temporality—the “reluctant pace of the White imagination” against an urgency and “refusal to wait another day” (Dumas, 2018, p. 40)—remains a core tension in working to disrupt White supremacy. The TEs in this study demonstrated a willingness to engage with this and other tensions and also acknowledged that such tensions frequently remain unresolved. They described pedagogical strategies that they used to challenge White supremacist logics but also pointed out when these approaches had limitations or unintended consequences.

Furthermore, TEs’ narrated experiences underscored that the component logics of White supremacy are deeply interrelated. As TEs struggled to engage students or to know when to push against deficit ideologies, they also engaged questions about White ignorance at the same time; as they considered discursive power along racial lines in their classroom, they also had to consider the role of dehumanizing narratives and harm toward TCs of color as a potential issue in their classrooms. Broadly speaking, an unequal racial distribution of power is sustained through White ignorance and historical erasure, which creates the conditions to perpetuate dehumanization of people of color—and the cycle sustains itself. In other words, one of the core challenges of disrupting White supremacy is that its component functions are not easily isolated or identified; rather, they continue to mutually reinforce one another. Because White supremacy has been a historically continuous political system with self-sustaining mechanisms, one cannot necessarily identify concrete teaching practices that are quite clearly antiracist without considering how these practices fit into a broader sociopolitical system. All our instructional practices have consequences for individuals, for the class, and within a broader sociopolitical system. The TEs in this study demonstrated how important it is to have both deep racial knowledge and pedagogical knowledge to be able to make decisions that take these considerations into account.
IMPLICATIONS

As we seek to support teachers in learning about the role of race and racism in schools and to become agentic in disrupting forces of systemic inequality in schools, it is imperative that, as TEs, we can also reflect about how we ourselves engage in similar equity dilemmas within our own institutions. Like K–12 schools, institutions of higher education sustain inequality, and as practitioners within these institutions, we are constantly faced with decision points and dilemmas during which we can either resist or sustain the status quo—that is, resist or sustain White supremacy. This article demonstrated the ways that TEs in this study described their own pedagogical decision-making within their classrooms and how they viewed these decisions in relation to race, racism, and White supremacy. The experiences of these TEs provide some insight into how TEs experience and navigate the complex and multilayered forces of teacher education as a White supremacist institution.

Using the logic of White supremacy as a framework for analyzing the work of teaching underscores the interplay between classrooms and classroom context. Although much has been written about context as significant for teaching and learning, particularly as relates it to equity in education, more research is needed to explicate how social context informs teachers’ in-the-moment pedagogical decisions. Specifically, we need a research agenda that explicitly interrogates how educators navigate the dilemmas and tensions that arise when instructional goals related to equity come into conflict with the systems and structures that perpetuate racism and sustain White supremacist cultural norms. Although this study focused on the specific work of TEs, the types of tensions examined here are relatable for educators anywhere who seek to do justice-oriented work from within unjust educational systems.

It would be overly simplistic to suggest that teaching about racism from within White supremacist institutions is itself an antiracist act of resistance. Indeed, Dumas (2018) reminded us that “racial justice” work in education often is not designed to end injustice because “that is not what an antiblack society is interested in” (p. 31), and that ultimately, “the only thing that can affect Black freedom is the death of whiteness, the end of the Master” (p. 43). Still, despite critiques of gradualism and reformism from within, I believe we can move in the direction of revolutionary justice when we engage in the kind of authentic and critical reflection that we see from the practitioners in this study. TEs with a deep knowledge of White supremacy as a political system who use that knowledge not only to develop curricular goals for teaching about racism but also to critically reflect on pedagogy and positionality will continue to challenge these institutions in deeper
and more disruptive ways. I believe these findings have utility for TEs who, like Dumas, “imagine how we might bring this whole thing down, and rejoice in these possibilities” (p. 42) and who hope that this work generates radical action within the academy and among their teachers.

At the same time, we must also consider how this work is relevant for TEs who do not necessarily come to the work with a deep knowledge of White supremacy. Just as we aim to provide support and learning for TCs who are developing racial knowledge, and as we grapple with the challenges of engaging TCs who enter into teaching with different understandings of justice-oriented teaching, so too can we engage questions about the support and learning of TEs. This study focused on the tensions that exist for TEs with expertise in racial knowledge and an understanding of White supremacy, but future studies might explore how this logic of White supremacy exerts similar pressures and creates similar or different tensions as we look more broadly at teacher education. Such exploration would necessarily include research on the experiences, practices, and needs of TEs who lack such expertise; indeed, further research might grapple with questions about what “expertise” in justice-oriented teacher education even consists of. A second line of inquiry might look more closely at the differing needs of TCs along racial lines, with special attention paid to the needs of TCs of color. A growing body of research has begun to examine the experiences of TCs of color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; Gist, 2017; Philip et al., 2017), and this study affirms the need for more research that examines how the experiences of TCs of color might differ from their White peers. This study demonstrated some of the affordances and possibilities of comparative analysis of TEs’ experiences across institutions, and we can continue to think about broader applications of this theoretical framework to study the work of TEs.

The TEs in this study teach explicitly about racism, White supremacy, and managing pedagogical dilemmas related to equity, and there is a layered complexity to the way that they must draw distinctions—both in their own practitioner reflection and for their TCs—between their own teacher education pedagogy and the way they teach TCs to attempt to do similar work in their K–12 classrooms. In other words, as they offer explicit instruction to TCs on how to support critical consciousness raising for K–12 students and engage in equity advocacy in K–12 schools, they also model instruction in critical consciousness raising and engaging in equity advocacy in IHEs. These TEs demonstrate that critically reflective practice and navigating equity dilemmas are as important for TEs as they are for K–12 teachers who seek to resist racism and White supremacy in schools. Existing research tends to focus on the need to support teachers in this sort of critical reflection, and my recommendation would be to also
provide programmatic supports for TEs to engage in collaborative professional development in order to examine and discuss the role of White supremacist forces in teacher education programs. TEs who teach about race and racism have identified dilemmas at both the classroom level and the programmatic level that are related to the broader logic of White supremacy, and as a field, teacher education will benefit from more critical engagement with these issues.

The TEs in this study expressed a desire to disrupt the power and sustenance of White supremacy, described specific actions they take to engage in resistance from within White supremacist institutions, and yet also reflected critically about how their pedagogical decisions might be implicated in maintaining these very systems. These narratives offer important and nuanced representations of the pedagogical tensions that arise when working both within and against White supremacist institutions. This critical reflection, I think, is perhaps one of the best models for teachers of critical race praxis; it demonstrates the kind of critical wrestling with equity dilemmas that, as one participant described it, shows that we are not perfect, but aware. It is reminiscent of the tension in acknowledging Bell’s (1993) theory of racial realism and his call to accept both the “futility of action” and conviction that “something must be done” (p. 587); that is, working within and against White supremacist institutions is, of course, inherently tense. The findings here demonstrate that an open engagement with these tensions through critical reflection can be productive for teacher educators.

NOTES

1. One well-known articulation of this phenomenon is DuBois’s Black Reconstruction in America (1935), in which he outlined the role of access to property, political power, and material resources in shaping Black–White relations in the post-Civil War era.

2. Patel (2015) wrote, “Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) display ideologies of diversity explicitly and also manifest less seemly logics of capitalism, entitlement, and status. College campuses are not unique in these displays, but they offer a productive focus precisely because of their visible position in the nation’s discourses of meritocracy, upward mobility, and multiculturalism. In other words, education is and represents property, and more specifically in the U.S., white property” (p. 658). Patel argued that a core characteristic of Whiteness as property is that stratified property rights are “protected for whites and inaccessible to people of color” (p. 660).

3. Gibbons’s (2018) five refusals of White supremacy are: “(1) First, refusing to acknowledge much less reckon with the depths of violence inflicted upon body, mind, and soul. (2) Second, clinging to the privileges emerging from
a racialized hierarchy and blocking the voices that call into question those privileges, which are also defined by class and gender. (3) Third, evading the weight of history instead of actively coming to terms with the different ways in which our past continues into the present. (4) Fourth, denying responsibility for white supremacy’s spatial consequences, where a refusal to share space and resources deepens inequalities and maintains both white ignorance and dominance. (5) Fifth, refusing to get down to roots—to acknowledge structure and grapple with the exploitative nature of capitalism and the centrality of racial logics in capitalist development that has ensured the longevity of both economic exploitation and racism” (p. 733).


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LISETTE ENUMAH is currently an independent researcher and consultant. Her research interests include teacher education about race and racism, racial equity in schooling, and professional support for teachers and teacher educators of color. Her most recent publications include “Interpretive frames for responding to racially stressful moments in history discussions” in Theory & Research in Social Education (2020) and “Using video to highlight curriculum-embedded opportunities for student discourse” in Journal of Teacher Education (2020).