

“We Always Talk About Race”: Navigating Race Talk Dilemmas in the Teaching of Literature

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas

University of Pennsylvania

There is considerable confusion in contemporary society when it comes to talking about race. Because of this confusion, race talk in schools can be fraught with difficulty, leading to problematic conversations, disconnections, and ultimately student disengagement. While studies in psychology, sociology, and linguistics have considered the role of race in discourse, there have been fewer of these investigations in English education, especially research on the teaching of literature. This article looks closely at the classroom talk of two veteran English teachers—one an African American man, the other a White woman—in a racially diverse high school, showing how teachers employ different strategies to navigate similarly fraught conversations. Taking an interactional ethnographic approach, I demonstrate ways that conversations about race that emerged from literature units in both classrooms opened up opportunities for some students to participate, while constraining and excluding others. The results of the study revealed that the two teachers navigated these dilemmas through tactical and strategic temporary alignments of actions and discourse, but in both classes, silence and evasion characterized moments of racial tension. As a growing number of researchers and teacher educators provide workshops and materials for teachers interested in classroom discourse studies, supporting new and experienced teachers’ investigations in this area may ultimately prove fruitful not only for teaching and learning, but also for race relations.

A decade ago, Allan Luke described English education as a primary curricular space for “political interventions, struggles over the formation of ideologies and beliefs, identities and capital” (2004, p. 86). One such political intervention, desperately needed in contemporary American life, involves racial equity. Numerous literary texts provide opportunity for dialogue about race in our society. Novels like Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, plays like Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the work of poets like Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou have been part of high school English curricula in many districts and states for nearly a generation. Reading literature that wrestles with both the history of race in the United States and contemporary race relations encourages a critical view of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), with the ultimate intent of creating ethical and literate citizens (Alsup et al., 2006). Because conversations about race in literature index and mirror conversations about race in our society

(Anagnostopoulos, Everett, & Carey, 2013), they can be fraught with difficulty. Such conversations can further lead to disconnections and ultimately disengagement from talk about race, whether in text or society.

In English classroom interactions, race talk dilemmas arise as teachers and students wrestle with the narratives they are studying, and as they talk and write about those narratives. Yet there is limited research about *how* everyday classroom teachers handle conflicts and disconnections about race that emerge from English curricular content and classroom discussions. It is only after we, as researchers, know more about how teachers currently handle such conflicts—documenting their successes and their failures—that we can develop tools to help them navigate conflicts around race in the future.

To examine how English teachers handle race talk dilemmas that arise while teaching literature, this article looks closely at the classroom discourses of two veteran English teachers—one a Black man, the other a White woman¹—in a racially diverse high school, showing how teachers employ different strategies to navigate similarly fraught conversations. My research led me to the following questions:

- What are teachers' linguistic strategies and tactics for handling race talk dilemmas that arise during the teaching of literature?
- What challenges do teachers confront while attempting to navigate these dilemmas? How do they attempt to resolve the challenges?

Race Talk Dilemmas in the Teaching of Literature

The novelist Toni Morrison (1992) noted some time ago that “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (p. 9). Discursive silence and evasion can encode race without naming it, thereby circumventing debate. Morrison (1992) further observed that this “habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (pp. 9–10). More than two decades later, discourses about race remain problematic in literature, schools, and society. In everyday classroom interaction, teachers and students evaluate characterization, plot, setting, theme, authorial style, and the nature of story conflicts, empathizing with or critiquing characters' actions and comparing them with the choices they would have made (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013, p. 25), concomitantly developing social, cultural, and political attitudes in students alongside the teaching of reading and writing, and forming shared ethical positions around the most pressing contemporary issues (Christie, 1999; Christie & Macken-Horarik, 2007). Because this aspect of teaching literature is implicit rather than explicitly stated, race talk dilemmas may surface for teachers while they are engaged in literary instruction.

My definition of race talk dilemmas—moments in conversations about race that have the potential for conflict—is derived from educational anthropologist Mica Pollock (2004). In her ethnographic study of a racially diverse high school in California, Pollock examined *when* and *how* race mattered—in other words, when and how people at the school described race, when and how they avoided such

descriptions, and the ways in which participants in her study built racial orders at their school through their careful use and avoidance of racial descriptions. These labels, contestations, and silences indicated dilemmas in speaking about race, particularly when racial inequities were noticed. Pollock (2004) identified six paradoxes that were evident when teachers and students talked about race: (a) people do *and* do not belong to simple racial categorizations; (b) race does *and* does not matter; (c) the de-raced words people use when discussing plans for racial equality can actually keep them from discussing ways to make opportunities racially equal; (d) the more complex inequality seems to get, the more simplistic inequality analysis seems to become; (e) the questions people ask most about race are the very questions they most suppress; and (f) although talking in racial terms can make race matter, not talking in racial terms can make race matter, too (p. vi). I engage more fully with two of these paradoxes later in this article as I discuss my findings.

While studies in psychology, sociology, and linguistics have taken up dilemmas in race talk and interaction, there have been fewer of these investigations in English education, especially with the teaching of literature as the focus. However, existing research does reveal that race and racial formation matter in English classrooms, *whether or not race is explicitly named*. For example, Rex (2006) analyzed discourse in three high school English classrooms where White and African American teachers shaped classroom talk to build social communities that fostered teaching and learning, finding that while the perception and handling of tension during racially charged moments varied from teacher to teacher, “conflicts . . . were avoided in racially tense situations and emerged in racially neutral ones” (p. 305). In a later study, Skerrett (2011) interviewed English teachers at racially diverse secondary schools in Massachusetts and Ontario to better understand their approaches to racial literacy instruction. Defining racial literacy as teaching “an understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups” (Skerrett, 2011, p. 314), Skerrett described teachers’ approaches to talking about race as falling into one of three categories: (a) apprehensive and authorized, (b) incidental and ill-informed, or (c) sustained and strategic. These approaches reflected teachers’ respective experiences of discomfort and uncertainty in teaching racial topics they perceived as controversial as well as their perception of the significance and appropriateness of talking about race with their students.

Surfacing the complexity of race talk during the teaching of literature is in itself a complex endeavor. Race and racialization depend on context, and thus, the repertoires of teachers and students adept at negotiating race are quite varied and defy easy categorization. Studies that examine discourse conflicts between teachers and students, and between and among students, have shown that students position themselves agentively in classrooms (Candela, 1999; Jackson, 2003; Mirón & Lauria, 1998; Park, 2008). When discussing literature, students may say things to each other that are inaccurate, intolerant, or offensive, leading to disagreement and heightened emotions (Juzwik et al., 2013, p. 124). Furthermore, race talk is often perceived as jeopardizing participants’ safety and comfort (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). This perception can lead to problematic labels,

contestations, and silences during classroom discussions.

Whether or not students and teachers attempt to avoid conversations about race, however, race is inescapable. Pollock (2004) concluded her study by calling for framing conversations about race with “honest, critically conscious discussion of race talk itself and its dilemmas” (p. 218), as surfacing these dilemmas may provide insight into how to move toward more critically conscious and inclusive classroom discourse. Dilemmas that lead to conflict in classroom discussions have been observed by others researching language in education (Cazden, 2001; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 2003; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1997). In discourse studies, the interactional ethnographic work of Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon, and Green (2001) has been influential in helping researchers and educators understand how dilemmas in classroom talk are negotiated by examining how relationships among members of a social group are constructed in and through moment-by-moment interactions, how these interactions are negotiated, and how the outcomes of an interaction are connected to subsequent events (p. 357). This study is intended to add to these bodies of literature, focusing on race talk dilemmas as opportunities for students and teachers alike to grapple with issues of race in US society while also recognizing that those same dilemmas may derail teaching and learning. Peering into the classrooms of experienced teachers as they navigate the “fraughtness” of these dilemmas across racial differences may help in imagining how to engage all students—even during the most contentious conversations.

Context of the Study: Rainfield High School

Rainfield is a large comprehensive high school (grades 9–12) in a medium-sized Midwestern city, Rainfield Township. During the academic year of the study, the student body was 63.2% White, 13.4% African American, 10.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 12.6% “Other,” a supercategory that included students not classified into separate racial categories by the district.² Boys were 52.2% of the student body, while girls were 47.8%.

I first became interested in understanding discourse conflicts in English teaching as one of the few African American teachers at Rainfield. Several years later, I returned to the school as a researcher and consultant, convening a series of professional development workshops for 9th- and 10th-grade English teachers and inviting seven participants to learn about discourse analysis while recording one of their classes over the course of a semester. Each teacher in the group selected a conflict-laden moment from their audio or video data to analyze, and then reflected with me about what they had learned. While the resulting research report recounted case studies of these seven teachers as they learned how to analyze their own and their colleagues’ classroom talk (Thomas, 2010), their engagement with issues of race, difference, and race talk dilemmas during literature instruction emerged as a salient concern during the study. As practitioner-researchers, the teachers inquired into their own practice and shared stories about how to handle these difficult moments with each other and with me through the iterative questioning process of interactional ethnography.

Participants' Cases: Anthony Bell and Ella Daniel

In order to investigate how teachers navigated race talk dilemmas during their classroom instruction, I focused on two of the seven participants from the larger study. Anthony Bell and Ella Daniel were both experienced and respected teachers within the English department at Rainfield. Anthony Bell, an African American man, had been teaching at Rainfield for almost 10 years. His colleague Ella Daniel was White, a self-proclaimed "child of the sixties," and had been teaching English in Rainfield Township schools for over 30 years. Both teachers had been assigned 10th-grade English classes on the lowest track (known colloquially at Rainfield as "10th regular"), which they subsequently selected as their focal group for the study. While 10th regular was Anthony's usual teaching assignment, Ella was most often assigned to the honors and Advanced Placement track. I focus on Anthony and Ella in this article in order to examine how teachers from different backgrounds take up Pollock's (2004) call for "honest, critically conscious discussion of race talk . . . and its dilemmas" within their classroom contexts (p. 218).

Data Selection and Analysis

The data for this study is derived from the larger interactional ethnographic project described above. In that study, I took a directed content analysis approach to data collection and selection, co-selecting with teachers participating in the discourse analysis group specific lessons that highlighted their self-reported dilemmas of practice (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Since the purpose of directed content analysis is to validate or extend an existing theory or theoretical framework (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281), I found this to be the best approach to researching race talk dilemmas alongside my participants as they engaged in teacher research for their own purposes. The classroom videos of the two lessons that I explore below were part of a much larger corpus of videos and audio files from the professional development workshops, classroom periods of focus, interviews, and retrospective video analyses used in the earlier study. In addition to the two classroom videos (each approximately one hour in length), I also drew on study group transcripts in which Anthony and Ella discussed these lessons with their teacher colleagues, and interviews that I conducted with both teachers.

While interactional ethnography guided my logic of inquiry and helped me understand Anthony's and Ella's strategies for handling conflict over time, to better understand moment-by-moment interaction during specific moments of conflict, I turned to discourse analysis. As Omi and Winant (1986) have suggested, "the racial order is organized and enforced by the continuity and reciprocity between micro level and macro level social relations" (p. 67); thus, analysis of the ways teachers and students negotiate their racial statuses, roles, and identities in situ is useful for understanding ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988).

After identifying and transcribing the lessons that Anthony and Ella identified as their most challenging conversations about race that semester, I used Martin and Rose's (2003, 2007) appraisal analysis framework to code the language used

by each teacher and his or her students. Appraisal analyses are concerned with evaluating the kinds of feelings that are being negotiated in a spoken or written text, the strength of the feelings that are being negotiated, the intertexts from which the feelings are derived, and how listeners and readers are aligned through language (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 26). From Martin and Rose's extensive appraisal framework, I focus on what they refer to as the *language of judgment*, because of my interest in how teachers and students in each classroom evaluated the role of race during these lessons. According to Martin and Rose, speakers and writers use the evaluative words and phrases of judgment to state how they feel about certain people, places, things, and ideas. They also use similar words and phrases to talk about how people in a society *ought to* feel. In other words, by looking for the language of judgment, what is being valued and what is being sanctioned in a text may surface. As students and teachers engage in complex negotiations during moment-by-moment classroom interaction, they are recontextualizing the ethics, norms, and values of our society specifically for the pedagogic space (Christie, 1999, p. 158). This recontextualization presents in two different registers of classroom discourse: *instructional*, which is talk primarily focused on the teaching of specific curricular skills, and *regulative*, which is talk primarily focused on keeping order, maintaining relationships, and forming identity (Christie, 1999, p. 159). Race talk dilemmas can arise in either register, or both.

When race in literature is foregrounded in a classroom conversation, the discourse among students and teachers is not solely focused on the literary text. Taken together, both instructional and regulative discourses provide information about how students are expected to think about race within an English class, in their interpersonal relationships, and ultimately, in relationship to the self—for better or for worse. The excerpts selected represent moments when a race talk dilemma could have potentially derailed instruction but did not because of discursive moves that Anthony, Ella, and their respective students made. Places where Anthony, Ella, and their students were using words and phrases to specifically judge and evaluate race are indicated by a different font.

Once I located where teachers and students were judging the role of race, either in the literature under study or more generally, I examined my codes to determine whether the judgment was occurring during instructional or regulative talk—in other words, whether the teachers and students were talking about the book, about students' behavior, or about the larger society. In some cases, because of the ways that pronouns were being used, this is not clear. This discursive blending between judging instructional talk about race and judging regulative talk about race is not surprising, since discourse during the teaching of literature generally mirrors the ethical concerns of the larger society (Christie, 1999). Therefore, I have coded Anthony's and Ella's instructional and regulative discourse. Regulative talk is shaded in gray, instructional talk is unshaded, and talk that seems to serve both functions is both shaded and underlined.

The two novels that were discussed during the teacher-selected lessons were autobiographical memoirs, in keeping with the 10th-regular curriculum: James

McBride's (1998) *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* in Anthony's class, and LouAnne Johnson's *Dangerous Minds* in Ella's class. *The Color of Water* is a biracial man's reflections on growing up with a White mother. *Dangerous Minds* recounts a White teacher's experiences working in an under-resourced, predominantly African American urban high school. Both books led students in Anthony's and Ella's classes to bring up race. Ella's students pointed out the presence of "the n-word" in *Dangerous Minds*, while Anthony's students complained that they were "tired of reading books about race." In the study group, both teachers identified the reactions of their students as potentially conflict-laden, and they used both instructional and regulative discourses to navigate these dilemmas.

Findings

Anthony Bell and Ella Daniel navigated the race talk dilemmas that emerged in their classrooms in different ways, as I detail in the following sections.

Anthony's Race Talk Dilemma: Race Does (and Does Not) Matter, Because People Do (and Do Not) Belong to Simple Racial Categories

For the last unit of the school year, Anthony decided to have his class select a novel to read together. The students' task was to review district-mandated and supplementary lists for 10th grade, research and discuss each book, and argue for their choice; the class voted on which book to read. Anthony had strong opinions about the books his students might choose, and he used his role as facilitator to steer the conversations in ways that made students argue for the books he thought the entire class should read. One such book was *The Color of Water*, which Anthony introduced by aligning the book's author with current events and with the identities and social subjectivities of students in the classroom. Students moved from vocally expressing reluctance to read the book to actively listening and nodding as Anthony presented his case.

In the following excerpt, Anthony talked at length about the contemporary ethical and moral significance of *The Color of Water*. Because Anthony's objective for this lesson was for the students to form consensus about the literature and themes to be studied before collectively selecting a whole-class novel, he modeled his ethical position on each book for his students, drawing upon their lived experiences and navigating a matter that had been conflict-laden for the students in his class in the past: multiracial and multiethnic identity. The blending of the instructional and the regulative registers, and the use of judgment, is indicative of the race talk dilemma with which Anthony wrestled in this lesson: How might a Black teacher name race and state its importance if his students were reluctant to talk about it?

Excerpt 1a: Anthony Bell's Third-Hour Class, Curriculum Initiation, Student Reading Choice Pre-unit

Participants

Anthony – Black male teacher

Maya – Black female student

Randy – White male student

Joe – White male student

Javon – Black male student

1. ANTHONY: Can I tell you about some books that I like? Very briefly. Uh . . . how many of you . . . (*Lifts a copy of the book list over his head.*) A teacher next door, Ms. Parker, she . . . (*Puts arms down; turns toward desk.*) A couple of years ago, I heard these kids talking about this book called *The Color of Water*. And the title immediately got my attention.
2. MAYA: We read it.
3. ANTHONY: Yeah, I actually read it.
4. MAYA: I read what you're talking about. Last year.
5. ANTHONY: And the thing . . . about the book is . . . (*looks up at the ceiling*) I want to steer away from that a little bit, 'cause you guys talk about, (*in a teasing voice*) "We always read books about race. We're always reading books about race. I'm tired of this."
6. SEVERAL STUDENTS: (*indistinguishable chattering and whispers*)
7. ANTHONY: Heard a student tell me that . . .
8. SEVERAL STUDENTS: (*continuing indistinguishable chattering and whispers*)
9. ANTHONY: (*Raises his voice.*) Heard a student tell me that yesterday.
10. RANDY: I don't want to read it.
11. ANTHONY: This book . . . *definitely* deals with some racial issues.
12. RANDY: I don't want to read it.
13. ANTHONY: But it's KIND OF . . . a different spin.
(*Students stop talking. The classroom is now quiet.*)

Here, Anthony was regulating classroom talk through tactical use of direct questions and commands, using personal pronouns, and ventriloquizing his students' past judgments about the 10th-regular curriculum ("We always read books about race," Line 5). While it was untrue that students in Anthony's classes were *always* reading books about race, studies show participants can perceive cross-racial dialogues as uncomfortable or even dangerous (DiAngelo & Sensory, 2014; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Consequently, Anthony's opening discourse was indirectly regulative: "Can I tell you about some books that I like? Very briefly" (Line 1). He then broached the possibility of the class reading *The Color of Water* by acknowledging his students' professed racial fatigue, using a personal narrative about his experiences reading the book. Despite these strategic moves to start the conversation, one of Anthony's White students, Randy, stated aloud that he didn't want to read the book. However, Anthony threw a curve ball in response: "It's kind of a different spin" (Line 13). This quieted the class so that Anthony could make his pitch.

Excerpt 1b: Anthony Bell's Third-Hour Class, Curriculum Initiation, Student Reading Choice Pre-unit

13. ANTHONY: But it's KIND OF . . . a different spin. (*Students stop talking. The classroom is now quiet.*) Because it talks about an interracial family . . .
14. RANDY: (*murmurs, inaudible to camera*)
15. ANTHONY: . . . trying to get along.
- 15a. And I know we definitely have some biracial kids and the struggles they go through in society, and what it means for a Black man to date a White woman, and how she goes about raising her kids. It's amazing! It really helped me see things because I taught African American lit a number of years ago. What interracial students go through. What their struggle is. Is Obama Black? Is he White? What is he? Huh?
- 15b. (*Turns to the left, looks in the direction of a student and lowers his voice while the class remains silent.*) Desiree, put that up before I lose my mind. (*Turns back to the entire class and raises his voice again.*)
- 15c. Can he really understand what it's like to be an African American, especially when he was brought up in a different country?

After the mention of the book's "interracial family" in Line 13, Anthony began to blend instructional and regulative discourses, providing information about the main theme in *The Color of Water* while also demonstrating why his students should value the topics of this story. He immediately drew parallels between the novel and particular students in the class—"I know we definitely have some biracial kids" (Line 15a). In order to warrant his judgment that McBride offers "kind of a different spin" (Line 13), Anthony turned to the specific case of one of the most visible biracial persons in the nation at the time of the study, then—Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama. Anthony's questions about Obama were rhetorical; the class remained silent. His references to Obama's and McBride's backgrounds were both instructional and regulative. Both were related to the topic under discussion—implicit in each reference was the fact that both Obama and McBride are biracial people with White mothers and Black fathers. Whether the "struggles" he referred to were those of the book characters or his students was ambiguous. However, this reference was also regulative, as Anthony demanded interactive engagement from his students through the series of rhetorical questions.

During this segment, Anthony was clearly navigating dilemmatic race talk with his students, defusing at least three potential interactive conflicts. First, several students seemed to be agitated about the prospect of reading another book about race. Randy insisted that he did not want to read the novel, and repeated this assertion (Lines 10, 12). Later in the segment, Desiree was distracted by something at her desk (Line 15b). In these potential conflicts, there is some evidence that perhaps not all the students agreed with Anthony during this conversation. The statement of disagreement and off-task behavior can be interpreted as explicit and implicit lack of alignment (Candela, 1999). A shared ethical position about race

had not been achieved (Christie, 1999), and students were willing to let Anthony know it, although most were not speaking up. Thus, Anthony faced a dilemma—he wanted to value the interests and perspectives of his students but had planned this lesson specifically to explain the value of texts that he believed were important for them to read.

Anthony defused each potential conflict while he was talking specifically about race. First, he stopped the chatter about the book by ventriloquizing students' previous opinions on "books about race" (Line 5); then, he acknowledged that *The Color of Water* dealt with racial issues (Line 11), and raised his voice slightly to get students' attention (Line 13). Anthony did not directly address Randy, but instead began explaining the novel's significance. Yet later in the segment, when the entire class except for Desiree was quietly listening to him, he addressed her by name and commanded her to stop her behavior (Line 15b). Despite these potential tensions, classroom instruction proceeded without interruption. Students did not respond negatively to Anthony's mimicking of student voices, raising his voice in the classroom, or correcting a student in front of her peers, suggesting that a classroom environment existed wherein students did not perceive his responses to their actions and discourse as threatening. As long as the focus remained on race, students remained quiet. But when Anthony switched to talking about poverty and socioeconomic class, which are issues also raised in *The Color of Water*, students were much more vocal in their objections.

Excerpt 1c: Anthony Bell's Third-Hour Class, Curriculum Initiation, Student Reading Choice Pre-unit

- 15D. ANTHONY: If you're rich African American (*raises hands*) can you understand what it's like to be middle-class (*lowers hands*), what it's like to be poor?
- 15E. Or like some of my students in my class this year say, "I'm from the hood!" or "I'm from the ghetto!" because they come from South Walnut or North Walnut . . . and I laugh at 'em. (*Students laugh; Randy exclaims, "What's up!"*) Doggone luxury apartment complex, are you kidding me? You have no idea what real poverty is. What I mean is, are you going to eat at least one meal today?
16. MAYA: (*shaking her head*) But you can't say that about everyone, Mr. Bell.
17. ANTHONY: You know, I take that . . . I take that back.
18. MAYA: You don't know everyone.
19. JOE (to Maya): The *majority*.
20. ANTHONY: I take that back. But the whole thing is, I don't see any of you . . . how . . . don't even raise your hand . . . (*points around the class*) how many of you know what it's like to miss a meal? And I'm not talking about because of some fad diet. Or I'm not talking about because of a wrestling meet. Or you *have* to work because your family needs the money to pay rent?

21. RANDY: I do.
22. MAYA: *I've* missed a meal.
23. ANTHONY: Huh? You missed a meal? Was it because you couldn't afford a meal, or because you couldn't make it to your most convenient restaurant?
24. MAYA: No, because we didn't have enough money to pay for, like, meals, or have meals like three times a day.
25. ANTHONY: All right, OK. I'll take that. You did eat at least once a day. . . .
26. JAVON: Butter bread! (*Students laugh.*)
27. ANTHONY: You guys are laughing, but I'm dead serious. . . .
28. MAYA: (*giggling*) No, we're laughing because you're being . . .
29. RANDY: . . . being too *creative*.
30. ANTHONY: That's right. I don't know what your background is. That's fair. (*indistinguishable chattering*) Speak up, Javon.
31. JAVON: I'm just saying, you gotta . . . some people, they just don't want to become conscious of that. They don't care. They're not like that, so.
32. ANTHONY: I feel you one hundred percent. In other words, Tupac says, "I gotta get mine, you gotta get yours," right? (*Javon nods.*) I can only worry about me, I can't worry about anybody else.
33. RANDY: Yep.
34. ANTHONY: Back to what I was saying. Let me get back to my point. You with me? You never understand what it's like . . . Maya . . . until you walk in someone else's shoes. *The Color of Water*, this book gives a realistic portrayal, at least to me. It really opened my eyes. I would really like to read that. But like I said, it's your choice. (*Points to a student off camera.*) I see you over there reading! So that's *The Color of Water*. What's next?

The moment Anthony's teacher-talk stopped focusing solely on race and moved to socioeconomic class, two significant changes occurred. First, Anthony was immediately countered by his most vocal female student, Maya, who challenged the limits of his knowledge of students' lives (Lines 16, 18). Although Joe defended his teacher, Anthony immediately repaired the interaction with Maya, who was the only Black female student in the class, telling her "I take that back" several times. Notably, when the conversation moved away from judging themes found in *The Color of Water* (interracial marriage and children), the experiences of famous figures (James McBride, Barack Obama), and whether rich African Americans could relate to poor ones, and toward students at Rainfield, students immediately spoke up after listening quietly. Maya and Randy responded to Anthony's judgments of students by judging *him*—they questioned his knowledge of their socioeconomic statuses, and said that he was "being creative" with his storytelling. It is also notable that while most of the time the African American boys in the class did not speak much, Javon spoke up then, responding to Anthony's discourse about some students joking about being from the 'hood: "They just don't want to become conscious of that. They don't care" (Line 31). It is interesting that Javon judged

his peers' jokes about poverty by evaluating them and their motives. In response, Anthony code-switched ("I feel you," Line 32) and quoted hip-hop icon Tupac Shakur, eliciting a nod from Javon, and verbal affirmation from Randy. Anthony then used the turn toward real life to bring his pitch for *The Color of Water* home: "This book gives a realistic portrayal. . . . It really opened my eyes" (Line 34). After reassuring the class that the choice would ultimately be theirs, he moved on to talk about the next book on the list.

Anthony's conversation with his students illustrates a dilemma: race does (and does not) matter because people do (and do not) belong to simple racial categories. In the first part of the transcript, Anthony's discourse indexed multiple racial labels: *biracial kids*, *Black man*, *White woman*, *Black*, *White*, *African American*. Then he immediately asked the students a series of rhetorical questions about which racial category Barack Obama belongs in, even questioning the significance of his international upbringing. Yet Anthony did not acknowledge the complexity or the socially constructed nature of such categorizations. Once the conversation turned to a discussion of socioeconomic class in Rainfield Township, and students pushed back against his perceptions of their experiences with poverty, Anthony seemed reluctant to engage with the intersections of race, class, and gender (Brown, 2011; Crenshaw, 1989), even initially expressing disbelief that Maya could have known hunger. Although Anthony's stated goal in this lesson was to open up the curriculum so that students could choose a text to read together, close analysis of the conversation shows several missed opportunities to add nuance to simplified racial categories.

Anthony later told me that his goal for exploring the themes of multiple texts in class was to get his students more interested in reading. He explained that if he raised awareness "that the book is out there," some students would be likely to read it on their own. Yet it was unclear whether Anthony recognized his own race talk dilemmas when it came to labeling and categorizing James McBride, Barack Obama, and the multiracial students of African descent in his classroom. I also wondered whether the exchange with Maya helped Anthony become more critically conscious about the kind of suburban poverty that existed in Rainfield Township. Although his students chose to read Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Anthony reported that he was glad to have exposed them to a number of different titles, and would invite future classes to engage in the same book selection process. In the end, however, Anthony's students did not choose the book that Anthony advocated for during this lesson; instead, they chose a novel that does not discuss race in any meaningful way. Therefore, even though he positioned *The Color of Water* as "kind of a different spin," negotiating a shared ethical position with his students around naming race and class proved challenging for Anthony during that literary lesson.

Ella's Race Talk Dilemma: Although Talking in Racial Terms Can Make Race Matter, Not Talking in Racial Terms Can Make Race Matter, Too

Down the hall, Ella and her students were starting to tackle *Dangerous Minds* when one of her students quietly drew attention to "some bad words in there." The "bad

word” in question was *nigger*, one of the most racially charged words in American English. Through her facilitation of the subsequent conversation, Ella helped her students understand the rationale for the shared ethical position that educated people in the United States were expected to hold about “that word.” All of the students were careful in their approach; one ventriloquized Ella’s perspectives on the word, but none of the students of color spoke at length. The ways that Ella sidestepped conversations about “the n-word” and avoided saying it were both strategic and tactical, but ultimately led to dilemmatic racial talk.

Ella first invited me into her classroom as she began her unit on *Dangerous Minds*. This was the first day that Ella and her students had talked about the book as a class, so they were in the process of establishing consensus on the general themes before engaging in close reading. While elsewhere I have analyzed this lesson for its cultural responsiveness (Thomas, 2013), here, I include it as another way that teachers handle race talk dilemmas—this one sparked by a single word. Building on previous analyses, it is evident that attempting to find common ground in determining who should be able to say “the n-word” was ideologically dilemmatic for Ella and her students (Billig et al., 1988). Even before the racial differences between Ella and her students are taken into account, the asymmetrical distribution and circulation of power in classrooms must be considered. Thus, Ella was faced with a difficult dilemma: How might a White teacher respond to her student’s observation that “there are some bad words” in the book, particularly since the bad word in question was one of the most historically charged and currently controversial words in American English?

Excerpt 2a: Transcript, Ella Daniel’s First-Hour Class, Curriculum Initiation Phase, Dangerous Minds Literature Unit

Participants

Ella – White female teacher

Kidada – Multiracial female student

Ryan – White male student

Serena – White female student

Omar – African American male student

1. KIDADA: Oh. When I was reading, I was noticing that there are like really bad words in there.
2. ELLA: Oh yeah, right! Some “bad words in there.” Which maybe means that we should jump right to number . . . (looks at handout) 11, because that’s the first bad word at least that comes to my mind.
3. UNIDENTIFIED MALE STUDENT (OFF CAMERA): Oh God.
4. ELLA: She uses the n-word in the book, on page 28, I think is the first time. So does anybody have some comments on that? Why would she use the n-word? Should she? Should she not use the n-word? I’m just throwing it in there to spice things up (Students are quiet.) Ted? Ryan? Your

- lips are moving back there.
5. RYAN: She's using it as a sentence enhancer.
 6. ELLA: As a sentence enhancer?
(*A few students laugh.*)
 7. ELLA: Okay. Boy. That's good. What does that mean?
 8. RYAN: She's . . . she's using it because she *wants* to use it. Technically, that's not the first time they use a *bad word* in there.
 9. ELLA: Okay, you say these are bad, supposedly bad kids. . . .
 10. RYAN: Supposedly bad kids.
 11. ELLA: And not the first time she's used a bad word there. So it's a sentence enhancer, really used to accurately portray her character. Right? That these are the words that the characters would use. Any other comments? Yeah, Serena?
 12. SERENA: She's using it to prove a point. Like, if they don't want her to say it, then she doesn't want to hear it back from them. Because she heard people going back and forth, calling each other names, and she was trying to figure out what to do.
 13. ELLA: Okay. You said something . . . if they don't want her to use it?
 14. SERENA: Or like, if she's trying to prove a point that she doesn't want to hear that stuff in her class, then she would show them how it sounds to her. . . .
 15. ELLA: Okay. How did it sound to her? Why don't we go to that page? And that could be helpful. Because you see, one of the things she says about it is that "it erases someone's face." (*flips through the book*) Page 12 . . . is that what you're talking about? Serena, when she explains how it sounds to her, and then Mac, if there's something else?
 16. SERENA: Well . . . on page 28, like . . . yeah . . . they're yelling at each other.
 17. ELLA: Serena, could you try to speak up, please?
 18. SERENA: Um, sorry.
 19. ELLA: I'm old and hard of hearing. Yes?
 20. SERENA: They keep going back and forth with each other, and she says she doesn't want to hear it, and Stacy says that Black people can call each other that, and she's saying that she doesn't want to hear it. She's trying to say that if I said it, then how would you guys feel about it? If I said it—meaning, White—how would you feel? She's hearing it from you guys, and it's disrespectful.

In the excerpt above, *nigger* was quickly evaluated, judged, and sanctioned by Ella and her students as "the n-word," "that word," "some bad words in there," and "the first bad word" that could "spice things up." When one of her students mentioned "some bad words in there," Ella was well prepared, and that preparation was evident in her regulative discourse. When Kidada first pointed out the word, Ella immediately directed the students to answer a related question on the

handout, “number 11” (Line 2) and mentioned “page 28” a few moments later (Line 4). Therefore, a lesson that was presented as exploratory and shared was also premeditated and strategic (Erickson, 2004), a feature of the regulative discourse of English teachers who have developed strategies for racial literacy instruction (Skerrett, 2011).

Ella did not completely avoid talking about the presence of the word in the text; she and her students engaged with it within the context of the novel. They did not say *nigger*, instead choosing to use other words and phrases (like “the n-word”) in its place. Since this was an English classroom, not a town hall meeting about race and language in contemporary American society, or an Internet forum with open comments, the discussion of “the n-word” was contained within curricular content, managed by Ella *and* her students through their usage. Although no one in the discussion said the word aloud, racial differences among the characters were named not only by Ella, but also by the students in a school culture that tacitly mandated colormuteness within classroom instruction (Pollock, 2004; Thomas, 2013). Serena, a White student, named both the race of LouAnne Johnson (“White”) and the race of her students (“Black people,” Line 20). There is much to be said about constraining the conversation in this way within racially diverse, complex classrooms. By relegating a racial slur to the fictional world of *Dangerous Minds* instead of the tangible world outside of the English classroom, the teacher and students could avert conflict. Thus, the dilemma of talking about “the n-word” in a multicultural classroom helmed by a White teacher is addressed by the unspoken solidarity that Ella and her students negotiated: certain words are so bad that they should remain unspoken. Silence and evasion can be used to avoid racial conflict, but risk limiting further discussion (Morrison, 1992; Rex, 2006).

Excerpt 2b: Transcript, Ella Daniel’s First-Hour Class, Curriculum Initiation Phase, Dangerous Minds Literature Unit

28b. Ella: Let’s go with the cards here and go with Omar. What do you think?

29. Omar: (*unintelligible*)

30. Ella: Should she be using the n-word here?

31. Omar: No.

32. Ella: Okay. (*beckoning gesture*)

33. Omar: (*unintelligible*)

34. Ella: Okay. Now, Ryan is bringing up that it enhances the sentences that she’s using because it accurately portrays the characters. So what about that?

35. Omar: Um . . . (*unintelligible*)

36. Ella: Pardon me?

37. Omar: I have no idea.

The conditions of the larger research study prevented me from conducting interviews with individual students. It is uncertain whether or not Ella and her class

ever truly resolved the dilemmatic presence of “the n-word” in *Dangerous Minds*. During the entire class period, including the discourse segment presented here, Ella remained in control of the classroom discussion. Also, the two students who spoke at length in this conversation—Ryan and Serena—were White. Ella called on Omar, who was African American, for his opinion, but he had little to say. When Ella asked Omar what he thought about the view that “the n-word” operated as a sentence enhancer, he said, “I have no idea” (Line 37). It could be speculated that Omar had no thoughts about the point, or that he was withholding his opinion. However, without an after-class interview with Omar to learn what he was thinking and what he meant, it cannot be known for certain whether “I have no idea” expressed what he was truly thinking about the conversation.

Excerpt 2c: Transcript, Ella Daniel’s First-Hour Class, Curriculum Initiation Phase, Dangerous Minds Literature Unit

38. **Ella:** Okay. (*nods*) You need to think about it a little bit. Let’s bring up then the fact, for example, that this past summer, *that past summer*, last past summer matter of fact, the NAACP had a funeral for the n-word. And the idea was that the African American community itself, these leaders of the African American community, were trying to say that this word has no place in our vocabulary. You should just leave it out. Now these kids are arguing that hey, we get to say it to each other, and it’s just part of our vocabulary. So they’re saying, hey, we get to choose what’s in our vocabulary. A bunch of grown-ups aren’t going to tell us what words we can use and not use. Will you take a minute here . . . let’s take two minutes . . . and write down in that space your thoughts on the use of the n-word? Can they say (*reading from the book*) “we can be able to do it”? She says that “black kids can say it to each other.” And then we know that the grown-up in the room doesn’t want that to happen. We know that in larger society, grown-ups . . .
39. **Unidentified male student (off camera):** Some grown-ups.
40. **Ella:** . . . largely don’t want that word to be used. (*referring to the handout*) You can go on the back. That’s why I initially, I didn’t make it two-sided because I wanted you to have enough room to write. (*sound of the pencil sharpener*) Your thoughts on it? Also, at this time we can say you don’t have to write down the answers to every single question. Occasionally on these questions, we’ll take a minute so you can write down your thoughts. If you don’t know the answers to these questions, then it’s a good idea to jot down what we end up agreeing to. But in general, you don’t have to necessarily be filling them all out. All right, so two minutes. I’m watching the clock. Two minutes always feels like a long time.
41. **Unidentified male student (off camera):** Number 11, right?
42. **Ella:** Yep.

Ella had now introduced a new voice of authority into the discussion, groups of people that have condemned the use of “the n-word”: “the NAACP,” “the African American community,” “leaders in the African American community,” and “grown-ups” (Line 38). One student challenged her by insisting that only “*some* grown-ups” (Line 39) “don’t want that word to be used,” but the others allowed Ella’s position to stand without protest. Before the discussion moved to the way that this word might be used by different groups in society for different reasons, Ella quickly moved away from instructional discourse about the subject matter and began to carefully regulate the writing assignment that students were to complete after the discussion. The remainder of the period continued with discussion of the word within the context of *Dangerous Minds*, as students answered questions that Ella had prepared for them.

Ella’s wrestling with this dilemma highlights how talking in racial terms—as well as *not* talking in racial terms—makes race matter for the teaching of literature. Other than Ella’s anecdote about the funeral for “the n-word,” there was little discussion about the societal metadiscourses that *nigger* indexes. Ella used the authority of African American leaders as evidence that the word should be forbidden to all, yet she did not address the widespread use of “the n-word” within particular registers of African American English (Kennedy, 2002; Paris, 2011; Smitherman, 2006). Neither did this conversation touch upon the historical context of the word, contemporary debates about language rights (“Black kids can say it” [Line 38], with the attendant implication that White people cannot), or even why use of the word has been contested. With her prepared questions, Ella had strategically planned to manage a predictable conflict so as to keep everyone engaged. However, regulating discourse around one particularly charged word (that was *and* was not being talked about) amplified its significance.

After analyzing her discourse during this lesson, Ella reflected that it had gone as she planned. She expressed to me that she was glad there had not been a conflagration around “the n-word,” but several of my questions remained unanswered even after interviews and extensive member checking. Did Ella recognize—unwittingly or not—her own race talk dilemmas in LouAnne Johnson’s uncannily parallel depiction of her classroom teaching? What did Ella want her students to think about and learn from the student characters’ approaches to the touchy situation? Although Ella positioned the novel as something that she and her students were “doing together,” it was evident from her conversations with me that she had read far enough ahead to carefully direct what might have been a contentious conversation. In the final interview, Ella reported that her students enjoyed reading *Dangerous Minds*, and that she would use the novel again with future classes.

Conclusion

Anthony and Ella show us how two experienced English teachers navigated race talk dilemmas that arose while initiating new literature units. Although Anthony and Ella were both teaching literature lessons that foregrounded racial issues, some discrete features of their discourse differed. Whereas Ella relied on her students’

prior knowledge about what was forbidden to talk about in English class, Anthony disrupted traditional classroom discourse conventions as his students discussed a number of potential literary selections. While Anthony aligned a particular racial group of students with an award-winning author and a man who would be president, Ella creatively appealed to the eminent authority of the NAACP and their 2007 symbolic funeral for “the n-word” to reinforce her point that no one should be saying the word, an even stronger social sanction than author/heroic teacher LouAnne Johnson’s (1992) assertion that “not in this classroom, they can’t” (p. 28). Although definitions of a “successful” literature lesson varied across classroom contexts drawn from the same population of students, both teachers used language that strategically hailed authority figures from outside the school to regulate the social implications of teaching novels about race and to negotiate solidarity with their students.

Both Anthony and Ella had well-established routines for classroom talk, which helped to push their students through the conflict inherent in talking about race. In Anthony’s class, power circulated between teacher and students, with Anthony using regulative discourses embedded within instruction when it was his turn to talk. Ella’s class was more traditionally structured, but she handled a particularly difficult lesson by placing discursive boundaries around a racial slur, and her students followed her lead. Thus, their language usage differed, as Anthony appropriated students’ discourses to make a point about reading “books about race,” while Ella chose not to engage in the direct use of a racial term even while quoting from the novel itself. Both teachers valued students’ perspectives and encouraged their responses but, in both cases, guided them toward a shared ethical position: Anthony, toward consensus on literature; Ella, toward consensus on language.

However, despite Ella’s and Anthony’s ability to press through race talk dilemmas that surfaced in their literature lessons, it was clear that silence and evasion characterized particularly tense moments during both conversations. Race mattered in Anthony’s classroom when he tried to sell the importance of James McBride’s *The Color of Water* by connecting McBride’s search for identity with that of Barack Obama and biracial students at Rainfield. Ultimately, Anthony’s students were unconvinced by this rationale, voting as a class to make the canonical selection *A Farewell to Arms* their final book of the year. Race mattered in Ella’s classroom when one of her students of color pointed out the presence of a racial term in a book that the entire class was reading. As Ella and several students negatively judged the use of “the n-word,” not only in the book, but also within society, other students remained silent even when prompted to speak. As Ella and Anthony’s department chair animatedly observed about discursive conflict in the classroom during one of our workshops, “it’s so much easier to sidestep it!” The conversations during Anthony’s and Ella’s literature lessons demonstrate that even the most skilled and well-meaning tactics of discursive silence, evasion, and “sidestepping” in teacher talk encode race. This is because racial identity in the United States is complex, emotional, embedded in history and contemporary conditions, context-dependent, and intersectional—and because race matters for teachers as much as it does for students.

Implications for Future Research

In *Colormute*, Pollock (2004) observed that “the more complex inequality seems to get, the more simplistic inequality analysis seems to become,” and “the questions we ask most about race are the very questions we most suppress” (p. vi). The changing fabric of American society means that increased cultural and linguistic diversity in the nation’s English classrooms is inevitable. The literature in our curriculum is often weighted with dilemmas of race, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity for which there is little productive discourse. Students receive implicit messages that conflicts must be resolved, despite the fact that we live in a world with many pressing conflicts and few politically viable solutions. Furthermore, it is not often emphasized to students that conflict resolution sometimes results in the positions of some people being ignored, subjugated, or suppressed; that not all conflicts are resolvable; and that multiple, even contradictory, points of view about even the most contentious topics are possible. As students are taught about conflict in the literature they study, they need to know how similar conflicts can be resolved (or not) outside the classroom.

How might this be done? One method may be to cultivate greater metalinguistic awareness among English teachers. A growing number of scholars and teacher researchers in literacy and English education are providing professional development materials and workshops for those interested in race, language, and discourse studies (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013; Brown, 2009; Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013; Rex & Schiller, 2009; Rymes, 2009; Stevenson, 2014). Anthony and Ella reported feeling much more confident about their ability to handle classroom conflict after learning more about *what* they said and did during tense moments, and *how* they said and did it. Moreover, both teachers reported becoming quite intentional about the way they talked to their students after reviewing videos and transcripts of their classroom lessons. Since conflicts in human interaction are often resolved through talk and action, providing teachers with opportunities to engage in professional development focused on classroom discourse and interaction can be a powerful way to increase awareness of the nature of conflicts.

The use of digital tools to facilitate race talk during literary lessons should also be explored. Ella might have been able to engage more students in conversation about “the n-word” if *Dangerous Minds* had been discussed on a class blog or a Goodreads thread.³ After his lesson, Anthony might have considered bringing in a video about the rise in poverty in middle-class towns like Rainfield Township, or asked students to research the rise of the multiracial United States census category. In our socially networked age, the ability to communicate with others across modes, as well as social differences, has become increasingly essential for the digitally literate.

Along with professional development on language, discourse, and technology, further research on the role of race in English classroom discourse is necessary. Although Rainfield district policy restricted researchers’ access to students, it would have been useful to interview Anthony’s and Ella’s students immediately

after each lesson to gain insight into their experiences during these contentious conversations. Investigations that challenge simple racial categories and attend to issues of intersectionality would also be useful for understanding how gender, orientation, class, religion, language, nationality, and other factors of difference affect discourse. Learning how race talk unfolds in homogenous classrooms as well as in superdiverse settings (Blommaert, 2013) would tell us more about how to wrestle with the discomfort and loss of safety that students and teachers perceive as they navigate these often-difficult conversations.

Returning to Luke's (2004) observations about the politically contested curricular space of the English classroom, examining the role of race in classroom talk and interaction might be one way to move toward restorative English education that envisions transformative possibilities for learning and teaching about literature, writing, and life (Winn, 2013). If one potential outcome of transformative literary pedagogy is to "teach literature so that people stop killing each other" (O'Reilly quoted in Winn, 2013, p. 128), then classrooms like Anthony's and Ella's are promising sites to begin the hard work of racial reconciliation, social justice, and cultural change.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author deeply appreciates the efforts of all those who made this study possible. The University of Michigan's Rackham Graduate School provided grant funding, and Michigan's Joint Program in English and Education provided technology and materials for the research project. In addition, Jennifer Moore and Nora Peterman at Penn GSE provided helpful feedback on drafts of this article. Finally, the open participation of Anthony, Ella, their students, and the Rainfield community was vital to the success of this work.

NOTES

1. Here and throughout, I use the terms *Black* and *African American* interchangeably. *Black* predominates in intracommunity usage, while *African American* is most often used in contemporary educational research literature.
2. District test score data from the year of the study combine the following racial labels into "Other": "Native Americans, Hispanics, Middle Easterners, and others." It was not evident from the information provided how students of biracial or multiracial backgrounds were officially classified.
3. Goodreads describes itself as "the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations." The site can be accessed at <https://www.goodreads.com>.

REFERENCES

- ALSUP, J., EMIG, J., PRADL, G., TREMMEL, R., YAGELSKI, R. R., ALVINE, L., . . . SAWYER, M. (2006). The state of English education and a vision for its future: A call to arms. *English Education*, 38(4), 278–294.
- ANAGNOSTOPOULOS, D., EVERETT, S., & CAREY, C. (2013). 'Of course we're supposed to move on, but then you still got people who are

not over those historical wounds': Cultural memory and US youth's race talk. *Discourse & Society*, 24(2), 163–185.

BILLIG, M., CONDOR, S., EDWARDS, D., GANE, M., MIDDLETON, D., & RADLEY, A. (1988). *Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

BLOMMAERT, J. (2013). *Ethnography, superdiversity and linguistic landscapes: Chronicles of complexity* (Vol. 18). Bristol, United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters.

BOURDIEU, P., & PASSERON, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: SAGE.

BROWN, A. F. (2011). Descendants of "Ruth": Black girls coping through the "Black male crisis." *Urban Review*, 43(5), 597–619.

BROWN, D. W. (2009). *In other words: Lessons on grammar, code-switching, and academic writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

CANDELA, A. (1999). Students' power in classroom discourse. *Linguistics and Education*, 10, 139–163.

CASTANHEIRA, M. L., CRAWFORD, T., DIXON, C. N., & GREEN, J. L. (2001). Interactional ethnography: An approach to studying the social construction of literate practices. *Linguistics and Education*, 11, 353–400.

CAZDEN, C. (2001). *Classroom discourse analysis: The language of teaching and learning*. Westport, CT: Heinemann.

CHRISTIE, F. (1999). The pedagogic device and the teaching of English. In F. Christie (Ed.), *Pedagogy and the shaping of consciousness* (pp. 156–184). London: Continuum.

CHRISTIE, F., & MACKEN-HORARIK, M. (2007). Building verticality in subject English. In F. Christie & J. R. Martin (Eds.), *Language, knowledge, and pedagogy: Functional linguistic and sociological perspectives* (pp. 156–183). London: Continuum.

CRENSHAW, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, fem-

inist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–168.

DIANGELO, R., & SENSOY, Ö. (2014). Getting slammed: White depictions of race discussions as arenas of violence. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 17, 103–128.

ERICKSON, F. (2004). *Talk and social theory: Ecologies of speaking and listening in everyday life*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.

GUTIÉRREZ, K. D., BAQUEDANO-LÓPEZ, P., & TEJEDA, C. (2003). Rethinking diversity: Hybridity and hybrid language practices in the third space. In S. Goodman, J. M. Lillis, & N. Mercer (Eds.), *Language, literacy and education: A reader* (pp. 171–187). Trent, United Kingdom: Trentham Books.

HSIEH, H. F., & SHANNON, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15, 1277–1288.

JACKSON, D. B. (2003). Education reform as if student agency mattered: Academic microcultures and student identity. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84, 579–586.

JOHNSON, L. (1992). *Dangerous minds*. New York: St. Martin's.

JUZWIK, M. M., BORSHEIM-BLACK, C., CAUGHLAN, S., & HEINTZ, A. (2013). *Inspiring dialogue: Talking to learn in the English classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

KENNEDY, R. (2002). *Nigger: The strange career of a troublesome word*. New York: Random House.

LEONARDO, Z., & PORTER, R. K. (2010). Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of 'safety' in race dialogue. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13, 139–157.

LUKE, A. (2004). The trouble with English. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 39, 85–95.

MARTIN, J. R., & ROSE, D. (2003). *Working with discourse: Meaning beyond the clause* (1st ed.). London: Continuum.

MARTIN, J. R., & ROSE, D. (2007). *Working with discourse: Meaning beyond the clause* (2nd ed.). London: Continuum.

- McBRIDE, J. (1998). *The color of water: A Black man's tribute to his white mother*. London: Bloomsbury.
- MIRÓN, L. F., & LAURIA, M. (1998). Student voice as agency: Resistance and accommodation in inner-city schools. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 29, 189–213.
- MORRISON, T. (1992). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- NYSTRAND, M., & GAMORAN, A. (1997). The big picture: Language and learning in hundreds of English lessons. In M. Nystrand (Ed.), *Opening dialogue: Understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom* (pp. 30–74). New York: Teachers College Press.
- OMI, M., & WINANT, H. (1986). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge.
- PARIS, D. (2011). *Language across difference: Ethnicity, communication, and youth identities in changing urban schools*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- PARK, H.-Y. (2008). “You are confusing!”: Tensions between teacher’s and students’ discourses in the classroom. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 43(1), 4–13.
- POLLOCK, M. (2004). *Colormute*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- REX, L. A. (2006). Acting “cool” and “appropriate”: Toward a framework for considering literacy classroom interactions when race is a factor. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 38, 275–325.
- REX, L. A., & SCHILLER, L. (2009). *Using discourse analysis to improve classroom interaction*. New York: Routledge.
- RYMES, B. (2009). *Classroom discourse analysis: A tool for critical reflection*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- SKERRETT, A. (2011). English teachers’ racial literacy knowledge and practice. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 14, 313–330.
- SMITHERMAN, G. (2006). *Word from the mother: Language and African Americans*. New York: Routledge.
- STEVENSON, H. C. (2014). *Promoting racial literacy in schools: Differences that make a difference*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- THOMAS, E. E. (2010). “We’re saying the same thing”: How English teachers negotiated solidarity, identity, and ethics through talk and interaction (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/77791>
- THOMAS, E. E. (2013). Dilemmatic conversations: Some challenges of culturally responsive discourse in a high school English classroom. *Linguistics and Education*, 24, 328–347.
- WINN, M. T. (2013). Toward a restorative English education. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 48, 126–135.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas is an assistant professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education. A former Detroit Public Schools teacher, her interests include children’s and young adult literature, English education, African American education, and classroom interaction research. She has been a member of NCTE since 2000.

Initial submission: January 30, 2014

Final revision submitted: April 6, 2015

Accepted: April 21, 2015