RACIAL LITERACIES MATTER: THE RELATIONAL CONTEXT OF A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

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Abstract

The current political and legal violence against DEI and the Black Lives Matter movement has pushed the debate on racial inequality to include the academic opportunity gap, systemic injustice in schools and classrooms, and racialized gender violence. This article, Racial Literacies Matter, calls us to consider hegemonic practices and [D]discourses that are hindrances to inclusive and equitable educational environments, viewing education as a dialogical and dialectical process in which knowledge is co-constructed in the process of dialogues between educators and learners, and among learners. In this article, one black undergraduate student's narratives illustrate her psychological struggles, sense of self, and persistence in the relational context of whiteness. Her experiences with White Institutional Presence (WIP) led to her psychological disconnection and prevented her from experiencing a sense of community at school. We suggest the creation of the third space, a counter-hegemonic intersubjective relational context that avoids the enaction of "power-over" ethnocentric white monocultural perspectives, and a space with a spirit and sense of community and belonging where Racial Literacies Matter.

Keywords: racial literacy, third space, whiteness, people of color, white monoculturalism

Introduction

The current legal and political attacks on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement demand a call to action, compelling us to awaken and respond to the multilayered systemic, structural, and discursive state-sanctioned violence, including anti-Black racism, and broader discrimination against people of color. The media focuses on the struggle against militarized police violence, but the BLM movement, in "building a world where everyone can breathe" (Crenshaw, 2020), has pushed the debate on racial inequality and inequity to include the academic opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2014), systemic injustice in schools and classrooms (Paris & Alim, 2017), and racialized gender violence (Crenshaw, 1989). These structural and systemic injustices call us to investigate those practices, [D]discourses, policies, and laws that are hindrances to inclusive and equitable environments. To improve educational environments, we must confront the realities shaped by racial inequities that impact our communities—whether in classrooms, institutions, or across the nation. As Crenshaw (July 17, 2020) stated, "Where a problem isn't fully seen, it cannot be fully solved," this includes addressing the "racism effect" in education, which refers to the ways in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact educational structures, processes, and discourses that affect people of color generally (LatCrit Primer, 2000). Guinier (2004) further advocate for racial literacy, which allows us to analyze "race in its psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions" (p. 115). Accordingly, this paper aims to examine the significance of Racial Literacies Matter (RLM) and the need for RLM by analyzing the relational context of whiteness, particularly white monoculturalism, through the lens of one black student's lived experiences at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI).

Conceptual Framework

Racial Literacies Matter

Literacy education has historically been considered from a computational view of the mind; however, sociocultural approaches to language learning and literacy development question those assumptions. From a critical sociocultural perspective, what "being literate" means varies depending on the socially, culturally, and politically constructed social world, and literacy is inherently multiple and ideological, encompassing more than just academic skills, strategies, and knowledge (Gee, 2004; Street, 2013). The learning of language and literacy depends "in large part on patterns of the distribution of power and knowledge in a society" (Luke & Freebody, 1997). According to Gee (1992, p. 40), "literacy practices are almost fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interactions, values, and beliefs": thus, fully viewing these practices can reshape the literacy education in the interest of diverse marginalized groups of learners. The concept of "literacy practices" illuminates the connections between identities, relationships, and power positions within social and cultural structures (Hull & Schultz, 2002). In a pluralistic society, there is also no neutral literacy (Ferdman, 1990; Street, 2013).

In this regard, scholars collectively shape racial literacy as a framework for understanding and addressing race and racism, with applications in education, psychology, law, and social justice. The term "racial literacy" was introduced by Twine (2010) in her book *A*

White Side of Black Britain: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy for the development of a critical understanding of race and racism to navigate and challenge structural inequalities particularly in interracial families. In the field of society, Guinier (2002) connects racial literacy with civic engagement and transformative change, encouraging society to view racial disparities as indicators of larger structural problems. For the purpose of teacher education, Sealey-Ruiz (2021) emphasizes racial literacy development among teachers and students to address inequities in classrooms by conceptualizing six components of racial literacy development: critical love, critical humility, critical reflection, historical literacy, archaeology of self, and interruption. DiAngelo (2018) emphasizes whites' racial consciousness by confronting privilege and bias and by challenging white defensiveness and encouraging active engagement in racial justice conversations among whites. Tatum (2010) highlights the importance of open discussions and understanding the role of race in identity formation. Similarly, Stevenson (2014) emphasizes the emotional and psychological aspects of racial literacy, particularly in building tools for meaningful and transformative racial dialogues. Their work encourages self-reflection, critical thinking, and proactive engagement with systemic inequalities.

Grounded in the aforementioned scholars' work, from a sociocultural and relational perspective, this paper conceptualizes "Racial Literacies Matter" as critical literacy for social change, cultural diversity, economic equity, educational justice, and political enfranchisement, which will be accomplished by reshaping "literacy education in the interests of marginalized groups of learners, who on the basis of gender, cultural and socioeconomic background have been excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant economies and cultures" (Luke, 1997, p. 143). RLM emphasizes a reciprocal human system, which is central to individual development. According to Sarason (1974/1988), a sense of community needs to be relationally based and that "the dilution or absence of the psychological sense of community (PSOC) is the most destructive dynamic in the lives of people in our society," leading to "loneliness, alienation, rootlessness, and not belonging" (p. x). Extending Sarason's view, McMillian (1996) includes a greater emphasis on connections with others in a space to authenticate and speak one's truth. Truth, a person's statement about his or her own internal experience, becomes the primary unit of analysis for the spirit of sense of community. In other words, a classroom community needs to be a reciprocal place of emotional safety, where one has faith that he or she will belong and fit in, and the community will respond with acceptance. The spirit of sense of community mirrors what relational-cultural theorists know: that mutual empathy is an "empathic bridge" (Jordan, 1992) that leads to mutual empowerment (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Surrey, 1991), which allows each person to feel seen, heard, known, and respected in a relationship.

Whiteness and White Monoculturalism

It is essential to "see" that Whiteness is a cultural ideology embedded in the language, cultural practices, traditions, conception of time, and notions of good and bad, expressed in multiple ways within a white, social environment (Lewis, 2004). According to Malcolm X, "Whiteness is a state of mind and not complexion" which embraces "a constellation of processes and practices" (Frankenburg, 2001, p. 73). Unfortunately, according to Black (2004), there is an entrenched refusal to recognize in the academy the "sheer weight of Whiteness" (p. 1) that prevents Whites from seeing their philosophical underpinnings that position Whiteness as normative and White educational practices as neutral. Whiteness is not only a cultural location but also a racial discourse (Leonardo, 2002). Yancy (2002) summarizes that "whiteness functions

as an epistemological and ontological anchorage, assuming the authority to marginalize other identities, discourses, narratives, perspectives, and voices [thus creating] a binary relationship of self-Other, subject-object, dominator-dominated, center-margin, universal-particular, white-black." (p. 567). Thus, the United States is a white country ideologically through the racialized design and marginalization of non-white identities and naturalization and immigration laws (Lipsitz, 2006). When Whiteness becomes a system that stratifies access to positions, resources, and power, as well as sanctioning and promoting a White racial ideology as a standard for normalcy and White superiority (Thompson, 2004), it becomes a problematic verb.

In this article we will use the attribute of monoculturalism in the construct of White Institutional Presence (WIP) to investigate how Whiteness is a problematic verb, generating barriers and acts as an everyday obstacle for black students (Gusa, 2010). Gusa (2009) had suggested in a previous paper that the disparate retention outcomes for black undergraduates are rooted in a chilly or hostile campus environment cultivated by a pattern of behavior, which she refers to as WIP. As a sociocultural framework, WIP centers a critique of the ways that whiteness is advanced through the institutional level policies and practices —focusing on the white normative messages and practices that are exchanged within the academic environment. Monoculturalism reflects a PWI's white historical legacy. It cuts across all facets of institutional practices and organization (i.e. conducting research and teaching) and has profound ramifications about the perceptions of the world and knowledge dissemination (Christian, 2002). Monoculturalism is exhibited in policy initiatives, course content, research practices, research methods, and teaching pedagogy that are structured by white canonical perceptions, relationships, and worldview. As Gee (2008) posits, the difference between the one's primary home-based Discourses and the secondary school-based Discourses, which we term White Institutional Presence (WIP), causes students of color and black students to lose their identities as they try to adjust, or resist in response to treatment as an "Others" in the classroom and school, and ultimately effects those students' academic achievement. Untying the contributor's narratives to "fully see" his/her difficulties in the relational and social contexts of whiteness, we can unpack the "linkage of literacy and race" (Ladson-Billings, 2016) and build communities of liberation and empowerment.

Method

Data Collection and Analysis

The research participant is Nyela (pseudonym), a black female student. Her participation spans from her senior year of high school through her college graduation in a predominantly white public state college located in the northeastern region of the United States. Data were drawn from six years of data, including two formal interviews, six emails and several phone interviews, and the participant's writings about her lived experiences in her schooling lives for six years in two PWIs. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. All the data were analyzed using the method of The Listening Guide (LG) (Gilligan, 1990). LG is a relational, feminist method that is responsive to different voices and foregrounds the relationship between researcher and contributors through complex and multilayered relational experiences within the perspective of race as a sociocultural construction. The Listening Guide method encompasses four sequential listenings: listening for (a) plot or story, with attention to recurrent words and images, metaphors,

stories, contradictions, and shifts in the sound of a voice and its position (1st, 2nd, or 3rd person narration) through the layers of the interviews; (b) hearing the psychological thinking of the participant by listening to the participant's self, the "I" voice or first-person voice, and then "I" poems are constructed including the other voices represented in "we," "you," and "they."; (c) forms of psychological violations that may lead to self-silencing and capitulation to culture norms and values; (d) the sound of her voice until it enters the researcher's psyche.

Findings

"My God is Black": Nyela's Inner Struggles and Self-Determination

Nyela understands what needs to be done to be successful. Nyela states, "You can't separate me from my color." Nyela lives in a world that judges her by her color, and battles every day to show that she is more than the stereotypes placed upon her. She is a person who can "get along with mostly anyone;" however, "racism is always in the back of her mind." There have been times that she has felt uncomfortable telling her truth; however, she will always tell it. Employing literacies as a "social constructions forged in the process of humans pursuing values, goals, and interests, under the conditions where some groups have greater access to structural power than others" (Lankshear & Lawler, 1987, p.79). We can see Nyela's process of pursuing her goals and interests, as she speaks her truth of facing structural and discursive powers of whiteness. One repercussion of monoculturalism and the other attributes of WIP is that the "we" voice may remain silent. Though Nyela's college has a minority recruitment program, her "we" voice, community voice, and voice of belonging are strangely absent. The "we" voice is only used five times in interviews during the six-year duration of the study. According to Robinson and Ward (1991), the self as "we" in the black worldview is the notion of the extended self-connected with others. Does Nyela's lack of "we" illustrate her lack of sense of community in this college community?

The one narrative where Nyela animatedly speaks her truth in the classroom dialogue of why Blacks have broad noses, dark skin, and nappy hair we hear the positive "We" voice. The capacity to learn to "see" the other and to "make oneself know" is a fundamental aspect of learning (Surrey, 1991). According to Surrey (1999), when a person's voice is acknowledged, she feels validated and empowered as a relational being. This relational empowerment creates a sense of moving forward together, developing a sense of community. The next poem shows a classroom that is not inclusive. In this monocultural classroom, whites refuse to see Nyela's point of view. It is a classroom where the "white" answer is the only correct answer. Nyela shares: "Another time we were talking about God and a student said, 'God is white.' I told them that the bible said God is like coal, in the Old Testament, and that's black." When Nyela shares her opinion that God is black, both the students and teacher get upset and disagree. "They," a classroom of whites, refuse to allow her opinion. "The students get real upset and the teacher agreed with them. He was a priest before this." The next voice poem exhibits the bones of the relational dynamics of this situation.

Nyela	White students	Nyela
We've talked We've talked We talked		
		I told them [God is Black]
	They got upset	
		I walked out I went back
	They acted	

Nyela's narrative shares a disconnection with her classmates not allowing her vision of a black God. The class and teacher do not want to accept Nyela's perspective that her God is black. This narrative end abruptly with a critical disconnection, a moment where Nyela experiences the pain and frustration of not being understood. The problem is not just Nyela's difference; rather it is "problematized differences" of subordination and power (Walker & Miller, 2001). Using power-over, the class dominates by naming God's race; refusing to accept Nyela's views, her voice is "drowned out by white noise" (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxii). Nyela moves from a "we" voice of connection, to her "I" voice of inner strength in the face of domination. Her "I" voice shows her refusal to accept the dichotomy of "powerful-powerless" and "active-passive" response (Hartling et al., 2004). Her discourse ends abruptly with a critical disconnection, a moment where Nyela experiences the pain and frustration of not being understood. The dismissal or trivialization of Nyela's beliefs is an assault on her humanity and dignity (Jordon, 2002, p.1). Mutuality, "an openness to influence," (Jordan, 1991, p. 82) was not experienced by Nyela. In a room where there was no personal support for her opinions, Nyela walks out. She stated, "You can't change people. It's their problem, not mine." The tone goes from determination to resignation. Unfortunately, this classroom community did not invite reconnection. Nyela returned for the next class where the class "acted like it never happened," but it did. Nyela explained she felt "tension" but thought it could have been just herself. This relational context could prevent progress toward mutuality and authentic connection; however, Nyela stated "I was fine, and I continued to participate." Nyela continues and participates, but it is a question about how many students of color, especially black students would choose not to come back and participate. How can administrators, faculty, and fellow students support the students of color like Nyela on their campuses? Nyela articulates the answer with a strong voice:

See me as an
individual.
See me as a person.
Don't look at me and just see my skin color.
I am a black woman so be careful of what you
say.
Careful what you do.

To "see" Nyela as an "individual" is to hear her words. To create a safe and empowering space for Nyela to grow, one must be aware of what People of Color go through daily – racism. This means, living in a racialized world, educators must be careful with what they, as whites, say and do.

Discussion

Pedagogical practices and research can strengthen and empower diverse students from nondominant communities only when marginalized people's experiences and voices are recognized, understood, and valued. This article demonstrates the psychological struggles, sense of self, and determinations of one black undergraduate student in the relational context of WIP, and how Nyela's ways of being and thinking, i.e., her black literacies, her primary D/discourse − the "initial and often enduring sense of self and sets the foundations of our culturally specific vernacular language and is the way that we use language, feel and think, act and interact, and so forth" (Gee 2008, p. 156) − were devalued and untapped in the relational context of the monocultural WIP. This WIP is used to rationalize, distort, and produce illusion in order to maintain the interests of the dominant group; thus, the WIP functions as cognitive manipulative tools because "people are simultaneously the products and the producers of discourse" (Edley & Wetherell, 1997, p. 206). Just as Marxian false consciousness and Foucault's power/knowledge are examples of power exercised in consensual forms rather than in coercive forms, the whiteness ideology has been imposed in the name of academic achievement, communicative efficiency, and national unity. It is time to rethink what literacies mean and, in particular, what racial literacies mean in the contextual relations of the PWIs.

Socio-cognitive educators, as well as relational-cultural theorists, are concerned with the development of mutual empowerment in a community of learners in order to encourage and sustain productive discourse for literacy learning and development (Langer, 1987; Jordan, 2001). Mutual empowerment, also referred to as "power with," transpires from "synergistic and nonhierarchical interactions," which encourages *all* participants to work together in ways that cultivate connections and promote everyone's power (Surrey, 1991). Each student's voice is acknowledged, so that she or he experiences a heightened sense of clarity and feels affirmed and empowered as a relational being (Surrey, 1991, p. 172). Creating and sustaining this relational context leads to increased awareness, understanding, and learning. This is a context where the views of another are connected to one's own knowledge, thus "building new and enlarged understanding of the broader human experience" (Surrey, 1991, p. 171).

To accomplish equality and equity of literacy education, *all* voices and literacies, (e.g., cultural and linguistic practices), especially Racial Literacies (i.e., ways of being, thinking, doing, learning of students of color) need to be valued, heard, and enacted in *thirdspace* (Bhabha, 2004; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López & Tejeda, 1999; Soja, 1996) in *internally persuasive discourses* (Bakhtin, 1981), with no possessors or authoritative figures to enforce and centralize the dominant white monocultural curricula and views about the world. It is essential to construct hybrid third space in the classroom where the dominant discourses and nondominant discourses converge, i.e., the catalyst and empowering space for change emerge, in order to allow *all* students especially, diverse students of color to develop academic abilities, cultural and socioemotional competence, critical consciousness about self, O/others, and society, and construct positive identities.

Implications

The teacher's classroom practice in Nyela's class represents the Eurocentric whiteness-centered curriculum and practices "to build the esteem of White students while ignoring, marginalizing, and destroying the spirits of Black children" (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020, p.

426). Thus, most of all, we suggest Tappan's (2006) Freirean model of conscientização, a framework for fostering critical consciousness through a three-step process, to address systemic racial issues within predominantly white academic contexts: (1) uncovering the reality of privilege and its pervasive influence; (2) dismantling and rejecting the myths, narratives, and symbols perpetuated by dominant systems; and (3) replacing these outdated constructs with new narratives, symbols, and ideologies that promote liberation and equity for *all.* In alignment with these three steps, we outline specific strategies for developing "critical capital" among *all,* especially white teachers and students for the development of critical literacies abilities.

First, it is time for white teachers and students to reflect on/in (in)actions to unveil white privilege and then take action to decenter myths and images within each discipline that perpetuates white privilege. This would entail moving marginalized texts, discourses, and identities to the center of one's curriculum, thus, incorporating diverse perspectives, inquiry, and multiple knowledge bases. The academic classroom practices would deal with the "tensions, contradictions, and structural ambiguities" within a learning community by addressing and redressing the multiple forms of oppression as they play out within and among academic communities" (Conyers Jr., 2003, p. 221). One way to redress white privilege can be done using the method of "The Archaeology of Self process." This is an excellent tool for "self-excavation where racism, stereotypes, and bias live" (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021, p.26). This work "must be done individually *and* in community for it to have the influence and power needed to bring about the dismantling of racism and move toward recognition and respect for the full and wonderful humanity of people of color" (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021, p.27). Another way is to present counter-ideological arguments to each white racial frame that arises in the class (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This would entail addressing white entitlement reactions openly when data presented disrupts their supposedly race-neutral values of meritocracy or white historical/social understandings. White teachers and students need to value the collective survival and thriving of the class (Schiele, 1994) and facilitate a positive learning environment that promotes an intergroup atmosphere. White students and teachers, as well as the institutions, must acknowledge individual rights for learning and take social responsibility by offering support, encouragement, and help to one another (Schiele, 1994).

Second, *all* teachers, particularly white teachers, must actively recognize and address whom and what is silenced by examining how texts, talks, voices, identities, ideologies, and classroom discourses can derail productive pluralistic dialogue. This awareness cannot be achieved solely through mandates or workshops, but requires cultivating a deeper understanding of how whiteness shapes teachers' practices and beliefs, responding to the diverse needs of their students, and addressing barriers to inclusiveness within their classes. Whiteness is a discourse and a manifestation of systems of power, but white people are not whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). Thus, according to Utt (2016), teachers "face a choice. White teachers have a responsibility to transform their relationship to whiteness to live our lives and enact our pedagogies in ways that are anti-racist – as the alternative is to live in ways that support the racial oppression inherent in whiteness." Teachers need to foster a subjective as well as a cognitive experience of knowledge, where learning is holistic, interdependent, and bidirectional, rather than independent and unidirectional (Schiele, 1994). Teachers and students need to move away from an encapsulated brain paradigm to a more holistic sociocultural and sociopolitical understanding of the worlds in which they live and the worldviews in which they are operated and operate.

Finally, Moos (2003) asserts, "Given the power of environments and the tyranny of the majority, we need to focus more attention on how to nurture individuals who are in the minority"

(p. 8). Therefore, we ask teachers and teacher educators, especially white teachers to consider the need to "reevaluate structures of knowledge, cultural patterns of relationships, and organizing principles of institutional life" (Pewewardy & Frey, 2002, p. 78) by reflecting on the norms and values that arise from a Eurocentric worldview – which might systematically impair students of color's ability to participate and succeed. Since "human beings learn and grow through interactions with difference and not by reproducing what they know" (Matsuda, 1988). We suggest that educational institutions recognize and value the contribution of people of color as creators and holders of knowledge that challenge and critique mainstream perspectives and traditions (Delgado & Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000). According to Sáenz et al. (2007), opportunities for critical diverse dialogue in class are a significant predictor for positive intergroup relations on campus. As hooks (1994, p.207) eloquently states, "The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created." Despite its limitations, the classroom holds transformative potential— it is a space where individuals can strive for freedom by cultivating mind, heart, and the courage to confront reality while collectively envisioning ways to "move beyond boundaries, to transgress." This vision reflects Racial Literacies Matter as a practice of liberation.

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