



Research Article

“I Feel Sad”: The Cultural Politics of White Emotions in Pre-Service Teachers’ Response to Literature

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Abstract

This paper details a critical ethnography I conducted in my own classroom—an undergraduate children’s literature course for pre-service elementary educators—in which I analyze white students’ emotional responses to multicultural children’s literature through the lens of a cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2015; Zembylas, 2008). In my paper I use critical whiteness studies and critical emotion studies to analyze the effects of these emotional responses, complicating the assumption that emotions are a bridge to empath and exploring how white emotional performativity often serves to deflect from authentic critical discourse, reinforcing white supremacy in educational spaces. I look reflexively at my own pedagogy as a white educator, noticing the ways in which my failure to critically interrogate white emotions contributed to a classroom culture that valued majority voices over the voices of students of color. I conclude with the impacts of this study on my own commitments as a teacher-researcher.

Keywords: children’s literature, empathy, critical whiteness studies, critical emotion studies

In the dim basement of an old high school, now home to the Curriculum and Instruction department of the University of Minnesota, college students share their responses to children’s literature about immigration and refugees. “I feel sad,” one white woman shares, referring to the high number of refugees who are children, details she read about in that day’s assigned scholarly literature (observation, November 20, 2019). Other white students echo her thoughts, and most responses move between feelings of sadness for refugees and questions about how to teach children’s literature about immigration and refugees without getting too “political,” a common concern in the course. The discourse clearly positions the identity of immigrant and refugee as Other, despite the fact that there are five women of color, four of whom are also immigrants, in the room.

The students are sharing in a circle, and when it’s her turn to share her thoughts, Hope, a Black female with a soft voice who had mentioned a few weeks ago that she is an immigrant, says that there are often traumatizing reasons people have for coming to the United States from other countries, and when we teach this literature we need to support those students (observation, November 20, 2019). The room is quiet after Hope speaks, as hers is the first voice to disrupt the white discourse at work, the feelings of sadness for that had been circulating the room. I—the instructor for this course—find myself nodding, appreciating the perspective Hope provides to our discussions, until I experience a reflexive shift. I understand, in a moment, that Hope is not providing a suggestion for how to take up immigrant and refugee literature with young students, but is implicating our class in a failure to take trauma into account when discussing this literature ourselves, here and now. I realize that, despite my ideologi-

cal and pedagogical commitments to critical theory and social justice, I have enacted a pedagogy that assumed students were reading these texts as windows into cultures and experiences not their own, as opposed to mirrors of their own identities (Bishop, 1990). Though the development of empathy through engagement with literature is a goal I have for my students, the emotions circulating the room prior to Hope's comment were instead examples of empty empathy (Zembylas, 2008). The class moves on, but I stay in this moment.

This reflexive shift happened towards the end of data collection for a critical ethnographic study I conducted in my own classroom, a children's literature course for pre-service elementary teachers that focuses explicitly on multicultural literature, critical literacy, and social justice. Until this moment I had been feeling very stuck in the "messy zones" (Fine, 1994a) of my first engagement with qualitative research, unsure of what I was looking for, questioning my positionality, and worrying about the ethics of trying to answer my research question by observing and making judgments about others. I knew, intellectually, that critical ethnographers are implicated completely in our research, but I had not yet lived out this knowledge, or experienced how it feels to suddenly understand the intrinsic connection to both the problems and possibilities within research.

This paper details the process of my critical ethnographic study and the analysis that came from this reflexive shift. I use critical whiteness studies (CWS) and critical emotion studies (CES) to analyze the effects of white students' emotional response to literature, complicating the assumption that emotions are a bridge to empathy and exploring how white emotional performativity often serves to deflect from authentic critical discourse, reinforcing white supremacy in educational spaces. I look reflexively at my own pedagogy as a white educator, noticing the ways in which my failure to critically interrogate white emotions contributed to a classroom culture that valued majority voices over the voices of students of color. I conclude with the implications of this study for educators and researchers as well as its impacts on my own commitments as a teacher-researcher.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in critical theory, a broad theoretical framework that has influenced many more specific critical qualitative research methodologies and analytic lenses, including critical whiteness studies (CWS) and critical emotional studies (CES). What CWS and CES have in common—what connects them to critical theory—is their dedication to challenging systems of power, oppression, and hegemony, to attempting to "confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 305). In this paper I use critical whiteness studies and critical emotion studies to examine the ways in which white students' emotional response to literature impacted and interacted with white hegemony in the classroom. In addition to these critical theories, I bring to my research and analysis a poststructural understanding of self/other, knowledge, and power, which significantly influences how I come to understand my own entanglement in my research findings.

Critical Whiteness Studies

Critical whiteness studies (CWS) is a field of scholarship that aims to "reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege" (Applebaum, 2016). CWS approaches issues of systemic oppression from the perspective of whiteness in particular, seeking to "deconstruct, challenge, and transform whiteness" (Yeung et al., 2013, p. 18) as a project of antiracism. According to Matias and Mackey (2016), CWS uses a "transdisciplinary approach to investigate the phenomenon of whiteness, how it is manifested, exerted, defined, recycled, transmitted, and maintained, and how it ultimately impacts the state of race relations" (p. 34). Jupp et al. (2016) explain that, in the field of education research, white teacher identity studies seek to "prepare and conscientize a predominantly white preservice and professional teaching force for teaching and learning across cultural differences in public

schools” (p. 63). The first wave of white teacher identity studies, which took place in the 1990s and early 2000s, emphasized “white privilege analyses and identified all the ways that white teachers denied, evaded or diminished the salience of race in teaching and learning” (Jupp, 2017, p. 17). Second-wave studies, in contrast, are “race-visible” (Jupp et al., 2016; Jupp, 2017), and provide a more critical examination of the complexities of whiteness and race. Second-wave scholars work to understand “how oppression and white supremacy function within individuals, institutions, and systems, in complex, socially contextualized and historicized ways” (Boehm-Turner, 2020, p. 64). While not every scholar writing within CWS identifies as researching within second-wave teacher identity studies, the field has impacted whiteness studies within education significantly.

I believe that my own positionality as a white woman educator, which I will explore in more detail below, necessitates that I approach issues of race, racism, and systemic inequality from a place that both acknowledges and continues to challenge my own implications in these systems as a white person in education. In my analysis I use CWS to examine the ways in which my white students’ emotional response to multicultural literature, as well as my own failure to interrogate those emotions, contributed to multiple missed opportunities to disrupt white hegemony in the classroom.

Critical Emotion Studies

Critical emotions studies (CES) is an emerging field of analysis that connects to the “affective turn” (Clough, 2007) present in recent cultural studies and social science scholarship, which brings together psychoanalysis, theories of embodiment, political theories, and critical analysis of affect and emotion (Zembylas, 2016). According to Trainor (2006), CES specifically “represents various disciplinary forays into the relationship between emotion and whatever it is that a particular discipline studies, from brain chemistry to teacher education to election results” (p. 645). In this paper I take up Ahmed (2015) and Zembylas’ (2008, 2016) understanding of emotions as things that do rather than things that are, and define emotions as performances that produce action within specific social and political contexts. Specific concepts I explore related to CES in this paper include the dangers of sentimentality (Zembylas, 2008) and the complications of empathy, which reveal the ways in which the performance of emotions such as love, care, and concern can lead to passive empathy (Boler, 1997), false empathy (Delgado, 1996; Matias & Zembylas, 2014) or empty empathy (Zembylas, 2008), as opposed to active, or transformative empathy.

Matias and Zembylas (2014) explain that in false empathy, for example, declarations of caring or empathy are often inauthentic because they fail to be accompanied by action: “the object of compassion exists primarily within an imaginary realm that sentimentalizes the other and avoids any action that shows caring in practice” (p. 321). This sentimental framing of the other’s suffering remains at a superficial level and fails to acknowledge that this suffering is in part effect of socioeconomic relations of violence, oppression, and poverty. But most importantly, such expressions of caring fail to recognize how they are embedded in modalities of racism and social inequality that are perpetuated by assuming that declarations of caring are enough to alleviate the other’s suffering. (Matias & Zembylas, 2014, p. 322)

Methodology

Throughout this study I practiced critical ethnography, a research methodology that “begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (Madison, 2020, p. 4). In this case, the lived domain was a children’s literature course for pre-service teachers that is explicitly committed to critical literacy and social justice. I began my research study with a broad question: what are the complexities and contradictions that arise in a children’s literature course explicitly committed to critical literacy and social justice? I found critical eth-

nography, with its focus on examining systems, social interactions, and culture as a way of making meaning and effecting change, to be the most appropriate methodology with which to explore that question. Critical ethnography also emphasizes the importance of relationships within the lived domain (Madison, 2020), and conducting research in a class that I taught over a full semester allowed me to engage in “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998) with students in our shared context over a significant length of time.

In terms of methods, I used data collection methods common to critical ethnography including class observations, two semi-structured interviews with two different interlocutors, and document analysis of relevant student work. Class observations were gathered in a handwritten notebook while I simultaneously taught and facilitated learning. After each class I captured my immediate observations and reflections in a field note, and then I traced my reactions and developing analysis through analytic and reflexive memos written after each field note. Over the course of my data collection, my research question shifted and narrowed as I traced patterns of discourse, and I ultimately found myself most interested in the ways in which the performativity of emotions in response to multicultural literature served to neutralize, and even shut down, real critical engagement of oppression and injustice.

My own entanglement in the research process—as both instructor and researcher, as a white woman engaged in social justice research—led to many “speed bumps” (Weis & Fine, 2000) that caused me to reflexively reconsider the ways in which I was also implicated in the whiteness-at-work, or the “discursive strategies that create paradoxes among teachers’ beliefs, intentions, and actions” (Yoon, 2012, p. 587) I was observing among my students. Ultimately, my reflexive and embodied participation in the research process itself allowed me to “work the hyphen” (Fine, 1994b) between self/other, joining other qualitative researchers to “probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations” (p. 72). As a result, my own identity and positionality, described in more detail below, are intrinsically connected to my research findings and analysis.

The Research Setting

Children’s Literature for Educators is an undergraduate multicultural children’s literature course within the education department of the University of Minnesota. It is required for all pre-service elementary teachers, but because it also offers a writing credit, many students from outside of the college take the course as well. During my study the class met once a week for three hours at a time, and throughout the semester students read a variety of diverse children’s literature, from picture books through young adult novels, organized into units focused on sociocultural issues such as race, gender, class, and disability. Students also read and responded to popular and scholarly articles that analyze how each sociocultural topic or identity is represented in children’s literature.

I taught one of the three offered sections of the course, and chose that as my research site in large part because of the authentic relationships with the students that I had developed prior to my data collection, as well as the intimacy with which I knew the course materials and goals. Relationships are an essential tenet in critical ethnography (Madison, 2020). I knew that I would be more successful at working the hyphen between self/other (Fine, 1994b) if I was already an authentic member of the community, with relationships extending in front of and beyond the research study itself.

Of the 17 students in Children’s Literature for Educators, 12 were white, and nine of those white students were women. There were three white men and five women of color. Most of the students were in their early 20s, but a few were non-traditional students either coming to education as a second career or taking the course for extension credits. Because of the differential in power between myself as an evaluating instructor and my students as participants in a graded university course, consent forms for participation in my research study were collected but sealed in an envelope until after grades for the

course were submitted. Ultimately, all students consented to participation.

Researcher Identity and Positionality

Throughout my study my identity as a white woman educator was entangled with my research, influencing the questions I asked, the discourses I centered, and the pedagogical choices I made. My whiteness was ultimately present in my findings and analysis as well, as it became clear that, despite my commitment to social justice education, as a white educator I am frequently complicit in the failures of education to disrupt oppression and injustice. I have been raised to value neutrality over discomfort. While ideologically I align myself with Fine's (1994a) activist research projects that "seek to unearth, interrupt, and open new frames for intellectual and political theory and practice" (p. 23), this research revealed to me the ways in which I instead enact a neutral pedagogy, working "against [my] antiracist efforts, since [I] literally and ideologically cannot be in two places at once" (Grinage, 2019, p. 141). This understanding erased any boundaries that might have been left between self/other in my research, spurring me towards deep reflexivity of what I myself must confront and change in order to more fully live out my values and beliefs about the emancipatory and anti-oppressive goals of education.

Findings and Analysis

My research revealed that emotions of white pre-service teachers were performed for two objectives: to indicate morality and to maintain neutrality. I will examine each of these, using data collected from my observations, interviews, and document analysis to explore the impacts of white emotions on the criticality of classroom discourse and culture, particularly the ways in which these performances are evidence of the dangers of sentimentality (Zembylas, 2008).

Emotions as Indications of Morality

Throughout my research and my reflexive analyses I realized that much of the supposed empathy circulating in our classroom was superficial and empty (Boler, 1997; Delgado, 1996; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Zembylas, 2008), lacking the active qualities necessary for it to have any impact on the project of social justice. I explore two examples found in classroom discourse and written reflections below.

Each week my students wrote short discussion posts in response to that week's readings. In her written response to the topic of immigration and refugees in children's literature, Samantha, a white female, wrote:

The post about migration makes me very sad. I did not realize the amount of people the US has been deterring in terms of refugees, and it makes me feel like we are not doing a good job as a country loving on people who need care. As somebody who wants to care for humans as a living, I think that there needs to be more value placed on human life and making space for refugees. (online reflection, November 14, 2019)

Megan, another white female, wrote that the article about refugees "broke my heart," and that "for them to be removed from everything they have known to a world of unknowns and fear, especially in this current political climate, must be completely terrifying and traumatic for them." She goes on to express gratitude for the people "out there doing this work" to support refugees. (online reflection, November 19, 2019).

While an initial read of these two responses indicates emotions of empathy and compassion, a closer analysis reveals that these expressions of sadness and broken hearted-ness—absent any critical examination of the wider systems and structures that create refugees as well as what it would really take, beyond support, for us to no longer have a world where refugees exist—serve to normalize and reinforce existing paradigms and create objects of the refugees. In her exploration of the cultural politics of pain, Ahmed (2015) explains that in an emotional response to literature:

The negative emotions of anger and sadness are evoked as the reader's: the pain of others becomes "ours", an appropriation that transforms and perhaps even neutralises their pain into our sadness. It is not so much that we are "with them" by feeling sad; the apparently shared negative feelings do not position the reader and victim in a relation of equivalence. . . . Rather we feel sad about their suffering, an "aboutness" that ensures that they remain the object of "our feeling."

(p. 21)

Ahmed contends that "stories of pain involve complex relations of power" (p. 22), and both Samantha and Megan's responses are evidence of this neutralization of pain into emotions about the other that reinforce rather than challenge the power differentials between the students and the objects of their feelings. These emotions indicate a proper morality, yet fail to move students towards what Spelman (1997) calls co-suffering.

In a different unit focused on Indigenous representation in children's literature, three students read and discussed *When We Were Alone*, a picture book written by David A. Robertson and illustrated by Julie Flett. The book is about an Indigenous grandmother's forced attendance at government mandated residential schools during her youth, arguably a heavy and emotionally weighted topic. Chloe, the only white female in the group, read the book aloud, often stopping to make comments about the book and talk through her interpretations and reactions. It was clear that she didn't understand the context of the story, despite the unit's explicit focus on Indigenous representation and our class discussions of Indigeneity and decolonization that preceded this small group discussion. As she read, Chloe paused and said, "It looks like she went to a private school," then, "That looks like her grandma," and at one point, "Oh that's so sad" (observation, November 6, 2019). In the end Chloe summarized that the young children are lucky they can speak their [Indigenous] language and wear whatever they want, as the grandma couldn't in school. In addition to a lack of understanding of the experiences faced by Indigenous students forced to attend residential schools, this response was an example of empty empathy, where Chloe's moral sadness only served to reinforce the power dynamics at work in the historically unequal relationship between white and Indigenous peoples rather than challenge it. It also positioned Chloe as a moral spectator in the "distant suffering of victims and perpetrators" (Zembylas, 2008, p. 9), one of the dangers of sentimentality outlined by Zembylas (2008) in his critique of trauma narratives in education.

It is important to note here my own complicity in the discourse of empty empathy that often circulated in our classroom. As an educator, it is my job to help develop students' dispositions of empathy, and reflexive analysis of my own choices in terms of pedagogy and facilitation revealed the ways in which I allowed empty empathy to stand as adequate indication of morality instead of pushing students towards active empathy. In many moments my entangled identities as both teacher and researcher led me to simply observe when I should arguably have intervened, worrying about my own influence on the data I was collecting but forgetting that "intellectual questions are saturated in biography and politics and...they should be" (Fine, 1994a, pp. 30-31). Upon reflection I realized that my failure to interrogate superficial sentimentality was also evidence of another way in which whiteness was at work (Yoon, 2012) in the classroom: the primacy of neutrality and feelings of comfort over the uncomfortable disruption of injustice.

Maintaining Neutrality

Throughout my observations it became clear that my students were preoccupied with concerns about the difficulties they might face when incorporating diverse representations in children's literature in their future classrooms. Moments of potential for active empathy were often stymied by the pre-service teacher's desire to remain neutral, to avoid situations that might be deemed "controversial," a word that often circulated in our class discussion. One week I opened class with a discussion based on a ques-

tion I'd received after the previous week's unit on LGBTQ representation: "How can we teach LGBTQ literature without feeling like we are pushing our beliefs?"

Jonathan, a white male, was the first to respond. He shared that in his education courses he's been taught to try to be "objective," avoiding interpretation and just stating things as they are, as fact. Chloe chimed in, suggesting that you could, for example, do a unit about family, and include books with two moms and/or two dads (observation, October 23, 2019). At this point both students' tones were pretty hesitant—they weren't sure how to answer this question, and they were clearly taking a careful approach.

Abigail, a white female who also identifies as Jewish (interview, November 25, 2019), raised her hand and said she thinks it's "totally fair to educate" children on "specific LGBTQ topics." It "shouldn't be controversial" to talk about real kids and real families (observation, October 23, 2019). Two more students, both white females, spoke up in agreement, saying that if you are grounded "in your own reason for teaching" and bringing LGBTQ books in the classroom then you're positioned to answer any questions from parents about why you teach what you teach, and that these issues "should be talked about and normalized" because you "can't avoid hard conversations, and young kids can make sense of anything" (observation, October 23, 2019). My observation notes detail that all three of these students were much more engaged in this topic vocally and with their bodies than the first two, and that they "positioned themselves in opposition to ideas of objectivity or neutrality, in opposition to Jonathan" (field notes, October 23, 2019).

Erik, another white male, joined the conversation to argue that diversity can be objectively taught in a classroom but that it "gets tricky when you are talking about values" (observation, October 23, 2019). This assumption that values are "tricky" appeared again for Erik a few weeks later during our focus on disability in children's literature, when he qualified disability as a non-controversial topic because it's not about "values" (observation, November 13, 2019). Erik's understanding that some of the sociocultural topics the class covers are more controversial than others, that some are about values and others aren't, reveals to me the whiteness-at-work (Yoon, 2012) in the assumption that whiteness and heterosexuality are normal and everything else is different, and therefore difficult.

The ways in which some students, including Erik, focused on teaching with a neutral stance reveal the primacy of feelings of comfort over hypothetical moments of discomfort, such as when a teacher is challenged to defend their choice to include non-majority representations in classroom literature. Ahmed (2015) theorizes the dominant white heteronormative space as a sanitized "comfort zone," arguing that "normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it. The word 'comfort' suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it also suggests an ease and easiness" (p. 147). The cultural politics of comfort at work in these discourses clearly values ease and easiness over moments of uncomfortable disruption.

My students' concerns about controversy also reveal Yoon's (2012) whiteness-at-work, which "can be difficult to pinpoint because it is often a normative, unspoken assumption of how things are" (p. 607). Yoon details a study group that investigated white teachers' problems of practice, where reflection was limited because teachers failed to talk about their own identities or question their own privilege, instead positioning themselves in "non-racial and culturally neutral terms" and "positioning students as generically 'different'" (p. 607). In this group the facilitator's intervention only served to excuse the participants from talking about race explicitly. It is clear to me that my students who were concerned about controversy positioned themselves in alignment with white normativity, and therefore positioned the diverse texts and the identities they represented as that which was different. As I mentioned earlier, despite my ideological commitments to social justice education, this research study revealed to me the ways in which I also enacted neutrality. I found that I often valued my own embodied comfort and "easy" alignment with white normativity over the more discomfoting, but much more

important, work of justice. As Zembylas (2008) argues, “schooling is not a neutral ground” (p. 7), and both pre-service and more experienced white educators must continually push ourselves to tear down the facade of neutrality and commit to antioppressive education.

Implications

Classrooms all over the United States, from K-12 through higher education—including teacher education programs such as the setting for this research—use literature for the purpose of increasing students’ experience with textual mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Students read to get to know themselves and others. However, beyond the initial inclusion of representative and inclusive texts in classrooms, this study demonstrates the vital importance of pedagogy. As much care, attention, and education needs to be given to how inclusive texts are taken up in classroom spaces, especially when those classroom spaces are majority white. Following are two pedagogical praxes, developed from critical emotion studies scholars, that provide educators with ways to enter and move through affective classroom spaces intentionally and directly.

Critical Emotional Praxis

According to Zembylas (2008), a politics of emotion does not only involve risks for educators but also offers possibilities for a renewed criticality that might serve to produce new understandings and ways of being in the world. Critical emotional praxis, or CEP, is Zembylas’ suggestion for a “critical mobilization of emotion” (p. 5). According to Zembylas, CEP is grounded in an understanding of the role of emotions in power relations; it consists of the ability to question emotionally charged and cherished beliefs, “exposing how privileged positions and comfort zones” (p. 12) inform perspectives and actions. CEP translates these emotional understandings into relationships, teaching practices, and enactments of social justice. My analysis demonstrates the need for CEP in teaching and learning, specifically in courses such as mine that explicitly ask students to engage emotionally with identities different from their own.

One way that I have aimed to practice CEP in teaching settings after this study is to guide students through critical reflections about their positionalities in relation to course material, as well as how they are affectively responding to both texts and classroom interactions over the course of the semester. When students name their positionalities and investigate how their multifaceted identities are impacting their cognitive analyses and emotional responses, it allows for a more complex and critical exploration of their responses to literature. In addition, these reflections have given me as the educator the opportunity to better know and respond to each student, asking questions and inviting them to consider their emotions in relation to explicit course goals around social justice.

A Pedagogy of Discomfort

A pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas & Boler, 2002) is an explicitly antiracist method of teaching that “requires that individuals step outside of their comfort zones and recognize what and how one has been taught to see (or not to see)” (Zembylas & Boler, 2002, n.p.). A pedagogy of discomfort involves the investigation of emotions and “critical reflection that informs changes in hegemonic beliefs and habitual yet harmful actions and practices” (Ohito, 2016, p. 458). In a pedagogy of discomfort, moments of tension revealed at the nexus of racialized interactions and their inscribed traumas should be welcomed, even designed. It is only when feeling and facing our discomfort that white pre-service and practicing teachers can begin to re-vision our affective reactions, habits, and behaviors within systems of white supremacy.

In my own praxis, the ability to practice a pedagogy of discomfort has begun with developing my own critical awareness of my responses to emotions, many of which have been socialized in me

from family dynamics and social norms since childhood. It has been essential for me to develop my own comfort with discomfort, to sit in moments of tension instead of trying to resolve them, and to be okay myself with times that discomfort circulates in classroom spaces. Only after developing that personal praxis have I been able to welcome—and as Ohito (2016) names, even design—opportunities for discomfort in curriculum and pedagogy. After a recent course lesson that was full of tension, where students were challenged to investigate their own thinking in relation to power and community change, students' reflections revealed that, while some did not enjoy the experience in the moment, they later realized that the conflict itself was a learning moment, a spark that challenged their held assumptions and ideas of *is* and *what can be*.

In sum, I believe that pre-service education programs as well as in-service professional development should draw from CEP and pedagogies of discomfort in order to support teachers' understanding of the powerful role of affect in the classroom, as well as the vital role teachers hold in noticing and disrupting emotions such as empty empathy when they circulate.

Conclusion

Emotions are and will always be at work within education. This critical ethnography demonstrates the dangers of these emotions when they fail to move past sentimentality and empty empathy, and when they value the comfort of white educators over the challenging but essential enactment of antiracist pedagogies. Those interested in the role of emotion and affect in education should look towards critical emotional praxis and pedagogies of discomfort as methods by which to explicitly challenge white supremacy in education, as well as develop antiracist dispositions within white educators. Teacher-educators, myself included, must not let ourselves lapse into neutrality, but must instead interrogate our students and ourselves, reflexively uncovering what our emotions are enabling and what they are preventing.

As described above in the implications, it is essential that educators—especially white educators, in this context—embark on a critical reflexive practice to consider how to design, invite, and respond to moments of affect in the classroom. When teaching inclusive children's literature, it is important to plan not just for the course itself, but for the affective, emotional responses that will inevitably come up. Practices like having students keep a self-reflexion journal have significantly increased my own ability to guide students through naming and examining their own emotional responses, considering what those emotions do (Ahmed, 2015) to reinforce or disrupt the norms of white supremacy culture. Instead of simply teaching literature, I now teach literature and attempt to facilitate multiple opportunities for students to consider and discuss their personal and collective response to literature. More than any tangible recommendations, however, this study reveals the personal work white educators must do to make possible real learning around social justice. When I look back at what I learned over the course of this research process, I realize that all my important growth was born not of comfort, but of discomfort. When I failed to interrogate my white students' emotional responses to literature and the shallow emotions circulating in our classroom I failed as an educator to provide them opportunities for growth. Realizing my own role in the data from this research was certainly not comfortable—but it was essential. The reflexive process of conducting this research and practicing writing as inquiry has opened up new commitments and possibilities for myself as an educator. As Ahmed (2007) describes, “every experience I have had of pleasure and excitement about a world opening up has begun with such ordinary feelings of discomfort” (p. 163).

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