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Demonstrating the Power of CRT in the Experiences of Graduate Students

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Introduction

Nearly 30 years ago, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was introduced to the field of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings and Tate argued that, in order to understand educational inequities in the United States, it is essential to analyze the intersections of race and property. Specifically, they drew parallels between Harris' analysis of whiteness as property within legal studies and educational inequity. Within the American school system, whiteness acts as the ultimate property because it grants "rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property and the absolute rights to exclude" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 59). Simply, whiteness is valued, celebrated, and rewarded in school settings (Castagno, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis, 2001; Yoon, 2016). The construction of whiteness as property in schools allows for the advancement of students who possess whiteness (white and white-passing students) and the subordination and victimization of students of color.

Throughout the past three decades, scholars within the field of education have utilized CRT to gain a greater understanding of educational outcomes and the experiences of students, teachers, and administrators of color in schools. For instance, CRT has provided the tools for identifying threads of racism in curriculum and materials in K-12 classrooms (Brown & Brown, 2010; Thomas & Dyches, 2019). It has supported studies that have shown how racist policies and historical movements have influenced public schools and schooling (Buras, 2011; Freidus, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Additionally, CRT has helped scholars identify instances of students' transformational resistance to cultural norms and ways of being in U.S. schools that devalue the knowledges and experiences they have (Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001). CRT has also shed light on how preservice teachers and teacher educators of color in the academy navigate predominantly white teacher education programs with white cultural norms (Baszile, 2008; Blackwell, 2010; Brown, 2014; Kohli, 2009; Matias, 2013b; Picower and Kohli, 2017). It has helped to identify barriers to recruitment and retention of teachers of color (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Kim & Cooc, 2020; Villegas & Davis, 2008). Other studies using CRT have identified ways that white pre-service teachers maintain and uphold racism (King, 1991; Matias, 2013a; Shim, 2017).

Presently, CRT has gained nationwide attention. In the last few years, conservative politicians and media personalities have co-opted the theory and rebranded it as an indoctrination tool to teach students to hate white people, or for white students to feel guilty for being white. Many conservative politicians have been successful in spreading misinformation about CRT, as seen during the Senate Judiciary Committee's confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's appointment when Republican Senator Ted Cruz asked the overly-qualified nominee whether she agrees that babies are racist (Associated Press, 2022). It is clear that some politicians continue to

significantly influence public perception of CRT on the national stage with hyper-local implications. In the state of Texas, during a global pandemic, Republican-backed policies have added stressors to a profession that has been struggling to recruit and retain qualified educators. Over the last two years, Governor Gregg Abbott has forced teachers to teach online and in-person, banned mask mandates, censored teaching by mandating race and sexuality be left out of the curriculum along with an ever-growing list of banned books. All the while doing nothing to fairly compensate teachers and protect them and their students from gun violence, instead, Abbott, has made it easier to legally acquire guns (including assault rifles) for anyone over the age of 18 by opposing red-flag laws and universal background checks.

Like many scholars who came before us, we have found CRT useful in unpacking our experiences as graduate students at a predominantly white public university and in our work as teacher educators. In an attempt to demonstrate the utility of an urgent need for CRT in all education fields and spaces, we penned this essay. In it, we use our experiential knowledge to demonstrate the ways that race operates in big and small ways in our work as graduate students. First, we articulate what we mean by experiential knowledge. Then, we provide details about our context and our understanding of CRT. Next, we each share an experience, followed by a critical race analysis of the experience. We end the essay with suggestions for continued applications of CRT in education.

Experiential Knowledge

One of the key contributions of CRT is re-centering and assigning great value to experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge emphasizes the lived experiences of people of color as legitimate and essential in understanding racial subordination (Yosso, 2005). Critical race theory draws on the lived experiences of people of color by including storytelling, family histories, scenarios, and narratives (Yosso, 2005). For two of the authors, Alexis who identifies as Black, and Mónica who identifies as Latinx, the centering of experiential knowledge allows our stories and experiences to be validated against claims of objectivity and neutrality in society. For the third author, Jimmy, who identifies as white, CRT gives the tools to critically analyze and challenge whiteness in his own experiences. As educators, we believe that our work is not neutral and our lived experiences within the field can serve as evidence to reveal, name, and take action against racism. In this paper, each author shares a racialized experience in our work followed by an analysis informed by CRT. The analyses are intended to connect each experience to a broader historical context revealing the implicit and explicit ways in which racism operates in the education system. We believe that any critically oriented teacher education program can find our analyses useful in the quest to make education a more just and humanistic experience. Next, we will discuss the conditions that brought the three authors together and the sociopolitical events that impacted them in different ways.

Context

Our paths brought us together from different geographic regions, sociocultural backgrounds, and teaching experiences. They intersected at the start of the Fall 2019 semester as we each began our journeys as doctoral students in our department. We met through our enrollment in the same courses at the beginning of the program. We represent three different program areas (cultural studies in education, bilingual and bicultural education, and language and literacy studies), but we are united by our interests in disrupting dominant ideas and practices that are socially and culturally damaging in schools.

We attended class at a highly-regarded, large research institution. We entered into an academic department with a reputation for centering equity and social justice in teaching and research, primarily made up of women and of people of color. Despite this distinction, we worked as teacher educators in a predominately white teacher preparation program. In our work, we supervised pre-service teachers in their field placements around Austin, whose public schools have been noted as the most segregated in Texas (Sterne, 2020). While most of our pre-service teachers are placed in schools with large populations of Latinx students living in working-class communities, some are still placed in schools in particular areas of the district where a clear majority--60-75 percent--of the students are white. And, even if the majority of our students were not white, research has indicated that teacher education programs in their policies, pedagogies, and curricula tend to center whiteness (Blackwell, 2010; Brown, 2014; Kohli, 2009). In addition, our university is still grappling with its ties to white supremacy and the larger, colonial history of the universities in the United States (Gordon, n.d.).

Regardless of Austin's progressive reputation, the city is still haunted by a history of racist policies like redlining and the strategic construction of an interstate in order to enshrine segregation (Busch, 2013). It is the capital city of a state whose governor recently issued an executive order for officers to pull over vehicles suspected of carrying migrants (but recently blocked by the U.S. Attorney General) (Executive Order No. GA 37, 2021). This particular convergence of land, history, and policy is knowledge that has been produced and made obvious because of the tools of CRT. This understanding of our particular context informs how we ourselves make sense of the spaces we inhabit and our connections to them. Below, we offer a brief overview of CRT.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from the legal field. In the 1970's through the thoughtful analysis of the existing dynamics between race, racism, and the law by Derek Bell and Alan Freeman. Later joined by Richard Delgado, Bell and Freeman worked to establish and name the framework. In law CRT unveiled how laws are not objective, neutral, or apolitical. These ways of thinking about objectivity and neutrality have been applied beyond the legal field (Delgado & Stefanic, 1993, 2017). Specifically, in the field of education, CRT has been used as a theoretical and analytical framework to analyze the impact of race and racism in educational structures, academic outcomes and the school experiences of children of color with a greater aim of working towards challenging and eliminating educational inequity (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Scholars have used CRT to address racial-microaggressions and campus racial climate in higher education and to reveal the challenges and experiences of Latinx identifying students (Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso; 2000; Solórzano, Villalpando & Oseguera, 2002). CRT has served to examine and theorize about various racialized and ethnic experiences such as African-American (Lynn, 1999) experiences and Asian-Pacific American experiences (Teranishi, 2002) in education. Extensions of the CRT framework in education have also revealed ways in which students resist racism and oppression in educational spaces (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). CRT is useful in revealing and identifying social inequities which is helpful and necessary for those motivated to work towards social justice. Daniel Solórzano (1997,1998) identified five tenets of CRT in education:

1. *The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination.* Race and racism exist and are central to people's experiences in U.S. society. CRT acknowledges that racism has micro and

macro elements, can be institutional and individual, can be conscious and unconscious, and its impact compounds on individuals and groups.

2. *The challenge to dominant ideology.* CRT challenges dominant ideas about neutrality and objectivity such as color-blindness and meritocracy that serve dominant groups and maintain the status quo.
3. *The commitment to social justice.* CRT is committed to social justice and doing away with racism and all types of oppression.
4. *The centrality of experiential knowledge.* CRT demands we center the experiences and knowledges of marginalized students and communities. One way to do this is to problematize "stock" stories that are typical in the school curriculum and uphold white supremacy and continue to subjugate marginalized communities.
5. *The transdisciplinary perspective.* CRT insists that race and racism analysis must include historical context and transdisciplinary methods.

By understanding CRT and its usefulness as an analytical tool, stakeholders in the education field can apply these central tenets and find ways to work toward the greater aim of eradicating all forms of oppression.

Recently, CRT has come under attack in the media by conservatives. One example is the reaction to Nikole Hannah-Jones groundbreaking 1619 Project that utilized a critical lens to locate racism and slavery at the center of the United States national narrative (CITE NH-J or others identifying the role of CRT in 1619). Former President Donald Trump called CRT a “Marxist doctrine that rejects the vision of Martin Luther King Jr” (Tensley, 2021). Current republican Florida governor Ron DeSantis referred to CRT by stating “it’s basically teaching kids to hate our country and to hate each other based on race” (Tensley, 2021). CRT is also targeted by conservative legislatures across the country. In Texas SB3, was signed into law on December 2, 2021, and overhauls the teaching of “civics” in Texas schools. The use of the word “civics” to refer to the content that is banned, in the codification of the law, does not have to specifically name works by racial minorities (i.e. Martin Luther King, Jr’s Letter from Birmingham Jail). Instead, its wording treats civics pedagogy as politically neutral and seeks to curtail any teaching that implicates white people or white students in the perpetuation of racism (SB3). Notably, the bill does not name CRT specifically, and it distorts the true nature of CRT by oversimplifying it as something that is taught in K-12, a “strategy” to incite anti-whiteness or make children feel guilty or ashamed for being white. The bill denounces race, gender diversity, and inclusion training for school staff and banning books, prohibits discussions of current events in classrooms, and advocates for the maintenance of a “neutral” curriculum. Therefore, understanding CRT is more important than ever for educators at every level.

Unpacking our Racialized Experiences Using Critical Race Theory

Alexis

To fund the first year of my doctoral program, I worked as a field supervisor for the College of Education. In this role, I acted as an instructional coach for student teachers. Each week, I visited a student teacher’s classroom and observed them teach a forty five-minute lesson. After teaching the lesson, the student teacher and I debriefed. Typically, this debrief consisted of myself providing feedback while a student teacher furiously asked questions or panicked. It was a tough job, yet I felt energized in advocating for and supporting new teachers.

During the fall semester, I coached ten student teachers split between three schools. One of the school placements was Kirkwood Elementary. Kirkwood Elementary is an elementary school located in an affluent neighborhood in North Austin. It is a part of the Austin Independent School District (AISD). While the majority of students who attend schools within AISD are Latinx (55%), Kirkwood is a predominantly white elementary school. During the 2020-2021 school year 62.4% of students who attended Kirkwood identified as White, 26.2% Hispanic, 5.4% as two or more races, 3.3% Black, 2.6% Asian, and 0% American Indian (Austin ISD, 2021). Since only 3.3% of students at Kirkwood identified as Black, I stuck out like a sore thumb whenever I visited. Although the students were familiar with field supervisors coming in and out of their classrooms, whenever I entered most classrooms, I was greeted with “Are you [insert the only Black student in the classrooms name] mom?” I imagine this is because the students were not used to seeing a Black person representing the University or a Black professional in their daily lives. In effect, they reasoned I had to be the token black student’s mom. Nevertheless, I usually responded “No. I am your teacher’s teacher and I am here to observe them.” Most students would appear shocked and then quickly forget about the Black woman in the back of their classroom furiously writing notes. However, the fifth-grade classroom at Kirkwood was always hyper-aware of my presence.

As a Black woman, I take pride in and careful attention to the health and presentation of my hair. Many researchers have documented and analyzed the importance of hair to Black women (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016). To ensure the health of my hair, I engage in a strict hair regimen each week. This consists of moisturizing my scalp every other morning with essential oils and wrapping my hair in a silk scarf or bonnet every night. I use a multitude of essential oils to moisturize my scalp. Typically, this includes a combination of olive, tea tree and jojoba oil. This mixture leaves my scalp moisturized for the day and myself smelling refreshed. Throughout my childhood my mother moisturized my scalp two to three times a week. The aroma of oils on my scalp takes me back to those intimate moments. For me, this mixture of oils smells like love and reminds me that I am loved.

Since I complete this ritual of moisturizing my scalp every other morning, it was inevitable that I would visit Kirkwood on days that I had a freshly moisturized scalp. The first time I entered the fifth-grade classroom with a freshly moisturized scalp I arrived to their classroom early. The class was still at the gym. I took advantage of this extra time by quickly walking to the back of the classroom and preparing myself for the upcoming observation. Soon after, the fifth-grade class arrived. The line leader, a white boy, led the class into the classroom and immediately screamed “Ew! It stinks in this classroom!” His outburst caught the curiosity and attention of his other mostly white classmates who sniffed the air and exclaimed “Ah! It does stink! What’s that smell?” All around me I heard “It stinks!” “Do you smell that?” “What is that smell?” There was so much commotion the teacher had to redirect the students to get their attention. In that moment, I was confused as to what the smell was. I didn’t smell anything unusual and just brushed it off as middle school children playing middle school games.

The next week, I returned to the same classroom with a freshly moisturized scalp. The same scene from the previous week transpired except this time the middle schoolers were looking at me with disgusted eyes. My curiosity was peaked again, yet I brushed it off. The following week I returned to the fifth-grade classroom with a freshly moisturized scalp. Some of the students entered the classroom with their noses pinched. I witnessed a white middle school girl whose nose was not pinched laugh at white middle school boy whose nose was pinched. She asked him playfully “Why are you doing that?” He attempted to whisper “That girl is here. It always smells when she is in

here. She stinks.” The same boy, with a crowd of white middle school students watching then asked me “Why do you smell like that?”

In that moment, I realized the students were reacting to my hair oils. I immediately felt small and like a foreign animal at a museum. Prior to studying at the University of Texas, I was a third-grade teacher on the northside of Milwaukee. All of my students were Black. My classroom frequently smelled of a mixture of essential oils. Never did a student complain about the aroma of the classroom. Now, I was sitting in a majority white classroom where the students were outwardly expressing their disgust with my cultural practice and questioning my hygiene. I felt humiliated, defenseless, angry and resentful. I ignored the student and quickly wrapped up the observation. Leaving the classroom, I vowed to never put myself in that position again. I responded by altering my hair care routine. On mornings I visited Kirkwood I moisturized my scalp in the afternoon. However, I still remained unprotected within Kirkwood Elementary’s walls.

Analysis: The transdisciplinary perspective

The fifth tenet of Critical Race Theory stresses its transdisciplinary perspective. Specifically, CRT draws on literature from other fields to analyze and understand race and racism. To better understand my experience as a Black woman visiting Kirkwood Elementary, it is useful to incorporate a Black Feminist framework. Utilizing this framework, Black women can define their womanhood and social position in the world separate from white women and Black men, challenge dominant narratives that demonize and subordinate Black women and empower Black women to continue to work towards a more equitable world (Hill Collins, 1991; Yosso, 2005). Black feminist theory centers the theoretical framework of intersectionality. Intersectionality posits that privilege and discrimination manifest in specific ways at the intersection of multiple social categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality and ability (Crenshaw, 1991). In effect, when studying Black women there is not just a race problem or just a gender problem. Black Feminist theory highlights how primarily race and gender along with other social categories work together to produce a unique individual experience of Black womanhood.

The social identities of Black and female allow me to understand my experience of race and racism as a Black woman at Kirkwood Elementary. I move throughout the world with a host of stereotypes marked on my body. Throughout history, Black women have been characterized as (a) Mammy, a woman who is nurturing, full of love and sexually undesirable; (b) Sapphire, the masculine loud female; (c) Jezebel, hypersexualized woman who tempts men; and (d) the Welfare Queen, the woman who is loud, talks back and milks the system while refusing to work (Annamma et al., 2019). Academic literature published as early as the 1930’s discuss Black women as footloose and ignorant (Fraizer, 1937;1940).

These images are consumed by society and result in an implicit bias toward Black women. This bias follows us everywhere, even to school. My coarse full locs contrasted to straight wiry hair represented uncleanliness and unprofessionalism to the white children of Kirkwood. I was immediately marked with the presumption of filth and impurity.

Critical Race Theory is essential in unpacking my experience at Kirkwood because it unveils how racism is endemic to society. When I enter schools, I enter as a Black woman. It does not matter if I am donning a UT Field Supervisor name tag or my finest suit, I enter as a Black woman, riddled with a host of political, cultural and social significance. Kirkwood and it’s students are not neutral

or apolitical. I was ostracized and made to feel disgusting due to my natural Black hair. Black Feminist Theory is necessary in understanding my experience at Kirkwood because it allows me to highlight experiences that diverge from white women. Lived experiences are valuable in understanding Black women and the multiple levels of meaning within Black women's everyday lives.

Mónica

At the start of my first semester as a doctoral student at South University, I sat in a cohort seminar with preservice teachers I would be supervising. In this supervisor role I would be working alongside preservice teachers observing them implement lessons and providing feedback and opportunities to reflect about their experiences in the field. During this initial meeting the students presented summaries and reflections about books they each had read over the summer. The books they read were about race and the titles were chosen from a list provided to them. I believe that one of the intentions of the activity was to make visible how race may impact education. As one of the students talked about the book they read, they used the term "colored people" repeatedly. I was sitting next to the cohort coordinator, a white woman, who turned to look at me and whispered, "Correct her!" I did not correct her. I said nothing. I was the only instructor of color in a classroom with predominantly white students. This was one of many problematic, racist, or oppressive instances I experienced and witnessed that semester.

Eventually, I expressed some of my concerns to the cohort coordinator regarding disparaging comments or assumptions some of the preservice teachers made during class or during one-on-one meetings regarding students and families in their field placements. Unbothered by what I was reporting to her, she assured me this would not be the first or the last time preservice teachers would make racist or deficit remarks and even joked that if I thought these instances were alarming, I should have seen the last cohort. On another occasion several weeks later, I spoke to her about the incident that had occurred early in the semester during the book presentations. I expressed that I did not appreciate how she handled that situation. I again brought concerns about other instances of racism from her and students in the cohort. This time her response was different. Her indignation was clear as she described how shocked and disappointed she felt at the idea that she may have asked me to correct the preservice teacher. She then asked why, "IF" she had said such a thing I did not "say something sooner." She said she had been doing her job for over 25 years and worked with "all kinds of people" and had never had something like this happen and could no longer trust me.

Analysis: The centrality of race and racism in society

My home language is Spanish, and I identify as a Salvadoran-American woman. I have replayed many of the situations from that first year in my head several times and questioned what was wrong with me. In my reflections, CRT has helped me understand how race is central to how I am treated and what I experience, in this case specifically in an educational space that is predominantly white. The story I share has micro and macro elements of systemic racism. The isolated everyday comments or microaggressions (Solórzano, 1998) did not sound like a "big deal" but over time compounded and called me to speak up. When I spoke up, the coordinator first absolved themselves from the institutional and macro consequences as if all of it is out of their control. At the individual level, they did not take responsibility for their discriminatory actions. Instead, my story was met with a denial followed by "hypersensitivity" that positioned the white perpetrators' actions as unconscious and unintended "if" it had happened (Solórzano, 1998).

The importance of CRT in making sense of or analyzing situations like the ones I experienced is that we can identify everyday things in our practice and norms, that can be changed, individually and institutionally, to eradicate racism and campus racial climates that are oppressive and exclusionary. Taking a closer look at micro, small or individual acts or forms of oppression, whether intentional or unintentional is not the end-all, instead, those moments and actions when identified are starting points for taking action against racism in education. Unexamined race, racism, and power contribute to the possibility of preservice teachers accepting and adopting subtractive practices (Valenzuela, 1999) and reduce education to a mere transactional endeavor far from its potential for liberation and social justice (Freire, 1970; King, 1991; Matias, 2013a; Shim, 2017).

White preservice teachers and teacher educators must examine and critically reflect on their whiteness to develop and grow their understanding of the individual, structural, and systemic educational norms that can uphold the status quo through dysconscious racism or “limited and distorted understandings” (King, 1999, p. 133) about race and social inequity. White teachers and preservice teachers must interrogate their whiteness to be able to engage in culturally responsive pedagogies that avoid reifying racial oppression and white supremacy in schools (Matias, 2013a). Even when white preservice teachers engage in self-reflective practices or activities in their coursework, such as critical race book readings, it is possible that they may “unknowingly” or “unconsciously” feel uncomfortable and activate emotional “filters” that make it challenging for them to engage in authentic critical self-reflection about their relationships to race and racism (Shim, 2017).

In academia and teacher preparation when racism is met with compassion and understanding for the racist, the claims are that racists are “unaware”, and innocent, nothing changes. At most we feel good about “trying” and doing our best to “nudge” racists. This signals a belief devoid of context, history, and the endemic nature of racism. Thus, using CRT as a tool of analysis in the education field can make evident the ways in which our work and institutions uphold or hinder the tenets of CRT and most importantly and urgent we deprive ourselves of the opportunities to engage with questions about how and what actions are necessary for our quest for social justice.

Jimmy

After months of developing a curriculum for the new racial affinity groups program for pre-service teachers that Alexis, Mónica, and I proposed, we were finally ready to recruit participants. This process involved creating and editing a promotional video, hosting an information session for interested pre-service teachers, and managing a database of registrations. We divided up each of those tasks into smaller, independent tasks to bring completed to our weekly Zoom meetings. As a result, much of the initial composing and creating happened in isolation.

In preparation for the info session, we each designed a few slides and wrote some ideas in the presenter notes about what we wanted to share about the slide. I was assigned to draft our talking points for one slide about the structure of the program and one slide listing the weekly topics that would ground the groups’ discussions. I was confident that the writing I had done about the session topics and structure of the program on my slides thoroughly explained our vision for the affinity groups and gave participants all the information they needed to decide whether the program was something they would be interested in. When we got around to discussing my slides in our meeting, though, Mónica and Alexis gave me the same feedback on nearly every sentence—that sentence is too wordy, this description is too theoretical, what you wrote is too abstract. I noticed my heart beating faster, and I felt embarrassed. For a split second I felt defensive, but as I inquired into the feeling, I

recognized that I had made a huge mistake. By using abstract and theoretical language instead of simple and concrete descriptions, I had written this overview of the program for an imagined audience that was unaware of the themes and topics related to racism. I had written it with white participants in mind.

I received similar feedback as we implemented the program. Each week we met to review and revise the curriculum that we had put together the previous summer. Alexis and Mónica noticed a pattern: the structure of the sessions, which I had suggested (an introductory “activity” about the topic followed by “discussion”) centered whiteness. The structure presumed that participants needed an opportunity to learn about different ways that racism is upheld by dominant ideas like meritocracy and deficit thinking, a presumption that is likely valid for most white participants, but less likely so for the Black, Asian, Latinx, and multiracial participants. If the purpose of the affinity group for BIPOC participants is to come together and make meaning about shared experiences in ways that were healing, starting the session with an activity meant to deepen one’s understanding of racism could be distracting or even offensive. Similarly, Mónica and Alexis would regularly suggest rewriting the proposed discussion questions for the affinity groups, sometimes because they were too abstract, sometimes because they centered whiteness (although we found ways to keep those for the white groups), and oftentimes for both reasons. In preparing for the information session and in our curriculum revisions, because of the grace and trust of my colleagues of color, I learned that I was falling short in my responsibility to develop plans and sessions that invited everyone to participate.

Analysis: Challenging dominant ideologies

My experiences here illustrate a major lesson I have learned: no white person can ever completely shed the racist conditioning of our society and its institutions. In fact, expecting to achieve some kind of triumph over racism itself is an example of the individualistic, competitive, and progress-oriented thinking that white supremacy relies on (Jones & Okun, 2001; Leonardo, 2002). It’s a colonial mindset that hopes to conquer whatever is in our way so that we can put the discomfort all behind us and live in (false) harmony. Rather, this thinking (a “dominant ideology” from a Critical Race Theory perspective) distracts white folks from our present work. CRT makes clear that racism is endemic to Western institutions and to cultural and social arrangements the world over (Gunier, 2004; Omi & Winant, 1994). The structures and systems of schooling have benefitted me in ways that endorsed and rewarded white language norms. This is evident in the ways that whiteness as a dominant ideology still seeped through in my work on this program with Mónica and Alexis.

Despite my efforts, the rotten core of this dominant ideology of whiteness still resides in me. It is clear in the way that I can choose to avoid addressing racism I witness; in the way that I create distance between myself and other “bad” or “worse” white people as a way to ease my own discomfort and to prop up my ego; and, as my stories above show, in the way that I can so easily intellectualize racism and white supremacy rather than experiencing its violent and spirit-murdering effects (Love, 2019). My participation in dominant ideologies maintains white supremacy, while my disruption of and divestment from them can act to resist it. Because I am white, I can mostly only know the material, emotional, social, spiritual, and psychological costs of white supremacy and racism in an abstract sense, and Critical Race Theory helps me understand that.

Implications & Conclusion

The experiences shared above demonstrate the power of CRT as a lens for making sense of our experiences in our educational contexts. CRT provided a pathway for Alexis to understand how her Black and female identities caused the Kirkwood students to experience her in a particular way. CRT validated Mónica's experiences when interacting with whiteness instead of leaving her confused and holding guilt that didn't belong to her. CRT allowed Jimmy to implicate himself in benefiting from and perpetuating white supremacy in academia. Without CRT, we may be left to make meaning of racial violence or our own perpetuation of white supremacy in ways that do not implicate systems and structures, leaving those systems of unchecked power uninterrupted.

In connection to some of the vignettes we shared, we see a need for spaces that encourage reflection on identities and how they position us in relation to the world and others. We see a need specifically for pre-service teachers to engage in race-based affinity groups. Such a space can foster racial consciousness through regular reflection that explicitly centers race, but in a setting where shared knowledges, experiences, and histories can be used as a resource for healing, growth, and action (Pour-Khorshid, 2019). As a result, we have begun developing and implementing a race-based affinity group program for pre-service teachers in our college. It is our hope that such a program, rooted in our own experiences paired with the tools of CRT, can further the collective project of raising racial consciousness among educators.

Alexis Bigelow is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. A former third-grade teacher, she is interested in how Black women elementary teachers pedagogically make space for Black students to develop and enact their civic identities. Current and future research projects draw on critical and Black feminist theories to contribute to the knowledge bases of Black women elementary teachers and resistance in K-12 classrooms.

Mónica Pineda is a PhD candidate in Curriculum and Instruction in the Bilingual Bicultural Education program. She is Salvadoran American and is a former dual-language early childhood educator. Pineda holds an MA in early childhood education. Her research interest include nuanced representations of language and literacy practices of Latinx identifying students and communities; bilingual education; multimodal learning & multimodal teaching; and humanizing, culturally responsive pedagogies.

Jimmy McLean is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. A former public school teacher, he is interested in how elementary literacy teachers imagine and enact critical and humanizing pedagogies with their students. Current and future research projects draw on critical, feminist, and queer theories to both contribute to the knowledge bases of literacy studies, critical curriculum studies, and gender/sexuality studies and inform transformative action in K-12 education.

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