Reopening Racial Wounds: Whiteness, Melancholia, and Affect in the English Classroom

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This article critiques a classroom encounter between a Black student, Richard, and a white student, Nick, that complicated the white English teacher, Mr. Turner’s, attempt to facilitate a discussion about racial progress in America. Students positioned their bodies on a continuum between 1, no racial progress since the 1930s, and 10, full racial equity. When Richard positioned himself at the low end of the continuum and Nick located himself on the high end, a disruption occurred after Mr. Turner moved his body toward Nick while verbally validating Richard’s perspective. I argue that the classroom’s affective register was altered by racial melancholia, reopening racial wounds and reproducing whiteness, evoking emotions I call “melancholic affects.”

Responding to Baker-Bell, Butler, and Johnson’s (2017) call for a critical race English education and following the theme of this special issue, critical whiteness in English education, this article explores how whiteness disrupted an English teacher’s attempt to facilitate a dialogue about racial progress in America since the 1930s. Stemming from a larger yearlong critical ethnographic research project that I conducted in a high school English classroom, this study uses racial melancholia (Cheng, 2001; Eng & Han, 2000) and affect (Massumi, 2015) as theoretical tools to uncover the subtle and insidious ways that whiteness operated when students engaged in this dialogue concerning racial progress (or a lack thereof) and as a result exposed the persistent reality of racial violence in contemporary American society.

Often, when we evoke the connections between past state-sanctioned racial violence and how this violence continues to haunt Black, Brown, and
indigenous people, it produces racial melancholia, the reopening of racial wounds that have festered for centuries, having never fully healed. Tensions arise when exposing this wound, highlighting the complex relationship between history and racism. An imperceptibility often surrounds this tension; feelings slowly emerge within us or sometimes suddenly appear, seemingly in ways that we cannot explain. These tensions manifest in the feeling that people of color unexpectedly acquire when realizing they are being followed by a police squad car or the dread they feel when being racially profiled in a department store. During these moments, there is a shift in atmosphere: A casual joy-ride turns into an anxiety-riddled car trip; the department store clerk transforms a fun shopping spree into a nightmarish reminder of one’s skin color. Alternatively, sometimes the atmosphere is predetermined to contain a racial register, for example, when one finds oneself driving below the speed limit on the highway or making sure to keep hands out of pockets while strolling through the jewelry store—all in hopes of avoiding racially motivated encounters. As Ahmed (2010) notes in the epigraph, these situations are “angled.”

Of the utmost importance for the purposes of this article is Ahmed’s (2010) assertion that “the pedagogic encounter is full of angles” (p. 57, emphasis added). Ahmed’s description of the critical formulation of pedagogic maneuvers as “angled” contains significant implications for teaching and learning about race in the English classroom. For instance, in what ways are affects racially angled, how do these angles influence the teacher, and what emotions are produced as a result of these angles that may either inhibit or promote classroom learning opportunities? I analyze this series of questions by examining a specific classroom pedagogical encounter where the white classroom teacher, Mr. Turner, Nick, a white student, and Richard, a Black student, clashed during a discussion about racial progress that was contextualized by what I term melancholic affects, which produced intensified emotional responses during the conversation.

I first describe what is commonly known as the “affective turn” (Clough & Halley, 2007) recently taken up in the social sciences and humanities and place it within the context of educational scholarship on race and racism. I then more closely study how formations of racial melancholia are influential to understanding affect and the pedagogical encounter. Using Mr. Turner’s conflict with Nick and Richard as the source of my analysis, I illustrate the aforementioned incident, which involved students positioning themselves on a continuum between 1 and 10—1 representing no racial progress since the 1930s and 10 representing full racial equity. When Richard positioned himself at the low end of the continuum and Nick located himself on the
high end, a conflict ensued and Mr. Turner had to make a split-second decision as to how he was going to handle the encounter. The ensuing conflict occurred when Mr. Turner agreed verbally with Richard’s perspective while simultaneously moving his body away from Richard to stand next to Nick. During this decision, I argue that racial melancholia mediated the affective environment and influenced the emotional responses of the teacher and students in the classroom. I demonstrate how racial melancholia is a useful tool for uncovering methods in which technologies of whiteness are mobilized to interrupt critical race dialogues in the English classroom. I end with a discussion of how “working” the pedagogical angles can be used to disrupt hegemonic constructions of whiteness through the production of alter-accomplishments (Massumi, 2015) that represent affective practices of antiracism.

Affect, Race, and (Classroom) Space

The study of affect has experienced a reemergence in the past decade within the social sciences and humanities where scholars have sought to better understand and theorize the context and transmission of bodily energies, intensities, feelings, and emotions (Brennan, 2004; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Theories of affect have also been used to understand race in ways that consider ontologies of racialization in conjunction with epistemological, material, and discursive forms of racism (Lim, 2010; Saldanha, 2006, 2010). Still other studies define affective formations within the realm of psychoanalytic accounts of race and subjectivity (Ahmed, 2004; Hook, 2005). These various studies are characteristic of the many theories of affect that encompass the field of critical affect studies (Rice, 2008) as there is not one single generalizable theory of affect, nor should there be, considering “the tensions, blends, and blurs” of affective environments (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 4). What may be the most enduring contribution to the affective turn is the recognition of the corporeal as dynamically interconnected to the sociopolitical (Zembylas, 2015).

Originating from Spinoza’s (1677/2001) proclamation that affect is defined as the body’s capacity to affect and be affected, I make central the modes in which bodies are mobilized within classroom spaces as inextricably linked to theorizing racial encounters through a psychosocial lens. Centralizing the movement of bodies within racial interactions foregrounds an analysis of affective formations in the classroom and enables an articulation of the ways in which affective forces are organized to achieve certain ends. This theorization of the corporeal dimensions of the classroom allows for
representations of race that uncover ontological conceptualizations of racialized bodies rather than solely focusing on the discursive, emotional, and/or ideological modes of racism. In other words, we cannot fully comprehend epistemological theories of race without considering ontologies of racialization. The study of affect instead positions historical assemblages (Zembylas, 2015) as the critical backdrop for the methods in which epistemologies of race are deployed in classroom spaces, including the ways we think, talk, and feel about racism. Racial melancholia illuminates these affective formations and exposes the often-hidden linkages between racialized bodies and affective energies and intensities within classroom spaces.

**Melancholic Affects**

The concept of racial melancholia as a “constellation of affect” illuminates the “tension between the past and the present, between the dead and the living” (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003, p. 1). Race scholars have used the Freudian (1917) concept of melancholia, or the harmful act of mourning loss, as a framework for making connections between the traumatic effects of racial violence on racial identities (see Cheng, 2001; Eng & Han, 2000). Racial melancholia’s relationship to trauma and history enables an ontologically based analytical device that can be used to unveil normatively structured affective formations in the classroom. The repeated aggravation of past and present racial wounds that come to frame racial encounters, bodily movements, and the feelings that these movements and encounters conjure underscore the psychosocial reproduction of trauma. Racial melancholia’s connection to affect highlights the notion that “every *intrasubjective* process is potentially an intersubjective exchange” (Cheng, 2006, p. 126, italics in original).

The intrasubjectivity of racial melancholia refers to how the dead remain inside us—how the history of our racial losses becomes the formation of the ego itself. The encryption of these losses within us is significant when theorizing intersubjective racial encounters and how these encounters are shaped by racial preconceptions. The “angling” of affects is psychosocially linked, considering the American history of racial transgressions and the ways in which these transgressions continue to haunt society. For example, as Cheng (2006) illustrates, “The ‘personal’ or the ‘individual’ is always potentially colored by historical relations and contingencies” (p. 126). Thus, bodies, behaviors, and feelings are not separate or outside of the nation’s complex racial history; rather, they are shaped by these histories and form the manner in which we interact racially.

The racially melancholic subject is tormented by the festering of past
racial wounds through the inability to work through and properly mourn the internalization of grief. As a result, this grief is often repressed and driven into the unconscious as a means of resisting conscious recognition of the terror of white supremacy. However, what happens when racial realities are brought to the forefront of one’s consciousness, where racism cannot be ignored any longer? These instances of confronting racial traumas engage the interplay between the intrasubjectivity of psychic processes and the intersubjective context of racial encounters. Affect’s role in these encounters establishes the potential (dis)connectivity of the subject(s) within a given relational field. Massumi (2015) explains, “So what you are, affectively, isn’t a social classification—rich or poor, employed or unemployed—it’s a set of potential connections and movements that you have, as a function of those classifications, but always in an open field of relations” (p. 40). The most prominent “social classification” when directly confronting racism is indeed our racial identifications, which function affectively by providing or restricting a certain degree of freedom or power within a given encounter depending on one’s racial identity.2 For instance, these gradations can be as faint as an airplane passenger’s subconscious nervous reaction to sitting next to someone wearing a turban or as penetrating as the bullets of a police officer’s weapon firing at a 12-year-old boy playing with a toy gun.3 Either way, racial affects play a key part in the movements, behaviors, and feelings of social interactions.

Within the classroom racial affects operate in multifaceted, complex, and often subtle ways through bodily movements, sensations, and feelings mediated by our racial classifications. The dynamics of racial melancholia include the shifting of affective intensities and energies in relation to the (re)aggravation of our racial wounds. That is, the force of our feelings regarding race is affectively connected to the emergence of past racial injuries in the present. Underscoring Cheng’s (2001) proclamation that we feel the most melancholic when we are confronted with the shamefaced reality of racism, I call these intensities melancholic affects. To further explain, when we are confronted with the ghosts of our racial past, when the racial trauma we have repressed bubbles to the surface, the affective register is altered and, in an instant, there is a micro-perception (Massumi, 2015) or a sensation that takes place bodily before it reaches conscious recognition. Then our perception of the affective event is expressed through feelings because emotion translates into our conscious perception of an affective experience. A melancholic affect can be described as the moment when the atmosphere in the room changes or what Brennan (2004) refers to as the transmission of affect. The intensity of the room is altered by confronting racism: There
is an occurrence of collective discomfort, anxiety, or nervousness, similar to when one describes the energy of a situation as so intense that one could cut the (racial) tension with a butter knife.

Classroom melancholic affects embody Ahmed’s (2010) assertion that pedagogy is full of angles through the evocation and transmission of racial trauma within teaching and learning. The pedagogic encounter in the context of teaching and learning about race in the English classroom has the potential to reproduce normative racial dynamics, but it also has the potential to elicit an alter-accomplishment (Massumi, 2015) that disrupts hegemonic formations of racialization, indicating that perhaps a fundamental element of antiracist pedagogy may be to better understand how affective classroom politics function in the context of racial melancholia. The persistent barrier to this type of pedagogy is that the normative response to having discussions about racial issues is typically resistance, discomfort, and disengagement. The consequence is that the deeper we dive into learning about race, the more we unlock previously repressed racial trauma and thus the more difficult learning sometimes becomes. For example, often during surface-level race conversations, whites feel as though they have made progress and that learning has occurred, while people of color often become frustrated with the lack of racial literacy that whites exhibit. The end result is only the illusion of equality—the affective environment simply becomes a reproduction of whiteness. Then, when race conversations begin to go more in-depth, white students often become resistant to learning by using a plethora of affective techniques to avoid their culpability in perpetuating racism—what I describe later as “white intellectual alibis” (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2015). The task of the antiracist pedagogue is to adjust the relational field to allow for the potential for alter-accomplishments to take place within the classroom for critical race dialogues to evolve and progress. As the rest of this article illustrates, this is by no means easy to achieve and involves much effort, but it is nonetheless vital to disrupting hegemonic racial constructs.

**Method and Positionality**

This article draws from a yearlong critical ethnographic study I conducted in a 12th-grade English classroom at Sumner, a large Midwestern suburban high school. Critical ethnography strives to challenge dominant ideologies, discourses, and narratives that disenfranchise and indoctrinate people in a world with unequal power dynamics (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993). This type of research espouses an overtly political message that seeks to be a catalyst for social change and contribute to emancipatory
knowledge in the quest for social justice. As such, my usage of critical ethnography enabled me to illuminate and decipher the presence of whiteness and affect during the classroom discussion concerning racial progress.

The data I collected during the 2014–15 school year included (1) field notes, (2) semistructured interviews, and (3) the gathering of classroom artifacts including curriculum documents, student writing/homework assignments, and online discussion forums. In particular, I relied heavily on field notes and an audio-recorded transcript taken during the classroom encounter, as well as interviews with Mr. Turner and Richard that I conducted after the incident to further contextualize the conflict.

The classroom in which I conducted my research contained racial dynamics that uncovered how racial ideologies functioned to influence the ways whiteness shaped classroom practices. This specific classroom was ideal for this type of exploration because of the white classroom teacher, Mr. Turner, and his commitment to openly discussing race with his students. The students were also quite accustomed to talking about race as they had been in the same English class together since ninth grade, where learning about racism had been a focal point of the curriculum. The racial demographics of the class reflected the wider student population of Sumner, a large Midwestern suburban high school, whose student of color population increased steadily over the course of the previous decade from approximately 11 percent to 45 percent. Mr. Turner’s class was composed of 33 students, 16 of whom were students of color and 17 who were white. Not only were students familiar with one another, but they also had a previous relationship with me, as I had served as their English teacher in both ninth and tenth grade. There was also a rapport between Mr. Turner and me, as we had been friends and colleagues for six years.

Inside the classroom, this level of familiarity among the students, the classroom teacher, and me allowed for a high level of comfort. The closeness of the group enabled a depth of social history through the interconnectedness of the relationships. Students in the class possessed a tacit link with one another; every student was able to recall past stories, jokes, and incidents that had occurred over the course of the past four years of being in the same English class together. The family-type atmosphere, established because of the intimacy of the class, also generated a high level of trust. The students felt comfortable enough to be uncomfortable with their classmates. The students trusted each other enough to be vulnerable, and because they were able to be vulnerable, they engaged in discussions about race despite instances of discomfort.

Although in general terms the classroom environment was a comfort-
able location for students, comfort and trust are not fixed variables. There were times when students felt varying levels of discomfort and times when students did not trust one another. My researcher positionality is important to mention here considering the fluid nature of the researcher and participant relationship. Because I had past relationships with the students as their former English teacher, it was possible for certain participants to be more candid about their racial experiences—something that may not have happened without an already established previous relationship. Still, my insider research status went deeper than past student relationships because of my extensive involvement in curriculum writing for Sumner’s English department. As a result, I was able to contribute significantly to the established curriculum that the students were engaging with in Mr. Turner’s class.

The English curriculum at Sumner reflected my philosophical standpoint of incorporating a social justice–focused framework for teaching about critical issues and fostering critical consciousness, with learning about race and racism at the forefront. The students not only understood that race scholarship was my main focus as a researcher, but they also knew that I identified as Black and often could guess where my allegiance lay on matters of racism occurring in society. Yet, students were often not afraid to challenge my perspective or disagree with my opinions on race-related issues. These facets of my researcher identity help to provide further context for the classroom dialogue, outlined in the next section.

**Context and Background of the Encounter**

The class had just completed a unit on the Richard Wright (1940) novel *Native Son*. In this unit, Mr. Turner taught lessons related to racial violence, race and capitalism, and the history of 1930s Chicago, including the growth of communism within Black spaces. I greatly admire and respect Mr. Turner’s willingness to incorporate these topics into the curriculum. I believe he has demonstrated a genuine commitment to antiracist teaching and has made significant progress developing antiracist pedagogy. I am explicitly declaring his commitment to antiracism here to illustrate that despite my critiques of his pedagogy later in this article, my intention is not to portray him as an unsuccessful racial pedagogue. Instead, my point is that any teacher may make similar missteps in the process of practicing antiracism.

Mr. Turner proceeded to devise a lesson that would enable students to discuss how far the nation has progressed in achieving racial equity since the 1930s. He wanted to find a method for students to think and talk critically about the overt violence of the Jim Crow era and connect this violence to
issues involving police brutality and other forms of public displays of racism occurring in present-day American society. To achieve this level of analysis, he instructed students to write their opinion about the topic by posing the following question:

What would Richard Wright say about the progress (or lack thereof) we have made as a society since the publication of Native Son?

The next class period, he asked students to identify a number on a scale from 1 to 10 as to how far they believe the country has progressed racially since Native Son. He then asked the students to locate themselves on an imaginary continuum around the room, with one corner of the room representing 1 (no progress since the 1930s) and the opposite corner representing 10 (racial equity has been achieved). Mr. Turner chose this structure for the discussion because he thought it would provide a visual representation that would allow the students to see where everyone stands on the topic, but also, he encouraged students to change their position on the continuum if their classmates’ responses were persuasive enough.

The students rose out of their desks to move to their prospective spots on the continuum. The majority of the class was clustered between about 4–6 on the scale, while just a few students located themselves on the opposite ends of the continuum in the 1–3 or 7–10 range. Mr. Turner facilitated the discussion by asking students to volunteer their opinions. After a student offers a thought, his customary pedagogical strategy during discussions is to summarize the response in his own words to ensure he understood what the student was saying and also to make sure the rest of the class understood the student’s answer. The most common thoughts students gave referred to racial progress being made over time. For example, one student said:

I think what we are learning now in school about race is what we are going to teach our children. Like the younger generations are less racist than our grandparents.

The discussion took place over about 15 minutes with no students changing their positions on the continuum. I could sense an overall feeling of nervousness during the discussion through the body language of several students and the careful, reluctant responses being given, as if students were afraid of saying something that would offend or challenge someone’s viewpoint. Even I felt a certain level of tenseness as students shared their perspectives. The conversation culminated with an interaction between Mr. Turner and two students on opposing ends of the continuum, Nick and Richard. The interaction is important to consider here.
Mr. Turner’s Racial Encounter

Mr. Turner’s pedagogical approach during classroom discussions is to stay neutral, especially when the topic concerns race. He believes that it is critical for classroom teachers not to impose their viewpoints on students and, as a result, I observed him interjecting his opinions on the topic of race only on rare occasions. Following this neutral pedagogical strategy, Mr. Turner deliberately refused to position himself on the continuum for fear of influencing student opinions. Noticeably present throughout the dialogue were the two students at the opposing ends of the spectrum, a white male student, Nick, and a Black male student, Richard. Neither student verbally offered his opinion, yet Mr. Turner, as well as the rest of the class, was anticipating their contributions. I observed many students glancing at both of them over the course of the discussion, expecting some sort of conflict to occur. Nick and Richard have a history of clashing over their opposing ideas on race, and both students are strong-willed and opinionated. It was not until the conversation began to stall that Mr. Turner decided to ask Richard if he would like to share his opinion.

Richard was sitting in a stray desk located around the 2 area on the continuum. With an inflection of passion in his voice, he explained that although forms of racial progress have been achieved since the publication of *Native Son*, recent police shootings similar to Michael Brown’s are proof that not much has changed since this era. Mr. Turner, who was standing in the center of the horseshoe, paraphrased Richard’s words and then paused to see if any student would volunteer to respond to Richard. When no student offered a response, Mr. Turner turned to face Nick, who was standing on the opposite end of the continuum around 8, and asked Nick for his opinion. Nick, with a shaky tinge in his voice, reluctantly stated that he believes much progress has been made and as a country we are close to achieving racial equality. Richard became visibly frustrated as Nick shared his opinion, and he began shaking his head back and forth in opposition. Nick ended his response by saying:

The people on the other end [of the continuum] are smarter at talking about this [race] so I guess since I am on this end I’m just not very smart.

The class observed Richard still shaking his head, and Mr. Turner, noticing Richard’s frustration, asked if he would like to respond. Richard expressed his frustration by stating:

How could you say this when police are shooting Black people?! How could we have possibly made this much progress?
Mr. Turner, who at this point was still standing calmly in the middle of the horseshoe, offered a verbal acknowledgment of Richard’s response:

This is a very good point that Richard brings up and it seems to be in contrast to what you are saying, Nick, about racial progress. How do we as a country explain all of this violence, yet claim to have made so much progress?

As Mr. Turner spoke this statement, he walked from the middle of the horseshoe to stand about a foot away from Nick on the end of the continuum. Immediately, as Mr. Turner walked toward Nick, Richard put his head down on his desk and covered his face with his arms.

Mr. Turner, still standing next to Nick as he looked around at the class, noticed that Richard put his head down, and the rest of the class noticed too. The conversation halted after this occurred, and the intensity in the room became palpable. The students fell silent. Mr. Turner asked if there were any more comments, and no one responded. I noticed many students shaking their heads as if to indicate they did not want to talk anymore. So, Mr. Turner proceeded to end the conversation by thanking students for engaging in the difficult discussion and indicating that there would be conversations about the topic over the next couple of teaching units. With about 10 minutes remaining, the class moved on to an activity unrelated to race. Richard still had his head down on his desk, and when class ended, he did not leave as students filed out of the room. Mr. Turner and I both approached him to see how he was feeling. He lifted his head off the desk and with an agonized look lamented:

I can’t do this anymore. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do. I was in the car for the Trayvon Martin verdict and I didn’t know what to do. During Michael Brown and Eric Garner, those verdicts, I was in the car too. This keeps happening again and again, and again. I don’t know what to do. I feel hopeless.

Reopening Racial Wounds

If racial melancholia can tell us one thing, it is that the past does not always stay in the past. The context of the discussion, racial progress in the wake of present-day racial violence, constitutes an affective relational field where the national espousal of disarticulated racial grief rises to the surface. Melancholia’s seething presence reveals our affective attachments to past histories of violence through the reopening of the nation’s racial wounds. Ruti (2005) explains:
In the same way that nations and other collective entities owe their current shape to complex and at times highly conflicted histories, the lived present of each of us is traversed by a countless number of invisible threads that connect us to our pasts. (p. 638)

These interwoven threads connecting our racial pasts are largely invisible to us because our psyches find ways to repudiate the past on a conscious level, resulting in these disavowals being more aggressively reasserted in the unconscious (Ruti, 2005). However, the discussion brought the class face-to-face with grief that had been previously distorted and repressed and asked students to make sense of what has been lost by exposing the invisible threads attached to old racial wounds. The discussion embodies what it means to face those immaterial objects that haunt us through the transmission of affect, igniting past traumas that engulf the present—a melancholic affect.

The “angling” of pedagogical encounters underscores how race and trauma converge and emerge within the classroom as the discussion represents the class’s exposure to the nation’s infected racial wounds.

What is at stake here is much more than simply identifying oneself on a continuum since the discussion engages the core of the nation’s racial traumas. As a student aptly described during the discussion:

I just think that we can’t put ourselves even at a 5 because it starts with institutionalized racism and then it bleeds out into society and if you don’t get rid of the source you can’t address other problems. It is like a wound. You can clean the wound out, but it is still there.

The imagery of bleeding out and wounding is a suitable metaphor for racial injury. The tension in Nick and Richard’s encounter certainly illuminates the apprehensive nature of the exchange and also points to a central conflict for the antiracist pedagogue. The conundrum involves how one navigates a situation where there is a confrontation with the painful history of racial violence and how this confrontation often becomes a barrier to antiracism. Cheng (2001) states, “It can be damaging to say how damaging racism has been. Yet it is surely equally harmful not to talk about this history of sorrow” (p. 14, italics in original). Our racial wounds persist even if we choose to ignore them. The antiracist pedagogue must make the choice to address racial injury, but with this choice comes much pain and sorrow. The discussion that Mr. Turner wanted the class to engage in was an attempt to confront our racial traumas, but the clash between Nick and Richard disrupted further engagement as the affective dynamics of the encounter reinforced racial hegemonies. During the encounter, the pain of racial trauma was evident; however, the process of facing racial injury is a necessary component of
antiracism. A closer examination of the encounter between Mr. Turner’s pedagogy in relation to Nick and Richard’s disagreement can provide valuable insights into how the opening of racial wounds produces melancholic affects that often disrupt antiracist agency.

**Affective Economies and the Rippling Effect of Emotion**

The most crucial aspect of the exchange among Nick, Richard, and Mr. Turner was not so much what they were saying, but where their bodies were positioned in the classroom. The tipping point of this encounter is Mr. Turner’s movement away from Richard to be closer to Nick, which prompted Richard’s disengagement. Bundled within Mr. Turner’s movements and Nick and Richard’s reactions to those movements are the histories of their bodies—“the lived past of the body” bound up within the affective event (Massumi, 2015, p. 49). These histories encompass assemblages of both their past interactions (including the ways their bodies have existed previously within the classroom) but also interactions that predate the existence of their bodies. This predated history refers to the racialization of the body or what Fanon (1967) identifies as a “historical-racial schema” that constitutes the racialized body as being woven “out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” by whiteness (p. 95). Here the body has a predetermined objectification where one’s skin has already been contextualized through the prism of race. There is a layering effect of histories for Nick, Richard, and Mr. Turner—the history of their marked racial bodies and their history of past interactions within classroom and school space that help formulate the affective register.

To grasp the intensity of the moment, Nick and Richard’s history within the classroom needs to be further explored. For as long as I have known Nick and Richard, ever since ninth grade, they often disagreed on topics related to race. Their polarizing perspectives made discussions edgier as they clashed over the reality of racism. Nick’s viewpoints came to represent traditional white conservative values where racism is a relic of the past and everyone has an equal chance of succeeding in life as long as they work hard enough. Conversely, Richard’s views reflected those of a staunch social activist; at his core lies a spirit for antiracism and he strives to fight against racial injustice. Over three years, their frequent conflicts had a lightning-rod effect in the classroom. Whenever race was a topic of study, Nick and Richard came to symbolize conductors of racial static that attracted the energy for the proverbial strike.
Ahmed’s (2004) theorization of affective economies contextualizes how the history of Nick and Richard’s interactions became the catalyst for the intensification of affective space. Affective economies, as Ahmed (2004) suggests, allow for emotions to accumulate much like capital accumulates in an economic sense. That is, emotions accumulate over time through “the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become” (p. 45). Much like how the circulation of commodities increases in magnitude over time, “the movement between signs or objects converts into affect” (p. 45). Nick and Richard’s frequent disagreements signify an accruement of affective value where the sign becomes the positioning of Nick and Richard at opposite ends of the continuum. The lightning rods and the object become the charge of emotionality during the encounter, the lightning strike. The undercurrent of racial static pervades the affective environment, with Nick standing in support for racism (or at least a postracial society) at one end of the continuum and Richard in support of antiracism at the other, symbolizing opposing poles of the ideological struggle for control of racial knowledge.

For Ahmed (2004), the affective value of signs, subjects, and objects underscores what she calls the “rippling effect of emotions” that involve a process of movement mediated by history (pp. 44–45). The circulation of emotions moves both sideways between signs, subjects, and objects as well as backward and forward through the past and into the present. Within the context of Nick and Richard’s conflict, feelings spread as part of both the affective accumulation of their previous confrontations as well as through the reopening of the nation’s racial wounds. These “feelings take us across different levels of signification, not all of which are admitted in the present” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 44, italics in original). Thus, the interaction between the intrasubjective and the intersubjective is at work here: The circulation of feelings is psychosocial in nature. These emotions are not contained within sign, subject, or object but are instead only produced as a result of the relationality between Nick and Richard (that is, the linkages between signs, subjects, and objects) and the expression of repressed racial trauma created through the pedagogy of Mr. Turner. Khanna (2003) asserts that the distressing return of the inassimilable lost object into psychic life produces an affective state as the lost object is unable to be mourned. In this case, the lost object represents the nation’s festering racial wounds that are typically suppressed, but in this instance become transparent because students were asked to consider the connections between past and present racism on the continuum. The intrasubjective then refers to the psychic recurrence of past and present racial losses, while the intersubjective illuminates the
racial dynamics of social encounters; both the “intra” (the psyche) and the “inter” (the social) merged to manifest melancholic affects during Nick and Richard’s confrontation.

**Whiteness as Technology of Affect**

Having established that affective formations can accumulate value through the circulation of emotion, what ultimately are the effects of this accumulated value? The emergence of affect and the production of feeling as a result of affective encounters are concomitantly imbued with structures of power that Hook (2005) identifies as “hegemonies of affect.” Here my analysis turns toward a particular hegemonic construct: whiteness. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) emphasize the reproduction of whiteness as intimately connected to emotional and bodily reactions. Their analysis maintains that the hegemony of whiteness is upheld in part through affective investments in white identities and through insidious patterns of operationalized emotions that aim to disrupt classroom race dialogues, which they label as “technologies of affect.” Whiteness as technology of affect engages the Foucauldian (1977) term *technology*, which is defined as a set of techniques and practices used by individuals, either on themselves or on others, to accomplish certain objectives. Affective technologies pertain to the arrangement of affects and emotions within a given field of relations that are mobilized in ways that reify hegemonic constructs. Whiteness as technology of affect has implications for antiracist praxis through the theorization of the methods whites use to preserve racial power dynamics within classroom spaces.

An explanation of the subtle reification of whiteness during Mr. Turner’s encounter with Nick and Richard requires us to consider the emotional and bodily dimensions of affective technologies. Recalling Nick’s response to positioning himself at the higher end of the continuum (close to achieving racial equity), he justified his placement by replying that he was simply “not smart enough” to discuss the topic. His appeal to ignorance is a stark example of an affective technique called “white intellectual alibi” where whites “attempt to project a non-racist alibi for themselves to maintain equilibrium” (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013, p. 152). For example, white intellectual alibis resemble the behavior patterns that researchers have identified as commonplace responses to critical race dialogues, where white people express an array of techniques to avoid the heightened anxiety associated with discussing race including awkwardness, silence, anger, and incoherence (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Pollock, 2004). In this instance, Nick’s white intellectual alibi was ironically to claim to be unintellectual, which I interpreted
as a ploy to avoid looking racist to the rest of the class for placing himself at the highest point on the continuum. There was a discursive element to his strategy where Nick accounted for his perceived racism by appearing incoherent, but the other side of the affective coin reveals the emotional subtext of his statement as crucial to the movement of Mr. Turner’s body toward him during the interaction. Stemming from an understanding of Mr. Turner’s willingness to remain neutral during race dialogues, I read Nick’s emotional disposition as a plea for white empathy. If we are to believe that Nick desired Mr. Turner’s emotional support, not only did Nick want to be seen as not smart enough, he wanted to be consoled for feeling this way. I think he was appealing to Mr. Turner’s empathetic nature and banking on the likelihood that Mr. Turner had perhaps felt the same way as a white person at some point in his own life.

Helping Nick’s case for empathy was Richard’s angry response. Certainly, Nick anticipated Richard acting as such; after all, they had had plenty of past experience disagreeing with one another. This prompted Mr. Turner’s next movements, which unveil the power of both whiteness and affective technologies in the classroom. Mr. Turner, a veteran teacher who is by no means a novice antiracist pedagogue, had to make a split-second decision. He had two students, one white and the other Black, who are in conflict over the reality of racism. His choice reflects the nuanced angling of the pedagogic encounter and the blending of bodies, emotions, and discourse within affective formations. Choosing to move his body to stand by Nick while verbally supporting Richard is a white intellectual alibi in its own right. His movement toward Nick was a method for maintaining equilibrium during a heightened moment of anxiety. This is where Mr. Turner’s pedagogical strategy of neutrality works against his antiracist efforts, since he literally and ideologically cannot be in two places at once. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) affirm, “Affectively, within a white subject’s self-understanding, he cannot be racist and anti-racist at the same time” (p. 156).

The formation of Mr. Turner’s white intellectual alibi takes place on two fronts. The first involves his psychic management through his attempt to support both viewpoints: his verbal support for antiracism and his bodily support for racism. Within this contradictory space the alibi serves an emotional purpose: “It allows white subjects to establish stability in the face of destabilizing situations, such as critical race dialogue” (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013, p. 156). The second comprises the literal matter of being unable to stand in two places at once, stressing the power of the corporeal in light of Mr. Turner’s verbal support for Richard. In this instance, Mr. Turner’s movement toward Nick represents both a social shielding (Mr.
Turner’s and Nick’s bodies are protecting each other from the discomforting trauma of racial dialogue by virtue of standing next to one other) as well as a psychic shielding (Mr. Turner’s bodily association with Nick provides the white empathy that Nick desired, but also Mr. Turner enables a certain level of comfort for himself by creating a sense of equilibrium during a particularly turbulent moment). I read this movement as ultimately securing a preservation of white safety for both of them. Indeed, it is illustrative that Hook (2005) refers to the affective resonance of whiteness as a “force-field of attachments” (p. 82). Nick’s original white intellectual alibi thus sets off a chain of affects that ultimately curtails the discussion and effectively (and affectively) reproduces whiteness.

After the discussion, Mr. Turner expressed his frustration concerning his facilitation of the encounter. He deeply regretted not silencing Nick more explicitly and in retrospect had a self-awareness about his movement toward Nick as causing Richard to put his head on the desk. Within his split-second decision to move closer to Nick, what forces compelled Mr. Turner to act in such a way? Hindsight is 20/20 for Mr. Turner, as he would have never made this decision knowing the consequences of his actions, but it is important to consider the question posed by Spillers (1996): “It would be useful to know, though, in general, how bodies respond to bodies not like their own, and what it is that ‘sees’—in other words, do we look with eyes, or with the psyche?” (p. 79). I believe that Mr. Turner’s pedagogical choice was not consciously motivated by the affective pull of whiteness since Mr. Turner recognized that his movement caused Richard’s disengagement after reflecting on the incident (not during the incident), so the answer to the aforementioned question may indeed be that in this instance Mr. Turner was “seeing” with his psyche. My interpretation was that the shuttling of Mr. Turner’s body may have had more to do with the body’s skin color that resembled his own rather than the body’s skin color that did not. Herein lies the essence of race and affect: The body’s (in)ability to enter into relations with other bodies. Even for this brief instance affect “provides the invitational opening for a rationality to get its hooks into the flesh” (Massumi, 2015, p. 85). The hegemonic hooks of whiteness pull the puppet strings that coerce Mr. Turner to stand next to Nick, thereby symbolizing an explicit form of white solidarity in Richard’s eyes, indicating that Mr. Turner’s bodily movement came to mean more than his words, prompting Richard to disengage from the discussion.

The hegemonic hooks of whiteness pull the puppet strings that coerce Mr. Turner to stand next to Nick, thereby symbolizing an explicit form of white solidarity in Richard’s eyes, indicating that Mr. Turner’s bodily movement came to mean more than his words, prompting Richard to disengage from the discussion.
more than his words, prompting Richard to disengage from the discussion. These racialized affects have severe consequences for Richard’s well-being. Richard’s reaction to the movement of Mr. Turner’s body illustrates the sinister repercussions of white intellectual alibis. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) describe this impact as such:

Whereas whites have the ability to put themselves in harm’s way within the anti-racist project, minorities rarely have the power to voluntarily choose to experience discursive violence. People of color have no recourse for an alibi. They are guilty bodies. (p. 157)

In the process of Mr. Turner’s shielding of Nick, the discursive violence, and I would also add the psychic violence, was absorbed by Richard. Richard reiterated these sentiments when he later clarified why he was angry:

He [Mr. Turner] was understanding what I was saying but he kind of still sided with Nick’s point of view even though he personally didn’t feel that way. He wanted Nick to feel comfortable in expressing his viewpoints even though they were sort of dumb. He [Nick] made stupid viewpoints, so that angered me.

Richard also added another reason for his anger:

I was fed up with Nick and his bullshit.

Let us not forget the melancholic connection to this incident; the intensity of Richard’s anger is due to the high-stakes nature of the dialogue. For Richard, this discussion served as a means for validating that the racial violence he sees around him is a threat to all of humanity. My interpretation of this was that Richard was less concerned with where Nick placed himself on the continuum since I’m sure he suspected beforehand that Nick would be high on the scale. Instead, what mattered most to Richard was that Mr. Turner would refuse to validate Nick’s point of view by not moving to stand next to Nick on the continuum. Richard needed Mr. Turner to put himself “in harm’s way.” A necessary part of critical discussions concerning race is confronting the unsettling and painful realization of racism. Yet, these confrontations are also when we are the most melancholic and the most vulnerable relative to the traumas that haunt us. Not only was Mr. Turner “seeing” through his psyche, but so were Nick and Richard. This form of “seeing” was not optical, but rather was the process of deciphering their unconscious traumas and working to come to grips with their racial grief.
Thus, in the context of affective strategies, white intellectual alibis serve a psychosocial purpose within the melancholic landscape. When the affective environment became the most melancholic, Nick and Mr. Turner each used alibis to escape the uncomfortable conscious presence of melancholy, which enabled a certain ability for both of them to produce feelings of safety in the face of suffering. However, the social aspect of this psychosocial encounter is a result of Nick and Mr. Turner needing each other to ensure the validity of their white alibis. Therefore, the guilty body in this incident was Richard, who could not obtain an alibi in the first place.

**Conclusion: Affect Is a Synonym for Hope**

To what extent should Mr. Turner’s attempt at discussing race in the classroom be considered unsuccessful? Mr. Turner’s assessment of the lesson was that it failed to advance the conversation concerning more current racial issues, and he greatly attributed the encounter with Nick and Richard as the main reason for which the dialogue was ineffective. My analysis of their interaction seems to back up his claims since affective technologies of whiteness disrupted the dialogue. However, if we take a closer look at the affective politics of classroom interactions, the perceived failure of the lesson may not be so apparent. Theorizing the relationship between affect and ideology is useful in understanding how power operates within the realm of the classroom. The dimensions of affect constitute a pre-ideological event where affects take shape before we are inculcated by ideology. Massumi (2015) further explains:

> To be in affect, ideological predeterminations have to enter the event and take effect. They have to reassert themselves to make themselves effectively ingredient to the event. Their effectiveness is always an accomplishment, a renewed victory, and what needs to be accomplished can fail. (p. 58, italics in original)

What Massumi’s assertion tells us is that in the context of affective politics, there is always the potential that ideology will fail to indoctrinate us and reassert its control.

In classroom spaces, these affective events are plentiful, but the manner in which ideology interpolates us often renders affective formations imperceptible. Similar to Bourdieu’s (1977) conception of *habitus*, we are duped into unconsciously repeating the script that ideology has written for us, often in ways that ensure our dominance. The potential for affect as a tool for the antiracist pedagogue lies in its ability to find the cracks in ideology’s armor. The critical English educator must determine, in any given
affective event, where there are openings for the power of ideology to be usurped. Lim (2010) summarizes this potentiality with his description of the relational field:

The range of things that might potentially be done, felt, or perceived is continually modified by what actually happens between all the different bodies on the field . . . It is because of this multiplicity and this constant modification that the virtual or potential field of affect guarantees an openness to difference and thus the momentum for change. (p. 2398)

Since affect guarantees a degree of openness for every situation, Massumi (2015) refers to affect as synonymous with hope. An understanding of affective politics emphasizes that the body is not fully predetermined to follow an ideological script. As a result, there is always the potential for actions that break the chains of hegemony.

The antiracist pedagogical alteration that perhaps should have been made during the encounter among Nick, Richard, and Mr. Turner was for Mr. Turner to either stay in place or move closer to Richard. In this singular encounter, Mr. Turner was unable to disrupt the hegemonic construction of whiteness as a result of his movement toward Nick. However, before we call this interaction a failure, we must consider that affects do not take place as singularities. There is a continual emergence of affects at any given pedagogical point in time. In other words, this interaction will not be the last opportunity Mr. Turner will have to make pedagogical alterations. What was most instructive for Mr. Turner was what he learned as a result of this pedagogical misstep. Sometime after the class period, Mr. Turner and I talked extensively about his thought process during the incident. He walked around the empty classroom and replayed the event:

I remember walking away from this corner [standing in Richard’s corner] and going to stand in this kind of like neutral territory over here [walks to the middle of the horseshoe]. And then as I walked over to Nick, I turned and Richard’s head went down. Like it was this physical moment.

Mr. Turner then discussed with me the realization that he made a mistake by walking to stand by Nick:

I watched Richard put his head down and I was like, oh my god, what did I do? And at what cost was I willing to do that? And that was my big feeling of depression; I feel like to preserve Nick, I destroyed Richard.

When determining whether the incident should be considered ineffective, we need to also consider the rigorous self-reflection that Mr. Turner engaged in
after the event in question. During an interview that took place three months after the encounter, his final comment to me about the incident was this:

I know my words are important during these conversations [about race], but now I realize how important my body is too. This idea of the power of my body is now something I am always going to be aware of in the future when we have these types of conversations.

Although the incident became a reproduction of whiteness, I would not necessarily qualify the encounter as hopeless. In light of the insights that Mr. Turner gained from the interaction, it can be classified as an alter-accomplishment insofar as it primed the potential for future alter-accomplishments. For Mr. Turner, the interaction “[amplified] a previously unfelt potential to the point of perceptibility” (Massumi, 2015, p. 58). It became the momentum for future change in that Mr. Turner now has the potential to be aware of his body in relation to his words during critical race dialogues. The learning resulting from this interaction gives Mr. Turner the capacity to adapt and redeploy his pedagogy when faced with similar interactions. There is now a space available in his pedagogical repertoire to make a habitual leap toward comprehending the importance of the corporeal; the memory of this pedagogical encounter enables Mr. Turner the possibility to enhance his recognition of bodily positioning in the classroom. He is now conscious of the power of his affective presence in classroom space.

Despite what Mr. Turner learned after the incident, there is still the question of “at what cost” with regard to Richard’s melancholic reaction to the encounter. In Mr. Turner’s words, he “destroyed” Richard while “preserving” Nick. These dynamics are characteristic of race dialogues that reproduce whiteness as students of color bear the burden of the provocation of racial trauma. Richard’s feelings of hopelessness became heightened as a result of a layering of losses caused by the melancholic psyche: “The racially melancholic minority is doubly versed in the art of losing. The racially denigrated person has to forfeit the full security of his/her imaginary integrity . . . but is then forced to take in . . . and reidentify with that loss: a double loss” (Cheng, 2001, p. 175). In this instance, Richard’s double loss is layered with the insecurity of his own integrity caused by Mr. Turner’s bodily movement toward Nick as well as Richard’s reidentification with the conscious racial injury that comprises the melancholic nation as a result of this movement. In the moment, this may have left Richard psychically destroyed (conversely, Nick was psychically preserved), but hope is not lost because the next day Mr. Turner was able to apologize to Richard and express his regret for not more explicitly defending his viewpoint. Although this apology did not erase the
pain Richard felt, he did appreciate the fact that Mr. Turner acknowledged his mistake and was pleased that Mr. Turner vowed to be more aware of how his words and actions affect students of color during race discussions.

The implications for classroom practice that can be gleaned from Nick, Richard, and Mr. Turner’s interaction are that confronting violence is a necessary aspect of discussing race in the classroom (Leonardo & Porter, 2010), but being willing to continuously learn from these confrontations is also necessary for pedagogues to improve their ability to teach about traumatic subjects. For Mr. Turner to learn from his mistake, he had to have the courage to design a curriculum6 that uncovered the nation’s racial injuries to even be in the position to make this mistake in the first place. Antiracist pedagogy must include these types of conflicts. However, the unconscious is sometimes an unpredictable entity, and the pull of whiteness is strong. To say that Mr. Turner learned from this interaction is tenuous considering that he may unconsciously make the same pedagogical error when faced with a similar decision in the future, since we see the most clearly through our psyches when we are the most melancholic. Instead, Mr. Turner must learn through repetition; after all, whiteness cannot be abolished overnight. This requires that pedagogues repeatedly put themselves in situations where they are meeting racial trauma as a means of understanding the nuances and intricacies of affective formations of whiteness and the emotions that are produced as a result.

Still, simply meeting trauma cannot be enough, as Mr. Turner was only able to understand through a process of self-reflection, via the conversations he had about the incident with both Richard and me. This form of learning resembles Boler’s (1999) conception of a pedagogy of discomfort, defined as “both an invitation to inquiry as well as a call to action” (p. 176). A pedagogy of discomfort seeks to highlight what can be gained from the repetitious commitment to traumatic learning. Mr. Turner not only sought to engage in this racial dialogue as a form of collective action, but he participated in critical inquiry through his conversations with me and with Richard. This type of pedagogical process is necessary when considering that alter-accomplishments need to be primed. The priming involves the hard work of finding the crucial pedagogical angles that produce social change. Working to produce these pedagogical alter-accomplishments is vital to antiracist orientations of teacher education and the advancement of critical race English education.

Notes
1. All names and places are pseudonyms.
2. This is not to say that other social classifications do not intersect, overlap, and interlock with race, which speaks to the elaborate blends and blurs of affective politics.

3. As in the case of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old Black boy shot dead by a police officer in 2014.

4. I typically acted as a participant-observer in the classroom and sought to participate in most activities, but for the same reason I chose not to locate myself on the continuum.

5. The description of this entire section is taken from my field notes and an audio-recorded transcript of the class period.

6. Curriculum design is not something I explicitly analyze here, but it is nonetheless important to note. Mr. Turner’s decision to have students place themselves on a continuum made it likely that Nick and Richard would disagree, creating the space for some kind of conflict to occur. Although not discussed in this article, curriculum theory in the context of racial melancholia, whiteness, and affect opens new pathways for critique specifically in relation to critical race English education, but also more broadly in the field of critical literacy. Could Mr. Turner’s lesson be designed in a way that would promote more productive conversations? Levine-Rasky (2000) identifies a commonly used but ultimately unproductive approach to teaching about racism that she calls “white privilege pedagogy.” This type of pedagogy emphasizes an individualized confessional model of professing one’s material advantages as a white person rather than focusing on highlighting the social relations and systemic structures that solidify whiteness. Levine-Rasky (2000) states, “The body of the white individual resides at the fulcrum of the confessional model at the core of white privilege pedagogy” (p. 276). Mr. Turner’s curricular choice to focus on body position to discuss racism may have trapped students into participating in this type of pedagogy.

References


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