I Can Be Silent and Be Saying a Lot: Teachers' Racial Literacy in a Southern Elementary School

Kimberly J. Howard
University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd

Part of the Geography Commons

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
I CAN BE SILENT AND BE SAYING A LOT:
TEACHERS’ RACIAL LITERACY IN A SOUTHERN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By

Kimberly J. Howard

Bachelor of Arts
Winthrop University, 2001

Master of Arts
San Diego State University, 2004

____________________________________

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Foundations of Education

Department of Educational Studies

University of South Carolina

2013

Accepted by:

Michelle Bryan, Major Professor

Gloria Boutte, Committee Member

Kara Brown, Committee Member

Sandra Schmidt, Committee Member

Lacy Ford, Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the teachers of Creek and beyond who take risks in the pursuit of equity in education for all students. I also dedicate this work to Marianna and all of my students at Creek Elementary who deserve educators who are willing to engage in difficult dialogues so that every young person is recognized and celebrated for their unique potential for greatness. These students inspire me to keep asking questions about the borders of our lives.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of my committee who have been remarkable teachers along this journey. Your wisdom and guidance has contributed to this work, and you have inspired me to continue to ask difficult questions in order to discover healing answers. I would also like to thank my friends and writing partners who have given me great advice, inspiration, and reminded me why this work must be done. In particular, I would like to thank Kindel Nash, Sophia Rodriguez, and Ashlee Lewis for your loving support over the years.

Finally, I will forever be grateful to my family for being who you are and reminding me who I am throughout this entire process. To my mother who listened to countless hours of social theory over the phone, laughed with me when I was too serious, cried with me when I wanted to give up, and gave me hope when it seemed lost, you are among my greatest blessings. To my children Jonas, Micah, and Kyeson who have been a part of the process each and every day, as I watch you grow, you remind me why I work to challenge the realities of today in pursuit of a better tomorrow. Your innocence, wisdom beyond your years, and unique spirits make me dream big dreams and work with a purpose. Finally, this work would not have been possible if not for the love of my life and partner in all things, Travis Howard. I am amazed by your leadership and vision as an educator, your dedication to our family, and your enduring love and support for me. Every time that I started to lose my focus you stood beside me, helped me to take one
more step and find “joy in the journey.” I cannot possibly capture all that you have done
for me as I write these final words. You continue to be an inspiration. . .
In order to better understand how teachers make sense of race in schools today, this ethnographic study explores the following research question: How do teachers in this school make sense of race, and how does the spatiality of the school inform this process? The study was conducted over a 14-month period in a southern elementary school and is presented as a poetic, narrative, and thematic analysis of the connections between the geographic location of this particular school and the teachers’ practices, pedagogies, and conversations about race both inside their classrooms and in other school spaces. This study demonstrates how teachers’ racial (il)literacy is manifested in spatialized moments that have real and lasting implications for teachers and students in the school. Results from this study provided the foundation for a conceptual tool that could be utilized by educational researchers interested in better understanding the intersections of geographic place and race in educational settings.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .................................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................... iv

ABSTRACT ..................................................................................................................... vi

LIST OF FIGURES ......................................................................................................... x

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................... 1
  Beginning with the Borders of My Classroom ......................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem ......................................................................................... 3
  Study Overview ......................................................................................................... 6
  Study Purpose and Research Questions .................................................................. 7
  Study Contributions .................................................................................................. 8
  Defining Key Terms ................................................................................................. 10

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK .................................................................. 18
  Review of Relevant Literature and Related Studies .............................................. 18
  Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................... 28

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ..................................................................................... 53
  Study Design ............................................................................................................. 53
  Data Collection ........................................................................................................ 58
  Participants ............................................................................................................... 70
  Context ...................................................................................................................... 74
  Data Analysis .......................................................................................................... 74
Reflexivity .......................................................... 81
Limitations ............................................................ 92
CHAPTER 4: “WELCOME TO OUR MULTICULTURAL SCHOOL”: TEACHERS’ LIVED EXPERIENCE OF RACIAL “DIVERSITY” IN CREEK .......... 95
Creek ....................................................................... 97
Creek Elementary ....................................................... 100
Public Narrative .......................................................... 104
Environmentally Correct: Racial Knowledge Teachers Rarely Said Out-Loud .... 109
CHAPTER 5: DEFINING SELF, DEFINING TEACHER, AND A PLACE THAT DOESN’T WANT ME .................................................. 132
Personal Racialized Histories ........................................... 132
White Teachers Discussing Race at Creek Elementary ...................... 137
Can I Be a Teacher at Creek Elementary? ........................................ 139
CHAPTER 6: RACIALIZED MOMENTS IN THE CLASSROOM .................... 153
Instruction .................................................................. 153
Unplanned .................................................................. 162
Embodied .................................................................. 165
Recognizing Racialized Moments .................................................. 171
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION ................................................. 175
Teachers’ Lived Spaces in Creek............................................. 175
Race in the Classroom ...................................................... 199
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS ............................ 213
Borders Like These Walls: A Place to Begin a New Conversation ............. 213
Racial Texts ................................................................ 216
Final Thoughts .............................................................................................................. 228
Implications .................................................................................................................. 230
Future Studies ................................................................................................................. 233
REFERENCES ............................................................................................................... 237
APPENDIX A: Creek Elementary Racial Demographic Changes in a Ten-Year Period ................................................................................................................................. 250
APPENDIX B: Standardized Test Score Comparison between Racial Demographics .... 251
APPENDIX C: List of Characters ..................................................................................... 252
APPENDIX D: Important Terms ..................................................................................... 255
APPENDIX E: Semi-Structured Interview Questions ..................................................... 257
APPENDIX F: Initial Themes from Coded Data ............................................................... 258
APPENDIX G: Racial Texts in Colorblind Literacy and Racial Literacy ....................... 259
APPENDIX H: Data Collection for Spatialization ........................................................... 260
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1  My Theoretical Frame ............................................................... 52

Figure 8.1  Reading Racial Texts in Creek Elementary .............................. 223

Figure 8.2  A Map for Researching Racialized Spaces .............................. 233
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the Borders of My Classroom

I entered Creek Elementary\(^1\) six years ago as both a certified English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher and as a doctoral student interested in the dynamics of race, culture, and community in education. During my first semester at Creek Elementary I met Marianna. Marianna was a highly intelligent fifth grade Mexican immigrant student who was in many ways the inspiration for this project.

I worked with Marianna in my pull-out classroom\(^2\) when she needed extra help with assignments from her mainstream teachers. One day, while doing a social studies assignment, Marianna and I began to talk about the city in Mexico where she was born. She asked me to show her where her hometown was on a map and I was surprised when

---

\(^1\) Names of people and places are pseudonyms throughout. I have purposely changed all names of people and places and have slightly altered some of the grade levels, genders, and dates to protect the anonymity of Creek and Creek Elementary as a whole and the individuals who so graciously volunteered to participate in this study. Though these changes were purposely made to protect identities, the changes that I made do not alter the overall meaning or significance of the data. A thorough exploration of the names of particular places and the ways in which these place names are overlooked and silenced in this study is beyond the scope of this particular study. However, this explanation is certainly merited and would be informative for educational research; consequently, I intend to return to in future research. For example, an exploration of the interaction between names of places and people’s perception of the role and identity of the school would be fruitful (see Tuan 1974; 1991). Specifically, explorations about the connection between school and community when the school’s name matches the name of the community (i.e., Creek and Creek Elementary), or when schools take the names of socio-political figures (i.e., César E. Chávez Elementary, Patrick Henry Elementary, or Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary).

\(^2\) This classroom was located in the library in the center of the school, and it was about a quarter of the size of a mainstream classroom. During my first two years at Creek Elementary, I used this “pull-out” model of instruction and I usually worked with between two and six students depending on the time of day and students’ needs. After the first year, I began to transition to a more inclusive approach to instruction where I co-taught with mainstream teachers in their classrooms.
she was unable to find Mexico. So we started by locating Mexico and then I showed her
where her hometown of Michoacán appeared on the map. We talked about different parts
of Mexico where I had been, and then I pointed out the line demarcating the border
between the United States and Mexico. Marianna stopped me and asked, “What’s a
border?” I explained that it was the division between the two countries, and she asked,
“But why? Is it a river or a wall or something?” Struggling to respond, I described that
in some places there was no visible barrier, but in other places, there was something
resembling a wall or a fence. She inquired, “Like the walls of this classroom?” I simply
responded, “Maybe,” but the question echoed in my mind.

A few years before my conversation with Marianna, I had done a case study of
three Mexican families’ experiences of schools near the Tijuana/San Diego border.
Though my experiences in “the borderlands” had been positive, I also knew that the
borderlands I described to Marianna were contested spaces, spaces that represented
political and social separation between people. It was in this moment that I began to
contemplate the multiple meanings and the impact of borders that transcend simple
definitions of time and space. Marianna’s question became the catalyst for my inquiry
about the borders that defined spaces of learning and teaching in Creek.

Over the next several years, I informally observed how borders of race and
language, in particular, were constructed in invisible and silent ways such that students
like Marianna were positioned as ‘other’ in a space of mostly White and mostly English
speaking students. I became increasingly intrigued with the profound impact of Creek’s
geographic location on teachers and students, and how the geography of the school
seemed to influence people’s perception of themselves and others. My first three years in
Creek, then, were largely devoted to both teaching and an informal exploration of borders and this evolved into the current study.

Statement of the Problem

Statistics reveal that students of Color make up 43% of the population of school children nationwide, and this percentage is increasing (NCES, 2010). At the same time, 83% of full time teachers are White. In the simplest terms, students of Color most often have White teachers, signaling a cultural disconnect when read in conjunction with the performance indicators above. Notably, scholars on the shortage of teachers of Color point to its origins in the 1954 Brown decision which irreparably damaged the Black teaching force when schools were desegregated, and Black educators were dismissed from their positions (Foster, 1997; Guinier, 2004; Milner & Howard, 2004). The subsequent cultural mismatch (though different scholars use various terms) that results between students of Color and White teachers has been identified by a number of scholars as an area that needs further research, deep reflection and action (Boutte, 2007; Earick, 2009; Delpit, 1995; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2009; Marx, 2006; Winans, 2010).

Exploring the cultural mismatch between teachers and students is particularly critical in light of recent statistics. For example, in 2010 Black students were retained more often than any other group (21% more), suspended in middle and high school grades (43% more often), and scored lowest of any other group on standardized tests such as the ACT. Additionally, Black and Hispanic groups score significantly less on standardized achievement tests than their White peers (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2010; Vanneman et. al, 2009), and only 60% of Black students and 62% of Hispanic students
graduated in four years (NCES, 2010). These statistics highlight persistent trends. First, academic performance gaps between White students and students of Color on standardized tests suggest racialized disparities in student achievement and learning outcomes (for a discussion on this see King, 1991; Ladson Billings 1994; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003). Second, harsh disciplinary penalties are disproportionately applied to students of Color and students of Color drop out of school at alarming rates (Hilliard, 2003; NCES, 2010); thus, these disparities have long-term effects on their chances for economic, legal, and professional freedom (Delpit, 1995; Kim, Losen & Hewitt, 2010).

Ukpokodu (2004) asserted, “a critical issue in teacher education today is the mismatch between racially homogenous teachers and students from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds” (p. 19). Milner (2003) clearly explains that there are consequences of “racial mismatches in cultural contexts: Teachers do not understand the experiences and life worlds of their students. Thus, teachers’ thinking, pedagogy, and practice follow patterns that do not meet diverse learners’ needs” (p. 179). Said in another way, there is an epistemological division between teachers’ and students’ of color ways of knowing that must be better understood. Furthermore, Milner and Howard (2004) insisted that further research must focus on the “strategies, infrastructure and policies” (p. 295) that were not addressed when schools were racially integrated, and the “fundamental issues around teachers’ racial and cultural identities in schooling” (p. 295). In addition, Kress (2009) identified a gap in our understanding regarding “the history, culture, and identities of White educators and how these forces necessarily impact the ways in which curricula are designed for youth of Color” (p. 41). Moreover, he emphasized the need for critical questions about “the present we are constructing, and what does this mean for the youth
with whom we work?” (p. 48). Finally, Akiba (2007) emphasizes a need for empirical studies to interrogate “the degrees to and manners in which pluralism is practiced and varies greatly across classrooms, schools, and geographic regions, partly because of local policies concerning the multicultural education programs” (p. 224).

Another major obstacle in realizing educational equity cited by teacher educators and educational researchers is pre-service and in-service teachers’ inability to recognize the significant role that race plays in teaching and learning environments and educational outcomes (Delpit, 1995; Dickar, 2008/2008; Earick, 2008; King, 1994; Kinloch, 2009/2010; Lewis, 2001; McIntyre, 1997; Milner & Howard, 2004; Pollock, 2004). Further, both recent studies (Castro, 2010; Haviland, 2008; Lowenstein, 2009; Picower, 2009; Pollock, 2005) and classic studies (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lewis, 2001; McIntyre, 1997) have been conducted in an effort to illuminate and explore teachers’ roles in addressing racial disparities. These studies point to the need for teachers to gain “a complex understanding of multicultural issues” (Castro, 2010, p. 203), and specifically point to the need for teachers to develop racial literacy (Mosley & Rogers, 2011; Skerret, 2011). Indeed, while recent studies have investigated pre-service teachers’ understandings of race and racism in education (e.g., Milner, 2007; Mosley & Rogers, 2011; Nash, 2012), a review of literature on racial literacy reveals significantly less research about in-service teachers’ racial literacy (one example is Earick, 2009) and how it actually looks in schools.

Consequently, in this study I ask questions about how race emerges in today’s classrooms, in local spaces, and the complexities of White educators’ histories, cultures, and identities inform teaching and learning environments. Moreover, I address this
mismatch and how it impacts the lived experience of students and teachers of Color in ways that often are invisible, and masked in a “multicultural” narrative. Finally, I explore notions of teachers’ racial literacy and how the ability to make meaning of race impacts teaching and learning environments in the school.

Study Overview

This study is an ethnographic exploration of how teachers made sense of race in a predominately White southern elementary school in the United States. Numerous studies that explore pre-service and in-service teachers’ conceptualization of race attest to the fact that many teachers struggle to understand how race matters in the teaching profession, and how to work toward educational equity for all students (Earick, 2009; Mosley & Rogers, 2011; Nash, 2012; Picower, 2009; Winans, 2010). However, given that these studies indicate that we need to better understand the everyday lived experiences of teachers in schools, I concluded that the project would benefit from an ethnographic approach.

Ethnographic studies on the topic of race in schools have explored notions of colorblindness (Lewis, 2001; Pollock, 2005) and inquired about racial disparities in schools, particularly urban schools (Dickar, 2008; Ferguson, 2001; Morris, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999; Vaught, 2011). These studies have collectively addressed the dynamic interplay between racialized hierarchies and academic disparities in schools (including policies, labeling, resilience, tracking, teacher-student relationships, uses of space, race talk). However, the majority of these ethnographic studies were conducted in secondary schools and, with the exception of one (Morris, 2009), they were conducted in settings outside of the southeastern region of the United States. Importantly, a number of scholars
have identified the need for educational research that centers the complexities of place (Helfenbein & Taylor, 2009; Kinloch, 2010; Nespor, 1997; Schmidt, 2011). Further, scholars have asserted that research in the South in particular will to contribute to our understanding of African American identity and schooling experiences (Morris, 2009; Morris & Monroe, 2009), the impact that Latino migration has had on disrupting the Black-White binary in the region (Winders, 2005), and how school actors in the South construct and respond to racism (Hardie & Tyson, 2013). Responding to this call, I saw Creek, with its complex history of segregation, resistance to integration, and shifting demographics, as a vital place/space for situating the study.

**Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The broad purpose of the study was to better understand how teachers negotiated meanings of race in school and how school-places brokered these meanings. To accomplish this goal, I focused explicitly on the nexus of geographic place, social space, and race in the South as a space where race is embedded into the fabric of local communities and woven together with the acerbic inheritance of slavery and racial injustices that materialize in memories, moments, and symbols today.

The study was guided by the following research question(s):

*How do teachers in this school make sense of race, and how does the spatiality of the school inform this process?*

a. What is the substance, form and function of teachers’ race talk?

b. Where and when do teachers reflect upon or act in ways that demonstrate their understanding of race?
c. What resources (e.g., policies, experiences, stories, etc.) inform teachers’ understanding and interaction with individuals who are racially similar or different from themselves?

My review of literature included a variety of studies and methodologies which explored the ways in which teachers make sense of race in schools (Buendia, Ares & Juarez, 2004; Lewis, 2003; Milner & Howard, 2004; Osler, 1997; Picower, 2009), including studies that specified racial literacy as the topic of inquiry (Mosley & Rogers, 2011; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Skerret, 2011; Winans, 2010). These studies informed the questions that framed this study and the decisions I made with regard to the ways I took up ethnographic methodologies such as co-performative witnessing, data analysis, (re)presentation, and study conclusions. I further framed my study within the intersections of several critical social theories to explore these research questions. In sum, this study was guided by a complex theoretical framing and carefully crafted methods in order to understand how teachers made sense of race, and how the place of Creek Elementary itself influenced this process.

**Study Contributions**

First, the decision to situate the study in this particular school is significant given that its teacher and student demographics, as well as its performance indicators are quite close to national norms, particularly with regards to the disproportionate representation of White teachers (Appendix A) and the disparate achievement of White and non-White students (Appendix B). Moreover, as the southeastern region of the United States, and Creek in particular, have a long history of segregation that has been challenged by a changing racial demographic, race was continually interpreted in dynamic and complex
ways in the school. Taken together, these factors made Creek Elementary a rich site of inquiry for exploring teachers’ racial literacy and its link to interpreting and reifying racial disparities as a natural fact of life in school.

Second, by interrogating how teachers made sense of race in the nexus of a primarily-White, southern elementary school, this ethnographic study presents a different geographic context than previous studies on the notions of racial literacy and cultural mismatch which generally focus on urban, high school, and/or primarily racial minority schools outside of the regional south. It interrupts the unspoken assumption in the dominant discourse that race is only an issue pertinent for urban, Black, and/or poor schools, (but not wealthy, primarily-White, suburban, or rural schools). It also adds to the scholarly conversation about racial disparities between Black and White teachers in the teaching workforce (Jay, 2009; King, 1991; Milner & Howard, 2004; Osler, 1997).

Finally, the study provides unique insights into the cultural mismatch between teachers and students as it relates to the ways that race is systematically omitted from the dominant discourse of a primarily White southern elementary school. Importantly, it illuminates spaces where some teachers’ racial literacy is defeated and misrepresented in schools. I demonstrate how the defeat of racial literacy is a function of systemic racism within what I call a colorblind D/discourse (which I explain in the following chapter) that uses words such as “multicultural” as a substitute for race (Rogers & Mosley, 2006), and served as a hegemonic discourse (Jay, 2003) via language, symbols, and social performances.

In conclusion, this study responds to Amanda E. Lewis’ (2001) assertion that “We need to understand the role schools have played historically and contemporarily in racial
stratification, and their potential for doing otherwise” (p. 783). In the spirit of the latter half of this call to research, I hope to “unhide” the democratic potential of schools as “common” social spaces (Nespor, 2008), and reveal the ways in which racial literacy is an essential aspect of overcoming the cultural mismatch between students and teachers in schools.

**Defining Key Terms**

**Connecting literacy to racial literacy.** In order to explain my conceptualization of “racial literacy,” a notion central to this study, I must first explain how I conceptualize the term “literacy.” I view literacy as the ability to make meaning of socially and culturally constructed signifiers (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Edwards, McMillion & Turner, 2010; Heath, 1983; Long, Volk, & Gregory, 2004). To me, literacy requires much more than phonemic awareness, phonics, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension, or the five pillars of literacy (for a review of literacy trends and an explanation of the five pillars see Cassidy, Valadez, & Garrett, 2010). Here, I offer a simple sentence to demonstrate each of the five pillars of literacy\(^3\). In order to read this simple sentence, “The family has a pet cat,” first, a child must have *phonemic awareness*, or the recognition that the letters c-a-t represent phonemes (the sounds [k], [a], and [t]). Second, when a child can look at the letters c-a-t and combine all of the sounds in the word that form the word “cat,” that demonstrates *phonics skills*. Third, a child must able to connect the sounds represented by letters and accurately pronounce the word “cat,” this is referred to as *accuracy*. Fourth, a child who can automatically identify the word cat in a sentence in order to read

\(^3\) Although I believe this to be an overly basic but accurate portrayal of the five pillars of literacy, the purpose of giving this example is not to offer a critique or to contribute to scholarship on literacy in the traditional sense, rather it is to lay a foundation on which to apply my approach to the notion of racial literacy.
the sentence “The family has a pet cat,” is reading with fluency. Finally, most US teachers would expect a child to demonstrate comprehension of this sentence by describing an animal with four legs (cat) that a father, mother, and one or more children (family) keep in a house to pet, feed, and play with on a regular basis (pet).

However, my understanding of literacy problematizes defining literacy in this way, since for example cats are culturally constructed as animals that are appropriately kept as pets (as opposed to wild animals or food for example). Additionally, the notion of family is also culturally and socially constructed to represent biological parents of at least one child (as opposed to ten or more children, a single-parent household, same-sex partner parents, foster families, grandparents who are guardians, or a multitude of different constructions of the notion of family). My understanding of literacy requires more of someone than the ability to form a mental picture of a furry pet or a dominant definition of family. I understand literacy as a person’s ability to read words and symbols in books, on computers, in advertisements, and instruction manuals to name a few and make meaning from that text. Ultimately, I view literacy as a person’s ability to consume, synthesize, refute, and critique ideas, concepts, and philosophies. Literacy, then, is tied to the particular cultures, spaces, and times in which a person is situated within the world. In this way, the process of literacy involves expectations and understandings that are external to the individual, as well as the individual’s interest and background knowledge about particular texts.

Let me give an example based on my own background with diverse languages about the role that both culture and language play in this process. In high school, my best friend was Korean, and after graduation I spent the summer in Korea. I wanted to learn
Korean so she began to teach me the characters that serve as the foundation for written text in Korean. To me, the characters did not mean anything and when I wrote my friend’s father a thank you note in Korean that I copied from my friend’s translation of my original English letter, her father commented that it looked like I had “drawn” him a letter. In addition to my lack of knowledge about Korean characters, I also had very little working knowledge of the culture or customs in Korea. While I was there, I ate something resembling ice cream that I have recently learned to call “patbingsoo,” but in Korean it is written “팥빙수“. There is no “English” translation for this flavored ice shavings with sweetened azuki beans, tteok (rice cake), chewy jelly bits, and various fresh fruit. I suppose there is no translation because it is extremely uncommon in the United States at least I have never seen or eaten anything like patbingsoo here.

I tell this tale to illustrate my point that literacy is tied to places, concepts, and understandings that do not directly translate across time or between places. Most literacy teachers emphasize three important skills that readers must have to comprehend a text. Those are making text to self, text to text, and text to world connections. In my example above, if I had a Korean novel about an adolescent boy growing up in Seoul, Korea that was translated into English, there are concepts like “patbingsoo” that I simply would not understand had I not been to Korea. Additionally, there would be a great deal of concepts that might be assumed by the author as basic knowledge of Korean history (such as Korea’s strained political relationship with Japan) that would be incongruent with my life experience and training.

In this example, my ability to connect myself to the text would depend on the language that is used (if it is written in English or Korean characters) and my experiences
with Korean people and in Seoul. My ability to make text to text connections between this (imaginary) novel and a popular American young adult novel would also be limited by my understanding of disparate notions of adolescence and gender roles in Korea and America. Building on text to self and text to text connections, making a connection between the text of this Korean novel and the world would rest on my ability to conceive of life outside of my immediate surroundings. This capacity would be influenced by travel, people that I had met, linguistic knowledge, stories that I had heard, pictures that I had seen, news reports, and so on. Without a contextual understanding of Korea, my ability to connect myself to the experience of an adolescent child in Korea would be limited at best, and quite possibly incomprehensible due to cultural incongruity. Finally, all of these skills rely on the types of texts that an individual is exposed to (and the manner in which they are taught about the background of these texts), and an individual’s assessment of the degree of usefulness and interest in a particular text.

**Conceptualizing racial literacy.** To take up the notion of making sense of race, I drew from the work of Lani Guinier (2004) who proposed the concept of racial literacy as the “capacity to decipher the durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narratives of nations” (p. 100). Within the context of education, Skerret (2011) defines racial literacy as, “an understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political and educational experiences of individuals and groups” (p. 314). My understanding of racial literacy involves the ability to decipher what Lewis (2001) describes as racial messages, the “implicit and explicit racial lessons that are ‘taught’ and learned in schools” (p. 782). Racial messages are a constant part of social interaction between people, regardless of intent or consciousness
on the part of individuals. In a single setting, racial messages understood by individuals differently in ways that may conflict with one another.

Thus, for the purposes of this study, I define racial literacy as a negotiated skill between individuals and the social webs in which a person is located. Racial literacy is a skill acquired through social lessons (taught in both formal and informal spaces, such as playgrounds, classrooms, homes, public rallies, and news reports) which result in the ability to make connections with one’s self, conflicting or correlated racial messages, and the world. Finally, racial literacy is not a linear process - it is demonstrated in moments and fluctuates depending on how race is translated in and through local places.

In this study I accept the idea that teachers send and receive both conscious and unconscious racial messages (Lewis, 2004), and these racial messages inform how students make meaning of race (their own and others’). Further, I conceptualized the negotiated meaning-making process of race as one that has profound effects on how students relate to the world, including their teachers. Because I contend that race is written textually (e.g., books, forms), and socially (e.g., pictures, symbols), both students and teachers must learn to critically read race in order to critique racism and injustice that takes place in subtle and overt ways in our world. In this way, I also view racial literacy as preparing students for democracy (Rogers & Mosley, 2006) and racial literacy as a moral and professional imperative for teachers.

Ultimately, this study rests on an understanding of racial literacy as an ability to read the world (Freire, 2002) and name the world, and the ability to connect the text of race at the local level to a global understanding of the world’s racialized hierarchies. Racial literacy requires teachers to connect this understanding to recognize, refute,
critique, and synthesize the structure of race in the daily lives of people in local spaces, such as the school. The following story metaphorically and materially illustrates the ways in which I see racial literacy as connected to literacy in a broader sense.

Early one morning before school started, I walked through the media center toward my office and noticed the White media specialist talking with three White female students. As I was getting settled into my office, I overheard the media specialist ask one of the girls, “Are you sure you want that one?” The girl incredulously replied, “Yes.” I knew that children often came in before school to pick out their “birthday book” (someone, usually family members, symbolically donated money to the media center in a child’s name) from a stack of books that the media specialist had purchased from a vendor. I was curious about the comment because I had never before heard the media specialist react in this way to any child who selected a birthday book. A few days later my suspicions were confirmed when I noticed a picture displayed in the entrance of the media center. The picture was of one of the girls I had seen that morning. She was smiling and holding a book with Kwanzaa\(^4\) in the title. When I asked the media specialist about the picture, he confirmed that he was uncomfortable about letting the girl choose that particular book as her birthday book.

In this study, I suggest that the process of racial literacy is informed by teachers’ knowledge of history, place, and culture and the racialized signifiers created therein. In this example, the media specialist read the racial signifier of Kwanzaa as non-White, and her choice of associating her embodiment of Whiteness with Kwanzaa as a Black signifier to be incongruent. I observed and analyzed this decision and discomfort in

\(^4\) Kwanzaa is an African American and Pan-African holiday that celebrates “what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense.” It is celebrated from December 26 through January 1 each year. For more information see http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/index.shtml.
connection with the media specialist’s knowledge of history, and the socio-cultural context of Creek as a primarily White southern space where Black and White were dichotomous signifiers. In this situation, the media specialist was unable to make sense of his dissonance about race because it was improper to discuss “race,” although it was clearly the subject informing his hesitation. Yet, in the silence that ensued (no explanation was provided to the student for the specialist’s hesitation/resistance, no space was available for the specialist to discuss his discomfort), messages about race were still communicated.

In sum, I view racial literacy as an ability to analyze racial signifiers with a deep knowledge of racialized structures, undergirded by an understanding that these structures are endemically unequal. Consequently, I viewed the implications for making sense of race in Creek to extend beyond the school and connected to “racialized hierarchies [that] mirror the distribution of power and resources in the society more generally” (Guinier, 2004, p. 115). Finally, I assert that racial literacy must radically mutate through time and space due to the unique histories, cultures, and social organizations of particular places and the perpetual changes of places throughout time.

The ways in which conflicting narratives about race materialize in the spaces of this southern school reveal the complexity of racial literacy as a non-linear process, and a skill requiring collaboration as opposed to isolation. Additionally, while this is a study of racial literacy, it is simultaneously a study of racial illiteracy, or what I call colorblind literacy- the failure to recognize race in connection to structures and systems of society⁵. In this study, I point to the ways in which Creek Elementary school supports racial literacy.

⁵ Throughout the study, in places where I am not specifically addressing the notions distinctly, the term *racial literacy* will encompass the notion of *racial illiteracy* as well.
illiteracy and how without public or private conversations about race, racial inequity among teachers and students is inevitable.
CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Review of Relevant Literature and Related Studies

My review of relevant literature and related studies informed my research questions and methodology for studying how teachers make sense of race in Creek Elementary. In this section, I describe how the concept of racial literacy fits within the larger context of multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy and anti-racist education. Then, I provide an overview regarding how racial literacy and cultural mismatches have been explored in research. Finally, I outline the ways that the present study draws from previous studies on racial literacy and discuss how it is unique.

Connecting Bodies of Literature to Racial Literacy

Racial literacy is a concept that is used in connection with three terms taken up in educational research and pedagogy. While the use of these terms converge and diverge ideologically, I emphasize how each supports teachers as they work toward racial literacy. Those three terms are: multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and anti-racist education. While a thorough review of the forms and functions of each of these is not possible in this space, I introduce each of these concepts here to situated racial literacy in a broader and contested field that is most often referred to as multicultural education.
Multicultural education can be traced to the Civil Rights Movement, as a struggle for freedom, political power, and economic integration (Sleeter & McLaren, 2009). However, the term multicultural education carries with it a lot of different meanings (Lee, 2009). I borrow from Castagno (2009) to describe six distinct approaches to multicultural education. Those are:

1. Assimilationist, where diversity is either a threat or ignored, Whiteness is dominant, and the goal for students is social reproduction.

2. Amalgamation, where diversity is viewed as neutral, there is a discourse of unity and the goal for students is to reduce prejudice.

3. Pluralistic, where diversity is relative, power is shared, and the goal for students is that differences should be respected.

4. Cross-cultural competence where diversity is viewed as essential, power is shared, and the goal for students is cross-cultural competence.

5. Critical awareness approach where diversity is viewed as essential, the status quo is interrogated, and the goal for students is an increased awareness of the social world.

6. Social action approach where diversity is both essential and inspiring, power is challenged, and the goal for students is to work for social change.

These variations are important for understanding fissures within the area of multicultural education and in the present study I use these divisions in my analysis of teachers’ racial literacy. Enid Lee (2009) suggests that anti-racist education is the version of multicultural education that looks at discrimination and asserts that a multicultural classroom is not synonymous with the racial integration of bodies of children. Instead,
anti-racist multicultural education is ultimately concerned with social change that empowers people.

In a similar way, Gloria Ladson Billings (1995) introduced the term “culturally responsive” to refer to pedagogy and curriculum that has a “synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture” (p. 467), as a result of her research on successful teachers of African American students (Ladson Billings, 1994). Framing education in connection with community stands in opposition to an epistemology that locates student failure within individuals in a meritocratic system. To be clear, culturally relevant pedagogy is not a replication of “styles and behaviors of exemplary teachers of color” (Seidl, 2007), rather it is “an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness” (Ladson Billings, 1995 p. 483).

Ladson Billings (1995) describes teachers who enact culturally responsive pedagogy as making “conscious decisions to be a part of the community from which their students come” (p. 479), encouraging “a community of learners rather than competitive, individual achievement” (p. 480), and believing that “knowledge [is] about doing” (p. 481). Culturally responsive teaching is therefore closely related to anti-racist education.

Anti-racist education, including anti-racist teaching, is a complex concept; therefore I draw upon the explanations of several leaders in the field to build my definition. Nieto (2009) explains that anti-racist teachers are those who pay attention to “areas in which some students may be favored over others, including the curriculum, choice of materials, sorting policies, and teachers’ interactions and relationships with students and their communities” (p. 101). Troyna and Carrington (1990) add that it
works toward “organizational, curricular, and pedagogical strategies that aim to promote racial equity and to eliminate attendant forms of discrimination and oppression both individually and institutionally” (p. 1). Mosley (2010) critiques how some scholars and practitioners take up culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural education as a way to account for diverse perspectives and celebrate the cultural backgrounds of students. She argues that anti-racist teaching is specifically concerned with disrupting racist ideologies through talk and action.

Au (2009) adds that anti-racist education is a “serious struggle for social justice, a struggle that recognizes the need to fight against systematic racism, colonization, and cultural oppression that takes place through our schools” (p.ii), and George J. Sefa Dei (2005) explains it as a “proactive educational practice intended to address all forms of racism and the intersections of social difference (race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.). As a form of education that makes very explicit the intended outcomes to subvert the status quo and bring about change, the politics and credibility of anti-racism rests in action” (p. 136). Finally, Earick (2009) described anti-racist educators saying that they accept racial identity and hegemony, are accountable for racism, and take action grounded in realistic acts. Thus, I define anti-racist education as the educational action resulting from a critical awareness of race and the resulting materialization of anti-racist curricular choices, collegial relationships, pedagogical styles, student-teacher interactions, and decisions about policy and procedures.

My understanding of racial literacy takes into account the valuable contributions of multicultural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and anti-racist education. These bodies of literature support my knowledge base for racial literacy by critically
considering race (as a social construction) and how it operates in and through education. When racialized disparities are recognized, anti-racist education becomes a natural development of racial literacy, because anti-racist education educates students (and teachers) to discern and work against racism and racial inequity in various forms and contexts (Skerret, 2011). In simplest terms then, I view anti-racist education as racial literacy in action.

**Research on Racial Literacy**

Since Guinier (2004) coined the term racial literacy, educational researchers have taken it up in many ways. In my review of research specifically focused on racial literacy, studies have investigated the concept in a variety of contexts and for different purposes. Many of the studies focus on pre-service teachers in the context of higher education (e.g., Brown, 2011; Mosley, 2010; Mosley & Rogers, 2011). However, research on racial literacy has also included an evaluation of curricular policy in Brazil (Canen, 2010), a critique of history curriculum that limits pre-service teachers’ understandings of racism as historically situated and institutionalized practice (Brown, 2011), and an exploration of how emotions impact White college students’ racial literacy (Winans, 2010).

Rebecca Rogers and Melissa Mosley have published several articles on the topic and are arguably leaders in the academic conversation about racial literacy. Their work primarily takes up racial literacy through critical discourse analysis (CDA). Recently, Mosley (2010) proposed Critical Race Literacy Pedagogy, which she described as a “set of pedagogical tools to practice racial literacy in school settings with children, peers, colleagues and so forth. . . [which] interrogates the ideologies that shape knowledge” (p.
452-453) including curriculum and discourse. In the present study, I include critical race literacy pedagogy within the term anti-racist education. Germane to the present study, Mosley (2010) concluded that there is no linear path to anti-racist education and that enacting critical race literacy pedagogy must be a supported process.

In a recent study, Mosley and Rogers (2011) analyzed pre-service teachers’ racial literacy engaging in book clubs within a tragic gap, borrowing from Palmer’s (2009) notion of the “tragic gap,” that is to say the metaphorical space between ‘what is’ and ‘what should be’ in regard to racism. They found that these pre-service teachers demonstrated a deep level of engagement as well as resistance that was evident in their discourse. In sum, Mosley and Rogers’ (2011) work demonstrates clearly the discursive dimensions of racial literacy and how people develop understandings of race through metaphors, jokes, stories, and other cultural narratives. My review of literature on racial literacy (i.e., Bryan et. al, 2012; Mosley & Rogers, 2011; Skerret, 2011; Winans, 2010) influenced how I anticipated hearing and observing racial literacy and discussions about race through discourse, and because their work so clearly points to racial literacy through verbal discourse, I made methodological choices to observe for other ways in which the subject of race was evident in the everyday lives of teachers in Creek Elementary through non-verbal cues (e.g., images, symbols, traditions, etc.).

In my review of the literature on racial literacy and cultural mismatches between teachers and students, four studies have significantly influenced the questions that I asked in this study, my methodological design, and my understanding of racial literacy. The first study is Amanda Lewis’ (2003) examination of how race and racial inequality are reproduced in day-to-day life in schools. In this ethnographic study, Lewis selected three
schools where she conducted ethnographic case studies. She posited that elementary school is particularly powerful in shaping people in racial terms. Lewis’ study investigated the ways in which race is a product of schooling, and illustrated the implicit lessons children are taught about race, or racial messages in schools. Lewis studied three elementary schools largely as an outsider in the late 1990’s in California and focused on the racialization process, thus she was interested in parents, students, staffs, and teacher participants. Lewis’ study pointed to a need to consider social context, but this lens was not central to her study. She concluded, “Context clearly matters in at least three ways: spaces themselves can be racially coded, local contexts and institutions can have both direct and indirect influences on identification processes, and the effects of being categorized as well as understandings of the meaning of race can vary by context” (p. 142).

The second study is Mica Pollock’s (2004) exploration of race talk in schools. Pollock focused on de-racialized speech and written words (e.g., newsletters) in a high school. Her ethnography was conducted in a California high school from 1995-1997 where she taught for a year prior to the study. She concluded that teachers and administrators had a “colormute” (the absence of public conversation that suppressed race words and de-raced talk in hopes that race would become irrelevant) approach to race and found that this had adverse consequences for students that reinforced inequity. Pollock explained that colormute talk acts as a tool of colorblindness that denies race and racism, and perpetuates our failure “to describe accurately the complex dynamics of our existing inequities” and instead chose “not to analyze inequities at all” (p. 144). Pollock called for race conversations for educators that would enhance racial literacy (though she
did not use the term racial literacy). She proposed that asking provocative questions, navigating predictable debates, and talk more about talking would be a generative approach to race talk that would interrupt inequity. In sum, Pollock’s work illuminated how teachers avoid race talk through colormute discourse, silencing and silent discourses.

The third study is Allison Skerrett’s (2011) investigation of secondary English teachers’ racial literacy in Massachusetts, U.S. and Ontario, Canada. In this study, she conducted two semi-structured interviews of 17 teachers in racially diverse high schools. Findings from her study illuminated three approaches to racial literacy which she named 1) apprehensive and authorized (or fearful and officially sanctioned by the schools), 2) incidental and ill-informed (or occasions to discuss race that were not planned and teaching about race that was erroneous or incomplete), and 3) sustained and strategic (or teaching about race that was planned and anchored in an anti-racist stance). It is important to note that these findings indicated that teachers did not always fit into a single category, rather the teachers moved in and out of the categories depending on the context, opportunities for collaboration, and their knowledge of particular topics. Skerrett (2011) asserted “with strong racial literacy knowledge and skills, students and teachers can expose, and devise powerful strategies to redress racism in nations such as the United States and Canada that are struggling to dismantle their racialized hierarchies” (p. 329).

The fourth study was Maryann Dickar’s (2008) ethnographic exploration of the ways that students and teachers in an urban majority-Black high school in New York culturally constructed spaces of agency and identity within the school. Dickar, as a former teacher in the school, focused the majority of her analysis on the ways that students negotiated identity in informal spaces such as halls and doorways, and how
teachers in the school did not recognize the significance of this “thirdspace.” In her study, Dickar takes up Soja’s (1996) notion of “thirdspace” as “a space that supported binaries between school-oriented and street-oriented identities . . . but also posited a third or ‘other’ option” (Dickar, 2008 p. 22). In sum, her study considered how racialized ideologies and discourses became grafted onto specific school spaces.

Applications to the Present Study

I drew from lessons and themes of these studies to inform my study questions, methodology and representation. Specifically, I looked for colorblind or colormute discourse, and I considered Pollock’s suggestions (p. 222) for interrupting inequity to formulate interview questions. Additionally, Pollock’s work illuminated the difficulties in observing silencing and silent discourses (e.g., careful glances, avoiding the use of race labels), so I carefully selected methods for observing silence (e.g., storybox, photography, carefully observing body language). I also paid attention to Skerret’s (2011) assertion that collaboration enhances racial literacy. As I observed and analyzed data, I considered this assertion when there was an obvious lack of collaboration.

As a whole, my review of the literature affirmed that my position as a teacher in the school with sustained involvement in the school community was important in accessing silent spaces and gaining the trust of teachers (and students) so that I could observe multiple layers of how race was constructed in Creek. This influenced my decision take an ethnographic approach and helped me to envision how I could simultaneously be a teacher and researcher in this space as a co-performative witness (Madison, 2005, 2007).
The ethnographic studies influenced my methodology in this study, though my study offers a unique perspective in the conversation. First, the ways in which Dickar (2008) took up the notion of thirdspace was informative for conceptualizing how to investigate space in schools. Dickar focused primarily on the spatialization of student agency. In a different way, I take up the rhizome\textsuperscript{6} of spatialized moments where teachers’ concepts of self and other were expanded to renegotiate boundaries and static definitions of race and self. I also added layers of firstspace, secondspace, and lived space (Soja, 1996) to my analysis of Creek and Creek Elementary in a southern and primarily racially White space (these concepts will be discussed in the following chapter and are defined briefly in Appendix D).

While many current studies on racial literacy use critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method for analysis, I did not conceptualize my analysis as CDA, though I certainly explored discursive dimensions of race. I made this decision because I was interested in what Lewis (2005) refers to as racial messages and the process of making sense of those messages in the school space through a nexus of experiences, environment, images, traditions, language, stories, policies, and performances. I wanted to understand the multiplicity of racial messages (how and what these messages were at a systemic level), and within these messages I wanted to explore notions of individualism as well as collectivist ways of thinking about race and culture. Therefore, CDA which has been critiqued for its assumption of individualism and tendency toward binary structures (Mosley & Roger, 2011), did not match my purposes in analyzing data.

\textsuperscript{6} The concept of rhizome is taken from Deleuze and Guattari (1980) and should be taken here to mean multiple entry and exit points.
Another way that this study diverges from other studies that examine racial literacy is my focus on practicing teachers in their everyday lived experiences in school. Rogers and Mosley’s work (Rogers & Mosley, 2008; Mosley & Rogers, 2011) often centers on pre-service teachers. My focus on practicing teachers introduces a complex notion of how school spaces shape racial literacy that I explored through multiple levels of observation, interviewing, analysis, and reporting.

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to better understand the interaction between geographic location and how teachers make sense of the notion of race, I drew on Critical Race Theory (CRT), critical geography, and feminist theories to guide this inquiry. A thorough explanation of each of these theories and their various applications to educational research is beyond what I can provide. However, in this section I explain the basic premises of each, and identify the specific ways that concepts from each theory were applied to this study. Finally, I describe how the intersections of CRT, critical geography, and feminist theory helped me to conceptualize this study of teachers’ racial literacy.

**Critical Race Theory**

Gloria Ladson Billings and William Tate’s (1995) article *Toward a critical race theory of education*, is often cited as the formal introduction of CRT to educational research. The significance of this article was that it highlighted the fact that race remains untheorized in education. Their work marked a paradigm shift for many educational researchers interested in issues of race and racism in education. Over the past two

---

7 Critical Race Theory is rooted in critical legal studies. Derrick Bell is largely credited with the introduction of CRT to the academic community when he protested the lack of faculty of color at Harvard University in 1991. Bell called for a shift from the treatment of race as a methodological variable toward a central, conceptual place in research (Bell, 1992; Leonardo, 2012; Omi and Winant, 1994).
decades, there have been many developments in this framework that centers race in educational research. In fact, scholarship related to CRT includes a number of related theories including Critical Whiteness (Haney Lopez, 1996; Harris, 1993), Lat Crit (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Haney Lopez, 1997), Critical Race Feminism (Wing, 2003), Tribal Crit (Brayboy, 2005), and Critical Raceclass theory (Leonardo, 2012). In the next section, I identify and describe the key tenants accepted among all of these branches.

**Key tenets and terms.** Critical race theory (CRT) aims to disrupt, expose, challenge and change racist polices and practices that disenfranchise groups of people based on race (Solorzano, 1997). Simply put, although other social identities (e.g., gender, class) can be taken up, CRT scholarship in education “highlights those aspects of society, institutions, schools and classrooms that tell the story of the functions, meanings, causes, and consequences of racial educational inequality” (Zamudio et.al., 2011 p. 2).

The following is a synthesis of the primary tenets in CRT scholarship that serve as a foundation for this work in education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Solorzano, 1997; Vaught, 2011; Zamudio et al., 2011). Key tenets include:

1) **The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism:** CRT asserts that racism is endemic to the United States and is a permanent factor in American social and political life;

2) **The challenge to dominant ideology:** CRT challenges claims of positivistic, neutral knowledge particularly as it pertains to race and racism are ahistorical because racism is constitutional to societal inequity, and must be explained through a historic and contextual lens. Further, education is an institution that perpetuates ideologies of meritocracy, individualism, and colorblindness;
3) The commitment and struggle for social justice: CRT insists that it is not enough to produce knowledge, but to engage in critical action, or critically informed action in the service of social justice in the pursuit of transforming education to better serve the needs of all students;

4) The centrality of experiential knowledge: CRT privileges the voices, stories, and epistemic knowledge generated by the lived experiences of people of color, therefore counterstorytelling, or the methodological practice of honoring stories that counter dominant narratives are celebrated and necessary;

5) The use of an interdisciplinary perspective: CRT utilizes interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work that is aimed at disrupting oppression and transforming unjust society is welcome, though liberal projects of incremental change within existing power structures are rejected.

In this project I drew upon these tenets by engaging in an interdisciplinary perspective (borrowing from geography, education, sociology, and anthropology) for exploring teachers’ understanding of both race and racism, which troubled “neutral” notions of meritocracy, individualism, and colorblindness in my analysis. My choice to investigate the spatiality of race in Creek by exploring the connections of the history of racism and its connection to the present, and the privileging of voices of Black teachers in this project as counter-storytellers were all directly connected to my understanding of the endemic and institutionalized ways that race and racism are socially reproduced. Given my White racial identity, I also acknowledge that my perspective was both limited and partial based on the privileges of my Whiteness, which I discuss further when I describe White identities and my positionality as a teacher-researcher in the study.
**Race.** I draw from CRT to define and explain concepts central to this study. CRT scholarship views race as a social construction. That is, race is a social reality, but a biological myth. CRT scholars adhere to the belief that race is “a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies” (Winant, 2000, p. 172). Importantly, I understand race to be meaningful, yet also unstable and politically contested (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Omi and Winant’s work on racial formation in the United States centers race as a “fundamental axis of social organization in the U.S.” (1994, p. 13). Interestingly, although race is at the center of all CRT work, there is no agreement on a singular definition of this driving concept. In fact, it is often difficult to discern the difference between race, ethnicity, or nationality among CRT scholarship (Leonardo, 2012). These discursive shifts between terms as well as their political and cultural connections support the idea that race is a contested amalgamation of concepts about human bodies as it is translated in and through various times and places. Given the multitude of approaches to study and conceptualize race, in this study I carefully observed and asked questions about race, ethnicity, and culture in order to better understand the various frameworks that informed teachers’ concepts of race. Using an example pertinent to the current study, Black/African American racial identity, can be complicated in American teachers’ minds when they have Jamaican or Brazilian immigrant students whose phenotypes match their

---

In this study, I chose to use the racial signifier Black to represent all racial and ethnic groups of people whose bodies were read as “Black” in this school context (e.g., African American, immigrants who are of African descent including Jamaican and Haitian), a fact that can be largely attributed to the one-drop rule as established through the Plessy v. Ferguson case in the 19th century. This homogenization process will be discussed in the final chapters. I will use specific terms such as “African American” when I am specifically talking about only that particular group within the perceived “Black” group.
African American peers but whose cultures, languages, and national origins are quite different.

**Racism.** Deconstructing racism is the heart of CRT scholarship. Within the CRT framework, racism is viewed as any practice that “creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 71).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2009) makes an important distinction between prejudice and racism. He asserts that while prejudice is individual, racism is based on a racialized social system framework where the individual is linked to a larger cultural system that confines people by race. His work outlines the foundation of a racialized social system where unequal economic, political, social, and psychological rewards are allocated along racial lines. These disparities constitute racial differences, and it is this conceptualization that I draw upon when I used the term “racialized” in this study, as an identity ascribed to individuals or groups as part of a larger system. As Bonilla-Silva (2003) explained, this racialized system is where, “actors in racial positions do not occupy those positions because they are of x or y race, but because x or y has been socially defined as a race” (p. 40-41). In this study, I understand racism as a structure of racialization that systematically benefits the race socially defined as White.

**Critical Whiteness and colorblindness.** Critical Whiteness, as an examination of how Whiteness has become a hegemonic norm (Picower, 2009), is a growing body of literature (Clark & O’Donnell, 1999; Earick, 2009; Lensmire, 2008; Lewis, 2001; Marx, 2006; Nash, 2012; Sleeter, 1996; Thompson, 2003; Trainor, 2005). In this study, I borrowed heavily from three specific areas of critical Whiteness studies: (a) the concept
of Whiteness, (b) the discourses employed by White people to mask Whiteness, specifically colorblindness, and (c) White supremacy.

The concept of Whiteness is often elusive and it is difficult to describe for people who are White. Ian Haney Lopez (1996) argues that one is not born White, but becomes White through the *chance* of their ancestry, the *context* (the social setting where one is situated that defines race), and the *choices* that a social actor makes to ascribe to or reject racism. Richard Dyer (1997) explains that being White is often viewed as an invisible quality that transcends the body. Whiteness is viewed in connection with the spirit and soul, while non-White identities are conversely associated with the corporeal. In sum, Dyer states, “Whiteness is of course always already predicated on racial difference, interaction and domination” (p.13).

Bonilla-Silva’s contributions to Whiteness studies are central to my understanding of Whiteness. He argues that Whiteness operates at structural, symbolic, personal, and ideological levels and these social understandings work to privilege White people (2003; 2009). Bonilla-Silva further argues that key to White privilege and racism is the epistemic difference between Black and White conceptualizations of racism. He asserts that to many Whites racism often means individual prejudice, while for most people of color racism is understood to be systemic or institutionalized (2003).

Benjamin Blaisdell (2005) makes the case that Whiteness creates rules and laws. It appears in education through curriculum choices, pedagogy, norms, and discourse. White curriculum and White pedagogy make value judgments that assume that Whites can borrow from both White and Black knowledge, but that Blacks can only hold knowledge for and through a Black consciousness. For example, African American
literature is often systematically separated from mainstream curriculum while White authored texts (such as Shakespeare) are studied as the literary canon (Morrison, 1992). In this study, I analyzed the ways in which Whiteness was evident in teachers’ pedagogies and at the institutional level, and how some teachers countered Whiteness through their teaching.

Gayatri C. Spivak (1990) warns that the centrality of Whiteness is “always constituted in terms of its own marginality” (p. 40) which requires both fear and the stereotyping racial “others” (e.g., as potential criminals). Positioning oneself as a racialized (White) victim creates the image of innocence. bell hooks (1990) names Whiteness as both a representation of terror, and an identity which rests on a perpetual reliance on a cycle of terror. Thandeka (1999) advanced this argument in her research with and about White people. White participants in her study recounted events in their childhood and adolescence where their parents’ or adults close to them invoked terror as discipline for their attempts to associate with the racial “other”. The result of these experiences was that terror was transferred onto the racial other in the form of fear, rejection, and separation. This resulted in a cycle of terror. In sum, I frame Whiteness as a racialized identity based on privilege, terror, and transcendence of the body. Within this racialized system, Whiteness is the standard against which all racial others are measured.

Colorblindness and White talk are tools used to maintain Whiteness as innocent, or as Thompson (2003) explains the desire to be the “good White.” In my review of the literature colorblindness (Blaisdell, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2003/2009; Lensmire, 2008; Marx, 2006) is closely related to White talk, or the veiled and strategic discursive tools
used to avoid, interrupt, and dismiss counter-arguments, to collude with other White actors to create a culture of niceness, minimize or redefine racism to include reverse racism, and to declare commitment or act paternalistically toward racial others (Frankenberg, 1993; McIntyre, 1997; Nash, 2012). In this study I use the term colorblindness to include White talk, but to signify much more than speech patterns.

Bonilla-Silva (2009) identifies four central frames that advance colorblind discourse used by White people. Those frames are

(a) Abstract liberalism, the discourse that attempts to rationalize racial unfairness with notions of equality, meritocracy, opportunity, and choice

(b) Naturalization, the discourse that advances the idea that racism is just the way some people are

(c) Cultural racism, the discourse that advances racism is the result of cultural deficiencies and is the fault of people of color

(d) Minimization, the discourse that draws on the argument that racism is not prevalent anymore in American society.

Marx (2006) adds an important layer for understanding colorblindness in the context of this study by explaining that colorblind discourse often includes a discrimination against heritage languages, or languages other than English. This demonstrates one of the various frames and manifestations of colorblindness. I view the commonality shared among different iterations of colorblindness as a failure to acknowledge racism as a social reality, a discourse that maintains Whiteness.

To say that colorblindness is a discourse is insufficient without a clear explanation
of the notion of discourse. Discourse involves ways of interacting, representing, and being (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1996; Rogers, 2002). Discourse in this sense requires an understanding of the inextricable link between the use of language as a cultural tool and its connection with the social realities that language is used to describe. In this way, the idea of discourse signifies that language informs culture and culture informs language.

James Gee’s (1996, 1999) distinction of big “D” Discourse and little “d” discourse make an important contribution to how I conceive colorblind D/discourse in this study. Gee explains that big “D” Discourse involves the ways of believing, representing, acting, performing, and valuing that support a person’s ability to be a competent user of language. On the other hand, little “d” discourse is how people actually use language to make meanings with each other as they interact in social situations. There is a wide body of literature on this topic (see for example Halliday, 1978; Fairclough, 1995; Rogers, 2002; Rogers & Mosley, 2008), however, I borrow from these studies of discourse to suggest two variations on the word as I use it in this study. Those are, Discourse as ideological, and discourse as the units of language used to represent thoughts and ideas.

Identifying Discourse and discourse in this way added an extra layer for analyzing how the colorblind D/discourse operates. I define colorblind Discourse and colorblind discourse respectively based on scholarly literature and research that includes my autoethnographic study of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Blaisdell, 2005; Howard, forthcoming; Lensmire, 2008; Lewis, 2001; Marx, 2006; Pollock, 2005).

Colorblind Discourse upholds a firm belief in the reality of meritocracy and individualism. CRT scholarship problematizes meritocracy as a hegemonic viewpoint that represents America as a race-neutral society and alleges racial fairness and the
The universality of social norms. This allegation results in the denial of both historical and contemporary racism with respect to everyday social life in the present time. It also fails to acknowledge the expertise, experiences, or knowledge of people who have been racially marginalized. In the end, colorblind Discourse fails to acknowledge the systemic racism that normalizes Whiteness.

Colorblind discourse, involves the use of language that denies racism, and race as a social construct. Colorblind discourse includes the omission of racial signifiers or discussions about the topic of race in speech (e.g., referring to a man and avoiding a racial description of him, justifying racist remarks by avoiding talk about race saying something like “She was probably just having a bad day”), making statements to downplay race as significant (e.g., “I don’t care what color you are, black, white or purple”), claiming innocence (e.g., “I would never judge anyone because of the color of their skin”), or making the idea of race into a joke to downplay the gravity of the effects of the construction of race (e.g., Using a name that signifies an ethnic group outside of whiteness to self identify, for example Laquisha or Paco).

With this in mind, I use three terms to signify three different yet related concepts. *Colorblind D/discourse* signifies both the colorblind ideology and the observable expression of that ideology. *Colorblind Discourse* indicates a way of believing, acting, performing, and valuing in a way that denies the social significance of race. *Colorblind discourse* implies the use of language that implicitly and/or explicitly denies race/racism as socially significant. In this way, I view colorblind discourse as “White Diss-course [that is] tantamount to ‘dissing’ or insulting people of color behind the façade of innocence or normalized speech” (Matias, 2012, p. 12).
To people operating with a colorblind discourse, the term White supremacy only signifies overt articulations of racism such as racist hate crimes and the groups of people (i.e., KuKluxKlan) who commit those crimes. However, in this study, I borrowed from CRT to define White supremacy in connection to Whiteness as property where “racism operates as the means of participation in the larger structure of White supremacy” (Vaught, 2011 p. 10). In this system, Whiteness represents the exclusive freedom to own property and the inability to ever be owned, while Blackness is dehumanized and a commodified form of property to be owned (Harris, 1993). In this way, White and Black represent “a permanent binary: rights and the lack thereof” (Vaught, 2011, p. 37). Ultimately, I view White supremacy as the system that holds Whiteness and Blackness in place, a system that takes different forms in different places and one that is upheld through the colorblind discourse that denies that the system exists. Therefore, this study can be viewed as a micro-level deconstruction of White supremacy in which teachers are both directly and indirectly implicated in playing a role in the perpetuation of this system.

The role of CRT in framing this study. Understanding how teachers make sense of race is the focus of this study. My methodology and analysis held race as a constant in social interaction, such that making sense of race was something that was observable in conversation and social interaction, but it was also present in silences, visual representations, stories with subtle innuendos or verbal codes, decisions, interactions between teachers, choices in curriculum, and teachers’ interactions with
parents. To be clear, while this study interrupts colorblind and White epistemologies of meritocracy, and demonstrates the ways in which teachers were a part of an institution that perpetuated this way of understanding race and human bodies in a racialized system, it should not be read as an attack on individuals. This would be antithetical to my premise that race is understood by individuals who are connected within a larger social system (local, national, and global) that sends, receives, refutes, and upholds competing racial messages in that system. In fact, my methodological choices were made so that I would not focus on teachers who were explicitly racist (to be clear, there were only a few examples of explicit racial prejudice during my five years at Creek). Rather, the three White teachers central to this study were what I considered to be relatively typical teachers in Creek who I believe genuinely wanted their students to succeed. While I would not characterize any of these teachers by the word “racist,” we are all part of a system that perpetuated racial inequity.

Deconstructing implicit racism requires a careful framing, and CRT was essential for capturing hidden meanings in social interactions. This theoretical framing impacted my choices to simultaneously center Black teachers and privilege their stories in the (re)presentation of Creek Elementary as a racialized space. In this way, I aimed to call attention to their counter narratives to interrupt stories that privileged colorblind and individualistic epistemologies. These methodological choices revealed data that illuminated some of the obstacles teachers faced in demonstrating racial literacy.

I borrowed four terms from CRT scholarship that were especially useful in my analysis of data: coevalness, allochronism, microagressions, and meritocracy. The

---

9 Epistemology will be discussed in the discussion and findings chapters, however I understand epistemology to be a justification for beliefs about the nature and scope of knowledge, or where knowledge comes from, how it is defined, how it is acquired, and ultimately whose knowledge is counted as valid.
counter narratives of Black teachers in this study problematized notions of coevalness, or equality of opportunity in time and place (Duncan, 2006; Tate, 2008) and allochronism, or the denial of coevalness. In this study, I differentiated between the terms “equality” and “equity” as a way to signify the notion of coevalness. While it is commonly accepted that students and teachers in contemporary racially integrated public schools are receiving equal treatment by virtue of the fact that students of all races are participants in public schooling, the educational disparities that I outlined in the introductory chapter problematize “equality” as synonymous to “equity.” As opposed to equality, equity requires coevalness. Equity requires that teachers and students of color are not viewed from a deficit perspective. For instance, equity would mean that Black teachers’ professionalism would not be secondary to their Blackness, and decisions about students’ class placement would not be made primarily based on racial ascriptions of their identities.

Counter narratives were also essential for identifying microaggressions that I, as a White person, was blind to at times. Microaggressions are “subtle and commonplace exchanges that somehow convey insulting or demeaning messages to people of color” (Constantine, 2007, p. 54). In this study, I intentionally interviewed people of color who could provide counter narratives about race in Creek, and I carefully considered ways to observe specifically for microaggressions in my methodology (e.g., visual data, subtle messages on classroom assignments, observations of student and teacher interactions).

Finally, for the sake of clarity, I use the term *anti-racist education* to signify the practice of racial literacy. Anti-racist education, as I explained in my review of relevant literature, is a framework for implementing the CRT concept of social justice into
educational practices (Nieto, 2009). I designed my study as an ethnography, as an inquiry into the daily lives of teachers making sense of race in this school to better understand the connections between racial literacy and the practices (or lack) of anti-racist pedagogies. Since my early observations of teachers making sense of race indicated that geographical location was an important part of this experience, I turned to critical geography to add to my conceptual frame.

**Critical Geography**

The lens of critical geography (Dickar, 2009; Helfenbein & Taylor, 2009) added another layer for understanding this study of teachers making sense of race in both time and place. Critical geography scholar Edward Soja’s (2010) notion of spatiality was a central concept in this study. I understand spatiality to signify the combination of history and geography, and the inextricable link between the two. Soja (1996) explains the spatiality of human life as “place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography” (p. 1). In this study, I attempted to capture how the spatiality of Creek and Creek Elementary is contested (e.g., my poetic representation of the multiple voices of Creek). Incorporating the lens of critical geography helped me to acutely observe and analyze how this school as a place, or location of social interaction (Creswell, 2004), influenced teachers’ decisions about race and racism (e.g., what racial categories to assign to students on forms, conclusions about what constitutes racism) and approaches to race and racism (e.g., how to properly go about placing racial labels on students, (dis)engagements in conflicts about racial stereotypes with students, administration, or other teachers). Critical geography is a relatively recent lens of analysis for educational researchers. In this section I: (a) provide a brief outline of the
disparate ways in which critical geography has been taken up in education, (b) describe the key concepts that I used throughout this study, and (c) explain specifically how critical geography informed my study design.

**Critical geography in education.** My review of the literature revealed six different ways that scholars have recently taken up critical inquiries about notions of place and space in education. Because critical geography is a new and burgeoning framework in educational research, my search of available literature did not reveal a clear differentiation of disparate approaches to place/space in education. So, I attempt here to capture the divisions within place/space in education that are all associated with critical geography in an effort to describe both what this study is, and what it is not. Studies have taken up notions of space and/or place in a number of different ways including primarily as an ecological project (e.g., Gruenewald, 2003), an experiential space in the process of teaching and learning (e.g., Moje, 2004), an investigation of the role of architecture in educational experiences (e.g., Valero, 2012), a form of literacy that is useful for researchers, teachers and students in the form of mapping systems such as GIS (e.g., Hogrebe & Tate, 2012; Tate, 2008), as situated pedagogy where students critically decode social, political, historical, and aesthetic aspects of the local space (e.g., Gutiérrez, 2008; Kitchens, 2009; Kinloch, 2009; Schmidt, 2011), and an exploration of how spatial codes are used to signify particular identities such as “East” representing the working poor class (e.g., Buendia, Juarez, & Peercy, 2004).

I borrowed my definition of critical geography from Helfenbein and Taylor (2009) who explained critical geography as an inquiry into “how spaces change, change over time, and impact the lived, material world” where spaces are relational, or “a
rhizomatic interaction of space-- place, power and identity that point to a new understanding of people in the world” (p. 237). Using this definition, my study is most similar to the final two projects described above (a situated pedagogy and an exploration of spatial codes), although my engagement with Soja’s notions of space (which I describe below) is significantly different than the studies I have reviewed in existent literature. In this study, I take up critical geography to analyze how teachers decode social, political, historical and aesthetic aspects of the school and how the teachers’ *sense of place* (Schmidt, 2011) of Creek Elementary, carries with it particular assumptions, innuendos, and expectations about the ways in which people interact in the school place as an institution that perpetuates racialized hierarchies.

**Place.** Given the essential role of the notion of place within critical geography, it is necessary to define how I understood the idea and the reality of place. To explain notions of place, I drew from scholars in the field of geography. Doreen Massey (1994) explained a concept of place that accepts that 1) places are not static, 2) places do not have the kind of boundaries that warrant a simple counter-position to the outside, 3) the identity of a place is not homogenous, yet 4) places are unique and their specificity resides in the distinct mixture of local and wider social relations. Massey adds an important layer to my understanding of Creek as a place through her definition of *locality* as “the uniqueness of a place” that is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence, but where a large portion of those relations, experiences and understandings are actually constructed on a far larger scale than we happen to
define for that moment as the place itself… instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings. And this in turn allows a sense of place with is extra-verted, which includes consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local (p. 66).

In this way, I envision Creek as a unique place, while at the same time the lines and boundaries which separate Creek from other places and the wider world are blurred and difficult to decipher. Despite my understanding of Creek as a locality (or “place” as I will generalize hereafter) in order to focus the scope of the project, I position Creek Elementary as a locality within the place of Creek which has contested boundaries and social networks that are both locally unique and bound to global places in observable and undetected ways (e.g., importing goods and services, demographic changes, new businesses, policies for buildings and education).

Tim Creswell (2004) explained that places are meaningful locations that “are being made, maintained, and contested” (p. 5) through place-making activities (e.g., neighborhood organizations pressuring people to clean up their yards, nations projecting themselves to the world through postage stamps and money, oppressed groups attempting to assert their identities through public protest); and he defined all places as “spaces which people have made meaningful” (p. 7). To illustrate the idea and reality of place, a particular baseball field may signify warm and comfortable feelings to one boy who has played on that field and had positive experiences there, but to another boy who got in a fight on that same field it may invoke a sense of hurt and fear. In this study, when I use
the term place, I mean to invoke the notion that a place is an observable location that represents a social meaning that can be shared and contested and changing.

**Space.** Massey (2007) characterizes “space” as relational, and as a product of practices and flows, engagements, connections, and disconnections, and local places as “specific nodes and articulations within this wider power geometry” (p. 167). In this study, when I use the term space, I wish to invoke a much broader concept than place. Space then will signify an infinite amount of possible locations where human interaction happens in and across time. In this sense, space is both boundless in size and inconceivably small. For instance, spaces of human interaction happen on computers where people are sending and receiving messages, or spaces can also be small and seemingly insignificant to outsiders like the corner of a wall where pencil marks represents a girl’s growth in height and thereby her childhood. Finally, spaces include places like the baseball field that has significance far beyond the two boys in the previous example of place. This baseball field, conceptualized as a space extends to a history of baseball, competition, and sports in general. In this example, this baseball field is bound to all other baseball fields, all of which are gendered, racialized, and politicized spaces that signify and host the historical and contemporary inclusion and exclusion of particular players and fans. In this way, space includes places but is a much broader and abstract concept.

**Firstspace, secondspace, lived space and thirdspace.** In addition to the abstract notion of space, there are four terms that are particularly important for my analysis and

---

10 Although in my review of the literature the terms “space” and “place” are in some ways used interchangeably, and there is a considerable amount of debate about the various definitions of these terms, I define them here for the purpose of clarity in this project. However, I accept that these definitions which draw a line of distinction between space and place are debatable within the community of scholars who engage in work in the area of geography.
conclusions, those are firstspace, secondspace, lived space, and thirdspace. While there are different applications for these terms depending on particular projects taken up by scholars using critical geography, I define what I mean when I use them in the present study. Firstspace is a concept built upon the notion of perceived space (Lefebvre, 1991), and implies that which can be empirically measured or mapped; spatial outcomes of social processes (Soja, 1999). For example, in this project I viewed maps, demographic data, and the school building structure itself as firstspace in Creek. Secondspace is related to Lefebvre’s (1991) conceived space and is subjective, imagined. It is the domain of representations and image. For instance, in this study, I asked about, observed and recorded the words that people used to describe Creek and Creek Elementary (e.g., “home,” “racist,” “changing”). The notion of lived space (Lefebvre, 1991) implies both the real and imagined. It is an inhabited space of experience. This is much more difficult to capture, which is why as I will explain in the following chapter I chose to collect data as a “co-performative witness” (Madison, 2007) where I was both a teacher and a researcher who was experiencing the place of Creek Elementary alongside and with the teachers that I was observing. In this way, I observed the lived space of Creek as a teacher in classrooms and understood teachers’ explanations of their experiences as a result of knowing subtle, but important, details of the school (e.g., knowing and interacting with certain students who were integral to teachers’ stories, feeling the public shame when my students’ test scores did not meet the expectation of administration).

The final term, thirdspace, is both complex and critical, and it is a fundamental concept in this interdisciplinary project. Soja (1996) advanced and connected concepts from both Lefebvre (1991) who focused on physical geography and the spatial,
Bhabha (1994) who focused primarily on discursive and philosophical notions of space. The combination of the spatial, discursive, social, physical, and philosophical form the nexus of what Soja describes as thirspace. Soja (1996) describes thirspace as a space where

   everything comes together. . . subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history (p. 57).

He goes on to explain thirspace as a product of “thirding” within the “trialectics” of space. Succinctly, trialectics take on discursive binaries and ideas and open up spaces for additional otherness in a way that disorders discourses of difference. To illustrate, Soja (1996) lists the following examples of trialectic terms and ideas: subject, object, unity; identity, contradiction, difference; history, space, globality (p. 70). While it is not limited to three terms or “thirding,” as the term itself implies, trialectics must be constituted by at least three terms used in tandem. In this way, thirspace is both physical and philosophical, a space of experience and knowing that is “radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge” (Soja, 1996 p. 61).

Soja’s explanation of thirspace includes hooks’ (1990) description of living in the margins as a place of radical subjectivity, a place from which to critique discourses of difference and binaries. Additionally, though cited to a lesser degree, Soja evokes Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1999) work on borderlands as well. In this study, I explored and analyzed the ways in which teachers found and described thirspaces as spatialized moments.
where their concept of self and other were expanded. In these spatialized moments within this school place, teachers described what I (not they) name thirdspaces, where I saw them (started to) working toward a renegotiation of boundaries and static definitions of race in Creek Elementary.

**Applying critical geography to this study.** Critical geography was essential in conceptualizing this study. Rather than viewing this school place as simply the context where teachers made sense of race, I used concepts from critical geography to formulate questions that guided this study. These questions called for a critical analysis about the connection between racialized social relationships and the space of this school where these relationships were enacted. In turn, critical geography informed my methodological choices. For example, an essential portion of data came from classroom observations and observations of conversations and actions in everyday school spaces. Critical geography also impacted my analysis where I took into account the ways in which firstspace, secondspace, lived space, and thirdbase worked together to inform teachers’ racial literacy in the school place of Creek Elementary. Viewing the school place in this way deepened my examination of the dialectical (or trialectic) interactions between spatial and social processes (Creswell, 2004; Davis, 2005; Soja, 1996) that effect teachers’ performances and discourses around race.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to explain a discursive tool that I used in representing data and findings from this study. That is the implication of how I use the terms Creek and Creek Elementary. When I use the term Creek, I am signifying the larger place of Creek that is politically, socially, and historically informed, contested and connected in space to other places (i.e., Big City, Southern State) which inform who lives
there, economics, and political boundaries. Creek is designated on a map, though even the lines on the map are somewhat contested depending on who you talk to in Creek. When I use the term Creek Elementary, I am signifying the locality of this school, materialized by the school building and the people who enter its walls (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, custodians, parents, visitors, community representatives, politicians). I envision Creek Elementary as intimately connected to Creek and the larger social structure of race that extends outside of Creek. Creek Elementary contains innumerable spaces where power and racial signifiers are formulated, contested, marginalized, and (dis)connected to the place of Creek.

Feminist Theory

The stories and explanations that teachers shared with me during the study suggested several occurrences where racial and gender identities intersected in ways that informed their racial literacy and their performances of racial messages. Thus, to fully analyze their experiences, I found it necessary to include feminist scholarship to my lens of analysis.

Feminist standpoint theories. First, I drew upon literature from feminist standpoint theories which positions women of color as holders of knowledge whose standpoint aids in their ability to interrogate the ways that race and gender identities work to create and maintain material inequalities (Anzaldua, 2004; Collins, 2001; hooks, 1990; Mohanty, 2003; Sandoval, 2004). The ways that Black teachers in my study resisted and acted as change agents, and referred to their simultaneously racialized/gendered identities within the school prompted me to consider the standpoints of particular students and
teachers in the school and add a layer of analysis that took into account the role of gender in the process of making sense of race.

**Borderland feminism.** Second, borrowing from Chicana scholar Anzaldua’s work, I interrogated the notion of borders in Creek Elementary. This decision was a result of my initial analysis of the data, specifically counter narratives. These stories problematized simple definitions of teacher as a role of a paid professional. These stories required a deeper analysis and understanding of the process of thirding discursive binaries and identity boundaries that reified or marginalized particular human bodies according to socially constructed boundaries of gender, socioeconomics, sexual identity, ableness, and so on. I drew upon the work of Anzaldua (2007) to analyze counter narratives in my data which revealed multiple layers of oppression and to identify where this negation of identity and power struggle took place. Anzaldua introduced the idea that borders are not simply places on a map or a division between here and there, us and them, rather they are psychic, social and cultural terrain that we inhabit, and that inhabits all of us (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). Further, Sofia Villenas (2012) challenged educators to think with Chicana feminist theory in order to rethink the borders between us and them, nos/otras (translated from Spanish to mean us/others), and begin to inquire about the ways in which communities might discover how nostotras (the feminine form of we in Spanish) can work toward equity in educative spaces. As a result, Chicana feminist work helped me to make sense of themes that emerged as I analyzed data from observations and discussions with teachers and students about the meaning of race in Creek Elementary.
The Theoretical Framing of This Study

Combining CRT and critical geography supported and enhanced the focus of this study of how teachers made sense of race in Creek Elementary. As I indicate in Figure 1 My Theoretical Frame, CRT is the lens upon which all others are positioned. I used CRT to make sense of key ideas, make methodological decisions, and decide how to represent data and articulate conclusions from this study. Adding critical geography was a natural addition to the CRT framework because it is interdisciplinary in nature. Combining CRT and critical geography helped me to identify and articulate the spatialized power structures of race that are inherent in the practices and discourses within this school, problematize the perception of race as a black/White binary, and highlight the power of narrative (for a discussion on the intersections of critical geography and critical race theory see Price, 2010). Critical geography allowed me to investigate how place played a role in shaping both race and racism in Creek Elementary. Finally, though they played a much smaller role in the overall project, adding the layer of feminist standpoint theory and Chicana feminist notions of borders helped me to better understand my own positionality as well as the gendered positions of teachers in the study. In sum, all three theories worked together in my analysis of how teachers made sense of race in Creek Elementary.
Figure 1.1 My Theoretical Frame
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

During my first three years at Creek Elementary, I kept an informal journal that documented key events and interactions that suggested themes about dominant ways of understanding race in Creek. As I began to work toward the process of creating a formal study design, I referred to notes from this journal, reviewed extant literature on race in education, and conducted pilot interviews with two teachers who were ineligible\textsuperscript{11} to participate in the current study, but agreed to participate in a series of interviews about race and the place of Creek. My purpose in the pilot study was to test interview questions and methods of data collection and narrow the focus of the present study.

As part of my research proposal, I used informal notes, research literature, and pilot interviews to formulate research questions and create a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C). The pilot study informed the present study which I describe in this section.

Study Design

This study asks how the spatiality of the school informs teachers’ processes of making sense of race. It was designed as an ethnographic inquiry informed by critical race methodologies. In this section, I begin by describing ethnography and how past ethnographic studies informed my design. Then I move into a description of my

\textsuperscript{11} I selected participants who were not classroom teachers purposely because I did not want to disqualify anyone for participation in the present study.
ethnographic design. Lastly, I clearly define the key terms I borrowed from CRT that served as analytic tools for making sense of teachers’ racial literacy in Creek.

**Ethnographic inquiry.** Ethnography, as a method for collecting and analyzing data, supported my commitment to a sustained involvement with teachers over the course of several years and my understanding of teachers’ racial literacy in the place of Creek Elementary as a contested social space. “Ethnography is the work of describing a culture” (Spindler, 1987, p.3). “Ethnos” is the Greek word for race of people or a cultural group (Vidich & Lyman, 1994, p. 25), and graph is a “picture” (Wolcott, 2002, p. 32), thus ethnography is a picture of a group of people, and in this case it is a picture of a group of teachers in the locality of Creek Elementary.

Ethnographers must study: “what people do, what people know, and the things people make and use” (Spradley, 1980, p.5). In this ethnographic study of teachers in Creek, I approached ethnography similar to what George Noblit (1999) described when he said, “Ethnography is simply particular forms of the everyday realms of politics, morality, and understanding” (p. 2). I designed the study to investigate what teachers do and know, and how they use cultural resources to make meaning of “race”. I use the signifier “race” here to demonstrate that the ways in which I have described my understanding of race, as systemic and tied to racism, is certainly not everyone’s understanding of the term. In this study, I was interested in the meanings, emotions, philosophies, and experiences brought to bare when the term “race” was used, and when conversations centered around ideas directly related to notions of race. I was also interested in how “race” was avoided or collapsed with other signifiers such as “culture”
or “ethnicity” as well as silencing tactics. Finally, I was interested in exploring how teachers put their understanding of “race” to use in their daily lives as teachers.

Importantly, in this ethnographic inquiry, I assert both ideologically and methodologically that teachers cannot be understood as an isolated group because the roles, identities, and responsibilities of teachers are directly and indirectly connected to the community, students, and administration with whom they work. For that reason, and to offer a more nuanced representation of teachers’ words and actions, some community members’, students’ and administrators’ voices are included in the data analyzed and (re)presented in the following chapter. To be clear, while this study focused on the teachers at Creek Elementary, it is not fair to say that all teachers were equally represented in this project. While I observed formally and informally in a great deal of classrooms at every grade level in the school, and other school spaces (e.g., hallways, media center, and cafeteria) in order to get a deep understanding of the logic and experiences from which the teachers build their ideas about race, I focused on a select group of teachers.

I drew from a variety of scholars to conceptualize and articulate the discursive, social, and spatial dynamics that I was interested in capturing within this study of teachers. I considered Melissa Mosley and Rebecca Rogers (2010) assertion that teacher talk about race is often interrogated without attention to how context supports particular discourses, therefore I carefully crafted my methodology so that I could “locate, name and interrogate a range of racialized discourses and actions” that extend beyond talk (p. 321). Because I was simultaneously interested in the spatialized structures of racialized power structures that inform teachers as a group, this study does not follow a traditional
trajectory for ethnographic work which studies a particular cultural group. In designing this study, I borrowed frameworks and methodologies from other non-traditional ethnographies, which I outline here. Jan Nespor (1997) challenged the traditional ethnographic lens that looks at what happens in a school by designing his study to capture what happens outside the school walls as well. In this way, he described his ethnographic design as a view of school as “an intersection in social space, a knot in a web of practices that stretch into complex systems beginning and ending outside the school” (Nespor, 1997, p. xiii). This atypical way of approaching school ethnography is closely related to how I conceptualized the design of this study. Nespor (1997) posits that the key to understanding education is more than what happens in classrooms or schools. It is within a tangled knot of networks and layered connections that people are tied together in school.

To further conceptualize the design of this study so that I could explore the spatiality of Creek Elementary, I borrowed from Maryann Dickar’s (2008) study of an urban high school where she focused on the ways in which “spaces inside schools are shaped by the discourses of those who use them and who also are, in turn, shaped by these spaces” (p. 7). Dickar’s work informed my ethnographic design in that I sought to illuminate micro-level spaces within Creek Elementary (e.g., classroom, hallway, the school website) that represented the intersections of Creek, Creek Elementary, and the teachers’ processes of making sense of race.

Finally, to center race in this study, I borrowed from the work of Sabina Vaught (2011) to conceptualize this inquiry as “a study of localized power relations that give a detailed and complex insight into the power dynamics of the society” (p. 24). In this
way, I was able to move to a deeper understanding of the diversity among and within spaces in which teachers (dis)engage with/in race talk, pedagogy, racialized pedagogy, and social action around racial themes. In data collection, analysis, and representation, I also reflected on the notion that research should not only reflect on the stories of people of color, but the lived experiences of their daily lives. Therefore, research should “engage the multiple ontological categories that give meaning to lived experience” (Duncan, 2006, p. 106). In sum, I approached this ethnographic inquiry as an exploration of a school that was not a depoliticized space, but a place where spatialized understandings of race were reproduced, contested, reinscribed, and refuted by, to, and with teachers.

Analytic tools from CRT. As I analyzed data, I utilized six concepts from CRT to understand and interpret teachers’ racial literacy and the perpetuation of racism at Creek Elementary: coevalness, allochronism, White supremacy, colorblindness, meritocracy, and counter narratives (definitions for these terms are included in Appendix D). These terms are each connected to the key tenets of CRT. First, CRT refutes the notion that racial equality has been achieved. Tied to this argument are two terms that are used to interrogate this claim: coevalness is access to the same thing, at the same time, in the same place, and allochronism, the denial of coevalness. Second, with regard to CRT’s focus on how to understand the function of racial oppression through dominant ideologies, I analyzed White supremacy in Creek. In this sense, I understood White supremacy as the racist system that holds Whiteness and Blackness in place within a racial hierarchy, a system upheld through the colorblind discourse that denies that the system exists. Therefore, I also evaluated the role of colorblindness, which as previously
discussed, implies a dominant way of being, acting, and valuing including speech patterns that refuse to acknowledge the existence of racialized systems. Third, the notion of colorblindness relies heavily on the idea of meritocracy, or the idea that everyone has an equal chance to attain status and power. So I looked for the ways in which people in Creek justified White supremacy through claims of meritocracy. Lastly, CRT privileges the voices, stories, and epistemic knowledge generated by lived experiences of people of color, so I privileged counter narratives by Black teachers as a way to interrupt the master narrative of race in Creek.

Data Collection

In this section, I explain how I came to this study. I then discuss how I recruited participants for the study. Next, I discuss the interview formats that I used. After that I discuss what I mean by “teacher-researcher” and co-performative witnessing as method. Finally, I describe the material data that I collected.

Study overview. I was engaged with the Creek community as a teacher in Creek Elementary for five years. After gaining approval for the study from the institutional review board, the superintendent of Loudon County Schools, and the school principal, I began a more formal process of taking fieldnotes as a participant observer (October 2010 to January 2012). During the fourteen months of formal observation, I maintained a research journal that included notes on my positionality, ethical dilemmas, people who community members or I cited as potential interviewees, my process of recruiting teacher participants and community representatives, and analytic memos and vignettes that emerged about possible themes in the project.
Recruiting participants. In order to gain an understanding of teachers’ racial literacy at Creek Elementary, I took a combined approach, a typical and criterion sample, to create a sample group of teachers to interview. I wanted to collect data from a “typical” sampling of teachers, or those who would help me to “highlight what is normal or average” (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 28) at Creek Elementary with regard to issues of cultural compatibility in the classroom. I also used a “criterion” sample because I wanted to better understand the experiences and racial literacy of Black teachers in the school. In this section, I detail how participants were recruited and selected for the study.

In order to make the school community aware of the study and to recruit “typical” participants, I announced my study verbally by giving a brief and discursively appropriate statement about my study at the first faculty meeting of the 2011-2012 school year. I said “I will be doing my dissertation study this year and I’ll be observing in the school and asking some of you to participate in the study by doing interviews. Basically I’m interested in how we as teachers understand race, culture, and ethnicity in Creek.” To capture the “typical” sample, my criteria to select participants was that they had to be core curriculum teachers at Creek Elementary for at least one year so that they would have some background experience of the school and (potentially) have experiences with how issues of race surfaced across the curricula. I also wanted a sampling of teachers from different levels to get a better understanding of how teachers at different age levels dealt with race in the classroom. Finally, participants had to be willing to participate and be nominated by a community nominator as being an “average” or “excellent” teacher of racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse students because these teachers would likely
have a general understanding about “race” and would be able to explain racial concepts in a way that was typical of the average teacher in Creek.

To begin the recruiting process, I placed a questionnaire and letter explaining my study in the office mailboxes of the school’s 50 certified classroom teachers. After one week, 35 questionnaires were returned and I walked to teachers’ rooms to collect the remaining questionnaires from teachers who had forgotten about it, lost the form, or were not sure how to complete the questionnaire on their own. I collected 42/50 questionnaires, and based on these questionnaires I compiled a list of 34 potential participants who indicated that they would consider participating in my study. I showed this list of these 34 potential participants to two community nominators, Mr. Teal, a White male assistant principal, and Mrs. Gray, a Black female assistant principal, because they most frequently observed teachers in their classrooms, knew the teachers well, and their administrative positions informed the values and expectations for teachers in Creek Elementary\(^\text{12}\). Because I wanted the teachers to represent typical teachers in the school, I divided the teachers who were willing to participate into three groups (1) Kindergarten and first grade, (2) second and third grade, and (3) fourth and fifth grade teachers. I asked these community nominators to name two teachers from my list at each of the three levels. I asked them to select “One teacher who is an ‘excellent’ teacher of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and one who is an ‘average’ teacher of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.” I chose to use this method for sampling drastically informed the outcomes of this study because of these particular administrators’ biases and perception of my criteria. At the same time, there were at least two advantages for this method. First, it took the responsibility of selecting participants away from me as a teacher-researcher who already had pre-conceived assumptions and preferences, second, it spoke indirectly to the qualities and characteristics of teachers who were approaching race, culture, and ethnicity in the “right” ways according to people who held positions of power in the school.

\(^{12}\) I fully acknowledge that this method for sampling drastically informed the outcomes of this study because of these particular administrators’ biases and perception of my criteria. At the same time, there were at least two advantages for this method. First, it took the responsibility of selecting participants away from me as a teacher-researcher who already had pre-conceived assumptions and preferences, second, it spoke indirectly to the qualities and characteristics of teachers who were approaching race, culture, and ethnicity in the “right” ways according to people who held positions of power in the school.
terminology to avoid selecting participants who were seen as being particularly ineffective and/or teachers who were considered to be prejudice based on race, culture, and ethnicity (e.g., teachers who make racist remarks, or teachers who refused to allow students to speak a language other than English in their classroom). My aim was to select teachers who best represented the racialized norms and values of Creek Elementary.

Although I was open to a larger sample, my selection of participants was influenced by an unexpected outcome in response to my request for the community nominators’ teacher ratings. As it turned out, four White teachers (no Black teachers were named) were cross-listed by Mr. Teal and Mrs. Gray as “average” by one nominator and “excellent” by the other (e.g., Sunday Thomas was rated by Mr. Teal as average and excellent by Mrs. Gray). This cross-listing signaled to me that these teachers would best represent the racialized norms and values of Creek as average to above average teachers for racially diverse students. These four White teachers were then asked to participate in the study. Sunday Thomas a White third grade teacher, Lexi Gunter a White fifth grade teacher, and Mary Martin a White kindergarten teacher formally agreed to participate in the study, and one teacher declined to participate.

Given my theoretical framework, I wanted to center the voices of people of color. Therefore, in addition to the typical case sample of three White teachers, I added a “criterion” sample which included “all cases that [met] some criterion” (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 28 as cited in Marshall & Rossman, p. 71). My criteria were that potential teacher-participants would be teachers of color, classroom teachers, willing to participate and had taught at Creek Elementary for at least one year. There were a total
of three Black classroom teachers at Creek, and I asked the only two teachers\textsuperscript{13} who met these criteria to participate. Tyrell Watters a special education (self-contained homeroom) teacher and Millie Blackwell a first grade teacher agreed to participate in my study.

**Interview process.** I interviewed the five teachers from my combined sample individually on three separate occasions each and I conducted two focus groups. Interviews were scheduled at a time (e.g., directly after school, at night, on the weekend) and location of their choosing (e.g., their home, their classroom, my classroom). Interviews were semi-structured (questions posed to all participants are included in Appendix C). I gave all participants this list of questions when we scheduled their interviews, at least a week before the interview. Teachers were invited to bring in support materials or write responses that would add to our oral interview. I approached these interviews in a conversational style so that the teachers felt comfortable enough to tell stories and expound on their explanations with great freedom (i.e., some interviews were less than an hour while others were over three hours long).

The first set of interviews focused on questions of place. Specifically, I asked teacher participants to reflect on their perspectives and experiences in Creek and Creek Elementary. The second set of interviews focused on race, their own identity and their perception of the meaning of race. After the second interview, I conducted two focus groups, one with White teacher participants and one with Black teacher participants (this

\textsuperscript{13} There was one other Black classroom teacher, but because she shared a grade level with Lexi Gunter and was new to the school, I did not ask her to participate.
decision will be discussed later in this chapter). These focus groups were organized around Judith Hamer’s (2005) notion of an interview storybox. I adapted Hamera’s storybox idea and collected observations in the school (brief scenarios, artifacts, photographs, students’ questions about race that I heard in classrooms, community members’ descriptions of Creek, and demographic statistics) in the form of a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. After showing and/or reading individual slides to the teachers, I elicited their responses to the material presented. This method of data collection was an intentional response to my assessment—derived from deliberate observations as well as a review of the literature of White silence around race and racism (e.g., Clark, 1999; Sleeter, 1996; Thompson, 2003; Trainor, 2005) that, inside the school, race was rarely the explicit topic of conversation and was often framed as a threat when it was the main topic.

In order to add depth to the study and better understand teachers’ stories, I observed them in their classrooms on four separate occasions each for a 30-45 minute time period and I took hand-written notes. The observations were open-ended and the main objective was to enrich and contextualize our conversations about race in Creek Elementary in the interviews. All interviews and focus groups were videotaped, audiotaped, and transcribed. Drawing from emerging themes as a participant observer, individual and collective responses to interview questions, and data from classroom observations, my final interview served as a member check interview where I fed back individuals’ quotes that spoke to how they were making sense of race in Creek Elementary. I chose to do this based on pilot study experiences and my participant observation where I became aware that teachers have little extra time, thus asking them to
read through pages of data would not be as productive as directing their attention to data most salient and offering up an opportunity to clarify their meaning through dialogue. I also offered open-ended questions such as “How was this experience for you?” and “Is there anything that has come up that you would like to clarify?” in order to allow teachers to speak to any portion of the study that I did not bring to their attention.

**Co-performative witnessing.** In addition to data collected from teacher participants, a significant portion of my data also came from a method of data collection that takes up what Soyini Madison (2007) calls co-performative witnessing. Drawing from the scholarship of anthropologist Dwight Conquergood (see Conquergood, 2002; Conquergood, 2006), Madison (2007) describes co-performative witnessing as “a shared temporality, bodies in the line, soundscapes of power, dialogic inter-animation, political action, and matters of the heart” (p. 827). Particularly relevant to the present study is Madison’s description of the “coevalness and borders” in co-performative witnessing. Madison (2007) explains co-performative witnessing as participant observation that allows the researcher “to live in and spend time in the borderlands of contested identities where you speak ‘with’ not ‘to’ others and where your (and their) ethnographic interlocutors are as co-temporal in the report and on stage as they were in the field” (p. 828). My conceptual frame for this study informed how I viewed and conducted my observations of self and others in Creek through co-performative witnessing as a *teacher-researcher* in Creek Elementary. This allowed me to experience the policies, discourses, relationships, duties, and pressures that informed my own racial literacy in Creek Elementary and my expression of that through anti-racist pedagogy, or lack thereof.
As a teacher, I was in the position of a co-teacher in five classrooms in the school (first through fifth grade). That is, I helped to teach all of the students in the classroom, though my main responsibility and focus was on my English Language Learner\textsuperscript{14} (ELL) students. Though none of the teachers I worked with were one of the four teachers nominated (and it may have been a conflict of interest anyway), I reiterated the focus of my study with each of them on several occasions and they were all agreeable to my role as a co-performative witness in their classrooms and teaching spaces (e.g., grade level meetings, trainings). On a few occasions I asked to audio-tape lessons or classroom activities that they did during my planning period or that we did together. For example, Ms. Drake (brief descriptions of all teachers are listed in Appendix E) was taking a graduate class so she created a lesson about “diversity and difference” where she asked students to write a short book about what makes them special. Member-checking with these teachers often took the form of informal conversations during lunch, planning, or in the hallways where I would ask them to clarify a particular point or explain a scenario further. In Ms. Drake’s example, as the students went out to recess I asked her if she would continue to plan similar lessons if it were not an assignment for graduate school and she said, “Probably not, but maybe as a ‘get-to-know-you activity’ at the beginning of the year.”

To further illustrate what I mean by co-performative witnessing, since it is relatively recent and uncommon in research, I illustrate how co-performative witnessing, as “feeling, sensing, being and doing witness” (Madison, 2007, p. 829) took shape in my

\textsuperscript{14} I want to acknowledge here that this term itself is contested since it implies a deficit approach to these students who are not fully proficient in English, while overlooking the “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) that these students bring with them into the classroom. Though a discussion and analysis of this point would constitute an entire separate study, I use the label to imply how my students were positioned as learners in the school.
study as a teacher-researcher. As a teacher-researcher I experienced a border between who was “us” and who was “other” when teachers expressed a dissonance about how to ascribe my identity as a teacher, researcher, or friend and as White or not-completely-White. For example, Mrs. Evans introduced me (Creek Elementary’s teacher of English) to her father saying, “She teaches Spanish and anything else we tell her to do.” I witnessed teachers’ discomfort after they made comments about racial identities in my presence and asked, “Are we offending you because your husband is Black?” and earnestly said, “Don’t be offended Mrs. Howard; I’ve got mixies,” (with reference to biracial children like my own). I also witnessed teachers’ disequilibrium with the meaning of race when teachers would ask me questions like, “Is it racist to call someone a Mexican?” Additionally, I observed (about half of the time these were recorded on video and/or audio-tape because it was not feasible or appropriate to record every event digitally) in spaces that were outside the classroom, but influenced our roles and responsibilities as teachers. For example, as a teacher-researcher I observed faculty meetings, school board meetings, planning meetings, trainings, and school events (i.e., fundraisers, plays, concerts, awards ceremonies). My sustained involvement as a teacher in the school allowed me to gain access into spaces where teachers were not as guarded as they were in my first year or two at the school; I suspect they would have been more guarded if I were an outside researcher with no direct connection to the school. It also allowed me to be aware of the ways in which people were kind to one another in a way that crossed racial lines during times of tragedy or extreme stress in particular. And while I choose not to report these observations here out of respect for the Creek
community, as a co-performative witness I was reminded of the hope that is possible in borderlands where people see the humanity in one another.

At the same time, the borderland of us/other as a teacher positioned me as simply another White person at times. For instance, during car duty one day Mrs. Kinny read my body as White and cautiously looked around before she whispered (to a small group of White teachers) her critique of “those people” who did not send their children to school on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. As a co-performative witness in this situation, I experienced the multiple dimensions of space, race, and roles that informed racialized dialogue in Creek Elementary (i.e., there were children nearby, other White teachers, and I had just begun my study and did not want to take an oppositional stance so I remained quiet). Finally, in this borderland of co-performative witnessing I felt questioning stares that were unsure about the nature of my close association with Millie Blackwell and Tyrell Watters (Black teacher participants). As Millie explained, “When they saw me with you they were nosey and they didn’t like it.”

While co-performative witnessing opened up spaces of clarity about teachers’ racial literacy, my role as a teacher-researcher required constant reflection. As a teacher, I had access to permanent records, privileged information, and access to people who likely did not understand my researcher role despite numerous explanations. Careful and consistent reflection in my research journal was an important way to maintain an ethical balance. Based on these reflections, I concluded that as a co-performative witness, I should focus on the lived experience of being and teaching in Creek in order to deepen my analysis of data, rather than as a method of data collection in spaces that were sensitive in nature (e.g., no data from students’ permanent records were recorded in any
form, I did not record interactions in protected meetings such as Individualized Education Plan (I.E.P.) meetings for students with a special education label).

In sum, co-performative witnessing allowed me to have experiential knowledge from which to draw in order to critically evaluate Creek Elementary teachers’ words and actions as dynamically informed by a number of social dynamics including personal, professional, historical, educational, emotional, spiritual, and relational as people represented what race meant to them as teachers in Creek Elementary. I argue that co-performative witnessing allowed me to resist judging individuals and served as a vantage point from which to view the structural dimensions of racism, within which we were all teaching and being teachers.

**Community representative interviews.** In addition to the data sources listed above, I also interviewed seven community members about Creek and Creek Elementary to gain a better understanding of the historical and contemporary issues that informed different perspectives on the school and community. I took a stratified sample (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 28 as cited in Marshall & Rossman, p. 71) of community representatives from Creek. A *stratified sample* is one that illustrates subgroups and facilitates comparison. I wanted to get a sample of people with diverse identities and backgrounds with an extensive background in Creek.

In order to locate and recruit participants for the stratified sample, I collected a list of possible contacts who people in Creek Elementary (faculty, staff, students) described as long-term residents of Creek who would have extensive personal insight about how race did, or did not impact life in Creek as well as personal knowledge about Creek Elementary’s role in the community. Everyone that I asked to participate agreed to be
interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured, similar to the format of teacher interviews, although I did not know most of these people well, or at all, before the time of the interview. I used data from these interviews to better understand the history and perception of race in Creek. A description of each community representative is included in Appendix E.

**Artifacts and visual data.** I collected artifacts in various forms throughout the study. First, some of the community representatives that I interviewed provided me with materials such as yearbooks, historical texts, pictures, articles, and statistical data. Second, in 2010-2011, I collected Creek’s weekly newspapers to enhance my perspective on the public perception of Creek Elementary. Third, during the summer before I began interviewing participants in 2011, I drove around the diverse landscape of Creek and took pictures of neighborhoods, construction projects, natural landscape, businesses, landmarks, and parks. Fourth, as a teacher-researcher, I included blank student information sheets, enrollment materials, tests, homework assignments, student work samples, class materials, training videos, school-wide public emails, Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) reports with testing and school data, data from the state department and National Educational Statistics database, and descriptions of district policies and initiatives (e.g., for ELL student policies, programs for “at-risk” students with an emphasis on African American students). Fifth, each month, for fourteen months, I took pictures of bulletin boards and student work that were displayed in the corridors.

Visual data were collected for two reasons. One, in order to get a sense of what the teachers were instructing and celebrating as “good” student work, at the beginning of each month I took pictures of student work that was on display in all of the corridors.
Two, to add depth to my interpretation of the rules and general culture of the school, I took pictures of school-wide displays. These pictures included the school discipline policies, advertisements for school events, bulletin boards, artwork, and signs.

Artifacts and visual data were used in a variety of ways. I used these data to formulate interview and focus group questions, to check the validity of my observations (e.g., testing data disaggregated by race to add to my understanding of student academic performance, historical texts to pinpoint when racial integration happened at Creek Elementary) and articulate a nuanced description of Creek.

**Organization of data.** I maintained printed and electronic copies of materials from the study consisting of three large notebooks including my research journal, interview transcripts, observation forms, historical information about Creek, a list of pseudonyms for names and places, the study proposal, forms and questionnaires, a record of the selection process of teacher participants and two boxes of artifacts that I organized by category (e.g., newspapers, curriculum). I also kept electronic copies of videotapes and audio files from interviews, focus groups, and observations organized in file folders on my computer and on disks that I stored in boxes.

**Participants**

In this section I provide a brief description of the participants whose stories and experiences are heavily represented in this study. I also include some details that describe our relationship, demonstrating my positionality over time and space as a racialized researcher, teacher, and friend to each of them respectively. Short descriptions of community representatives and other teachers mentioned in the data (re)presentation are included in Appendix E.
Lexi Gunter. Lexi Gunter was a fifth grade teacher nearing retirement age. She described herself as “a White southern girl.” She said that she was “a girl from Southern State. My roots are here. . . [with] German and English ancestors.” She was born and lived for most of her life in a town neighboring Loudon County. She was married and had two grown children. Our interviews took place in her classroom.

I first met Lexi when I worked with some of her ELL students during my second year (2008-2009) at Creek Elementary. We did not co-teach, but I was in her room regularly during that year. She had a great deal of training and took an active role in professional development both at Creek Elementary and at a state and national level. Our interactions were professional in nature, though we shared several personal stories during the study. I contact her infrequently at this point.

Mary Martin. Mary Martin was a kindergarten teacher in her early 30’s who grew up in Creek and graduated from Creek schools. She described herself as “Caucasion (giggling), I really don’t have that much in my background. I mean I think I have some Cherokee way back, but we always joke and say ‘I’m a European mutt’. . . (and she went on to say) I am a southern redneck, no I’m kiddin’. I’m very southern, so they always joke G.R.I.T.S. (girls raised in the South). The politeness, I do the traditional holidays.” She was married and had one small child. Our interviews took place in my office.

I do not remember the first time I met Mary Martin. I rarely worked directly with kindergarten students, and when I did, it was usually with another kindergarten teacher.

---

15 For the sake of clarity, I use the first and last names when introducing the teachers who participated in the interview portion of this study and their first name in the remainder of the paragraph or section. Teachers who were not formally in the study were designated by their title (e.g., Mr.) and last name. I use only first names for community representatives and students.
16 Each of these self descriptions were in response to my question in our second interview “How would you describe yourself racially, ethnically, and culturally?” For the purpose of consistancy, I edited the length of their responses but included the words they used as guides in their explanation of their identities.
She was always friendly to me. I remember talking to her in 2007 about our infant children and mutual struggles with a resulting lack of sleep. When Mary agreed to be in my study, I was curious about how much she would reveal to me and if she would be comfortable talking with me. I have infrequent contact with her at this point.

**Millie Blackwell.** Millie Blackwell was a first grade teacher nearing retirement age. In describing herself, she explained “I used to say I was Black. And my children have always said I’m brown, like the crayon. But now I say African American, because my ancestors were from Africa. And even though I don’t say much about it, Native American. But African American.” She was born near Loudon County and had lived and taught in a number of different states. She was married, with two grown children. Our interviews took place in my office.

In 2007 I met Millie Blackwell at my first faculty meeting in Creek Elementary. Millie and I developed a friendship that year, and we often commiserated about race relations at the school. The following year, I was excited to ask her if she would co-teach with me to pilot a new structure to serve my English Language Learners in her first grade classroom. While at first she agreed, after the first few weeks of school she told me that she simply was not comfortable having anyone else in the classroom with her. My feelings were hurt and I could not figure out why she was not willing to work with me in her classroom. Consequently, a rift developed in our relationship for the next few years. However, in 2010 we began talking again and re-establishing our relationship. In 2011, when I asked her to be in my study, she agreed. I lost contact with her when she left the school.
**Sunday Thomas.** Sunday Thomas was a third grade teacher in her early 30’s. She described herself as “Caucasion (with a questioning tone). . . [who is] Irish American and may [be] German. . . and southern. Not that southern. I don’t eat the normal southern food and I don’t use the vocabulary they use. I try to use proper English.” She grew up in southern state and had traveled to a number of other countries, including Spain where she studied Spanish. She was single with no children. Our interviews took place in her home.

During my first three years at Creek I had infrequent interaction with Sunday Thomas, but I would characterize our interactions as cordial. During my fourth year (2010-2011) at Creek, the third grade team included me in many of their professional and outside-of-school activities, so Sunday and I socialized outside of school from time to time. I maintain contact with her today.

**Tyrell Watters.** Tyrell Watters was a self-contained special education teacher for upper-elementary grades. He described himself saying, “I have struggled with this since I was a kid. I’m not your typical ‘Black man’. . . I’m clearly an African American, but I don’t know if I relate to any ethnic group. . . I just like being Tyrell. . . because I think we’re people before we are a part of an ethnic group, or before we are part of a culture.” He was in his late 20’s and grew up in southern state. He was single with no children. Our interviews took place in his home.

I remember seeing Tyrell Watters at our beginning-of-the-year faculty meeting in 2009. Our interactions over those first two years were infrequent but always pleasant. He was usually loud and quick to smile, and I admired his talent as a new teacher with his students. I maintain contact with him to this day.
Context

While I know it is traditional to position the community in which a school is located as a “context,” given my understanding of place and space, I see the Creek community (described in the next chapter) with all of its histories\textsuperscript{17}, apparitions, and presents colliding in the school locality of Creek Elementary. I view the school itself as part of this place and vice versa, thus while I do designate the terms separately for the sake of clarity there are overlaps between the two, and a spatiality that cannot be covered by the word context.

Data Analysis

Our conceptual and analytic tools must acknowledge the importance of the local. This is a call for a multiplicity of critical case and teacher practitioner studies, across nation, race, region, class, gender, and local circumstances that highlight the contexts, conditions, and processes of teaching; learn from them; and feed the findings back into grand theory and the state of the art in education. (Weber, 2007 p. 300)

My conceptual framework centered the intersection of race and place in this school and served as an organizational tool to make sense of how to collect data (e.g., questions that I asked, co-performative witnessing, visual data) and guided the analysis of that data. In this section, I explain specifically how I used a lens that combined notions of race and place to critically analyze data.

\textsuperscript{17} I use the term histories purposely to invoke the notion that there are many stories that can be told from many different perspectives about the past.
Research journal. Throughout the project, I maintained a research journal consisting of reflections on my position as a researcher, pre-coding notations for interview transcripts, analytic memos, and vignettes based on key events and stories. Notes in my research journal, based on my observations in Creek, served as a basis for questions that I asked community representatives and teacher participant interviews. For example, I was unable to locate an exact date of racial integration in Creek for the first half of my data collection period and I wanted to know about the experience from the older generation in Creek, so I asked several community representatives about this experience and the timeframe of racial integration in Creek. Also, in our focus group, Millie Blackwell and Tyrell Watters described the notion of “the box” in conversation with one another. As I pre-coded data and reflected on emerging themes, I identified this as an important concept but one that may be explained differently by each individual. Therefore, in our follow-up interviews, I asked each of them separately to explain what they each meant by “the box.”

My research journal was also the space where I organized information and ideas to create questions and strategies to conduct ongoing informal member-checks. For example, I strategically planned short conversations in the hallways with teachers about my observations; I recognized the importance of feeding back transcripts based on hand-written notes and identified after school as an appropriate time for teachers to read over my representation of their words to check my accuracy; and I planned to sit with teachers at lunch and engage in natural conversations about my study and how they interpreted the topic of race in Creek.
**Coding data.** To make sense of this data, I pre-coded data where I highlighted and made notes in the margins during data collection and maintained analytical thoughts in the form of memos and vignettes in my research journal. When data collection was complete, in February of 2012, I began formal analysis by starting my initial coding, or my first impression (Saldaña, 2009) of all data. My initial coding included primarily In Vivo codes using the exact words of the participants, emotions and identities described by participants, and descriptive codes to summarize the primary topic of an excerpt of the data (Saldaña, 2009) to add to the level of coding analysis (I used In Vivo and descriptive codes for the same portion of data) or as the primary mode of coding in portions of the data where In Vivo codes were not possible such as in many areas of my fieldnotes.

I used the following categories to organize codes: place, racial messages, identity, teacher performance, terms, racial stories, teaching philosophy, and key phrases. In order to make sense of data from each participant, focus group, visual data, artifacts, and community representatives, I organized codes under these categories to represent the individual participants or artifacts. Using these data snapshots, I evaluated how each of these representations of data answered specific research questions, then I organized codes under the appropriate research question and wrote analytic memos that reflected the individual as well as the whole picture of teachers’ understanding of race in Creek.

To organize fieldnotes, I created a timeline with primarily descriptive codes and In Vivo codes where it was possible. Codes were organized by dates with category descriptions next to them where some codes were organized under overlapping categories. For example, on October 10, 2011, I coded a scenario where my students were questioning the book that I selected for our reading group by saying, “Where are all
the White people?” Next to this code I signified the following categories: Teacher performance, racial messages, and identity.

During this process of reducing and organizing data, I generated specific questions or conclusions that I was reaching based on data to check the validity of my analysis with teachers. These member checks were done in informal spaces such as corridors, before meetings, or upon exiting the school when I had short conversations with teachers. For example, in a conversation with a group of teachers at lunch I asked them if they could recall any professional development about diversity offered by the school. They confirmed that it was not directly addressed at the school level.

Next, I combined all data from participants, artifacts and fieldnotes into tables consisting of categories and codes that responded to each research question. Finally, as I evaluated these tables in response to my research question, I drafted a conceptual map (Gribch, 2007) of data as a whole in the form of a picture of Creek. In this picture, I formulated the following preliminary themes for understanding teachers’ racial literacy in Creek. Those were: Environmentally correct: The White subtext; The box: Black teachers’ experiences; Faceless dolls: Student bodies; Welcome to our multicultural school: Symbolic multiculturalism; and Rebel rules: Surveillance. The number of occurrences where coded data (e.g., interviews, observations) occurred under each theme is represented in Appendix F.

I completed this process at the end of April, 2012. For personal reasons, and to give myself distance from the project, I resigned from my position at Creek Elementary and I took a three-month break from the formal analysis process. This allowed me to step back from the daily and intimate contact with the data and participants in the study and
begin to make sense of the big picture. In August of 2012, I began a new level of analysis. After reviewing the analytical documents described above, I began the process of making theoretical connections between my preliminary themes and concepts from my theoretical frame. As I began to articulate these connections, the following concepts emerged as salient for interpreting my data: allochronic, coevalness, colorblindness, borders/borderlands, and White supremacy. During this time, my conceptual map began to take shape as a racial literacy continuum, however, after further reflection on the data and theoretical connections, I realized that the process of racial literacy for teachers in Creek was not linear, and emerged in spatialized moments where static definitions of race were challenged.

In this final cycle, I hand-coded all data from fieldnotes, interviews, my research journal and focus groups with a focus on spaces of racial talk (and silence), symbolism, remembering, and representation. I wrote primarily In Vivo codes, and some descriptive codes and noted the location of the code in my data (i.e., Your soul is not White MB, 3, p.17” to signal an In Vivo code from the third interview with Millie Blackwell on page 17). During focused coding (Saldaña, 2009) I developed categories with a focus on the spaces in (connection with) the school where race emerged as salient for teachers, even if race was the silent subject. I then took all of the note cards and organized them with similar codes and started to create categories. I carefully considered data that did not fit into any category, and wrote analytic memos about what these outliers might reveal about the data as a whole or specific phenomenon. Finally, I organized the data at both the macro and micro levels of the school structure where teachers made sense of race in Creek Elementary. I labeled the macro level “Teachers’ lived experience of racial
‘diversity’ in Creek,” and there were three themes under this level: public narrative, environmentally correct, and defining self, teacher and place. I labeled the micro level “Racialized moments in the classroom” and there were five themes under this level: instruction, conflict, unplanned, embodied, and recognizing racialized moments. These themes organized and informed my data (re)presentation.

**Data (re)presentation.** I use the term (re)present to signify the acknowledgement that my iteration of this story is a limited version of many, many versions of stories that could be told by me or by people who live and/or work in Creek. In fact, I begin the (re)presentation Creek as a poetic analysis of the place of Creek where I layered quotes from interviews and observations into a poetic format. This poetic analysis demonstrates the multiplicity of the place known as Creek and the perceptions of those living there. Poetic analysis is a way that “researchers can enhance their abilities to listen and notice in the field during data collection, creatively play with metaphor and image during analysis, and communicate with more liveliness and accuracy when representing data to larger audiences” (Cahnmann, 2003, p.32), and it was one way that I specifically aimed to capture the multiplicity of voices and my vantage point within the thirdspace of Creek as a teacher-researcher.

With this acknowledgement of the multiplicity of versions of a Creek story, my choices in analysis and representing that analysis through text were carefully crafted. In order to explain these choices, I draw from the work of Ellingson (2009) who advanced a call for improved analysis in qualitative research. Succinctly, Ellingson described the notion of crystallization in qualitative research analysis as a combination of
multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent
text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a
phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers’
vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed
meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes
them.” (p. 4).

Using the idea of crystallization, I combined narrative analysis and thematic
analysis based on my conceptual framework. First, the chapters four, five, and six are a
series of stories based on observations of teachers and the voices of the teachers I
interviewed. To tell these stories, I used narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996;
Reissman, 2008) which relies “on stories as a way of knowing [where stories are] framed
and rendered through an analytical process that is artistic as well as rigorous” (Coulter &
Smith, 2009, p. 577). I defined narrative as “stories that connect events into a sequence
that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners
to take away from the story” (Riessman, 2008, p. 3), and stories that were told through
other mediums such as visual displays. I also understand stories as: strategic, functional,
and purposeful (Riessman, 2008); sacred, secret, and cover (Clandinin & Connelly,
1994); and stock, concealed, resistant, and counterstories (Roberts et al., 2008). As I
(re)presented the multiple ways that teachers made sense of race at Creek Elementary, I
looked for different types of stories that would (re)present the multiple voices in that
space.

To (re)create these narratives, I organized quotes from interview transcripts, focus
groups, and fieldnotes that answered the research questions in narrative form. I chose
narrative analysis to (re)present these themes to demonstrate a three dimensional story. The goal of this narrative analysis is to disrupt discourses tied to what the geographer Doreen Massey (1997) refers to as the power geometry, or where different social groups and individuals are placed in very distinct locations with relation to flows, interconnections and mobility within a place. This (re)presentation takes into account the histories, experiences, perspectives, and explanations of race in Creek Elementary in a way that illuminates the complex structures of the school today, as opposed to the everyday normalizing view that it is an elementary school like any other.

Second, after the narrative analysis, I drew upon my interdisciplinary framework taking concepts from CRT (coevalness, allochronism, White supremacy, colorblindness) and critical geography (space, place, spatiality, firstspace, secondspace, lived space, thirddspace) and Chicana feminist theory (borders, borderlands) to engage a “vigorouss, disruptive, and explanatory analysis” (Vaught, 2011 p. 24) to complete a motivational story where I challenge my audience to see invisible borders, envision the possibilities of borderlands, and hold fast to hope of racial equity in schools that has not yet been achieved.

**Reflexivity**

**Ethics.** In order to remind teachers, faculty, and staff that I was doing research in the school, I intentionally publicized my project in multiple ways throughout the data collection process. In addition to formally announcing my study at the beginning of the year faculty meeting, I also regularly informally mentioned my study to teachers. I would also say things like “Okay, I’m going to be a researcher now, so I’m observing how you guys are talking about this from the back of the room. Is that okay that I record
this for my study?” I did this to remind teachers that I was not simply performing the role of a teacher, but a teacher-researcher. In addition to these reminders in moments where I was observing, there were many occasions when I would feed back data to the participants (e.g., I gave the class sorting transcript to Ms. Deavers the day after I observed) to do member checks and ensure that I was correctly representing their words. These member checks also served as data points where teachers would confirm or refute how they were represented. There were a number of occasions when teachers would clarify their meaning as a result of viewing their words on paper. After taking these steps to ensure that I had ongoing permission to observe teachers as a researcher, I was assured that teachers were aware of my teacher-researcher role based on a number of occasions when teachers demonstrated their knowledge of my study. Teachers often asked me how my dissertation was coming and said things like “Are you taking notes on what we’re saying?” and “Are you getting all this?”

Ensuring that the Creek community as a whole was aware of my project posed a challenge. In an effort to be publically transparent and to allow for a wider community voice to participate and to gain insight from data that I collected in my study, I created a bulletin board in January of 2012 that was displayed in a central location in the school. The bulletin board was entitled “Looking back, looking forward in 2012.” This bulletin board included historical pictures that I had collected for different schools in Creek’s history. It also included a statement that said “Mrs. Kimberly Howard is writing a dissertation for the University of South Carolina about the history of Creek schools. I wanted to share some of the facts that I’ve learned with the school community and give a greater opportunity for people to share their memories of the school. If you have any
questions, see Mrs. Howard.” I provided pens and note cards on the bulletin board and personally invited many current and past teachers, students, parents, and community members to share their memories of school in Creek.

One aspect of being a teacher-researcher that was particularly difficult was the choice not to represent data that had the potential to be traceable to Creek or harmful in some way to participants. This was a constant topic of reflection in my research journal, and I sought the advice of my peers and mentors for particularly taboo data. One solution to protecting participants was to hide people’s identity through gender and professional position titles. I did this in a way that did not change analysis (e.g., If a participant spoke about the impact of their gender on their racial identity or racial literacy, I did not change their gender). Given my position in the school, I also had insider knowledge about students’ immigration status. While this information may have added another level to the analysis to include xenophobia, it was an ethical decision not to include anything about students’ legal status in this project.

My decisions to further disseminate this work will take carefully into consideration my ability to protect the anonymity of Creek and Creek Elementary to ensure that the social actors in this study are always portrayed in connection with the stage of Creek Elementary as knot of social interaction. I will also make decisions about reporting data based on a consideration that dissemination of this project will positively impact educators’ and or researchers’ understanding the complexity of racial literacy in schools.

Reciprocity. I have a deep respect for teachers and the teaching profession and I understand that participation in my study was not without cost, particularly giving time
and sharing deeply personal stories. Therefore, I actively sought ways to make sure that there were benefits to participation in my study beyond contributing to educational research as a cause for the greater good. Before the study began, I reflected carefully on how to give back to my participants in a way that would benefit them. The five teachers I interviewed were each given two “free-time coupons” where I volunteered to do menial tasks, teach their classes during my lunch or planning period, do morning duty for them, or perform another professional favor for them that would alleviate stress. During the focus groups, I also bought each participant a meal or gave them a gift card to get one on their own. I also helped some of the teachers who were working on continuing education and/or certificates with various academic work or tasks. Finally, during the interviews, several of the teachers mentioned that the process of discussing these topics was helpful at a personal and/or professional level to better understand themselves or the concept of race. Although I did not give my personal viewpoints about race during the interview process, I was an ear to listen, and some teachers made comments to the effect that it was almost “like a therapy session.”

**Credibility.** Though it was a difficult decision, for issues related to both credibility and ethics in research, I chose to conduct two separate focus groups (Black teachers and White teachers). I made this decision based on the responses during the first two interviews in which the White teachers demonstrated both anxiety and confusion around the concept of race in Creek and in general, and the Black teachers who demonstrated personal anguish and outrage over the concept of race in Creek. As a teacher-researcher, I felt a responsibility to ensure that I did not cause anyone to be either personally or professionally in danger or unduly uncomfortable during the focus group
and more importantly after the focus group. As a teacher-researcher familiar with these teachers and Creek in general, I also knew that White teachers and Black teachers most often engaged in race talk differently (sometimes through silence), and there was a strong possibility that if the groups were combined, both Black and White teachers would be more likely to self-edit their words about race to protect themselves and their perception of each other as well.

In an attempt to work toward an accurate (re)presentation of data, in my final interview with each participant I read aloud quotes from their transcripts that I had initially coded as significant for emerging themes. I also did constant member checks in informal spaces to check my understanding of teachers’ words\(^{18}\). My pilot study, extensive data collection over a 14 month period, and co-performative witnessing also added to the credibility of interpreting how teachers’ racial literacy looked in Creek Elementary. Finally, I consulted with my academic peers and mentors on issues of research methodologies and interpretation of data throughout the project. Their feedback was helpful in making decisions about data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

As I neared the end of my analysis, I adapted Patti Lather’s (1986) guidelines for establishing validity in openly ideological research which are: *triangulation* (multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes), *construct validity* (recognizing the roots of a priori theory and indicating how theory has been changed by the logic of the data), *face validity* (establishing data credibility by member checking with tentative results and refining those based on participants’ feedback), and *catalytic validity* (using research to

\(^{18}\) I consciously decided to do more informal member-checks based on my pilot study when participants did not actually read the (re)presentations of data, out of respect for teachers’ time and commitments to their students, and in order to be able to feed materials back to teachers in a timely and natural manner that was more conversational.
benefit respondents in a way that they come to gain self-understanding and ideally self-determination through research participation) (p. 67).

First, my conceptual framework and study design, as well as the multiple levels of analysis that I took to reach conclusions in this study, were all steps that I took to address triangulation. Second, my research journal, including analytic memos, helped me to carefully reflect on the ways in which my data surprised me and shifted the trajectory of my analysis in unexpected ways. For example, in my conclusions, I originally proposed more of a linear continuum for racial literacy, however, after reflecting on the spaces and moments when teachers demonstrated more or less clarity about racial hierarchies and racialized systems within Creek Elementary, I was compelled to re-evaluate my original conclusions and consider a more cyclical and fluid process of racial literacy. Third, face validity was probably the most difficult part in the process for me. It required me to not only establish times to meet with participants again but also to find ways to engage them actively in the process of meaning-making with me in a way that was not discursively or ideologically alienating for them. I was able to meet with Tyrell Watters and Sunday Thomas and these meetings aided in my analytical process so that I was able to revise areas of my conclusions that were incomplete or misleading. However, it is important to note that I did not see this study as five separate case studies of individual teachers; rather I saw it as an ethnographic study of teachers situated in the locality of Creek Elementary. As a result, when I conducted member checks I did not present my analysis of the school as a whole, rather each participant’s individual understanding of the structure which were for several participants diametrically different. Furthermore, I chose not to share my analysis of Creek Elementary primarily out of an ethical responsibility not to create more
divisions between teachers who have to work with each other on a daily basis. Fourth, catalytic validity is an idea that I will continue to revisit long after this project is complete. Maintaining contact with the teachers in this study will demonstrate the lasting (or fading) impact of this project on their work as teachers.

**Positionality.** My work at Creek Elementary was always as a teacher-researcher. The year before coming to Creek, I had started my doctoral program and was a full-time student. For a variety of personal and professional reasons, in my second year of the program I decided to take a position as an ESOL teacher because it afforded me the time to continue with my studies, the financial support to maintain the expenses of a growing family, and the experience of working with diverse learners in a public school. I took my position as a teacher seriously, performing the roles and responsibilities of a teacher during my five years at Creek Elementary. This entailed attending meetings, social events, training, in addition to the more obvious roles of a teacher, like planning lessons, teaching classes, and meeting with parents. For three years, I was a teacher and graduate student, constantly moving between spaces in academia theorizing about schools and spaces within the school where I taught but where theory was largely disconnected from the lived experience of practical aspects of teaching and learning.

In my fourth year, I did a pilot study and at the same time conducted an autoethnographic study where I analyzed personal journals and documents and did a narrative and poetic analysis about my own racialized identity as a White, bilingual (Spanish-English), woman, ESOL teacher in an inter-racial marriage with biracial children (Howard, forthcoming). This was an important line of inquiry to engage in before entering this project because I was able to name and describe the colorblind
epistemology as it appeared in my own words and as a result better understand the function of race talk. It was essential for my role as a researcher to explicitly reflect on how my racial identity and perceptions of that identity are translated in and through different social spaces.

In my fifth and final year in Creek when the formal study actually began and I recruited participants into my study, it was a natural progression of the groundwork that had been laid in the first four years. Though for several years I knew that I wanted to do an ethnographic study, I was not always sure that I would do it at Creek. The phenomenon that sparked my interest in Creek as a research site was how people would talk about Creek in very disparate ways and how I witnessed students (like Marianna) being positioned in disparate ways within this place based on their identities. I was in a particularly good position to hear these conversations because I worked with every grade level in the school and worked with students who were often in the academic margins. As an ESOL teacher who co-taught in classrooms, I was also able to observe in a variety of classrooms and learning environments and work with different teachers. My sustained engagement also clearly demonstrated to me the importance of spending a great deal of time in the field. Some teachers, with whom I hardly spoke in my first year, were by the fourth or fifth year comfortable enough with me to talk openly and/or agree to be in my study. After four years, I had also learned the subtleties of discourse in Creek based on the changes that had taken place since I had been there (i.e., Teachers often talked about “the favorites” that is to say the teachers who were perceived to be the best teachers by school leaders).
For all of these reasons, I saw my role as a teacher-researcher as a co-performative witness (Madison, 2007) in the sense that I was both a teacher and a researcher. I was not simply, for example, observing how teachers were evaluated based on student test scores, but I too was being evaluated on student test scores. This level of engagement made room for a standpoint from which to look around Creek and make sense of what it meant to be a teacher in Creek. With this understanding, I talked to, observed, and interviewed teachers based on years of experience, knowledge of community members and community dynamics (e.g., school board rulings, neighborhood disparities), and common events and experiences that we shared as teachers at Creek (e.g., dress code policies, holiday celebrations). This extended engagement as a teacher-researcher informed methodological decisions from the beginning to the end of the study. For instance, I identified the need to create a focus group that was accessible and specific to Creek, without being unpleasant. Finding and an appropriate method was a challenge, but I chose to create a “storybox” (Hamera, 2005) which led to rich data. Because of my extended experience in Creek, I was able to draw upon background knowledge, discursive tools (e.g., names of people or particular phrases) to engage a dialogue about race when race was a taboo topic.

My awareness of my role as both a teacher and researcher caused me to ask some difficult questions of myself. There were times when my research role took precedence and caused me to self-edit more than I would have if I were simply a teacher. For example, in the race sorting scenarios (in chapter four) I positioned myself as a researcher instead of sharing my thoughts as a fellow teacher. I chose to remain silent because of my role as a researcher. I made decisions like my decision to observe rather than fully
participate in the discussion so that I could maintain candid communication with as many community members as possible, and to be able to observe in scenarios where teachers were discussing the often avoided topic of “race.” At the same time, when I was clearly in the role of a teacher as my primary identity like in a scenario with my student Khan and Ms. Drake (in chapter six), I attempted to maintain a positive relationship with teachers but interrupted what I perceived as clearly stereotypical images of my students and incomplete conclusions about race, culture, and/or ethnicity.

Differentiating between these moments was something that I had been thinking about since my first year at Creek Elementary. I reflected on this role carefully and practiced this balance in my pilot study. My research journal includes critical reflections on such moments when I was silent and why, as well as when I chose to speak, why and how it impacted the relationships. My primary aim was to discover how teachers made sense of race in Creek Elementary in their daily lives as a way to unveil the influences on this process, their lived experiences, and to connect this process to educational realities for students and teachers. I focused on this aim as a teacher-researcher so that I could interpret these realities, particularly in a place where many people argued “I just don’t see how [race] affects me here.”

The layers of my racialized identity added to the complexity of my role as a teacher-researcher. Although I identify as racially White, and I believe most people would read me as White, my ascribed identity to the faculty of Creek Elementary was what I would describe as not-completely-White. Over the years as I got to know teachers, my inter-racial marriage and biracial children became the topic of many conversations or kind gestures (e.g., teachers would ask me how I racially categorized my
children, the teachers took up a collection toward a gift card for my second and third sons). My ability to speak Spanish allowed me to communicate with a group of parents and students (for most of my experience in Creek) with whom no other faculty member could speak. This allowed me to have a different perspective from most of the teachers on Spanish-speaking parents and their frustrations in communicating even the simplest messages with the school, such as why a child was absent from school.

As a result of my not-completely-White positionality, when as a researcher I was observing racially charged conversations, teachers often demonstrated a conflicted read of my Whiteness. I was aware of how my identity was read in a way that may have impacted responses. For instance, Lexi Gunter (White teacher participant) named one of the most difficult parts of the interview process was being honest (though she assured me she was) when talking about race because she “wasn’t sure if [she] was offending [me] because [my] husband is Black.” At the same time, my not-completely-White identity was also read as a “political race” aligned with the Black teachers in my study. I make this assertion because during an interview with Millie while she was adamantly critiquing “White teachers” she stopped to clarify that she did not include me in this group, explaining “Your soul is not White.” Additionally, I make this assertion based on Tyrell’s statements about his level of transparency with me because of my not-completely-White identity. He said, “If you had not worn the hats that you wore... I wouldn't have been comfortable, I'm trying to think of some of my White friends who are teachers. They would have been offended.”

In this way, I have to wonder about my own racialized identity as a White teacher-researcher. I wonder if this study had been presented to my peers and authorities
in the school and district by a person of color if it would have been approved. I wonder how freely or differently people would have interacted with a teacher-researcher who was not racially White. I also wonder if a person of color could have moved in and out of spaces in the same way. Certainly these are questions that cannot be answered empirically, though based on the data and my analysis of those data, my answers to all of these questions would be, probably not.

In conclusion, as a White researcher studying race, Dickar’s (2008) work helped me as I made room for systematic and thoughtful reflection on my racialized identity and how ascriptions of my White identity impacted the people I was observing in this school. My positionality and purposes in the study can best be described by what Guinier and Torres (2002) call “political race” which “does not ask what you call yourself but with whom you link your fate” (p. 10). In this study, I am committed to telling the stories of the lived experiences of people of color who are experiencing racial prejudice and whose professional lives are being threatened by a system of racism. I am also committed to revealing the ways in which Whiteness is recreated in classrooms and school spaces in ways that are complex, troubling, and painful. I am then politically aligned with those who challenge systems that uphold White supremacy, and interrupt a master narrative that silences the voices of people of color. Bringing these ideas together, the political race that I speak of is a group of people who are committed to the charge of racial equity that recognizes, protects, and celebrates the humanity within every human body.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. In addition to the ways in which my complicated racial identity may have had repercussions beyond what I am able to analyze
or identify, I also identify myself as being “from California.” This geographical outsider status certainly impacted my observations of Creek and how I was perceived by others. However, because I have lived nearly half of my life in the South and also consider it a place I have come to view as home, I consider my geographical identity as being both an insider and outsider to the South. It is likely that this geographical insider/outsider status was read in a variety of ways by different participants in the study and members of the Creek community and likely impacted our interaction.

It is important to articulate that a limitation of this study was that it was conducted by one person. As a White, female, ESOL teacher in my 30’s, I came into this study with a composite identity that was mostly one of privilege in this setting. Therefore my identity shielded me and made the moments when I experienced racial prejudice a rare first-hand observation that was not directed toward me personally. It is also important to note that, given my position as a White female, I do not claim to be doing CRT. Rather, I have attempted to employ concepts and analytical tools that enabled me to listen carefully for racial themes, thus aligning my fate through political race (Guinier & Torres, 2002) with people in this and other school spaces who are experiencing racial oppression and striving toward racial literacy.

Secondly, while I observed the general practices of teachers in many classrooms over a five year period, the number of teachers with whom I engaged in this study was limited to a group of five out of a total of 50 teachers at Creek. Therefore, there are certainly many other stories and perspectives that went untold in this study and its (re)presentation. Another part of this is my position as an ESOL teacher. Due to this position title, teachers made assumptions or drew conclusions about my background or
politics as a result of the position itself. Therefore, it is very likely that there was a
degree of censorship among teachers (including teacher participants) as they talked to or
in front of me about race, culture, and/or ethnicity.

Finally, it is the particularity of Creek Elementary that I aim to highlight
throughout this study. In this way, I hope that this study clearly demonstrates the
dynamic and profound impact of local places in shaping teachers’ racial literacy. The
study’s particularity is perhaps its major contribution; thus, this study is not meant to be
taken as generalizable.
CHAPTER 4

“WELCOME TO OUR MULTICULTURAL SCHOOL”: TEACHERS’ LIVED EXPERIENCE OF RACIAL “DIVERSITY” IN CREEK

We smile life is good, southerners like it sugarcoated

Different kinds of people livin’ here now, more Hispanics than there used to B

A Black boy came home with me from the cotton gin, KKK said “Let us take him!”

everyone here knows each other

Today all tests were postponed because of confederate day

It’s home. My grandmother and my mother both taught here

we were a farming community, my uncle drove down the road on a tractor

We were sharecroppers, the plan was to keep us in debt

We are old Creek and new Creek too

My inheritance came from slavery, grandma told me “our family sold slaves”

It was rare back then to see a person who Could speak Spanish

People move here because they like the lily White

You know it’s like these newcomers act entitled to be here

Used to be nobody to offend, we were environmentally correct, the same

I went to the party for Ms. Kelly, this White guy said nigger in front of me.

Saw a car with “Protect the endangered species” on a confederate flag.
Throughout my study, I asked teachers and community members to characterize Creek and Creek Elementary in our interviews, and I observed how people described the school and the community. Some people referred to Creek as “home,” others described it as “racist,” and most agreed it was “changing.” My memory of driving through Creek for the first time is a mental picture of orange cones littering the road as it was being widened for the growing population. This construction made room for a “transition” in this agricultural community; however, as I discovered later, there was no agreement on what Creek was transitioning to become. It was this transition that intrigued me most.

In many ways, Creek and subsequently Creek Elementary remained “undefined.” I attempted to capture the essence of a contested social space in which “We hear what we know” in the poetic representation of Creek and Creek Elementary above. In this contested social space, the “Borders of Creek” were rarely traversed by counter narratives, but when histories and stories that explicitly named the racial divisions in Creek did emerge, they added important layers to my understanding of the spatiality of this school. Consequently, the multivocal text is based on the words of teachers, students, and community members in Creek. The text demonstrates the ways that the space of Creek was read by different actors, and the stories that informed how they read the space itself and each other within the space. This poetic description serves as an anchor for the analysis and (re)presentation of data in this chapter and the chapters that follow.

---

19 I used poetic analysis to “find, experience, and express the desire, passion, ambivalence, powerlessness, uncertainty, shame, love, fear and other emotions that are hidden in our relationships and our cultural discourses” (Oikarinen-Jabai, 2003, p. 578). Poetic analysis is a way that “researchers can enhance their abilities to listen and notice in the field during data collection, creatively play with metaphor and image during analysis, and communicate with more liveliness and accuracy when representing data to larger audiences” (Cahnmann, 2003, p.32).
In sum, Creek’s identity was contested depending on who was describing its histories, race relations, boundaries, or population. It was within this site, with its unwritten rules, perceived territorial boundaries, and “new conversation” in response to the changing racial dynamic, that Creek Elementary provided an education for Creek’s youngest citizens.

Creek

The ways in which race was interpreted in Creek Elementary School were inextricably linked to the local community of Creek. Therefore, it is important to understand the place of Creek through the eyes of the people who live and work there. The following description of Creek captures the multiple ways it was viewed by the people with whom I spoke with in this study.

Creek is located in rural Loudon County. Jamie Carol20, a 54 year old White resident of Loudon and District employee, vividly described the dynamics in Creek and Loudon in general. She said about Creek, “You’ve got the old and the new. Not the aristocrats necessarily but it’s the old land owners, who remember the way things were, when life seemed to be a little bit simpler for all of it, and then you’ve got these newcomers who come in and seemingly with some degree of entitlement because they’ve been around in other places of the world, and sometimes I’m sure that creates some struggles in that area. Creek was more of the farming, large tracts of land, family-owned large tracts of land. When I first came to the district office, as far as school size, the school might have been 250-300 students in it. Sort of isolated because major road arteries weren’t in place. There was no industry in Creek, at all, just sort of a sleepy, very country I suppose. In a lot of ways, Loudon is very provincial. There’s always this

20 Brief descriptions of all participants are included in Appendix B.
inward look, this is the way things are, this is the way the world is, because ‘This is my world, this is what I know,’ and trying to step outside that world and find something different, uh, has not been the norm.”

Despite the norm of “the way things are,” due to its physical location, Creek had experienced tremendous population growth, which included a drastic increase of racial and linguistic minorities. Tonya, a White, life-long resident of Creek in her late fifties and retired Creek Elementary teacher and member of the Creek Community Action Council, described the recent population increase in Creek (that has recently slowed somewhat) saying, “We can barely keep up now, our police coverage, our fire departments are all volunteer fire departments now. There's no way they could have kept up. So that slow down was good for us. I think it's made it a much more interesting, diverse. I don't know much more interesting. You know, it was just a small little, rural, everybody was just alike kind of place. And again, there are a lot of people who wish that it were still that way. A lot of the people who had never known anything different…you know southern people are kind of calm and laid back and relaxed and you know it’s a different environment. Some of these northern people come in and are a little more aggressive. They want to change this and that they want to change this. That’s not the way Creek is, so it’s like, go back.”

Many people like Jamie and Tonya, referred to an “old Creek” and a “new Creek” and described conflicting goals between these groups and rights to the land. For example, “new Creek” is connected to a number of large corporations that were new to the area and have recently completed or are constructing buildings and houses. Business opportunities, Creek’s relatively low taxes and housing prices for new houses in
subdivisions, and its close proximity to Big City (a large city in the southeast where many Creek residents are employed) made Creek a desirable place to live for people moving from other parts of the country and world.

At the same time, “old Creek” is represented by a dichotomous relationship between White families who had lived in Creek for generations and owned large parcels of land and Black families who lived in modest homes in McMarion which was widely known as the “poor” and “Black” area of Creek. During my study I spoke with White people like Patti Lemming, a life-long resident of Creek in her eighties and Creek historian, who, along with her family, own large parcels of land and refuse to sell them in order to preserve Creek’s more rural identity, yet I also knew several White families who had recently sold their land for large sums of money to new businesses in the area.

In a different way “old Creek” also represented the long-time Black population in the Creek area of McMarion. Otis, a Black, life-long resident of McMarion in his eighties and Creek Elementary custodian, gave an historical perspective on the dichotomy in Creek saying, “When I was coming up it was Blacks was to theyself, and Whites was to theyself. It wasn’t like it is now, all mixed… I grew up sharecropping. And the sharecropping was rent to the White man. And at the end of the year, they’d have to divide up the crops and the White man would get most of it.” Teaching assistant Marcus, a Black resident of McMarion in his mid-twenties, who attended Creek schools all of his

---

21 I capitalize the terms Black and White to demonstrate that these are not simply descriptions of identity, but identities in and of themselves (like Jewish or British). In Creek Black and White were the most common racial identities, and it was evident that though there were a myriad of other identities that could problematize these homogenized identities (e.g., Irish, Jamaican, African American, Egyptian, Russian, biracial), however, I use these terms as a point of entry in which to critique the dichotomy by strategically using these terms. There were, however, times that I used the terms “Caucasian” and “African American” and those were either based on quotes of participants or (in discussions of teaching history) in order to strategically connect to the notion of African heritage when groups of people from African countries who were sold into slavery in America, and are now referred to as African Americans.
life, described that in his experience, “Growing up it was McMarion Black, Creek White. Most Blacks come from McMarion.” As a result of these separate locations (Creek/McMarion) described by Marcus and economic divisions described by Otis, there had always been clear color lines in Creek. Thus, the construction of more racially integrated subdivisions over the past ten years created a “new Creek” identity with divisions between races that were not as intuitive as they had been in the past.

Willow, a White, life-long resident of Creek in her early thirties and aunt–by-marriage of Marianna and many of my Mexican students, had a particularly interesting perspective because her social identity represented both the old and new Creek groups simultaneously. While Willow’s White biological family owned large tracts of land, her extended family by marriage represented new linguistic (Spanish), national (Mexican) and racial (“Hispanic”) identities in Creek. She shared her insider perspective on the contentious racial dynamics in Creek, “When more races moved in, it started a new conversation. The people who’ve always been here, the one’s whose bloodlines go way back, they hate it.” Willow explained how regional and geographic identities were also used to divide people in Creek, “It’s not just racist, it’s the northerners and different people flooding in here from other places. I can still say that the majority of people around here hate the northerners. I still hear ‘some Yankee runs that place up the road.’ Are we still in the war?”

**Creek Elementary**

Data from interviews and historical documents revealed that between 1800 and 1950 there were approximately nine community schools for White children in Creek, most often associated with churches. By the late 1940s many of these schools
Creek Elementary was first recorded in 1948. I did not find any written records of any schools for Black children in Creek. Written records and interviews with people who lived in Loudon County in the 1950’s indicated that Bates Academy (in the city of Loudon approximately 20 miles north of Creek) was the only available school for Black students in Loudon County. Bates Academy was established in 1879 and was both publicly and privately funded. Bates Academy closed in 1969 when the federal government mandated that Loudon schools be racially integrated. Before that time, community members told me about one Black family who attended Creek schools for one year, but the school officially integrated in 1969.

Creek Elementary’s new school building played a significant role in making Creek a desirable place to live. As Marcus observed, “The first thing that started to grow the area was building this school. That started everything else. That's what started it. Then they started building all the houses. They tore down the old school. We knew we was getting a new school. And everyone started coming, they checked it out, it's peaceful quiet and here come everybody.” The new school building signified modernity and economic promise with its architecture and technological advancements (Promethean boards in nearly every classroom, WiFi access, and multiple computer labs).

Nevertheless, Creek’s not-so-distant past lingered in the minds of many Creek residents, a place in time where schools were separated by race.

Tonya described Creek when she went to school in the 1960’s and 70’s, “It was first grade through 12th grade. We rode the same buses. We ate in the same cafeteria. But there, I think were like 33 kids in my first grade. And I knew everybody at the school. I knew their grandmother and their mother and their cousins. So you could ride the bus
with the 10th graders because they knew where you lived and they knew you and it was no big deal.”

In the not-so-distant past, Creek was distinctly the “White school” in the area, thus many Black residents’ memories of Creek Elementary were memories of exclusion and inequality. Otis recalled his memories of school in McMarion and described his school experience in the 1930’s saying, “It didn’t go no higher than seventh grade. I had one teacher and she taught all the way from first through seventh. So that’s where I got my education. Well, at that time it ain’t like the schools is now, the only (Black) high schoo’ was Bates Academy High School in Loudon and you didn’t have, no transportation, no way of getting’ up there, and so all I was able to get is seventh grade education . . . Mom and dad they always promised they was gonna let me go to Riverview (a neighboring town where there was a Black High School) and stay, but every year they’d tell me we’ll let you go next year. Then next year come and they’ll tell me ‘We need your help on the farm’ cause we was farmers, only way we had a living.”

Despite the commonly accepted idea that segregation and discrimination ended when Creek was integrated (integration in Creek will be discussed specifically later), Marcus recounts some of his memories as a Creek student (1994-2006). Marcus explained, “Say if we were in the hall, a group of Blacks, we got in trouble. Anybody else, didn't. That's racism to us, you discriminating. And basically if you have all the coloreds and the others, and your doing that, and you always going to the coloreds, we take it as your discriminating against our color.” Marcus recalled his earliest memories of kindergarten (in 1994), “I want to say all the Blacks went to the white house (describing the physical location of his classroom). It was mixed, but the majority Black
was the white house. They had a separate part for the White kids.” This tracking continued through Marcus’ school experience, he explained, “Some [classes] were based on ability and how you scored. It was mostly separated by where you were and the class you were supposed to be in. I remember one class that it was mostly us Blacks, and to me it was a dumb math class. 5th or 4th grade, somewhere back then.” The separation of Black and White was particularly apparent because as Marcus pointed out, Black students were always a small minority at the school, maybe “20 out of 100, [it was] always White majority.”

Several people described how Creek’s Black-White dichotomy had been disrupted in recent years. Willow reflected on the changes that she has seen in Creek, “When I was growing up, even though the teachers and staff were not supposed to be racist, I think they were. They didn't verbally express it, but they were. I could always tell what teacher was racist, their reactions, how they were with students. It wasn't a big deal back then if you were racist, because everybody was racist.”

Tonya confirmed that the disruption to the Black-White dichotomy was a recent phenomenon. From a retired teacher’s point of view, she said, “I can remember distinctly the first Hispanic child that we had, spoke not a word of English, not a word of English. It was in 1994 or 95, beautiful little Hispanic girl. She’d just go ‘Missy’ all day long. And the teacher would say, ‘I don’t know what to do with her. I have no idea.’ We were just shocked that they would actually want this child to come to this school here and put her in our classroom and expect us to teach her. And she, she really did not speak a word of English, and we were not educated in ways to help her, I mean, you know, that was not part of our background.” As these comments point out, the connections between the
population growth and demographic diversity in Creek posed a number of challenges to the White majority at Creek Elementary. Students who were historically excluded or simply not present in the community in years past were now a part of the school, and teachers would react in various ways as described by Willow (“racist”) and Tonya (“just shocked”).

In sum, my study of teachers in this elementary school was conducted in Creek, a place that was experiencing a large growth in its general population including significant racial and linguistic changes between 2000 and 2012. During these years, the percentage of students who spoke a language other than English at home (mostly Spanish, but also Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Tagalog, Greek and French for example) went from .1% to 8%, the percentage of White students at the school went from about 90% White to 75% White, and while the percentage of Black students stayed relatively constant, the Hispanic student population grew from nearly 1% in 2000 to 7%. These demographic changes started a “new conversation” among the Creek Elementary School community and among the teachers. These conversations usually included words like “multicultural” and “diversity.” I begin to retell the story of Creek teachers making sense of race by describing this “public narrative” of racial diversity in Creek Elementary.

Public Narrative

This section begins by introducing how Creek Elementary was characterized at the macro level - in the public spaces of the school by teachers and administrators. Next, I illuminate the ways that this public narrative of Creek Elementary as a “multicultural school” was troubled in subtle ways by teachers in more private spaces where they
accepted the “environmentally correct” manner of the “way things are” and/or talked about “diversity” in a way that was not as “sugar coated.”

**We have our flags but we don’t do much.** The entryway of Creek Elementary was lined with flags from numerous countries around the world. It was common to hear teachers and administration characterize Creek Elementary as a “multicultural school,” despite the fact that demographically Creek Elementary had a student body that was 76% White and 92% monolingual in English. When I asked Sunday Thomas to reflect on the question, “In what ways do culture, race, ethnicity, your own or others, affect the school?” She explained, “I know we have a very ethnically diverse community, kids with families from all over the place, and their relatives from all over the place. And so we have the little flags all over the lobby.” I asked Sunday about the meaning of the flags, and she said, “We wanted to make the school look more welcoming one year, so we decided to hang up flags for all the different ethnic backgrounds that we have at the school. But we’ve never really done anything with it. And new people coming in have no idea what those flags mean and it’s never addressed. So we have our flags, but we don’t do much to address it, or study it, or talk about it.” She continued talking about a lack of conversation about what diversity actually means, “Maybe people don’t know how to do it without stepping on toes. Maybe they feel like if they bring it up, or if they celebrate one ethnicity, then they will have to celebrate others and they don’t know about others. I don’t know. Black history month, they send us an email saying ‘What are you doing?’ And that’s it. And part of it is that we have so much other stuff to do, and there’s only so much time in the day.” I asked more questions about the idea of “diversity” at Creek Elementary, and finally clarified by saying, “So in your estimation, would it be safe to
say that it’s not really a priority?” Sunday clearly stated, “No it’s not a priority. No, I think it’s just kind of not addressed, not made a priority.”

In another interview, Mary Martin confirmed that diversity was something that was increasingly used as a descriptor for Creek, and it was a term used several times by her in our interviews. In her final interview, I asked Mary to clarify her use of the term. She explained that when she went to school in Creek from 1983-1995 there were “maybe six African Americans in my graduating class” and “one Hispanic child.” Thus, the designation of Creek as “diverse” was in reference to “how it was” but the demographic changes did not change the conversation among teachers. Mary simply said that during the entire year issues of diversity with reference to instruction, planning, student evaluation, or school-related events “ha[d] not come up, not once. In all actuality we think Creek is more diverse than other places, but we're not. Mr. Drexel (the principal) says all this about 'We are diverse,' but really, we're not. Go to a school in Big City or an inner city, and we're not. What is it, we're probably 90% Caucasian or. . .?” I inserted that I thought Creek was about “78 % White,” and Mary continued, “Still 78%, you wouldn't get that in an inner city. In the big picture, we're not diverse at all.”

Mary’s comments pointed to an emerging theme that illuminated the complexity and controversial definitions of the term “diversity” that seemed to be used as both a badge of honor and a topic to avoid depending on the situation and purpose of the speaker. The most common explanation of our school’s approach to multiculturalism is reflected in Sunday Thomas’ words when I asked her if racism was an issue in our school. Her words characterized how the majority of teachers described Creek’s approach to multiculturalism when she said, “I think our school tries hard to be fair to
everyone. We have awards and everyone has a chance. Chorus concerts, clubs and activities; nobody is excluded because of race or ethnicity. I think our school tries hard not to leave anybody out, or be racist toward any groups. So at our school, I don't think it's an issue. It may be an issue between students every once in a while, but it's probably that the kid did something that the other kid didn't understand but it's probably just personality versus personality rather than Hispanic versus Asian and they just turn it that way.” Thus symbols like the flags in the lobby, and linguistic markers like “multicultural” were used to represent a “fair” approach to a changing demographic at Creek Elementary.

**Diversity discourse.** “Diversity” was a word that came up often and became important early in my study. One particular conversation on the Monday before Thanksgiving in 2010 demonstrated early on that teachers had drastically different interpretations of the idea of “diversity.” I was co-facilitating an afterschool literacy meeting with a group of about eight teachers who were leaders in the literacy committee. We were creating a mission statement for the school’s writing curriculum based on a collection of written statements where each teacher was included in a small group charged with the task of writing short statements that described our philosophy on literacy in an all-staff faculty meeting.

During our follow-up leaders’ meeting, Mrs. Hartful, a White kindergarten teacher mentioned, “I think we need to include something about diversity [on the mission statement].” Though I agreed with her theoretically, I saw this as the perfect opportunity to unpack what we mean by this word, so I posed, “While I agree with you 100%, it should be a priority, I never saw ‘diversity’ or anything like it on any of the statements
that any group came up with. We need to make a statement that we are going to be willing to be accountable for, and no one said ‘diversity,’ so I don’t know how we can put it in there. I’m not saying we can’t, we just need to be careful about how we do it because no one wrote it. So we don’t know if it’s one of our major beliefs. What do we mean by ‘diversity’ anyway?” Seemingly disgruntled, Mrs. Hartful replied, “Well, all any teacher has to do is look around her classroom and see that diversity is something that is important at this school. And if we are interested in individual children’s interests, we need to look at diversity.” After an awkward transition, the group moved forward with no resolve on whether or not to include “diversity” in the mission statement, nor a definition about the word diversity.

Two days later, I passed Mrs. Hartful in the hallway as she led her kindergartners down the hall wearing Indian head-dresses and Pilgrim hats. I ask her where they were going, “We are on our way to the Pilgrim and Indian Feast. Aren’t they cute?” she asked. I smiled courteously, despite my assessment that the costumes were reinforcing racist stereotypes. I concluded that Mrs. Hartful and I had very different definitions of “diversity”.

Using the broad term of diversity without defining it was echoed by a number of teachers in Creek in a variety of ways. One example included Mario, a Mexican immigrant second grader who had failing grades. In a conversation with his second grade teacher about the various causes for his lack of success in school (based on reading assessments, standardized test scores, and grades), his teacher concluded, “I wish I could just take him home;” suggesting that if Mario lived with her, his success in both school and life in general would change for the better. I understood this teacher’s comments to
imply an effort to respond in a positive way to “diversity” by offering an hypothetical solution. However, my perspective on this solution to a perceived problem was very different based on several interactions with Mario’s Spanish-speaking parents who were both loving and supportive of him. Though I often reminded teachers of the strength of his supportive home, because I was usually the only teacher at Creek Elementary who spoke Spanish, I was the only teacher who could speak to them directly.

Since the term “diversity” emerged as an important line of inquiry, I listened carefully when the word came up at school and asked teachers about it in interviews. Lexi Gunter, a White fifth grade teacher, said, “I still have to say it almost goes with skin color. . . Racial diversity, you look at that. A lot of times we'll look at it, and then we look on paper, and it's like wait a minute, we don’t see that, we don't think that.” Lexi went on to explain how her logic was linked with her career as a teacher. In her experience the process of identifying students’ racial identities had varied from school to school. Early in her career at another school, students’ official racial identity was based on informal assumptions about the parents’ racial identities. At first this meant the child’s race was denoted based on the mothers’ appearance, but this shifted through time due to the official policies of Southern State. Lexi explained that the next trend was that the child’s race should match the father’s race, followed by a policy stating that race should match the identity of the custodial parent, and most recently entering exactly what the parent marks on school enrollment forms.

**Environmentally Correct: Racial Knowledge Teachers Rarely Said Out-Loud**

There was nobody to offend. When I spoke with Tonya she explained how she experienced connections with other cultures over the years as a teacher and now as a
substitute teacher in the school. Tonya began, “When I started, everybody who lived here was just like me. We were all White. We were all middle-class. Our families all had large parcels of land. And you know, we, everybody was just exactly like me. So, and now you can, I don’t know, see the difference. . .We always had our Christmas trees, you never even had to worry about a Manora. We had our Halloween and all that, and you never had to worry about anything, because there was nobody to offend, because everybody was just like you. So you didn't have to be politically correct. And again I'm getting back to that environment. We were *environmentally correct*, because everybody here was just the same. You didn't have to take anybody, any other feelings into account, because they all felt the same way you did.” As Tonya continued to talk about the dynamics of race in the school, she critiqued herself and concluded, “Maybe race just wasn't a big deal to me. And it should have been.” In Tonya’s explanation of environmentally correct, she made it clear that because the environment of Creek was mostly if not entirely White, there was a perception of a shared culture at the school, so teachers did not need to adjust to differences in culture or political views. An environmentally correct way of being meant that although other places that were more culturally diverse may have to consider difference, this was an unnecessary conversation in Creek.

When I asked Tonya to tell me the exact year that Creek actually implemented racial integration, she said, “When I was in 8th grade. . . it was voluntary, we had two Black students. . . my memory is that they were not comfortable enough to stay. But then when I was in 10th grade, they closed the Black school, which was Bates Academy. And that’s when they all came here. Again, that might not be correct, but that’s what I
remember.” In the next breath Tonya continued, “I know my memory would not be the same as Alex’s. 22 He has a totally different perspective, because he didn’t come back the second year. But we all got along so well. I do not ever remember racial tension. I did not grow up with racial tension.”

Later, our conversation shifted to Tonya’s post-retirement life in Creek. She told me about an event earlier that week, “I had lunch with ten retired teachers, and we don't mean any disrespect to REHAB, but we call it Retired Educators Having A Ball, and at the table someone pulled an article out and a Black woman had died. And we had taught many of her children, her great grand children, and she had like maybe 87 grandchildren and 142 great grandchildren. Well there were three or four people and the person brought this article to say, 'Do you know how many of these there were and how they were breeding?’ Definitely racial undertones to the conversation, nothing was said, but you knew why she brought the article. ‘Do you know how many of these kids are up there?’ And it was a very strange feeling for me. Again, nobody said anything, it was just the sheer numbers, but this was Tuesday, just this Tuesday. But these are people who are my age or older. I'm one of the youngest in the group. I'd like to think that you won’t find it, when you retire. You won't be able to step back and say that. I hope we get away from it, but it's still there in a lot of people in this area.” At this point I stopped to clarify, “I assume that the whole group is White women.” Tonya confirmed, “Absolutely. We have one Black teacher who retired, and we have invited her many, many times, but she re- she didn't even come to her own retirement party. She's just not a social person, but we have invited her. But I don't know of any Black teacher who has retired from Creek. So that tells you something.”

---
22 Alex was one of two Black students who attended school in Creek voluntarily in 1968.
**We have better quality kids.** In my experience at Creek, race was rarely a topic of discussion at the school-level, but when it did come up the discussion usually involved test scores. At a faculty meeting in the spring of 2011, testing data\(^{23}\) was displayed by homeroom. The assistant principal, Mr. Teal, handed out data that reflected the gains of each 2\(^{nd}\) through 5\(^{th}\) grade homeroom class that year. Mr. Teal stated that there was “no reason that Creek Elementary shouldn’t be right up there with [the neighboring district with a very good academic reputation] or the top school in Southern State.” After about 15 minutes of explaining what the scores implied and the expectations that administration had for student growth, teachers who achieved an “excellent” rating were given a certificate for a personal day off. A number of teachers were visibly upset at the end of the meeting, which was closed by Mr. Drexel admonishing the teachers who were not rated as “excellent” that “When the state comes in to see who we have to get rid of because of budget cuts, this is the kind of data they are going to be looking for.” One teacher in particular, Ms. Sydney who was new to Creek Elementary and had come from another school in Loudon, had extremely high test scores, so Mr. Drexel recommended that other teachers go to observe what Ms. Sydney was doing in her classroom.

I wondered what the teachers thought about this meeting and how they understood Mr. Drexel’s warning. The next day at lunch several teachers were talking about the faculty meeting and most were upset about the comments and implications made in the meeting. As we talked, Ms. Sydney (who was not present) came up in the conversation. Ms. Cornelius commented, “Well you know what my theory about that is. She’s from another [Title 1] school, where they actually have training.” I pushed the teachers on this

---

\(^{23}\) In my four years at Creek Elementary, this was the first teacher meeting devoted to the discussion of testing data, but these discussions became a trend during my fifth year.
point and eventually asked, “So what’s the difference between those schools and this one? I have heard that Creek is the ‘best’ school in the district, but if the other schools have better teachers, what does that mean?” Ms. Cornelius responded matter-of-factly, “Well, we have better quality kids. That school is full of country bumpkins.” The conversation continued about who is responsible for “good teaching” in a school, but I took particular note of the distinction between the students of Creek as “better quality” based on a comparison of students in the other school because they were “country bumpkins”.

A spatial logic for testing disparities was explained further in my series of interviews with Sunday Thomas who commented, “I don’t think [racial diversity] means that much. The race of the kid does not affect- their test scores are not affected by their race. Now, if there’s a language barrier or a learning disability, that does, but if it’s a little Black boy, a Hispanic kid, a White kid, they are all in the same class, they are all going to get the same instruction, it is based on that kid, it’s not based on their race, it’s what they’ve learned and what they can do and how good of an education that they’ve gotten. What teachers they’ve had, which ones cared, and which ones just filled out paperwork. It’s not really based on their skin color or their cultural background, ethnic background.”

As a follow up to this statement I gathered standardized testing data that demonstrated racial disparities of performance in Creek (portions of the data I showed are included in Appendix A). In our final interview, I showed the data to Sunday without explanation and asked her to reflect on what she noticed. She said, “I notice the White students scored a lot better than African Americans, a percentage in the exemplary section. Even the Hispanic is higher than African American. Even the limited English,
their percentage is higher than the African Americans.” I asked Sunday to explain the difference in performance, interested to hear her explanation given her logic that “Race does not affect their test scores.” She explained, “A lot of our students in our school have very supportive parents, and they help at home and come in for conferences, and make sure they get a good nights sleep before the test. Therefore they are going to do better when they go in and take the test. And I think our African American students live in an area where they don't have that support.” Sunday explained further that differences in test results were not connected to race but were related to “language barriers, disabilities, teaching and parent support.” She added that it was important to consider responsibility and look at “the child themselves. Do they even care? If they don't do anything all day, and they don't want to do anything, if you give them a test, they'll just bubble it in and they don't care. So parents, teachers, students.” As I observed a great deal of formal and informal meetings, conferences, and trainings, Sunday Thomas’ comments were consistent with a large percentage of my observations in informal meetings, conferences, and trainings where teachers and administrators expressed their views about racial disparities in test scores. Basically, this logic held that the disparity was a symptom of individual shortcomings on the behalf of teachers, parents, and the students but was never discussed as a systemic or school-wide issue.

I want copies of these/I don’t relate to them at all. The racial divide between teachers’ views of Creek came into focus when I asked the focus groups to tell me what came to their minds when they saw pictures of “Old Creek.” When Millie and Tyrell saw a picture of a Creek area school in the 1930’s, a black and white picture where all of the students appeared to be White, Tyrell looked at the picture and commented, ”I don’t
relate to that picture at all. And this is our school?” I explained, “It wasn’t called Creek, but it was the beginnings of the school.” Tyrell continued, “It looks dreary, no life to it… I also noticed that this is the beginning of the Creek population. I can think of people now that I’ve met at Creek; teachers, parents, students, that look like these people, but I don’t relate to them at all. At all!” Millie nodded in agreement with Tyrell’s comments.

The reaction of three White teachers to the same picture was much different in their focus group. Mary Martin commented, “I bet my grandpa is in there.” We discussed how old he would have been if he were alive and figured out that the years would not match his attendance. Mary continued, “But I bet my great grandmother was a teacher here.” I then showed another picture from the 1930’s and Mary asserted, “I bet he is in that picture somewhere. I want copies of these.” The discussion went on and the teachers agreed that the students looked very “clean” and “put together”.

**The front office.** In our focus group, I had a collection of adjectives that people used to describe Creek in my observations and interviews throughout the study. One of the words was quiet. Millie Blackwell picked out the word and declared, “Creek is not quiet!” Tyrell Watters followed, “I’m not even talking about the town outside, I’m talking about the people (hand motion like a mouth) running their mouths.” As the conversation progressed, I clarified, “You’re saying, even in the quiet it’s not quiet, right?” Tyrell responded, “Even in the quiet. I can be silent and be saying a lot.” Millie added, “It could be quiet and in a state that is disconnected from every place else, it is totally, definitely not quiet.”

To illustrate Tyrell introduced how the front office was one place that could be characterized as a loud quiet space. He said, “When you walk into our front office,
nobody can be saying anything and but it’s so loud, it’s ringing, to where I got to go! To get my stuff and go.” Millie explained, “You hear everything in there!” I asked, “How can you tell? Is it glances?” Tyrell replied, “It lingers. It lingers, it’s that spirit that’s in that room, of uncertainty, of inquisition, it’s like if you stay up here long enough, we gonna get you.” Millie simply stated, “It’s a big game.”

Tyrell illustrated by explaining a situation that I had observed while waiting for him in the office that afternoon to meet for our focus group together. In the interaction I observed, Tyrell had come up to the office to ask a question about a student and the secretary reminded him that he had not been checking in on the computer time clock each morning, or signing the late book on her desk when he was late. I watched and listened as the secretary threatened him saying that he might have a “pink slip” in his box if he was not careful and did not follow the rules. Tyrell responded to her in a joking tone. In the focus group that afternoon Tyrell commented, “That’s the game. You gotta play the game, but if you notice something, I went right back to my room. I didn’t do anything in that book. She was just running her mouth that’s all.” I asked him about the “pink slip” and he said, “Like she has any power over that, but that’s just what she wants. What I really came in to tell her was that ‘Guys in case you don’t see me up here, it’s because I’m parking in the back and I’m not running up here just to tell you that I’m here and run all the way back down there.’ It wasn’t that I forgot. You don’t forget two weeks not to sign in, but I intentionally do not sign that book. I intentionally don’t walk into that front office. I hate going in there. Going into that front office has the potential to ruin my entire day.” Millie interrupted saying “I hate it too. They are not trained. They are not trained to be secretaries. They are trained to be a gossip lynch from the community.”
confirmed my observations of the interaction in the office with Tyrell saying, “[The secretary] said, ‘Well you’ve been late everyday.’ And you said ‘Well you’ve got it on film and you would have noticed if I wasn’t here!’” Tyrell replied “Oh ya! You would have known if I wasn’t here. And they do have cameras. And I know that you (referring to the secretary) know because you do have cameras, and you do watch them. And like you say ‘Oh like all we do is sit up here and watch what’s on those cameras?’ Yes you do! I’ve seen you.” Both Millie and Tyrell commented on several other occasions about the discomfort they felt in the front office and how as a result, they would avoid it whenever possible. I recalled that on several occasions I had seen the secretaries watching videos of students and teachers as I passed through the office. This conversation shed a whole new light on the office space for me, in particular the uses of the video cameras.

**Creek Elementary as apolitical.** Politics also came up with Millie, in an interview she commented on the day that Obama was elected saying, “No one spoke to me that day, no one! Children didn't want to take the News for Kids (a children’s newsletter for social studies) home. I explained to my students that his mother is White.” Obama’s election and presidency was a sore subject in Creek. On the day that Obama addressed the nation’s school children to welcome them back to school in 2009 (for a discussion on the controversy see Silverleib, 2009), Creek Elementary students were not allowed to watch his speech at school. That day when I saw Mr. Drexel in the cafeteria I asked him about it, he explained, “We don’t do politics at school.”

Being a member of the faculty brought with it many opportunities to engage in informal conversations with faculty and staff. These informal spaces were where many
political conversations took place. For example, during car duty one afternoon, Mrs. Kinny, a teaching specialist, brought up a recent event where a neighboring district had mandated students to attend school on Martin Luther King Jr. Day because of a snow day. This resulted in an NAACP protest, parent protests, and national press attention. As a result the school district decided that in the future snow days would automatically be made up as Saturday school. As she explained the recent ruling, Mrs. Kinny looked around cautiously (in my estimation checking to make sure that there were no people of Color within earshot) before stating to a small group of White teachers, “Now, it’s these same people who keep their kids home on MLK day who will also keep them home on spring break make-up days, when they need to be in school. I mean, at least at school they were talking about the MLK holiday and we were celebrating and educating the kids about the history of it. What were they really doing at home anyway? Come on. No one says anything about us going to school on Presidents Day.” The other two teachers involved in the conversation nodded and responded “Mhm”.

**The way they talk makes them sound unintelligent.** Though linguistic differences were generally seen as a Spanish/English dichotomy (demonstrated by the fact that on several occasions teachers would introduce or refer to me as a “Spanish teacher”), there were other significant linguistic differences that I observed as well. One example was when I passed Ms. Sunnie, a third grade teacher, who was having a friendly conversation with Otis, a Black custodian, and another Black custodian on her way out of the lunch room. As we walked out of the cafeteria she commented to me, “I feel so bad, but I can’t understand anything they say. I want to understand them but I don’t. The way they talk makes them sound unintelligent.” Having studied the differences between
African American Language (AAL) and having been a part of countless family conversations when AAL was the predominant language spoken, I had a deep critique of this passing comment, but I simply said, “It’s like a different dialect.”

In an effort to help bridge the gap between Otis and Ms. Sunnie I continued the conversation by offering a story of how my husband’s grandparents would talk on the porch and I had no idea what they were saying. I told her I would pretend to understand for a while, but eventually I learned to understand them much better. Ms. Sunnie affirmed, “Well, good for you.”

Standard English was the norm in most Creek Elementary spaces and was used by most teachers and school leadership, who often represented other linguistic forms (AAL, Spanish, Vietnamese) through deficit framing explicitly (i.e., Ms. Sunnie’s assertion that AAL sounds “unintelligent”) or implicitly as this next story demonstrates. Every Monday on the morning announcements, Mr. Teal would announce “La estudiante estrella” (The star student) for Spanish, a related arts class. One Monday Mr. Teal was sick so Mr. Drexel took over. When Mr. Drexel got to the part where he was supposed to read “La estudiante estrella,” he simply said, “Sorry, I don’t speak Spanish,” and went on with the announcements omitting the Spanish phrase. As the primary leader in the school, Mr. Drexel’s implicit messages about language became apparent through subtle and not-so-subtle comments. During a faculty meeting where teachers’ homeroom test scores were displayed publicly some teachers began to question the evaluation of teachers based on standardized testing. The teachers voiced possible inequities of rating their work based on test scores, particularly if they had what several teachers named the “low class”. In response, Mr. Drexel stated, “If Mrs. Howard comes to your class (to work
with English Language Learners), you probably have the low class.” Toward the end of the conversation, Mr. Drexel reminded the teachers to accept the inconsistencies inherent in a “diverse” school stating, “This is our multicultural school!”

**Class sorting.** For most of my first four years teaching in Creek, I did not observe a single instance when race was the central and explicit topic of conversation among teachers at Creek Elementary. The topic of race was generally avoided, but when it was unavoidable (e.g., When I asked teachers “How do you identify racially/ethnically?” on a questionnaire) most teachers and staff would simply dismiss the question and say something like “Race does not matter at Creek Elementary.” Given the overwhelming silence, it was difficult to observe racial messages, which is why my prolonged and intimate engagement with the community was essential. The following story illustrates an interruption to the message that race was not important at Creek Elementary. In this scenario, race was a primary category for organizing students into homerooms which provided not only an opportunity to observe how teachers made sense of race, but it also provided an avenue to discuss the logic behind race talk and racial ideology with participants.

It all started in May of 2011 when I went to the third grade team meeting to give them information as a member of the school-wide writing committee. As I walked through the door, I heard, “Oh, Kimberly, you are the perfect person for this conversation. We were just talking about race sorting. We don’t know what to do with some of these kids.” My interest was peaked, “What do you mean?” The teachers went...

---

24 While I did observe other teacher teams engaging in this process, this team of teachers was the most candid about their logic, which is why I chose to highlight this particular group. Their candid talk came from years of knowing me as a teacher and in some cases friend and while perhaps some of their statements are racial stereotypes and even offensive it should not be read as a personal attack or malicious, rather in most cases fueled by years of unanswered questions about race.
on, firing off questions about race, which was a shocking given the general silence on race in Creek. Ms. Sunnie asked, “Like what do you do with this kid? She’s mixed, but she’s light-skinned and you could never tell, so I put her as White. So what pile does she go in? Is she African American, or White, or other?” Then Ms. Deevers asked me, “So what would you say she is? What are your kids?” Not knowing exactly how to respond because of my numerous roles as a teacher, researcher, and friend to some of these teachers, I simply said, “I guess in some cases they would be considered African Americans. I think they’re both-” Ms. Deevers interrupted, “Really, you’d say they’re African American, not ‘other’? I just ask my kids.” I responded, “Well, it depends on what you are doing with this information and who is telling you to categorize these kids I suppose.”

Mrs. Evans pressed the issue further, “Well, like I have one, she’s mixed. She has dark skin, so I guess I’d say she’s Black. And I have another one who is light. She is mixed with something, but. . . I’m not sure what. Can we just look at them and decide?” Ms. Sunnie asked emphatically, “So what do we do with these mixed kids?” Because I know that Ms. Sunnie, who is White and engaged to a man from Ecuador, I respond, “Well, what will you do with your kids? What would you call them?” Appearing somewhat baffled, Ms. Sunnie said, “I mean, well they will be mixed, because we’ll be the parents, but this girl, it’s her grandma so that doesn’t really count. So I would just put her as White.” After a few more minutes of conversation where the teacher deliberated about how to best categorize particular children, I said, “This is very interesting, I wish I had my camera. Can I record your conversation? This is perfect for my dissertation.” They seemed to agree. I explained what I needed to tell them as a member of the writing.

---

25 By “kids” she meant her students.
committee. Then I asked, “I’m going back to the back of the room and I’m going to write
down everything you say. Is that okay?” The teachers nodded in agreement and I sat
down at a desk in the back of the room, vigorously scratching down what the teachers
said as they attempted to sort students who were now 3rd graders into their 4th grade
homerooms.

Mrs. Aranda the team leader began, “Okay, pull out all the normal kids first.
Now the special ed. kids.” There was some discussion about where to start with the
process of sorting students into homerooms. Meanwhile, Ms. Cornelius came to the back
of the room to tell me privately “I’m just uncomfortable with this whole thing. I don’t
want any part of it! Not any of it.” After a few minutes, Mrs. Aranda decided on a
starting point, “We need to pass out all the minority students equally.” Mrs. Deevers
commented, “I don’t understand why we’re sorting them this way” as they sorted the
forms26 identifying their current students into piles by race. “Can we just have a stack of
White and everybody else?” Ms. Sunnie asked. To which Sunday Thomas replied,
“Well, how are we gonna decide that?” At this point Ms. Sunnie seemed to realize that
she may have said something offensive. She looked at me and said, “Are you getting all
this?” The conversation on how to best categorize children continued with a great deal of
debate. Mrs. Bell asked, “Can we not just switch White for a White and Black for a
Black?” Mrs. Aranda remarked, “I’m not the one who said race matters. The races crap
is stupid. Like Kinu, he’s from France, but his parents are from Sri Lanka. Try explaining
that to a third grader.” At this point Mrs. Lamont looked at me in the back of the room
and asked, “Are we offending you Mrs. Howard, because your husband is Black?”

26 The form included information such as reading ability, test scores, a narrative written by the teacher
about the student, and gender. Race was undefined on the form itself, and simply appeared as “Race
__________.”
Before I could comment (and I did not really want to), she explained, “Well, we all know your husband, and your husband is hot, we all know that.” Ms. Cornelius continued the process and acknowledging my presence she said, “Don’t be offended Mrs. Howard; I’ve got a mixey.” At this point the thought occurred to me that maybe my presence was influencing this process, so I asked, “Are you performing for me cause you know I’m watching?” Ms. Sunnie replied, “Nope. This is how we always are.”

Finally, there was a definite directive on where to start with the sorting of students into classes. Mrs. Aranda decided that the Black students would be sorted equally among various classes. While the teachers placed the cards in their appropriate racially designated pile, they continued to ask questions. One teacher had a child who was apparently biracial and asked if she should place the child in a homeroom since she was Black. Ms. Bell replied, “No, we’re only talking just about legit. Don’t add the mixed yet.” When the teachers finished sorting the Black students, Sunday Thomas asked, “What about Hispanic kids? And what about this Jamaican girl?” To which Mrs. Aranda responded, “No, we’re going on race, not ethnicity, yet.” They finished distributing Black students equally according to both race and gender. When they finished, Ms. Deevers asked, “Oh we’re using biracial now? I have other-others besides biracial.” To which Ms. Sunnie sarcastically responded, “Next we’re going to be sorting by red-head and blonde.” At this point, someone shouted out, “Hispanic, is that...(the category of ‘other’)?” Mrs. Bell responded, “No, that’s like Indian,” as an explanation for how the category of “other” should be used. Mrs. Evans questioned the nationality of one of her students (this student was also one of my ESOL students, so I happened to know that the student is Ecuadorian). Mrs. Evans said he “is Colombian, no Ecuadorian, one of those.”
Ms. Deevers interrupted the process and held up three placement sheets, and said, “These are the three most important, and it ain’t got nothing to do with race. This one is Hispanic, but he’s at the end. He defies all race.” She held onto his placement card. The conversation continued, Mrs. Evans said in a sarcastic tone, “This one has dark hair, and her mother speaks Spanish, but she’s not Mexican because that offends her.” To which Mrs. Aranda responded, “Well, have you asked her?” Mrs. Evans answered, “Well, yes but I forgot what she said.”

Ms. Cornelius looked at a pile of cards and asked, “Are these the kids that will work with [Mrs. Howard]?” Mrs. Aranda continued, “Yes, now let’s do Hispanics.” Ms. Deevers suggested, “Well we have to do [Mrs. Howard’s] babies first.” So, the teachers sorted out the “Hispanic” students. Afterward, Ms. Cornelius announced, “Now, what? All the whites, whitey time.” Several teachers jokingly echoed, “Whitey time.” Mrs. Lamont interrupted “Whitey time” saying, “Oh, I have an Asian.” Curious, I asked Ms. Deevers about one of her students who was difficult to identify racially, “Where are you going to put her?” Ms. Deevers responded, “Lord only knows what she is. She don’t even know. I have to separate her from some of my other girls. That’s for sure, but that’s not because of race.” After this, Mrs. Aranda announced, “Okay, now everyone. Let’s look at what we’ve got with the races and let’s look for high, medium, low (ability, which was another category on the sheets).”

There was a brief exchange about academic performance then each teacher sat with a pile of racially sorted papers in front of her and pretended to be the prospective fourth grade teacher and sorted through their piles. After this, Mrs. Aranda suggested, “Now, maybe let’s do behaviors.” The discussion continued and the teachers attempted
to problem-shoot for combinations of children based on their knowledge of individuals’ needs and personalities. As they approached the end of the sorting process, I had to excuse myself because it was my son’s birthday. Several teachers told me to wish him happy birthday on their behalf.

The next day, I gave Ms. Deevers the transcript that I had typed based on my observations and handwritten notes. I wanted to be sure that I had gotten everything right. She agreed to look at it and told me that they stayed until 5:00 to put finishing touches on the homeroom groups. I went to afterschool duty and when I returned 30 minutes later, I passed Ms. Deever and Mrs. Aranda in the hall. Ms. Deevers had the transcript in her hand, and Mrs. Aranda was talking with someone else. I said to Ms. Deevers, “Hey, just the person I wanted to see. What did you think?” Ms. Deevers said, “I was mortified!” “At what?” I asked. Ms. Deevers explained, “Well, what I said, but at what we all said. I mean some of those comments . . . I couldn’t believe it. I mean like this one (pointing to a comment) that’s terrible. And that wasn’t me. I would have never said ‘mixey’. I wrote comments all over. It looked right. I just was mortified.”

Mrs. Aranda joined our conversation, and I said to her, “Maybe we can talk for a minute. I need something. Could you send me the email with Mr. Drexel’s directions on how to place kids?” Mrs. Aranda looked puzzled, “What email? We didn’t get one.” I responded, “Oh, I thought there was an email or something.” Mrs. Aranda replied, “No, Mr. Drexel just told me.” I asked, “What exactly did he tell you? Hold on I’m going to write this down. I got a pen and wrote on the back of the transcript Ms. Deever had. I mean how did he tell you to sort the classes?” Mrs. Aranda responded, “The first thing he said was ‘There are not many African Americans at this school. In fact I’ve never
been at a school with this few African Americans, so we need to make sure we evenly distribute them. Heck, we have everything else, so just kind of distribute them evenly.’ Then he said ‘Then make sure that there are an even amount of boys and girls, low-medium-high students’ and stuff like that.’ I inquired, ‘But did he tell you why?’ With her eyebrows furled, Mrs. Aranda said, ‘I’ve never really gotten the reason behind it. I mean it seems to be racially motivated.” Ms. Deevers chimed in, “Yeah.” Mrs. Aranda continued, “I mean, I don’t know, is it so that if a parent walks in they don’t see a room with all Black kids and think ‘That’s the Black class’. I mean, who cares, it should be based on who they are.” Ms. Deevers said, “Like I said, give them (the Black students) to me.” Mrs. Aranda paused for a moment, and finally said, “I mean why is it, why did we do that? We passed out all the minority students based on their race and didn’t consider their personality or what they need.” Ms. Deevers agreed, “True, we did.” Mrs. Aranda continued, “I mean, we looked back and made sure there were not major conflicts for kids who needed special consideration, but we didn’t consider just a ‘typical’ minority kid, those who don’t have any behavior problems or who aren’t ESL or have an IEP." At this point, Sunday Thomas walked by and Mrs. Aranda began talking with her. Ms. Deevers and I talked over a few more corrections to the transcript and she voiced her embarrassment again. On my way out, I talked with Sunday Thomas who asked about the transcript I was holding. I said, “This is everything ya’ll said yesterday. Oh, hey don’t you have a Jamaican girl in your class? What did you end up putting her down as?” Sunday replied, “I put her down as African American. (Pausing, apparently waiting for my confirmation). Well, because she’s, her skin is dark. Is that right? Is that what I

---

27 IEP stands for Individualized Educational Plan that is put in place for students who are deemed to have learning disabilities after a series of observations, tests, evaluations, and parent-teacher meetings.
should put?” Although I realized that she wanted some guidance, for the sake of the larger project (not knowing at the time that she would be a major participant in the study) I replied, “Well, I don’t really want to say. There is not right or wrong answer in my mind. I’m not trying to see if you all get the right answers.” Sunday continued, “Well, you know, come to think of it, I actually have two Jamaican kids in my room. One is lighter though. He looks mixed, maybe and his dad still lives over there. But I put him down as ‘other’ because she’s darker. So is that wrong?” I reaffirmed that I was not judging the correctness of the answers, but trying to make sense out of their process.

Intrigued by this class sorting process, I also observed the first and second grade teams sorting students into homerooms. These teachers, like the third grade team were uncomfortable with the process, particularly with having to discuss and categorize students by race. Interestingly, the second grade team sorted their students using intersecting descriptions of each student (high/medium/low; Black/White/Other; Male/Female; and other considerations such as ESOL and Special Education). Although the second grade teachers’ confusion about the significance and categories of race mirrored the third grade discussion in many ways.

The first grade sorting process was very similar to third grade, but I did notice that Millie Blackwell originally had intersecting descriptions listed for each of her students (e.g., White, female, medium). When I asked her about it afterward in an interview she said, “I didn’t like the way it was being done, but I was told by the team leader that that’s the way it was being done. Once again they’re not sensitive to race. It doesn’t matter. They don’t think about there are 25 kids in a class and there is one African American girl in the class, and I spoke up about that. I said, ‘It is not right for you to put her in that class
by herself,’ but you don’t see that, you don’t feel that because it’s not you. You would have to be me to know what it’s like what it feels like to be that one. And what I see happening is, and I don’t know if I’m getting off topic, but what I see is that some of our Black children are forgetting who they are and those characteristics. They are starting to forget who they are and they are acting White and they are quickly reminded that no, you are not. And it really hurt me one day this little boy, he’s gone now, but he said to me that he was White, I said, ‘Why?’ And his dad told me later on that if he was White the kids at the daycare would play with him. And that lets me know that the community which we are a part of, for us anyway, they’re not sensitive to race. This is the beginning of my sixth year, and I know that they are not sensitive to race.” Despite Millie’s critique of the process, in my observation at the class sorting meeting she silently gave in to the way the other teachers organized the students.

I also made it a point to discuss the process with our administration, so I looked for an opportunity to bring up the topic with them. On my way into the building a few days after observing the third grade team, I passed Mr. Teal, a White assistant principal. After a few minutes of small talk while he was helping students out of their cars, I introduced the topic, “So, I have a question about the teachers doing class placement. I was wondering about that process, how the teachers are being told to organize the classes and why we’re doing it this way this year?” Mr. Teal responded, “Well, I don’t really know, it was Mr. Drexel’s idea. He thought that we’d do something different this year since the teachers know the students best. It’s kinda like we’re shooting in the dark as administrators and it takes forever. Mr. Drexel thought that the teachers might have more insight into how to sort students into different classes. They are arranging the students by
race, gender, and—” I interrupted, “Yeah, that’s especially what I wanted to talk with you about for my dissertation work. I was wondering how it was explained to the teachers, and why they are separating the kids by race. I wondered about the logic behind it and how that was explained to the teachers, why it’s important.” Mr. Teal paused and said, “To be honest with you Mrs. Howard, I don’t know. I mean I guess it’s because ‘That’s the way it has always been done.’ I mean, Mr. Drexel acted like that’s just the way we do it, that’s the way he’s always done it, that’s they way [the principal before him] had always done it, so that’s it. That’s the way we do it. I mean I don’t know why it’s that way. I guess maybe because so if you look in a classroom and see a bunch of Black kids in the same room, it looks bad. I don’t know. You know, it’s kind of like one of those things people never talk about but it’s the way things are done.” He continued to reflect on the logic behind the process by using a personal story to make sense of it. Mr. Teal knew my husband, who was also an administrator, so he continued, “It’s like, I’m going on these interviews and I look at the fact that this principal is a man, the assistant principal is a Black woman, the other assistant principal is a White woman. Well, who do you think he’s going to hire? I mean, I don’t think it should be that way, but that’s the way it is. I think it should be based on who is the best for the job. I mean like the other day, I was talking to this kid and he said, well, ‘You know Mr. Teal I was watching that president’s wife (Hillary Clinton) on TV the other day and I think she will be president one day.’ I said, ‘Why do you think that?’ The child said ‘Because she’s a woman, and if a Black man is president, it’s only fair that a woman gets to be president next’. It shouldn’t be that way. It should be whoever is the best for the job. You know? I mean, don’t you see it too?”
I was feeling somewhat uncomfortable, because he had indirectly implied that my husband had perhaps gotten his job as a principal, not because he was qualified, but because he was Black. At the same time, as a researcher, I was conflicted in my response, not wanting to squelch anyone’s honesty when they spoke about race, and as a teacher I knew that I was supposed to respond in the affirmative with a smile. So, I responded, “Well, I see what you’re saying, but as I was telling the teachers, I’m not so interested in what exactly is the right answer as much as trying to understand how you come to these conclusions, where you’re getting your information, and the logic behind your conclusions. Like observations that you make, or research, or conversations with other people, or your boss. Things like that, the process of it. And then, how you explain that information to the teachers, and the messages that they hear. It’s really a focus on them. So would you say yours is more from observation then?” Mr. Teal responded, “Ya, I guess so. But you should ask Mr. Drexel, cause, I don’t really know Mrs. Howard. I don’t know why we do it that way. It just seems to me that ‘It’s the way it’s always been done here,’ and so we keep doing it that way. But I don’t know the logic behind it. You should talk with Mr. Drexel.” We ended the conversation with small talk, and I went in the building to start my day.

For about a week, I tried to find an appropriate opportunity to speak with the principal about the sorting process, and it came up naturally when I had a meeting with him specifically about my students’ placement for following school year. During the conversation he referenced the fact that our school is “multicultural” so placement can be difficult. This was the perfect lead into what I wanted to discuss with him. I said, “Yeah, that’s one of the other things on my list to ask you about. I was wondering because you
know I’m writing my dissertation about how teachers understand race, culture, and
ethnicity and I was wondering how you explained to teachers how to divide up the
classes for next year.” Mr. Drexel replied, “It’s been good because now teachers realize
what hard work it is and also because they know the kids better than we (administrators)
do. I told the teachers to divide first the GT students evenly among the classes. Then we
only have three spaces, Black, White, and other at my other school. I’ve never been at a
school with so few African Americans, I mean you couldn’t go anywhere and have so
few African American kids. We had Hispanic but here we just have ‘other’ because there
are just as many kids considered ‘other’ here as there are White kids so I told them to
make sure to put at least two African American students in each class, because it’s
important that they have someone who looks like them. I think all the rooms should be a
‘melting pot’ and all the “homerooms should look basically the same. So I told them
after gifted and talented, divide by Black, White and other, also considering gender, then
high-medium-low and ESL and IEP’s and things like that. That’s basically how I’ve
always done it.” We concluded our conversation with small talk before I left his office
to attend another meeting.
CHAPTER 5

DEFINING SELF, DEFINING TEACHER, AND A PLACE THAT DOESN’T WANT ME

In this chapter, I highlight some of the stories and explanations of race that were deeply personal to the teachers in this study. These were stories and understandings that the teachers carried with them to school and informed the ways that they made sense of race in Creek and Creek Elementary. Because teaching is deeply interpersonal, this chapter represents the ways in which teachers were caught in between their prescribed roles as teachers and their personal experiences, relationships, and discourses which informed how they made sense of race as teachers in this school.

Personal Racialized Histories

Defining Black, Defining Self. When I asked Millie Blackwell to identify racially she said, “I used to say I was Black. And my children have always said I'm brown, like the crayon. They've always done that. But now I say African American, because my ancestors were from Africa. And even though I don't say much about it Native American, but African American.” Tyrell Watters gave me a very complex and multi-layered reply. He spoke about his racial identity saying, “I have struggled with this since I was a kid. And being a part of my family, we identify people, certain cultures, based on race. So if you’re a White woman, I expect certain things from you. If you are a black man I expect certain things from you. Well, I’m not your typical ‘Black man’. I’ve always felt like I’m this White man, stuck in a Black man’s body. And that’s just been all
my life. And I’ve struggled with it because I have friends who weren’t like me. I always hung out with a lot of White girls.” Then he explained his cultural identity saying, “I don’t know if there’s a word for me. The professional culture, I’ve tried to be a part of that. Once I realized that I wasn’t going the thug route, cause that was never going to happen- I realized that I was going to be teaching that was my escape route. You can’t dress like this and go out with your friends. But now I have the excuse that I just got off of work and so they’re like, oh okay. But I can go the whole professional route instead of what I’m expected to be as a Black man. And that definition has changed with me of who I’m supposed to be as a Black man. I knew my dad as a Black man, a manly man. Me, not so much. . . I don’t think there’s a word for me.” Finally when he discussed how he sees himself ethnically, he said that he does not limit himself to a particular label, saying, “I’m choosing not to. I don’t have a definition.”

A Southern Identity. When I asked Mary Martin and Sunday Thomas to identify themselves racially their answers were much more concise. Sunday said, “Caucasian (in a questioning tone), is that what you mean?” Mary laughed when she said “Caucasian, I really don’t have that much in my background. I mean I think I have some Cherokee way back but we always joke and say ‘I’m a European mutt.” Lexi simply stated “I’m just a White girl from Southern State,” but when I asked her about the “White” descriptor means, she admitted, “I honestly don’t know.” Interestingly, all of my White teacher-participants defined their identity as southern. I was curious about the meaning of this identity, and realized that it had to do with a connection with a home place and memories both good and bad. Lexi Gunter provided a deep historical perspective of what it means to be a “southern White girl.” Part of her explanation was a personal history that
demonstrated how she learned to make sense of race as a child. “Growing up in school, there were White people and there were Black people. That's all there were. There wasn't even-- if there were any biracial children, I didn't know them. I didn't know anybody but White and Black people. When I was going to school it was just White people. I can tell you the two first families of African American children that came to my school because at that point there was an incentive for them to integrate the schools, and so I knew the two families that came. It was just, you know it was a different time.”

Lexi continued, explaining the geographic segregation of races. “You didn't live in the neighborhood with anyone except White people. The Black people did not live in a neighborhood with White. You knew the Blacks lived here and the Whites lived here. I remember there were separate entrances for some of the businesses. There were separate drinking fountains. It's things that I'm uncomfortable to some degree discussing that with my students, because of the fact that it just sounds so wrong. There was a lot of things that we learned from that, in that you learned how you do get along and how you are the same. I know that by the time I got in high school it was full integration, but it was we went to the same school, that was the separation. And you know I had a friend, a little girl who her family integrated, I know she came to a couple parties I had in high school, but she came to White children's parties. White children did not go to Black children’s parties. I don't remember being invited. I don't think that it went two ways. So when I say just a White girl, when I grew up, that's all that it was. There was not-- I guess I didn't even realize there was a third or fourth, another group of people you could have. It was just you're this or you are this.”
Family Stories. During our interview about race, Lexi told what seemed to be a painful memory from her early childhood. “My mom had a Black lady that helped do work at the home, and one of the things that I remember would upset me when it was mealtime she would sit in the kitchen. And I would say ‘Mama why can't Star come and sit at the table with us?’ And she was just appalled that I would want her to sit with us. You know her upbringing was that you didn't sit at the table with them. You know so I couldn't understand why Star ate in that room by herself and we are having a meal in here, but Star would have been uncomfortable at the table with us. She didn't want that any more than my mom would want that. And it was just the kids that didn't understand. And I saw Star not that long ago, it was really interesting to see her after all these years. That's one of the things I saw, and didn't understand it as a child. It's like why is she having to eat in the other room? And why would she refuse to eat in the room with us? It's like she wouldn't have dared to sit with us, and my mom wouldn’t have dared to invite her.” As I listened to Lexi’s story, I thought of my (Black) family members who had told me stories of growing up in the South and working in White spaces. Listening to this story, I could identify with the young Lexi who did not understand the racism that separated people in the same household, and Star who I imagined to have her own dinner table at home where she would prefer to eat, at a table where she was welcome. I understood Lexi’s southern mother to be following the rules of a separate society and training her child to do the same, and I was struck by just how early these messages begin.

In an interview with Mary Martin, I asked her to reflect on the interview experience as a whole in my final question and she said that some of the questions,
particularly those about her own identity were the most challenging “because some of that stuff you forget and talking about it makes you think through it.” Mary continued, “And I didn't realize how racist my dad's family is. Like my dad, he had mammies growing up. I mean my dad's mom wouldn't even let us watch Family Matters because she was like 'That's the Devil's show!' I'm like ‘Steve Urkle?’ I was like seriously, seriously? That annoyed me, but that’s just the way they were.” Mary continued, “And I found out that my dad's family, they are just crazy. . . I found out that recently, I knew my grandfather was racist, but he actually killed a Black man in Millville and nothing ever happened, they just let him go free, and to me that's just like, like, that's crazy.” Trying not to let on how mortified I was, I asked, “What year would that have been?” Mary answered, “It would have been, like, it was before segregation.” I clarified, “You mean before Civil Rights?” Mary smiled at her mistake in terms, “Yeah, it would have been before Civil Rights. . . The 40's maybe.” I asked, “So how does that make you feel to be-?” Mary interrupted, “It's embarrassing, you know? Knowing that I came from that. And to me, knowing a little bit of history and how my dad was raised, like I don't condone how he was with my friendship with Kenny (a high school friendship forbidden by her father because Kenny was Black), but it wasn't out of nowhere. He was taught that, that's the way he grew up. Like he had Black friends, and he would let me have Black girlfriends. And that was more in college. That was hush-hush. Just that fear of—'Oh my gosh, they are going to date.’ It helps me understand it. At the same time, it makes me mad. Knowing what I know now it could have been a lot worse. And I’m like, that’s my grandfather you know!”
White Teachers Discussing Race at Creek Elementary

When Race Matters. Sunday Thomas reflection on the process of sorting students by race was conflicted. She said, “I don’t know. They didn’t want to stack it to where one teacher gets all the White kids, this teacher gets all the Black kids, this teacher gets all the Hispanic kids, I mean it’s a good thing in a way because kids need to be used to being around people who are different cultures, different backgrounds and skin colors. And they learn that they have things in common and they can get along.” I asked, “And how do you think they learn that?” Sunday said, “I think they learn that from their parents. I mean if they sit around and listen to their parents talking about the Hispanics down the street and the Black people next door, they are going to do the same. Some, they might learn from movies and T.V., just those stereotypes.” I asked Sunday to talk about how these assumptions are built, and she said that some children and families in Creek “are always around the same type of people and they don’t want to go out of that.” In her explanation there was logic that it would benefit students to be around other races at school, but that racist stereotypes and learning about race was something learned outside of the school. Ultimately she clearly explained that she did not really know where racism came from or what her role was in interrupting racism.

Ethnicinticity? At the beginning of the year meeting in 2011, I announced my study to the entire staff, giving them a brief description of what my study was about and letting them know that I would put an invitation to participate and a questionnaire in their school mailboxes. One question proved to be very difficult for many teachers, “How do you identify racially/ethnically?”
After two days, several teachers still had not returned the questionnaire. Understanding the busy lives of my fellow teachers I went by classrooms to hand-collect the remaining forms. Ms. Witter said she could not finish the form because she did not understand a question. She asked, “What is racially ethnically? I’ve never seen that word ‘racially’.” She asked me several times to explain it, but I said, “Pretend I’m not in here. What would you say?” We went back and forth several times and finally I said, “You can just put a question mark if you need to.” She did.

Mrs. Evans wrote, “It’s based on how the kids look,” then verbally explained, “but it doesn’t really matter to me. If it’s important for some reason, I will ask the kid and then talk about who their parents are.” At this point her eyes lit up and she said, “Oh, like your kids (referring to my children). I would start by saying, ‘You have such beautiful skin’ and then I would ask them about their parents.” I nodded my head showing that I understood what she was saying.

Later, in the afternoon I collected another form from Mrs. Runine who said, “I didn’t know what that question meant, so I asked Ms. Deegers, ‘Ms. Deegers, what does this mean?’ And she said ‘That you’re a White girl.’ And so that’s what I wrote ‘I’m a White girl’. I opened up her survey and on it was written “cauc.” I said, “Actually you wrote [kok].” We both laughed. She said, “Ya, I didn’t know how to spell Caucasian.”

This question about race and ethnicity proved to be a difficult one throughout my study. In an interview with Mary Martin I asked, “Who are you racially?” She was unclear about the question and asked, “Meaning, ethnicicity?” In our final interview, Mary identified this as probably the most difficult questions to answer in our series of interviews. As a whole, teachers in Creek seemed overwhelmingly uncomfortable in
categorizing themselves racially or discussing the topic of race in general. My questions were usually met by questions, which I found to be derived from unanswered questions that these teachers were often embarrassed to ask.

**The Colorblind Solution.** With all of the various messages that Lexi Gunter had been given about race, she concluded that being “colorblind” was probably the best way to be. She described her family and their different approaches to talking about race. She said, “My child probably never thinks of color and I've said that about her, she is very colorblind. That is the last thing she would say if she was describing someone. I try to not make that part of my description. My husband would probably start with that. He would lead with that because that's what he sees first. . . I would not identify by skin color, because that is not what I want to be seeing.” In my observation, like Lexi most teachers at Creek Elementary avoided describing or discussing race whenever it was possible, and would echo in many ways the sentiment “because that is not what I want to be seeing.” This way of thinking, talking, and making decisions about race in Creek was connected to how these teachers made sense of themselves both personally and professionally.

**Can I Be a Teacher at Creek Elementary?**

**It’s Their Box!** In the focus group with Millie Blackwell and Tyrell Watters, Millie became exasperated as we talked about working with teachers who she described as “non-color” in the school. She said, “Nobody really knows Millie and what Millie likes to do. That Millie collects dolls; that I wanted to be a dancer. They don’t know these things because they have me in a box. So nobody knows the person that I really

---

28 When I asked Millie to explain what she meant by the term “non-color” she simply said, “It means White, I don’t like to say White.”
am.” I asked, “What’s the box that defines you?” She explained, “Well, the box doesn’t really define me, it’s just that I have to play this role. It’s their box.” I asked, “What do they title it?” She reinforced her point, “It’s their box!” Tyrell joined in saying, “It’s their box. We don’t even know because we don’t get to see it. We’re in the box. We don’t know what that title is or that definition. We’re in that box, so we know we have to conform some kind of way, but we don’t know what that is or what that means.”

Millie illustrated what she meant by “the box” with a story, “I was told by a teacher of non-color that has only been here a few months ‘You want this respect that you haven’t even gained.’ And I was thinking, ‘Where did you get this from?’ First of all, I’m told when I talk in meetings you don’t really want to hear from me. Everything is discussed before meetings. So when I come I’m told, ‘Here it is. Read that.’ I mean, if no one ever throws you the ball, how can you play?” She went on to describe how the other teachers seemed to have silent expectations for her “to be the nanny while they sit there and talk [on the playground].” Millie demonstrated her disgust at other teachers’ treatment saying, “I’ve been at this a long time. And I just think when you are an intelligent Black woman, and intelligent Black man (looking at Tyrell), Creek is not accustomed to dealing with people who are aware of who they are. And one of the things that I really believe, and I went to Mr. Drexel when he first [came to Creek Elementary as the new principal], and I said ‘People are not sensitive to race here,’ and he asked me for material. I gave it to him and he never followed through with it. I see things not progressing as far as race relations. I see them going backwards.”

I continued the conversation by asking Millie and Tyrell about how students were selected and placed into homerooms by teachers the previous year. I asked, “Why do you
think race was included as a major category for sorting [students into classrooms]?”

Tyrell quickly responded, “Because of the boxes, the boxes that we put children in.” I asked, “So the same boxes that you’re in?” And Tyrell agreed, “That same box. Those kids don’t even realize. They don’t even know until they grow up and they see, ‘This person looks at me and expects this of me because of what?’ That’s the box we made for them in kindergarten and pushed them through the system. Everybody needs to be put in a box and placed in a room. And I think they made conscious decisions about, okay are we going to put all these boxes that are the same here, or are we going to disperse them out.” Later Millie explained the limitations of the boxes, she said, “It is my belief and I’m not just saying this, I am convinced, that every child has a gift and so does every teacher. But if you don’t allow them to use it, you will never see that.”

I Needed a Pencil Sharpener. In the second interview with Tyrell Watters I asked, “Who are you racially?” He quietly responded, “That is becoming more apparent to me, who I am racially. I feel like a White guy in a Black man’s body, but coming to Creek and teaching has taught me that I am NOT the White guy that I am inside. I’m this huge burly loud Black guy with dreads. And dude, you need to cover that up with everything else that you have to offer. Your smarts, the way you talk, because it was not accepted. Granted now it’s more accepted, but when I first started teaching it was like ‘Don’t you say anything if you see a child walking down that hallway’.”

Tyrell told a story that explained when he first realized his racialized position at Creek Elementary during his first year. He said, “So, I needed a pencil sharpener for my room and I went up [to the front office], and this was when I loved [the women who worked in the front office] and I felt like they were so excited about me. So I saw a
pencil sharpener at the desk. I didn’t know anyone and I asked [a secretary] if it was anyone’s and she said she wasn’t using it, and she didn’t really think that anyone was. So I asked [the other secretaries and one] responded with an affirmation. She may not have been responding to me, I realized later. So, I took it down to my room, plugged it up, and used it.

Next thing I know, the principal comes storming down the hallway rips into my classroom, unplugs it, takes it and walks out the door saying ‘We don’t take pencil sharpeners around here.’ So I followed him out and said, ‘Let me explain because I don’t think that you really understand what really happened.’ And I realized at that moment, I realized had I been Mrs. Evans (an older White female teacher) it wouldn’t have went down that way. ‘This big huge scary Black man came in here and we didn’t know what to do so we just got quiet’ (imitating what the office staff might have said in a high-pitched voice). And so I went back up there and said, ‘Look I didn’t mean to steal anything, and if you didn’t want me to take it, I wish you would have just said that.’ And [one of the secretaries] says, “We did tell you that.” And so I was like ‘Maybe my perception was off I didn’t hear it but have a good day.’ And that’s when I realized, ‘Tyrell you are in here with a pot of snakes’.”

And another person told me that, ‘Be careful because they will chew you up.’ And when they told me that I was like ‘Okay I got it, I got it.’ That was my realization that you don’t look like they do, so you can’t do some of the things that they do and get away with it.” I asked, “So it’s a different standard?” Tyrell explained, “Mhm. As a man I’m expected to be one thing. As a Black man I’m expected to be one thing.” I asked him, “Can you tell me what those things are?” Tyrell said, “I don’t know because I don’t pay
attention to that stuff.” So I checked my understanding, “You just know you’re not what they’re expecting.” And he confirmed, saying, “I’m not what they’re expecting. I don’t know what they’re expecting, but I know I’m not it. I don’t know what it is. Maybe I’m crazy, but I know I’m not it.”

**I Hit a Kid and Said a Racial Slur.** Tyrell Watters demonstrated how race was important in his experience in Creek, particularly with parents, when he told a story from his first year at Creek Elementary. “All of the sudden I get called to the office, the director of student services was there, because a letter has been mailed to the district office saying that I hit a child, said a racial slur to a student, and I touched a kid inappropriately. To this day I've not seen this letter. But they (parents) have that much power, I could have lost my job just then.” I was trying to make sense of all this, and asked, “A racial slur, did they say what you said?” Tyrell said, “Yeah, I remember, she (the director of student services) was holding that letter and I asked her to go through all three incidents. And I remember everything. There was one day, I was walking up the hallway, and I told Mr. Drexel that if he put a Black kid, a White kid, a Hispanic kid, a Chinese kid, a Filipino kid, I wouldn't be able to remember who I was talking to. But there was this kid walking up the hallway holding a Kleenex to his nose, and I said, ‘How did you get a nose bleed?’ He said ‘I was playing basketball on the playground.’ And I said, ‘Were you playing basketball, or were you PLAYING basketball?’ And he said, ‘I was playing basketball.’ And I said, ‘Well can you actually play?’ And that was the racial slur. I don't even remember how I hit him. That story still doesn't, I don't even know if it was him or not, but I hit a kid supposedly. But my defense was ‘If I hit a child, that child would not live to tell about it.’ So let's just be real about it. If I hit a child and there was a
mark. . . and that's what taught me that, in our school, it's not about the reality of things, it's about the parent's perception of the child's perception of what happened. That's watered down big time. And your sob story, they'll hear you out, but it doesn't really matter. ‘Well he felt bad’ that's what I was told ‘Well that's how he felt.’ When are ya'll gonna stand me up as a teacher and say, ‘Mr. Watters would never do that. We don't have that at our school’? So aside from actually doing our jobs and teaching, we have to be on egg shells and I don't like doing, I don't like being on egg shells, I don't like being on egg shells.”

Not knowing exactly how to follow this dynamic story, I said, “So I have to ask, I don't know how to ask it without like putting words in your mouth, but had that situation, like that same exact, had you not been you, Black male you, do you think it would have been interpreted the same way?” Tyrell immediately responded, “God no!” So I asked, “How did you interpret—” Tyrell interrupted, “You don't see this every day in Creek, Southern State. You don't see this! You don't. It's not until you talk to me that you realize that I have some sense. Uh, no. This would not have went down that way. It would not have went down that way.” Tyrell continued to demonstrate using another story, “I cried my heart out because a bus driver reported me to transportation safety last year, because I screamed at a child on the bus on a field trip. Mind you there were six other teachers on the bus. The only reason I yelled was because they were talking and Ms. Prince couldn't get them quiet and you couldn't hear anything.” I clarified, “A White bus driver?” He confirmed, “Yeah, a tall White man.”

**Can I Just Be a Teacher?** In my second interview with Tyrell, the topic was race. Tyrell revealed many surprising, sad, and confounding ideas in his explanation of
his identity and his experiences at Creek. He recounted a push and pull about his racial identity that he chose to self-identify as a “professional identity.” At the same time, he said that his presence and the lessons he had learned in Creek had impacted his identity saying, “And that definition has changed with me of who I’m supposed to be as a Black man. . . But me, I don’t think there’s a word for me.” He continued, “Granted now it’s more accepted, but when I first started teaching it was like, ‘Don’t you say anything if you see a child walking down that hallway.’ They made me, recognize: You’re a Black male teacher, you’re a Black male teacher, you’re a Black male teacher. Oh my gosh! Can I just be a teacher? And what does that mean? What’s the level of expectation from ya’ll? I know what I expect from me, but that’s not cause I’m a Black male. That’s because I went to school and got my training, and that’s what I expect.” I followed this by asking Tyrell, “So do you, I don’t know if the right word is ‘resent’ that, but that aggravates you that you’re a Black male teacher and not teacher first?” Tyrell nodding his head said, “Yes, absolutely. Yes, because I’m not a teacher. That Black male teacher, that may have a slew of compliments behind it, but it’s always preceded by Black male teacher.” Tyrell gave the example, “When I first came to Creek, walking down that hall, stares galore, when I came to visit, to think about interviewing. The principal is walking me through the hallway and people were looking at me like ‘Is he gonna be the new janitor?’ ‘Why he got on them clothes if he’s gonna be the new janitor?’” We laughed mutually understanding the stereotype, and Tyrell continued, “But I do, I think that was put in my face and I hate every minute of it. Even my mentor, he put that in my face, you know you’re a Black male teacher and you’re such a hot commodity. And I’m like ‘Did you read that paper I just wrote?’ I mean let that stand for something. Can I just be a
good teacher?” We continued talking and I asked him, “So when you were talking about walking down the hall for the first time and your first days as a teacher, I’m trying to think of a word to describe how you felt?” He replied, “I enjoyed it.” Confused, I asked, “You enjoyed everybody looking at you?” Tyrell explained, “I didn’t realize why it was. I thought it was, you’re impressed. Then I realized they were nosey and they were scared.”

The Person in Control is Almost Always White. When I asked Lexi Gunter to explain what diversity means in the school she began by contrasting social life with the historical timeline of her life. Lexi explained, “When I grew up if someone did housecleaning it was a Black person, and now it can be anyone from any culture. And that bothers me about our cleaning crew [at Creek Elementary], that there are only Blacks represented. I don't want our students to think that that is the only group represented.” I asked Lexi to explain why she thinks this is a problem, and she said, “I don't want them to see that a menial job is only done by a person of color. I don’t want them to think that. But when that's all that they see, when the people that they see cleaning our school are almost always Black and the person in control is almost always White, I don't want the kids to see this as expected. I don't want them to say I can be this or I can't be that, or I will be this but I won't be that. We don't have enough people of color teaching in our school. I wish we had a better mix. I wish that our, maybe it does, I wish our school population matched our teaching, it may because we have a low minority population [in Creek]. But I don't know.”

What’s Next? The limits of teachers’ realm of responsibility in working with students were informed by leadership, which is exemplified in the following story. Mr.
Greene (Black music teacher), and although I did not know him well, one of our few conversations was about a program that he started to provide before school childcare for families whose work hours required them to go to work before the school officially opened. We spoke in the workroom while I was making copies and I told him that I was so proud of his efforts because I thought it would really benefit families who needed some extra help. A week after our conversation, Mr. Greene was prepared to announce his new program and ask teachers to promote this opportunity among their students. Mr. Drexel introduced Mr. Greene’s program to the faculty meeting in the following way, “Mr. Greene is doing a before school program. The flyers are in your boxes. I told him, ‘Gosh, what’s next? Are we going to feed them dinner and let them spend the night here too?’” While Mr. Drexel laughed, I looked over at Mr. Greene whose smile had faded and I wondered if the wind had been taken out of his sails.

How Can I Stay? Throughout the five years that I knew Millie Blackwell, she had a constant struggle to stay at Creek Elementary “not because of the little people, but because of the big people.” It was a puzzling scenario that I cannot explain without naming racism as the root issue. Because I was a teacher in the school and worked with every grade level, as well as the leadership team, I was privy to hearing wide-spread rumors about Millie Blackwell and how the principal had often said publicly, “I’m working on getting rid of someone.” It was commonly accepted that the “someone” was Millie.

29 Unfortunately, at Creek Elementary, most people had not been challenged to hear different voices that represented a diversity of perspectives or ways of knowing. In my first interview with Tyrell Watters, I asked, “How does the geography impact the demographics of students and teachers?” He said, “When we have those afterschool functions, you see it. You see who lives to the right as opposed to the left of the school. And I see that parents are instilling a message in their kids about what Creek should be. And they are going to carry that on for generations.” I asked, “What is that message?” Tyrell explained, “Not a good one. Be concerned about things that don't concern you. Be concerned about things that aren't important. Our parents are setting that tone.”
At the same time, my own observations of Millie engaging the students through her teaching as well as the principal’s comments to me behind closed doors in the spring of 2010, “Say what you will about Millie, but she knows what she’s doing in front of those children!” both pointed to Millie’s ability to effectively teach young children. So in the fall of 2011, when teachers repeatedly commented that the principal had said she wanted to “Get rid of Millie,” it was a puzzling situation. If Millie “Knew what she was doing” as a teacher, why would Millie need to leave Creek?

Millie explained her hyper-visibility and invisibility by saying, “I'm extra visible when it's something negative, when they want to exploit my reputation or discredit me. But invisible when it's something they want to do or accomplish. My feeling and thoughts aren't taken into consideration. I'm visible when they wish to do me harm.” In our final interview, with tears in her eyes she described the different standards for racialized bodies saying, “If a Black woman is assertive, they say aggressive. A White woman can say the same thing I say and it's considered being assertive but when I say it, I have anger problems. . .because it's the way it's always been. Because of where we are.” As we talked she compared her experiences of “the box” with her perception of Tyrell Watters. She said, “His box and my box are two totally different boxes. His box has windows and my box does not. This is my perspective that the box they have me in is ‘Get in here, do what I tell you! I want you doing reading at 9:00 and lunch here.’ I have a small box. They don’t like me because I'm not the normal little nigger. They don't like the way I look, the way I dress, the way I talk, and I'm sick of them! I'm not your house nigger. I never will be!”
She went on to provide the following insight about the reasons she was being forced out and why she was resisting this push, despite a great deal of emotional pain and health problems. In our last interview in January of 2012, Millie explained, “I keep hanging on because I have kids in my room who need me. I keep hanging on because of them, trying to finish my job with them. I feel like if I don't [my Black students] will lose out and they won't be strong enough to stay here. So I just keep coming another day.”

In an interview, I showed Millie the one piece of school-wide curriculum that explicitly discussed race and asked her to respond. The video was about the Civil Rights movement created by the assistant principal created to justify a technology grant. In response, Millie began, “I mean we don't enjoy freedom. The same racism in the 1960's we had, we still deal with today. I saw a teacher in the hallway today with an African American student and when I had him, he was never suspended for anything no matter what kind of problems he has. Now he is disciplined for every kind of behavior problem he has. I don't feel like we enjoy the same freedom. We may be drinking out of the same water fountains, and able to frequent restaurants, but it's because our money is green, not because we are wanted there. We are so diverse now. If you look at the small places, like Creek, you can see, people are moving from up north and they are coming here because they like the small town feel of ‘White is right.’ People are wondering why they are moving here, and it's because they like the lily White. That's what it is here. African Americans are the minority here, and they keep it that way. The teachers are rarely, they rarely hire an African American to replace a White teacher. And if we enjoyed our freedom, why do I feel like as an African American woman, an educated African American woman that I have to, that racism is still so prevalent here?”
We continued to talk about a new initiative at the school to promote leadership qualities in students, Millie questioned the goals of the program based on her experiences, “Are you really going to focus in on all children are going to be a leader? Or just some? Or the same White children being the leaders, the African American and others being subservient to them? I don't feel like, if we did, there would be more African American teachers and families. And I know other African American teachers who've left because of the racism that has occurred, and they ask me, ‘Why are you still there?’ And I ask myself the same question. And the answer is because there are still children here who need me. That's why I'm staying.”

Millie continued, asking some difficult questions of herself. She expressed what she called a “fear of forgetting,” stating “I must never forget who I am” which was a struggle for her in Creek. She expressed profound exhaustion stating “I’m just tired. Tired of fighting to be in a place that doesn’t want me. Kim, there’s nothing I could ever do to make these people like me.” She emphasized, “These aren't just things running around in my brain, they are supported by actions, not paranoia. It's real. What do I do? How do I stay? How do I get passed letting them have what they want to have? And when I do [go], I want it to be because I'm ready to go, not because I'm pushed. I feel like, I'm getting those feelings. I don't want to be the teacher who stays in the classroom because they can't get a job somewhere else. Go. Not with the souls of children. And the kids, sometimes when I feel like I can't go another step I look at the child who's struggling and I'm like that's it (the reason I stay).”

For reasons I still do not have complete clarity on today and simply the busyness of life, Millie and I did not have close communication over the next month and a half. In
March, we had a short conversation as the school day began and she referenced the fact that she was, “Getting outta here.” I took that to mean she was applying for another position for the next school year, but the next day before I could ask her what she meant, she was gone, without a goodbye or forwarding address.

The principal sent out an all-staff email stating that Millie Blackwell had a great opportunity to work in Big City and we “Wish her the best.” When I left school that day, I noticed Mrs. Blackwell’s name was removed from her door and recalled the principal publicly declaring, “I’m working on getting rid of someone.” Millie’s voice rang in my ears as I remembered her saying, “This place is like the 50’s without the lynching. The lynching is different, they lynch you with their mouths!” Walking through the office and saw all of the teachers’ pictures. With Mrs. Blackwell gone, there were only three Black teachers left, one in a mainstream classroom and none at the early childhood level. As I passed through the lobby and saw flags from all the countries represented by our students I could hear the motto that so many educators in Creek like to claim, “We are a multicultural school.” What does that mean? I wondered.

I remember how Millie described Creek in our last interview and a part of me is glad for her on a personal level. She said, “This is a place that is kind of like an inside-out place. Because people say they don't see color, but that's all they see. . . and people that you would never think talk, they do talk. So one of the things with women of non-color, they may hate each other, but if it's against you as a woman of color, then guess what, you lose every time. And people talk and keep things going and you would never know. That if they know that someone's out for blood, they're going to turn on you too. As long as it keeps the light off of them, that's why they do everything to keep things
going. To keep the light on you. . . It's about keeping your nose clean. So if someone higher up doesn't like you, then they will immediately turn on you too. These people see color. I don't care what they say. They see it.” More than anything, there is one thing that haunts me the most. It is the dilemma that Millie wrestled with in our last interview “I have kids in my room who need me. I keep hanging on because of them, trying to finish my job with them. I feel like if I don't they will lose out and they won't be strong enough to stay here.” What will happen to those children? I wonder.
CHAPTER 6

RACIALIZED MOMENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

This chapter represents the micro level ways that teachers made sense of race in the more private spaces of their classrooms. Though a critical interpretation of the public narrative of “diversity” was not probable in the school in general, it was sometimes evident in discussions at the classroom level. This chapter demonstrates how different narratives about race were ignored, interrupted, and reinforced by teachers who recognized or overlooked “racialized moments” in their classrooms.

Instruction

Cinco de Mayo and other “multicultural” holidays. The general consensus among teachers was that we did not center discussions of race, culture, or ethnicity at Creek Elementary, although holidays were symbolic occasions for celebrating culture. Mary Martin primarily addressed cultural differences through holiday presentations where students learned from teachers, parents, and each other about holiday traditions associated with “other” cultures. Mary explained some of the ways she incorporated race, culture, and ethnicity into the classroom, “We do Christmas Around the World. I am going to have one of my room mothers come in and do latkes and she’s going to play dreidles. . . I’m just exposing them to things. I’m not making them celebrate anything. I wouldn’t have a problem with it if it was my daughter. I mean I think that’s part of the problem, people being so close-minded. You know they weren’t exposed to it. They overreact. You can have a kid who’s going to grow up and be opinionated, not
opinionated, but ignorant to other beliefs.” At this point Mary clarified her point and asked me a question, “I mean I don’t want you to go out and be Buddhist or anything. I mean I don’t bring religion into it, but I mean I expose them to Hanukkah and Christmas and Kwanzaa. I have a lot of Hispanic kids who don’t celebrate Halloween. Isn’t Halloween supposed to be big over there?” I responded, “I think it’s Dia de los Muertos.” Mary went on to explain that she was excited to celebrate Cinco de Mayo this year in honor of one of her Hispanic students. Because I was the ESOL teacher, I realized later that this particular student was an immigrant from Honduras, and Cinco de Mayo is a celebration of Mexican Independence. By the time I connected this contradiction weeks later, I decided not to correct the incongruity and see if Mary might figure it out on her own. When I asked her about celebrating holidays in the final member-checking interview, she still had not realized the inconsistency.

Confederate Day. One day in particular pointed to the contested nature of holidays in Creek, Southern State. This came up in an interview with Tyrell who described how he taught about the Civil War, “I get angry, when that realization comes to me, ‘We live in what would have been the Confederacy’ and ‘Oh my God I can’t believe I live here!’ And [my students] say ‘Ya let's move!’ Granted we live in what they'd lead you to believe that everything is hunkey dorey.” This comment reminded me of something that no one mentioned in the school, but that I found interesting. That is, Southern State officially commemorates Confederate Day (e.g., students are not allowed to participate in standardized testing on that day). Tyrell and I discussed our mutual amazement, and he went on to describe what he saw as his purpose in re-educating his students who had been mis-educated about history. Tyrell listed several observations that
demonstrated this mis-education. For example, he noted “We have Confederate Day. My kids still think that George Washington is the president. We had the word "leadership" as a vocabulary word last week, and I did a lesson saying ‘Who exhibits leadership in our classroom, in the school, in the country? Who's the president?’ [A child said], ‘George Washington.’ [I said], No! Google.com, President Barack Obama!’ So much disrespect! And I didn't realize this until I started teaching social studies.”

**Christopher stinkin’ Columbus and race as history.** Sunday Thomas and Mary Martin represented the majority of teachers’ approach to the topic of race in the curriculum at Creek Elementary. They both expressed that slavery, race relations, and racism was something they avoided when possible. Mary Martin said that she usually talked about racial issues in conjunction with Martin Luther King Jr. Day, but said that her kindergartners “just don’t understand. And they just, it’s like ‘Why would they do that? Why would you do that?’ They just don’t understand it in kindergarten. And I try to explain that sometimes we are mean to each other. But they just don’t understand in kindergarten.” Sunday said, “It’s very difficult to know how to talk about it. And I’m always careful because we do spend a lot of time on slavery and the kids when I have African American kids I’m really careful, I don’t want them to feel like they are not as good as anyone else in the class because they are the same skin color as the people who were treated as slaves so many years ago. So I watch from person to person to check for reactions on their faces.”

Although every teacher that I spoke with referenced the fact that race came up when teaching history and described it as a difficult topic to teach, a few teachers took a distinctly different approach. This approach is both personal and emotionally invested in
a discussion about race that connected the past to the present. It was an approach that challenged students to think in new ways about the history of race and racism. For example, in a focus group I showed Tyrell Watters and Millie Blackwell pictures of posters that third graders had made about slavery. Written on the posters were comments like, “Those people were having a baby. That baby cost a lot of money,” and “Slaves were captured and taken to be sold as slaves in Southern state.” The posters sparked a conversation with Millie and Tyrell about how they address race, culture, and ethnicity in their classrooms. In the conversation, Tyrell cautioned, “I wish people would acknowledge that it's hard for people to teach slavery. It's hard for me to teach about slavery, and I'm African American. I wish that teachers, especially Caucasian, I wish that teachers would be a little more um, I wish that people would put as much thought into this as they do Christopher stinkin' Columbus. When I get ready to teach social studies, the Civil War, when I get ready to teach I have to teach what it’s like to dislike someone because of the color of his skin. Kids didn’t know what that was because it’s so normal to them that they didn’t need a definition for it because it’s their way of life. And I’m talking about Black kids and White kids. I have a Black kid and every time you turn around a ‘Hispanic kid stinks’ and ‘I hate Mexican food’ and I know that’s a result of mom and dad. I have kids who have never eaten Hispanic food, and never listened to music from that culture, because ‘We don’t do that.’ They just are taught that, and it’s that level of ignorance that makes me sad and it scares me. It scares me big time. But I wish that the kids knew that it wasn't just about- we were sold.” This project to create posters about slavery was one that all of the third grade students were assigned to do, and was designed by Sunday Thomas with the intent to show how slavery is a global
phenomenon that extended to today (e.g., she mentioned that in her planning meeting with another teacher they had discussed that sex trade exists in the world today). Sunday explained that in her explanation of slavery, she discussed how “They were considered property and they were not considered people.” This message was clear on the posters and brought me to tears as I saw the images and read the students’ words that positioned slaves as something other than people. However, the posters in the third grade hallways only represented African Americans during the pre-Civil War era most often shackled and being sold.

Since Tyrell taught multiple grade levels in his self-contained special education classroom, he also taught this lesson. Tyrell’s description diverged from the norm that avoided difficult conversations and questions for fear that students would “get mixed up.” Tyrell described his approach to this same lesson where he explained to his students that “Slaves were a necessity for the economy, but let's talk about some of the bad stuff too. . . Who could put a price on a human being?” In my focus group with Tyrell and Millie, he evaluated the pictures of posters from other teachers’ classes, and critiqued them saying, “These are from the children's perception, of that teacher's perception, of the books perception of what actually happened. I think it's good to look at, but even my kids I had to be like ‘Oh, let's be factual here! Some things you're writing are a little opinionated, so let's stop and write the facts’.” Although in many ways the intention of the lesson was to teach students about the faults of slavery, the teachers played a critical role in the delivery, the product, and presumably the learning that took place despite the shared lesson plan.
In the focus group Millie Blackwell explained how her approach differed from the norm, “We did an African American project during Black History Month. And we did, we are Black for 365 days of the year. But that was one of the few because Black history is definitely not discussed in first grade. They might throw out a few names, but it was not discussed. When I did social studies I tried to put that in there, but they took me off of that and put me on language arts.” Although she was unable to influence her grade level’s approach to social studies, Millie described several ways that she intentionally countered racial stereotypes in her classroom and why she felt that it was so important. Millie said, “Like when I was talking about collard greens and they were saying ‘Eww.’ But I let them know that it's something I enjoy, and you don't have to enjoy it, but some people do. I try to read literature that they can see us in a different light instead of all the time the negativity they hear and see on the T.V., and that's how we got into the thing about Black people stealing. And that's Black history, not all Black people are bad, and not all White people, or Hispanic people are bad. And that's what makes up this big beautiful world. It's not just one race. There are many races on the same planet, doing the same things. That's why it's important to help read to them and expose them to more. It's very important that children understand that their race, every race is important. Because we all make up this rainbow.”

**Conflict**

*It comes up when there’s a problem.* White teachers in this study expressed that race had not come up often or had not “come up, not even once” (Mary Martin). Mary and Sunday both acknowledged that race was part of the discussion with other teachers “If there’s kids that are struggling with stuff, we’ll bounce ideas off each other”
or “When I’m having difficulty with a kid, and I’m trying to get help” (Sunday). When I asked Sunday to reflect on how she addressed race when it came up in social interactions between students she admitted her discomfort with the topic in general saying, “Breaking out of your comfort zone is hard.” She expressed that race, ethnicity, and culture were not her priority since “I don't have any Hisp- like I don't have any students with learning, not learning, sorry, with um, language barriers, so I don't necessarily focus on the difference in ethnicity or race or culture, that much.” However, my role as the ESOL teacher added to this observation of Sunday’s classroom. I noted that out of 27 students, one spoke Portuguese at home and visited Brazil often, another student’s parents were from Colombia and she spoke some Spanish, three were Black, one took Greek classes on the weekend, and 21 had White phenotypes and spoke English at home. So, despite Sunday Thomas’ assertion that race, culture, and ethnicity were not an important factor that particular year, there were a number of diverse ethnic identities represented in her classroom.

**Mexico food, honkies, and the N word.** In a different way, Tyrell Watters emphasized the importance of recognizing “moments where it could potentially turn into racism.” Tyrell explained, “I've had Hispanic kids call Black kids nigger. Um, and these are things I don't hear, they come to me, but I believe it. I do not think a child would say 'He called me a N word' for no reason or 'He called me a spic.' Kids don't know that, they heard that somewhere. A White girl asked me ‘What's a honky?’ No one should ever use that word. Oh, we were talking about traditions from other cultures. We were talking about immigration and urbanization in social studies, and immigrants' traditions. My kids thought every tradition was American. Like, the piñata which of course is from
Hispanic culture and there was a child that said, ‘My mom said we can't hit it. She said it was a box Mexicans use to get candy from.’ I was like, ‘Anyone can use a piñata, it's not just a box. You use it for parties.’ The parent never showed them about it. Whether it was to keep from buying the parent diverged by saying 'The Mexicans hit the box,' and it turned into a negative thing for that child. And so I was like 'Is it really that bad?' And the kids was like 'No.' ‘Okay then, why are you interrupting me?’

A lot of, there's not really racism, it's ignorance. Farts. . . Juan farted one day and it was a stinker, DeShaun says 'It's because he be eatin' all that Mexico food' and so I said 'DeShaun could you explain why you smell like a bag of onions? Cause I'm Black and I don't smell like onions.’ And he shut up. Now granted, [Juan] eats some crazy food, and I'm like ‘Juan where did you get that?’ But DeShaun went that low to say that the kid's farts smell like that because of the Mexico food. Mexico food. But I never heard ‘DeShaun your farts smell because of the greasy Black food.’ At this point, I stopped Tyrell to ask, “So, I did have a question about your fart story. Not specifically about the farting, but the racial part. As a teacher, how do you see your role when there are times where tension arises, is it to interrupt that—?” Tyrell interrupted, “We stop everything we're doing and I go to teaching on that thing. If we don't finish our lesson, on whatever we were talking about, if I don't get anything done that day, we will talk about that.” So I asked, “And you take that on as teacher, right, you—?” Tyrell interrupted again and said emphatically, “I take that on as an American, as a person. I do not want this child thinking that this child's farts smell like this because they ate Mexico food. No! I go and say ‘Guys you know how we talked about the digestive system, and the nervous system, and all that? Remember when we talked about intestines? We go to something we've
learned, and I go to making them feeling low about that because you are gonna go so low as that, that you are going to be the only one that laughs. And they look crazy, and I just go on and follow through with it. You see how silly you look!”

**Dion couldn’t play on their kickball team.** At lunch on a Monday afternoon I was talking to a group of third grade teachers after being sick for several days. Ms. Deevers seemed perturbed and recounted that in my absence, a young White boy, Charlie, who often bullied others had made racist comments at recess to a Black boy, Dion. Specifically, Charlie told Dion that he couldn’t play on their kickball team at recess because, “only White boys could play.” Ms. Deevers confronted Charlie, asking him if Dion was his friend. Charlie answered that they were friends, and Ms. Deevers told him privately that he had better be careful or the other boy would “probably punch him in the face one day for those kinds of comments.” Ms. Deevers followed that by saying that she was sorry for that comment because on Friday at recess they actually did get “in a kicking fight,” and Ms. Deevers sent both boys to the principal. Ms. Deevers reported that Mr. Drexel gave the boys a harsh talking to and decided that they would both serve ISS (in-school-suspension) on Monday, however “Mr. Teal changed that.” Instead, Mr. Teal (the assistant principal) told Ms. Deevers that after speaking to Charlie’s mother, they came to an agreement that Charlie would serve ISS on Tuesday instead of Monday. The change in punishment happened so that Charlie could go to *Stars* (a gifted and talented program that required a full day off-campus on Mondays). Ms. Deevers found this ruling unjust saying, “So, he’s not really being punished. Charlie doesn’t care if he misses my class, but if he missed Stars, that would be punishment. Just because his mom called, he is going to get out of it. I told Mr. Teal that I don’t know
what to do or who to talk to because his mom is probably the one he learned it (racist behavior) from anyway. And I told Mr. Teal that if Charlie isn’t going to ISS Monday, I’m not sending Dion either.”

Ms. Deevers continued to analyze the situation. She described how she talked with her class on Friday about the issue, telling them, “My class is a rainbow of colors because that’s how I want it, and if you’re not a part of the rainbow then you need to get out of my room.” In Ms. Deever’s opinion, her lesson was negated by Mr. Teal’s decision to send Charlie to Stars. Her hard line about racism was further devalued when Mr. Teal visited her class on Monday, when Charlie was not there because he was at Stars, and lectured the class about how racism did not coincide with the “Rebel Rules” (our school-wide discipline policy that is named for our mascot the “Rebels”). At this point I interjected that Mr. Teal’s statement about situation not coinciding with the Rebel Rules “is really interesting, on so many levels.” After a few seconds, apparently realizing the contradiction, several of the teachers laughed and shook their heads.

**Unplanned**

**I don’t want to get into that debate!** In my second year in Creek I transitioned my ESOL program to be more inclusive and began working with my ELL (English Language Learner) students in their mainstream classrooms. Some of the teachers I worked with were eager to “co-teach” with me and we actively planned lessons and instructed students in a way that resulted in even monolingual English students introducing me to their parents as their “other teacher.” However, some teachers that I worked with were for a variety of reasons not as eager or able to share their time or space. The latter was the case with Janeth’s (Mexican immigrant student) 5th grade
teacher Mrs. Marony (White, 28). In this mainstream classroom my students and I occupied awkward spaces of teaching and learning. The following vignette demonstrates a moment when race, culture, and ethnicity were not adequately understood or planned for, yet it emerged as an important topic of conversation. The result of our lack of co-planning as teachers, the limitations of the school structure for an ESOL program, and the mainstream teacher’s limited view of culture resulted in an awkward space of teaching and learning for many members, including myself, in the classroom.

It was a Monday morning and Janeth and I quickly finished our review of work from the previous week so that she could join the class in their review of the current week’s spelling words that were also social studies concepts. The teacher introduced the word “culture”. Janeth raised her hand and asked, “What is ‘culture’?” At this point my interest as a researcher was peaked, and I immediately flipped over the scratch paper Janeth and I had been using to jot down the teacher’s response. Mrs. Marony thought for a second and responded, “Well, it’s where you are from. Where are you from?” Janeth did not respond (I assumed because she was not sure how her Mexican heritage would be judged by her teacher and classmates). Mrs. Marony continued, “It’s what your beliefs are.” The class began whispering and calling out responses. An African American boy, Jabari, raised his hand and asked “What’s my culture? African Am-“but before the student could finish, Mrs. Marony interrupted and said, “No. It’s like Protestant and Jewish. Like during the holidays, we celebrate differently. Another White student asked, “Can Jewish people be Christians?” Mrs. Marony, apparently caught off-guard answered, “Well, maybe. Any other words you don’t know?” As she passed the student desk where I was sitting, she commented, “I don’t want to get into that debate!”
Mrs. Marony looked and sounded somewhat uncomfortable, so I volunteered, “Well, anthropology is a whole area devoted to the study of culture, and even they haven’t agreed on a short definition.” This apparently sparked a new thought as Mrs. Marony told the class, “We’ll discuss each of your cultures in the next couple weeks. It will be part of your homework.” Some children moaned, but Mrs. Marony assured the students, “It will only take you five seconds. Your parents have to do more than you.” Immediately after this, a student began to speak without being called on and Mrs. Marony scolded, “Didn’t we just talk about this last week!” A Black student said, “Oooh!” And Mrs. Marony asked, “What is ‘oooh’?” Jabari replied, “Oooh is like ‘You got told’.” Visibly agitated, Mrs. Marony asked if there were any other questions about the spelling words and no one responded. The students packed up their belongings and prepared to leave for music class.

It turned out that the cultural project was a questionnaire for parents to complete. It asked questions about holidays and traditions in the home. The questionnaire was written and to be completed in English and Janeth’s mother had some trouble helping her to complete it since she was not literate in written language and did not speak English.

The space to know. When I talked with White teachers both informally and in interviews, their reactions to the topic of race and racism ranged from “panic” to “not comfortable.” Every White teacher that I spoke with indicated a preference to avoid the topics of race and racism with their students. In the focus groups, I shared a scenario from my own teaching experience in a small reading group where one of my Mexican students asked, “Where are all the White people [in this book]?” His question was in response to a book that had illustrations of only Black characters. My small group of
Latino students went on to state that, “Black people are bad,” and other denigrating comments. I asked each focus group to respond to this scenario without telling the teachers how I responded. Millie Blackwell stated, “It makes you feel sad because the kids don’t have the space to know that the same way you can have a book about White kids, you can have a book about Black kids. And it goes back to the teachable moment. Why do you feel this way? Why do you think that Black people are bad?”

Millie later offered an explanation of the conflict between her philosophy and people of “non-color” in Creek. She explained a scenario where four of her students had accused her of stealing their lunch money. She asked them, “Is it because I’m fat, I am gray, I’m missing teeth, or is it because I’m brown, I’m Black?” A six year old White boy replied, “It’s because you’re Black.” Millie took this opportunity to discuss with them that people of all races can be thieves, but that she as their teacher, would never steal from her students. After this conversation, there was a firestorm of parent complaints to the principal, and the principal removed two White students from Millie’s classroom. Millie offered the following analysis of the problem, “I’m educating students what it is like to be perceived for something that you are not, because YOU lack the intelligence. And the parents became upset because I was teaching their children something that they did not want them to believe.” In this way Millie’s authority and knowledge was constantly challenged by students, parents, and administration and her efforts in “teachable moments” were repeatedly thwarted.

**Embodied**

**You live in America now.** The holidays brought about many obvious examples of cultural disconnections and both implicit and explicit messages about belonging in
Creek. The following story from Thanksgiving week in 2011 demonstrates how messages were presented to students in ways that embodied a clear power dynamic of belonging and not belonging.

My collaboration with Ms. Drake, my co-teacher in my 4th grade classroom was in my opinion, not going well. She was taking graduate classes to become certified in ESOL, so ironically our planning time was limited. My intention in co-teaching was to co-plan lessons for the whole class that we would co-teach, but that approach was not possible without planning. Thus, I often opted to conduct writing conferences with my ELL students in an effort to individualize instruction. During Thanksgiving week, I went to my 4th grade classroom to work with Khan, our student who was a recent immigrant from Thailand. Khan was having trouble with Ms. Drake’s writing assignment: “Pretend you are a turkey, and convince someone why they shouldn’t eat you for Thanksgiving dinner.” In our conference, Khan asked me, “What a turkey?” I attempted to sketch a turkey on a scratch paper, and Khan asked, “Oh. Yes. What thank giving?” I began to explain, though somewhat conflicted because of the political history of the holiday, “Well, it’s a holiday. Actually, this Thursday is Thanksgiving. We remember the people who came to America from Europe, and the Native Americans who tried to be friends with them. But the most important thing you need to know now is that it is a tradition to eat turkey on Thanksgiving. So let’s make a graphic organizer about why people should not eat you. Remember you are a turkey. Can you think of anything?” The explanation seemed helpful, and Khan began to name some adjectives to support his argument. At this point, Ms. Drake came over and asked how Khan was doing, and I began to talk about some of the cultural and linguistic difficulties that the assignment posed. Ms.
Drake interjected, “Oh. That reminds me, yesterday I was in a meeting with another ESL student and his mom and she said, ‘I don’t celebrate Thanksgiving.’ I couldn’t believe it! I mean, you live in America now. You should be thankful that you live here.” I challenged, “Well, she didn’t say that. She just said she didn’t celebrate the holiday.” To which Ms. Drake replied, “Well, my mom wasn’t from here, but we grew up celebrating it anyway, because she was thankful to live here in America.” I really did not know how to respond at this point, partly because of my position as a researcher and partly in an effort to maintain a collegial relationship with the mainstream teacher of my students. I resolved to continue to interrupt this line of thinking as it came up and reassured myself that maybe her remaining graduate courses would help her to come to a better understanding of the dynamics of Khan’s trouble with the assignment.

**My great, great, great grandfather.** Lexi Gunter was a storyteller. Her approach to teaching social studies almost always included the personal pronoun “I”. She was comfortable connecting to history and this approach was enhanced by her extensive work on her personal genealogy. One discovery that she made resulted in her disequilibrium about how to best approach or avoid the topic of slavery with her fifth grade students. In her research Lexi discovered a disturbing truth about her family history. Her great great grandfather was killed while attempting to capture and return escaped slaves to their owners. She had a newspaper clipping that detailed his death, but she was reluctant to share it. She expressed her dilemma, “When I talk about him, his job was to return escaped prisoners, that was his job no matter who those prisoners were. I don't know if the kids could see it. I don't want them to get too into her great grandfather was killed by a slave. The article said that he and some others were given the duty to
return slaves and my grandfather was killed by the slaves because they turned on them. I changed the word ‘slaves’ to ‘prisoners’ and I just don't know. I don't want to change history, but because of the age of my students, I don't know how to best present that to them. I copy/pasted it and changed slaves to prisoners, and it's been on my desk for weeks and I don't know what I'll do when I get to that part in history. I want them to understand that this is part of it. I don't want sides, was it right that he was killed? No. But was it right that they were enslaved? No. So at this point, I've changed it, and that's probably the way I'll keep it.” Lexi toiled over whether or not to share this story with her students, and how to do it if she decided to share it with them. After several months, she told me that she finally shared the story with them orally, though she said that there was “no big reaction” to this story.

Lexi explained her purpose in presenting slavery in this way. She said, “I keep driving home the point that slavery is across time and across places, that Native Americans had slaves, and that there were slaves in other countries. I don't want kids to see slavery as a Black/White issue. This is something that one culture did to another. We talk about the fact that slaves were seen as property and not people. When we talk about the Civil War, and who could and could not vote, we talk about that. And some of the kids are still grasping for that, the Black/White issue. I think it’s inappropriate to focus too much on the injustices that were done. I don't want that to be the focus of that's all that it was. I want them to see that this is how one became more powerful than the other, and not just the injustices.” Lexi Gunter gave insight into why some teachers, particularly White teachers, might feel anxious about taking on the concept of slavery in the classroom. She admitted, “I see it in myself when I'm discussing it. I try not to make
eye contact with just White children or just Black children too much. I feel that in myself. And I don't want them to feel uncomfortable.” Lexi continued to describe her objectives when discussing slavery, “Were you the slave owners or were you the slaves? I want them to have an appreciation for their background regardless. If you're the one on the census that couldn't read or the Marmaduke, I want them to see it as that has something to do with where I am but it doesn't necessarily mean what I can be. I think I always feel that when I'm teaching that.”

**Carl Winslow and Ms. Iris.** On several occasions and in many ways, Tyrell illustrated how deciding to become a teacher “wasn’t a mediocre decision.” He described it as his “lifestyle.” Tyrell’s understanding of being a teacher was based on his background that included being born almost a trimester early addicted to drugs and realizing “I should be one of the kids I teach.” For Tyrell, being a teacher included a passion for acting and performing where he saw teaching as “unscripted dialogue all day” where it is “a different play with every single student.” He considered it a privilege to perform as a teacher where he said, “I laugh, I weep, I get mad, I get happy, I get sad, all these things happen in the course of a day, seven hours.” In this way, Tyrell brings himself into his classroom with all of his talents, past, interests, convictions and passions.

As we discussed his identity, he explained that Black men are limited by an abbreviated spectrum where growing up Tyrell learned that “Black men can be Danny Tanner or Carl Winslow from Family Matters. We weren't Phillip Banks. We weren't rich. That was a judge, [we] didn't know what a judge was, we just knew that was the rich family... what I want to show is that a Black man can be so many different things in so many different days. We don't have to be the same thing every single day. We don't!”
As I reflected on Tyrell’s description of himself, and the “harsh awakening of coming to Creek” and how he described teaching as his “lifestyle.”

Tyrell discussed the “harsh awakening of coming to Creek” where people thought he was the “new janitor.” Tyrell explained that his roles change often and he has to be many different things to different people, but he said, “That’s why I have to come home every day. That's why I can't hang out with [other teachers from school]. This is the place where I can be me, and people who come over here, I can be me. And my faith, I can be me. And when I'm at church, communing with God, I can be me. Because I don't want to wake up one day and be Ms. Iris.” Ms. Iris was a physical education teacher that Tyrell had for sex education as a child. He told me a story about how some of his fifth grade students were going through puberty and he had to have very personal conversations with them about what was happening with their bodies and appropriate behavior in the classroom. He explained, “I turned into Ms. Iris that day. She was my PE teacher for two years, and she looked like a man, and had a horse voice. She didn't mind talking about sex. And someone would say something and she'd say, "Grow up!" So, yeah, I turned into Ms. Iris that day.”

Uncle Watters. Tyrell Watters ability to connect with students was evident both in and outside of his classroom. Tyrell’s connection with students in Creek Elementary became obvious to me when Zion, a Black boy in Ms. Drake’s fourth grade classroom, told me that he got his snack that day from “Uncle Watters.” I asked Zion about it because to my knowledge Tyrell did not have family at the school, but Zion assured me that he was quite close to his “Uncle Watters.” In an interview I asked Tyrell about Zion, and he said, “I am not his uncle. Last year he came up to me and gave me a hug, and he
said ‘What is your name?’ And I said ‘Mr. Watters,’ and the next day he found me and came in my room and said ‘Good morning Uncle Watters’ and I said, ‘I'm not your uncle,’ but he calls me that. And that has happened every day since.” Tyrell’s connection with students came at a cost at times. In our interview, he reflected on the dangers of connecting to White students, specifically White girls who were eager to hug him in the hallways. Tyrell said that he did not know exactly why they wanted to hug him, and while he cared for these students, he also said, “It scares me because when their family comes, the minute their daddy sees them hug this big Black man, I don't want to go down that road.”

**Recognizing Racialized Moments**

---

As I went about my day-to-day life as a teacher-researcher in Creek, I observed many moments when teachers and students worked together and seemed to understand each other across racial lines. I also observed teachers, including myself, who despite our best efforts and genuine desire to communicate, failed to hear our students. This is a story that captures some of the dangers when students and teachers do not hear one another.

Zion was often in trouble in his classroom, although he was always kind and usually compliant with me in our limited interactions. One morning, Ms. Drake was collecting money for an upcoming field trip that served as a reward for good behavior for her students at the end of the semester. Zion had just barely made it onto the list to attend and he brought a check for the designated amount. Ms. Drake said, “No, Zion, I’m not taking your check,” because as she explained to me students could only pay for the field trip in cash. Apparently Zion’s mom did not have any cash and I overheard a brief banter
about why checks were not the acceptable method of payment. As the morning progressed, Ms. Drake went on with her morning routine and after several minutes she realized that Zion was missing. While Ms. Drake went to look for Zion, I was left in the classroom to manage the students instead of teaching the mini-lesson I had prepared. After about 15 minutes, Zion and Ms. Drake reemerged with the school guidance counselor. As I lined the students up for their art class, I heard Ms. Drake telling Zion “I told you-” and Zion interrupted her saying, “You’re not listening to me!” As I replayed the scenario for Tyrell (Uncle) Watters, he offered the following analysis, “They're not hearing each other. . . [it] goes beyond I'm not hearing you because I can hear you right now, but if I don't hear what you're saying, that's the difference.”

**Working towards hearing each other.** One of the most profound moments in my study was in an interview with Tyrell Watters. We were discussing how he communicates with his students, and he explained how each of his students need him to play a different role in order to effectively communicate with them. Tyrell described, “I have to talk to DeShaun the way he's talked to at home. Granted, I don't use the words or language, but the tone. You cannot call his attention without using the tone that calls his attention. You have to be stern. You have to be loud. You think you're going to be quiet and get his attention? No.” Intrigued I asked, “So let me ask you this, do you think that a White teacher could ever be successful teaching DeShaun?” Tyrell simply stated, “Hasn't happened yet. I don't know. Hasn't happened yet. This kid went from a classroom where the teacher let him sleep for three months. So he came [to my class] and ‘Okay, you want to sleep? You're going to sleep while you do wall sits.’ And now, that child loves school. His mom calls me and says, he's sick but he wouldn't stay at home. Great now
he's going to get everyone else sick. But okay. That child knows so much about the
content I teach in my room. I know he's listening. He is not an easy child to teach. ‘Um, 
this is boring, I think I want to go in the hallway cause I'm bored’ (imitating DeShaun).
He's not easy, but he knows that stuff.

I have other students who, you cannot be loud. If I have to get loud with other 
kids, I ask them to step out of the room, because that's their culture. With some kids, like 
Terry, I have to turn into a White woman. I have to turn into his mama. Terry just doesn't 
understand man talk. He doesn't understand Black man talk. My voice goes up ten 
pitches. I have to say ten times with my eyebrows lifted ‘This is the way it is!’ (Tyrell 
demonstrates in a high pitched tone), and I have a picture of a White woman in my head 
while I'm doing it. And that's the way it is. It's from moment to moment: I'm grandma, 
I'm a White daddy, I'm a Black daddy. The great part of it is, they only hear what they 
know. So if I'm giving Black grandma to Laquisha, Lily who needs White sister, doesn't 
hear it. It doesn't phase her at all. So if I'm talking like her sister, she hears me.” At this 
point I interjected, “It's so interesting that you say that and I don't even know if I can 
formulate this, but do you think that's true of everyone and not just your kids?” Tyrell 
thought for a moment, “That's interesting. We hear what we know.” I followed, “It's 
profound, I mean I've studied linguistics and communication styles and psychology and 
all that, but that really breaks it down quite simply: we hear what we know, the language 
that resonates with us.” Tyrell continued, “Right, the thing that calls our attention. Body 
language too. I have to go back to that pencil sharpener thing. What they heard was 
‘Listen you whores, I am taking this pencil sharpener and you can't do shit about it!’ 
That's what they heard. That's not what happened. They heard what they knew of Black
men and that's what happened in their mind. And what happened in my mind was what I thought of them. ‘These women are so nice! They're letting me have this pencil sharpener. Yeah!’ Not anymore, but I heard what I knew. Even if [the secretary] said, ‘No, you can't have it,’ I heard them being nice. I hate that because that means perception outweighs reality.” Unable to play the part of a distanced researcher, I said aloud, “I wonder, linguistically speaking, you know there is such thing as a pigeon language, and I wonder if in schools, if that's what we need to do. When there are such diverse cultures, hopefully we're working towards hearing each other.” Tyrell replied, “Yeah, yeah, yeah! My kids are working toward hearing each other. And there are such diverse groups in my room. They are working toward hearing each other. And like I talk to them different ways, and they are learning to accept that. I also have to talk to them in ways that is going to prepare them for the future. Like with DeShaun I have to say ‘Now that wasn't a good decision?’ (in a White ethnic tone) and leave it there, and he's starting to respond the same way. To where if I were to say ‘What?! Is you crazy?’ (in a Black ethnic tone). So he's starting to hear both now. Whereas in the past it was like ‘Let's get out our marble folders’ (in a White woman’s tone of voice) and he was like ‘What are you talking about? I'm going to sleep.’ And, but now he's hearing both.”
CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

The previous three chapters demonstrate the multiple, overlapping, and contradictory ways that teachers made sense of race at Creek Elementary. I told stories in this way in an effort to express how I experienced these narratives of race in the same place and even on the same days. In this section, I begin by analyzing the larger, systemic “lived space” of our “multicultural school,” then I discuss race in classroom spaces. I organized the sections in reference to the structural level of the school and the classroom level where teachers were making sense of race to illustrate how teachers made sense of race as public figures working with their colleagues, responding to the directives of administration, and playing the role of a spokesperson for the school, while also making sense of race in their own more private space of the classroom. By (re)presenting data that sent divergent racial messages, even at times by the same teacher, it was my intention to interrupt the tendency to dichotomize racial reasoning. It was in the school space as a whole, where interpretations collided that individual teachers explained and enacted their understanding of race to each other, their students, and to me as their colleague, (in some cases) friend, and as an educational researcher.

Teachers’ Lived Spaces in Creek

The colorblind public narrative and environmentally correct racism. The spatiality of Creek Elementary, situated in Creek as a place with a clearly segregated and
racially oppressive past, provides a rich site of inquiry to analyze how geographic location informs teachers’ racial literacy. Viewing Creek through a historical lens was helped me to understand the racial dynamics of Creek today. Tonya, a White retired teacher, demonstrated the contradiction of remembering race and segregation in Creek when she explained that schools in Creek remained segregated until she was in tenth grade (1969) saying, “Maybe race just wasn’t a big deal to me” because she was White like “everybody else,” but “[maybe] it should have been.” It is on this contradictory point that I will build my argument about the connection between integration and racial (il)literacy in Creek.

As someone who went to school and worked as a teacher in Creek for her entire life, Tonya provided deep insight into the lived spaces of teaching and learning in Creek. Tonya remembered only one Black teacher who had ever retired from Creek. Despite her lack of clarity on what that statistic might mean, she concluded, “That tells you something.” The absence of Black teachers and students historically and contemporarily in conjunction with Tonya’s REHAB group who spoke with racist “undertones” about how a Black family was “breeding,” points to the fact that Black teachers remained largely excluded, and Black students (if viewed as the result of “breeding”) were still discursively marginalized and/or unwelcome in White educational spaces.

Key to this discussion is the “environmentally correct” way of being. Tonya explained that until recently, teachers did “not need to be politically correct” because “Everybody here was just the same” and there was an assumption that everyone “felt the same way you did.” This environmentally correct way of being created an isolating lived space for the few Black teachers who worked in Creek at the time of this study.
Millie Blackwell, Black first grade teacher, referenced this isolation when she said, “Nobody really knows Millie.” Meanwhile, Tonya indicated that White teachers concluded that some Black teachers were “just not social.” In my observation, this environmentally correct way of not taking “any other feelings into account” resulted in a disconnection between Black and White teachers that was still evident by Millie Blackwell’s “[fight] to stay in a place that doesn’t want me.”

The words used to narrate the past and present of Creek express the highly contested narrative of what makes up the Creek of the past and Creek in the present. Various words to describe Creek like “home, changing, growth, transitioning, undefined, multicultural, diverse, old, and new” suggest that Creek, and specifically Creek Elementary was a contested space. While a few community members called Creek “racist,” the “undefined” approach to a “multicultural” Creek Elementary, marked by the flags that hung in the lobby, made room for the majority of White teachers and school administrators to omit a discussion of racism and avoid unpacking the meaning of race in their own lives and the lives of their students. Sunday Thomas, a White third grade teacher, explained “We don’t do much to address it, or study it, or talk about it.” “Diversity” was recognized by some teachers, like Mrs. Hartful, a White kindergarten teacher, as central to our work since a teacher could “look around her classroom and see that diversity is something that is important at this school,” however the meaning of this term was contentious and rarely discussed. This was evident to me when Mrs. Hartful for instance dressed her students up as stereotypical Pilgrims and Indians (for a discussion on the dangers and alternatives to this practice, see Greeneberg, 1992; Haukoos, 1996; Ramsey, 1972).
Despite divergent interpretations of what it means to make diversity a priority, the colorblind approach to “diversity” and our “multicultural” school dictated what Pollock (2004) terms colormuteness, or the absence of public conversation about race. Colormuteness was evident when teachers would make claims such as “[race] doesn’t really matter to me” (Mrs. Evans, a White third grade teacher), when Millie Blackwell’s first grade team dismissed her suggestions about the need to consider students’ multiple identities when sorting students into classrooms, and by the administrators’ explanation that because there were “so few African American kids” at Creek Elementary, sorting students evenly by race was just (and according to this logic, should be) “the way things are done” with no further guidance or suggestions about the historical or contemporary issues that influence this process. Specifically, absent from all of the conversations about the process of sorting students into classrooms by race, interpreted by the teachers as racial phenotypes, was a connection to the historical context of racial sorting in Creek. In this way, the history of sorting students by race through segregation and the separate schools in Creek was distanced or dismissed from Creek Elementary’s present despite the fact that Creek schools were segregated when some of the current students’ grandparents (e.g., Otis, a Black custodian, had family members attending Creek Elementary) attended Creek schools.

The result of this disconnection was an inability to make sense of race in the present. This colorblind way of seeing, acting, and interpreting Creek through a post-racial lens (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) created a space where the measure of comprehending race was a teacher’s arrival at, and reliance on the idea that everyone in the school space has an equal chance to succeed (meritocracy) and is judged according to his or her
actions as an individual (individualism). This expectation remained constant despite evidence to the contrary, such as how students of color were sorted into classrooms primarily, or solely in some cases, based on the color of their skin and teachers’ perception of their racial category according to skin color, racial characteristics like hair texture or nose shape, language, country of origin (including by relationship to family), and the discursive choices provided (Black, White, “other”). Narratives of meritocracy (a system based on ability an effort) and individualism (the belief that society exists for the benefit of individual people) were demonstrated in sentiments like “Our school tries hard to be fair to everyone, we have awards and everyone has a chance,” and the staff meeting where teachers were assessed based on standardized test scores of their students and the teachers’ jobs were threatened when Mr. Drexel, the White principal, warned, “When the state comes in to see who we have to get rid of because of budget cuts, this is the kind of data they are going to be looking for,” and contradicted in comments that demonstrated inherent disparities and judgments on the quality of children expressed in the opinion that Creek had “better quality kids” which is why our test scores were higher than other schools in the district.

Ultimately, data from interviews, focus groups, and observations indicated that Lexi Gunter (White fifth grade teacher), Mary Martin (White kindergarten teacher), and Sunday Thomas (White third grade teacher) were often perplexed by race and narrowed their conceptualization down to the confounding topics of racial categories (e.g., Lexi’s explanation of the changes in policies about how students were categorized racially by the schools, Sunday’s questions about her designation of two students of Jamaican descent into separate racial categories of “Black” and “other”), racial characteristics
(e.g., Lexi’s conclusion that racial diversity “almost goes with skin color,” Sunday’s assertion that she did not focus on race, culture or ethnicity because she did not “have any Hisp- like I don't have any students with learning, not learning, sorry, with um, language barriers”), how to best interact with racialized others (e.g., Sunday’s description that she is “very careful” when she talks about slavery if she has “African American kids,” and she gages the conversation based on the “reactions on their faces,” Mary’s attempts to celebrate holidays such as Cinco de Mayo and confusion about her “Hispanic students who don’t celebrate Halloween”), and what racial terms were appropriate (e.g., Mary and Sunday’s questioning tone when they giggled as they described themselves as “Caucasian” in a way that indicated their discomfort with categorizing themselves racially). The fact that these teachers were nominated by administrators as teachers who demonstrated average to excellent levels of success with racially diverse students suggests that understanding race or feeling comfortable speaking about race is not an essential characteristic for Creek Elementary’s approach to “diversity.”

While the “diversity” of Creek was largely “undefined,” as a secondspace, the firstspace, or the observable aspects of Creek created a dissonance for teachers because the “environmentally correct” way of being dismissed race. Dramatic shifts in racial demographics (e.g., going from 90% White in 2000 to 76% White by 2012) created the need for teachers to contemplate and discuss how these changes impacted their pedagogy and perception of Creek Elementary, yet there was no room to engage in this conversation, as Mary Martin indicated in her experience race had not “come up, not even once.” Occasionally, teachers would bring it up as a problem, when they were “having difficulty with a kid and they were trying to get help” (Sunday Thomas), though
as much of the data suggests, gathering ideas from colleagues would likely not provide a deep level of insight about issues of cultural and racial differences. Overall, there was a general feeling that “[Diversity] is not a priority” (Sunday Thomas) in the lived space of Creek Elementary.

A dissonance between the realities of the shift in demographics and many teachers’ discomfort with the topic was obvious when teachers were told to consider race when creating homerooms. Using colorblind D/discourse (colorblind ideology and the observable expression of that ideology) asserted “I’m not the one who said race matters” which disconnected self and race, as a topic irrelevant in present time. In this way, ideas, facts, historical accounts, and experiences of race and racism in Creek were distanced into a space in time that was disconnected from the present. Present day Creek Elementary became a space where the meaning of racialized bodies was discursively silenced (e.g., Sunday Thomas said, “I don’t think [racial diversity] means that much”) although racialized bodies were interpreted in very real ways (e.g., every grade level used race as a primary category to sort students into homerooms).

This colorblind D/discourse included confusion, omissions, deletions, and outright denial of race and racism. Colorblind discourse was evident in the words and stories of White participants in this study. Examples from the data (re)presented here include Mary Martin’s difficulty conceptualizing “the questions” about race in our interviews and even pronouncing ethnicity (she varied her pronunciation throughout the study most often saying “ethnicinticity”), teachers like Ms. Witter, a White fifth grade teacher, who had difficulty completing a form because she had “never seen the word ‘racially’ before” and both Mrs. Runine, a White fourth grade teacher, and Mary Martin’s
lack of connection and anxiety toward their “Caucasian” identity. In the end, colorblindness in Creek Elementary was built upon the premise of meritocracy as the unquestionable standard in Creek Elementary. Meritocracy was accepted as the core belief to support the denial that racism of any kind was a reality in the school. Further, meritocracy was a way to make sense of the racial characteristics, racial categories, racial terms, and inter-racial interactions, as a way to ultimately dismiss their significance because “Our school tries hard to be fair to everyone” (Sunday Thomas).

Teachers defining self and other. All of the teachers in this study were born in the southeastern United States in or near Southern State. Interestingly, the White teachers I interviewed for this study all named “southern,” as part of how they identified culturally/ethnically/ racially, while the Black teachers in the study did not mention “southern” as part of their identity, a point I will return to later.

Connections between self and the South as part of identity had deep implications about how these teachers were brought up to think about race and how they connected to the place of their childhoods. Lexi Gunter described the South in her childhood through memories of the “signs” that clearly separated White and Black. She also told stories of experiences when she was separated from Black people, even within her own home (Star, her family’s Black maid). Mary Martin learned about the southern propriety of a Black/White separation when her friendship with Kenny was forbidden by her father and she was not allowed to watch television shows with Black characters because it was the “Devil’s show.” When Mary chose to break from tradition and pursue her friendship with Kenny, she risked a personal cost of the punishment or shame from her father (for more discussion on the Cost of Whiteness, see Thandeka, 1999). Despite this willingness
to see racialized others as friends, Mary was blind to the racism that impacted her life or social position in Creek, evidenced by her comment that “I don’t think [being White] means anything.” As a whole, the (re)presentation of family stories demonstrates a racialized past that these participants were mostly “embarrassed” by and stories that they rarely, if ever, told aloud. Silence and embarrassment contributed to a conceptualization of their own (White) racial category as something that “didn’t mean much” or that they “honestly [didn’t] know” how to reconcile.

This confusion was evident among a wider group of teachers when I collected questionnaires from teachers who were unable to complete the form due to the question about their racial/ethnic identities (e.g., Mrs. Runine, Ms. Witter, Mrs. Evans). Nevertheless, when I posed questions to the White teachers in my study about ethnicity and race, my questions were often met with questions that seemed to me to be genuine in moments of vulnerability and risk-taking to say aloud what they had learned to silence. I recognized these unanswered and unasked questions about race in Creek to be both a cause and symptom of what Millie Blackwell identified when she went to Mr. Drexel and said, “People are not sensitive to race here.” The lack of dialogue at a school-level about what we really meant when we said words like race, diversity, multicultural, or ethnicity was dictated by an understanding of race at an individual rather than structural level which led to false conclusions about race, racism, and self in relation to racialized others.

Millie Blackwell and Tyrell Watters, a Black special education teacher, also had a difficult time defining themselves racially, but our conversations transcended topics of terms or categories. Instead, these conversations problematized “race” itself and the box where they had been unjustly confined. Millie explained the ostracizing effects of her
ascribed racial identity, “Nobody really knows Millie and what Millie likes to do. That Millie collects dolls; that I wanted to be a dancer. They don’t know these things because they have me in a box. So nobody knows the person that I really am.” She also analyzed the double-bind of being “extra visible when it’s something negative, when they want to exploit my reputation or discredit me. But invisible when it's something they want to do or accomplish. My feeling and thoughts aren't taken into consideration. I'm visible when they wish to do me harm.” Throughout our interviews, Millie began to identify more heavily as “Native American” to explain her personal characteristics and reactions to situations, while Tyrell asserted multiple times, “I’m choosing not to [self-define]. I don’t have a definition.” The multiplicity of how they categorized themselves racially and ethnically is evidence of a different understanding than the norm in Creek which positions race as something that is a simple category and peripheral to daily life experiences.

There were a number of occurrences where the colorblind D/discourse led to inappropriate conclusions about racism or race as a category. First, Mr. Teal, a White assistant principal, failed to grasp the implications of punishing Dion (a Black third grade boy) for physical violence while downplaying the violence of Charlie’s (a White third grade boy) racist comments by allowing him to attend the gifted and talented program. This impacted Ms. Deever’s (their White third grade teacher) ability to explain racism to her students and the gravity of the offense. Second, Mrs. Marony’s (a White fourth grade teacher) denial of Jabari’s (a Black fourth grade boy) African American culture and her subsequent attempt to switch the topic when she “didn’t want to get into that debate” (about the possibility of Jewish people being Christians) showed her discomfort and lack
of understanding about the intersections between race and culture and the taboo nature of the topic. Third, Mrs. Kinny’s comments, “Now, it’s these same people who keep their kids home on MLK day . . . when they need to be in school. I mean, at least at school they were talking about the MLK holiday and we were celebrating and educating the kids about the history of it.” This statement demonstrates a disconnect between Mrs. Kinny’s understanding of race and the significance of requiring students to attend school on the only national holiday that celebrates an African American person, Martin Luther King Jr. It also demonstrates a colorblind discourse that references race without naming it explicitly (“these same people” namely Black people, as evidenced by Mrs. Kinny’s cautious look around the room). Fourth, when my (ELL) students were named as representing “the low class” by Mr. Drexel there was no discussion by the teachers or administration about the structural policies that positioned my students as “low” (i.e., The flaws in using standardized tests alone to measure academic ability, or the lack of bilingual staff, materials, or curriculum). This colorblind logic left inappropriate conclusions about the cognitive abilities of ELL students based on their language skills (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Finally, the “slave posters,” an assignment designed by Sunday Thomas and completed by all third grade students, were displayed in the hallway as a space to celebrate good student-work. Statements such as “slaves were captured and taken to be sold as slaves in Southern State” and “these people [sic] were having a baby. That baby cost a lot of money,” suggested that students did not grasp the inhumane treatment of people or the injustices of slavery that could trade people as possessions, or the idea that African American slaves were people who were held captive as slaves rather than a dehumanizing view as endemically slaves throughout time and
place was not an idea that these students (whose work represents a number of similar statements I observed) grasped in the lessons about the history of African American slavery. These racial messages exchanged by teachers, administrators, and students indicated both confusion and inappropriate conclusions about the concept of race and racialized others through a dehumanizing lens.

In conclusion, the data (re)presentation of the teachers’ lived space demonstrates numerous ways that the school was historically created as a segregated space which has evolved into a space narrated by a colorblind discourse that negates and silences cultural, linguistic, professional, and social remembering that contradicts notions of White meritocracy and individualism. In this setting, racial literacy that requires a “willingness to critique the structures that are unjust (economic, political, social and linguistic) and work toward change while realizing one’s place within those structures,” (Mosley & Rogers, 2011 p. 321) is far from the norm. In an “environmentally correct” Creek Elementary where Millie Blackwell explained as “insensitive to race,” these teachers’ unanswered questions and racist stereotypes were perpetuated by a colorblind discourse which worked to dominate and obscure the border between the “non-color” self and racialized others. Therefore, these teachers, though willing to critique injustice, were unable to read their own racialized place within the structure of the school or make connections between the past and present structures of racism in Creek.

A place that doesn’t want me. Through a colorblind discourse that denies the past or present realities of race and racism, the notion of coevalness, or “the sharing of present time” (Fabian, 2002, p. 32) remained impossible. Duncan (2006) explained coevalness as the idea that Thurgood Marshall advanced in the Civil Rights struggles of
the 1950’s, when Marshall asserted that “Equal means getting the same thing, at the same time, and in the same place” (as cited in Duncan, 2006 p. 93). Though the White teachers in the study asserted in a variety of ways that race did not matter at Creek Elementary, as I discussed in the previous section, there was clear evidence that race always mattered in Creek Elementary, although often invisible and indiscernible to teachers operating within a colorblind D/discourse.

The colorblind D/discourse made room for the creation of what I view as allochronic spaces for Black teachers and students of color in Creek Elementary. Allochronism, simply stated is the denial of coevalness, or the denial of equality in both time and place (Duncan, 2006; Fabian, 2002). Though allochronism has primarily been explored through D/discourse, my spatial lens revealed a denial of coevalness that took shape in the lived spaces of Creek Elementary. Allochronic spaces in Creek Elementary formed what I have come to see as the border of “the (colorblind) box” that Millie Blackwell and Tyrell Watters identified in our focus group. Tyrell explained how he experiences the space of Creek Elementary saying, “We don’t know what that title is or that definition. We’re in that box. . .we don’t know what that is or what that means.”

I will now describe the allochronic spaces of Creek Elementary, where racialized bodies are relegated to select spaces of the school, which impacts their lived spaces as teachers and students. For instance, Tyrell Watters clearly stated, “Coming to Creek and teaching has taught me. . .I’m this huge, burly, loud, Black guy with dreads.” Millie and Tyrell’s analysis of who others positioned them to be in Creek Elementary guided my analysis, where I suggest at least seven different types of allochronic spaces for teachers.

---

30 Data from the questionnaires indicated that teachers at Creek Elementary only identified themselves as Black, White, or a related racial identifier (e.g., Caucasian, African American).
and students of color in Creek. Those are: isolation, restriction, subservience, threat, charity, conviction, and roles and duties.

Spaces of isolation are what Millie suggested when she asked metaphorically “If no one ever throws you the ball, how can you play?” These spaces of isolation were informed by leadership where, for example, the principal, as a symbol of power, publicly declared to Millie’s fellow teachers that he was “working on getting rid of [Millie].” This isolating space took shape when the principal removed two of Millie’s students from her classroom, despite the principal’s earlier statement that “Millie knows what she’s doing in front of children.”

Spaces of restriction were what Tyrell described when he was told by the principal “we don’t steal here” after he borrowed a pencil sharpener from the office, when he was warned “Don’t you say anything if you see a child walking down that hallway,” and what Millie experienced when she was told by a new teacher that she had not earned “respect” as a colleague although as Millie pointed out her ability to “earn respect” was limited by the fact that “everything was discussed before the meetings.” Restriction was also shown for a student of color in the scenario where Dion was told to report to ISS while Charlie was free to attend a “gifted” program.

Spaces of subservience materialized where Millie felt like the “nanny” on the playground when she was expected to watch the children while other teachers shared in conversation. Subservience was projected onto Tyrell before he even started working at Creek Elementary when he was perceived to “be the new janitor” when he came from a job interview.
Spaces of threat surfaced where Black teachers’ careers were put in jeopardy like when Millie refused to stay silent about race by “teaching their [White] children something that they did not want them to believe” or attempting to educate staff by providing materials about race/racism that were later discarded by the principal. Threat was also a space where Tyrell was both read as a threat and his job was threatened when he was reported because a bus driver said he “screamed at a child on the bus.”

Spaces of charity materialized when White teachers spoke about some students of color, such as when Mario’s (a second grade Mexican immigrant boy) teacher who said, “I wish I could take him home.” This statement derived from an assumption that she could provide a better home for him than his own parents based on his performance in school and the incongruence of his Spanish-dominant home with the English-only classroom. Mr. Greene’s (a Black music teacher) before-school program was designated as a space of charity in Mr. Drexel’s warning about the dangers of providing before-school childcare, when he said, “Gosh, what’s next? Are we going to feed them dinner and let them spend the night here too?”

Finally, spaces of conviction were evident where for example Millie was accused by young Creek community members of “stealing their lunch money,” or Tyrell ironically being accused of racism within the colorblind D/discourse where racism was an elusive and individual concept and Blackness was read as a corporal threat, as opposed to a “non-color” identity which transcends the body (Dyer, 1997). This space of conviction was what Tyrell described when he was called to the office space because he “said a racial slur and hit a kid” and he was assumed guilty of the charge by the district representative.
The contemporary space of Creek Elementary relied on the perception of “the (colorblind) box” and the marginal allochronic spaces of its border to allow people of “non-color” to re-affirm the colorblind D/discourse virtually without interruption. This colorblind D/discourse argued “race does not matter” in Creek and claimed individuality, meritocracy, equality and racial innocence as constant values in Creek (e.g., exemplified in Sunday Thomas’ statements that asserted that race was not important in Creek Elementary because “Nobody is excluded because of race or ethnicity,” and her logic that racial disparities in standardized test scores were the result of the students “liv[ing] in an area where they don’t have the support” or that some students “don’t care”). The colorblind Discourse of Creek Elementary remains largely unquestioned as the way of life in Creek, therefore counter-narratives demonstrating racism vis-à-vis lived experience are positioned as invalid knowledge that has no space in the school.

I illustrate the relationship of allochronic spaces and the (colorblind) box by picturing the border of the (colorblind) box as made up of the sum of the allochronic spaces to which racialized others are limited in Creek Elementary. I add the adjective “(colorblind)” to signify three ideas. One, I wish to signify the histories of racial segregation in Creek as a place that was historically perceived as only “Black and White” as Lexi, Tonya, Marcus, Otis, Patti and Willow suggested in their interviews. When schools were integrated, the discussion of race suddenly became invalid, or what I see as e-raced. By e-raced I mean to imply the subtraction of race from D/discourse where race is observed on bodies, and assumptions are made about those bodies based on the observation of race, but explaining the causes or listening to the stories of the system of
race and racism are subtracted from discourse. Two, I use parentheses to imply that contemporary Creek Elementary, race and ethnicity are decentered or omitted in discussions of difference (e.g., Ms. Sunnie’s conversation with the custodians where she did not understand them and concluded that “they sound so unintelligent,” though ironically she taught students about forms of Black English and Gullah culture in social studies). Additionally, it is not entirely clear to those relegated to the borders why exactly they are being positioned in particular ways (e.g., the students who were placed in homerooms according to race were not included in the discussion about their race or ethnicity, for example Mrs. Evans forgot what her student who was “not Mexican because that offends her” had said about her own identity). Three, I use the term “colorblind” because as the class sorting demonstrated, all students who were not White (or “non-color”) were placed into a raced category, thus the teachers became blinded by color in a way that prevented them from actually considering the personalities, characteristics, backgrounds, and qualities of individual students.

For example, in the third grade class sorting process, there was a clear racial hierarchy ruled by the logic that Black and White were dichotomous. The symbiotic relationship between Whiteness and Blackness is a well-documented phenomenon that is not unique to Creek, rather it demonstrates the connections between Creek and wider American society where Whiteness is always defined through and in relation to Blackness (Dyer, 1997; Morrison, 1992; Mosley, 2010). In this racialized logic of sorting “all the kids evenly by race,” Black was the most important identity to consider, followed

---

31 A discussion of Black English is beyond the scope of the current study, however I draw from the research of numerous linguists (e.g., Baugh, 1999; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 1985) and educational researchers (e.g., Boutte, 2004; Delpit & Dowdy, 1998) who support the idea that Black English is a valid language that is informed by African Americans cultural heritage.
by an undefined “other” made up of students who were biracial or “mixies,” Hispanic, and so on. Finally, White students were the last to be sorted presumably because they could be sorted into any class in an effort to avoid “Having a Black class [that] would look bad,” which suggests an unspoken logic that frames Whiteness as goodness (Dyer, 1997) and a public narrative that defines its diversity by a teachers’ ability to “look around her classroom and see that diversity is something that is important at this school” (Mrs. Hartful). This logic was evident when the third grade team organized students according to their perceived relationship to Blackness. In this sense, anything “other” than a White phenotype was essentially homogenized as “Black,” meaning not White, and organized into a color hierarchy according to the degree of perceived Blackness that the student possessed. Within the colorblind D/discourse in Creek, the less “Black” someone was, the more “non-color” they were ascribed to be.

As a lived space, Tyrell and Millie explained that the (colorblind) box does not leave room for “who I really am.” Instead, the (colorblind) box required Black teachers to “have to play this role” despite the fact that they cannot see the expectations or have a view of the box itself. This box has been created within a school space that is narrated by the colorblind Discourse where Black teachers in Creek are simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. Millie describes the lived space of the (colorblind) box in Creek saying, “I’m extra visible when it’s something negative, when they (White faculty/staff) want to exploit my reputation or discredit me, but invisible when it’s something they want to do or accomplish.”

It is critical to emphasize that the construction of the (colorblind) box was and is structural, rather than the result of one person, or even a group of people in Creek. That
is, the structure of the (colorblind) box is connected to a place in time when schools were segregated and “There was nobody to offend” in an all-White school, and remains intact today in an integrated setting. The e-racing of this structure of inequity was illustrated by the fact that no one person could name the exact date that integration happened in Creek (two documents indicated it was 1969). Thus, integration was thought of (though not actually remembered) as a natural progression, or as Tonya stated, “It wasn’t a big deal.” Nevertheless, research on integration (Foster, 1997; Gay & Howard, 2000; Osler, 1997), and the empirical evidence demonstrating the continual inequities between White and Black teacher presence in schools (Milner & Howard, 2004; NCES, 2010) and student achievement today (Hilliard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; NCES, 2010) suggest that integration was and is a “big deal,” and did not mark the end of racial inequity in American schools.

My analysis of the (colorblind) box interrupts the claim that racial coevalness has been achieved at Creek Elementary. The colorblind D/discourse creates a narrative of racial exemption, yet materializes in spaces of Creek Elementary where allochronic spaces form the border of “other.” Together, these spaces form the (colorblind) box and make room for a “non-color” identity. This “non-color” identity (which when I asked, Millie explained the term as a substitute for saying White) enabled White teachers to operate in an “environmentally correct” lived space where it was assumed that “Everybody felt the same way as you did.” Clearly, Millie Blackwell and Tyrell Watter’s feelings about being teachers in Creek Elementary were not congruent with their “non-color” colleagues. This incongruence is summarized by a question Millie asked, “If we enjoyed our freedom, why do I feel like as an African American woman, an educated
African American woman feel that I have to, that racism is still so prevalent here?”

In conclusion, throughout the study, Millie Blackwell questioned the source and the manifestation of the oppression that she felt in Creek, asking numerous times of me, administration, and her students and their parents, “Is it because I’m fat, I am gray, I’m missing teeth, or is it because I’m brown, I’m Black?” These questions were posed at an individual level, but challenged a structural level of oppression where Millie deconstructed the racial messages of Creek and concluded that in Creek “They lynch you with their mouths,” despite claims that race does not matter in Creek. Millie’s words and her silent protest of leaving Creek Elementary was widely mistranslated. Although the public message about Millie’s resignation was “Millie took a position in Big City that was a great opportunity for her,” I believe Millie’s real message in this silent/silenced protest became clear in our final interview. That message was, “I’m not your house nigger!” In this silent/silenced act of leaving she refused to “forget who [she was]” and conform to the identity ascribed to her on the border of the (colorblind) box. I read her exit as a refusal to play or perpetuate the role that she had been cast, when she asked plainly “How can I stay in a place that doesn’t want me?”

**Making sense of race.** Most often in Creek Elementary, race was homogenized as “multicultural” or “diversity” and this framework is consistent with literature from multicultural education. Drawing upon this literature then, I borrow the categories designated by Castagno (2009) in her review of the distinct approaches to multicultural education to categorize the different approaches to multiculturalism that I observed when teachers attempted to make sense of race. Those are (1) **Assimilation**, where diversity is either a threat or ignored, Whiteness is dominant, and the goal for students is social
reproduction, (2) Amalgamation, where diversity is viewed as neutral, there is a discourse of unity and the goal for students is to reduce prejudice, (3) Pluralism, where diversity is relative, power is shared, and the goal for students is that differences should be respected, and (4) Cross-cultural competence, where diversity is viewed as essential, power is shared, and the goal for students is cross-cultural competence.

These four approaches to multiculturalism to make sense of race cannot be considered racial literacy since they fail to interrogate racial structures and ideologies (Mosley, 2010). I will demonstrate how each approach materialized in the statements and actions of teachers in Creek Elementary. The assimilationist approach to race was demonstrated by Sunday who said in reference to student awards, “Everyone has a chance,” yet the equality of opportunity was problematized by the lesson that she helped design about slave posters where among the many racial messages was a desensitization toward the local history of slavery in a space where dialogue is absent. I interpreted this approach through the work that was displayed in the hallways where students wrote about African slaves in dehumanizing ways. Disturbing imagery of African slaves in chains and academic work that was only partial, if not entirely false, was displayed in a way that all students and teachers were subjected to its offensive racialized texts with no space for dialogue or critique. Assimilationist racial messages disconnect the past to the present and require African American students to assimilate into a dehumanizing image of African American history that contradicts family stories, like Otis’ explanation of the school and economic system that was designed to keep his family in poverty, and Marcus, a Black teacher’s assistant and former student, whose kindergarten was (informally) segregated in the 1990’s. Ultimately, it requires students (and teachers) to
accept these dehumanizing messages and negates a view of racialized power structures altogether by oversimplifying the complexity of race.

The amalgamation message was demonstrated by Mrs. Marony who did bring the topic of culture into her classroom, but then went on to negate her student’s assertion that African American could be considered a culture. Further, she thwarted a critical conversation about the distinctions or hierarchies of race and/or culture. This was also evident in Ms. Drake’s (a White fourth grade teacher) assumption that all people living in America should celebrate Thanksgiving to show that they are thankful to live in America. Cultural pluralism was exemplified by Mary Martin who was eager to include her students’ cultures into the classroom. In this vein, she celebrated holidays and expressed an interest in getting more educated about different groups, but race “didn’t come up, not once,” and she admitted that “being White doesn’t mean much to me.” At the same time, her celebration of Cinco de Mayo for a Honduran student exemplifies superficiality of this approach, and thus its limitations. Cross-cultural competence was demonstrated by Ms. Deivers who approached her students as a “rainbow of colors” where she celebrated differences among students and facilitated discussions about the importance of diversity. Offering Spanish class to the school was another way that this approach was made evident. Both the principal’s refusal to speak Spanish, as well as the marginalization of ELL students academically, demonstrated that this approach was limited and devalued structurally. Regardless of intentions, these four approaches to race and a “multicultural” Creek Elementary, fail to recognize the stratification of racialized structures that unevenly distribute power throughout Creek Elementary.
**Thirdspaces.** Actively pursuing racial literacy was no easy task at Creek Elementary. It often took place in “isolated” (Millie Blackwell) spaces that Palmer (2009) refers to as the “tragic gap,” or the tension between the injustice of what is and what we know to be possible. I envision this thirdspace of racial literacy as a liminal space of both belonging and not belonging in Creek Elementary. I frame the thirdspaces in Creek Elementary as spatialized moments where teachers in the school recognized racial injustices in a way that ideologically challenged the environmentally correct way of being where it was not necessary to “take other feelings into account” or to be “politically correct.” I draw from the work of Soja (1996) to envision the thirdspaces of racial literacy. I envision these spatialized moments to be critical spaces of radical openness where the real, lived, and imagined spaces of race come together in moments of clarity where the borders between us/them were recognizable and questions about racial inequity became necessary to ask.

I give three examples of thirdspaces where race was recognized and interrogated with critical questions. First, Mrs. Hartful read “diversity” as located on students’ bodies that a teacher could observe when she “look[ed] around her classroom.” This reading of corporal bodies was without questions or answers about how we as teachers are articulating our pedagogies in response to “diversity” and suggests an epistemology of individualism. In a tangible way, the space of that particular literacy meeting became a thirdspace for me as I asked critical questions of my colleagues and myself, however this conversation was unfinished and my questions were left unanswered. The conversation ended without a definition, or clear vision of how diversity impacts our teaching and how we should respond. Without a critical consciousness of diversity, teachers continued to
dress children as pilgrims and Indians, and say things like “You should be thankful that you live in America!” (implicitly sending the message that immigrants who do not celebrate Thanksgiving are ungrateful to live in America by virtue of not celebrating a holiday, and that America is inherently better than the country of their origin).

Second, the moment when I asked Mrs. Aranda, a White third grade teacher, about the class sorting process and she asked of herself “Why did we do that?” was a moment where Mrs. Aranda recognized, if just for a moment, the border between us/them in Creek. However, without a critical dialogue about the meaning of race and the assumption of the meritocracy of a “multicultural” Creek Elementary, answering this question was left to Mrs. Aranda as an individual to question a system of racism from inside a (colorblind) box. Third, Ms. Deevers’ protest of Dion being sent to ISS illustrates a critical awareness of race. When she refused to send Dion to ISS at the directive of the assistant principal, she challenged the power of a colorblind enforcement of discipline. Yet this protest could be read as partial in that her position as a teacher lacked the authority necessary to stop Charlie from attending the gifted and talented program. In this moment when Ms. Deevers recognized the borders of the (colorblind) box that unjustly sentenced Dion to the allochronic space of conviction (ISS) while freeing Charlie, despite his part as instigator of the conflict, to be non-color and seen as “gifted” without interruption. In this moment I read Ms. Deevers critical awareness of race as a thirddspace where she admonished her students about the “rainbow” that is her class and protested unfair punishments for her student. Thus, as demonstrated by the teachers in this project, reading race in Creek Elementary was not a linear progression toward a particular goal. It was a skill that was developed over time, in connection with
the local, and it appeared in spatialized moments. To further complicate the tendency to interpret racial literacy as a linear process, Ms. Deever’s understanding of race within an unjust system was silent/silenced during the 3rd grade class sorting process where she stated, “I don’t understand why we’re sorting them this way,” yet she did not suggest a way to do it better or explain why it was not right. Importantly, the silences of this conversation were important where no one in the room was able to address her concern in a tangible way. I use the example of Ms. Deever strategically for two reasons. One, because I do not believe that racial literacy is a skill or responsibility limited or relegated to people of color. Two, because I want to show that racial literacy is a complex and puzzling process, a process that is not sequential or universally translatable. Rather, racial literacy takes place in moments, in spaces where race is conjugated in confounding ways and where racism is applied in asymmetrical ways.

These moments in the thirddspace of Creek, where racial literacy becomes possible corresponds to Castagno’s (2009) description of critical awareness. Critical awareness is where diversity is viewed as essential, the status quo is interrogated, and the goal for students is an increased awareness of the social world. The examples that I gave here exemplify a burgeoning critical awareness in these spatialized moments at Creek Elementary where the system of race and racism are visible.

**Race in the Classroom**

**Recognizing other racial texts.** Spatialized moments where race was recognizable made room a view of racial texts that were beyond the traditional reading of race using only racial categories, racial terms, racial interactions, and racial characteristics. A thirddspace opened up the possibilities of reading the racial texts of the
local school in connection to self, other racial texts, and the world. My analysis of data revealed at least six distinct racial texts though these racial texts often intersected in the lived space of the school and classroom. Those were histories— the multiplicity of stories of the past, raced roles, D/discourse, policy, embodied, and curriculum and instruction.

*Histories.* While reading the racial text of the all-White class pictures from Creek history, the White teachers in my focus group did not mention anything about race in their discussion of the picture. Mary Martin’s text-to-self reaction was from a position of non-color where she thought that her grandfather was likely in the picture. Though the whole group was aware of my focus on “race, culture and ethnicity” in this project, race was omitted from the conversation about these pictures. On the other hand, Tyrell Watters and Millie Blackwell expressed clearly, “I don’t relate to this at all! Where are all the Black people?” This racial text was one that was highly racialized given the context of the picture that was taken in a segregated Creek (1941). Tyrell and Millie read this racialized text and connected it to themselves and other racialized texts of the time where through segregation their racialized self was omitted and excluded from Creek history. My own read of this picture was further complicated by connecting to Mary’s racial text of the story of her grandfather (who she thought may be in the picture) who had killed a Black man in the neighboring town without punishment or prosecution. Thus, my read of the class picture as a racialized text represented not only a story of omission of Black bodies from segregated schools but a racial text of terror, injustice, and pernicious silence of stories. Meanwhile, this racial text was read by White teachers as a neutral history embodied by the smiles of school children. A critical reading of the racial text of history materialized in Tyrell’s classroom when he teaches social studies with
passion, “I get angry, when that realization comes to me, ‘We live in what would have been the Confederacy’” and when he interrupts omissions and gaps in students’ learning about America’s first Black president, and requires his students to engage in a discussion saying, “‘Who's the president?’ . . . President Barack Obama!”

*Raced roles.* Millie Blackwell and Tyrell Watter’s reading of “the box” was a thirdspace where they recognized and discussed the racial text of being accused of stealing, hitting children, and yelling at students as racial text, and their embodiment of being a teacher in Creek was a racial text where their bodies were viewed inequitably with their “non-color” colleagues. As Tyrell explained, “You don't see this every day in Creek, Southern State. You don't see this!” Although aware of the misreading of their racialized bodies in social interactions, these teachers connected themselves (as unique individuals) and their understanding of the world to the racial text of the role of race where they were falsely accused, and simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible based on their raced role (Jay, 2009). In response, Tyrell asked “Can I just be a teacher?” at Creek Elementary. I assert that this question was posed by both Millie and Tyrell who interacted with other teachers, the administration, and the students on a daily basis and embodied the question from a borderland space wherein teachers engage in anti-racist practices (e.g., Millie’s counter narrative to her students accusing her of stealing, Tyrell’s refusal to check in at the office, Tyrell’s response to being accused of stealing a pencil sharpener).

*D/discourses.* Reading the racial text of discourse is a slippery skill. The racial text of D/discourse is best demonstrated by the class sorting process. Millie recognized the racialized moment of the class sorting process and introduced a trialectic (beyond
binary terms) of the multiple identities of the students. The class sorting moment in particular carried great significance because of the colorblind literacy that teachers used to interpret race. This colorblind discourse that narrated “race” impacted the spatialized experiences of students and teachers for (at least) the next year. By sorting students into classrooms using a discourse that defines students in overly simplistic terms of “Black, White, or Other” the teachers’ colorblind literacy was ineffective for providing coherent logic with which to navigate the situation. Without asking critical questions about the racial text of the class sorting process itself (such as “Why, based on a historical context is race an important concept to consider when creating homerooms?” or “How should race, culture and ethnicity be considered and defined in a way that is informative but not overly deterministic?”), teachers made important decisions about their students based on a grammar of meritocracy and epistemology of individualism which contradicted the entire process of class sorting, if race “does not matter” at Creek Elementary.

Millie’s racial text-to-self connection was apparent when she said “‘It is not right for you to put her in that class by herself,’ but you don’t see that, you don’t feel that because it’s not you.” However, Millie’s reading of this racial text was negated by her teammates who only asked “what” is the race of a particular child. In this way, the Discourse of race as an individual identity, rather than a system of racialized hierarchies; and the myth of meritocracy in racially integrated settings, ironically determined students’ spatialized experiences in school.

*Positions and policies.* Positions were connected to the racial text of policies that read Mr. Greene’s (a Black music teacher) proposal to provide before-school care for students in the community who needed help with childcare in the mornings (which were
mostly poor students and/or students of color). The policy of school hours of operation was called into question by opening up the school doors an hour earlier. Meritocracy dictated that all students and their families should receive equal treatment and that extending the school day would redefine the role of the school within the community as a space that could potentially become a space of welfare where “we feed them dinner and let them spend the night here too.” In this way, the school walls and hours came into question and were reinforced. Thus, this borderland of meeting the needs of the community was misunderstood as welfare rather than identified as a need and connecting the school to the community.

*Embodied.* Tyrell Watters recognized the racialized text of his body in the Creek school space. His explanation of his work as a teacher included extending Creek Elementary students’ imaginary of what a “Black man can be.” To challenge a master narrative that limited his own childhood imaginary to “Carl Winslow or Danny Tanner,” Tyrell embodied a pedagogy of “unscripted dialogue.” His embodied pedagogy of critique to a narrow interpretation of what a Black man was a counter narrative for his reading of the racial text in often silent and/or celebratory expressions that narrowly labeled his roles, responsibilities, and personality as “That Black male teacher, that may have a slew of compliments behind it, but it’s always preceded by Black male teacher.”

From moment to moment he read intersecting racial texts of race roles, curriculum, policies, positions, histories, body language, and discourses and connected those texts to his understanding of himself, other racial texts, and the world of possibilities to interrupt the master narrative of what it means to be a Black man, and a teacher. In this way, the racialized text of his embodiment of teacher in Creek was a racialized text with the racial
message of multiplicity that asserted, “A Black man can be so many different things in so
many different days.”

Curriculum and instruction. Colorblind literacy makes claims to “diversity” and
what is “multicultural” and simultaneously sends disparaging racial messages through
curricular texts (such as having kindergartners dress up like stereotypical “Indians”,
lessons that leave students with dehumanizing images of African slaves where the
students wrote such things as “the baby cost a lot of money,” and where my Latino
students “didn’t have the space to know that the same way you can have a book about
White kids, you can have a book about Black kids”). Conversely, teachers who
recognized the spatialized moments of race ask students to connect the past to the present
by asking them to critically consider racial texts in their world like when Lexi asked her
students to consider that “slavery is across time and across places.” It is also found in
moments where teachers are planning lessons strategically to send racial messages, such
as Millie who planned social studies to teach students “We are Black for 365 days.”

In sum, I see a person’s ability to read the text of racialized social symbols,
positions, policies, relationships, curriculum and instruction, discursive markers, human
bodies, and body language as a socially informed process. As a process, I assert that
some people derive different meanings from the same text (e.g., the symbol of a
Confederate flag, racialized name-calling such as “cracker,” or the term “ethnicity”).
Whereas some people find no significance between themselves and racially informed
texts, others are personally, emotionally, even spiritually transformed by these texts. In
this way, people who are racially literate are able to look beyond individual racial
ascriptions and read the larger social systems that inform the local spaces of our lives.
Instruction.

Unanswered questions. Lexi Gunter provides a clear demonstration of a disconnect that would require the support of the school that is actively pursuing racial literacy. She certainly had some valid ideas to share with her students with regard to race and racism, but in Creek Elementary she did not attain racial literacy. Janet Helms (1990) warns “Anyone who intends to lead others into the jungle of racial conflict will first have to take the journey herself” (p. 219). As I analyzed data from interviews with Lexi, I identified several important questions that remained unanswered for her during the study. I have summarized them here: Is not seeing color a good thing? Is talking about racialized experiences acceptable? Was she offending me by sharing her opinions about race? Were her students old enough to handle discussing race? Would she offend or ostracize her Black students by discussing slavery? Lexi’s process of making sense of race was hindered in a (colorblind) box that did not allow for a healthy discussion of these valid questions. As a result, her pedagogy in some ways showed deep reflection and critical thinking on the concept of race, particularly in a historical and global sense with relation to slavery. However, removed from a discourse that talked explicitly about race, her understanding of the structures of race were limited.

The implicit “I”. Lexi Gunter’s dilemma about sharing the story of her great great grandfather who was killed by runaway slaves demonstrates the complexity of deconstructing the implicit “I” in the process of racial literacy. Lexi Gunter was arguably the most knowledgeable White participant in this study with regard to issues of race both because of her ability to articulate racism and how race mattered through personal stories (e.g., Star, “I remember the signs”) and professional experiences (e.g., the changes in
categorizing children by race). Lexi’s observation that all the custodians were Black and that “We don’t have enough people of color teaching in our school,” were facts largely unobserved by the majority of White teachers. Lexi demonstrated critical reflection on a deeply personal story of the structure of racism saying, “It wasn’t right that my grandfather was killed, but it also wasn’t right that they were slaves.” In this way, she humanized a local story of slavery. This story problematized the system of slavery as a human problem through the power of the personal pronoun “my grandfather,” so that this story reached beyond economic or the distance of impersonal facts about slavery and captured a human dilemma that implicated how both White and Black people have been damaged by the legacy of slavery and the injustices of racism throughout American history. When I asked her later if she had taught the lesson, her report that “There was no big reaction,” was interesting. While I was not there to observe the lesson to confirm or refute this assessment of her students’ reactions, I wonder if the disconnect with her students was in the reasoning that teaching about slavery should be focused on “how one [group] became more powerful than the other, and not just the injustices,” as well as the personal cost of interrogating her racialized self. Lexi showed confusion about her White racial identity when she self-identified as “a White southern girl,” and when I asked her “What does White mean to you?” She said “That’s the thing, I honestly don’t know.” Lexi would have to be clear on her family’s role and by implication, her role as a White person in the perpetuation of racial disparities without an interrogation of injustice as power, the story was in my opinion half-told.

I agree with Mosley (2010) who asserted that racial literacy and anti-racist education is a process connected to a community of teachers and learners. In this way,
while a story that interrogates the implicit “I” would have required an interrogation of Lexi’s racialized self, it would have also required the support of a community of educators who were working explicitly toward racial literacy and racial justice. Creek Elementary was not that space. The environmentally correct way of being in and doing school in Creek dismissed race as an issue that should be discussed. Conversely, the message was that to discuss race/racism, particularly in a critical way was to be incorrect. As a result, the environment was not conducive to supporting teachers working toward racial literacy.

Planning for complexity starting with Christopher stinkin’ Columbus. The words of Beaubeouf-Lafontant (2005) seem to fit particularly well to describe the agency Millie Blackwell demonstrated in Creek Elementary while she taught,

Blacks have *always* escaped from the plantation, returned to help others get Freedom. Escape from the community, the ghetto, what, return and help those that will get out. . . I see my role to step back and help those that *will* come out

(Original author’s emphasis, p. 440)

Millie Blackwell’s anti-racist pedagogy extended to all her students, as she described, “It’s very important that children understand that their race, every race is important.” In this way, Millie was helping others to escape the oppression of Creek. This invitation was not only extended to her Black students, but her invitation transgressed color lines and extended a new way of knowing through a humanizing approach to all of her students, including her White students. The fracture that Millie described as “teaching their children what they didn’t want them to believe,” reflects what Delgado and Villapando (2002) described as a knowledge apartheid, or a racialized debate about
legitimate knowledge and the purpose of knowledge. Millie’s teaching as anti-racist pedagogy was in my analysis an apartheid of knowledge about the racialized stories of Creek’s past and present. Millie demonstrated anti-racist education in the literature that she chose to teach about and read in her classroom so that her students could see Black people “in a different light instead of all the time the negativity they hear and see on the T.V.” She also attempted to plan “We are Black 365” for her grade level, and provide materials for administration to start a discussion about race at Creek Elementary.

**Unplanned.** There were many unplanned instances when race came up in classrooms. One was in a planned lesson to create posters about slaves. Although Tyrell Watters had planned to engage in the assignment, his critical questioning where he admonished his students, “Oh, let's be factual here! Some things you're writing are a little opinionated, so let's stop and write the facts,” demonstrated a moment where race was interrupted as a natural and historical fact of life for students. This moment was not planned, and as Tyrell explained, he took on issues that arose from social interaction or the curriculum that had racist themes as more than a teacher, but “as an American, as a person.”

Another unplanned moment occurred when Mrs. Marony introduced the word “culture” as a spelling word. In that moment, it appeared that she was not expecting all of the critical racial questions or critiques that her students had in response to a single word. The debate about culture and the numerous demonstrations by students of the multiple ways in which race is interpreted in our society were not something that Mrs. Marony had planned for, nor did it seem that she was ready to discuss. For instance, there were a number of critical questions brought up by students that went unaddressed.
related to the intersections of race and culture in my analysis of the situation. Janeth’s (a Mexican fourth grade student) Mexican immigrant status in a racialized space where Mexican identity was not a high-status identity resulted in silence and Janeth’s physical expression of discomfort when she was asked where she was from originally. Jabari’s (a Black fourth grade student) question if African American is considered a culture was silenced and negated, and the linguistic aspects of culture marked by “ooh” and “you got told” were also missed as part of a discussion on race and culture. This scenario demonstrates a classroom scene that was full of racial texts that were left unread and under-addressed.

**Conflict.** For some teachers, race came up as a conflict between their students and themselves, and they turned to other teachers “If there’s kids that are struggling with stuff, we’ll bounce ideas off each other” (Mary Martin) or “when I’m having difficulty with a kid, and I’m trying to get help” (Sunday Thomas). However, as Sunday explained, it was generally a topic that was not discussed because “breaking out of your comfort zone is hard.” And when race comes up “between students every once in a while, it's probably that the kid did something that the other kid didn't understand but it's probably just personality versus personality rather than Hispanic versus Asian and they just turn it that way.” Thus, race and racial conflict is seen most often as something that is merely a figment of a child’s imagination. At other times, such as when Dion and Charlie had a fight on the playground, teachers addressed the issue, but had little guidance or support to do so in a way that addressed the roots of racism present in these students’ words and actions.
On the other hand, Tyrell recognized these moments in his teaching when one of his students made fun of another student because of “Mexico food.” Tyrell read this racial text and tied it to the students’ prior learning about anatomy, thereby humanizing the biology of our bodies and demystifying racial stereotypes when he began a conversation saying, “Remember when we talked about intestines?” He also interrupted stereotypes that students brought with them from home, such as the simple statement, “Anyone can use a piñata.”

Millie guided her approach to the conversation with her White students when she asked them to name why they thought she stole their lunch money. It was this act that proved most deleterious for Millie. By providing a counter narrative for Blackness as good, honest, and knowledgeable, the Creek Elementary community reacted by “lynch[ing her] with their mouths.” Through her vivid linguistic imagery, the ties between race and place become clear. Indeed, as Mary Martin and Patti Lemming confirmed, race-based hate crimes were part of Creek’s history that was still alive in the memories of “old Creek.” Thus, the construction of racism can be read in these words as not a physical lynching but an emotional and professional lynching to punish the transgression of freeing the minds of young children from the oppression of racism that so clearly casts Black actors as “bad” and White actors as good in Creek. This message was learned by my second grade students who articulated that “Black people are bad” when we read a book with primarily Black characters, and it was this message that Millie attempted to counter in her classroom as a “space to know” in a different way.

**Embodied.** Lynn and Jennings (2009) suggest that Black male educators play an important role in breaking the stereotype that caring is essentially a feminine or White
quality. Tyrell Watters challenged this misappropriate definition of caring and other stereotypes about Black men with the counter narrative of his performance as a teacher. He explained, “I want to show that a black man can be so many different things in so many different days. We don't have to be the same thing every single day.” Tyrell’s humanizing pedagogy also caused students to call into question the historical and social space of their location in Creek as a historically slave-holding area. While connecting the local history to the curriculum about slavery, Tyrell’s students exclaimed “Let’s get out of here!” Tyrell’s pedagogy included performances in an effort to communicate with his students where he acted as “Black daddy. . . White daddy. . . Black grandma. . . and White sister,” and ultimately created a culture in his classroom where his students were “working on hearing each other.”

The embodiment of Tyrell as “a large Black man with dreadlocks” ran counter to the White middle-class woman as a prototype for the image of teacher (Foster, 1997). Yet, over time, despite warnings about keeping to himself, I witnessed how he was a beloved teacher to a wide variety of students, such as Zion who referred to him as “Uncle Watters,” DeShaun, a Black fourth grade student in a special education class, who “loves school” so much now that he “wouldn’t stay home when he was sick,” and young White girls who were not in his class who would hug him in the hallway. Tyrell’s pedagogy was clearly making a difference in the lives of students at Creek, illuminating the possibilities and the importance of Black teachers for the future of Creek. Tyrell’s pedagogy humanized the Black male body and suggested that it was possible, in some Creek spaces, for Black males to be something other than “a janitor.” More recently, he was recognized as a knowledge holder through his position as a respected teacher in
Creek though he cautioned that this pedagogy was not without a cost. For example, with regard to White girls hugging him, despite the innocence of it, Tyrell said “It scares me because when their family comes, the minute their daddy sees them hug this big Black man, I don't want to go down that road.”

In this way, Tyrell was constantly aware of the gaze imposed upon him in Creek, reminding himself that, “You don’t see this in Creek!” Under this gaze, Tyrell’s words and tone were often misinterpreted, such as when the bus driver reported him for yelling at students on a field trip. Incidents like this cost him emotional pain (he said “I cried my heart out”) and reminded him over and over that he was expected to “conform some kind of way” to “the box.” As a result, despite his pedagogy within his classroom, his freedom as a teacher was often called into question when he was positioned as a disciplinarian or his professionalism was questioned in incidents when his body was read as dangerous (e.g., pencil sharpener incident, when his job was threatened because he was accused of hitting a kid and saying a racial slur), and left him asking, “Can I just be a teacher?”
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this final section I begin by revisiting Marianna’s story as a way to frame my conclusions. Next, I name and define the notion of *racial texts*, and I identify the “Five pillars of colorblind literacy,” or the norms for reading race in Creek Elementary. I explain that the five pillars of colorblind literacy use a grammar of meritocracy and an epistemology of individualism. Then, I introduce a chart demonstrating how racial texts were read by teachers across the spaces of Creek Elementary, including what I call the thirdspace of racial literacy. I subsequently describe how these racial texts were interpreted and translated from the borderlands of anti-racist education. Finally, I will discuss the larger implications for this study.

**Borders Like These Walls: A Place to Begin a New Conversation**

“What is a border?” In the same way that Marianna’s questions got me into this study, my conclusions about how teachers made sense of race center Marianna’s inquiry about the borders that serve as physical, political, and social divisions. I position Marianna as a child Chicana theorist because teachers and students have symbiotic relationships; therefore, students are essential informants for exploring how teachers translate their understandings of race to students. Marianna’s question then frames my

---

32 This conclusion section is based on my narrative analysis and discussion taken together, and presents original ideas related to but not replicating the exact ideas previously discussed. In this way, I attempt to synthesize the major conclusions that I reached in this study as a whole and leave my readers with generative ideas for researching race in education.
interpretation of the connection between the spatiality of Creek and how teachers made sense of race in Creek Elementary.

Despite the geographical separation from the place of her birth and the fact that she had no recollection of crossing the border between Mexico and the United States, the United States/Mexican border remained central to the identity ascribed to Marianna in Creek. At the same time, Marianna as a child Chicana theorist was able to theorize from the borderlands of her mind and dare to interrogate the construction of borders by asking “But, why?” In this way, she inspired me as her teacher, and me as a researcher to read Creek through a lens that interrogated the persistent racialized borders of Creek Elementary represented in and through spaces like “the walls of [my] classroom.”

Anzaldúa’s (2007) idea that borders are not simply places on a map or a division between here and there, us and them; rather; they are psychic, social and cultural terrain that we inhabit, and that inhabits all of us is central to my interpretation of the borders of Creek. Further, Villenas’ (2012) conceptualization of nos/otras (translated from Spanish to mean us/others) challenged me to consider how this community might discover nostotras (the feminine form of we in Spanish). Put together, these ideas contributed to my conclusions about borders constructed long ago through school segregation and overt racism and how these borders remain largely intact through a colorblind D/discourse that usually left questions like “What is a border?” unasked.

From the standpoint of a student who was marginalized in Creek in nearly every aspect of her identity (a young, Mexican, undocumented, female, tan, primarily Spanish-speaking student) Marianna’s voice was often silenced within the (colorblind) box of Creek Elementary, yet she articulated a question that critically interrogates the
assumption of coevalness in Creek Elementary. That is, Marianna’s (and my other ELL students) presence suggested a thirding (Soja, 1996) of racialized terms, categories, and characteristics. This thirding.disrupted the “environmentally correct” racial binary established through segregation in Creek, which used Black/White binaries to narrate racial categories assigned to students who were primarily White. The recent increase of students of color in Creek forced Creek teachers to discuss racialized identities in a way that interrupted the general silence around race in post-segregated Creek, and brought in a “new conversation” about race, ethnicity, language, and culture that troubled the borders between us/them at Creek Elementary.

In this new conversation, teachers began to ask and answer explicit questions about racial characteristics (e.g., “she has dark skin”), racial categories (e.g. Sunday Thomas’ question about her two Jamaican students, various teachers’ interpretations of the category “other” on the class sorting sheets), interpersonal skills (e.g., Mary Martin’s attempt to relate to her Honduran student by celebrating Cinco de Mayo), and racial terms (e.g., “He called me a spic” and “What’s a honkey?”). The thirding of racialized others in this school place caused a dissonance for teachers in a space where “race” was most often a silent subject.

My co-performative witnessing in Creek Elementary enabled me to recognize the border between us/other from different angles on numerous occasions when teachers expressed a dissonance about how to ascribe my racialized identity. Co-performative witnessing helped me to identify the borders of Creek, and be aware of thirdspaces where

---

33 Thirding is where the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process that draws strategically from perceived opposing categories in a way that opens up new alternatives (Soja, 1996).
I recognized the trialectics in spaces, identities, and relationships. Through co-performative witnessing before and during the study, I recognized the borders of nos/otras of Creek Elementary, and began to read the racialized spaces of the school. Recognizing the borders of my own classroom was the first step in both conceptualizing, designing and analyzing this study of how teachers in Creek Elementary made sense of race by reading racial texts which is the topic of the next section.

**Racial Texts**

A first step [to treat the disease of racialized inequalities] would be to make legible racism’s ever-shifting yet ever-present structure. The oppressive conditions that most blacks still must confront cannot be ignored, but the continuing puzzle is how to addresses the complex ways race adapts its syntax to mask class and code geography. (Guinier, 2004, p. 100). To address Guinier’s “first step,” this project draws attention to the counter narratives of Black teachers and the oppressive conditions that persist in the lived space of this southern school today. Through my analysis of the syntax of race at Creek Elementary, I identified the concepts of the multiplicity of stories of the past, raced roles, D/discourse, policy, embodied, and curriculum and instruction, in addition to the racial categories, racial terms, interpersonal skills, which were commonly read as “race” in Creek Elementary. Here I address the totality of those concepts by labeling them *racial texts*. I define racial texts as the social signifiers of racial messages. I argue that a conceptualization of racial texts is central to an explanation of the diverse ways that teachers made sense of race in Creek Elementary. These racial texts are structured by the
unwritten social rules of Creek and are interpreted in divergent ways based on the teachers’ orientation to the text.

5 pillars of colorblind racial literacy. In this section, I begin by identifying the four main racial texts considered by teachers in colorblind literacy where comprehension of race was based on a grammar of meritocracy, or the structure that holds racial reasoning together— a structure that must remain consistent to a racial message of merit-based achievement and success. The grammar of meritocracy is upheld by an epistemology of individualism, or the idea that individuals are the generators of knowledge, and individuals have freedom to choose to (dis)engage in a merit-based system.

The five pillars of colorblind literacy parallel the five pillars of literacy (recognition of phonemes, phonics, accuracy, fluency, comprehension), a simplified definition of what it means to be literate in society. The five pillars of colorblind literacy consist of racial categories (e.g., Black, White, other), racial characteristics (e.g., skin tone, hair texture, facial features), interpersonal skills with racialized others (e.g., “I teach the generic” and “I would not identify by skin color because that’s not what I want to be seeing”), knowledge of racialized terms (e.g., descriptive like “dark-skin,” derogatory such as “spic,” and those that carry discursive racial messages that reinscribe binaries such as “mixies”), and finally an acceptance of the grammar of meritocracy where it is assumed that everyone has a “fair” opportunity to succeed. I assert that these five pillars were the basis of the “environmentally correct” way to read race in Creek Elementary.
Colorblind literacy is closely related to what Pollock (2004) calls “colormute,” the absence of public conversation that suppresses race words and de-races talk in hopes that race will become irrelevant. However, my conceptualization of colorblind literacy extends Pollock’s idea of colormuteness as primarily a discursive tool (of talk and strategic silence) by introducing the spatialization of colormuteness. A colorblind literacy requires teachers to interpret the firstspace (observable characteristics of race) and secondspace (perceptions of race) of the school place to inform their lived space of colorblindness. In other words, these teachers clearly saw diverse racial bodies within the school place (e.g., race sorting into homerooms) and incorporated these observations into the public narrative of the school where “new Creek” was now “multicultural.” The “multicultural” public narrative provided the storyline for the lived space of the school from a “non-color” perspective.

At the same time, colorblind literacy had a significant impact on students’ spatialized experiences in school (e.g., Zion, Dion, class sorting) as a place of miscommunication, discipline, or being raced in a White space. In this way, colorblind literacy in Creek Elementary was tested and limited by the enforced boundaries of the school that clearly impacted the spatialized experiences of students and teachers with regard to race (e.g., a policy that denied students the opportunity to hear Barak Obama’s address to school children in response to local racialized politics, Black teachers feeling threatened in the office space). The spatiality of Creek Elementary pushed teachers to reflect on their knowledge of the past and present of how Creek racialized people to make sense of how race mattered in their teaching spaces. Yet, this disequilibrium, or tension (when teachers read racial texts as defined by colorblind literacy) was often replaced by
returning to a secondspace reading of Creek Elementary as “fair” given the grammar of meritocracy. Thus, the way race was structured in Creek reinforced colorblind literacy as the correct way to read racial texts.

While colorblind literacy took various forms (as I outlined in my discussion on multicultural approaches to racial diversity), all forms of colorblind literacy have one thing in common—they lack colorsence (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; hooks, 1994; Matias, 2012). Colorsence is the process of coming to critical awareness of racial identity that requires learning raced history and re-centering once marginalized counter narratives. As the data (re)presentation and discussion indicated, without colorsence to explain the historical structure of racism and the socio-cultural significance of race in Creek, there were profound effects on teachers’ curriculum, instruction, discipline, classroom discussions, and relationships. The absence of colorsence seems to characterize the “non color” label that Millie Blackwell used to generalize White teachers at Creek Elementary. The non-color position disavowed these teachers from making connections to racial texts outside a grammar of meritocracy, which dictated that all readings articulate some form of the message that race does not matter and that individuals are judged on their merit as a result of personal choices.

Despite the representation of the various spatialized moments when race emerged as a significant topic or issue in Creek Elementary, “race” was a silent subject in most social spaces. Thus, racial texts were most often interpreted (and ignored) as a silent subject whereas Tyrell Watters explained, “I can be silent and be saying a lot.” When Mary Martin said about race, “I never really hear much about it,” and “It hasn’t come up once,” I connect her assertions to Tyrell’s theory that “We hear what we know.” At
Creek Elementary, racial knowing was a silent acceptance of meritocracy and a negation of an acknowledgement of the systems of racism in which we are all implicated.

Nevertheless, “race” as a silent subject of conversation carried a multitude of meanings, similar to my example (in the introduction) of the possibility of multiple definitions for both “cat” and “family” in the seemingly simple sentence “The family has a pet cat.” In hidden spaces of Creek, the concept of race represented shame, separation, and confusion to many of the White participants in my study (represented by the family stories and unanswered questions) who seemed to be searching for ways to connect the self to racial texts, which disrupted the grammar of meritocracy. Nevertheless, the grammar of meritocracy left no room for these feelings or questions about the racialized borders within an integrated Creek, and these teachers’ questions about connecting their own Whiteness to the racialization process in Creek was incomprehensible. Therefore, their ability to conceptualize race as psychological, interpersonal and structural (Guinier, 2004) was negated by the grammar of meritocracy. The grammar of meritocracy bifurcated memories of Creek’s racialized past, preferring a history that celebrated the advent of integration as the end of racism despite a multitude of stories (histories), symbols, policies, and practices which contradicted the caricature of a racially-exempt Creek.

In sum, colorblind literacy consists of a reliance on a particular racial syntax (the grammar of meritocracy) to assess the comprehension of racial texts. The ability to comprehend racial text in this way relies on a way of knowing where the core of knowledge centers self as non-color. This way of knowing is what I call an epistemology of individualism. This epistemology blinds the self to the realities of the local inequities.
The tools by which teachers communicate and interpret racial texts are read through the medium of the colorblind discourse, or words and ideas conveyed through speech. Finally, colorblind literacy is only assessed on four levels: racial categories, racial terms, racial characteristics, and interpersonal skills with racialized others.

As Lewis (2003) indicated in her study, local contexts and institutions can have direct and indirect influences on identification processes. This study of the locality of Creek Elementary demonstrates how the current racial texts of Creek were connected to its historical and contemporary racial structure, yet a colorblind literacy e-raced racialized histories and mystified contemporary racial texts. In the locality of Creek Elementary teachers were (in)directly assessed by the school community on their ability to read racial texts through the grammar of meritocracy, which occasionally tested teachers on “what” race means. This assessment process was evident in implicit expectations to reinforce meritocracy through a colorblind discourse by school leadership, parents, colleagues and sometimes the students themselves (e.g., Millie’s White students’ parents complained and she was reprimanded by administration after she confronted her students for accusing her of stealing, teachers who were expected to accept standardized testing as an equitable measurement of their effectiveness as a teacher, an unspoken directive to sort students by race because it is “the way things have always been done”). In a dynamically different way, what I call racial literacy began with the question of asking “why” and “how” race is given meaning in Creek, which is what I will discuss in the following section.

**Breaking with colorblind literacy.** Zion’s exclamation, “You’re not listening to me!” metaphorically represents one of the many dangers that surfaced at the border between colorblind literacy and what I will frame here as the *thirdspace of racial literacy*
in Creek. While Zion immediately expressed a connection with Tyrell Watters by referring to him as “Uncle Watters,” Zion was often in trouble in Ms. Drake’s class. The moment in which he ran away from the space of Ms. Drake’s classroom and returned to an interrogation where he exclaimed, “You’re not listening to me!” could be read in (at least) two different ways. A colorblind literacy lens would ask “what” happened, while a thirdspace reading of the racial text would also ask “why” the events happened, why the teacher and student were not hearing each other, and what about the space of the classroom was exclusive for Zion and where did he go to find solace? The answers to these questions are not as important in the telling of this story, as the questions themselves.

Asking these kinds of questions begins a conversation that interrogates the discursive divisions between “us” of “non-color” and racialized “others” because it interrupts the grammar of meritocracy, which assumes that everyone in the school space has an equitable experience and opportunity to succeed. Whereas Ms. Drake read the racial texts present in Zion’s critique and protest of what he saw as unfair treatment as an assessment of his individual behavior alone, Tyrell Watters’ understanding that “They’re not hearing each other,” acknowledged the possibilities of the D/discursive and embodied racial texts as a possibility for contributing to the situation.

Comprehending racial texts as something more than the first four pillars of colorblind literacy (racial terms, racial categories, racial characteristics, and interpersonal skills) required teachers to make connections to, between, and beyond racial texts. Therefore, the thirdspace of racial literacy is open to the multiplicity of racial texts in Creek Elementary including racialized social symbols, policies, relationships, discursive
markers, human bodies, and body language (Appendix G highlights the racial texts in colorblind literacy and racial literacy). Thirdspace readings of racial texts acknowledge multiple readings of the same racial text (e.g., the class pictures in the focus groups, racialized name-calling such as “honkey” or “spic”), and accept the notion that racial texts can be personally, emotionally, even spiritually altering. Figure 8.1 illustrates the diverse ways in which teachers were positioned in relation to racial texts and their diverse approaches to making sense of race. The smallest box in the middle represents the (colorblind) box where non-color teachers made sense of race using a grammar of meritocracy. The border of this box was made up of the allochronic spaces where racialized others served as a border representing “them” while non-color “us” were those located inside the smaller (colorblind) box.

Figure 8.1 Reading racial texts in Creek Elementary
On the other hand, reading race in connection with self, other racial texts, and the world, which happened in spatialized moments, or thirddspaces of racial literacy. I view the thirddspace of racial literacy as a space in motion where there was a radical openness to reading the racial texts of the local space in connection to a larger system, which defines race and contributes to racism. These moments of clarity where teachers engaged in a process of reading local racial texts in connection to the world made room for a thirddspace of racial literacy. This thirddspace was open to the multiplicity of places, cultures, and histories of Creek as a space that was constantly sending and receiving racial messages through the mediums of curriculum, stories (written or spoken), D/discourse, social interaction, policies, and the reading of human bodies (the presence and absence of raced bodies, and ascriptions of race). A thirddspace of racial literacy recognized that race was spatialized in Creek elementary. For instance, in private White conversations (e.g., “You live in America, you should be thankful you live here), practices (e.g., class sorting), and discursive positioning (e.g., the “low class” of ELL students). Finally, a thirddspace of racial literacy interrogated the borders of Creek Elementary and asked why they existed and how Creek Elementary could embrace the “we” (nosotras) in Creek in a way that disrupted traditional renderings of the “us” and “them” dichotomy.

Envisioning racial literacy as situated in the particularity of a place, responds to Guinier’s (2004) assertion that “the problem is not just race but race as conjugated by class, geography, and the organizing narrative of upward mobility” (p. 116). This study demonstrates the idea that readers of racial texts are situated in local spaces where meanings are spatially specific. Thus, comprehending racial texts in schools requires a
great deal of knowledge about the particular place of a school. Whereas colorblind literacy reads racial text as located in individuals, and is limited to asking “what” questions in route to conclusions of meritocracy, thirdspaces of racial literacy requires teachers to make connections between racial text and self, other racial texts, and the world within the framework of the local and asks “why, how, when, where, and what” is race here and now, and how are racial texts related to histories of racism. In this way, the thirdspace of racial literacy (represented in Figure 8.1 by the circle with no beginning or end that is both a part of, and beyond the school) engages in a dialogic process that embraces multiplicity and actively seeks answers to questions about how racism structures our lived space in this school.

The ways in which some teachers recognized racialized moments in the school and classroom spaces, specifically addresses Guinier’s (2004) assertion that “racial literacy is contextual rather than universal. It does not assume that either the problem or the solution is one-size-fits-all” and that it “is about learning rather than knowing” (Guinier, 2004, p. 115). Nevertheless, a commonality between these spatialized moments where racial texts were read in ways that identified race in connection to part of a larger social structure, required teachers to have at least a momentary consciousness that meritocracy is a myth within a system of racism. In sum, the thirdspace of racial literacy was where teachers made connections between racial text and self, other racial text, and the world as a space of radical openness. It was a space that embraced the trialectics (a disruption of discursive binaries) of racial texts in a way that interrogated “the way things are” in Creek.
The borderlands of anti-racist education. Figure 8.1 also shows what I refer to as the borderlands of anti-racist education. These borderlands were not limited to simply formal instruction or informal socializing between teachers and their students, but were spaces where teachers fully engaged and made the spatialization of race a priority in their instruction, social relationships, conflict, embodied pedagogies, and unplanned dialogue. It was in these borderlands of anti-racist education in Creek Elementary that teachers put critical understandings of race into action. As the term “borderlands” indicates, this type of pedagogy was not the norm; rather, it was something that pushed the boundaries of what was possible in the school based on an understanding of the multiplicity of knowledge and identities. Crossing over into this borderland required a recognition of, though not a position on, the borders made up of allochronic spaces. Recognizing and critiquing the borders where racialized others were pushed to the outskirts was a necessary ability before teachers could engage in anti-racist education.

Tyrell Watters described the borderlands of anti-racist education when he and his students engaged in a lesson where instruction, relationships, conflict, embodied pedagogy, and dialogue collided. In the moment after his (Black) student said, “Hispanic people stink,” Tyrell’s Creek Elementary classroom became a borderland where Tyrell considered his students’ cultural backgrounds and interrupted racism by asking his students to interrogate their academic learning, social relationships, racial stereotypes, and discourses all at the same time. Negotiating this borderland of anti-racist education required a deep understanding of all his students and the critical consciousness to think through the structures of race that were informing the space from outside his classroom.
While Tyrell Watters and Millie Blackwell often felt relegated to the borders of Creek, they exercised agency in the borderlands of Creek through acts of protest. For instance, Tyrell protested entering the office space, that Millie referred to as the “gossip lynch from the community,” where on many occasions he had been falsely accused of theft, racism, unprofessionalism, abuse, and threatening behavior (demonstrated in the sections “the front office” and “I needed a pencil sharpener”). Tyrell’s protest of the destructive space of the office was misunderstood by the school secretary, who misread the protest as simply insubordination. She subsequently threatened that he may wind up with a “pink slip,” thus Tyrell’s challenge was not without risk. Nevertheless, Tyrell persisted in his protest of a space that threatened his personal and professional well-being reasoning that conforming to the policy of reporting to the office in the morning “isn’t worth ruining my whole day.”

Tyrell negotiated the borderland space in his classroom by playing different roles in his classroom (Carl Winslow and Ms. Iris). However, it is important to note that he had to “come home everyday” because he didn’t “want to wake up one day and be [someone else].” In this way, anti-racist education at Creek Elementary seemed to come from the outside in, from people who lived in other communities but worked in the Creek Elementary community. Despite a number of attempts to provide and counter denigrating racial texts, anti-racist pedagogies were often dismissed at a larger school level (e.g., Millie was removed from the team planning social studies after she planned lessons that centered race, and she asked if the new program to promote leadership qualities in students is for all students, or just some). Rejecting people of color as being valid knowledge holders in the community created a limit, or a boundary to what was
allowed in Creek. As a result, there was a limit to the level of anti-racist education allowed in Creek Elementary. In this way, Millie Blackwell observed that Creek was an “inside-out” kind of place. She explained “people say they don't see color, but that's all they see. . . and people that you would never think talk, they do talk. So one of the things with women of non-color, they may hate each other, but if it's against you as a woman of Color, then guess what, you lose every time.” With this understanding of the social network of this place that rejects people of color, it was important to live outside this community and connect to people who accept “who [Millie] really is.”

**Final Thoughts**

In the end, I read the phenomenon of how teachers made sense of race in Creek Elementary as determined by their knowledge and connection to the place, their racialized lived experiences, the system of Creek Elementary itself, and particular epistemologies. Racial texts were filtered through disparate racial (il)literacies by teachers simultaneously in spaces throughout the school. The public narrative of “our multicultural school” made room for White teachers to read racial texts from a “non-color” point of view, although some White teachers demonstrated moments where they asked critical questions and demonstrated a critical consciousness that made race borders between us/them blurry in thirdspaces of Creek Elementary.

To cross over into the borderlands of anti-racist education required recognizing the border made up of allochronic spaces (where racialized bodies were treated inequitably) in local school spaces. A border-crossing (requiring an epistemological shift away from individualism) interrupted the grammar of meritocracy as the reality of integrated Creek Elementary. The thirdspace of racial literacy embraced the trialectics of
racial texts from racial binaries, and used a discourse that extended race far beyond the racial texts of racial terms, racial characteristics, racial categories, and inter-racial relationships. The thirdspace of racial literacy was a vantage point from which to see and hear racism as rooted in the racial history of Creek in connection to the state, nation, and world. From this thirdspace, teachers asked questions of why, how, when and where racism occurs in Creek, and how we can interrupt racism from persisting.

Two final questions loom at the conclusion of this study. One, in our lived space of the realities of our daily lives, “How do I stay?” and “Can I just be a teacher?” Millie’s question has been answered for her personally. She could not. Questioning the system of racism at the macro level of Creek Elementary became too much and too oppressive for her at a great personal cost to her health and general well-being. Her act of protest, though misread as an e-raced text, was her final response. There was no room in the space of Creek Elementary to teach children what “they didn’t want them to believe” and to ask that we begin a school-wide conversation that would be “sensitive to race.” In this way, I understand Millie’s characterization of Creek as an “inside-out kind of place” to mean that while Millie read the racial texts in the local place of this school and made connections between herself, other racial texts, and the world, colorblind literacy omitted many of the racial texts so that there is nothing to read, nothing to connect with, no way to understand race as a lived experience, diverse racial texts, or race in connection to the world’s social systems. Thus the culture of Creek Elementary is one that generally supports racial illiteracy. Therefore, a teacher who is unsupportive of colorblind literacy, or racial illiteracy, is someone who does not fit in this “environmentally correct” way of being in Creek.
Tyrell’s question was enacted more often at a micro level. He asked, “Can I just be a teacher?” The answer for me is written in moments, in spaces, and in the place of Creek. The racial text of his embodiment of teacher in his classroom is challenging his students to recognize the borders within their classroom. Tyrell’s “unscripted dialogue” about race in his classroom pushes his students to work toward “hearing each other.” In the space of his classroom, Tyrell takes on the charge of interrupting racism as “an American, as a person” and creates a “space to know” in new and different ways. It is my sincere hope that he will find a space in Creek Elementary where he can just be a teacher, in all spaces of this school. But the beginning of creating such a space must, in my estimation, start with working toward hearing each other and learning to read the racial texts as they are translated through time and spaces. Locating the borders between us/them, and taking action to systematically tear them down would be a next step to creating a spaces where students have the “space to know” in multiple ways.

**Implications**

Before beginning a discussion about the implications of this study, there are two important points that I will reiterate about my conceptual framework. In this study I accept that race and racism are complex, structural, and part of the fabric of American social reality. I also accept that places are socially constructed and socially perceived. Related to these social realities, I assert that race and place interact in unique ways and that these intersections change form over time.

To be clear, conclusions that I reached in this study are limited to an analysis of how a group of teachers made sense of race in the place of Creek Elementary during the time of the study. Nevertheless, with these ideas in mind, I believe four lessons can be
learned from this study. First, this study demonstrates the unique ways in which race is spatially defined in relation to a particular community and in spatialized moments within the school as a social space. Second, it clearly illuminates (some) dangers of colorblindness for students and suggests that inequity among the teaching force or students was not answered when schools were racially integrated. This study demonstrates the dynamic ways in which histories and structures of racism are recreated in a school where some teachers must struggle to “stay in a place that doesn’t want me” or leave because the cost is too great to their personal well-being. In particular, Millie’s exit from Creek suggests careful attention to should be paid to the recruitment, training, retention, and dismissal of teachers of color. In essence, teacher educators, administrators, and human resources officers need to ask broad questions about what motivates teachers of color to want to teach, to want to continue to teach, and if they leave, what were the factors that led up to their exit from teaching. Acknowledging the impact of race on these issues, and further evaluating the socio-cultural significance of race in school localities would require a shift in a colorscense approach to the training, retention, collaboration, and hiring processes of teachers. Third, the racial injustices illustrated in stories and accounts of the teachers and students here point to the dangers of colorblind literacy and intimate the importance of creating a school environment where teachers can learn to read local racial texts in ways that enhance their ability to teach and connect with all students so that teaching and learning spaces are characterized as safe places where we are learning to hear each other. Fourth, racial literacy must be something that teacher educators address with pre-service and in-service teachers. Moreover, it must be intertwined throughout all of their coursework because, as this
study has demonstrated, teachers’ knowledge and understanding of race influenced their classroom management, discipline policies, instructional styles, curricular decisions, interaction with peers and students, and a multitude of aspects of their teacher identity and role. At the same time, multiple stakeholders, from educational researchers to teacher educators to public school educators (and all the roles in between), must ask a critical questions about how they are preparing individuals to become more critical and understand race at a systemic level given that the institutions that receive these individual teachers are often inherently racially inequitable. Further reflection and action on this conundrum is needed, and cannot be fully addressed by only one set of stakeholders.

As a result of my analysis process and conclusions which were represented as a figure 8.1 (Reading racial texts in Creek Elementary), I have created a tool that can be utilized by educational researchers (including action researchers) to conceptualize the racialized spaces of/in schools. This tool could be used in a variety of contexts in both formal and informal learning spaces (such as community programs or museums). A map for racialized spaces (Figure 8.2) is a conceptual tool that I propose for inquiries at the intersection of race and place. Appendix H details precisely the methods of data collection that I used to uncover (some of) the racial texts in the firstspace, secondspace, and thirddspaces of this school place.
Future Studies

Based on this study, I have identified several areas of inquiry for future studies on racial literacy and cultural mismatches between students and teachers. First, racial literacy and anti-racist education are intertwined. This study clearly illustrated the dynamic structure of Creek Elementary that limited teachers’ ability to engage in anti-racist education, thus, I was unable to observe (structural) school-level forms of anti-racist education. Further studies are needed to identify variations in the racial demographics and geographies where anti-racist education is being implemented at the school level. Additionally, this study suggested that school leadership played an important role in informing teachers’ racial (il)literacy. Future studies could center the role of school administration in the process of school personnel making sense of race. Additionally, other studies could explore the factors influencing administrators’ racial
literacy, and the structural and socio-political influences on their understandings of race and (dis)engagement with anti-racist education. Moreover, because of my position in the school and ethical decisions about reporting data, the role of teachers as “policy actors” (Brown, 2010, p. 298) by enforcing (standard) English in the classroom and interpreting the connection between race and immigrant status was minimized in my analysis. Future studies could focus on the role of language and immigration in racial literacy and its connection to racialization across spaces.

In order to extend a discussion of the cultural (mis)matches between teachers and students with a spatial lens of analysis, comparative studies could explore similarities and differences in racial literacy when firstspace is dynamically different, meaning, when racial demographics, school context (e.g., rural, urban), or geographical locations (e.g., Oregon, Maryland, or different countries) vary greatly. Finally, studies that focus on the connections between racial identity and racial literacy are necessary. This study suggests that there is a connection between racial identity and racial literacy, although a thorough exploration of this connection was beyond the scope of the present study. My analysis of teachers’ racial literacy revealed that Black racial identity and lived experiences certainly informed racial literacy; however, while the intersections are connected, I do not believe there is a direct correlation. Or said in another way, not all people of color will recognize or make connections between racial texts and the structural, historical, and psychological factors that influence these racial texts. At the same time, not all White people will be oblivious to these connections and indeed may demonstrate racial literacy. In order to better understand how this works, studies which explore diverse firstspaces could ask specific questions about this identity/racial literacy connection. For instance, are Black
teachers in primarily Latin@ schools demonstrating racially literacy? Are White teachers
in primarily Black schools more racially literate than those in primarily White schools?
Are teachers more racially literate in multi-racial schools (i.e., 25% Asian, 25% Black,
25% Latin@, 25% White) than racially homogeneous schools? Finally, though
investigating the experiences of Black teachers was not the primary focus of the present
study (rather how teachers made sense of race, of which experience was a part), data
from this study suggest that racial literacy, or lack thereof, among faculty and staff in this
school may contribute to an ongoing disparity in teaching staff as well as the perpetuation
of teachers’ inability to recognize the system of racism in schools.

In conclusion, over the five years that I worked with teachers and students at
Creek Elementary, there were very few moments when I observed overtly racist
comments or actions (some are represented here). Although this study emphasizes the
spatialized moments where race was the (silent) subject, there were also many more
stories that I could tell about the caring teachers, resilient students, and supportive
administrators that characterized much of my lived space at Creek Elementary. My time
in Creek will always have a special place in my heart and I cherish the friendships that I
have with many teachers that remain today. It is with that in mind that I find the
perniciousness of racism so troubling, because even in a place like Creek, we are still all
implicated in the injustices of racism where students do not have the “space to know” or
remember the past or make sense of their present in multiple ways. Nevertheless, in my
work represented here and in my future work, I chose to hold onto the hope that we all
must always work toward hearing each other and create spaces where “diversity”
becomes more than discourse and we can discover and rediscover “nostotras” and create
school spaces that are equitable for Millie, Tyrell, Marianna, Dion, Zion, Jabari, Janeth, and Mario.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
Creek Elementary Racial Demographic Changes in a Ten-Year Period

![Bar chart showing racial demographic changes over ten years for Creek Elementary School.](chart.png)
APPENDIX B
Standardized Test Score Comparison between Racial Demographics

Grades three through five English Language Arts, 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English Language Arts Standards not met</th>
<th>English Language Arts Standards met or exceeded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grades three through five Math, 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Math Standards not met</th>
<th>Math Standards met or exceeded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grades three through five English Language Arts, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Math Standards not met</th>
<th>Math Standards met or exceeded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grades three through five Math, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English Language Arts Standards not met</th>
<th>English Language Arts Standards met or exceeded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C
List of Characters

I. The five main teachers are identified by their first and last name. Those are:

  * **Tyrell Watters.** Tyrell is a self-contained special education teacher for upper-elementary grades. He was in his late twenties and grew up in Southern State.

  * **Millie Blackwell.** Millie was a first grade teacher nearing retirement age. She was born near Loudon County and had lived and taught in a number of different states.

  * **Mary Martin.** Mary was a kindergarten teacher in her early thirties who grew up in Creek and graduated from Creek schools.

  * **Sunday Thomas.** Sunday was a White third grade teacher in her early thirties. She grew up in Southern State.

  * **Lexi Gunter.** Lexi was a White fifth grade teacher nearing retirement age. She was born and lived for most of her life in a town neighboring Loudon County.

II. Teachers and administrators who were named in the study but were not the main focus of the study were identified by their title and last name. I did not formally interview anyone on this list as part of the study, however, my observations of their words and actions contributed to my understanding of the process of how teachers made sense of race in Creek.

  * **Mrs. Aranda** – White third grade teacher
  * **Mrs. Bell** – White third grade teacher
  * **Ms. Cornelius** – White third grade teacher
  * **Ms. Drake** – White fourth grade teacher
  * **Ms. Deevers** – White third grade teacher
Mr. Drexel- White principal
Mrs. English- White third grade teacher
Mrs. Evans- White third grade teacher
Mr. Greene- Black music teacher
Mrs. Lamont- White third grade teacher
Mrs. Marony- White fourth grade teacher
Ms. Sydney- White second grade teacher
Mrs. Runine- White fourth grade teacher
Mr. Teal- White assistant principal
Ms. Witter- White fifth grade teacher

III. Students who were named in the study but were not the main focus of the study were identified by their title and last name. I did not formally interview anyone on this list as part of the study, however, my observations of their words and actions contributed to my understanding of the process of how teachers made sense of race in Creek. In order to protect these students some of their genders and grade levels were changed in order to hide their identities, though their racial identities are consistent with my actual interpretation of their racialized bodies based on observations and conversations.

Charlie- White male third grade
DeShaun- Black male fourth grade SPED (Special education) self-contained
Dion- Black male third grade
Jabari- Black male fourth grade
Janeth- Mexican immigrant female ELL fourth grade
Juan- Mexican third grade male SPED self-contained
Laquisha- Black female third grade SPED self-contained
Lily- White female fifth grade SPED self-contained
Marianna- Mexican immigrant female ELL student (no longer at Creek Elementary but was in fifth grade when we discussed borders)
Mario- Mexican immigrant male ELL second grade
Terry- White male third grade SPED self-contained

IV. Members of the community that I interviewed were identified by only their first name.

Damion was in a high-ranking position in the district office. He was a White man in his fifties who grew up and worked in Loudon County. I did not know him well before or after the study.

Jaimie was in a high-ranking position in the Loudon District office. She was White and in her sixties, and she lived in Loudon County for her entire life. I had spoken with her and attended a number of meetings with her. I had an on-going professional relationship with her.
Marcus attended school in Creek for his entire life and graduated in 2006. He was a Black life-long resident of McMarion in his twenties and a teacher’s assistant at Creek Elementary. We had a friendly working relationship before and after the study.

Otis was a custodian at Creek Elementary. He was a Black life-long resident of Loudon County in his eighties, and lived in McMarion for most of his adult life. Otis grew up as a sharecropper and attended a segregated school through seventh grade when he reluctantly dropped out to support his family through farming. I did not know Otis well before or after the study, but several Black community members recommended that I speak with Otis to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of segregation.

Patti was a historian and a writer who had studied Creek professionally. She was a White woman in her eighties who grew up on her family’s large tract of land in Creek where they owned a prosperous business. I did not know Patti well before or after the study, but a number of people (both White and Black) referred me to Patti as a wealth of knowledge about Creek and when I called to ask if she would do an interview with me, she readily agreed.

Tonya was a retired teacher who had lived in the Creek area for her entire life. She was a White woman in her late fifties who was active in the community and regularly substituted at Creek Elementary in her spare time. We had a friendly working relationship before and after the study.

Willow was a White aunt by marriage to several of my Mexican immigrant students. She was in her early thirties and was the mother of two biracial children at Creek Elementary. We did not know each other well before the study, but during and after the study we had several conversations framed around both my research and teaching.
APPENDIX D:
Important Terms

**Anti-racist education** is action in educational settings resulting from racial literacy which materializes in curricular choices, collegial relationships, pedagogical styles, student-teacher interactions, and decisions about policy and procedures. This includes culturally relevant pedagogy and critical multiculturalism.

**Allochronic spaces** represent materially real, but often socially undetectable, spaces where coevalness is denied. These spaces are not static and are inequitable locations of racialized bodies in places.

**Coevalness** the access and ability to get the same thing, at the same time, in the same place.

**Colorblind D/discourse** signifies both the colorblind ideology and the observable expression of that ideology.

**Colorblind Discourse** indicates a way of believing, acting, performing, or valuing in a way that denies the social significance of race.

**Colorblind discourse** implies the use of language to implicitly or explicitly deny race/racism.

**Counter narratives** (also referred to in CRT literature as counterstorytelling) are stories that are told which counter the master narratives that rest on meritocracy, individualism, and colorblindness. These stories are generated by the lived experiences of people of color and are privileged in CRT scholarship.

**Creek**, I am signifying the larger place/space of Creek that is politically, socially, and historically informed and contested. When I use the term Creek Elementary, I am signifying the place of this school that is materialized by the school building and intimately connected to Creek and the larger social structure that extends outside of Creek.
Creek Elementary represents a space where place, power and identity are connected in Creek.

Firstspace is a concept built upon the notion of perceived space (Lefebvre, 1991), and implies that which can be empirically measured or mapped; spatial outcomes of social processes (Soja, 1999).

Place I mean to invoke the notion of an observable location which carries with it a social meaning that is both shared and varied between and among people.

Race is a social construction, where race is a social reality, but a biological myth.

Racism is a system or a structure where human bodies (as groups or individuals) are categorized according to the ascription of their body within the racialized social system that systematically benefits the White race.

Secondspace is related to Lefebvre’s (1991) conceived space and is subjective, imagined. It is the domain of representations and image.

Space then will signify an infinite amount of possible locations where human interaction happens in and across time. In this sense space is both boundless in size and inconceivably small.

Thirdspace cannot be reduced to only material or mental spaces, it is the space of radical openness to trialectics where everything comes together. It is connected to physical space but also transcends the space at the same time (Soja, 1996).

Thirding is at least one term that disrupts the original binary choice. The original binary terms are not dismissed entirely but are subjected to a creative process that draws strategically from perceived opposing categories in a way that opens up new alternatives (Soja, 1996).

Trialectics is a D/discourse that is radically open to additional otherness or thirding, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge. Thirding is a starting point, a place to build and introduce more possibilities and expand the production of knowledge beyond what is now known (Soja, 1996).

Whiteness is a racial identity based on privilege, terror, transcendence of the body, and the standard against which all racial others are measured.

White supremacy as the system that holds Whiteness and Blackness in place, a system that takes different forms in different places and one that is upheld through the colorblind D/discourse that denies that the system exists.
APPENDIX E
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

First interview: Place

1. Where have you taught throughout your career?

2. How were those experiences similar or different to where you teach now?

3. What do you think is important for a teacher to know about teaching in this school community? In this region? In this state?

4. How does where you are affect what you teach or don’t teach?

5. How does where we are geographically impact the student and teacher demographics at this school?

Second interview: Race/culture/ethnicity

6. Who are you racially/culturally/ethnically?

7. What does it mean to be a teacher? Who are you as a teacher?

8. How do race/culture/and/or ethnicity impact your daily life as a teacher?
9. When, where, and why do you talk about or think about cultural/ethnic/racial identities at school?

10. In what ways do cultural/ethnic/racial identities (your own or others’) inform this school?
APPENDIX F
Initial Themes from Coded Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Recorded number of occurrences in data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmentally correct</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The (Black) box</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faceless dolls</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Multicultural”</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebel rules</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX G
Racial Texts in Colorblind Literacy and Racial Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Pillars of Colorblind Literacy</th>
<th>Components of Racial Literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Racial terms</td>
<td>• Racial terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Racial characteristics</td>
<td>• Racial characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Racial terms</td>
<td>• Racial terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interpersonal skills</td>
<td>• Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grammar of meritocracy</td>
<td>• Racialized social symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Discursive markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Human bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Body language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Other possibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX H
Data Collection for Spatialization

Firstspace:
* Annual Yearly Progress report which includes standardized testing statistics of the school
* Census data of Creek
* Statistics on Creek Elementary from the National Educational Statistics website
* Maps of Creek and Loudon County
* Pictures of Creek (neighborhoods, businesses, road signs, roads, landscape, construction, flags, traffic) and Creek Elementary (bulletin boards, hallways, student work, discipline policies, building, playgrounds, landscape, books on display, entryway)

Secondspace:
* Historical documents including cookbooks with written histories, local books and pamphlets
* Artifacts of student work, assignments, public emails, and printed policies (student and teacher handbooks, district policies)
* A bulletin board that invites the public to participate in sharing memories of the community and school
* All interviewees were asked to describe the place using adjectives or short phrases
* Newspaper articles that describe the community or school
* Observed in teacher spaces (faculty meetings, lunch tables, planning meetings, hallways, teacher duty) how teachers talked about Creek Elementary

Thirdspace:
* Focus groups based on a storybox with pictures, artifacts, and scenarios of Creek and Creek Elementary (including a list of descriptions of Creek)
* Observations of teaching
* Co-performative witnessing
* Member-checking (feeding back transcripts or quotes from observations or interviews)
* Personal stories about Creek and Creek Elementary