Exposing and Disarming Whitelash to Advance Anti-Racism: A Collaborative Autoethnography on Interracial Co-teaching

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Abstract

Objective: Instructors and students of color regularly experience retaliatory discourse and behavior denying the existence of racism. This white backlash–or *whitelash*–against anti-racism education harms BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and further entrenches the sociopolitical system of white supremacy. This study aims to expose and disarm whitelash in the social work classroom. ***Method:*** We employ a collaborative autoethnography to interrogate our experiences as racially diverse co-instructors seeking to interrupt harm in the classroom. Our primary data source is 10 recorded processing sessions in which we discuss student feedback as related to the social construction of whiteness. ***Results:*** When white students felt uncomfortable–i.e., sad, guilty, angry, ashamed–they lashed out in an effort to re-establish white comfort. Contesting this whitelash required embracing discomfort and emotional engagement, resituating ourselves as learners, and centering BIPOC learning. ***Conclusions:*** This counter-narrative highlights the importance of attending to and disrupting white emotional hegemony in the classroom. By considering white resistance to learning in the context of racialized emotions, anti-racist instructors and researchers can more effectively identify and dismantle the reproduction of whiteness in the social work academy. Efforts to address whitelash are crucial given the ongoing harm to BIPOC.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, counter-narratives, critical whiteness studies, whitelash, interracial team teaching, pedagogy of discomfort

Exposing and Disarming Whitelash to Advance Anti-Racism: A Collaborative Autoethnography on Interracial Co-teaching

As social work moves in the direction of anti-racist education and practice, social workers of color have urgently called attention to how theme profession continues to perpetuate white supremacy and harm BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) (see King-Jordan & Gil, 2021; Pewewardy & Almeida, 2014; Tascón & Ife, 2019). For example, scholars have pointed out that social work education has largely erased the contributions of social workers of color (Curran et al., 2022; Parker, 2023; Wilson et al., 2024), white social workers often reinforce racial power structures when working with racialized clients (Bogue, 2022; Vincent, 2022), and social work research commonly objectifies and dehumanizes People of Color (Murray-Lichtman & Elkassem, 2021). Moreover, when anti-racism educators call attention to whiteness, white students often resist learning, instead espousing color-blind rhetoric that denies the existence of racial inequity (Edmonds-Cady & Wingfield, 2017; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Ozias, 2023). Crucially, this white resistance to anti-racism is not merely an innocent emotional reaction, rather it is a driving force seeking to re-establish the white supremacist status quo (Matias, 2013, 2016). Consequently, this study builds on existing literature to explore interracial teaching partnerships, in which a white instructor and an instructor of color co-teach together, as a promising anti-racist pedagogy that fosters student and instructor reflexivity and accountability (Gollan & O'Leary, 2009; Odera et al., 2021).

Whitelash

Retaliatory white backlash that protects white supremacy can be described as *whitelash* (Embrick et al., 2020; Hartley & Hafen, 2025; Matias, 2020; Zembylas & Matias, 2023), a term first coined in 2016 by news commentator Van Jones in his nationally televised comments on the

Trump election. Van Jones stated that the election of President Trump "was a whitelash against a changing country…It was whitelash against a Black president in part…And that's the part where the pain comes" (CNN, 2016). Embrick and colleagues (2020) expanded upon this conceptualization to characterize whitelash as reactionary discourse, actions, and ideologies in opposition to movements for racial equity. Although the term whitelash is recent, the phenomenon is not new (Embrick et al., 2020). For example, in 1988, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of retrenchment to describe how racial reform is often followed by significant and widespread backlash. There is a "long historical record of white violence and intimidation that has manifested in response to racial progress" including lynchings, race massacres, and Jim Crow laws (Embrick et al., 2020, p.6). As seen in these examples, whitelash against racial equity functions at the individual, institutional, and structural level to protect the sociopolitical system of white supremacy (Embrick et al., 2020).

Interpersonal Whitelash and Racialized Emotionalities

To conceptualize interpersonal whitelash, Embrick and colleagues (2020) draw on Bonilla-Silva's (2019) theory of *racialized emotions*, which contends that "people experience, learn about, and interpret racialized relationships not just practically but emotionally" (p.4). Therefore, emotions are socially produced as specific to an individual's social location within the context of racial domination. Racialized emotions "serve as manifestations of the power dynamics underlying race and racism" (Jiang & Tham, 2024, p.4). White supremacy inequitably centers and prioritizes white people's affective interests and emotional well-being while invalidating People of Color's experiences and emotions (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). Interpersonal whitelash is thus the retaliatory discourse and actions that individuals and groups employ to

defend white privilege and white supremacy when feeling threatened by progress toward racial equity (Embrick et al., 2020).

Building on the connection of whitelash and racialized emotion, critical whiteness scholars have explored how white emotionality functions to shore up normative white supremacy while punishing People of Color (Matias, 2020; Whitehead et al., 2021; Zembylas & Matias, 2023). In practice, "examples of emotionalities of whiteness in dialogue about race and racism can include resistance, deflection, and color-evasive discourse and can derive from feelings of shame, guilt, and discomfort" (Matias et al., 2022, p.13). Zembylas and Matias (2023) describe these white emotionalities as "white emotional backlash" which "with its entanglement with hegemonic whiteness and white supremacy, inflicts tangible emotional trauma and violence onto People of Color" (p.462). Illustrating this connection between white emotionality and racial harm, Lilly and colleagues (2023) describe white students' "use of tears as a weapon against Black students when a conversation around White privilege arose" (p.398). In social work, research suggests that white students and faculty members respond with tears and demands for comfort when their white privilege is threatened (Aguilar & Counselman-Carpenter, 2021; Jeyapal & Grigg, 2021; Lilly et al., 2023).

Critical race scholarship describes white emotionality as not only an internal psychological process, but also a social and relational process that produces and maintains racial hierarchies (Kim, 2016; Matias, 2016). Demands for white comfort function to mask racial harm (Joseph et al., 2020; Matias, 2016; Ozias, 2023; Zembylas & Matias, 2023). For example, in social work, Aguilar and Counselman-Carpenter (2021) describe how white women faculty demand emotional comfort in an effort to deflect responsibility for racism. White tears thus function as a form of whitelash that protects white privilege and white supremacy by deflecting

responsibility (Zembylas & Matias, 2023). Demands for white comfort reflect the social positioning of individuals within a racialized society, that is to say, white people's emotions are often privileged, and People of Color's emotions are often marginalized (Bonilla-Silva, 2019).

Critical scholars contend that white comfort is "institutionally protected in ways that exacerbate harms to affected groups" (Joseph et al., 2020, p.170). Across institutions, social work students of color have reported that they experience racial microaggressions from white students who react emotionally when learning about race and racism (Lerner & Kim, 2024a; Ocampo & BlackDeer, 2022; Weller et al., 2023). Additionally, critical research highlights the violence that white students perpetuate against women of color who teach anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogy. For example, critical whiteness scholar Cheryl Matias (2020) contends that, for women of color "teaching race and racism, let alone whiteness, is emotionally taxing, spiritually violent, and times wrought with unfounded retaliations" (p.257). Similarly, Khan and Absolon (2021) describe "violent repercussions for Indigenous and racialized social work educators" who do anti-racism work (p.159). Supporting these statements, women of color have shared that, in retaliation to their anti-racist pedagogy, white social work students have left negative course evaluations disparaging their person (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022) and have complained to administration that the instructor made them feel 'unsafe' (Duhaney & El Lahib, 2021).

Strategies to Disrupt Whiteness in Social Work Education

Given the ongoing harm caused by whitelash against anti-racism education, the social work academy must expose and disarm white resistance to anti-racism education. To this end, this study explores *interracial teaching partnerships* and a *pedagogy of discomfort* as promising

strategies to promote student and instructor self-reflexivity and accountability, thus challenging the reproduction of whiteness in the classroom.

Interracial Teaching Partnerships

Interracial teaching partnerships are an anti-racist pedagogical approach in which two or more racially diverse instructors co-teach a course (Curiel, 2021). In social work education, this approach often consists of a white instructor and an instructor of color who share teaching responsibilities and space in the classroom (Gollan & O'Leary, 2009; Odera et al., 2021; Ouellette & Fraser, 2023). Nascent evidence from the literature suggests that racially diverse teaching partnerships can decenter whiteness by modeling relational approaches to anti-racism, fostering self-reflexivity and accountability, and by centering lived experience. The interracial team teaching approach to anti-racist social work education focuses on centering relationships as instructors model self-reflexive solidarity and connection (Odera et al., 2021, p.810). Power sharing allows instructors to provide feedback to one another to challenge unnamed biases (Miller & Garran, 2017). However, when co-teaching there is a continual risk that white instructors inequitably hold more power in the classroom due to embedded racism and normative of white supremacy (Garran et al., 2015). Therefore, white instructors must actively relinquish power (Curiel, 2021).

Furthermore, research suggests that anti-racist social work educators often focus on educating white students about racism and whiteness while neglecting the learning of students of color (Lerner & Kim, 2024b; Odera et al., 2021). To combat this white centering, white instructors hold white students accountable to the space they take up in the classroom by "refocusing attention away from a problematic other to problematising self and/or whiteness" (Gollan & O'Leary, 2009, p.716). Parallelly, instructors of color facilitate learning that centers

People of Color's lived experiences of racism (Garran et al., 2015). Co-instructors can thus work together to resist intellectualization of racism and make space for racialized emotional responses that vary according to positionality (Odera et al., 2021). In sum, team teaching is a promising avenue to interrupt whiteness because it allows instructors to step up or step back according to their areas of expertise, thus facilitating experiential learning directly connected to the instructor's lived experience.

Pedagogy of Discomfort

Given that whitelash is a form of racialized emotion, it is essential that anti-racist educators attend to the socioemotional aspects of learning. A *pedagogy of discomfort* is an approach to learning first conceptualized by Boler (1999) that seeks to make visible the ways in which emotional comfort maintains structural oppression. Educators who utilize a pedagogy of discomfort argue that, when "challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities" feelings of discomfort are not only inevitable, they are also a sign of "individual and social transformation" (Zembylas, 2015, p.163). Discomfort is essential to anti-racist education because it disrupts normative beliefs and assumptions that support white supremacy (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Zembylas, 2023). A pedagogy of discomfort requires both instructors and students to embrace vulnerability and discomposure and question what they have been taught to see (Boler, 1999; Bonilla-Silva, 2019). Illustrating the importance of discomfort as an ethical necessity, critical race scholar, Zeus Leonardo (2009) argues that "as long as whites ultimately feel a sense of comfort with racial analysis, they will not sympathize with the pain and discomfort they have unleashed on racial minorities for centuries" (p.90). White comfort is, however, deeply entrenched as a fundamental defense protecting white interests and insulating white people from accountability, making it extremely difficult to disrupt (Joseph et al., 2020).

Counter-Narratives as an Anti-Racist Research Method

Given how white supremacy is embedded within the social work profession, it is not enough to merely engage with anti-racist pedagogical approaches, these practices must also be evaluated with a critical lens that considers how knowledge production in social work has historically served to entrench whiteness (Murray-Lichtman & Elkassem, 2021; Strickland & Sharkey, 2022; Tascón & Ife, 2019). This effort to challenge whiteness requires methodologies that counter hegemonic white narratives by centering the voices, perspectives, and stories of People of Color (Berrett-Abebe et al., 2023; Matias, 2013, 2016, 2020). Critical race scholars Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) contend that for People of Color "naming one's own reality" is an essential aspect of challenging color-blind claims of neutrality and objectivity (p.56). Over the past three decades, critical race educators have subsequently built a rich methodological tradition of employing counter-narratives–also called counter-stories–to contest racialized power structures in the academy (see Arday, 2018; Del-Villar, 2021; Jiang & Tham, 2024; Matias, 2013, 2020; Pewewardy & Almeida, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, Pewewardy and Almeida (2014) share counter-stories of their personal experiences in the social work academy "to illustrate operations of white supremacy and offer alternatives" (p.230). Similarly, Matias (2016) uses counter-stories to "learn from white resistance to make critical race work more effective in debunking whiteness" (p.151).

Collaborative Autoethnography

Scholars have employed autoethnography as an approach to constructing critically reflexive counter-stories that disrupt normative whiteness (see Arday, 2018; Matias, 2016, 2020). Autoethnography is a type of qualitative analysis that situates the personal in the context of social, cultural, and political processes (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographic researchers seek to "tell

stories to *explain* how they respond to their environments in certain ways and how their sociocultural contexts have shaped their perspectives, behaviors, and decisions" (Chang et al., 2016, p.19). Although autoethnography has traditionally been an individual research endeavor, collaborative autoethnographies (CAEs) are becoming increasingly common across disciplines (Winkler, 2018). In the CAE approach, "each author is not only engaging in radical self-study, but transformative collective examination as well" (Odera et al., 2021, p.808).

Within recent years, social work educators have employed CAE to examine and disrupt whiteness and settler colonialism in social work. The self-reflexive nature of CAE is well aligned with critical whiteness studies–which seek to identify and challenge white supremacy within the self, within relationships and groups, and within institutional structures (Tang Yan et al., 2021). Moreover, scholars have used CAE to critically analyze their own experiences of marginalization or oppression as a result of white supremacy in the social work academy (Aguilar & Counselman-Carpenter, 2021; Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022; Mbakogu et al., 2021).

Study Aims

This study seeks to build on nascent literature by using a critically reflexive CAE approach to explore how interracial team teaching partners can expose and disarm whitelash in the social work classroom. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) *How does whitelash manifest in response to anti-racist social work pedagogy?* and (2) *How can interracial teaching partnerships foster student and instructor reflexivity and accountability?*

Methodology

To answer these research questions, we use CAE to self-reflexively interrogate our personal experiences, interpersonal interactions, and pedagogical activities as a white, transgender PhD student and a Latina, cisgender Senior Instructor. We provide a brief narrative

overview of our approaches to inquiry, our experiences teaching, and our relationship with each other. These positionality statements were written independently to ensure authenticity.

Author 1

I am a white, transgender, queer, and disabled PhD student. In my research and in the classroom, I strive to interrogate my own role in structures of white supremacy. To this end, I seek to use critical theories and approaches to examine the ongoing social construction of whiteness. When I teach, I talk openly about my experiences and identities as connected to structures of power and oppression and I seek to create a learning space in which students can be critically reflective of their own strengths and areas of growth. I view teaching as a tool to foster accountability. In addition to calling in students when microaggressions or harm occur, I invite students to call me out.

This study grew out of a desire to integrate critical theories and pedagogies to interrogate how I, and other white social work instructors, perpetuate racial harm. This study is part of my dissertation, which analyzes how social work education can identify and dismantle white supremacy within the profession. I am enthusiastic about CAE as an anti-racist research method, because it provides a rare glimpse into the lives of educators, researchers, and scholars who are challenging whiteness. I chose to do this CAE with Author 2 because I want to share the joy I feel when we teach and learn together. This study is a celebration of all that we have learned about ourselves and each other through our partnership.

Author 2

I am a proud Mexican cisgender woman. I am also able-bodied, heterosexual, spiritual, and middle class. These identities are an important part of my identity and frame my perspective, my world view, and my work within research and student interactions. I have been a Licensed

Clinical Social Worker for 25 years, and a faculty instructor in higher education for 12 years. As an educator, I have embarked on a decade-long process of immersion into Social Justice and Liberation content. As a woman of color, I have intentionally placed myself into spaces where decisions are being made, helping to infuse equity and social justice into my department and into the university in the form of courses, policies, and support programs.

This study is a unique next step in my learning and growth which allows for a critical look at how I am teaching anti-oppressive courses, how I am intervening when things become "real," how I approach instruction for white students versus students of color, and how I can successfully create movement into the cycle of liberation for all my students (Harro, 2000a). I found the weekly meetings and evaluations we conducted through this study made our teaching more intentional, allowing us to "use" each other and our unique identities to create the best learning edges in the classroom.

Study Context

In this study, we analyze our experiences co-teaching two distinct anti-oppressive Bachelor of Social Work courses at a predominantly white university located in the western United States within a predominantly white city. In Spring 2023, we co-taught a practice course with 3rd year B.S.W. students and in Fall 2023, we co-taught a first-year seminar that counted toward general education credits and was open to all freshman and transfer students enrolled in the university. In terms of racial/ethnic demographics of these courses, about 75% of students were white, 20% were Latino/a/x, and 5% were another marginalized racial identity.

In both courses, we used a range of strategies to create an anti-oppressive learning environment in which students were willing to share their thoughts and emotions with their peers and the instructors. In alignment with hooks' (1994) critical pedagogy, we sought to disrupt the

banking method of education, instead framing learning and knowledge as co-constructed by students and instructors. We began each course by sharing our identities as related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, size, religion, age, ability, and socioeconomic status. We then asked the students to similarly introduce themselves and share how they identify. This exercise was students' first exposure to our classroom model which embraced productive discomfort and vulnerability. We then co-constructed community principles and guidelines with students in an effort to make visible and begin to challenge normative whiteness. Throughout both courses, we sought to bring attention to power dynamics by openly discussing how power influenced our relationship as co-instructors, and by facilitating student discussion about how identity is socially constructed in relation to power structures. To this end, early in the term, we defined the three types of microaggressions–microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults (Sue, 2018) and had students work together to practice interrupting the different types of microaggressions in case examples. Students then reflected on microaggressions they had experienced, witnessed, or enacted and discussed different strategies for interrupting harm. To support this reflexive practice and deepen engagement with the course content, we incorporated large group discussions and smaller "home groups." These small group discussions facilitated relational connection across identities. These classes became spaces where students laughed, theorized, and reflected together, forming a close-knit group.

Dataset Generation

To capture nuance in this investigation, our CAE approach focused on critical introspective dialogue between authors (Chang et al., 2016). Our primary data source was 10 reflexive processing sessions recorded in the Fall of 2023 in which we discussed our interactions with students–and with each other–in the context of white supremacy. Supplementary data

sources included formal and informal course surveys, student responses to assignments, and excerpts from class recordings. The recorded processing sessions ranged from 31 to 55 minutes, with an average duration of 42 minutes. During the processing sessions, we discussed this supplementary student data, asking ourselves exploratory questions such as "how am I feeling about these students' perspectives?" and "why might I be having this particular response?" Throughout this process, we sought to attend to any convergences or divergences in feelings and perspectives, creating a space for accountability and mutuality.

Ethical Protections and Implications

We sought ethical approval from [University's] institutional review board to conduct this study drawing on our own personal experiences and student data, including course recordings and content, informal student feedback and course evaluations. Upon review, the board determined that the study was exempted because it was "not human subjects research." This decision reflects an ongoing debate as to how institutional review boards should approach autoethnographic research considering that it is 'a story of self' that does not fit neatly within the boxes of scientific research (Chang et al., 2016; Lapadat, 2017). Although autoethnography is inconsistently regulated by ethical review, scholars have discussed the complex and multi-layered ethical implications of the study of the self within the context of relationships and interactions with others (Ellis, 2004; Edwards, 2021; Lapadat, 2017).

One common ethical framework used in autoethnography is Ellis' (2007, p.3) attention to the "relational ethics" that are involved in stories of self that implicate others. In our study, relational ethics is especially important considering that we draw on supplementary student data and students are featured so prominently in our narrative. Therefore, to protect students' rights, we informed students that: (a) classroom recordings, class content, and course evaluations may

be included as de-identified and anonymized data sources for our study, (b) data would not be analyzed until after the end of the course, and (c) the study would in no way impact students' grades in the course. Additionally, considering the sensitive nature of the topic at hand, we also provided students the opportunity to "opt-in" to providing informal feedback about their emotional experiences when learning about race and racism.

Data Analysis

To analyze data, we employ Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. This methodological approach is particularly well-suited to CAE because it facilitates an analysis of the researcher in relation to the data (Rutter et al., 2023). By centering our partnership throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing process, we sought "to interrogate the social construction of meaning within a critical orientation to qualitative research" (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p.1).

Throughout our analysis, we explored "emotion as a starting point or point of entry" for transformative change (Ahmed, 2014, p.14). To familiarize ourselves with the data, we independently read and re-read transcripts while engaging in reflexive memoing to explore salient ideas and our reactions to the data. We then engaged in collaborative pair coding of semantic and latent meaning as related to our research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which ultimately informed the themes that we generated. To create a roadmap for the manuscript, we considered how the themes worked together to tell "an interpretative story," subsequently naming and defining each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p.2). This analysis process continued throughout our writing, as we entwined rich quotes from our transcribed processing sessions alongside verbatim written student feedback to construct a narrative that critically analyzes our experiences teaching together. This in-depth analysis of classroom interactions is modeled on

anti-oppressive and anti-racist social work practice literature that uses real-life vignettes to illustrate harm in the social work classroom (Mak et al., 2021; Mirick & Davis, 2021).

Analysis

To clearly distinguish different data sources in our analytic writing, we use italics to indicate verbatim excerpts of written feedback from students.

Exposing Whitelash

To explore our first research question, "*how does whitelash manifest in response to anti-racist social work pedagogy?,"* we sought to identify how students emotionally responded to anti-racism education and how student emotionality impacted learning. In line with Bonilla-Silva's (2019) theory of *racialized emotions*, we reflected that students' emotional responses to learning about racism and white supremacy varied according to their social location within the white supremacist racial hierarchy. We found that students of color were validated by learning about racism and white supremacy, while white students more commonly reacted with surprise, guilt, or hostility. We perceived these white emotionalities as the foundation for retaliatory white discourse and behavior that sought to externalize negative emotions by blaming discomfort on People of Color. We concluded that white students are often unused to racial tension and resisted learning because it provoked discomfort. In response to material that illustrated racism as more than just an intellectual idea, but rather a system of violent oppression, we observed that white students lashed out and sought to reestablish white comfort through any means necessary.

Racialized Emotional Reactivity

In both courses we taught together, we incorporated readings, documentaries, podcasts, and media highlighting the lived experiences of People of Color. This included content on settler colonialism and the genocide of Indigenous peoples; white supremacy, racism, and chattel

slavery; and mass incarceration and police brutality. We also discussed social work's role in perpetuating whiteness, and we critiqued Robin DiAngelo's (2018) conceptualization of white fragility (see Brown, 2018). This material was intended to catalyze students' critical awareness of institutional and structural racism, thus forming the foundation for anti-racist social work practice.

In an informal feedback survey, students anonymously shared how they felt when learning about settler colonialism, racism, and white supremacy. Students described feeling a range of emotions, including, *"surprised," "uncomfortable," "sad," "ashamed," "embarrassed," "sick to my stomach," "disgusted," and "angered."* We found that learning about race and racism provoked discomfort, frustration, and anger from both students of color and white students; however, students of color's emotional responses largely related to the validation of their experiences of racial oppression, while white students reacted to their feelings about their acknowledgement and/or denial of whether racism exists. This variance of emotional reactivity as related to identity and lived experience aligns with Bonilla-Silva's (2019) description of racialized emotions as "socially engendered" in the context of racial domination (p. 3). To explore how emotional responses vary depending on social location, we discussed student feedback in relation to our own lived experiences.

Author 1 observed that many students of color felt anger or frustration related to our society's refusal to acknowledge and address racism and white supremacy. For example, a student of color shared in the informal feedback survey, "*[The course content] made us feel shitty and angered. [We] also felt uninformed and left out. [It] minimized our reality of oppression and racism from the past."* We discussed this statement during a processing session, and Author 2 reflected on the quote in the context of her experiences as Latina woman:

> As soon as I finished reading [this quote], it struck me as a Person of Color that wrote this. They're saying that their pasts, their past lives, their history was all minimized to hide the gross, racist injustice that has happened. So *'the films made us feel shitty and angered,'* I think that's like that internal rage like 'this has happened to us.' '*Also felt uninformed*,' so the Person of Color is saying 'why did I not know this? why was I left out of this and [why was] my reality minimized?'

Drawing on her own experiences as a Person of Color, Author 2 reflected that learning about race and racism can validate students' lived experiences of racial harm. Similarly, Weller and colleagues (2023) conducted a qualitative study exploring social work students' emotional experiences when learning about race. The authors concluded that Black students felt a "sense of validation" when learning about racism (p.541). Making space for and validating students of color's emotional reactions and lived experiences is a crucial aspect of anti-racism education. We created opportunities for students of color to share their feelings and perspectives on course content and dynamics through small and large group discussions, assignments, anonymous feedback surveys, and outside of class meetings.

In contrast to this emotional response as connected to lived experience, we observed that students who were not directly impacted by racial oppression and who were just beginning to gain awareness of racism and white supremacy, tended to feel anger and frustration that was directed at racist systems and tied to feelings of surprise and shame. For example, one white student anonymously stated, "*The [course content] was a slap in the face I didn't know I needed. I'm embarrassed and angry that I wasn't aware of this before, and it's forced me to check myself."* Another white student shared, "*There were often times I felt uncomfortable about the information presented. I felt angry and sick. The photos shocked me, but it was extremely eye*

opening." When students shared that they felt negative emotions, we intentionally created space to unpack these feelings by asking students to reflexively identify where their emotions originated from. White students shared that feelings of shame were often tied to their perception of themselves–i.e., *"I no longer feel proud to be an American"* and/or our society–i.e., *"we hide our history because we're ashamed about it and because we don't learn anything."* Following Harro's (2000b) model for the cycles of socialization and liberation, we reflected that, for many white students, the course catalyzed a "critical incident that creates cognitive dissonance" resulting in students "waking up" to the realities of racialized oppression (p.53-54). We observed that in response to course content, students had to assimilate new information and shift their understanding of themselves, which caused a "mini crisis" (Author 2) in which students experienced heightened emotional reactivity.

Not all white emotionality was related to shame or guilt, instead some white students responded with denial. For example, we experienced open hostility from some white students who claimed that our discussion of white supremacy was a form of reverse racism that "*oppresses us [as students]."* We both found it exhausting and exasperating how students denied the connection between their emotions and the course content, but we also felt a release of tension when students were "starting to connect that their emotions are not just about them being irritated with people at the front of the room" (Author 1). Describing her appreciation for students who understood how their emotions connected to course content, Author 2 commented:

> We're giving them accurate information, accurate histories. We're pulling the veil back from their eyes even though it is so uncomfortable [to do that] … They may not fully understand that that's what left them feeling the way they're feeling, but I think some of them did.

Pushback Against Discomfort

We reflected that students in "both classes started to pushback when they're first starting to feel the shame" (Author 2). This finding echoes evidence from the literature that suggests that white students resist learning about racism because it provokes uncomfortable feelings such as guilt, shame, anger, and despair (Matias, 2016; Tatum, 2010). In our processing sessions, we discussed how white students attempted to derail the class from content about racism and white supremacy, instead seeking to center the entire class's attention on ensuring their own white comfort. When we doubled down and set a firm boundary that we would not defer to white emotional comfort, we reflected that these students lashed out in an attempt to relieve negative emotions and ease feelings of shame and guilt. To explore this student pushback against discomfort during our classes, we describe two case examples which are real-life vignettes of classroom interactions (see Case Example 1 in Table 1 and Case Example 2 in Table 2). We then analyze these case examples to construct counter-stories.

<Place Table 1 Here>

We interpreted the student's response that he "*struggles*" with negative emotions as a form of avoidance and white centering. Author 2 set a hard boundary by stating that she had "no way to sugarcoat" it. Author 1 reaffirmed this boundary and sought to refocus attention on the impacts of racial oppression. After class, Author 1 questioned whether we should have eased the students' discomfort to facilitate learning. Author 2 pointed out that easing the students' discomfort might be a form of white complicity. Ultimately, we decided to reach out to the student to check in and discuss how discomfort can be productive in the context of transformative learning.

During a subsequent reflexive processing session, we discussed how the student singled out the instructor of color as the perceived source of their "oppression" while maintaining positive regard for the white instructor, despite the fact that we both doubled down in our responses. We reflected that the student may have lashed out and projected their feelings of shame onto the instructor of color in an effort to avoid feeling discomfort. Seen through a critical race lens, we perceived the student's placement of blame on Author 2 as a form of disavowal that relieved the student's racial discomfort. In this context, victim blaming is a racial ideology that underpins whitelash and protects white affective interests (Embrick et al., 2020). In other words, white individuals may disavow their complicity in racial harm and instead blame BIPOC for their discomfort in an effort to alleviate negative feelings such as guilt, anxiety, and shame (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Straker, 2004). As related to social work education, Jeffery (2005) argues that "students resist being pushed to question themselves in a way that disrupts their identity as a 'good person.'" (p.418). Moreover, critical race and whiteness scholars explain how the disavowal of white complicity can be "unconsciously experienced as deeply gratifying" because it reaffirms racial boundaries (Straker, 2004, p.407). As a real life example of this critique, Author 2 commented on the first case example,

> "I wonder if it gave him great delight to ask that question because then...here I claim myself to be Mexican…[So] what does that mean when a person who holds an oppressed identity becomes the oppressor?"

In this reflection, Author 2 named what critical scholars have pointed out: not all racialized emotion is negative, and emotionalities of whiteness are not limited to white guilt and white anger (Matias, 2016). As stated by Bonilla-Silva (2019), white people may "derive satisfaction and even pleasure in domination," therefore they have an affective interest in perpetuating white

supremacy (p.8). This critique illustrates that white pushback against discomfort is not an individual and isolated reaction, rather it is inextricably linked to the emotional hegemony of white comfort. The second case example further develops this analysis of white comfort.

<Place Table 2 Here>

Our interpretation of this second case example is that white students centered their own emotional experiences and attempted to derail class to avoid having to learn about racism. When we held them accountable to the harm they were inflicting, we observed that students responded with denial, anger, white tears, and demands for emotional comfort. Illustrating this demand for comfort, one student shared the following informal course feedback with us, "*In order to have space where not only are we hearing these discussions [about racism], but we're engaging in identifying behavior in ourselves, the other components of life need to be lessened for the time being."* Author 2 called out the irony of this student's comments during one of our processing sessions:

> "*The other components of life need to be lessened*" for white people to be able to take on the conversations and learn about race? Is that what I just took away from that? Gosh, that would be really nice. Could we press the pause button for People of Color, so they don't have to deal with race while they learn about race?

Reflecting on this quote and other student feedback, Author 1 stated during a processing session that "the students saw the tension as exclusively related to the class structure and not anything to do with content." White students not only disavowed their complicity in racial harm, they also denied the role of whiteness in provoking their discomfort, instead framing their emotionality as a response to assignments that were "too difficult." Supporting this finding, critical literature

suggests that this denial of white emotionality is a key feature of white emotional hegemony that functions to relieve white individuals of negative or painful feelings (Kim, 2016; Matias, 2016).

To challenge this disavowal of racialized emotions, we decided to directly name the connection we perceived in the class between racial dynamics and discomfort. In response to white students' pushback against learning, Author 2 stated during class, "every single person that holds a [racially] oppressed identity has to sit with the racial tension that this assignment asked you to sit with and that tension *was* the actual assignment, sitting with that *was* the learning." However, we found that when we named the connection between emotional reactions and racial power dynamics, white students once again attempted to make themselves into the victim by re-centering their own emotions. For example, in response to Author 1 calling out white centering in Case Example 2, a white student said they would stop participating in group discussions due to discomfort with our teaching approach. Students also used course evaluations as an institutionally protected avenue to reassert white comfort, for example, one student stated, *"I don't feel safe in this classroom. The judgement and rejection come from the teachers' reactions rather than students. This makes me shut down."* While Author 1 was initially taken aback by this statement, Author 2 shared that she gets this type of comment every semester. Author 2 stated, "I can actually predict who's going to write that it's not a safe learning environment, and the reason that it's 'not safe' is because it's actually not a safe environment for hate." In the courses we taught together, we observed that white students demanded they feel safe when engaging in whitelash rhetoric and behavior, however, these demands for safety obscured the violence enacted on BIPOC.

By framing class dynamics through the lens of socialization, we were better able to understand how whiteness protects itself. We reflected that whitelash responses that sought to

punish those who threaten white comfort were not individual in nature, rather they reflected a group interest in preserving the current racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). We observed that students who lashed out behaved as if they were "a mini mob" (Author 2) engaged in "groupthink" (Author 1). In our experiences, one student engaging in whitelash "leads the way for the whole class" (Author 1). For example, reflecting on the interaction in Case Example 1, Author 1 noted that, "this student has been acting as a spokesperson for other folks that he says talk to him about their concerns… he's thinking that he's doing everyone a favor." But "he's at the center of the whiteness and the maleness" (Author 2). This finding is similar to Evans-Winters and Hines (2020) discussion of groupthink in the social work classroom, in which the authors contend that white students resist anti-racism learning by "conspiring with other students in the class" to challenge the instructor and the course content (p.8). We see this groupthink in our first case example when the white student who sought to undermine Author 2 appealed to his peers.

While this student, and others who acted similarly, believed they were advocating for the safety of their peers, this advocacy for white comfort invalidated the experiences of both Author 2 and students of color. Thus, the collective desire to reaffirm white comfort maintained "a systematic relation of violence" by continually centering white feelings while ignoring and dismissing the harm inflicted on People of Color (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p.148). In fact, after the incident described in Case Example 2, Author 2 reflected that "it was like a full-frontal assault" and a student of color provided the following course feedback, "*Thank you for addressing this [incident]. Yesterday's class environment made me feel very uneasy as a classmate and a minority."* Reading this feedback, Author 2 reflected, "you know, that's about as simply put as you can make it of who got it and who didn't."

Disarming Whitelash

For our second research question, "*how can interracial teaching partnerships foster reflexivity and accountability to dismantle whitelash?,"* we considered how a pedagogy of discomfort and attention to socioemotional learning facilitated student growth. Reflecting on the importance of emotional engagement as a fundamental aspect of the learning process (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Lerner & Kim, 2024b; Zembylas & Matias, 2023), we sought to provide a structured learning environment in which this discomfort does not turn into whitelash against People of Color. To build this learning environment, we had to resituate ourselves as learners, as students and instructors alike practiced challenging racialized power dynamics and decentering whiteness. Through this process, we ascertained that centering BIPOC learning functioned as a catalyst for learning across racial differences, as white students had to wrestle with no longer being the center of the classroom. Notwithstanding the potential for growth, this type of socioemotional learning in which students reflexively challenged themselves, each other, and the instructors, required firm limits to prevent further harm against People of Color.

Embracing Emotional Engagement and Discomfort

As we navigated whitelash, we reflected on the importance of proactively acknowledging and processing emotionality when structuring the class:

> It feels like [talking about race and racism] brings up anger no matter what, and the question isn't whether or not someone's angry–it's who they're angry at. Because in this setting with the course we give them the space to be angry at the structures [of oppression], but outside of that, someone's sense of disgust or fear, or anger or guilt gets turned inwards or towards already stigmatized groups. (Author 1)

Consequently, we used the phrase "class as container" to describe how we sought to actively create a boundaried space that minimizes harm to BIPOC. For example, in the second case example, when white students claimed it was oppressive to grade them on their engagement with content on race and racism, we reflected that "the container wasn't firm" (Author 2) because we did not immediately set a limit with students that we would talk about their grades at a different time when we did not have a presenter. Reflecting on this instance and others, we noticed that when whitelash escalated it was due to not having firm enough boundaries. Furthermore, we noticed increased pushback from students when we did not provide sufficient structure for emotional engagement with learning. For example, after the whitelash incident in Case Example 2, we reflected "we're not utilizing their small groups enough, and that processing is what we missed these last two weeks" (Author 2). This need for emotional engagement with anti-racism education is reflected in Lerner and Kim's (2024b) study on anti-racist social work education, in which the authors argue that white students must learn to sit with uncomfortable emotions. Likewise, Bonilla-Silva's (2019) contends that we must recognize racialized emotions and disrupt social and emotional aspects of racial domination in order to truly engage in anti-racist change.

In reflecting on the racially specific responses to discomfort, we reaffirmed that "[we] want the tension, [we] want the discomfort among people who hold privilege" (Author 2). This desire to embrace discomfort as essential to learning fits with a *pedagogy of discomfort* as conceptualized by Boler (1999), Zembylas (2015), and Zembylas (2023). A pedagogy of discomfort is "a teaching practice that encourages students to move outside their comfort zones and challenge the beliefs, habits, and practices that sustain their biases" (Zembylas, 2023, p.194). As co-instructors, we sought to model productive discomfort by connecting course learnings

with examples from our personal experiences and by correcting each other in front of the class when we microaggressed. When we planned for class, we had "real intentionality around keeping the tension, processing the feelings that come up and processing the fragility that comes up" (Author 2). Ultimately, our goal was to foster a classroom environment in which both instructors and students sought to name racial tension and contend with their emotions as connected to structures of racial oppression.

In response to this pedagogy of discomfort, Author 2 observed that students of color immediately "had like, little half smiles–they leaned in, they were more excited." In contrast, white students initially resisted learning, but when we pushed through white centering and desire for white comfort, white students experienced deep learning that challenged their assumptions. For example, the white student who lashed out in Case Example 1 shared the following feedback at the end of the course, *"Thank you for all your hard work and consideration in that class…I've never seen a college professor care so much about the class they are teaching while also challenging our personal beliefs so well."* We reflected that engaging in a pedagogy of discomfort facilitated transformational learning because it challenged students to acknowledge and address rhetoric and behavior that protects whiteness. This approach to anti-racist teaching called into question how 'safe spaces' enact violence on BIPOC by prioritizing white 'safety' (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). By pushing students to engage in uncomfortable reflexivity, we sought to provide students with the skills to identify their own complicity in the reproduction of whiteness within social work education. This approach aligns with the National Association of Social Workers' (2025) call for "confronting the harm that our profession has caused and continues to perpetuate" by engaging in honest and accountable self-reflection (para. 6).

Resituating Ourselves as Learners

Through our teaching partnership, we recognized that embracing discomfort was essential not just for students, but also for us as instructors. Illustrating the bi-directional social and emotional learning process between students and instructors, in the aftermath of the whitelash incident described in Case Example 2, a student pointed out their own complicity as a student and our complicity as instructors. They stated, "*I didn't speak up yesterday because of my own fragility…As I watched you comfort the one gal who proclaimed that her integrity was being questioned, I realized that we all just witnessed white fragility and coddling."*

We discussed this feedback together as teaching partners, and Author 1 reflected that they had sought to ease their own discomfort by justifying their actions to the white students. Their validation of white emotionality caused the situation to escalate and re-centered whiteness while harming students of color. Author 2 provided constructive feedback to Author 1, stating that she finds that when students are entrenched in a particular viewpoint or belief, it is more effective to focus on everyone else's learning rather than stopping the class to get one resistant person onboard. This conversation was particularly impactful for Author 1 as a newer instructor because it made clear how their own avoidance of discomfort reinforced whiteness in the classroom. Author 1 reflected on their complicity, stating, "I think in this process I have been centering on the negative emotions white students have been expressing to the detriment of other voices in the classroom." This reflection aligns with evidence from the literature that suggests that anti-racist social work pedagogy often "centers the experiences of white students and whiteness, instead of—and at the expense of—students of color" (Lerner & Kim, 2024b, p.3). To combat this normative centering of whiteness, we had to engage in critical self-reflection that resituated our role in the classroom as that of a learner.

Centering BIPOC Learning

Through our interracial teaching partnership, we re-affirmed that anti-racist pedagogy must not only be focused on subject matter, but also on re-constructing social processes to center BIPOC learning and validate BIPOC experiences of harm. We viewed this type of social and emotional learning as a form of resocialization, in which both students and instructors challenged white norms of behavior and racialized power dynamics. For example, in the first case example, when the white student lashed out to protect white comfort, we perceived that he was also lashing out against the decentering of whiteness. In fact, in direct response to this whitelash, a student of color spoke up during class and re-affirmed that it *"*felt really good to her*"* that we were centering BIPOC learning instead of caving to white comfort. During a subsequent processing session, Author 2 reflected on this interaction, stating,

> It's really interesting how this very bright, very intuitive person of color had assumed those things about me and my approach. But yet the white dudes in the class were attributing oppression and all kinds of nastiness to me. [Laughs].

We observed that this instance of whitelash against the centering of BIPOC was similar to bell hooks' (1994) description of white students' reactions to her class on African American women's literature. hooks observed that white students accepted the representation of People of Color in course content, however, they resisted the decentering of white perspectives and ideas because it felt threatening. Like bell hooks, we noticed that white students resisted and felt threatened when we challenged normative social processes.

Notwithstanding the whitelash against the decentering of whiteness, we found that naming whiteness and focusing on the needs of students of color catalyzed a learning opportunity across racial differences. For example, after the whitelash in Case Example 1, a student of color reflected on her interactions with white peers, stating, "*There was a real introspective process*

about it because I really had to stop and think to myself, am I trying to please the people with more dominant identities, the way we have been socialized to please them?" This student's reflection aligns with Lerner and Kim's (2024a) conclusion that students of color felt they were expected "to center White students' feelings over their own" (p.78).

Parallelly, after we called out the whitelash incident in Case Example 2 as harmful to People of Color, a white student provided the following course feedback about the incident, "*this was the best lesson in fragility, white or otherwise, that any of us could have been gifted. Everyone in the classroom today learned something about themselves and their perspectives."* Consequently, we suggest that centering BIPOC learning in the classroom functions as a powerful counter-narrative to whiteness, thus advancing anti-racist pedagogy and facilitating learning for students of color and white students.

Implications

Embrick and colleagues (2020) contend that whenever there are movements towards racial equity, there will be white backlash against these real or perceived threats to white racial domination. In the context of anti-racism education, discussions about race and whiteness may be perceived as a threat by white students who experience feelings of guilt, shame, and discomfort (Matias, 2020; Zembylas & Matias, 2023). To alleviate these feelings of discomfort, students may resist learning or lash out (Edmonds-Cady & Wingfield, 2017; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Ozias, 2023). Across the social work literature, researchers are increasingly documenting how white student resistance has manifested as violence against BIPOC students (Lilly, 2023; Lerner & Kim, 2024a) and instructors (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2022; Duhaney & El Lahib, 2021; Khan & Absolon, 2021). However, despite the frequency of harm, there is a lack of research exploring practical strategies to disrupt whitelash in anti-racism education (Whitehead

et al., 2021). Moreover, although critical whiteness scholars are examining how white emotionality reproduces whiteness (see Matias, 2016; Ozias, 2023; Zembylas & Matias 2023), this type of critically reflexive analysis of racialized emotions remains largely missing from the social work literature. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by applying critical whiteness perspectives to expose and disarm whitelash against anti-racism education.

Through a critically reflexive counter-story, we expose whitelash as "weaponized white emotionalities" that resecure whiteness and enact violence on BIPOC (Zembylas & Matias, 2023, p.458). We subsequently explore strategies to disarm this whitelash, including embracing discomfort and emotional engagement, resituating ourselves as learners, and centering BIPOC learning. Throughout these strategies, we discuss the importance of setting limits to prevent and minimize harm to BIPOC. Reflecting on Bonilla Silva's conceptualization of racialized emotions, we contend that anti-racist educators must explicitly incorporate social and emotional learning to facilitate anti-racist pedagogy. This conclusion aligns with calls to Jiang and Tham's (2024) argument that attending to racialized emotions combats whiteness by cultivating critical awareness and facilitating genuine race dialogues. Vitally, our interracial team teaching approach of a pedagogy of discomfort sought to attend to the racialized emotional differences in how both instructors and students engage with anti-racism education depending on their positionality. Knowing that white students would respond more positively to being called out by a white instructor, Author 1 sought to step in and challenge white students directly when they centered their emotions. Parallelly, Author 2 focused on validating students of color's experiences of racial harm by focusing the class on the emotional, physical, and material impacts of whiteness.

Much of this pedagogical approach and counter-story aligns with previous research that explores interracial teaching partnerships as a strategy to promote both student and instructor

accountability and self-reflexivity (Curiel, 2021; Garran et al., 2015; Gollan & O'Leary, 2009; Odera et al., 2021). Similar to Garran and colleagues (2015) we experienced that the team teaching relationship facilitated challenging one another's unnamed biases. This relational approach to teaching and learning modeled "vulnerability as an act of resistance," thus setting the scene for the decentering of whiteness (Odera et al., 2021). Additionally, in alignment with Curiel's (2021) systematic review of team teaching strategies, we found that team teaching created a support system for each of us as we navigated student denial and defensiveness.

Notwithstanding this potential for transformative learning, a limitation of this study is that we largely focused on identifying and contesting negative white racialized emotions, thus potentially recentering whiteness (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). To counter these deficit-focused and white-centered narratives, Leonardo and Zembylas (2023) propose that future research should center Black affect to counter white emotional hegemony. As examples of scholarship that analyzes racialized emotions as a resource to counter white hegemony, Ohito and Brown (2021, p.135) explore "Black affective networks" as "pathways for temporary escape from the anti-Black violence built into PWIs." Likewise, Rolón-Dow & de Novais (2024, p.1) discuss how racialized emotions can function "as maps and compasses for students of color navigating a predominantly white university." Overall, future research directions include examining the depth and implications of racialized emotions as an essential aspect of anti-racism education.

Conclusion

This collaborative autoethnography offers a counternarrative to expose how racialized emotional reactivity and pushback against discomfort escalate into whitelash in anti-racist social work education. Through an interracial teaching partnership grounded in a pedagogy of discomfort, we discuss how we sought to disarm whitelash by embracing discomfort and

emotional engagement, resituating ourselves as learners, and centering BIPOC learning. Our findings affirm that emotionality is not peripheral to anti-racist pedagogy—it is foundational. Anti-racist social work education must interrupt whitelash to prevent additional harm to students and instructors of color. Our hope is that this study illustrates how whitelash against anti-racism education can be transformed from an inevitable setback, into an opportunity to disrupt the social production of whiteness. By actively engaging racialized emotions and setting intentional boundaries, interracial co-teaching can transform the classroom into a site of radical possibility where discomfort becomes a catalyst for growth.

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Table 1

White Student Resistance to Negative Emotions

Case Example 1
During a class session on settler colonialism, students discussed the role of anger in motivating learning and collective action. One white student stated that he felt it was difficult to engage with the course content because it provoked negative emotions. His comments and our responses are provided verbatim directly from the transcript of the class recording. **Student:** It's really hard to have all this be difficult and not be told to have time to take care of yourself while you're listening to all of it. **Author 2:** The most I can help my students understand is how to take action. When I say, "moving into rage," the anger when it hits a certain point becomes when you can actually take action. Like sadness, guilt, shame–all those emotions get people stuck and people stay stuck. What helps is to move into action, which I think is the most important thing to hear. **Student:** Those are all negative emotions. I struggle with that… **Author 2:** I think what you're feeling, being overwhelmed and seeing us and feeling super frustrated are absolutely spot on and real, and I have no way to sugarcoat this content. **Author 1:** Ultimately, I think what it comes down to is that it should suck because it's nothing compared to the lived reality of it. Directly after class, Author 1 questioned their response, stating, "I definitely could have handled that better…I probably shouldn't have doubled down." The next class period, when processing racial power dynamics among students and instructors, the same student again expressed his desire not to engage with negative emotions. Author 2 re-affirmed that feeling uncomfortable was part of learning. The student responded by telling Author 2 that she was "an oppressor." He then asked Author 2, "how does it feel to be an oppressor?" This occurred in front of the whole class.

Table 2

White Students Lashing Out to Protect White Comfort

Case Example 2
The class discussion for the day was about slavery as connected to contemporary racial oppression. We had a speaker who was a Black man presenting about his personal experiences of police brutality. A group of white students interrupted the speaker to argue with the instructor that they should not be graded on their engagement with material about race and racism. Numerous students escalated in their resistance to the content and learning. The presenter stepped out of the classroom to take space for himself, deeply upset by the students' resistance to the content, and the white instructor called out the student behavior as being a form of white centering that deeply invalidated and harmed People of Color. In response to

being called out, students' emotional responses intensified. We witnessed rage, indignation, tears, and shame. Some students responded with raised voices that their integrity was being questioned while other students began to cry and attempted to seek out the presenter after class to apologize.