Silencing Racialized Humor in Elementary School: Consequences of Colormuting and Whiteness for Students of Color

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Abstract

Racial humor among students of color presents a sociopolitical dilemma for teachers, requiring rapid calculations of if and how to respond in ways that support an inclusive and equitable classroom climate. This analysis uses two instances of racial humor in an elementary classroom to unpack a White teacher's responses to students of color who were both creators of and audience to racial jokes. Starting from the point of affirming the teacher's decision to intervene, findings explore the ramifications of how intervening had multiple, layered consequences for the dynamics of silencing and racialization among students of color. The purpose of this approach is to model how to sift through the complications of silencing race talk and to support conceptual and practical conversations about anti-racist pedagogical moves in the midst of fleeting, meaningful moments in classroom socialization to race.

Keywords: racial humor, silence, colormute, whiteness, white teacher

Throughout a given school day, students interact with numerous identities. In this world of interaction and identity, students of color in racially diverse schools predictably engage with each other over race, ethnicity, language, and culture. In many situations, students talk about academic work simultaneously and seamlessly with social conversations that perform identity work around race and ethnicity. This social talk includes race talk and racial humor, a source of rich cultural-historical and community-based knowledge but also a potential source of psychological or emotional bullying. These slight nuances in intention, tone, and interpretation often depend on who tells the jokes, about whom, and for whom.

Race talk is an interactional discourse that is substantively about race, racism, and racialization (Pollock, 2004). Racial humor is race talk that is intended to be funny, often playing with racial meaning and identity (Rappoport, 2005; Weaver, 2010). Racial humor

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can be multi-modal, encompassing jokes, teasing, gestures, and facial expressions. In schools and classrooms, racial humor performs status work around power, friendship, and identity in front of a classroom "audience." Racial humor may or may not be considered racist—depending on the speaker, intended target of humor, and other contextual factors (Mayo, 2008; Rappoport, 2005; Weaver, 2010)—and may not even be perceived as funny. Instead, humor may also intend to harm. Thus, racial humor presents an affective and sociopolitical puzzle for classroom climate and teachers' judgment.

Teachers—who are predominantly White women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013)—may not be certain when or how to acknowledge or respond to students' race talk and racial humor. Middle-class White women teachers observe student interactions, interpret them, and choose whether and how to respond. These responses are instances of leveraging professional and moral judgment that draw on varied issues, such as instructional goals, tacit cultural values and beliefs, background knowledge, and relationships with students (Campbell, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shulman & Elstein, 1975). These split-second decisions can create anxieties of Whiteness, regardless of a White woman teacher's personal commitments to equitable education (A. Lensmire, 2012). For example, numerous studies have described how White instructors' facilitation of race dialogue may focus on monitoring rules of engagement, such as norms of politeness, thereby shutting down race talk (Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009; Yoon, 2012).

This study uses two interactions from a fifth-grade classroom to explore the trade-offs involved when middle-class White women teachers silence racial humor as inappropriate among students of color. These interactions reflect how an equity-minded, middle-class White woman teacher enacted piecemeal, ideological dissonance that moved between reifying middle-class Whiteness and pursuing anti-racist pedagogies. Becoming a critically conscious, academically ambitious, and equitably minded teacher for students of color is a struggle of imperfection, one that is captured in this analysis.

These two examples are interpreted in a way that peels back the layers of racial socialization for both a teacher and her students. A layered analysis considers multiple potential meanings and is derived from a strategy of analyzing humor modeled in Berger (1993). I describe and interpret interactions and social processes, including inconsistencies. Thus, I am neither labeling middle-class White women teachers as *either* racist *or* culturally responsive, nor am I proposing essential ideas about how certain race, class, or gender groups (e.g., middle-class White women teachers or Latino boys) behave. Rather, I wrestle with the consequences of teachers' responses to racial humor—even when that humor may not be funny. I do not argue that jokes or racial microaggressions should be allowed to continue uninterrupted; rather, I note how simply silencing racial jokes has multiple possible consequences: a) Silencing can displace explicit attention and talk of racial inequity as an act of colormuting, or masking the race-related meanings of the content of talk (Pollock, 2004); b) silencing can affirm White supremacy and Whiteness ideologies about White persons' race comfort (DiAngelo, 2011; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Yoon, 2012;); and c) silencing limits educators' and students' capacities to explore and critically question the ways that they are learning to be participants in a racialized society and classroom community (Matias, 2013).

In preparation for a layered analysis of classroom interactions related to race and humor, I review the literature on race talk and examine how scholars have conceptualized racial humor broadly and in K–12 schools. Next, I lay out a framework of silence and discipline in schools that are sites of reproducing Whiteness and colorblind ideologies. The analysis examines two classroom examples before discussing how middle-class White women teachers might interpret and respond to racial humor among students of color.

Background on Racial Humor in Schools

Teachers have an extensive say over what, when, how, and with whom students interact in the classroom (Cazden, 2001). This aspect of teaching is an essential part of socializing students into academic and social worlds. That is, teachers socialize students not only on academic vocabulary but also on what constitutes polite, socially appropriate interaction for school (Apple, 2004).

Dynamics of teacher-structured talk change when the topic is race. In some cases, scholars have studied the discursive and pedagogical moves of middle-class White women teachers who seemed comfortable moderating student dialogue about race (see Lewis & Tierney, 2013). However, it has been more common to hear about White individuals' anxiety about doing so (Sue, 2015). Middle-class White women teachers have likely had fraught experiences with race talk with people of color, many of which may have informed or stemmed directly from being a White teacher in a classroom of students of color (A. Lensmire, 2012; T.J. Lensmire, 2010). White concerns about fear and safety around engaging in race talk—particularly emotional protection—have been embodied in White teachers' talk with students of color about race (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). In this section, I discuss how middle-class White women teachers have socialized students into race talk and racialized humor, particularly in classrooms with diverse students of color.

Race Talk in Schools and Classrooms

Research across several education-related fields, such as anthropology, counseling, and developmental psychology, has documented that race talk attaches social meaning to race (Pollock, 2004; Roberts, Bell, & Murphy, 2008; Schaffer & Skinner, 2009; Sue, 2015). Race talk is multimodal—it can be instantiated through speech, written text, gesture, clothing, music, and images (Johnson, 2011; Schaffer & Skinner, 2009). Race talk is not the province of any one ideological orientation; it requires interpreting meaning in social, local, and historical context.

Based on ethnographic observations in classrooms, a research base has emerged that explores various types of race talk in schools. In some of these studies, students actively constructed race talk in school alongside official discourse. These conversations may be spin-offs, playing with language from the classroom's official, teacher-sanctioned discussion resulting in a second undercurrent of discussion (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012). Race talk among students also may occur as groups work on projects and tasks, with academic talk woven into social banter (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Roberts et al., 2008; Tierney, 2013). In these conversations, students have made use of language to build and make sense of their school identities in relation to their social worlds (Gee, 2000). In other situations, race talk is part of "official" classroom discourse, sanctioned and facilitated by teachers; studies of this kind of discourse have

focused on teachers' discursive moves and intentions (Lewis & Tierney, 2013; Sue, 2015; Yoon, 2012). Although Lewis and Tierney examined more skillful critical pedagogy, Sue and his colleagues, across numerous studies (see Sue, 2015), explored the challenges of facilitating formal *difficult dialogues* on race in higher-education classrooms.

One important note is that many of the studies above referred to race talk in secondary schools and higher-education institutions. Few of these studies have discussed the teacher's race and gender identity as a relevant point of analysis. However, when teachers observe or participate in race talk, their power in the classroom means that their identities matter to some degree. Furthermore, few studies of race talk have considered elementary school students' race talk as it occurs in classrooms (exceptions include Schaffer & Skinner, 2009; Yoon, 2012). However, in research designs involving interviews with formal prompts for race talk, scholars have identified developmental differences in awareness of race and the appropriateness of race talk among children aged 8–11 (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). Some recent research has also suggested that racial discrimination exists among White children in early childhood and can be mitigated through educational interventions. In one study by Johnson and Aboud (2017), second-grade White children favored White characters in stories; however, after they engaged in a cross-race storytelling intervention, their favoritism reduced over time. The race of the storyteller also influenced how much these children discussed Black characters in the stories. However, kindergarten-aged White children adjusted their predispositions to lesser degrees than the second-graders. Thus, race talk and racial humor likely shift developmentally. Therefore, elementary-age race talk and racial humor merit better understanding in order to build tools and anticipate challenges for equitable teaching and learning environments.

This study focuses on race talk that is initiated by students of color in an elementary classroom. In a slight twist, both instances of this race talk became the object of attention from a middle-class White woman teacher yet remained outside of teacher-sanctioned discussion. That is, the race talk that students initiated was not validated by the teacher for expansion or bridging of the official classroom discourse and was given a negative status in the classroom (Gutiérrez et al., 1995).

Racial Humor

For the most part, scholars agree that mainstream, White-dominant norms in the United States dictate that race talk is generally impolite and inappropriate in social settings, particularly in public (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Mazzei, 2003; Sue, 2015). School social norms follow these patterns. Studies have described different ways in which teachers and students police race talk and racial identities, resulting in dominant ideological discourses such as colorblindness, colormuteness, and racism denial (Vaught, 2012; Watson, 2012; Yoon, 2012, 2016).

However, racial humor intentionally violates norms of politeness and silence around race (Mayo, 2008; Rappoport, 2005). Racial humor, therefore, deals in the currency of discomfort and disturbance (Berger, 1993; Mayo, 2008). In racial humor, paradoxically, discomfort from race talk can be associated with positive affect (Rappoport, 2005; Roberts et al., 2008; Weaver, 2010).

There are different stances toward racial humor in empirical and conceptual literature. Some scholars have examined the harms and racism in racial humor (e.g., Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013), whereas others have argued for racial humor's subversive, anti-racist challenge to dominant discourses (e.g., Roberts et al., 2008; Weaver, 2010). Both stances in the literature rest on the argument that racial humor is deemed successful in consideration of context (Weaver, 2010). In the following paragraphs, I discuss scholarship on major contextual factors in interpreting racial humor, including: a) the speaker; b) the audience; c) differing social statuses and identities of individuals involved in telling and hearing the joke; d) emotional and psychological impact of the joke on the audience; e) the "butt" or target of the joke; f) directions of humor toward self or others; g) historical meaning of symbols and language in the joke; and h) techniques and forms with which the joke is told (Berger, 1993).

Racial humor has a long history of playing with, inverting, and subverting racist stereotypes (Carpio, 2008; Lowe & Oh, 2015; Tierney, 2013; Weaver, 2010). There are racially cultural routines of exchanging jokes (e.g., "playing the dozens") that have been noted in African American humor (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005). In addition, some studies in the education field have explored how young people use stereotypes and racial humor to reverse and subvert the meanings of racist symbols and language (Roberts et al., 2008; Tierney, 2013). Thus, racial humor has been explored as an essential aspect of defining self, building bridges with racial others, coping with oppression, and finding solidarity in friendship (Hansen, 2012; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Tierney, 2013).

But studies conceptualizing the oppressive nature of racial humor have emphasized its reification of racist discourses and imagery, psychological and emotional harm inflicted on people of color who are targets of jokes or in the audience, and the effects of silencing minoritized racial others who must go along with being the butt of jokes (Cabrera, 2014; Carpio, 2008; Douglass, Mirpuri, English, & Yip, 2016; Raby, 2004; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013). In addition, scholars have explored the ways racial humor in public discourse (e.g., comics, newspapers) reveal institutionalized racist norms (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013).

Finally, racial humor often crosses boundaries of gender and sexuality. For example, Lowe and Oh (2015) explored how Notorious MSG's parodies of Asianness both disrupted and reified stereotypes of Asian men's emasculation. From a different perspective, Cabrera (2014) identified how racist jokes reified not only White supremacy among White male college students but also protected those students' White masculinity. Another study argued that women of color utilized awkwardness as a trope to illustrate the anxieties and complexities of their lives (Bradley, 2015). Finally, humor as a field of media and culture is heavily raced and gendered. Television marketing, for example, tends to reduce the use of humor in advertisements directed at White women, particularly in contrast to the use of humor for men ("TV commercials favor thin, young, White women," 2006). This suggests a stereotype that White women lack a sense of humor.

In school contexts, research on racial humor is a subset of studies on race talk. For example, some studies have described different ways in which teachers and students police or defend race talk, resulting in dominant ideological discourses such as colorblindness, colormuteness, and denial of racism (Castagno, 2008; Pollock, 2004; Watson, 2012; Yoon, 2012, 2016). Within this group, two studies in particular examined how racism was

excused as "just joking" and therefore was not "really" racist (Douglass et al., 2016; Raby, 2004). Douglass et al. also found that adolescent targets of racial/ethnic teasing reported feelings of anxiety despite dismissing the seriousness of the teasing. In contrast, other studies in education have explored young people's uses of racial humor to build cross-racial friendships, mitigate the seriousness of race-related academic content, and critique racist discourses (Hansen, 2012; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Tierney, 2013). These select studies on racial humor in schools have taken place in secondary schools among diverse adolescents of color. Notably, these studies were also conducted in classrooms where White teachers sought to implement critical pedagogies, making social politics of identity a central theme in the curriculum. There are no known studies interrogating middle-class White women teachers' interventions in racial humor among elementary school students of color; though they likely exist, they may not have been published or have a well acknowledged presence in relevant research literatures. Given research on young children's race talk and developing racialization, this study addresses this gap in empirical scholarship because children from young ages investigate and make sense of racial identity and racial difference, including learning social norms of avoiding or excusing race talk (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008; Johnson & Aboud, 2017).

Framing Silences of Race, Class, and Gender in Schools

Because race talk is not generally considered appropriate or easy according to dominant White social norms of engagement, racial humor violates and exploits silences around race talk. In schools, teachers' interventions to respond to race talk and racial humor address these violations. Exploring racial humor, therefore, requires an understanding of the dynamics of silence and silencing in schools. This section articulates the lenses through which I make meaning of middle-class White women teachers' silences and silencing around racial humor during interactions with students of color.

Silence is an abstention from or omission of sound, remark, or utterance (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). In theoretical terms, however, silence is not simply an absence or opposite of speech; silence is an active choice, whether it results from empowerment or disempowerment. Silence is also directional: Some silences are chosen for the self; some are imposed upon others. Thus, in an interaction, an individual can be silent, silenced, or silencing.

There are variations in the nature of silence. Therefore, neither speech nor silence is inherently liberatory or oppressive, though it is always related to how power is negotiated and produced because it underscores the positioning and sometimes struggle between parties over the discourse that is viable in a situation (Duncan, 2004; Ferguson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1996). Just as language and discourse are intimately connected to power and knowledge, so is silence (Baldwin, 1951; Fairclough, 2001; Foucault, 1975). From this critical, power-conscious perspective on race and gender, silence must be interpreted by how it functions in local and historical context (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As with racial humor, it is through these contexts that the dynamics of silence and silencing get their meaning. Next, I describe four dimensions of silence, focusing on examples related to race, social class, and gender.

The first dimension of silence and silencing is related to intention. Some intentional silences occur around race when individuals are afraid of saying something wrong, want

to avoid confrontation, or seek to deracialize conversation, thereby denying the validity of the knowledge of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Mazzei, 2003, 2008; Sue, 2015; Yoon, 2012). In this sense, intentional silence functions as a tool in the construction of White supremacy and the invisibility of Whiteness. In contrast, unintentional silences can reveal the inability or denial of privileged persons to recognize their dominant positions in social structures, such as race or social class (Baldwin, 1951; Castagno, 2008; Mazzei, 2003). Thus, even unintentional silences "speak"; they are a testament to normative power and also perpetuate the invisibility of Whiteness or class privilege.

Second, the normative dimension of silence can function in several ways—it can result in erasure, politeness, and muffling of speech. For example, Lorde (1984) described conversations in which White women sought to erase the experiences and facts of their oppression and normativize politeness that is perceived to be the realm of middle-class White propriety. Politeness norms are also an example of how people of color may experience forms of muffled speech; though not entirely silenced, people of color may have to speak in ways so as not to cause discomfort for White audience members (Lorde, 1984; Sue, 2015). This normativizing maintains racial, gendered, and classed oppressions. Relatedly, being silenced is often racialized, classed, and gendered; this pattern is easily observed in schools among students of color. For instance, Morris (2007) described how Black girls were differently monitored for the volume, tone, and energy behind their speech and movements. Lei (2003) also found this pattern and contrasted it to the ways that White teachers characterized Asian boys as quiet and submissive.

Closely related to erasure and muffled speech, colormuteness is another form of normativizing silence (Pollock, 2004). Colormuteness describes several conditions of race talk in schools when race is carefully avoided in certain situations and openly discussed in others. Selectively addressing race and racism through colormuteness is a conscious practice that is believed to protect speakers from being called racist. At the same time, selectively muting attention to race at times when racism is an important issue positions racism to continue (Hytten & Warren, 2003; Mazzei, 2003; Watson, 2012).

The third dimension of silence is how marginalized individuals and groups deploy it. Silence may be protective; it can be exhausting or painful for people of color to engage in conversation about the traumas of racism with White people (Delpit, 1988). At other times, silence is protective when people of color are assaulted by racial microaggressions and confrontation would be personally or professionally harmful (Baldwin, 1951; Duncan, 2004; Sue, 2015). In other situations, silence can be an empowered choice for people of color, a sign of resistance to being known or objectified (Duncan, 2004). Active resistance may be possible only through silence, or a refusal to speak. This reason for silence is frequently observed in racialized interactions between teachers and students though potential speakers of varying ideologies can employ it (Delpit, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 1996).

The fourth dimension of silence that I discuss here is physical silence or bodily discipline. In schools, physical and auditory silence have a specific history. Silence—or a quiet hum—and orderly productivity are considered the ideal images of a successful school (Beachum, Dentith, McCray, & Boyle, 2008; Foucault, 1975). Foucault describes physical regulation through discipline as institutionalized power over human beings. In schools, bodily discipline is rigorously enforced and represents rules of engagement: Students'

silence is expected to be self-regulated, only broken by raising one's hand, and students must stay in their seats unless otherwise allowed by an authority figure. Students in elementary schools are expected to move through the school quietly and in lines (Beachum et al., 2008), and to keep their clothing neat and voices modulated (Morris, 2005, 2007). This bodily discipline may be less enforced in more privileged schools (Beachum et al., 2008). These four dimensions of silence, particularly the latter, are leveraged by students of color and White women teachers alike as they negotiate power (im)balances in the classroom.

The question of who enforces or imposes silence—and under what conditions—is salient when middle-class White women teachers interact with students of color in school. Since the 19th century, teaching has been considered "naturally" middle-class White women's work (Cavanagh, 2005; Thompson, 1997). In the late 18th and 19th centuries, missionary zeal, U.S. expansion, and colonization played a role in the construction of middle-class White women as civilizers and educators of the colonized (Deutsch, 1987; Ware, 1992). These historical legacies are still discursively reified in the present (Cavanagh, 2005; Hyland, 2005; Lightfoot, 1978; Thompson, 1997; Ware, 1992). With the charge of socialization, middle-class White women teachers have the authority to determine what kind of behavior and socialization is best for children, and to determine what constitutes caring and effective teaching and parenting (Lightfoot, 1978; Thompson, 1997; Yoon, 2016).

This history is relevant to White women teachers' roles in silencing race talk and racial humor. A middle-class White woman teacher, through silence and silencing, can be an intermediary whose power over students is taken for granted; whose passive silence allows racial microaggressions disguised as jokes to go uninterrupted; who has internalized ideas of discipline and common-sense discourses of what it means to be a teacher with the role of socializing children; and who is subjected to surveillance herself (Foucault, 1975).

Methodology and Study Setting

This analysis draws on data from an interpretive, qualitative case study. In the larger study, I followed two teachers and three grade-level teams in a racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse elementary school, which I call Fields Elementary (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). Because I was interested in how Whiteness was constructed through daily interactions and embedded in taken-for-granted social norms in teaching and teacher learning, I utilized ethnographic approaches to fieldwork and data collection, immersing myself in the school over five months. As a result, I was able to achieve a level of saturation in terms of understanding the classroom dynamics and the identities of two teachers—I was able to share understanding smiles with students and with teachers. I knew the back-stories of the teachers, students, and the school district that continued to be referenced throughout the year; and I was able to discern the difference between routine interactions and unique ones. Along the way, I noticed not only the construction of Whiteness among the White teachers in the school, but also the ways that these White teachers affirmed or intervened in the racial sensemaking among students of color. For instance, I followed the ways that one teacher taught children to be "nice" and how to behave in raced and gendered ways. In another classroom, I noticed and followed how students of color talked about race among themselves, often out of earshot of their

White women teachers. Such conversations occurred most often in the fourth- and fifth-grade classroom in my study, though they also existed in similar ways in the focal second-grade classroom. These relatively private conversations were often sprinkled with giggles; one entailed arguments over what was "racist" or not. When analyzing these conversations, the giggles stood out, as well as their seemingly intentional release outside the jurisdiction of their White woman teacher. To understand and test this strategic suppression, I began to focus on when racial humor was used among students of color when the White woman teacher, Elizabeth, was nearby.

Study Site and Participants

Fields Elementary School was in a suburban city with high racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. It was described as "urban" by educators in the school district because of this diversity and because it served a predominantly lower-income community; at the time of the study, approximately 70% of students received free and reduced-price lunch. The population of the city had been changing due to an influx of immigrant communities. Teachers described, and district data affirmed, a pattern of "White flight" from the neighborhood over the last decade, as well as growing racial segregation within the school district. Fields had become one of the "Latino" schools in the district, with Latino/a students representing more than 40% of the student body. Still, the school served a diverse group of students, with no racial group representing a majority of the student population (i.e., African Americans comprised 13% of students, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were 17% of students, White students were 20% of students, and Native American students were 1% of the school). At the time of the study, the district did not track mixed-race student identities, though it began doing so the next year. Finally, the school had experienced heavy turnover in leadership. Elizabeth, the focal teacher in this study, counted three different principals in her first three years at the school, and assistant principals rotated every year. At the time of data collection, the faculty was predominantly White in contrast to the diverse students of color (i.e., in a school with over 620 students, two classroom teachers and two resource teachers were people of color, all of whom were Asian American).

Two teachers were focal participants in the study. The initial study design included consideration that I would interact with students in these classrooms, but I was primarily focused on White women teachers and White womanhood in teaching and teacher learning. Thus, students were not research participants in the study, and this analysis focuses on teachers' interpretations and actions. I devoted full and half days of observations to two teachers' classrooms, in addition to teacher-team and school-wide settings. The focal teacher in this analysis, Elizabeth, was a young White woman who was in her seventh year of teaching at the time of data collection. She had taught all seven years at Fields, though in different grades. Elizabeth was also a member of the school's instructional leadership team. She was raised in a two-parent, middle-class, White household; both of her parents were career teachers. She lived in a larger, wealthier, racially diversifying city about 10 miles away from Fields.

Data Collection

   I spent roughly 200 hours in each teacher's classroom (i.e., 400 hours total), following them throughout the school day and across settings. In addition to their classroom teaching, I observed their movement through hallways, school-wide assemblies and events, staff meetings, data and instructional planning sessions, and grade-level team meetings. I ate lunch with teachers in the staff lounge, and I observed several exchanges between teachers, students, and the school's behavioral specialist. I took extensive field notes, scripting as much quoted speech as possible. I also conducted formal, semi-structured interviews with each teacher at the beginning, middle, and end of data collection. These interviews explored each teacher's interpretations of her students and her philosophy of teaching diverse, predominantly students of color in equitable ways. These formal interviews were recorded and transcribed. I also had informal follow-up conversations with teachers throughout each day; some were recorded, but most were so brief that I scripted them immediately after they occurred (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Data Analysis

   Data analysis began during data collection, with reflective memos and *filling in* field notes (Emerson et al., 2011). After completing data collection, I conducted two rounds of open coding while reading the data corpus in its entirety, allowing themes and motifs to emerge from the data in the first round and grouping codes into categories for the second round. I narrowed codes down to four motifs: socialization, behavior management, academic status of students, and positive relationships/affect. Within these four motifs, I noticed that many of the episodes coded as "socializing" and "behavior management" related to teachers' disciplining students into silences around race, class, and gender. I also noticed the difference between the two classrooms' trends in how often students of color initiated and strategically conducted race talk among themselves. Specifically, I noticed a great deal of student-initiated race talk among Elizabeth's fourth- and fifth-grade students, with very little among the second-graders in the other teacher's classroom. Given the research base around students' racial identity development and awareness of race talk, this trend was not surprising (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008; Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008; Johnson & Aboud, 2017). As I focused on if and how students initiated race talk in the two classrooms, I found racial humor to be specific to the fourth- and fifth-grade students in Elizabeth's classroom. Elizabeth also engaged with the students' race talk selectively. Therefore, in the third round of coding, I focused on identifying silencing episodes in Elizabeth's classroom by finding examples of when Elizabeth enforced student silence or volume of speech, or when students refused to speak. Three of these instances related to students' humor, and two were specifically racial humor; other instances of student race talk and racial humor were conducted beyond Elizabeth's hearing, indirect evidence of selective silencing when Elizabeth was present or nearby. Finally, I chose to focus on two instances of silencing racial humor because of their unique complexities for affirming students' minoritized racial identities and friendships and also having the potential to harm. I began close analyses of the layers of racial humor and silence in each episode, using contexts from the classroom to interpret or question intentions, status (i.e., relationships between speakers), and normative values (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Finally, I engaged in in-depth member check conversations with the focal teachers. For this specific paper, I talked to Elizabeth twice. For both conversations, I provided her with an overview (i.e., bullet points) of the paper as well as the full manuscript. I left these conversations open-ended so that Elizabeth was not only responding to what I asked her. She read the full paper and asked questions about my analysis. She appreciated my emphasis on the complexities of responding to situations in the moment in a busy classroom. She asked how to balance race-conscious talk with district-driven encouragement to talk about "culture" instead of "race" as a way to acknowledge the ethnic diversity of students within socially constructed racial groupings, as I discuss below. Elizabeth always engaged in these conversations as a thought partner and provided a valuable reality check on what could make my research applicable and transparent for practitioners in complex school and district settings.

The Researcher's Role

Conducting this study caused me to reflect on my own experiences as an elementary school student. When I was in fourth and fifth grades, I was self-conscious of disrupting my White teachers' expectations for my own silence as an Asian American, cisgendered girl. At parent-teacher conferences, my teachers marveled to my parents that I was always an active participant in class and joked that sometimes I even talked too much. I knew growing up that I was expected by both White educators and Korean adults to be quiet, reserved, and sweet, but my family emphasized differentiating contexts for different behaviors. In school, an "American" space, they were proud that I spoke my mind and made friends. At home, I followed the outspoken model of my mother, and in Korean spaces, I was loud among the children and quiet among the adults. I have known these contextual differences from before I can remember them becoming conscious; being silenced was rarely demanded but instead imposed through social norms. I believe there might have been something similar at play for how students of color in Elizabeth's classroom chose not to joke about race in her presence.

Later, as a graduate-student researcher, I was also strategic about silence depending on context. I was not a participant in the study in the sense that I was not teaching or playing any role in the work of the school or classrooms. However, I was a participant in the sense that I interacted with teachers and students and assumed that my presence in the classroom had at least some minimal effect on teachers and students. For instance, teachers sometimes made eye contact with me when a student said something humorous. Students often included me in their conversations during group work or when they were waiting in line to go to lunch. In classrooms and during lessons, I chose to observe in the back or side of the classroom during whole-class lessons, but during small group work I frequently moved among different groups of students.

I was conscious that my study was initially designed to focus on teaching and teachers, and that students were not research participants. I am not certain if this stance was relevant to my rapport with students. Although I experienced an overwhelmingly positive welcome from the second-grade students, I did not establish a consistent relationship with the fourth- and fifth-grade students. Sometimes the older students giggled and stopped conversations when I was nearby, positioning me as an adult behavior monitor. At other times, students continued with their social, sometimes silly conversations in my presence, aligning me with

their space. As I sat next to students while they worked, I answered their questions about my race and ethnicity as a Korean American and about the fact that I was a college student. These responses conveyed that I was not entirely trusted by the students, though this status shifted depending on student and situation.

In this study of silence and power, I was conscious of research-as-surveillance and the function of observation in producing power and knowledge (Foucault, 1975). The presumption that a researcher can "discover new objects of knowledge" and "penetrate into men's [*sic*] behavior" (Foucault, 1975, p. 204) requires self-consciousness in observation and analysis. I could not treat Elizabeth as an object of study; she had always been open to reflecting aloud on my analyses of her and her colleagues' practice. When I conducted member-check conversations of this analysis with Elizabeth, our subsequent discussions explored teacher structure versus student ownership of discussion; the sheer number and complexity of interactions that a teacher processes each moment; and teacher responses that do not silence race or racism when they occur. We asked each other questions; Elizabeth pushed me to consider implications for practice and expressed that the study challenged how she would pursue her professional learning goals for the year. In this way, Elizabeth and I have kept each other accountable to the research goals.

Silencing Racial Humor: Two Examples

This paper documents the silencing of racial humor, focusing on the tensions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities of one middle-class White woman teacher's interventions into racial humor. Rather than a fixed stance toward socializing students into silence, Elizabeth's pedagogical moves suggested sometimes contradictory intentions that resulted from split-second judgment and decision-making. The ambivalence often related to a discrepancy between Elizabeth's intentions and her discursive enactments with students and was characterized by turning to structures such as sentence stems or procedures for engagement. I provide several possible interpretations of each incident to model the messy realities of middle-class White womanhood in teaching, as well as the problem-posing reflection that can further scholars' and practitioners' wrangling with middle-class White women teachers' responses to racial humor and race talk.

Setting the Tone of Elizabeth's Classroom

From early on, I recognized that Elizabeth knew her students' personalities. In her first interview, when I asked her to talk about her students, I prompted her to describe Fernando—a Latino boy—and Charleston—an Asian American boy. This conversation occurred before any of the incidents I later observed and analyze below.

> AUTHOR: So how would you describe some of their personalities? You see so many different sides of them. . . . So I'm thinking of like Fernando . . . .

> ELIZABETH: Yeah. Fernando, I see him as the kind of kid that he's got all that, like 10- and 11-year-old boy stuff going on in his head, like the naughty. But most of the time he keeps it inside—he's pretty quiet most of the time. But it's always going on. And then he knows when to let it out. His writing is full of potty humor. He's going to grow up and write those—

AUTHOR: *Captain Underpants*?

ELIZABETH: Well you know those movies like *Knocked Up* and those sad boy movies—he's going to totally grow up and write those. It's always just there. He keeps it in and is very polite most of the time.

AUTHOR: How would you describe Charleston?

ELIZABETH: Oh, he's funny. Oh, he's so funny. All the kids really, really like him, and I do too.

AUTHOR: Was he new this year?

ELIZABETH: He was new, so he came I think end of October? From New York? He's really, really bright. He's more mature than a lot of the other kids in his sense of humor and the way he talks to people. He's very funny.

In this exchange, the first aspect of these two boys that Elizabeth highlighted was their sense of humor. She noted that Fernando often "[kept] it in" and "[knew] when to let it out," and that Charleston was "more mature" than his peers in his sense of humor. Specifically, her perspective on Fernando's humor was gendered, tied to "naughty" and "sad boy movies" with "potty humor." For both boys, her views on their humor were not explicitly racialized, and she emphasized their politeness and maturity, a facet of White womanhood in teaching.

Taking a broader view, Elizabeth's classroom, a combination of fourth- and fifth-grade students, was efficient, focused on academic work, and had high levels of on-task student engagement. Students peppered Elizabeth with questions about all topics. I remarked on a quiet order in the classroom repeatedly in my field notes—at times with admiration, at times with concern. Though students worked together in pairs and groups for at least half the school day if not more, Elizabeth had clear boundaries for the volume of talk. Both volume and structures for engagement were strictly monitored with the instructional goals of helping students stay focused on academic tasks and of promoting an orderly environment in which participation was encouraged.

Similar to her general approach to disciplining noise and talk, Elizabeth allowed students to construct their classroom community through Class Meetings, a formal structure that she had adapted from Morning Meetings (Responsive Classroom, 2016). At times the structure felt routine without much depth of engagement, yet the meeting was also a space where students created classroom rules and expressed social needs. The dance between dialogue and control exemplified Elizabeth's balancing act with silence; Class Meetings both supported student dialogue and potentially decreased its authenticity.
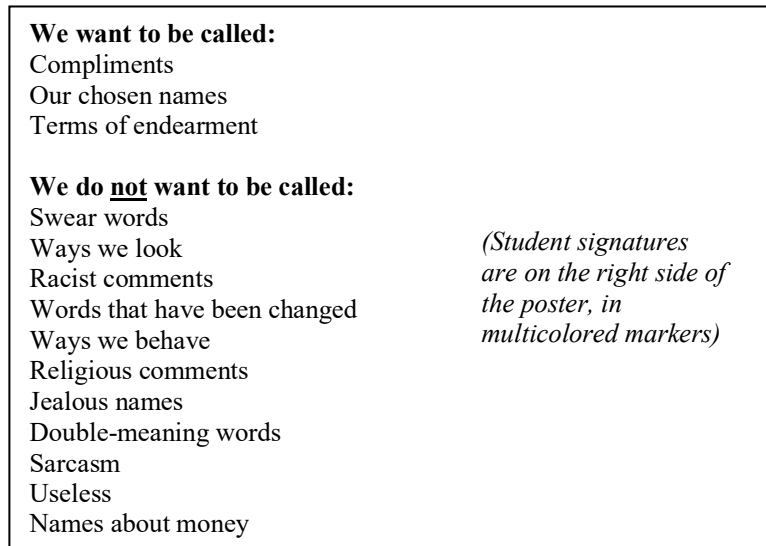
The weekly Class Meeting occurred on Fridays. Students pulled their chairs into a circle and began by giving compliments to the person to their left. Compliments were generic and repeated several times each, such as, "I compliment you for being a good friend." After compliments, Elizabeth pulled out a list of issues to mediate, which students had posted on the wall during the week. These were primarily relationship-management issues. "Plaintiffs" would describe the situation and what they desired in response; "offenders" would respond with how they would make amends and select someone to hold

them accountable to fulfill their promises. When discussing the process with Elizabeth, I asked:

AUTHOR: And how is that working for you?

ELIZABETH: I love it. I've been doing it since my second year of teaching. I love it because it solves those little nagging problems without me having to spend a lot of time with it day to day . . . . It gives them ownership of the problem, like, and teaching those conflict resolution skills, how to talk to someone about a problem. And then we do talk about, like, if someone's hitting you or something serious, tell me right away and we'll deal with it right away. But I love it.

Elizabeth had designed a process with the goal of providing structure for socializing students into conflict resolution. Conflicts were in students' hands to define, but resolutions and apologies took the form of structured options that had been suggested by Elizabeth. It was in a Class Meeting, Elizabeth reported, that students requested not to call each other names. Using an anti-bullying protocol from the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network's No Name-Calling Week called "It's All in a Name," Elizabeth departed from the usual Class Meeting script to help the students generate a group poster on "names we do want to be called" and "names we do not want to be called" (see Figure 1). The poster became part of Elizabeth's intervention in the following episode of racial humor.

We want to be called: Compliments Our chosen names Terms of endearment **We do <u>not</u> want to be called:** Swear words Ways we look Racist comments Words that have been changed Ways we behave Religious comments Jealous names Double-meaning words Sarcasm Useless Names about money *(Student signatures are on the right side of the poster, in multicolored markers)*

Figure 1. "No Name-Calling Week" Poster. Elizabeth's class discussed "names we want to be called" and "names we do not want to be called" during a class meeting. This is a re-creation of their signed poster.

Silencing Racialized Humor in the Context of Classroom Dialogue

In Elizabeth's classroom, fourth- and fifth-grade students were experimenting with asserting racial and ethnic identities. Elizabeth did not promote—but usually did not interrupt—this side of students' social interactions, such as when some Latina girls spoke

to each other in Spanish. The following exchange occurred during a classroom observation in March, well into the school year and the establishment of Elizabeth's classroom community:

> Students are working in groups to solve multiplication problems and are allowed to work with partners at stations. There is a group of three boys at the station by the computers. They are joking around as they settle down to work. I cannot make out what they are saying, until Fernando says, loudly with a laugh, which I hear from the front of the room: "Filipinos are weird." Before Sammy (Filipino), the intended target of Fernando's verbal poke, can retort, Elizabeth interjects, "Excuse me," loudly—not yelling, but still much louder than her usual speaking voice, and in a curt and obviously peeved way. She rapidly crosses the classroom and points to a poster on the wall above the boys' heads. "What is one of our rules?" she asks Fernando. He does not make eye contact with her. She points to "Names we do not want to be called" and then to "Racist comments" on the poster. The whole class has fallen silent and everyone is very still. Elizabeth says to Fernando, "Come with me, please." They go out into the hall. Elizabeth stands in the doorway, propping the door open with her foot, and speaks to Fernando in the hall, very softly. Everyone in the classroom stays subdued, working quietly, suddenly absorbed in multiplication. Moments later, they freeze again as Fernando comes back into the classroom and returns to his group. He doesn't talk to his peers; he bends his head over his notebook, his face red, working on the math problem alone. Elizabeth goes back to working with students, asking Brian, "Can you show me where all your numbers came from?"

In this example, Elizabeth's actions were both loud and silent; she called out "Excuse me" louder than her usual speaking voice and physically moved rapidly and gestured emphatically, causing a silencing of the entire classroom. She also shut down a conversation using mostly gestures, and addressed the incident with Fernando in private (i.e., quietly in the hallway, away from other students). By pointing to the poster, Elizabeth was making a normativizing move, positioning Fernando's comment with "racist names" and also positioned the comment outside of appropriate classroom discourse by pulling Fernando outside the classroom door. Elizabeth also silenced potential dialogue between Fernando and Sammy, the Filipino boy, and dialogue among the full class about the reasons why a statement like "Filipinos are weird" might be hurtful or not funny, particularly given the class' shared agreement on "names we do not want to be called."

I had not heard Elizabeth's conversation with Fernando in the hallway, which she explained to me later:

> ELIZABETH: So, we've had a problem in class with name-calling. So we did this lesson . . . where you talk about your name and how you got your name and why your name is important to you. Um and then the kids make a list of what they want to be called and what they don't want to be called and we talk about it in class. We made this poster (see Figure 1). They decided the only things they want to be called were compliments, or their chosen names, or terms of endearment—we talked about what that means. Everything else, no. Um, they all signed it—

AUTHOR: So did <u>they</u> [the students] come up with [the list of things they do not want to be called]?

ELIZABETH: (*nods*) They came up with these . . . . So they all signed it, and so the reason I was mad at Fernando is we <u>just</u> talked about this and he said to Sammy, "Filipinos are stupid," I think was what it was, or "Filipinos are"—

AUTHOR: —"are weird"—

ELIZABETH: —"Filipinos are weird." And Sammy is Filipino.

AUTHOR: So what did you say to him in the hall?

ELIZABETH: I called him on it, and I said "What did you say?" And he said, "<u>That's</u> weird." And I said "Nooo, that's not what I heard. You said 'Filipino'—I heard it very clearly." I said "Would you like it if someone said that about your culture?" He said no. So I said, "That's not okay, we've talked about this," and he's staying in at recess to write an apology letter to Sammy.

Upon having a greater contextual understanding of the classroom community and of Elizabeth's purposeful intervention in this moment, it is important to affirm several aspects of Elizabeth's teaching moves. First, Elizabeth had promoted dialogue among students around race, identity, respect, and name-calling. She had recently engaged the whole class in understandings about "names we do not want to be called" and was unequivocally committed to supporting the students' definitions of respect. In addition, she had critical consciousness and alertness for student interactions in the midst of a busy classroom with numerous simultaneous student group conversations. She was assisting students on math problems and was not physically near Fernando's group at the time of his joke. In other situations, White teachers could have had adequate logistical and instructional distractions to pretend not to have heard the situation and let it slide. Instead, as an equity-conscious White teacher, Elizabeth decided to act on a teachable moment and to affirm her students' earlier classroom conversation.

Elizabeth's response also provides an illustrative example with which to consider the consequences and implications of how to intervene in racial humor that takes a negative turn. The first and most overwhelming consequence of Elizabeth's intervention was physical and verbal silencing. All the students in the classroom and I responded to the unexpected and unusual strength of Elizabeth's "Excuse me" by physically freezing and immediately silencing ourselves—before I turned back to scribbling in my notebook. Perhaps the students froze because the muffled strength of Elizabeth's sharp reaction was so unusual. Or perhaps the students were uncomfortable because the teacher, through her gesture, had silently labeled something as racist. It was clear, physically and audibly, that the students felt anxious at the unusually public and stern expression of Elizabeth's disapproval. The silence and stillness in the room was sudden, and took a moment to break even after Elizabeth signaled that the situation was over by returning to the students she had been working with before the incident.

A second consequence of Elizabeth's reaction was silencing potential dialogue about race talk, boundaries of humor, and how to tell if and when it was acceptable for people to

tease each other in cross-racial friendships. She seemed to assume, based on her earlier interpretation of Fernando as knowing "when to keep [humor] in," that Fernando was both intentional in his actions and well informed by a recent class conversation. She also seemed to assume—without the context of the larger conversation between Fernando and Sammy—that Fernando's racial humor had been inappropriate. Based on these assumptions, dialogue was silenced in two ways.

At one level, Elizabeth's intervention silenced Sammy—perhaps he could have stuck up for himself, requested Elizabeth's mediation, or had a clever retort. Alternatively, Sammy could have been relieved that Elizabeth intervened. Perhaps, as often happens in racial humor, he had been silencing his own discomfort with Fernando's joke and was glad to not have to play along. In this case, Elizabeth not only protected her students' classroom rules but also stood up for a student of color; these moves could silence future harms and increase inclusivity. At a second level, however, the poster against name-calling stated that students did not want to be called "racist comments," but Elizabeth left no space to discern if Fernando's joke was racist, what contextual cues made Fernando's statement racist or funny, and whether a joke could be both. Students thus missed an opportunity to deepen an ongoing dialogue about their classroom community and to investigate important issues of community and society more broadly. As a result, Elizabeth's strong response echoed how some White teachers' intentions with students of color can unintentionally reproduce Whiteness (cf. Hyland, 2005).

A third consequence of Elizabeth's actions occurred in her reported conversation with Fernando in the hallway. Though Fernando had chuckled "Filipinos are weird," Elizabeth deracialized the joke when she asked Fernando in the hallway, "Would you like it if someone said that about your culture?" Elizabeth referred to race and ethnicity as "culture," a depoliticized term often used to replace "race," perhaps also to soften the disciplining of Fernando's joke. This move deracialized what had been silently labeled a racist comment when Elizabeth pointed to the class poster before talking with Fernando in the hall. Thus, Elizabeth silenced—or colormuted—the very reason for reprimanding Fernando.

Elizabeth attended to this last point in particular in our member-check conversation. She confirmed that it had been an unspoken norm at Fields Elementary to refer to students' cultures rather than to their race or ethnicity in an attempt to recognize cultural diversity within broader racial terms, such as "Asian" or "Latino." We discussed whether or not race should be used instead, and when culture is more accurate, with no clear decisions outside of context. For this situation, I suggested that the conversation could have been a fruitful one for students—if not with the entire class, at least with the particular group of boys—to have as a small piece of an ongoing exploration. Was Fernando making fun of Sammy's culture? Was Fernando being racist? How could Sammy respond if he didn't like it, even if Fernando didn't think he was saying something racist? How can racism occur even among friends? If addressed in the context of ongoing conversations, I suggested that these questions might support students' underlying racial sense-making and their skills for race talk, self-awareness, and empathy across difference.

Finally, a fourth consequence related to silencing student agency to decide when something required a teacher's immediate intervention or when it could wait for a Class Meeting. Elizabeth had noted that serious situations could be brought to her attention and addressed right away. However, this concern was raised not by Sammy, the target of the

joke, but by Elizabeth, an unintended audience. Elizabeth, with her depth of understanding and experience, interpreted the joke as a racist microaggression. Honoring this insight is important. Starting from Elizabeth's interpretation of this situation, the question I raise is thus not about waiting for Sammy to speak up in the moment when he was likely the target of a social power move by Fernando, but rather how best to facilitate Sammy's agency over defining the situation, its seriousness, and his preferred solutions.

Though racial humor can be part of establishing rapport among students of color, it can also be disrespectful and exclusionary. The four consequences of Elizabeth's interpretation resulted from her interpretation of Fernando's joke as the latter. The consequences of her response had silencing effects that inadvertently colormuted dialogue around "racist comments," silenced student agency for bringing issues to the classroom community, and created a physical and audible silence that was difficult to break—a physical redness and solitude when Fernando returned to his mathematics with his head down. Since Fernando was also a student of color, these consequences moved in directions that were contradictory to the cultivated, teacher-sanctioned opportunities to make sense of race and friendship in school. The next instance left me with the same feeling that something unintended had been left behind in the wake of Elizabeth's well-intentioned actions.

Correcting Grammar to Silence Racialized Humor

In another brief incident, Elizabeth addressed self-derogation—intended to be humorous—of a Chinese American male student, Charleston. As with the incident between Sammy and Fernando, Elizabeth's response was complicated by the double edge of racial humor and multiple dimensions and directions of silence. In this situation, the humor played on Asian American stereotypes.

The class was crafting letters to other fourth- and fifth-grade students across the country, writing sections of their letters in response to prompts. After each prompt, Elizabeth asked students to share what they had written in a rapid "whip around." This incident took place at the beginning of the activity.

> ELIZABETH: I want you to think about—what is the most important part about you? If you're writing to another kid in another state, what would you tell 'em is the most important part about you? Write a sentence.
>
> *(She pauses while students write; most begin right away.)*
>
> ELIZABETH: We're going to do a whip around. A whip around is when [everyone states their answer in turn, going around the room quickly].
>
> *(Eight students share their responses; next it is Charleston's turn.)*
>
> ELIZABETH: Charleston?
>
> CHARLESTON: *(in a goofy voice, laughing so he almost can't speak, with a mock Asian accent)* Me Chinese.
>
> ELIZABETH: *(with a slight frown)* That is not a sentence.

> CHARLESTON: *(in his normal voice, with a slight sag in his shoulders, his hands in his pockets)* I am Chinese.

> ELIZABETH: Thank you. (*She nods to next student.*)

When Charleston uttered "Me Chinese" with a mock Asian, stereotypical Chinese accent, he was holding back giggles. His face straightened immediately upon Elizabeth's response and her indirect reprimand. The moment passed rapidly, particularly as Elizabeth maintained the speed of the whip around; it was also evident that Charleston was slightly deflated, perhaps feeling embarrassed. Elizabeth did not stop to "correct" other students' writing in the whip around, though several others shared their racial or ethnic identities (e.g., "I am a Mexican girl").

Charleston's joke, and Elizabeth's response, occurred in the context of classroom routines of sharing writing in class, Charleston's known humorous personality, and Charleston's relationship with his classmates. In her first interview, months prior to this joke, Elizabeth described Charleston this way:

> One of the kids just cracks me up and his name is Charleston. Um. He came to the class in October in the middle of the year. He's just a hoot. His writing is funny, he's funny, he likes to share in class, he um . . . . He is one of the—I didn't realize until he was sharing—his writings, usually are funny, comical. But he was sharing one day about something that meant something to him, and he talked about when his dad died I guess within the last year, and he was talking about the last time he saw his dad and they were doing a lion dance for Chinese New Year and he was in the—and then he just started crying. It was a good moment. The rest of the class was really sensitive and one kid patted him on the back and we had talked about like wow, that's really important to write about when you have feelings like that and you don't have to share it but it's really good that you felt that you could express that in your writing. That's, I really like him.

In prior instances of sharing writing in Elizabeth's classroom, writing had been an opportunity for students to build community and explore meaningful experiences. Students were kind toward Charleston and his writing. Elizabeth's recounting established how academic work was mutually constitutive of relationships, racial and cultural identity, and classroom climate. In addition, Elizabeth shared evidence that Charleston had written about his ethnicity more than once, in ways that were deeply personal, emotional, and vulnerable.

This later joke of "Me Chinese," then, could have been construed as positive—Charleston was proud that he was Chinese. He had claimed his race and ethnicity as the most important part about him multiple times. It was the first thing he wanted to share when describing himself in a letter to someone he had never seen or met. He also felt comfortable making jokes at his own expense in front of his classmates.

Yet, Charleston's "Me Chinese" joke played on the positioning of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners with an inability to speak English properly, a racial stereotype that affects Asian Americans' sense of belonging as well as their academic and professional opportunities (Takaki, 1998). Because of this drawing on existing historical stereotypes, it was a more sophisticated joke than Fernando's "Filipinos are weird." Perpetuating

historical stereotypes of Asian Americans could have been an unintended consequence of this racial humor. From this perspective, it is again important to affirm that Elizabeth interrupted the joke in some way.

Acknowledging the complexity of the joke, I turn again to the consequences of Elizabeth's response to it. In front of the class, Elizabeth addressed the grammar of Charleston's sentence, rather than the accent or tone, and suggested the meaning of his humor. This deracialized approach silenced, again, her main concern with the joke's racial meaning. In this first consequence, the official classroom space of sharing writing was not a place for racial humor, or perhaps at least not of this kind.

In addition, Elizabeth moved quickly, not discouraging Charleston's claiming his identity but also not affirming its value-neutral iteration of "I am Chinese." She stated "thank you" in response to his corrected grammar rather than to his identity claim. The concentration on grammar, ironically, re-emphasized the stereotype of Asian American linguistic incompetence. Thus, the second and third consequences were colormuting race and ethnicity—not only avoiding racialized meanings that were the salient issue, but also treating racial and ethnic identity moves as neutral. In schools, as in society, these identity claims and plays on stereotypes are potentially risky for students of color, particularly in front of White audience members who may laugh along without acknowledging the power and oppression behind the stereotypes or humor (Hansen, 2012).

The fourth consequence occurred on the student level. Unlike her response to Fernando, Elizabeth's subtle reprimand of Charleston did not have visible or audible subsidiary effects on the rest of the class. However, much like Fernando, Charleston was physically silenced as well as verbally reprimanded. His posture, volume of speech, and lowered eye contact suggested embarrassment. Also, in contrast to her response to Fernando's joke, Elizabeth did not have an individual conversation with Charleston about his joke. Instead, Elizabeth's intervention left Charleston alone with the emotions of being reprimanded, with the responsibility for making meaning of stereotypes with a larger history than his employment of them, and to think through rules for when he should or shouldn't say something about his race and cultural identity. Though admittedly a fleeting moment, the joke and Elizabeth's response left Charleston alone with the responsibility of decoding socialization of race in school.

Detangling the Consequences of Silencing of Racial Humor

The dynamics of racial humor moderated by a middle-class White woman teacher in a diverse elementary school classroom illustrate the complexity of teaching as "a social and political commitment to students and to uncovering a fuller and more complicated truth" (Nieto, 2010, p. 109). Classroom and school cultures, racial climates, knowledge about race in school, and colorblind ideology are not constructed only in moments of overt racism or in clear-cut, dichotomous racist and anti-racist ways. They accrue and are pieced together through short interactions of colormuting and silencing in the midst of efforts to create classrooms of respect and dialogue.

Neither of the examples above constituted extreme moments of overt racism. In fact, silencing racial humor occurred in the context of other pedagogical practices and student experiences that encouraged student dialogue about their racial and ethnic identities. However, silencing racial humor, in both instances, disciplined students of color,

normativized notions of appropriateness, erased or colormuted motivating concerns about racism, and resulted in reprimanded students' further engagement in self-silencing. Students of color felt anxiety and embarrassment due to the silencing discipline.

Silencing is not bound to any ideological stance. In these particular observed instances of silencing of racial humor, students of color were left alone with the burden of making sense of their experiences, identities, and how these fit or did not fit in school. These conversations set up the normativization of Whiteness—through colormuting—as standard knowledge for school and as the rules of appropriate engagement. This silencing is part of constructing schools as institutionally and culturally White spaces where students of color are marginalized.

Silences reflect trade-offs in a teacher's instantaneous judgment. While managing time, tasks, dozens of students, and their relationships, teachers' judgments and constraints are made in the intersections of power, equity, and academic tasks. Noticing student talk, interpreting it in the social context of the classroom, and choosing how to respond are judgment processes that use cognitive, affective, relational, and ideological resources. Furthermore, as a White woman teacher, Elizabeth was both aware and unaware of how her own identity might have influenced her decisions. Although her beliefs about anti-racism were strong, she also emphasized appropriateness and politeness through silence. When and how should a White woman teacher decide to take up a dialogue between students of color, even just two of them? In her moments of recognizing and responding to racial humor, Elizabeth was alert to subtle rumblings of racism and—with the rapid judgment that had to take place—resorted to different forms of silencing, including deracializing the topics of contention. Silencing was a "stiff-arm" response to racial humor that lacked the depth of engagement and structure for dialogue that Elizabeth tried to incorporate in other classroom routines. That is, in addition to reflecting White women's desire for feeling White racial safety and politeness, Elizabeth resorted to silencing as a quick solution that seemed to fit her intentions, rather than pursuing a solution that could have been more transformative for her and the students.

In these two episodes, Elizabeth's silencing moves precluded dialogues about what is considered racist or what is considered name-calling. When she reframed Charleston's joke as a grammatical concern, Elizabeth shut down a rich source of historical and sociopolitical knowledge that could have benefited all students to discuss and learn about. In both of these situations, dialogue did not have to be laborious or time-intensive, though race dialogues may be avoided with this rationale. Instead, silencing moves transformed these opportune moments into disciplinary situations (Foucault, 1975).

Perhaps the nature of these situations as racial humor stands out because I knew that Elizabeth was well equipped to facilitate class discussions quickly. I observed multiple instances when Elizabeth was intentional about leaving time for students to ask questions and open up new paths of discussion about concerns related to health and safety and then was able to move back to planned lessons within five minutes. In contrast, I also observed several conversations when Elizabeth preemptively closed out discussions about colonization, race, and history, telling students "let's talk about this another time," or "that is a complicated issue." These latter instances did not feel affectively negative but signaled that race was too complicated for fourth- and fifth-graders, or perhaps for the forward march of the school day. I surmise that race and racial humor were fraught conversations

for Elizabeth as a White woman teacher, as they are for so many White women teachers. Because she did not have ready responses for students, she silenced them in the name of expediency. In our member-check conversations, Elizabeth did not comment on how she handled race talk more broadly other than to say that she had no tolerance for racism in her classroom.

However valid, a recognition of time constraints still does not account for several fundamental issues of racialization that were operating in Elizabeth's responses to Fernando's and Charleston's jokes: a) Students have and play with emerging racial identities; b) students may make jokes that have a double edge of reproducing racist stereotypes; c) students may not know the historical implications of these stereotypes, or they may be challenging them; and d) students experience micro-instances of racialization that accrue over time and are shaped in tension with predominantly White adults and colormuteness.

In this study, students of color reflected their complex identities and sense-making of the world even from a young age. Their teacher, a White woman, flattened these issues by deracializing and silencing them. Though we know a bit about high school students' experiences in these situations, we know very little about them from an elementary student perspective. In addition, though there is a growing base of understanding White women teachers' racial and gendered identities (e.g., Hyland, 2005; A. Lensmire, 2012), there is less understanding and interactional analysis of if and how these identities matter in the ways they engage with students of color on their complex identities.

The fluid nature of these racialized dynamics and meanings, constructed between students of color and middle-class White women teachers, also has implications for understanding the construction of school racial climate. The result of accumulating these small interactions and statements—overt and covert, implied and unintended, academic and social—is a burden of stress for students of color (Steele, 2010; Sue, 2015). As this study shows, the stresses and self-doubt, sense of not-belonging, and wonder about how to embrace identity as a student of color can begin in elementary schools and are complex processes that students of color and other marginalized students navigate each day (see e.g., Paley, 1979, 1997). Relatedly, Elizabeth's silencing and socialization of her students of color around racial humor may have had unintended consequences. That most race talk and racial humor took place away from Elizabeth suggested that students of color in her class believed that racial humor was bad, that their White woman teacher would not appreciate or allow it, and that racial humor as a vehicle for racial sense-making was to be used in school only in unofficial student spaces. I hope that this study can inform how teachers, leaders, and professional preparation programs can build not only critical consciousness and knowledge but also a courageous facilitation of racial dialogue in elementary-level classrooms. Important practitioner resources have established that teachers of color and White teachers facilitate these dialogues among racially diverse students (e.g., Paley, 1979, 1997; Polite & Saenger, 2003). However, few research studies have shown how teachers facilitate these conversations, particularly student-initiated spontaneous ones, consider the challenges and pitfalls of doing so, explore if and how students' identities and school experiences shift over time with these dialogues, or think through stages of deepening this practice once it is initiated.

Conclusion

Schools are a world of interaction and identity, and students of color in racially diverse schools predictably engage with each other over race, ethnicity, and culture. In many situations, students perform identity work around race and ethnicity in social conversations that are embedded in academic discussion. This social talk includes race talk and racial humor, a source of rich cultural-historical and community-based knowledge, but also a potential source of psychological or emotional harm.

Fields Elementary School is just one school, and Elizabeth is just one teacher; but this analysis tackles conceptual and practical explorations of silence and silencing, the boundary crossing of racial humor, and the vagaries of Whiteness and colormuteness in teaching racially and ethnically diverse students. I observed students' private subversion of appropriateness with racial humor, as well as the reassertion of race silence by the middle-class White woman teacher. Therefore, this analysis has resisted a static or simplistic portrayal of a middle-class White woman teacher in a highly diverse elementary school. Elizabeth reified White womanhood as socializing and civilizing children of color but with a focus on a racially inclusive classroom climate, a concern initiated by her students. Elizabeth was aware of—and also wrestled with—race dynamics and her sense of responsibility to enact anti-racist moves.

How teachers interpret and regulate racialized humor and joking among students of color affects how students are positioned as agents in crafting their identities and socialized into cross-racial friendships in school. The fact that Elizabeth was a White woman did not necessarily entail that she would preclude or silence race talk and racial humor among her students of color. It is likely that teachers of color wrestle with similar situations and may respond in similar colormuting ways; one does not have to be White to silence race talk. However, all teachers and students in their complex identities embody histories and social meanings that are relevant to how they interact with each other in the classroom, though this may not be acknowledged. Thus, I surmise that students interpret the meanings and dynamics of teachers' responses in different ways based on how they perceive who the teachers are racially and in terms of gender (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008; Johnson & Aboud, 2017). As a White woman, Elizabeth was situated in the racialized and gendered history of public schooling and teaching in the US. In the situations in this study, Elizabeth's interventions were perceived by students of color through the filters of bodies, presumed sociopolitical identities, and tacit models of interpreting the world.

In these dynamic and complex contexts, focusing on consequences moves analyses of classroom race talk in elementary schools beyond teachers' intentions to examining observed consequences for students' experiences with identity, emotion, and social positioning around race. This contributes to detangling problems of practice that lack clear resolutions and illustrate how an equity-minded White woman teacher can enact a piecemeal ideology that contributes to students' sense-making about racism in ways that are both beneficial and troubling. Because there are tensions, trade-offs, and split-second judgments involved in disciplining student race talk, observing the effects of middle-class White women teachers' actions on students of color, particularly through a lens of silencing, can be a powerful way for educators and anti-racist scholars to sift through muddy waters.

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