



# On “Ceding Space”: Pushing Back on Idealized Whiteness to Foster Freedom for Students of Color

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## EMANCIPATORY AND ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY AND TEACHING

Emancipatory pedagogy and teaching and antiracist pedagogy and teaching are rooted in two different paradigms of thought but are connected through a fundamental understanding of what it means to teach and learn in sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts where interlocking systems of oppression are operating alongside white supremacist ideals and logics. At its core, emancipatory pedagogy views education as a medium for developing critical consciousness, democratic engagement in society, and as a practice of freedom; hence, education is a process of liberation—from defining and seeing oneself through heteronormative and

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oppressive gazes while working to live one's full humanity. This type of pedagogy aims to foster humanization, heightened critical consciousness, and establish a problem-posing (Freire, 2021) education system. Early Black scholars such as George W. Ellis (1917), Anna Julia Cooper (1930), and W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) believed that emancipatory pedagogy in education could be used as a weapon to fight racist social, political, and economic structures that perpetuated Black peoples' oppression. Further, emancipatory pedagogy underscored the constant struggle for freedom for Black people while also equipping students to be change agents for transformative change. Educators such as Cooper, Woodson, and others enacted a liberatory pedagogy that not only resisted white supremacist propaganda in schools but also affirmed Black joy, wholeness, and thriving.

The process of emancipation consists of demystifying the workings of power because it is only when we know how power works and how it works upon us that we can begin to liberate ourselves and others from it—partly through our reading of the world around us (Freire, 2021). For white teachers, understanding the workings of power can be difficult to unearth, given their racial identification and socialization in a world that is immersed in a system of racial privilege and power from which they benefit. Early scholars (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2000; Shor, 1987) define emancipatory pedagogy as deeply rooted in the idea that education is central to creating a just and democratic society. Emancipatory teaching is predicated on negotiating and transforming relationships between educators and students, integrating students' epistemologies into instruction, and deconstructing institutional structures for schooling and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state (McLaren, 2000). Historically, Black educators have enacted emancipatory pedagogies and practices in community schools that served Black children and affirmed their ways of knowing and being. An emancipatory pedagogical approach is critical for teachers to enact in the classroom in order to help students interrogate and consider their participation in transforming systems and structures that work to marginalize and disenfranchise some while advantaging others. Some scholars define emancipatory pedagogy and teaching as having three aims: humanization, critical consciousness-raising, and the establishment of a problem-posing education system.

More contemporary writers, such as Noah de Lissovoy (2010), have introduced ideas that complement the early conceptualizations of emancipatory pedagogy by Black scholars and other critical scholars. De Lissovoy challenges scholars to rethink education and emancipation to consider a renewed emancipatory pedagogy that recognizes an essential equality between students and teachers and a liberatory agency that uncovers and builds on students’ effectiveness as beings against domination. Further, he posits an understanding of emancipation as the discovery and affirmation of the persistent integrity and survival of beings in struggle. For teachers and students to be in an authentic relationship in a system of domination (like the current educational system), the transformative act for teachers is to create relationships with students *outside* of that logic. Thus, emancipatory teaching “speaks to human beings, against the official idiom and curriculum that do not believe or know they are there and that see them as only the occasion for assessment, management, or ‘interaction’” (p. 210). Similar to the tradition of early Black scholars, de Lissovoy advances the idea that teachers’ pedagogy and practice should model for students how to resist domination and equip them with the tools to do so. As de Lissovoy argues, the teacher and student work to find each other through a set of difficulties produced not only by schooling but also by common understanding of what it is to be, to learn, and to know.

Antiracist pedagogy takes a different approach to teaching and learning by emphasizing “race, racism, power, and structural oppression in a capitalist society” (Kailin, 1999, p. 82). Julie Kailin’s (1999) approach to this concept in teacher education prompts teachers to examine the historical roots of institutional racism in the United States in addition to the ways that curricula and schools as institutions support racism. Antiracist pedagogy is a pedagogical perspective that “names and confronts white supremacy, not white people per se” (p. 82) and has as a goal to understand the problem of racism, deconstruct it, and actively work against it through teaching and learning. In her 2002 book, Kailin provides an analysis of capitalism’s role in maintaining racial inequality. Further, antiracist pedagogy is an orientation toward teaching and learning that is concerned with the differential experiences of historical inequalities and sociopolitical marginalization for People of Color (Upadhyay et al., 2021), particularly under capitalism. While Kailin (2002) is not the first to talk about

antiracism in education, her book provides an analysis of capitalism's role in maintaining racial inequality. This is an important concept for white teachers (and all teachers) to understand and locate in their pedagogy and practice as they work to teach Students of Color and in Communities of Color where people have been historically and persistently oppressed by racial capitalism. Dei (1996) describes antiracist pedagogy as “an action oriented strategy for institutional [and] systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of oppression” (p. 25, as cited in Upadhyay et al., 2021). An evolving discourse on antiracist practice has underscored what it means to teach in ways that move teachers to “become agents of antiracist change” (Kailin, 2002, p. 122).

Kailin and other white scholars are not the first to pioneer antiracist pedagogy and teaching. We agree with many Black scholars that antiracist pedagogy and teaching was pioneered by Black educators in the nineteenth century; their pedagogical practices were fundamentally antiracist and are more akin to what Givens calls a fugitive pedagogy (Givens, 2021). This antiracist and emancipatory pedagogy and practice centered solidarity and collectivity alongside resistance against white domination. We posit that on its own, novel, more contemporary conceptions of antiracist pedagogy and teaching cannot fully attend to the academic and personal needs of Black and Brown youth in K-12 schools. Further, white teachers' uptake of emancipatory teaching can easily fall into white saviorism if one is not careful about their constructions of freedom and their role in it for Students of Color. From a fugitivity perspective, white teachers' pedagogy and practice become abolitionist-oriented to provide the necessary conditions for Students of Color to experience joy, wholeness, and freedom from domination in schooling. Further, this perspective counters viewing whiteness as the benchmark for goodness, smartness, and success and centers the ways that communities of color conceptualize these ideas as starting points for Students of Color learning and achievement.

### WHITENESS AS GOODNESS, SMARTNESS, AND SUCCESS

Leonardo and Broderick (2011) argued that “Whiteness is nothing but false and oppressive means that it exists only as a tool for oppression” (p. 2225). Despite, or perhaps because of this, the project of U.S. schooling is oriented toward reproducing the ideology of whiteness. We can see this in the ways that schools and teachers take up other exclusionary ideologies, such as *goodness* (Moon, 1998) or *innocence* (Annamma, 2015),

*smartness* (Kolano, 2016; Leonardo and Broderick, 2011; Staiger, 2004) and *success* (Montoya et al., 2016), all of which intersect with whiteness (Annamma, 2015; Leonardo and Broderick, 2011, p. 2228). Because for some to be good, others must be bad; for some to be innocent, others must be guilty; for some to be smart, others must be “not-so-smart”; and for some to be successful, others must be failures, all of these are ideologies of exclusion, and they all gesture toward the only group that has been consistently historically constructed and represented as good, innocent, smart, and successful: white people. Leonardo and Broderick (2011) went on to argue that “To the extent that both racial and intellectual supremacy are taught, they are pedagogical. This is the great promise of this work—that of pedagogical possibility for the disruption of oppressive ideological systems such as smartness [and whiteness]” (p. 2227). In order for pedagogies to be truly antiracist and emancipatory, they must be oriented toward the abolition of these ideologies. However, all too often, we see classrooms and teachers reproducing them instead.

While not all white people ascribe to the ideology of whiteness, it might be particularly difficult for teachers from white middle-class backgrounds to imagine other ways of knowing and being that do not aspire to whiteness. Research shows that many teachers, especially white teachers, view their Students of Color through a deficit lens (Carter Andrews et al., 2019a; Pyscher & Lozenski, 2014; Sleeter, 2017). This may be a result of the “white spatial imaginary” which “portrays the properly gendered prosperous suburban home as the privileged moral geography of the nation” (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 13), reinforcing the link between whiteness and goodness, smartness, etc. Teachers want success for their students. If they are not deeply critical of received notions of success, which are already aligned with whiteness, they may reproduce the ideology of whiteness by pushing their students to be good, smart, and successful in ways that counter their and their community’s conceptions of these ideas.

Harris (1995) describes whiteness as a form of property, granting material and symbolic advantage to those who possess it and oppressing those who do not. Leonardo and Broderick argue that smartness is also a form of property, constructed against those who are not-so-smart, which often includes disabled people. They added that “This property only has value as a commodity if there are others who continue to be denied access to its possession” (p. 2221). When teachers educate their students toward a desire for the property of whiteness and smartness, they are pushing them to “become suboppressors in an oppressive system, and rather than

challenge it, they [will be] content with sharing in its spoils” (p. 2224); this practice does not further antiracist goals in schooling. Encouraging students to aspire to whiteness, even when coded as aspiring to goodness, smartness, and success, reinforces these ideologies because by their definitions, in order for some to access them, others must be kept out. Even teachers with antiracist commitments might be pushing their students to win the racial capitalist race, rather than stepping back and questioning the whole game. For example, Graham (2020) found that, at a no-excuses charter school designed to support traditional measures of success, such as test scores and college acceptance, classroom management practices that emphasized teacher control and student conformity discouraged students from developing the critical skills necessary to understand or combat inequality. “Rather than leading kids in wrestling with complex challenges or coming up with solutions, they emphasize understanding and complying with existing rules and structures” (p. 673). When schools teach kids that being a scholar or a leader means full compliance with white-normed models of “good” behavior, white-normed measures of intelligence such as standardized testing, and acceptance to elite, predominantly white colleges (many of which were founded on profits from slavery, or even kept enslaved workers (Mustaffa, 2017)), schools are teaching students to idealize and aspire to whiteness—and evading the responsibility of teaching students to understand, critique, and resist white supremacy.

When schools and teachers idealize whiteness, they push Students of Color to aspire to something they can never fully achieve, no matter how good, smart, or successful they are. The United States is not a meritocracy, and the property of whiteness is not equal opportunity. Students of Color are keenly aware of this, as Carter Andrews et al. (2019b) argued in an examination of the school experiences of adolescent Black girls. The researchers found that Black girls and young women “work tirelessly to negotiate the expectations of them, but those goalposts constantly move” (p. 2545). These expectations included “acting like a lady,” following dress codes that were not enforced for White girls or any boys, and disapproving “the myth of Black anti-intellectualism.” All of this proved “impossible,” however, because “normative notions of girlhood and femininity are constructed along Eurocentric and patriarchal lines” (p. 2554), so no matter how ladylike they behaved, what they wore, or how well they performed in their classes, these Black girls would never achieve the unspoken ideal upon which all of their schools’ expectations were founded: whiteness.

Dumas (2014) described the doubled suffering this impossible setup causes among marginalized students: “First, the drudgery and futility of the school experience itself, and second, through the loss of hope for oneself individually, and for the group, collectively, in terms of improved social recognition and economic stability” (p. 8). When teachers set Students of Color up to aspire to whiteness, the kids know they are being set up to fail, and this may damage their relationships with their teachers and school community. Dumas argues that this is especially relevant to Black students who, by the logic of whiteness ideology, are denied the possibility of citizenship, or even humanity (Dumas, 2016). Promoting whiteness, even through the apparently race-neutral ideologies of *smartness*, *goodness*, and *success*, is not only discouraging but actually dehumanizing, for students who are always already excluded from whiteness.

#### WHITE PERFORMATIVE EMOTIONS UNDERMINING ANTIRACIST AND EMANCIPATORY PEDAGOGIES

Leonardo (2002) reminds us that whiteness and white people are not synonymous; however, white people hold advantages from whiteness “because it benefits and privileges them” (p. 32) when they choose to profit off of power created and protected by oppressive systems. These benefits are not limited to the privileges received within the larger systems, but on individual levels, these advantages are manifested through white performative emotions that can lead to harm of the historicized Other (Jones, 2022). Where whiteness possesses power, white emotionality is concerned with “feeling” power (Boler, 1999). Particularly in school systems, white teachers have to work intentionally to not be (consciously or unconsciously) concerned with feeling power in their approach to and interactions with Students of Color. An example of white emotions “feeling” power within society is the sympathy given to Kyle Rittenhouse who hysterically cried during his trial begging for mercy, which resulted in the Jury finding him not guilty of all charges (Campaomor, 2021). In contrast, despite George Floyd’s incessant cries out to his mother when a police officer had his knee on his neck, he was labeled a criminal and murdered (Collins, 2020). In these two examples, white tears and white performative emotions carried so much power that they overshadowed the fact that Rittenhouse murdered two people and injured another. George Floyd’s Black tears meant little to nothing as he didn’t even live to stand trial.

An example of white emotions “feeling” power in schools is white teachers who intentionally choose to evade topics that discuss race and racism so that they do not feel guilty teaching about the violence of white supremacy against People of Color to their Students of Color (Thandeka, 2009). Disguised within this performative emotion is the need for the teacher to hold on to power. If the teacher discusses race and racism then they will have to acknowledge that white power, both historically and presently, is often obtained due to harms of the historicized Other (Bartz & Kritsonis, 2019). This realization is in direct opposition to the notions of white perfectionism found within schools that positions whiteness as “good” (Moon, 1998), as “the standard to which all other behaviors are judged” (Lynch, 2018, p. 22), and the standard to which all behaviors should aspire.

Given this understanding of whiteness “feeling” power, we (the authors) wonder in what ways do white teachers’ emotions (e.g., white guilt, white fear, white wokeness) as performance (Giroux, 1997) undermine antiracist and emancipatory pedagogies? We focus specifically on the ways white fear and white wokeness hinder white teachers from implementing antiracist and emancipatory pedagogies authentically, as we consider these emotions tools that work to operate as violence against Students of Color. As Matias and Mackey (2016) noted, emotions are a state of being, and the very essence of whiteness “feeling” power limits, if not inhibits altogether, one from engaging with antiracist pedagogies.

## WHITE FEAR

The first emotion with which we engage is white teachers “feeling” fear in their classrooms. White fear within schools manifests in a variety of ways. For some teachers, white fear impacts the disciplinary practices of Students of Color. Baggett and Andrzejewski (2020) maintained that three types of white fear (material fear, embodied fear, and rhetorical fear) work together to over-discipline Black students and other Students of Color. The authors defined material fear as the loss of tangible items and concrete resources. Embodied fear is characterized as the violent stereotypes of Black people as perpetuated by white supremacy that positions Black people as inferior to whites. Lastly, rhetorical fear is described as the fear white people possess of being labeled as a racist or bigot.

A contemporary term known as “the Karen” describes white women who weaponize their privilege by conceptualizing fictitious complaints



that situate People of Color as dangerous (Wellington, 2021). When white teachers perform as “Karens,” by over disciplining their Students of Color, they are embodying an emotive white fear narrative that perceives People of Color as “inferior, less civilized, less human, and more animal than whites” (Lensmire, 2010, p. 166). This fear, though illusory, becomes a justification for white teachers to impose harsh discipline policies on their Students of Color. Frankenberg (1993) argued that the fear white people experience of People of Color merges an inversion of reality with a notion that non-white people are in a perpetual state of pursuing white power, oftentimes through violence. Some white teachers believe their Students of Color are “pursuing power” in the classroom when their students exhibit behaviors that defy white perfection (Carter Andrews et al., 2019b) such as “talking back,” or even talking “loudly.” In response to this performative fear of losing control or power in their classrooms, white teachers might inflict harmful discipline policies against their Students of Color (Baggett and Andrzejewski, 2020; Carter Andrews et al., 2019b; Morris, 2007). White fear performing as a catalyst to enact harmful disciplinary practices prevents teachers from employing emancipatory practices because it perpetuates low expectations of their Students of Color. Assuming their students’ behavior is “bad” or “not normal” because it may be different from how whiteness claims students should behave (Carter Andrews et al., 2019b; Morris & Perry, 2017) prohibits teachers from holding high expectations of their students—a key component of emancipatory pedagogies (Cooper, 1930; Ellis, 1917, Du Bois, 1935).

For other teachers, white fear manifests through rhetorical fear or the fear that someone will label them a racist. Tatum (1997) asserted that white people would rather express that they live in a colorblind society where a discussion of race and its harmful effects do not exist because “they hold a belief that talking about race makes things worse—that it promotes racism and/or is racist within itself” (p. 182). Research on white teachers demonstrates that they would rather avoid (Segall & Garrett, 2013) or “reroute” (Garrett, 2011) their lessons from engaging with issues of race for fear of implicating themselves in broader social problems. An example of this is illustrated in Garrett’s (2011) study where white teachers rerouted their lessons from a discussion of racism to other “isms” (e.g., sexism, classism, capitalism), because they felt more comfortable discussing other social problems and because it distanced themselves from racist acts implemented by racist people. Key components of antiracist pedagogies include acknowledging that racial injustices exist and, in turn,

challenging those systems of inequalities (Kailin, 2002; Pollock, 2008). When white teachers actively choose to prevaricate discussions of race in their classrooms, it becomes impossible to enact antiracist pedagogies because the teacher fails to acknowledge that we live in a racist society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Subsequently, an evasion of discussing race also inhibits teachers from enacting emancipatory pedagogies, because students' critical consciousness to dismantle oppressive systems cannot be cultivated if the oppressive systems are never taught and critiqued.

This rhetorical fear can also impact white teachers' pedagogies when they choose to implement colorblind pedagogies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). For fear of being labeled racist, white teachers might profess "I don't see color, I just see children." This notion is rooted in white ideologies of teacher professionalism that proclaims all students *should be treated equally*, but when white teachers profess to not see color, what they are doing is performing in fear of being labeled "bad," "racist," or "unprofessional" (Choi, 2008). Colorblind pedagogies prevent the implementation of anti-racist pedagogies because colorblind pedagogies fail to acknowledge students' "lived experiences shaped along racial lines" (Pollock, 2008, p. 15). Maintaining power through *fairness* and treating everyone *equally* benefits white teachers by portraying them as "good," but this portrayal of whiteness as "good" and performative fear of being "bad" results in the marginalization of the lived racial disparities experienced by their Students of Color.

In addition to white teachers' fear of being identified as racist, Boucher (2020) wrote that "White teachers fear losing the status of white supremacy, but they also fear their neighbors if they stand against it; that is the trap of whiteness" (p. 243). For white teachers in this conundrum, even if they wanted to employ antiracist pedagogies in their classrooms, they may feel trepidation to do so for fear that their white peers might abandon them, or white parents might report them. Even more, Boucher (2020) maintained white teachers' fear of being ostracized by their white peers and their fear of losing access to the power of white supremacy outweighs standing in solidarity with their Students of Color. To avoid unacceptance by their white peers, many white teachers disengage from teaching about race and racism. Again, both antiracist and emancipatory pedagogies necessitate the acknowledgment of race, but for white teachers to truly embody antiracist practices, they also must be willing to surrender the privileges afforded to them by being white (Leonardo, 2002). This means that white teachers have to be willing to be ostracized and they have to be

willing to experience discomfort if they want to authentically implement antiracist practices and stand in solidarity with their Students of Color. If white teachers fear losing the power associated with whiteness, then enacting antiracist and emancipatory pedagogies becomes unattainable. White teachers who can cede space—as Shange offers as a pedagogical stance—can create learning environments that decenter whiteness, minimize their power, and enable students to be agentive in their own learning.

### WHITE WOKENESS

Where white fear prevents white teachers from engaging in discussions of race, white wokeness sits on the other end of the performative emotion continuum. Before the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the popular term “woke” or the phrase “stay woke” was limited to people well versed in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). During the Ferguson protests, “stay woke” became a national, even international, cautionary term of the #BlackLivesMatter movement where activists urged everyone to be on the watch for police brutality (Romano, 2020). In 2016, Childish Gambino’s hit record *Redbone* expanded the meaning of “staying woke” to a general term of being aware of anything which one may consider unjust. Today, “woke” is a widely used term to signal that one understands something.

White people, including teachers, have appropriated the term “woke” to signal their nuanced understandings of the harms of race and racism in America. When we reference white teachers being woke, we are referring to those teachers who think that because of something they have done, such as attending a protest or rally, or because of their proximity to People of Color, perhaps having a Black friend or family member, they are exempt from exhibiting any racist behavior. Boyce (2021) described being white and woke as the “affect and accompanying behaviors associated with becoming convinced that one has done one’s part in making the world a better place” (p. 161). In this sense, to be white and woke is harmful to Students of Color because it undermines antiracist pedagogies, which recognize the racialized lived experiences of People of Color. When white teachers claim to be woke, it creates a false equivalence between white teachers and their Students of Color. In her study of white teachers who self-proclaimed themselves to be woke, Jones (2020) found that these teachers performed as “being woke” to demonstrate to their students that they can understand and relate to the oppressive experiences that their

Students of Color had endured. Claiming to understand their students' experiences because they are woke, similar to colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), undermines the violence that their Students of Color have experienced.

To be woke and white is to also maintain power through contentment—a contentment that assumes when one is woke, they have reached the zenith of becoming an antiracist (Boyce, 2021). This ideology of white wokeness as an apogee undermines antiracist pedagogies because it posits that antiracist work has an endpoint. These teachers believe they do not have to implement antiracist pedagogies into their classrooms because their wokeness, alone, is antiracist enough. Embodying antiracist pedagogies is an ongoing and lifelong process to which teachers must commit themselves (Pollock, 2008). For white teachers, this ongoing process includes constantly interrogating their biases, actively learning about different forms of racism that exist in both public and private life, and utilizing their privilege to dismantle racism (Kishimoto, 2018). As Blow (2021) noted in his critique of white wokeness, when white people cling to being woke as the pinnacle of antiracism, they are abandoning the activist roots from which it was created.

### ANTIRACIST AND EMANCIPATORY PEDAGOGIES AND PRACTICES IN ACTION

The performative nature of white fear and white wokeness function in opposition to our understandings of antiracist and emancipatory pedagogies. Matias et al. (2014) maintained that one cannot truly be antiracist if teachers do not work “to engage in a genuine process of antiracism that acknowledges the emotional complexities of whiteness, which undergird teachers' dispositions” (p. 323). The authors asserted that before white teachers can implement antiracist pedagogies, emancipatory pedagogies, or any other social justice-oriented pedagogies, they must free themselves of their “repressed raced emotions” (p. 332). Here, we offer a few examples of antiracist and emancipatory pedagogies and practices in action as examples of pushing back on idealized whiteness to foster freedom for Students of Color.

In her multi-year ethnography of a social justice-oriented school in San Francisco, *Progressive Dystopia*, Shange (2019) encountered teachers whose “repressed raced emotions” prevented them from effectively

implementing the school’s antiracist mission. One white female teacher became enraged in a staff meeting about students lingering in the hallways, proclaiming “This is not your [the students’] school, this is our [the teachers’] school ... I’m not going to provide therapy in the hallway. I’m not going to think about your trauma. Get in your classroom—that is your only choice” (p. 78). Shange argued that this teacher showed “an active denial of Black suffering” (p. 96) and “an imperial view of the school space” (p. 79) but remained unaware of her own “repressed race emotions” because they were unfolding within the context of what was assumed to be an antiracist space. Shange went on to describe how centering the needs of Black students could help educators imagine a school setting that is *not* normed to whiteness, idealizing whiteness, or pushing students to aspire to whiteness. In the same study, another, non-Black male Teacher of Color interrupts a Black female teacher’s class to reprimand the teacher because her class is, according to him, too loud. The Black female teacher, reflecting back on that moment, “rereads” her students’ loudness

as not only “being a kid,” but also being in one’s body. She pushes the responsibility back on Robeson as an institution, not to transform the loud kids into quiet ones, but to “offer space”—cede space, give room(s), release authority, subvert settlement—for us all to be loud together. For Zahra, the risk of policing loud student behavior is losing young people’s interest in “social justice”—their experiences in hallways and classrooms provide a hint of what a revolutionary future could look, sound, and feel like, and she wants it to be ‘a community.’ (p. 106).

Shange imagined with this Black female teacher a school that truly centered the wholeness, joy, and possibility of revolutionary futurity of Black children.

Sabzalian (2019) also offered a vision of schooling that does not idealize whiteness but instead is designed to “recognize and affirm sovereignty and self-determination” of Indigenous students and their communities (p. 215). Similar to Shange’s vision of a school that would “cede space ... release authority, subvert settlement,” Sabzalian, while acknowledging that schools are by nature colonial institutions built on stolen land, nevertheless envisioned that white models of authority and control could be replaced by “a relational practice of care, commitment, courage, and connectedness” (p. 216). One example that Sabzalian gives comes from a class

on Indigenous art, taught by white teachers, in which “students and teachers experienced respect and responsibility in action. They did so, not by paying homage to some timeless notion of Indigeneity, but through actual interactions with Indigenous peoples and nations” (p. 189). The class partnered with the U.S. Forest Service to design and paint a mural in a historic Forest Service bunkhouse. “Because the proposed mural design involved Native artistic elements, the tribal liaison told teachers they would need to run the design by tribal representatives for approval” (p. 188). The mural designs that the class originally proposed included stereotypical images and symbols and were not approved by the tribal representatives.

The white teachers initially struggled with their emotional response to being told no. “The hard part of the process,” one white teacher reported, expressing disappointment, “was that we wanted it to honor Native American people, but we didn’t want it to just be a ‘bland nature scene’” (p. 189). The teacher’s idea of what it means to “honor” Native people came into conflict with how tribal representatives wanted their tribe to be represented—which was not at all. Sabzalian argued that this process of being refused by the tribe was generative for the white teachers and students, who learned, through their disappointment, a concrete lesson in tribal sovereignty. One teacher reported:

I think it is better though. I learned a lot doing the murals because a lot of things we wanted to create didn’t get included. It was good for me to recognize that *my idea of what I wanted didn’t even matter* ... Now I don’t think I would try to do a Native American art project and we’re not Native American. (p. 191, emphasis added)

This is an example of ceding space—white teachers giving over their idea of what they wanted, releasing their authority, and moving through their disappointment toward a recognition of Native sovereignty and self-determination. Sabzalian challenges us to create “a democratic education that takes seriously tribal sovereignty” (p. 192), which by definition would require educators and institutions to cede space—including land, power, and control—to the desires and aspirations of Native communities. Sabzalian writes that “The tensions, uncertainty, and possibilities that might surface if schools took seriously tribal sovereignty are unforeseen, but we should struggle for such processes anyway” (p. 195). Part of

ceding space is relinquishing control, living with uncertainty, and pushing for a better world that has never existed and is therefore unknown.

A final example of antiracist pedagogy and practice that we would like to offer up comes from Alyssa Hadley Dunn’s (2022) latest book *Teaching on Days After*. In this text, Dunn offers multiple examples of teachers ceding space to the desires of their students after traumatic racial events in their communities and the larger society. One specific example is from a Chicago (Illinois) Public Schools middle school teacher, Quinn, who shifted her lesson plans in the aftermath of the trial of Jason Van Dyke, the Chicago police officer who murdered 17-year-old Laquan McDonald in 2014. In her seventh-grade classroom, Quinn opted for several student-led discussions of the trial and the larger topic of racial (in)justice. While she had already planned an English Language Arts unit on Black Lives Matter, Quinn made adjustments based on the outcome of the trial and the direction that conversations were taking among her students. Her revised essential question for the unit was: How can we respond to injustice in our community? Quinn had students “use a variety of texts (podcasts, videos, novels, news articles) to gain understanding of injustice in their community, and how they can respond to it. They will be able to participate in, execute, and facilitate productive conversations about topics that may be emotional or controversial” (p. 165). Students were able to write original realistic fiction stories about (in)justice and activism. Dunn describes the care that went into this teacher’s planning to ensure “students’ criticality and discussion skills were well supported.” (p. 165). This 11-week unit catered to students’ need to combine the personal, political, and intellectual in ways that cultivated their critical consciousness-raising and agency in their own fights against racial (in)justice. Further, Quinn put aside her own potential need to control the flow of the classroom and evolution of students’ ideas about police brutality and violence against Black bodies in order to provide a classroom space that actively allowed students to examine race and racism at institutional and systemic levels.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While this chapter has detailed the ways that white teachers’ ontologies and performative emotions can and do undermine efforts at antiracist and emancipatory teaching and learning in K-12 schools, we are teacher educators who remain committed to preparing and supporting teachers to enact pedagogies and practices that advance racially and socially just

outcomes for all students, particularly those who have been most marginalized by educational systems. While we provide some examples of antiracist teaching here that help readers understand the significance of ceding space, there exists a healthy body of research for teachers and teacher educators to draw from for improved teacher preparation and K-12 practice. The work of ceding space and resisting idealized whiteness in the K-12 classroom requires critical self-reflection about one's positions of power and the commitment to empowering Students of Color to be agents of their own learning. Ceding space without engaging additional forms of culturally sustaining and responsive practices that counter racism will not foster learning environments that amplify the brilliance of Students of Color. Efforts to build and sustain socially just educational environments for all students requires abolishing systemic racism in schools and classrooms; it is our best action for fostering freedom for Students of Color.

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