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“I Thought We Were Over This Problem”: Explorations of Race in/through Literature Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This article examines classroom practices that draw upon students' understandings of race and equity as they engage in critical literature inquiry to explore issues of power in our society. Our research team, comprising a fifth-grade classroom teacher, a doctoral candidate, and a university professor, analyzed students' written and digital projects to better understand what new skills, strategies, and meaning-making opportunities emerge when race is centralized in the curriculum. We documented the various ways students were able to voice their thoughts through multimodal learning in an elementary language arts classroom.

Talking about race is hard work. Partnering with educators who are interested in teaching their students to talk about race in school is even harder and laced with complexities that emerge as part of the process. Despite the challenges, educational scholarship is a worthy site for examining the construction of race and how it manifests in curricular decisions that affect elementary school students. Scholarship analyzing the connections among race, culture, and schooling has flourished, allowing scholars to develop new ways of analyzing these links. (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lee, 2007). Understanding the epistemological underpinnings of this body of work has the potential to highlight assumptions that undergird school curricula and typically go unquestioned. Given that curricula are never neutral (Apple, 1992), there has been growing interest in how teachers recognize the intentionality of the standards and alter lessons to address inequitable societal structures (like race) that impact students while continuing to maintain academic rigor (Fránquiz, 1999; Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Tyson, 1999). Our work is influenced by this scholarship, as well as principles of social justice (Lipman, 2004; Nieto, 2013), and reimagines curriculum as a space to investigate the potential of racialized conversations.

This study examined how fifth-grade students learned to inquire about and discuss issues of equity in the curriculum by explicitly addressing the impact that race and racism have in our society. Our team, which comprised a university professor (Detra), doctoral candidate (Kathlene), and fifth-grade classroom teacher (Emily), worked together to alter the language arts curriculum by utilizing literature and historical documents that address race. This exploration grew out of a conversation our team had about the students of color at Harvard University who created a Twitter handle, #iTooAmHarvard, to chronicle their experiences on campus. As we discussed the tweets, we brainstormed ideas about how to incorporate Langston Hughes' work into a unit we were designing about racial inequity. During a follow-up planning meeting, Emily shared that she was still looking for a text the students could read in tandem with *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor (2004). Kathlene suggested that we provide more

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historical context for the book by putting Taylor's work in conversation with Hughes' (1995) poem "Let America Be America Again." Our team felt this work would support and complicate the students' notions of race and racism as they read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Thus, "Let America Be America Again" functioned as an anchor text that grounded the unit we developed. Our goal in creating this unit was to better understand:

1. How conversations about race impact fifth-grade students' responses to texts; and
2. In what ways fifth-grade students' interpretations of texts evolve when given a digital platform to discuss their thoughts about race.

In what follows, we unpack student interactions around texts that focus on race and racism in a unit we designed to critically investigate social inequities in our society. Then, we draw on Critical Race Theory to discuss the how theory and practice can merge through critical literature inquiry. To conclude, we suggest implications for curriculum development.

Literature review

Drawing on two bodies of research, critical literature inquiry (Short & Armstrong, 1993) and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), this study examines the pedagogical possibilities that emerge when a fifth-grade curriculum is altered to focus on race as a means to explore access to equity and social justice concepts in society. Over the past decade, we have learned a great deal about how to engage students from different cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds in rich discussions about social issues using literature (Damico & Riddle, 2006; DeNicolo & Fránquiz, 2006; Lee, 2007; Martinez-Roldan, Yeager, & Tuyay, 2005; Tyson, 1999). Such discussions have fostered critical encounters with concepts that marginalize particular communities and require teachers and students to confront and address complex social topics (Appleman, 2000; DeNicolo & Fránquiz, 2006). Thus, children's literature can provide a starting point for addressing issues of social justice or injustice and function as a conduit for students to examine racialized events.

Critical literature inquiry

Our team was interested in learning about how to build upon students' knowledge of race and power as they read and discussed a variety of multicultural literature and texts in order to explore issues of equity. Drawing on the work of children's literature scholars (DeNicolo & Franquiz, 2006; Enciso, 2003; Mills & Jennings, 2011; Short, 2009; Sipe, 2007), we grounded our use of multicultural literature and texts in critical literature inquiry. We considered literature's potential to function as a tool to help students understand themselves and the world, thus making literature a potential site for critical inquiry. By critical inquiry, we mean providing a space in the curriculum for students to explore questions that are significant in their lives and address issues of equity and diversity. As students juxtapose their questions alongside texts and begin to work through tensions that arise, their conversations become catalysts for transformative action (Freire, 1970).

Across the studies we read (Copenhaver-Johnson, Bowman, & Johnson, 2007; Damico & Riddle, 2006; Tyson, 1999; Watson, 2009), children's literature scholars and classroom teachers argue that adopting an inquiry stance for conversations about race and power is a means to work against racism. In "Shut My Mouth Wide Open": Realistic Fiction and Social Action," Tyson (1999) considered how children, and African American males in particular, could be impacted by the literature they read that is provided to them in the classroom. She asserted that children's ability to walk alongside the characters (Langer, 1995) in order to not only comprehend the larger issues that are discussed but also begin to reflect on ways they would have handled the situation denotes the beginning of social action. Relating and responding to the societal issues brought up in literature helps to move children toward what Freire (1970) called "conscientization," meaning they begin to examine root causes for oppression (Tyson, 1999).

In Copenhaver-Johnson et al.'s (2007) study, their research team took up Faust's (2000) invitation for teachers and students to explore how race and power are constructed in children's literature. Through close inspection of two classroom teachers, pedagogy meant to "demonstrate how teachers might employ

children's literature to open race-oriented conversations by reading books that challenge normative race assumptions and evoke inquiry" (p. 234). They found engaging in critical literature inquiry (1) made students less apprehensive to express their "first draft thoughts" about race, white privilege, and power; (2) positioned teachers as listener and facilitators in conversation instead of interpreter of right or wrong; and (3) supported future conversations about racism in a supportive environment (Copenhaver-Johnson et al., 2007).

Another example of students reading and responding to literature in ways that deconstruct uncritical representations of race or racialized discourse can be found in Watson's (2009) study on the use of the "n-word." Watson worked with a classroom teacher and her students to make evident and interrogate the many ways racial discourse supports racial inequities in our society. Through a combination of literature, such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1881) and *The Friendship* (Taylor & Ginsburg, 1987), and popular cultural texts, like "Gold Digger" (West, Charles, and Richard, 2005), Watson (2009) asked the students to respond to the meaning of the n-word in the texts, compare and contrast how it was used, who used it, and how that pronunciation and context influenced the meaning. He found, through the series of lessons in which he engaged the students, that they developed a more nuanced understanding of racial discourse, particularly the use of the n-word, along with the need for teachers to address the complexities of students living and learning in urban multiracial environments.

Critical race theory

Critical race theory (CRT) originated from conversations that circulated among scholars of color within critical legal studies concerning the group's failure to take up issues that pertained to race (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). CRT locates itself within the intersection of critical theory and race, racism, and the law. It grew out of a need to establish terminology for discussing issues related to race and oppression that were not available in current scholarship (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) identified the following six unifying themes as constructs of CRT:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law ... Critical race theorists ... adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 6 as cited in Dixson & Rosseau, 2006, p. 33)

In this study, these themes functioned as a lens for analysis.

Although CRT emerged from the field of legal studies, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) built upon this framework to explore tenets of CRT in educational research. In their article, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), they contend that descriptions of inequitable school experiences and academic resources (Kozol, 1991) are the result of a racialized society that does not acknowledge or take up issues of race. In particular, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) identified three central propositions, namely (1) the permanence of race, (2) the importance of property, and (3) the intersection of race and class that further perpetuate inequities across groups. Further expounding upon these propositions, CRT education scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) explain that the "curriculum represents a form of intellectual property" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57) wherein the quality of it differs depending upon the location of the school.

Given that schools, and subsequently the curricula, are inherently political ideologies (Apple, 1992; Yosso, 2002) that present a limited worldview exclusive of race, we utilize CRT as a heuristic for understanding the potential of counter-narratives to expose the narrow scope of school-sanctioned

texts. By counter-narratives, we mean alternative stories or texts that present a humanistic portrayal of marginalized communities. Using a critical race perspective to analyze the literacy practices in an elementary school classroom can provide insight into how students make sense of (1) the impact of race and racism in American society, (2) the deliberate inclusion of communities of color in the curriculum, and (3) the intersectionality of socioeconomic status and race.

When the stories and the lived experiences of communities of color are moved from the fringes to the forefront of the curriculum, then the curriculum is expanded to include multiple perspectives and viewpoints. For instance, Dever, Sorenson, and Broderick (2005), describe how picture books helped second-grade students respond to issues of social justice. Utilizing literature as a way to gain entry into more challenging topics, they found that once young elementary children were exposed to social justice issues through storytelling, they exhibited more empathy. Additionally, Husband (2012) advocates for realigning the curriculum to address issues of social justice, especially race, with young children. Husband considers the realignment of the curriculum to include perspectives that often are omitted the first step in creating a curriculum that is anti-bias. In his study, Husband provides several examples, such as asking questions after reading books like *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (Coles, 1995) or discussing the so-called “flesh color” of disposable bandages when sharing different ways educators or young children can embed discussions about race into their classrooms. Doucet and Adair (2013) echo this sentiment by discussing the need for early childhood educators to not only acknowledge that children notice race, but also the necessity of holding open conversations in order to encourage equity. They also explain how popular approaches in early childhood, such as color blindness or celebrating diversity, were embraced by many educators of young children and noted how anti-racist or social justice teaching “represent[s] an evolution of the celebration of diversity approach” (Doucet & Adair, 2013, p. 91). Specifically using examples highlighting skin color, Doucet and Adair shared how the discussion of race is aligned with a social justice and anti-racist teaching framework.

Public education in the United States is fraught with political inconsistencies that have marginalized students of color (hooks, 2004). The history and current practices in public schools have given way to segregated buildings (Rothstein, 2013), disproportionate percentages of students of color in special education (Howard, 2010), higher suspension rates for African American boys and girls (Smith & Harper, 2015), and higher rates of dropout after college entrance (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Our study was conceptualized to shed light on inequities through the use of Hughes’ (1995) poem as an anchor text to support upper elementary children as they begin to analyze historical influences on present-day circumstances.

Research methodology

The focus of this qualitative study was to reveal how students discuss and make sense of racial inequities across modalities. The study took place in an urban fifth-grade classroom located in a traditional public school in the southwestern region of the United States. The school’s racial demographics consisted of a majority of students of color with Latino students being the largest group at 51%. The state education agency labeled the school as “economically disadvantaged” due to the amount of children on free and reduced lunch.

Participants

Sixty students (who mirrored the school’s racial, linguistic, and economic demographics) agreed to participate in the study. Thirty-one of the fifth graders were female and 29 were male; 13 qualified for special education services; and 8 were designated as limited English proficient; 61% of the participants received free or reduced lunch. Each student participated in literacy practices developed by the classroom teacher or by our research team. Detra and Kathlene observed, filmed, took field notes, and audio-recorded lessons during the language arts.

Materials

Emily (the classroom teacher) was responsible for fifth-grade language arts instruction, which was split into three blocks of 20 students. Emily was the sole language arts teacher in fifth grade and had more autonomy over how the curriculum was implemented than many teachers in her school district. This freedom allowed Emily to collaborate with Detra and Kathlene to delve deeper into an interdisciplinary unit about racism's impact on American society. To leverage personal experience and community-based knowledge, we encouraged storytelling, which is often utilized in CRT as a way to portray the perspectives of communities of color. This strategy provided a vehicle for the students to articulate their thoughts on complex topics and produce a variety of artifacts, such as thinking notes on literature, graphic organizers, memes, questions and answers comparing and contrasting texts, and poetry stanzas.

The materials Emily prepared to support the students' inquiry included print- and digital-based texts. She had print copies of "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes (1995), an audio recording and print copies of Chapters 1–3 of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 2004), six different digital platforms organized on The Buzz section of the class website (HiveSociety.weebly.com), and paper copies of "Little Things Are Big," by Jesus Colon (1982). Table 1 is a chart overview of the unit that lists the order the materials were introduced to the students.

Procedures

All students ($N = 60$) participated in each lesson. During the lessons, students participated in discussions about the themes and relevance of each text, worked in various participation structures to deconstruct the text, and engaged in conversations as a whole class to raise questions and debate issues that were salient in the texts. Each lesson took place over one or two days lasting 75–90 minutes (time varied based on schedule). An overview of each lesson is listed below:

Lesson One: Introduction of "Let America Be America Again"

Emily passed out the poem, "Let America Be America Again," by Langston Hughes (1995) to students and asked them to follow along while she read it aloud. After the first reading, Emily asked the students to share their thoughts, observations, or questions as well as to answer an online survey about the poem (see Appendix A for the questions).

Lesson Two: Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

Emily played an audio version of Chapters 1–3 of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor (2004). The students were given paper copies of the chapter to follow along with the audio recording.

Table 1. Overview of the unit.

Lesson	# of days	Observations of lessons
1	1	Initial reading of "Let America Be America Again;" students complete survey, http://hivesociety.weebly.com/1/post/2014/02/let-america-be-america-again.html
2	2	<i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i> ; students respond to audio
3	2	6 digital "Let America Be America Again" stations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time For Kids article, "Meeting of the Minds," http://www.timeforkids.com/news/meeting-minds/13406 2. Getting to Know Langston Hughes, http://www.biography.com/people/langston-hughes-9346313 3. The US Census from 1790–2010, http://racebox.org/ 4. Poem, "Running to America," http://hivesociety.weebly.com/running-to-america.html 5. TEDed, "Fight for the Right to Vote," http://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-fight-for-the-right-to-vote-in-the-united-states-nicki-beaman-griffin 6. Census Race Categories Shirts, http://hivesociety.weebly.com/census-tshirts.html
4	1	"Little Things Are Big," by Jesus Colon; students work at stations
5	2	Re-reading of "Let America Be America Again;" students create final stanzas http://hivesociety.weebly.com/1/post/2014/02/voice-of-the-hive.html

Table 2. Overview of data source modality.

Audio	Audio text (<i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i>) Audio from lesson videotapes and student conversations at stations
Electronic	Class blog (links to poems, survey, stations, and images) Electronic survey results of 1st reading Students' digital stanzas Videos of lessons
Print	Written text ("Let America Be America Again," "Little Things Are Big," <i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i>) Students' thinking notes from "Let America Be America Again" Charts from stations

Once students finished listening to the chapters, they responded to an online survey about the story and were challenged to think about the impact of race (see [Appendix B](#) for questions).

Lesson Three: Digital stations

After reviewing the students' survey results and notes from the *Roll of Thunder* activity, the team decided to focus on four issues the students were questioning by creating digital stations. The students accessed these stations on the classroom blog using iPads or iMacs.

Lesson Four: "Little Things Are Big," by Jesus Colon

In the fourth lesson, Emily introduced another poem to the students, "Little Things Are Big," by Jesus Colon (1982). The students received a paper copy of the poem, and Emily read it aloud while the students followed along.

Lesson Five: "Let America Be America Again," second reading

For the culminating activity, Emily asked the students to revisit the Hughes (1995) poem. In this activity, they were asked to create a final stanza on a topic that would connect their interests to a theme from the poem.

Data sources and analysis

Qualitative research methods (Charmaz, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), such as interviews, participant observation, field notes, collections of student-generated artifacts, transcripts of audio- and video-recorded lessons, analysis of the classroom blog, and photographs, were used to collect data over the course of five different lessons (see [Table 2](#)) that spanned two weeks. The data that we share in this article are a subset of the larger study that focused on culturally relevant approaches to twenty-first century literacy instruction. In what follows, we provide an overview of the data sources, their alignment with CRT themes, and our findings.

The data were analyzed inductively in three phases using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the first phase, Detra and Kathlene each independently read, organized, and coded the data in relation to our research questions. This process produced the results found in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Coding phase one.

Detra's codes	Kathlene's codes
Themes of race present in all literature	Racial literacy
Student-led conversations	Student agency
Inquiry driven curriculum	Technology integration
Digital tool integration	Inquire about social issues
Digital tools increase access to material and participation	Critical literacy
Various participation structures	Social justice
Student-centered curriculum	Curriculum developed based on students
Social studies topics integrated	Historical context represented in texts
Culturally relevant pedagogy	Culturally relevant pedagogy
Social justice focus	Democratic classroom

Table 4. Alignment of lessons with CRT themes.

CRT unifying themes (Matsuda et al., 1993)	Themes in children's literature/texts	Lessons from the unit
Race and racism are a defining characteristic of American society	Racism Stereotypes Hopes and dreams Finding opportunities Family Challenging democracy Fear	Lesson One Lesson Two Lesson Four
Expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, meritocracy	Racism Hope Challenging democracy	Lesson One
Asserts that the experiential knowledge of people of color is appropriate, legitimate, and an integral part to analyzing and understanding racial inequality	Racism Stereotypes Hopes and dreams Finding opportunities Challenging democracy Fear	Lesson One Lesson Four
Challenges ahistoricism and the interdisciplinary focuses of most analyses and insists that race and racism be placed in both a contemporary and historical context using interdisciplinary methods	Social construction of race Racism Family Stereotypes Hopes and dreams Finding opportunities Challenging democracy	Lesson Two Lesson Three Lesson Five
CRT is interdisciplinary	Social construction of race Racism Stereotypes Hopes and dreams Finding opportunities Challenging democracy	Lesson Three Lesson Five
Works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression	Social construction of race Racism Stereotypes Hopes and dreams Finding opportunities Challenging democracy Fear	Lesson Three Lesson Four Lesson Five

Detra and Kathlene met to compare and collapse codes using the research questions as a guide. The following themes emerged from this process: (1) digital tool integration, (2) racial literacy, (3) student agency, (4) social justice, (5) literature inquiry, and (6) historical and contemporary representations of race.

In the second phase, the research team revisited Lee's (2007) framework to see if there was alignment among the CRT unifying themes, themes from the literature and texts, and specific lessons and topics from the literature and texts. Next we reviewed the coded data to determine which CRT themes were addressed in each lesson (see Table 4).

In the third phase, the team met to revisit and discuss the data specifically looking across the themes and charts to refine them into categories that responded to the questions that guided this inquiry. The following themes emerged: (1) a more nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary issues involving race; (2) the integration of digital tools to share new understandings about race increased student participation; and (3) an increase in student agency.

Findings

Findings for this study suggest that critical inquiry contributed to a shift in the students' thoughts and conversations about race and advocacy as they explored notions of marginalization and inequality across time and space.

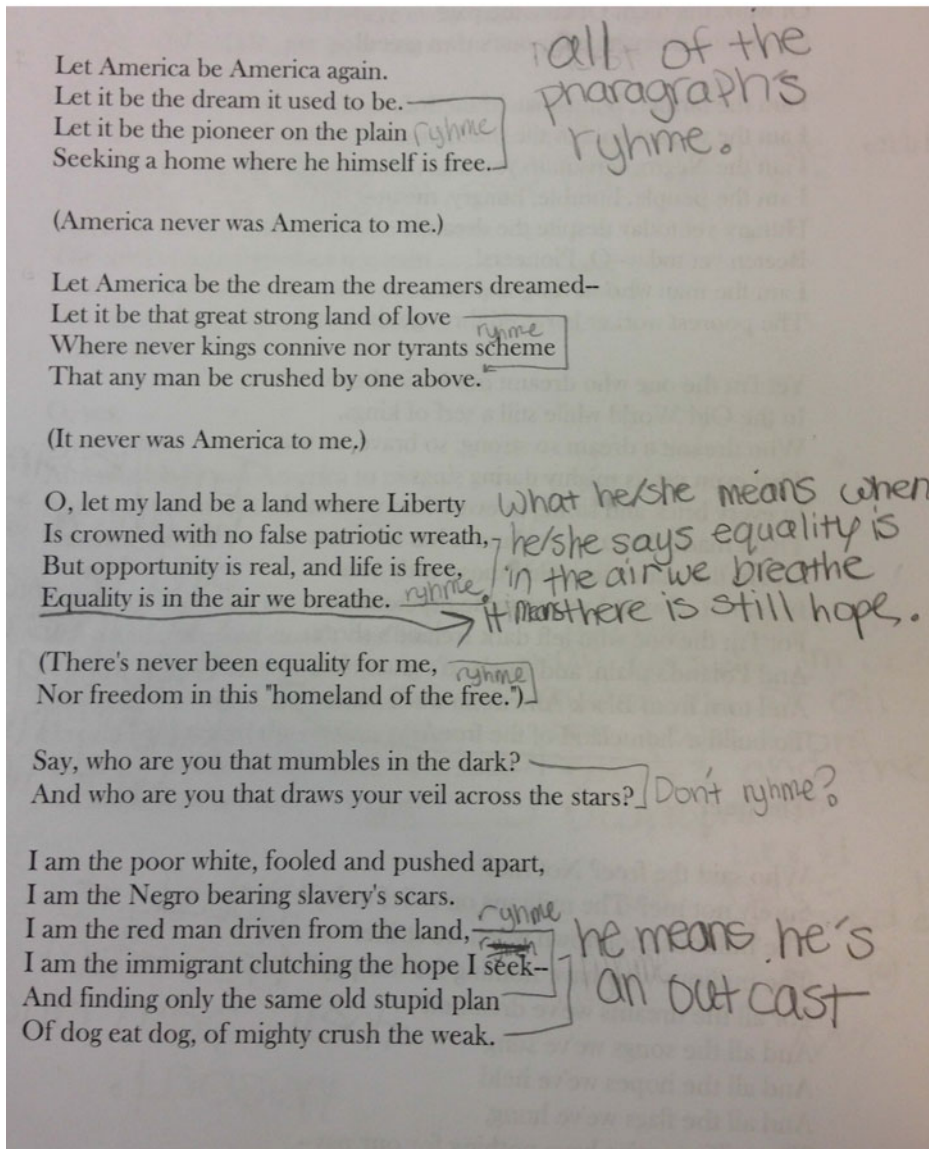


Figure 1. A fifth-grade student writes down her initial thoughts about the poem before completing the online electronic survey with her partner.

Close inspection of each lesson

Lesson One: Introduction to “Let America Be America Again”

During Lesson One, Emily read “Let America Be America Again,” and each block of students commented on specific words and phrases that stuck out to them, as well as inferred the possible time period of the piece. The discussions were intense. Students debated what the poem was about, the themes, and relevance to issues they face today and the author’s intention. They wrote down their thoughts next to the poem (see Figures 1–2). When the class discussion ended, students were paired and asked to review and answer questions about the poem and the connections they were making using a form embedded on the class blog (see Appendix A).

Lesson Two: Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

As students read along to an audio version of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, they took notes and discussed their emerging ideas. Their whole-group and partner conversations were thought provoking and

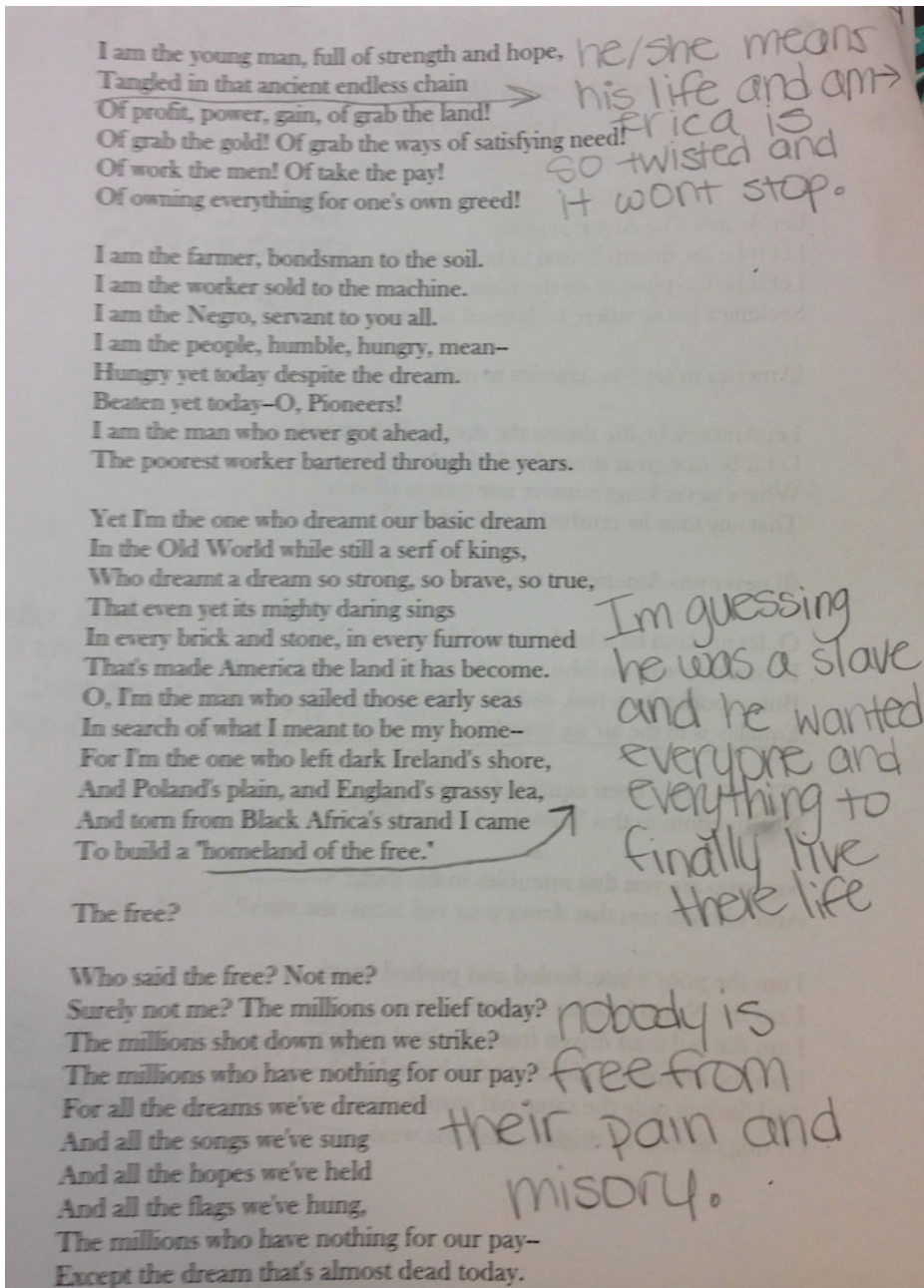


Figure 2. A fifth-grade student writes down her initial thoughts about the poem before completing the online electronic survey with her partner.

provided another opportunity to name and compare their historical understandings about race, opportunity, and power. At the conclusion of Chapter 3, our team asked the students to complete an online survey (accessed via course blog).

Lesson Three: Digital stations

The responses from the online survey from Lesson Two provided insight into how the students were making sense of the information we were reading and discussing in class. We met as a team to read and discuss these survey responses and then sorted them into the following four categories: (1) the social

conception of race; (2) pushing back against inequitable structures, such as voting laws; (3) concerns about immigration; and (4) more context around Langston Hughes and his life. Based on these categories, the team created six different digital stations that the students completed in small groups. Each pair was equipped with their copy of “Let America Be America Again,” writing utensils, and an iPad. Several of the activities were accessed via the classroom blog. Once the students reviewed the information online, they were then required to record their thoughts on the accompanying chart paper at each station (see [Appendix C](#) for questions).

At one of the centers, the students had to compare and contrast “Let America Be America Again” (Hughes, 1995) to “Running to America” (Rodriquez, 2014). Emily selected “Running to America” to introduce another perspective of what it is like to live in America from the perspective of an immigrant. Instead of filling in the Venn diagram, the students began to write questions on the outside of the chart, prompting others to respond to their questions. Some of the questions were:

- Q1: Why are white people so against African Americans? I thought we were over this problem.
Response: I agree. They're not aliens.
- Q2: Why are they still caring about race?
Response: I don't know but people should know.
- Q3: Does the author want to save America, too, or is he recording others' thoughts and words?
Response: I think he wants to save America.

Lesson Four: “Little Things Are Big,” by Jesus Colon

To expand the students' thinking about race and power beyond black vs. white, our team introduced another poem, “Little Things Are Big,” to the class. In the poem, Colon (1982) describes an encounter with a white lady and the anxiety it caused for him. The students read and reread the poem, taking notes and sharing responses with a partner and the whole class. What follows is an excerpt from the whole group discussion:

- Emily: So tell me your initial thoughts after we read this, what are some things that you noticed about the text?
Noah: Well ... in the text, it showed his feelings about the woman.
Emily: What else?
Kim: He was anxious. She [the lady] doesn't think she can really help him and so she screams. That made him overthink it [the interaction].
Emily: I like how you said it made him overthink it.
Greg: And in those days some people ... I don't know how to say it, but maybe ...
Emily: They didn't see people equally?
Greg: Yes, they didn't see people equally and so that created anxiety for him.
Susan: In the text, he noticed that there was segregation ... and not everybody accepted how they looked.
Lisa: When he got up to the top of stairs, he regretted not helping her because he thought maybe she wasn't going to scream or anything, she just needed help.
Emily: So that's called his “perception” of her. He had a perception of her that she had a perception of him.
Noah: This was true right?
Emily: Yes, this is a true story written from the perspective of this author, and it's interesting that there are layers of perspectives there. He had a perspective of her that she had a certain perceptiveness of him. Are there any events or things that have happened in the world or in your life today that you could maybe think about perspectives?
Jim: Martin [reference to Trayvon Martin], the guy had his hoodie on and went outside.
Emily: How's that connected to perceptions of people?
Jim: He was probably thought of as a gang member.
Emily: Because of his hoodie?
Jim: Because of his hoodie.

In the previous lessons, students were paired and asked to respond to questions related to the readings. However, after this lesson, instead of answering the questions Emily prepared, the students asked if they could look for articles to read and use to create their own conversation stations. Emily agreed and let the students craft their own questions about the poem or connect to previous readings. [Figure 3](#) shows an example of one student who found an article about Trayvon Martin in *The Washington Post*, printed off

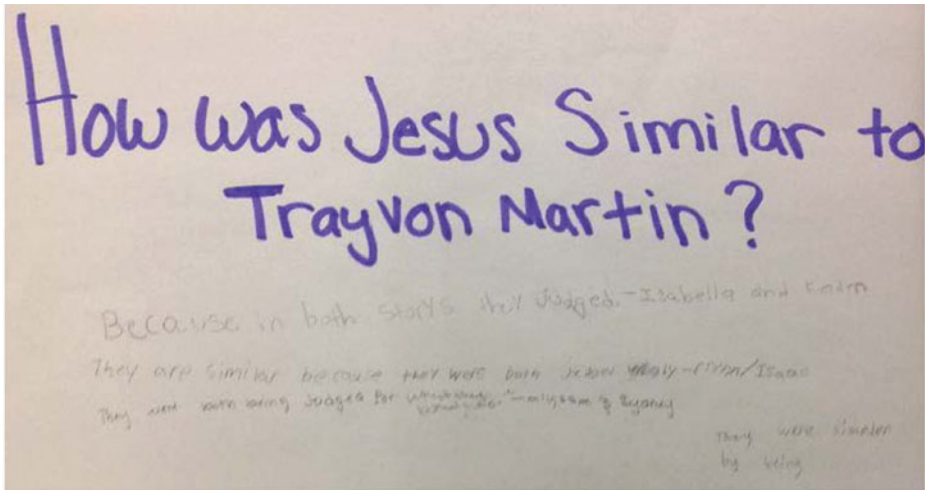


Figure 3. Student-generated question that asks peers to make a text-to-world connection by comparing the poem, “Little Things Are Big,” to the Trayvon Martin case: Because in both stories they judged; They are similar because they were both judged wrongly; They were both being judged for what they look like; They were similar by being judged.

copies, and wrote a question for his peers to answer. Next, the students went to each of the peer-developed stations to respond to the questions on the charts (see [Figures 4–5](#)).

Lesson Five: “Let America Be America Again,” second reading

To conclude the unit, we returned to “Let America Be America Again.” Our goal was to have each student make sense of their new understandings about race, power, and inequity and then share those understandings in the form of a stanza to be added to the poem. Emily shared a variety of strategies with the students in a mini-lesson and encouraged them to refer back to the poem in order to gain a sense of the author’s stylistic choices, voice, use of themes, and rhythmic pattern (see [Figures 6–7](#)). Once the students finished drafting their stanzas, they edited and typed their work and Emily posted each addition on the class blog.

The students wrote about a variety of topics that addressed gay rights, environmental protection, racism, classism, and poverty. [Table 5](#) includes a few examples of this work.

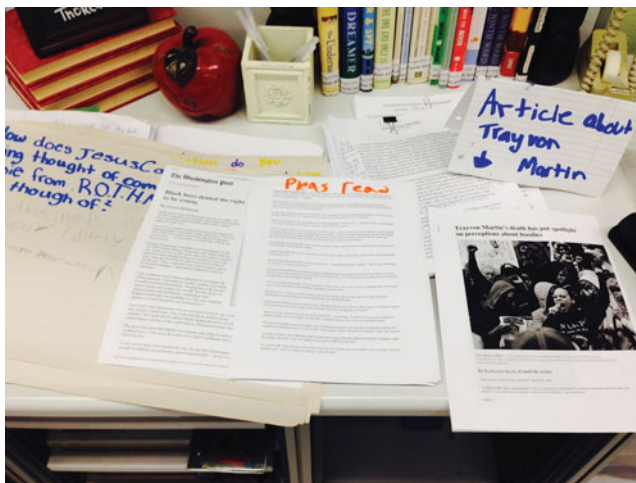


Figure 4. Article station created by students.

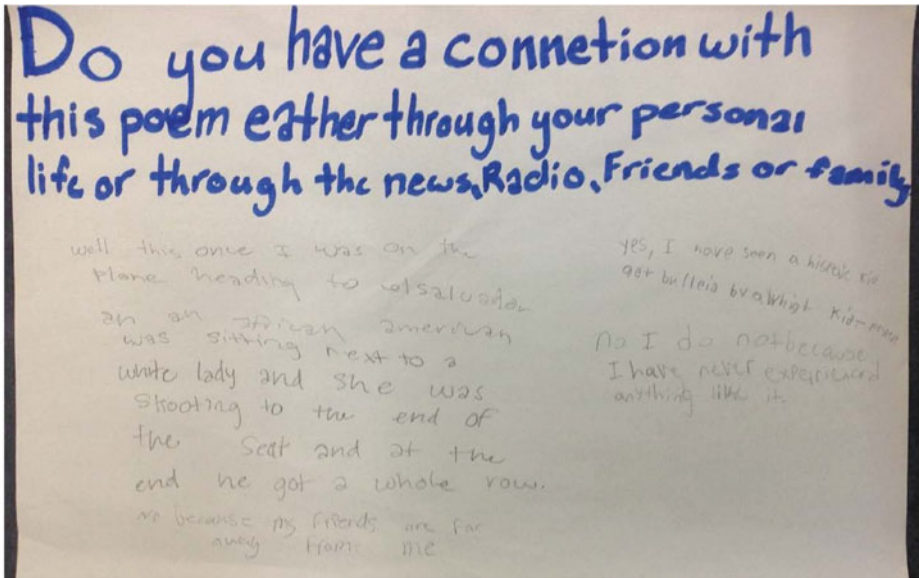


Figure 5. Student-generated question that asks peers to make a text-to-self or text-to-world connection: Well this once I was on the plane heading to El Salvador and an African American was sitting next to a white lady and she was scooting to the end of the seat and at the end he got a whole row; No because my friends are far away from me; No. I do not because I have never experienced anything like it; Yes, I have seen a Hispanic kid get bullied by a white kid.

Learning from the students

Finding 1: Nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary issues involving race

At the beginning of the unit, students began discussing how different groups of people fare in America and the societal implications these inferences may disclose about race. As our team read field notes that detailed observations of the students' interactions and read transcripts of their comments about fairness and equity, we noticed a shift in their discourse over time.

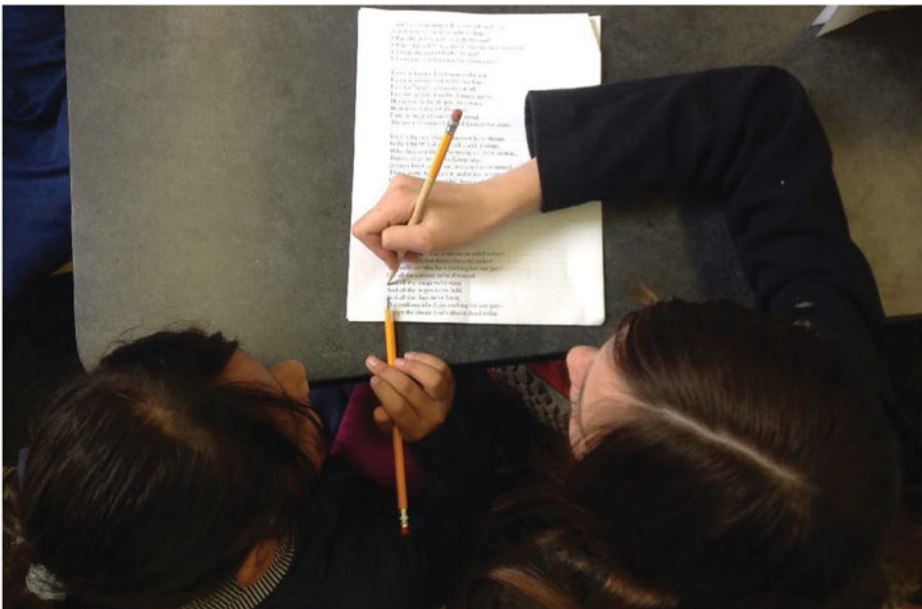


Figure 6. Two students read the Hughes poem for the second time.



Figure 7. After reading the Hughes poem for a second time, two students discuss how to answer the questions.

Table 5. Students' final stanzas.

Karen's stanza

We work so hard for your riches and greed
 You're in the way of all or needs
 We want a land of the free
 Where everyone's there to suit your need
 Where your color, your skin
 Is a tidbit of what really matters
 In this land of greed
 For we shall make this the land of the free
 We shall work night and day
 In groups of many
 In witch we shall say
 "In the hearts of many
 We suffer we pay with the hearts of many
 Today is the day
 In rights in justice you shall regret what you have done today
 In groups of many we shall talk with our hearts
 We will all be leaders today, today
 Is our chance to rebuild this
 Home of the free

Damon's stanza

America never was America to me
 Today, yesterday, or tomorrow
 America never was America to me
 "The land of the free" never was to me
 Today nothing has changed,
 The sea of judgment still high,
 The sky still filling with lies,
 The people that still never changed.
 How was America America to you?

Lucia's stanza

I am
 The
 Child
 With the
 Immigrant parents
 That came here
 For a better life
 And better
 Future
 But still ...
 Worried
 About what is
 Going
 To happen
 Next

Lenny's stanza

I am the worker
 I need better pay
 Cheaper stuff
 Better and more equipment
 More people helping
 More breaks
 Less hours

During the first few lessons, students began to question the impact of race and whether it was still a problem in society. They wanted to learn more, so, during the fourth lesson, the students decided to create their own stations and ask each other questions about the readings and other events where race was a salient factor. It was then that the students began to “see” beyond the classroom (Sims Bishop, 1990) and to make connections to events from the past as well as the present, such as the Trayvon Martin case, desegregation, and immigration laws. They sought out counter-narratives for many of the stories they were hearing on the news, from people in their community, or that came up in response to conversations they were having in class. The goal was to point out the nuances or discrepancies by comparing sources. As a research team, we were intrigued by this shift and asked the students about what we were observing in their work. During a conversation with Keith about a Trayvon Martin question he had written on the chart, he shared:

Well, I started thinking about this photo I saw with Justin Bieber in a hoodie and thought, what if Trayvon Martin was a white boy? I asked Emily if I could find an article about this and she said yes. Then, I wrote my question.

The impromptu question about the Trayvon Martin case and article selection spurred a variety of responses from the other students (see Figure 8). Below are a few of the responses to the question, “If Trayvon was a white boy, how would Zimmerman’s reaction change?”

- “I think he would have just asked him what was in the jug and bag instead of shot him! Because black boys are usually thought to be dangerous!”
- “He might not even acknowledge him.”
- “If he was white he would have been upset for a white person to wear a hoodie and it might not have happened.”
- “He might be nice to him. Maybe [Zimmerman] would not have talked to him.”

Although students were voicing their awareness of societal inequities and structures during the beginning lesson, their voices became more pronounced with the culminating activity, where the students

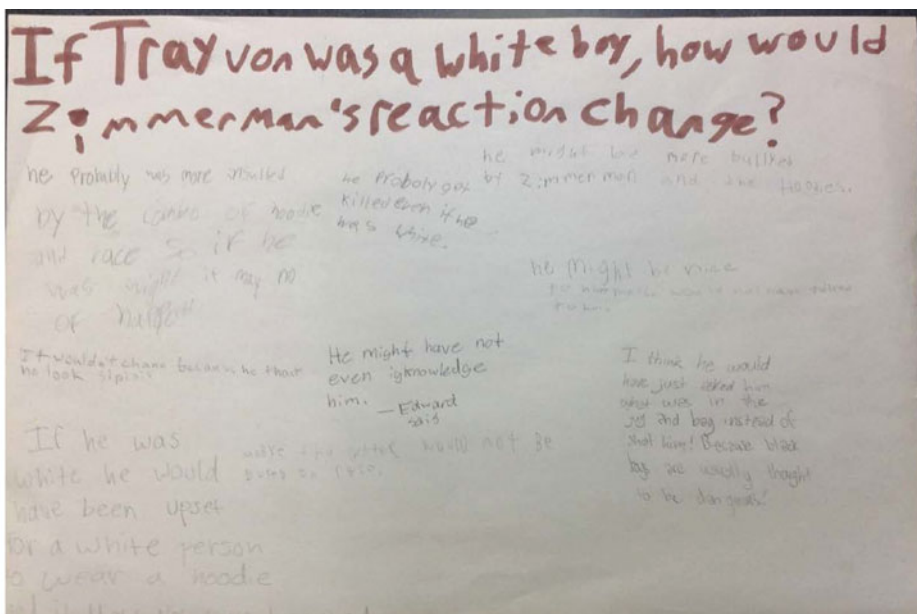


Figure 8. Student-generated question for peers to answer about Trayvon Martin. Student responses: He probably was more insulted by the combo of hoodie and race so if he was white it may not have happened; It wouldn’t change because he thought he look suspicious; If he was white he would have been upset for a white person to wear a hoodie; He might have not even acknowledge him; He probably got killed even if he was white; He might be more bullied by Zimmerman and the hoodies; He might be nice to him maybe would not have talked to him; I think he would have just asked him what was in the jug and bag instead of shot him! Because black boys are usually thought to be dangerous!

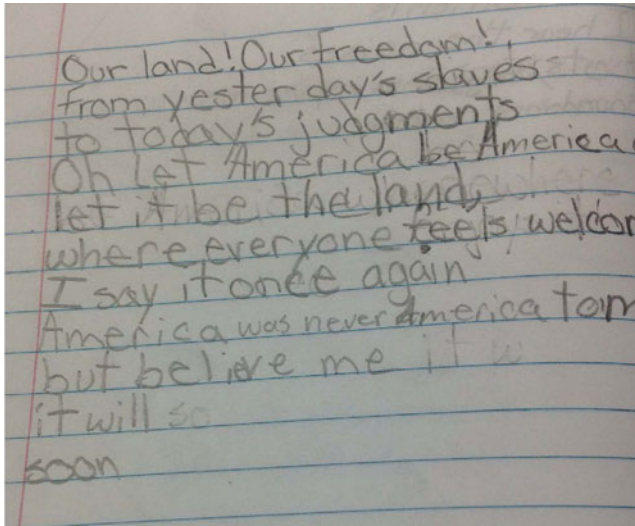


Figure 9. Initial draft of the stanza a student wanted to add to the poem: Our land! Our Freedom! / from yesterday's slaves / to today's judgments / oh let America be America again / let it be the land, / where everyone feels welcome / I say it once again / America was never America to me, / but believe me / it will / soon.

wrote their own stanza to the Hughes' poem. [Figure 9](#) shows an example of how the students were beginning to think about race and racism as integral aspects of American society along with the intersections of race, class, and gender. Throughout the unit, the students worked to understand how inequitable structures in American society go unaddressed or hidden in their daily lives. The final activity, where the students wrote stanzas, provided a space for the students to voice their frustrations, share their questions, and add perspectives that are not commonly represented in the literature (see [Figure 10](#)).

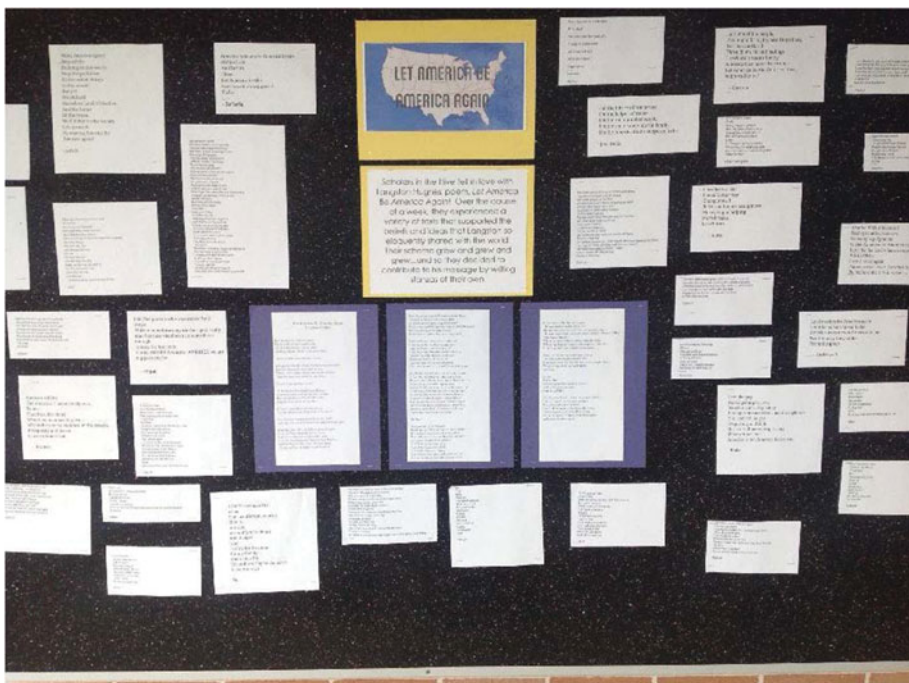


Figure 10. Bulletin board featuring all the students' stanzas and Langston Hughes' poem, "Let America Be America Again."

Finding 2: The integration of digital tools to share new understandings about race increased student participation

During the initial discussion of the poem “Let America Be America Again,” (Hughes, 1995) the students in each language arts class worked hard to make sense of unequal opportunities for different groups of people within society. Below is an excerpt from a whole-group discussion that highlights some of the inconsistencies students were trying to make sense of as they shared their insights on the poem:

- Sarah: Well, I think he’s trying to point out there’s been a lot of hard stuff in America and that the dream never came true or none of that came true.
- Chris: The slaves ... He was talking about the people like him and how they were kind of slaves because he said “the millions who have nothing for our pay” in that one part [refers to the text about not getting paid].
- Emily: What other thoughts, or feelings, or noticings?
- Justin: I think that what he means is America is never America. It’s not what they say it is. Like they say it’s the land of the free, but there’s actually a lot of people that aren’t actually free. Like the slaves, they’re not free, so why call it the land of the free?

During this exchange, the students were trying to figure out if everyone was truly free in America. Several CRT themes emerged from the discussion. The students began to challenge the ideas of colorblindness and that everyone was free by applying concepts of race and racism to historical contexts, such as slavery as an institution. The students’ openness to exploring the impact race, gender, and class has on society continued into the next activity.

After the initial reading and discussion of the text, the students worked with a partner to reread the poem and answer a set of questions on SurveyMonkey (see [Appendix A](#) for a list of questions). When asked how the poem was applicable to them, one pair stated:

- There are people that are struggling for survival and may not have hope while some people help them, others don’t even happen to care. In other places, there are often rich people who don’t help while people with less money do. This can happen at any place at any time.

Incorporating digital tools provided students with a medium to express their understanding of the poem while also providing valuable feedback for Emily as to how the unit should proceed. As the data reveal, using a digital platform created generative discussions that unveiled students’ thinking in layers and encouraged them to consider alternative opinions that pushed the conversation in new directions (see [Figure 11](#)).

Finding 3: An increase in student agency

Students across all three sections of the language arts class exercised their academic agency throughout the unit. For example, during the initial introduction to the lesson, students felt comfortable challenging



Figure 11. Students’ discussion.

the meaning of freedom when applied to present-day events and debated whether everyone truly was able to make their own choices. The students were trying to make sense of the different benefits of social class and race and decide what options were available for individuals from a working class background versus those who had attained higher levels of education. This excerpt is a conversation about the impact of social class on life choices:

- Emily: What about in today's world? What do you think?
 Chris: I think it probably is more of the land of the free.
 Emily: It's more of the land of the free, but not all the way?
 Allison: Like maids.
 Chris: But they get paid and it's a job they want to do.
 Jennifer: They don't want to do it. It's their only option.
 Allison: But don't they have a choice to pick that job?
 Luke: I mean, people do have a choice but sometimes they can't afford a different job. Not like with money. They don't always have an opportunity.
 Samantha: Like their education. Well, in the old days you could get a really good job. But now, you have to have a really good education and you have to have a good degree. You have to have a good education, elementary school all the way through college.
 Catherine: You have to have education to get a good job. But if you didn't have the right amount of education then you couldn't have the type of job you wanted to do. So, you have to go back down to a different job.

By letting the students' conversation continue, Emily carved out space in the curriculum for students to wrestle with social issues that were complex and challenging to solve. Although the students were able to clearly articulate their understanding of the current American social hierarchy and ways to circumvent the system, they were not able to come to a consensus on how to alleviate the problems linked to poverty, which is similar to the discussions and debate leaders have about these types topics. Allowing students the freedom to express their thoughts without judgment was pivotal for work in this unit. Lesson four was completely altered when the students asked to craft their own questions and create stations based upon the poems, videos, and class discussions about race. Emily encouraged the students to take control of their own learning by designing their own centers and questions. Across the lessons, Emily demonstrated that student voices mattered.

We revised [Table 2](#) to demonstrate how our team reviewed the data to determine which CRT constructs were taken up by the students across the units (see [Table 6](#)).

Discussion

Using CRT as a framework, the research team was able to successfully identify fractures in the curriculum that provide space for students to discuss social issues, with a specific focus on race.

Race and the curriculum

The students in Emily's room, regardless of race, each spoke up at least once to voice their opinions about race, which lead us to consider the impact of a classroom environment that consistently places issues of race, along with gender and class, at the center of inquiry. Similar to Schaffer and Skinner's (2009) study, which analyzed whether fourth-grade students were willing to discuss race alongside their examination of societal issues, the participants in our study were not only willing to discuss race but wanted to share their viewpoints on race, class, and gender. However, this is where the similarity of the two studies ended. Unlike Schaffer and Skinner, the overwhelming majority of participants in our study, who were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, were all willing to share their viewpoints. This leads us to believe that the classroom environment and the construct of honest and safe conversation were established prior to implementing the unit focusing on race. From previously creating an open environment, our team found that more students participated and shared their viewpoints, even when they differed with one another.

The students in our study also displayed a high level of engagement by participating in thought-provoking conversations and in-depth analysis of literature. Given that each lesson addressed the state

Table 6. Overview of findings.

CRT unifying themes (Matsuda et al., 1993)	Application to educational context	Connection to emergent themes from data
Race and racism are a defining characteristic of American society	Students examine: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • micro and macro impact of race • Institutional and/or structural forms 	More nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary issues involving race
Expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, meritocracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadening of the curriculum to include perspectives of communities of color • Analyzing the status quo and the idea of privilege 	More nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary issues involving race Integrations of digital tools to share new understandings about race
Asserts that the experiential knowledge of people of color is appropriate, legitimate, and an integral part to analyzing and understanding racial inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of multiple voices to present a more accurate portrayal 	More nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary issues involving race Integrations of digital tools to share new understandings about race
Challenges ahistoricism and the interdisciplinary focuses of most analyses and insists that race and racism be placed in both a contemporary and historical context using interdisciplinary methods	Students are tasked with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizing a historical analysis to better understand the intricacies of institutional racism • Understanding the interconnectedness of content areas to deepen perspectives 	More nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary issues involving race Integrations of digital tools to share new understandings about race
CRT is interdisciplinary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The curriculum is interdisciplinary in nature • Students are expected to connect subject area together to form deeper understandings 	Integrations of digital tools to share new understandings about race Increased student agency
Works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum is inclusive of race and examines racism when addressing social justice • Problem-posing curricula is presented 	More nuanced understanding of historical and contemporary issues involving race Integrations of digital tools to share new understandings about race Increased student agency

standards, our findings also highlight the potential for these topics to be incorporated into the curriculum. Throughout the unit, the fifth graders continued to wrestle with the social construction of race and the maintenance of racism. Initially, the students attached their thoughts on racism and racist actions to slavery and the fight for civil rights in the 1960s. It wasn't until further into the unit that the idea of social class emerged and helped the students begin to think about contemporary issues surrounding race. They began to question notions of meritocracy and the numerous ways race, gender, and class intersect to restrict opportunities for some while providing them for others. By the end of the unit, the students highlighted several current issues addressing race and racism. It was once they were given space to examine, explore, and discuss their thoughts that they were able to comprehend how racism has evolved and has yet to be eradicated.

Returning to our framework for this study, we can better understand how students were able to examine the permanence of racism and whiteness as property through discussions steeped in counter-storytelling. Racism is endemic in American society. As the students read and discussed multiple texts that span decades, they could identify and connect with the pain and anger the authors shared about racism and other forms of discrimination. Like the fifth-grade African American males in Tyson's (1999) study, our students' interest was ignited when they had to wrestle with more complicated and complex situations. The students were able to read about multiple incidents within the historical timeframe in

which they occurred, allowing them to better to understand the gravity of its impact on our society. This structure allowed them to walk alongside the characters (Langer, 1995), not only to comprehend larger societal injustices, but also to reflect on their own lived experiences. Through the use of literature, students gained a deeper sense of issues and were not only able to respond but often moved toward more social action-oriented activities (DeNicolo & Fránquiz, 2006; Dever et al., 2005; Kemple, Harris, & Lee, 2015; Tyson, 1999).

Although data provide insights into how race impacts educational opportunities and daily experiences for people of color, personal narratives or counter-stories provide further depth and grounded examples of what racism looks like in action. In Emily's classroom counter-stories became the main tool for sharing alternative perspectives that gave authority and validity to the lived experiences of those who have been marginalized.

Literature inquiry and digital tools

The data also revealed that creating space for open-ended responses to literature fostered opportunities to engage in pedagogical practices that examined dominant ideologies about literacy, power, and knowledge production. For the participants in this study, interacting with multicultural literature and texts with digital platforms was an integral aspect of the curriculum that provided space to raise questions about diversity, equity, and social change. However, as Copenhaver-Johnson et al. (2007) remind us, "Simply reading literature cannot instantaneously change deeply entrenched, stereotypical belief systems, particularly when the realities children live reinforce the systems of inequality feeding the stereotypes" (p. 241). Thus, the pedagogies teachers introduce their students to must sustain and problematize these issues by connecting them to daily experiences and questions that students grapple with in their lives.

A closer look at the culturally responsive digital literacies developed in this unit reveal the multiple ways students were able to view, compose, and respond across modalities, such as TED videos, iPad apps, Twitter, blog posts, audiobooks, photographs, and print texts, as they explored each text. Because we provided a variety of platforms, student participation in discussions increased and new understandings about race, power, and access began to emerge. Students were excited about sharing their work with a global community (they checked the blog daily for comments) and recognized how this positioned them as public intellectuals who were contributing to the discourse on race in American society.

Ultimately, digital platforms offered dialogic possibilities for exploring social issues. Digital platforms created a fluid space for building collective responses with contrasting perspectives and sharing these across all three language arts classes, with accessibility in and out of school. If this had been a pencil-and-paper activity, only the author and the teacher would have access to the information.

As we consider the absence of stories from the official literacy curriculum that acknowledge inequities, race, and power, it is imperative that we continue to provide space for students to make sense of this void and the consequences. In this study, Emily, the classroom teacher, had autonomy to deviate from the district curriculum to follow her students' interests, but what about teachers who do not have this freedom or believe this topic is not appropriate for their students to discuss? Our work joins the work of other scholars who question the absence of communities of color in the curriculum and seek to alter it by providing literature depicting realities faced in daily life. By providing an example of one fifth grade unit and its impact, we hope to inspire other educators to make the curriculum more open, honest, and inclusive. We need more studies that provide close reads of classrooms that juggle multiple academic agendas while foregrounding social action.

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Appendix A: "Let America Be America Again," SurveyMonkey questions

1. What inferences did you make while reading this poem? What can you infer about the author? What can you infer about the time period ... or is it referring to many time periods? If so, explain.
2. How is this poem applicable to your world? How can you relate it to current events that are happening in our world?
3. What words would you like to know more about? Using the context clues and your schema, what do you infer their meaning is?
4. What meaningful questions do you have about this poem?
5. What is a possible theme for this poem?
6. What was the purpose of the words in parenthesis? Why do you think the author used repetition throughout the poem?
7. How does the photograph on "the Buzz" connect to the poem? How does it connect to you, as a scholar?

Appendix B: *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, questions

1. What details, or facts, about this time period were you able to find as you read this excerpt?
2. What literacy elements do you think were added so that readers could connect emotionally to the text?
3. What type of person is Little Man? How would you describe him? Support your inferences with textual evidence.
4. What is the importance of the condition of the book paired with the race of the students in the characters' textbooks?

5. After reading this passage from *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, what information would you like to spend time further researching regarding this time period in our history? Which part of the text led you to your curiosity?

Appendix C: Lesson 3: Chart questions for digital stations

STATION 1: Time for Kids Article—“*Meeting of the Minds*”

Thinking back to the poem, “Let America Be America Again,” how do you think the *theme* or *message* of the poem could connect to this article? Use specific lines from the poem to support your answers.

STATION 2: Getting to know Langston Hughes

Now that you know a bit more about Langston Hughes, why do you think he wrote this poem?

Do you think Hughes would be a fan of Mildred D. Taylor’s book, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*? Explain your answer.

What factual pieces from *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* do you think Hughes referred to in his poem?

STATION 3: The U.S. Census from 1790–2010

*A census is when the government takes an official count of the number of people in the country. This occurs in the USA every 10 sources.

What were some *surprising* or *alarming* words/phrases that you noticed while analyzing these historical documents? Why were these surprising or alarming?

STATION 4: Poem—“*Running to America*”

Add to the Venn diagram comparing “*Running to America*” and “*Let America Be America Again*.” Focus in on the connecting section ... and don’t forget to add TEXTUAL EVIDENCE to support your thinking!

STATION 5: TED Talk—*Fight for the Right to Vote*

As you learned about the “*progression*” of voting rights over time, how were many genders or race left out?

Think about the title of Hughes’ poem—“*Let America Be America Again*.” Was America ever America? Or was Hughes making a statement using words creatively? Use textual evidence and your schema to back up your thinking.

STATION 6: Census Race Categories Shirts

Think about both texts. This station is open for any *comments*, *connections*, or *inferences* referring to the text as you analyze the “*race categories*” on the shirt. Make sure you use textual evidence to support your thoughts.

Notes on contributors

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