



## **Teaching About White Nationalism: Ethics, Vulnerability, and Racial Pain in Learning Environments**

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**Abstract:** U.S. white nationalism is virulent and escalating, expressing itself through a variety of digital and media spheres, violent assaults on Black, Jewish, Muslim, migrant and indigenous communities, and via increasing participation and alliance-building in mainstream politics. Notwithstanding the public presence, impact, and persistence of white nationalist organizations, education remains thin. These educational deficits have alarming implications, signaling a lack of public readiness to engage and challenge white nationalist movement building. Fostering a conversation between educators is therefore both productive and compelling. Such dialogue can catalyze increased communal and scholarly commitment to providing education about white nationalism, grounded in the premise that critical education is a necessary element of effective racial justice work. As a contribution to this vital discourse, we attend to the complex ethical challenges involved in the process of learning about white supremacist organizing, using the example of U.S. white nationalism.

**Keywords:** Whiteness, pedagogy, white nationalism, Nazism, populism.

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The 2021 attack on the United States Capitol building powerfully illustrated the extent to which white nationalism and far-right incarnations of patriotism have become increasingly visible in public space (Glaude, 2021; Kirby, 2021; Thompson & Fischer, 2021). While Donald Trump's presidency has undoubtedly inflamed and emboldened certain expressions of white rage and entitlement in the United States, notable growth of white nationalist movements manifested during and after Barack Obama's initial successful presidential campaign in 2008 (Miller & Graves, 2020). The present moment reflects an entrenchment of white supremacy in U.S. institutions (Speed, 2020). As Shannon Speed elucidates, no comprehension of white supremacy can be effective without a deeper engagement with the politics of colonialism, as a driving force undergirding U.S. society, structures, and ways of making meaning. In this discussion, we center recognition that contemporary white nationalism is powerfully rooted in colonial and white supremacist histories.

While U.S. media trumpeted the birth of a "post-racial" society in 2008 and beyond, white nationalist groups and enclaves experienced rapid growth in participation and membership from white people (Anderson, 2014, 2016; Hooker, 2017). The new recruits were disproportionately, though not exclusively, white males, who were affronted, unsettled, and often rageful at the prospect of Black leadership in the United States' highest public office. In addition to looking to proximate contemporary causes, existing racial and social movement scholarship gives us a solid, though still developing foundation to understand the roots of contemporary white nationalism in community mobilization dating back to the 19th century post-civil War reconstruction era, and earlier phases of colonization and nation-building (Byrne, 2018; Ridgeway, 1990).

Notwithstanding a growing field of knowledge to help ground our contemporary observance of white nationalist mobilization, too little information is reaching the public (Swain, 2002). We find that it is common for our university students, and even some academic colleagues, to find elements of the rhetoric or ideological frames surfacing in contemporary white nationalist mobilization to be inexplicable, confounding or seemingly without context, absent more of a theoretical and historicized foundation of colonization and white supremacy. College-level pedagogy about white nationalism is notably and painfully under-developed, with higher educational institutions typically offering no courses devoted fully to the subject. More limited modules manifest only sporadically in courses addressing U.S. racial histories or political extremism.

The need for pedagogy about white nationalism is nevertheless pressing and time-sensitive (Brown & Au, 2014). Learning about white nationalism enables several possibilities for students who are preparing for future professional and community work. Nuanced and critical study of white nationalism, Nazism, and related movements can substantially deepen student comprehension of the broader landscape of white supremacy and settler colonialism and

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strengthen student recognition of the ways in which “everyday” whiteness and structural racism set the stage for overt white nationalism. White nationalist reactivity to the Black Lives Matter movement remains relentless such that, as educators attempt to mobilize critical pedagogy about anti-Black racism, curriculum about white nationalism should be understood as a vital element of explicating white resistance to Black Lives Matter frames and visibility.

This paper is a collaboration grounded in our experiences as faculty teaching students about white nationalism, Nazism, and related far right, white identity-based organizing. In 2019, Beth Ribet designed an interdisciplinary first-year undergraduate seminar at UCLA entitled “White Nationalism and Nazism in the U.S.,” utilizing relevant concepts and frames from CRT. She has since launched a second course in Gender Studies, entitled “Gender, Populism and White Nationalism,” and a third course in Sociology entitled “White Nationalism and Right-wing Populism.” The first-year courses were for small groups (under 20), although the Gender Studies and Sociology courses were larger lectures. The majority of those enrolled were students of color, although white students also were present. Leslie Bunnage developed a research project focused on the rhetoric and mobilization strategies of the Tea Party movement. As an outgrowth of that work, she developed an applied learning course in Sociology at Seton Hall University in 2010, entitled “Research Practicum on the Tea Party Movement” in which undergraduate students were able to assist and accompany her in field visits to Tea Party movement rallies and meetings, and interviews with Tea Party leaders. The course included 13 students. Twelve of the 13 were female, and eight of the 13 were white, while the remaining five were students of color.

Upon dialogue, we rapidly recognized affinities between our respective courses, while also acknowledging the distinctions between classroom and applied learning, the topical differences in our respective curriculum, and the differing political landscapes in which we launched our curriculum (respectively during the Obama and Trump eras). While the white nationalism courses centered white nationalism squarely as their organizing theme, the Tea Party movement practicum surfaced white nationalism as a driving and sometimes unconscious theme embedded in Tea Party mobilization. Both courses interrogated strong expressions of U.S. patriotism coupled with organized opposition to policies, people and practices that would serve to upset white dominance or to disrupt the position of white people as the normative template for citizenship and American identity (Enck-Wanzer, 2011; Oliver, 2017).

Our intended audiences for this paper are primarily educators who have an existing foundation in anti-racist teaching, and some foundational awareness of the structural and historical relationships between white privilege, white nationalism, and white supremacy. The entry point for this discussion involves explication of the ethical challenges in pedagogy about white nationalism, for educators who are already both invested in and familiar with analyses of structural and ideological racism and white supremacy, whether through Critical Race Theory (CRT), or related spheres in Ethnic Studies, or subfields in the Social Sciences and Humanities. In other related work, we discuss strategies for explicating the relationship between white privilege and white nationalism in the classroom (Ribet & Bunnage, 2023).

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Our priorities and emphases in this discussion are shaped by our investments in CRT. This project implicates the application of tenets of CRT to the study of white nationalist movements (Hiraldo, 2010). The broader field of CRT embodies a set of analyses and tools for challenging white supremacy and is a valuable foundation for any educator interested in delivering pedagogy about white nationalism. One of these tenets in particular serves as an implicit guidepost in this discussion, namely the recognition that racism (and white nationalism specifically) is neither aberrational nor extraordinary, but rather is grounded in the major institutions of white supremacist societies, including law and education (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Decuir & Dixon, 2004). This tenet has traction in any study of white nationalism, particularly since it is often normative, in and out of academia, for white nationalism to be understood within the frame of “extremism,” and conceptualized as distinct from other expressions of whiteness and white privilege (Ribet & Bunnage, 2024; Cottom, 2018).

While we hold this epistemological frame as a foundation of our work in this paper, we are also concerned with the “nuts and bolts” of pedagogy addressing racially charged and traumatic content. As we considered the simultaneously productive and disturbing aspects of our pedagogy, we recognized some congruent themes and imperatives in our educational work. An array of political factors inform pedagogy about white nationalism. These include considerations that are normatively at play in critical and race-conscious curricula. Such considerations include (and are not limited to): a) historicizing our contemporary analyses, b) situating and supporting communal knowledge that students of color bring to dialogue, c) managing and responding to exercises of white privilege in the classroom, and d) grounding discussion in recognition of both structural and rhetorical manifestations of racism (Alderman et al., 2019; Gilbert 2020; Ullucci, 2010).

In essence, this paper is a think-piece about our experiences as educators and is informed by (but is not a vehicle for presenting any data from) our prior research. Instead, the paper develops an initial discussion of ethics in critical pedagogy about white nationalism, drawing informally on our classroom and field experiences with students. To this end, we incorporate review of physical and emotional vulnerabilities for students, and the complexity of varying student reactions to learning in more depth about white nationalist politics and the people who embody them. In this paper, we offer some additional reflection on the array of ethical challenges implicated in crafting and delivering pedagogy about white nationalism. The discussion is broken into three areas: a) empathy, distancing and humanization, b) racial vulnerability, grief, and rage, and c) physical safety.

### **Empathy, Distancing, and Humanization**

To study white nationalism thoughtfully and holistically requires learning more about who white nationalists are in the contexts of their lives and subjective realities. In some instances, the content of testimony, text and other data sources will be unambiguously repellent to students and faculty. Study of such content is not simple, as it generates intense emotional

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reactions and provokes difficult reflection on the nature and sources of sadism and cruelty, and the virulence of white racism. Yet, in these moments, white nationalists are -- to those who study them -- clearly understood enemies, rarely provoking empathy or identification.

However, many white nationalist movements recruit disproportionately among young, traumatized, mentally ill, and economically vulnerable white people (Blazak, 2003; Blee, 2003; Lennings et al., 2010.) Some rely on intergenerational socialization of children who are indoctrinated continuously (see e.g. Saslow, 2018). They can involve marked internal hierarchies with patterns of exploitation and (often gendered) violence targeting their own members (Giroux, 2017; Toop, 2020). It is somewhat common for people to commit to exiting white nationalist movements after some period of exposure and immersion. At least some of these individuals give public testimony, and take physical, legal and emotional risks in the interests of accountability (see e.g. Franco & Radford, 2018; Hunter-Gault & Kane, 2019; Picciolini, 2017; Saslow, 2018). For students (and for faculty), one of the challenges in studying white nationalism involves navigating experiences of empathy, partial identification, and humanization of the individuals who make up white nationalist movements. These social-psychological processes may be both meaningful and deeply uncomfortable for some students of color, as well as for white students who are Jews, Muslims, or otherwise belong to a targeted community (e.g., LGBTQ students). They may also provoke intense discomfort -- and ideally, critical self-reflection -- for white students who are used to perceiving white nationalists as entirely different from themselves and to framing white nationalism as aberrational.

In the white nationalism courses, students of color and a few white students began to initially articulate surprise and confusion about their own emotional reactions. The strongest such reaction was often the students' surprise and discomfort in response to feeling any compassion for individuals in white nationalist movements. These reactions surfaced as the class studied recruitment and exit politics, focusing on what needs or biographical factors drive entry into these movements, and on the process and the emotional and sometimes extreme physical risks involved in exiting these movements. The students viewed the independent film "Skin" (Director Guy Nattiv, 2018), based on the lived experiences of Bryon Widner, a young white nationalist who was recruited as a vulnerable teen, and repeatedly threatened, injured, and eventually hospitalized as he attempted to escape. When making sense of the film, students developed complex reactions to white nationalists, and recognition of stark internal hierarchies within white nationalist movements. Deeyah Khan's 2017 powerful documentary, "White Right: Meeting the Enemy," in which she identifies herself as a left-wing Muslim, South Asian feminist, and meets and questions white nationalists and former white nationalists, further enhanced student recognition of the class differences and politics within white nationalist movements, and strengthened recognition of white nationalist movements as simultaneously very dangerous, and comprised of individuals who, in some instances, are also vulnerable and struggling.

The second incarnation of the "White Nationalism and Nazism" class (in 2020) included an in-class guest lecture by Shannon Foley-Martinez, a former teenage Nazi, who has since spent

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more than two decades engaged in anti-racist organizing, and in assisting and mentoring white nationalists who are attempting to exit. Students were invited to ask her direct questions about her past violent behavior, her feelings about that behavior, her vulnerabilities as a young person, her current understanding of white nationalist movements and their ideologies, and her insights about anti-racist counter-mobilization. In subsequent debriefing, students highlighted her visit as one of the best aspects of the course and discussed how useful it was to comprehend how a vulnerable teenage girl could embrace such politics, and with what social psychological effects.

As students processed and made sense of their emotional reactions, discussion focused on empathy and humanization as concepts. The class explored questions such as: what does it mean to humanize someone, and specifically to humanize someone who is positioning themselves in opposition to you (or others) as an expression of racism (Ivie, 2008; Wiebe, 1996)? Is it possible to empathize with someone doing harm, specifically racial harm, without presumptively forgiving, minimizing, excusing, or justifying that harm? Does empathy deepen analysis, strengthen political strategy, or usefully complicate critical theorizing? Are there dangers in empathizing? For instance, does empathizing with someone who is a perpetrator of white racism necessarily or easily displace or shift attention from victims of racial harm? Does the focus on white psyches and receipt of empathy divert attention from structural racism?

In exploring this latter question, the students examined “exit politics,” and screened a Ted Talk by Christian Picciolini, who is a well-known former Nazi, a best-selling author, and was the producer of the television series, “Breaking Hate” on MSNBC. The students discussed a moment in the closing of his Ted Talk in which Picciolini exhorts the audience to empathize with the trauma and turmoil people in white nationalist movements have experienced. At the close of his talk, he tells his audience that empathy and compassion are the most important elements that contribute to “extremists” choosing to leave Nazi organizations. He then issues a challenge, stating, “Go out there today, tomorrow, hopefully every day. Find somebody that you think is undeserving of your compassion and give it to them, because I guarantee you, they’re the ones who need it the most.” (Picciolini, 2017).

Participants in the discussion examined Picciolini’s framing critically -- specifically the notion that Nazis need compassion “the most,” relative to the presumptive burden it could easily impose on people of color to prioritize or elevate white pain. Class members also reflected on the question of a former white nationalist building a relatively lucrative career based on that identity. The discussion included comparative and critical acknowledgment of the potential danger in focusing on perpetrator vulnerability and trauma when examining white violence, in contrast with the racially charged and often far less empathetic public responses to violence committed by persons of color and/or by Muslims. Posing a question like -- “Have we ever, in popular media, heard anyone talking about the trauma, vulnerability or emotional needs of people who are framed as “Muslim terrorists”?” -- can help to initiate critical reflection on the comparative public willingness to humanize and empathize with perpetrators of white racist violence.

Notably, when some students began raising the question of empathy, a few white students were among those most expressively resistant to feeling or validating any empathy towards

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former white nationalists. As discussed previously, empathy or emotional identification with a white nationalist can be challenging to some white students, specifically because it disrupts the ability to position white nationalists as thoroughly differentiated from their own experience of whiteness (For a related discussion, see Cottom, 2018). In this dialectic, a white nationalist is a kind of mono-dimensional trope held up in contrast to white people who are nice, and “not racist.” Recognizing commonalities between white nationalists and “good” people who are white is disruptive, and challenges white students to grapple with the uneasiness of recognizing similarities between their own navigation of racial power, and the movements and people under study. Empathy, therefore, can be discomfiting or psychologically threatening, precisely because it establishes commonality or identification (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). Course materials and discussion ultimately supported students in comprehending white nationalism as part of a contiguous landscape of white racist behaviors, perceptual patterns, choices, and civic engagement in which any/every person with white privilege is implicated and can potentially engage in conscious and unconscious decision-making. As the course progressed, and the relationships between white nationalist movements, white privilege, and mainstream racism continued to be interrogated, white student resistance to contemplating or acknowledging empathy dissipated.

The pedagogical process in the “White Nationalism and Nazism” course highlighted the emotional challenges and opportunities involved in studying the white right. A common trait of almost all students was a marked motivation to learn and to make sense of the material. Many of the students took on extra work out of interest, student preparation for each class discussion was relatively high and demonstrated thought, and absences were rare. Students also indicated that they were discussing and sharing course materials with friends and family members, to a greater degree than they normally would in other courses. Given the intensity of the material and the commitment the students brought to learning, it is unsurprising that students would struggle with how to humanize and empathize, as well as how to experience and articulate their experiences of horror and distress.

Learning can be a process of strengthening “emotional intelligence,” as well as a theoretical or analytical process. In discussion, students were encouraged to consider that empathy does not have to presumptively be burdened with expectations of premature (or any) forgiveness, or of defense or minimization of racism. For students of color struggling with the complexity of their reactions, it was vital to acknowledge that empathizing with or recognizing sympathetic elements within individual white experiences need not presumptively constitute a betrayal of self, community, or anti-racist commitments.

It was also helpful to recognize that empathy and humanization can be useful. For instance, empathy can deepen student relationships to theory and narrative, can aid in recognizing and strategically mobilizing against white nationalist recruitment and retention practices, and is part of the emotional work of comprehending racism. Simultaneously, empathy and identification with white nationalist experiences and traumas can become depoliticizing. Depoliticization occurs both by shifting focus from the harms visited on communities of color,

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and by elevating preoccupation with personal and psychological manifestations of white distress and vulnerability over recognition of the function of white nationalist movements as an outgrowth of structural racism (For related discussion of the risks of empathy, see e.g. Bloom, 2017). Effective pedagogy will necessarily anticipate that student relationships to content will be emotionally charged and rarely simple. CRT, again, can be a guidepost in this work, in offering educators a body of literature about storytelling and narrative as central to critical education, and in disrupting white supremacist epistemologies (Aguirre, 2000; Miller et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

In the Tea Party Movement course, one of the white students grappled with making sense of her mother's Tea Party membership. The student initially came to the subject material out of curiosity and shared the perception that the Tea Party was perhaps on the fringe, or a bit "wacky." During examination of Tea Party imagery, the students confronted a graphic featuring Barack Obama with a noose around his neck. The word "hope" had been replaced with the word "nope," as a parody of some of the Obama campaign messaging. The image was chilling for all students and illustrated the movement's investment in white supremacist messaging. For the student whose parent was a Tea Party member however, contemplation of the graphic was an emotional shock, and substantially shifted her comprehension of her parent's political activity. The invocation of lynching implicated in the graphic belied the frame of the Tea Party as merely embodying "fringe" politics and located her parent's politics more squarely within the terrain of contemporary white nationalist mobilization. Recognizing that white nationalist politics were present in her immediate family shattered her ability either to distance herself from the Tea Party movement, or to trivialize its significance. Though very emotionally difficult, ultimately this aspect of learning was productive. With the support of the class, the student was able to develop a familial dialogue, and interrogate and engage with her parent's racism.

Attending Tea Party rallies generated a high degree of alienation and dislike among the students, many of whom were also making sense of suspicious or intimidating reactions to their presence from Tea Party members. As a result, the challenges associated with empathy were less common. Such challenges did, however, become relevant for students when trying to make sense of Tea Party members who were (atypically) friendly or seemed to behave kindly. Students were more likely to feel very distant from the social realities of Tea Party members, while simultaneously recognizing the movement as dangerous and alarming.

The Tea Party movement demographics also shaped this orientation. Members are disproportionately over 40, and immediately noticed the presence of college students in their late teens and early 20s. Further, the Tea Party movement advances an anti-education narrative as among its central themes, continually emphasizing that colleges and universities are bastions of left-wing propaganda and multiculturalism (Skocpol & Williamson, 2016; Bunnage, 2012). So, students (especially though not exclusively students of color) were generally not targets for recruitment and corresponding friendly treatment, as they (or at least, those students who were white) might have been in some other white nationalist spaces. The Tea Party movement also has no equivalent to literature and discourse about movement exit, as compared to Nazi movements

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and organizations, for instance. Thus, student learning was confined to direct observation and study of the public face of the movement. Consequently, although most students were less conflicted in their reactions to Tea Party members (excepting the student with a parent in the movement), the class also had to work a bit harder to make sense of the motivations and worldviews of Tea Party membership.

We can imagine pedagogical approaches which intentionally avoid scrutiny of the social psychology of white nationalism, and focus more exclusively on public discourse analysis, and on legal, economic, and structural dimensions of white nationalist mobilization and state responses. However, we note that even if the course material is intentionally less engaged with learning in ways that better enable empathy or humanization, at least some students will struggle regardless, in trying to comprehend the psychological elements of white nationalist socialization and participation. Therefore, preparing for these questions or conversations ideally should be an organic element in the development of rigorous and ethical pedagogy.

### **Racial Trauma, Vulnerability, Grief and Rage**

In several ways, studying white nationalist movements, texts, and rhetoric invites students to recognize and confront white racism without the quasi-apologetic veneer of post-civil rights era claims to tolerance, “color-blindness,” or (depoliticized) diversity (Brown, 2013; Knowles et al., 2009; Lewis, 2004). In some key respects, white nationalism is contemporary white racism laid bare and grounded admittedly and unabashedly in its histories of colonization, slavery, xenophobia, and in the United States, to Jim Crow practices and policies. Student responses to the material inevitably reflect their own lenses and comprehension of white supremacy. For many white students, and for some students of color, the material generates some shock or confusion, as students struggle to make sense of the chaotic and inconsistent ideologies that typify white nationalist discourse, against the backdrop of their own consciousness about lived experiences of race and racism.

Some students of color and a few white students find the study of white nationalism simultaneously troubling and satisfying. That is, here is white racism that does not deny (or at least, denies less of) its agenda. White nationalism makes no pretense to inclusion or racial equity while it promotes the mechanisms of structural racism. While it would be untenable to define white nationalism as consistently “honest,” given its historical revisionism and distorted representations of racial power, studying contemporary white nationalism can be empowering or clarifying for students who are continuing to hone their analyses of the logics of racial domination in the United States. Nevertheless, whether experiencing shock, clarity or both, the study of white nationalism relentlessly implicates racial violence, sadism, and objectification (De Genova, 2020; Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2020). For students, particularly those students of color who are aware of or developing consciousness of ancestral trauma in the United States, the study of white nationalism is in part an encounter with and contemplation of concentrated racist destruction and racial pain.

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Such an encounter can constitute a profound learning opportunity, and for some students can be productively politicizing or generate fresh or strengthened commitment to anti-racist scholarship and organizing. Simultaneously, particularly for students of color, and in some instances for white Jews or white Muslims, confronting white nationalism can tap into communal and personal trauma. It is not uncommon for students studying white nationalism to experience grief, rage, hurt, or feelings of marked vulnerability. The distinction between a classroom or fieldwork setting, and for instance a group therapy or community healing space, is an important one. Neither the students nor the instructor will typically fully control the composition of or the dynamics emerging within the class. That is, “safe space” may not be a realizable or reliable goal. The imperatives of grading and course structure, and the dynamics of power and authority in student/faculty relations may also complicate or escalate student experiences of racial vulnerability (Harlow, 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998). Despite these realities, an ethical approach to teaching about white nationalism should anticipate the presence of racial and ancestral trauma as an aspect of student learning.

We should acknowledge that neither author encountered the challenge of having enrolled white students who were avowed white nationalists, or who were expressing identification or solidarity with white nationalist movements. In each instance, students self-selected and enrolled for elective credit. Though not all enrolled students explicitly identified with anti-racism or had substantial prior access to anti-racist pedagogy, our students shared, at minimum, a recognition of white nationalism as a social problem. While we did not experience white nationalist presence within our student cohorts, we recognize that more overt white resistance and hostility in learning environments is among the likely challenges some educators will encounter, particularly if critical pedagogy about white nationalism becomes more widespread. This reality amplifies the point that faculty cannot reliably plan for consistent or complete “safety” as a realizable goal, even while safety planning remains a necessary element of course or content planning.

Broader conversations about trauma-informed teaching, healing-centered engagement in classroom settings, healing pedagogy, racism and pedagogy, transgressive teaching, and comparative educational models provide an array of frameworks to guide faculty in developing effective and ethical approaches to race-conscious pedagogy (see e.g., Freire et al., 2018; hooks, 2014; Stachowiak, 2020; Tarver & Acosta, 2020). We add only two elements to the conversation, relative to white nationalism as a curricular focus. First, we note that encountering violently racist messaging directed against one’s own community is, of course, a psychologically vulnerable and often heartbreaking experience. While white nationalists have a very wide array of racist messaging directed at many populations, they also target and direct aggression at particular populations in some moments, with Black, LatinX immigrant, indigenous, Jewish and Muslim populations among the most frequent contemporary targets. In the present moment, the Black Lives Matter movement remains a very frequent target of white nationalist vitriol, a dialectic which can invite students to contemplate more deeply why and how the Black Lives Matter movement is understood as a profound threat to white supremacy.

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In small seminars, in applied research cohorts, and particularly on campuses struggling with under-representation and exclusion of Black, LatinX, indigenous, or international students, the likelihood is high that in one or more moments, a student will be “the only”: an isolated member of a racialized population, in a classroom in which the faculty member and peers do not share the same history or experience of racial trauma and vulnerability. It is vital to consider how to navigate such moments. Educators can embrace this challenge through acknowledgment of distinct histories and vulnerabilities, demonstrable solidarity, or through the inclusion of course materials (including guest lectures) that articulate and validate student experiences of racial vulnerability and anti-racist critique. Failing to consider and to plan for student experiences of racial isolation and trauma amplifies the likelihood that while confronting the virulence and viciousness of white nationalist rhetoric, students will experience alienation from the learning environment. The nexus of racially charged subject matter, when coupled with disconnection from collective learning and camaraderie with peers and faculty, can readily become (re)traumatizing or harmful.

Second, we note that pedagogy about white nationalism implicates specific questions about the use of humor, sarcasm, or mockery, whether by the instructor or by the students. When studying white nationalism, it is virtually inevitable that learners will have moments of recognition that, if not for their location in broader and deeply destructive racist systems, white nationalists can often be ridiculous or seem laughable. Their rhetoric tends to be riddled with internal contradictions, some invent fantasy titles for themselves otherwise reminiscent of a “Dungeons and Dragons” tournament or cyber-gaming science fiction scenario. When studying their recruitment pathways and biographies, it is evident that some are embracing notions of “superiority” as a reaction to various social insecurities.

Humor often functions as a coping mechanism and can be an embodiment of student or faculty strategy to manage trauma or other strong emotional reactions. Reactions utilizing humor, sarcasm, or ridicule of white nationalism are certainly to be expected. They can potentially be trust-building in context, especially if they reinforce anti-racist critiques, or remind students of their collective capacity to resist or disempower white nationalist ideological constructs. A caveat, however, is that humor can also convey that the subject or target of a witticism is unimportant or negligible. While this may be a viable discursive strategy to delegitimize white nationalists in some moments, it also runs the risk of trivializing the harms they commit or the dangers they pose (Ford et al., 2017; van der Elsen, 2020). This risk becomes more troubling when coupled with student vulnerabilities and racial isolation, as discussed in this section.

For instance, imagine a scenario in which an indigenous student is confronted with white nationalist statements, imagery and rhetoric celebrating and re-writing colonization (de Finney, 2015; Stineback, 1977). Whether there are any other indigenous people in the immediate learning environment (or not), the student may have a particularly acute understanding of the racial harm implicated in the white nationalist communication. If the student is the only indigenous participant in the conversation, the student may also be aware that in this environment, no one else will or can fully comprehend the impact of that communication for

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indigenous people. If the faculty member and peers proceed to simply laugh at white nationalism and ridicule white nationalist actors, and then move on, in this instance humor might easily reinforce the student's experience that racial harm is unrecognized. As a result, the student receives the message that the learning environment is not one in which indigenous experiences of white nationalist aggression will be validated. Simply put, being surrounded by unqualified laughter as one grieves or rages alone, can become deeply harmful.

Our aim here is not to encourage wholesale repression of humor, which as noted, can serve meaningful social and political functions within anti-racist pedagogy. However, with racially traumatic and loaded subject matter, its use should be coupled with reflexivity and intention, and may require a preface or subsequent acknowledgment to reinforce that while the class may mock white nationalists, the harms they commit should not be trivialized, and humor should not undermine the validity and urgency of grief, hurt, or outrage.

A final consideration involves exposure to racist imagery and language. White nationalist testimony, iconography, web content, social media, and video footage are riddled with images and phrasing that merit the common designation "hate speech." Perhaps more precisely, such content is itself an offensive expression of racism, such that receiving it will commonly be or feel violent and traumatic (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Leets, 2002; Stordeur-Pryor, 2016). Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor's work on the "N word" has been particularly useful in confronting the inherent violence that can infuse or operate through language. A challenge in teaching about white nationalism manifests in the reality that at least some of the potential curriculum is inherently degrading or harmful, and can exact a psychological toll for students, particularly those who are targeted by racist rhetoric. In field settings, primary ethical obligations vested in instructors involve preparing students for what they may encounter and remaining both available and conscientious in debriefing about student experiences. Reinforcing student capacities to exit the research encounter as needed is an essential measure. However, in fieldwork there are otherwise fewer choices to be made about exposing students to imagery and language. The setting determines what material students will be exposed to. In classroom and community learning settings, boundaries and expectations will often need to be collectively discussed, explicit (including warnings about content in video, audio, or written materials), and calibrated – as in field settings – to allow students to "exit" or terminate exposure to particular materials as needed, or to allow for collective decision-making in some instances about what content to include in the class.

### **Physical safety**

Physical safety is a consideration in both classroom and applied settings, though we readily recognize that the risks are substantially increased in fieldwork. White nationalist patterns of violent assaults do affirm that school settings can be a target. Given that college campuses are among the sites of white nationalist recruitment, it is wise to acknowledge classroom spaces as at least conceivably vulnerable to white nationalist physical aggression. As a

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precaution, for the white nationalism courses, the course location was removed from all publicly accessible schedules and directories, including the published syllabus. Enrolled students received the classroom location directly from the instructor and were asked not to share it further. This mechanism would not have eliminated the possibility of a white nationalist student enrolling in the course. However, it did reduce the prospects of any outside entities finding the class location.

For the “Tea Party” course, minimizing physical risk was an option for students who chose to avoid engaging in unobtrusive or participant observation at Tea Party meetings and rallies, and opted not to sit in on interviews with leaders advanced by the instructor. The array of social media and web documents and communities maintained by the Tea Party movement allowed students who preferred to avoid physical encounters to participate in purely digital engagement, textual and image analysis, and observation. Almost all students did opt to enter in-person field settings, after collective discussion about the context, possible emotional and physical risks, and benefits associated with on-site study. One student chose not to continue field visits after the first one, although she identified that the initial experience was worthwhile. None of the students encountered actual physical threats or altercations, so physical safety plans for exiting were not ultimately implemented. Overtly negative responses to students of color were essentially limited to hostile facial expressions, and in some instances, intrusive or confrontational questions about their presence accompanied by a suspicious tone. White students experienced some of the latter as well, to a lesser degree.

Preparation included discussion of risk assessment, student comfort zones, and strong and repetitious encouragement to exit any setting in which the level of physical or emotional risk seemed or felt untenable. In debriefing, students noted that they struggled with feeling empowered to terminate observation in field settings, because of learned and internalized pressure to complete assignments. For this reason, advance discussion of the prioritization of safety, and the ability to revoke consent or participation (including in their role as student-researchers) became an ongoing imperative. In addition, students were strongly encouraged not to enter field settings alone, and generally either accompanied the instructor, or observed in groups or pairs, to increase safety.

We stress that field research in white nationalist contexts is not a viable or reasonable option across all sites, and that the level of risk may have escalated since Bunnage’s field-driven course in 2010, given the increasingly violent tenor of public white nationalist rhetoric and encounters. Although there were no expressed physical threats or assaults occurring during the Tea Party movement course fieldwork, one mostly unanticipated issue arose as several young, white, female students entered Tea Party movement settings. Tea Party members, who are disproportionately elderly and middle-aged white males did, in several instances, attempt to flirt, objectify, and establish potential romantic or sexual connections with white, female students (whereas young women of color in this setting were treated with suspicion, but were not the targets of sexual advances). Student responses essentially involved avoidance and polite rejection, with interventions by the instructor to reinforce and support student boundaries. None of the students experienced any subsequent harassment or contact outside the field setting.

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However, the incidents did raise questions of gender and sexual safety, and the affected students experienced some emotional discomfort (Bunnage, 2012).

We continue to contemplate whether and when applied student learning involving in-person interaction or observation with white nationalists can be ethical and remain open to the argument that it should not ever occur, whether because of physical or emotional safety concerns, or a combination. At the organizational level, colleges and universities may also consider liability as a factor in assessing proposed curriculum. Despite the anticipated and unanticipated risks, the students in the Tea Party movement course evaluated the experience very highly and stressed that they were able to learn in ways that classroom study, or purely digital research could not have enabled. At least in this setting, their collective and individual feedback supported the position that the value of the learning opportunities justified the risks and challenges. We turn next to reflection on the overarching lessons learned from our work, and their implications for educators committed to doing similar work.

### **Conclusion**

In an era in which overt white nationalist rhetoric, public demonstrations, and acts of violence and harassment are ascending, doing damage, and finding affirmation from at least some prominent politicians, students are likely to remain highly motivated to learn about the origins, structure, tactics, and ideological mainstays of white nationalist movements. Meaningful delivery of course material requires empathic recognition of student (and faculty) racial trauma and generates a corresponding need for anti-racist analysis and social praxis. White nationalism consistently implicates gender and gender-based hierarchies, heteronormativity, exploitation of class tensions, exploitation of trauma and mental disability, and ethno-religious scapegoating. In turn, in addition to a foundation in Ethnic Studies and Critical Race Theory, useful pedagogy in the U.S. context requires awareness of heteropatriarchal tropes, class stratification and division, historical and contemporary anti-Semitic ideologies, the foundations and impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, mental disability stigma and rhetoric (i.e. white nationalism as “crazy”), and pre- and post-9/11 anti-Muslim rhetoric. As we constructed this paper, we reflected on some of the ways that pedagogy might manifest in the absence of one or more of these elements.

We can readily picture student alienation, invalidation of complex vulnerabilities, curriculum that reinforces notions of white nationalism as aberrant and exceptional and correspondingly detached from histories and from structural racism, poor attention to the impact of racially charged imagery and racist language, curriculum that privileges analysis of psychological deviance at the expense of structural analysis, or in contrast, curricula that fails to engage or recognize trauma. We share a recognition that self-reflexivity and emotional and political accountability are essential practices for educators with an interest in teaching about white nationalism. Given the complexity and volatility of the subject matter and the racial vulnerability of many students, it would not be an overstatement to claim that absent self-reflexivity, pedagogy about white nationalism could become harmful, in some of the ways delineated above. Educators may find that such self-awareness is somewhat more difficult to

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cultivate or sustain, without dialogue, points of comparative engagement, and support from peers.

Notwithstanding every dilemma that can manifest in developing and delivering pedagogy about white nationalism, we recognize without reservation that our teaching experiences have been deeply meaningful, and invaluable for us as anti-racist educators. The work is urgent, and the potential for holistic and powerful learning is substantial. Education about white nationalism responds to many of the questions that are salient and motivating for our students, and constitutes a foundation for mobilization and movement building, particularly in the Black Lives Matter movement era. Each of these factors reinforces our commitment to continue to teach about the white right, and our invitation to colleagues to recognize and embrace this work.

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