Navigating Contentious Times in Rural Education: An Introduction to Volume 11, Issue 2 of *TPRE*

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In this introductory article to the special issue, the guest editors situate the articles of the issue within the current contentious climate surrounding critical race theory (CRT). They first provide a background and summary of the major tenets of CRT then apply those tenets to current legislation aimed at banning CRT in schools. They then situate the current backlash against CRT within a history of resistance to racial justice efforts in schools. The editors explain their stance on the current issue of CRT and then substantiate their position with evidence from the articles within the special issue. The conclusions they draw are that CRT is a valuable and applicable theoretical tool in schools and education research.

Keywords: critical race theory, controversial issues, diversity, equity, inclusion, rural education

At the beginning stages of preparing this special *TPRE* issue focused on Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, we could not have anticipated the vitriol with which those very goals would become under attack in the nation's public schools. Since the time of our original call for submissions (Fall 2020), twenty-seven states have either introduced bills or taken steps to limit how teachers discuss race and/or racism. Twelve states have fully legislated or otherwise enacted these censures (Education Week, 2021). Additionally, many local school districts have also introduced or instituted a censure on a slew of equity-oriented educational concepts. The centralized focus of the attacks has been critical race theory (CRT) however the reach of censorship has included anti-racism, social emotional learning, implicit bias, and even the inclusion of diverse curriculum and diverse perspectives. In our own state of North Carolina, HB324 has passed the state's House and Senate with an intent to ban CRT (Hui, 2021a; Rebash, 2021). Particularly related to *TPRE* is how this coordinated assault has been taken up in rural schools. In Craven County, county commissioners

voted in favor of a resolution banning the teaching of critical theory in schools (Jenkins, 2021). In nearby Johnston County, a local school board adopted an anti-CRT policy in order to negotiate more funding from county commissioners (Hui, 2021b). Given the heightened attention these concepts are being given in rural education and the important role they play in equity, inclusion, and diversity, we will begin this issue by providing a brief overview of some of the important concepts from CRT, which is drawing the most amount of controversy. We will then situate the censure of these ideas within a history of backlash against racial justice progress in the nation's schools. Finally, we will introduce readers to the selected articles for this special issue, utilizing critical concepts to highlight their importance and connect them to the long, though not always linear, progress toward social justice in rural education.

What is Critical Race Theory?

CRT is a field of study that originated in legal scholarship and has since extended to many fields, including education (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). It

is an evolving framework that has developed a number of key tenets to better understand the endemic nature of racism in U.S. society and institutions and analyze why institutional racial remedies are usually so ineffective at addressing systemic racism and racial disparity. While the number of key tenets is not standardized and shifts somewhat from author to author (Bridges, 2018), there are several that appear across the foundational texts. First, and perhaps most central is racial realism. Racial realism posits that racism is not only a foundational aspect of U.S. society but also that it will permanently be so (Bell, 1992; Brown & Jackson, 2013). Second, and related to racial realism, is the principle of interest convergence, which states that U.S. society will only accommodate certain forms of equity for people of color when the interest of whites is also served (Bell, 1980), i.e. when the material interests of white people and the power of whiteness as a racial category are also maintained. Both racial realism and interest convergence help CRT scholars examine the economic and material deterministic aspects of racism, i.e., of how racism does not merely reside in discourse and dispositions but in a social structure that regulates the investment and divestment of resources according to race and white supremacy.

Third, is a critique of liberalism. Classic liberal ideology interprets social institutions such as education as inherently fair, meritocratic, and race-neutral (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Therefore, any racial disparity that occurs within systems like education is anomalous, and the result of either individual bad actors or the fault of the victims of racism themselves. Liberal ideology, therefore, relies on racial remedies that involve rooting out those bad actors, changing individual behaviors, or intervening in the practices of the victims of racism. CRT on the other hand critiques these dominant narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and instead sheds its light on the unintentional, ingrained, and even mundane ways that racism is maintained systematically via the normal operations of social institutions (e.g., law, health care, transportation, and education).

A fourth tenet is the unique perspective of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), which posits that people of color—because of their experiences of living with the daily manifestations of racism—have a better vantage point with which to examine and explain it. The unique perspective of people of color also relates to CRT's valuing of experiential knowledge. Because people of color have developed specific insights into racism, and since their epistemological standpoints are often excluded from and/or silenced within dominant theories and explanations of racial disparity, their experiential knowledge is a rich source with which to more fully and accurately understand the systemic nature of racism. The unique perspective of people of color and the valuing of experiential knowledge are often seen in CRT's use of counternarrative, which is a practice of centering the voices of people of color in order to speak back to dominant narratives on race, expose white supremacy, and offer new knowledge with which to understand race and racism (Berry & Stovall, 2013; Cook & Dixson; 2013).

Fifth, the CRT tenet of intersectionality explains how people of color do not merely live as members of their race but can also face a matrix of oppressions due to other aspects of their identity (Crenshaw, 1991), such as those related to their gender, sexual orientation, class, etc. Because oppression is intersectional, CRT uses a race-focused framework as a way to dismantle not only racism but also sexism, heterosexism, classism, nativism, etc. and it draws on interdisciplinary forms of knowledge to do so (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

These tenets help CRT scholars examine how race is a social construction, that despite it having no basis in biology or genetics, race is a category constructed "as a mechanism for creating hierarchy and an ideology of white supremacy" (Ladson-Billing 2013, p. 39). CRT has traditionally looked at the law's role in that construction (Bridges, 2018). As it has extended to the field of education, it looks at how race as a socially constructed system of categorization establishes a hierarchy within and between school contexts. It is particularly useful as a framework to examine the recurring and hidden manifestations of white supremacy in educational policy and practice. While it can help to name and respond to overt and blatant acts of racism, the bigger concern of CRT scholars in education is the

way policies and practices of curriculum, instruction, and classroom management maintain racial disparity regardless of intent and how those practices are dysconsciously legitimated by dominant ideologies. In fact, while CRT comments extensively on whiteness and pays attention to the actions and ideologies of white school personnel, its primary gaze is not on white people but on how white supremacy is normalized in seemingly race-neutral policies and daily practices, and it acknowledges that anyone, regardless of race, can be complicit in those policies and practices (Bell, 2008; Gallagher, 2020; Leonardo, 2004). Furthermore, even when CRT does pay attention to the individual and interpersonal enactments of racism, it does so for the purposes of racial literacy, which involves examining the interplay between the "psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions" of racism (Guinier 2004, p. 115), i.e., how our individual discourses and perceptions of race are connected to broader structural racism.

Current Misunderstandings of CRT

With a more accurate picture of the CRT's key tenets and areas of focus and of its role in educational inquiry, we can see what a poor understanding the attacks on CRT actually exhibit. For example, while NC HB324 does not actually mention CRT, when speaking to the press, NC Senator Phil Berger discussed CRT when arguing about the need for the bill (Granados, 2021), and Senator George Cleveland called Critical Race Theory "garbage" (Harris, 2021). Similarly, NC House Speaker, Tim Moore, argued that the bill would prevent "discriminatory concepts, like Critical Race Theory, from being taught as fact or endorsed" (Friedersdorf, 2021). When we compare what the bill actually says with the concepts from CRT, however, we can see a disconnect. For example, one piece of the bill decrees that schools cannot promote 13 ideas. Just looking at the first seven[1], we can see not only a lack of racial literacy but also that they do not even counter the principles of CRT:

1. One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex.

2. An individual, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive.

3. An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex.

4. An individual's moral character is necessarily determined by his or her race or sex.

5. An individual, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.

6. Any individual, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex, should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress.

7. A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist.

First, with regard to the ideas one and three, CRT specifically seeks to challenge notions of superiority/inferiority and the practice of treating individuals more adversely because of their race. Next, the second and fourth ideas frame racism and sexism as primarily acts perpetrated by individuals and as essential aspects of people's nature. Those framings counter the main focus of CRT, which positions racism in social structure not merely in individual intent or disposition (see Gillborn, 2005). While CRT does examine complicity in racism, it does not assert that such racism is inherent in any individual person. Because race is a *socially* constructed system of categorization, people are not inherently racist but *socialized* to uphold a racial hierarchy (which also means they can be socialized to disrupt it). Concept five also uses an individualist framing of race and racism. Again, CRT does examine complicity in racism (by both white people and people of color), but it does that on a systemic level, not individual one, and it does not merely locate racism as historical. So, while some CRT scholars may support policies that address racial history (such as reparations for the descendants of slavery) the argument is that U.S. society as a whole is responsible for its history, not individual

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[1] There have been multiple editions of the legislation. We focus on the first seven concepts as

they, at the time of writing, have appeared in both the earlier and most recent editions of the bill.

people. On the issue of concept six and guilt and discomfort, CRT scholars do look at the role of those emotions in learning about racism (e.g., Blaisdell, 2018; Matias, 2016), but the scholarship does not claim that people *should* feel those emotions. Rather, it examines how those emotions arise in (and can even impede) racial equity efforts and suggests how educators can collectively deal with them to have more productive conversations on race. Finally is number seven. CRT does not define meritocracy as racist. Rather, through its critique of liberalism, CRT challenges dominant narratives that assert the U.S. is actually a meritocracy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and it uses historical and contemporary factual evidence to support that claim. Therefore, narratives that frame the U.S. educational system as meritocratic obscure the institutional and structural racism that actually exists in schools and school districts. Again, in these seven items and throughout the bill, the language is racially illiterate in that it frames racism as individualistic and about intent rather than as a system that maintains a racial hierarchy that itself controls the distribution of power and resources (Guinier, 2004). The inaccurate wording of such bills (whether intentional[2] or due to ignorance) is evidence how in many of these attacks, CRT serves as a shibboleth for the broader antiracist efforts and/or the mere presence of discussing race more directly (Kearse, 2021; Sheasley, 2021).

The timing of the new attacks on CRT and antiracism training in schools should not be unexpected. After the murder of George Floyd and subsequent visibility of several antiracist protests and movements (such as the Movement for Black Lives [Buchanan et al., 2020]), increased number of symposia and speakers on racism in schools and businesses (Norwood, 2021), and increased verbal and financial pledges to racial equity from corporate America (Jan et al., 2021), it should be expected that the number of people who don't believe in the salience of race, hold majoritarian narratives about people of color, and/or are threatened by open conversations on race would make their voices heard in response. In fact, the increased attacks on

CRT and antiracism more broadly actually highlight CRT's salience. Racial realism tells us that not only is racism an endemic part of U.S. society but that it will always be so, and whiteness as property helps examine how that permanence is maintained, i.e., how white people will respond when the status property of whiteness is threatened.

Ironically, the attacks on CRT also prove how much it is still needed in work with and in schools. While some CRT scholars have defended CRT by saying that it is not taught in public schools (Cornish, 2021), we agree more with arguments that say it does have a place there (e.g., Stovall & Annamma, 2021). Kendall Thomas, a law professor at Columbia University, explains, "Critical race theory is concerned, above all, with addressing the literacy deficit in this country around race" and that it "starts from the idea that you cannot educate young people to take up their responsibilities as citizens unless you also give them a critical racial literacy" (Wall, 2021). CRT provides a comprehensive understanding of structural racism that is needed to develop racial literacy. With it, people can identify and intervene in their own complicity in that system of racism and better live up to the democratic ideals of the country. Why would we not want that taught in schools? CRT is already being directly used to affect specific school practice in a variety of ways, e.g., helping teachers to improve their literacy instruction (Mosley, 2010; Rogers & Mosley, 2006), school leaders to dismantle barriers to equity and increase student achievement (Amiot et al., 2019), and schools to develop school-wide racial literacy and antiracist school identities (Blaisdell, 2016, 2021). Increasing CRT's presence in schools and sharing that knowledge with students, families, and communities can similarly help them to increase their own racial literacy and to better live up to their own democratic ideals.

History of Backlash to Racial Justice in Education

Because CRT and related efforts toward social justice question or disrupt the power structures of racism and intersecting forms of oppression, their application in education has faced tremendous

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[2] See Shephard (2021) and Wallace-Wells (2021).

backlash throughout history and has often been met with white resistance or outright white vigilantism. Some scholars argue that these attacks have been most impassioned when real progress towards equity and social justice is being made (Blaisdell, 2020). In "Mothers of Massive Resistance," Elizabeth Gillespie McRae (2018) recounts a history of how white women in particular have utilized tools of white supremacy including social, political, and economic capital to influence education reform. In the interwar years, this included lobbying against textbooks that portrayed an objectionable view of the segregated South or ones that cast question upon the South's cause for secession. Other texts that confronted social issues during the same time also became "increasingly under attack 'in small town American Legion belt'" and book burnings were reported in multiple small towns (Evans, 2004, p. 77). In the 1950's and 1960's, when steps toward school integration were beginning to materialize throughout the nation, criticism and backlash ranged from verbal and physical assaults on young Black students entering public schools to the closing of all public schools in entire districts in efforts to evade integration (Library of Congress, 2004). Prince Edward County, Virginia kept their public schools closed for five years to avoid integration (June-Friesen, 2013). Often, when schools finally integrated (both in the North and the South) white parent pressure forced many Black educators out of their jobs (e.g., Dougherty, 2004). In the 1980's, 1990's, and early 2000's, efforts to move beyond merely integrating bodies in schools to the integration of multicultural content and perspectives in curriculum found its way into mainstream curriculum, coursework, and teacher education (see multicultural education and ethnic studies) but again found conservative backlash. In Arizona, this resulted in a legislative ban of any class that advocated "ethnic solidarity" (see Palos & McGinnis, 2012).

As many scholars and educators have found that the mere inclusion of diverse content has not been effective enough to dismantle structural inequities in classrooms and schools (Nieto & Bode, 2018), critical pedagogy and critical theories to dismantle root causes of inequity have found a noted presence in education. Now, these efforts

toward racial justice are today, as they have been in the past, facing opposition and censorship. It is important to note that in many of these historical cases of white backlash to racial justice reform in education, white resistance has often relied on appeals to fairness, neutrality, patriotism, and democracy even though the traditional curriculum or status quo they preferred was far from neutral (or fair or democratic). Today, again, attackers of CRT critique its presence in education as interjecting bias into the curriculum. However, it is important to note that all curriculum and instruction is power-laden (Apple, 2004) and there is still a deep literature base documenting the whitewashing of traditional curriculum and standards (e.g., Leahey, 2010; Loewen, 2008; Sabzalain et al., 2021; Shear et al., 2015). As much as historians despise the maxim of "history repeats itself," this seems to be the case as today's educators who seek transformative means toward racial justice have found ourselves once again facing a tsunami of backlash for our most recent efforts. At the very least, we are embroiled in what could be called an open and bitterly hostile public controversy.

Taking a Stance within Public Debate

Public scholars of education and educators like ourselves must make choices about how to frame controversies for our students and, in this case, our readers. This decision is especially difficult as educators across the country have had to navigate how their job security and well-being is affected by how they engage in discourse about race (Chapman, 2013; Villareal, 2021; Walker, 2021). Even though we have expert opinions on the topic, some might argue that we have an ethical obligation to present this controversy neutrally or without preference or bias. Much of the scholarship on democratic education identifies an open controversy based on if a question has multiple competing viewpoints in the public sphere. The following instructions are often given to educators when engaging in those conversations within their classroom role,

> Open questions are those for which we believe different answers could be legitimate. Though we may have personal opinions about the best answer to these questions, it is not appropriate to teach our students that a particular answer

to an open problem is correct. Closed questions are those for which we believe there is a correct answer that we should teach students to build and believe, even though it may have been open in the past, or may even open in the future. What is considered open (and therefore, "legitimately" controversial in the classroom) and what is considered closed is a matter of social construction (Hess & Gotti, 2010, p. 21).

While this seems like fair guidelines for democratic education, it becomes more complex when mapped on to issues of justice. Should educators in the 1950's and 1960's have considered the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation an open controversial issue for their students to debate because it was considered open by white segregationists? Or would justice demand that they take a stance to close that question and ensure all students' inclusion and safety? Hess & Gotti's advice is also problematic when considering issues of expertise. Should teachers be neutral on the question of human-caused climate change because it's debated in the public sphere even though 97% of scientific experts agree on its cause and existence ("Do Scientists Agree on Climate Change?" 2021)? We agree with Journell (2017; 2018; 2021) that some controversies should not be considered open based solely on a "politically authentic" criterion. In other words, teachers need not leave a question up for debate just because there is disagreement within the public sphere. In fact, we posit that educators have a role in closing some controversies for the sake of justice. Therefore, while there may be debates about the importance and legitimacy of CRT in schools, we consider the issue closed on the grounds of both justice and expertise. We encourage teachers and scholars in the field to use their agency to close this question as well. We offer this special issue of *TPRE* to substantiate our stance that CRT is an applicable and valuable theory in rural education.

This Special Issue as Critical Praxis

Often, scholars in higher education are criticized for their focus on the theoretical and lack of real world engagement. Instead, critical scholarship should prioritize and value praxis (Yamamoto, 1997). Praxis can be defined as action or engagement on the world that creates change.

According to Stovall (2004), critical race praxis "bridges theoretical concepts to everyday practice" (p. 10). Critical race praxis in particular involves educators using key theoretical understandings from CRT in order to collectively organize against and intervene in the way oppression is normalized in educational settings (Blaisdell, 2021; Yamamoto, 1997). Therefore, together, we offer this special issue as praxis. We intend the issue to highlight the work of scholars who are committed to imagining and provoking schools to be sites of resistance in rural areas— as we wrote about in our call for submissions (Gallagher et al., 2020). We also intend this special issue to speak back to the current public discourse demonizing critical theories in education by offering examples of how such scholarship is both applicable and valuable to the same rural spaces where it is most under attack. The articles in this issue apply critical theories to diverse fields and contexts. They include a media review, a theoretical piece, and empirical work. Together they inform the fields of social studies education, bilingual education, STEM education, and more. The locations within which their work is generated range from Appalachia, the Black Belt (as identified by Swain and Baker [2021]), South Florida, Utah, and elsewhere. While the authors of the special issue use critical theories to varying degrees in their articles, below we make connections between their projects/findings and critical analyses of oppression in education.

In "Whiteness Owns It, Blackness Defines It: Rural Reality in the Black Belt," Swain and Baker delve into the "centrality and spatiality of Black life" in rural space. Too commonly, the U.S. discourse on rurality imagines a white populace. The authors connect the persistence of this imagination to the enduring legacy of slavery and of plantation logic. In terms of space, plantation logic continues to position Black people not as people or inhabitants but rather as property and white people as owners. Swain and Baker contend that by better understanding plantation logic, educational researchers can more effectively examine how our conceptualizations of rural space are intertwined with our ideas about race and, subsequently, more effectively intervene in the way Black people continue to be marginalized and displaced in rural

educational discourse and practice. Toward those ends, they offer CRT as an analytic framework and walk the reader through the analytical potential of three prominent CRT concepts: racial realism, whiteness as property, and interest convergence. This analysis helps to uncover how rural spaces have always been racially contested spaces, how white communities maintain more valued educational property, and how reforms purportedly enacted to help Black students actually serve to maintain material interests for white people. In the end, Swain and Baker argue that a CRT lens is a useful way to develop a race-conscious approach to equity work in rural schools because it not only exposes the specific ways racism operates but also sheds light on the role Black people have had in shaping rural space. Therefore, by using CRT and similar frameworks to examine both the persistence of plantation logic and the labor and creativity of Black people within rural spaces, educational scholars and practitioners can more effectively understand and intervene in racial disparity within rural contexts.

In "Why Hillbillies Matter in Social Studies: *Hillbilly Elegy* and Why WE Must Respond," Colley offers an empirical analysis of K-12 social studies standards focused on the presence and context of Appalachia and Appalachia-related terms. Findings show that Appalachia is barely present or largely ignored, even within the state standards of the Appalachian region, and its minimal inclusion lacks authentic representation of the history and diversity in the region. Colley's analysis is important because it provides additional evidence of the role of school curriculum in othering. It also further provokes a necessity for a "full examination of the ways in which class, and in particular the intersections of whiteness and poverty, contribute to an ever polarizing America" both in the field of social studies and the social world beyond (p. 30). Colley emphasizes that the othering and lack of authentic representation of Appalachia in the standards is a result of leaving out authentic Hillbilly[3] stories and voices. As is often a problem within the field of social studies education, lack of robust standards

may prevent teachers and students from engaging in authentic multiple perspectives or critical examinations of power structures (e.g., Sabzalian et al., 2021; Shear et al., 2015). In this work, Colley utilizes the conceptual framework of whiteness and boundary theory together (see Wray, 2006), which provides a lens to understand the ways in which socially constructed boundary lines of race and class are a form of othering that obscures the fuller history and social and cultural capital of the people of Appalachia. It also allows the region to be used as a scapegoat for the country's social ills. Colley's work highlights how the construction of such boundaries are present in the social studies standards she examined and provides a call to action for social studies educators and teachers educators to work toward a more diverse representation and robust understanding of Appalachia. Similar to Swain and Baker, this work may also provoke readers to think through the necessity of conceptualizing broader understandings of rurality within the complexity of racial power structures.

In "Rural Teachers' Cultural and Epistemic Shifts in STEM Teaching and Learning," Tofel-Grehl and colleagues locate their work within the impacts of economic globalization felt in rural communities. As information technology and global capitalism have provoked a shift toward STEM educational goals, the authors completed a design-based research project that created integrated STEM and social studies curriculum along with accompanying professional development for elementary teachers who largely taught in rural settings. Their work focused on stories of immigration, migration, and forced relocation and utilized science and computing knowledge for engagement in complex stories that were not typically found in Utah social studies education. Through analyzing teacher reflections, they found that the teachers' curriculum enactments and experiences were impacted by their racial and cultural identities. While all teachers were nervous conversing with students about difficult history, the white teachers in their study had more concerns

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[3] Colley reappropriates this historically stigmatizing moniker.

and more often desired to avoid difficult conversations. Whiteness was also constructed through their overprotection of white emotions and uncritical examination of how their own and their students' identities related to the content. Tofel-Grehl and colleagues remind us that STEM education is not devoid of race or culture, and even within the enactment of intentionally designed curriculum that engages counter narratives, critical examination of the pervasiveness of whiteness is necessary.

In "'I Feel the Responsibility': The Nexus of Secondary Teacher Knowledge, Rural Education, and Emergent Bilinguals," Marichal (2021) addresses the needs of emergent bilinguals (EBs) in rural schools and the lack of cultural understanding many teachers in rural schools have of EB students. She attempts to fill the gap in knowledge about EB student experiences within rural contexts. To do so, she offers a model of teacher knowledge in which teachers support and supplement their professional knowledge with personal and place-based knowledge. Based on a qualitative study of four secondary teachers of EB students in rural Florida, she argues that, collectively, these forms of teacher knowledge can positively affect practice, making teachers more successful in meeting these students' educational needs. As for personal knowledge, Marichal found that teachers' reflection on how their own communities affected their identities helped them to similarly understand the role of community in their students' identities. In turn, that knowledge helped them develop authentic relationships with their students. With place-based knowledge, a more complex understanding of place was helpful for teachers in understanding students' experiences specifically in rural contexts. Combined, these types of teacher knowledge helped the teachers in her study frame their students' bilingualism, Hispanic ethnicity, and faith as resources for teaching. Marichal's article helps fill the gap in research in rural education as it relates to the need for more specific studies in which place and rurality are not seen as a backdrop in which the education of EBs happens but rather as major contributing factors to both who those students are and how

teachers develop meaningful personal and professional relationships with them.

In "Positioning Ourselves toward Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy," DiCerbo and Baker posit that asking teachers to consider their own cultural identities can be an important step in the process of creating culturally sustaining pedagogy. Participants in this study were teachers of English Learners (ELs) and through this research process, they created written narratives in the form of autobiographies. Via these narratives, participants were able to explore how their culture and experiences shaped their identities and influenced their connections to their students within rural communities. Through this deep reflection process, participants considered how their families, religious practices, finances, etc. may have positioned them with privilege. Even though their experiences were often different from their students, they focused on how their histories connected them across differences and provided space for effective classroom communities that provided culturally responsive teaching to ELs in rural spaces. From this reflection, participants chose to "take up roles that empowered them to approach teaching from culturally based perspectives" (p. 106) and they were "able to construct a teacher identity positioned on the side of educational justice and possibility" (p. 106). DiCerbo and Baker explain how writing an autobiography is a way to pay attention to our lives and the role of race, culture, and otherness. This can provide an opportunity for connections to English Learners or new populations of students whom educators may not have experience teaching. Findings reveal that while participants were able to reflect on their identities and how they positioned themselves toward their students, more research is needed on the extent to which these reflections impacted their beliefs, dispositions, and instructional practices.

In "Everybody Lives Near Appalachia: Examining *Hillbilly Elegy*'s Impact on American Society?" Mullins and Mullins offer an analysis of Vance's popular novel. In the elegy, Vance uses his experience growing up in rural Appalachia to highlight the cultural nuances of this population, often characterized by the tension between their experiences of poverty and the desire for an

ascension into the upper and middle class. Mullins and Mullins clarify that their critique is not centered around the syntax of the writing or Vance's own story. Instead, they ask critical questions related to the presentation of the Appalachian culture in broad generalizations. Mullins and Mullins offer the reader the opportunity to consider both between and within group differences among Appalachians. The review also grapples with the popularity of Vance's elegy and provides a critical analysis of why various population sects may be attracted to the narrative as presented.

Conclusion

Together, the work included in this special issue showcases the diverse perspectives in education through multiple approaches to examining the role of critical theories and race-based methodologies in rural spaces. Without being attentive to the characteristics of rural spaces, attempts to further diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts will not be effective. Rural spaces are unique contexts that are more geographically isolated than urban and suburban areas. This often means that people living in rural areas have less access to resources and people from outside of their community. In education this can mean limited resources such as classroom materials and school personnel. What this does not mean is a lack of diversity. A clear thread throughout each piece in this issue is that rurality is not a race or culturally neutral concept. As Swain and Baker posit in "Whiteness Owns It, Blackness Defines It," the discourse around rurality in this country has focused on whiteness. The danger of this mindset is that it maintains racial disparity and continues to center whiteness. Each contribution to this issue showcases the importance of acknowledging race and culture in these spaces in order to disrupt the power dynamics that have been abused for centuries. Through this collection, readers are forced to contend with questions of power in rural spaces. Who has it? Who doesn't? Who benefits from these dynamics? The responses to these questions are daunting as we consider what this means for racial equity, curriculum standards, and authentic representation of diverse identities within rural spaces. In order to consider these questions, we have to recognize that rurality is not

synonymous with white. Instead, the identities of people in rural spaces are diverse and should be validated and affirmed even when state and local laws push against these truths. The tenets of CRT allow us to resist these narratives and consider rurality through a race-conscious approach that forces us to ask, whose identity matters?

The contributions in this issue explore identity across different contexts, for example, Tofel-Grehl's study with STEM teachers delves into the reflections of teachers as they discuss how their curriculum experiences were impacted by their racial identities. Similarly, EL teachers in DiCerbo and Baker's study reflect on how their identities shape their teaching and how their identities connect them to their students. Marichal's work with emergent bilinguals reveals that as teachers reflect on how their identities are shaped by their communities, they are also able to consider how their students' identities are shaped by their communities, showing that rurality is not a monolith; instead, there is a richness of culture and experiences that come together to shape these rural spaces. It is important to validate and affirm these diverse perspectives as we consider how to engage in equity, inclusion, and diversity within the current political context.

This issue addresses rurality as it relates to equity, inclusion, and diversity in educational spaces and provides implications for this work, leaving little room to interpret rurality as a monolith. In addition, through the contributions to this issue, we are asked to consider the many possibilities for CRT in rural education. The authors ask us to consider the role of race and power in rurality. They ask us to consider the role of curriculum standards, identity, STEM education, English learners, and teacher knowledge. In the end, they all provide us with ideas for further research, but we would be remiss to pretend the constraints of this political climate will not still be at the forefront of educators' minds even after reading the contributions to this issue. So, when we consider the road ahead—and we consider how to effectively meet the needs of students in our education systems (particularly in rural communities) while focusing on creating a more fair and just society—we have to first remind ourselves that this work is far from complete. Then

we have to ask ourselves how to build support systems that allow us to stand up against legislation that continues to distract from the truths and realities of our communities and identities. We have to ask ourselves how we can advocate for others who may be silenced in their schools. DiCerbo and Baker suggest this is just one step in the direction of creating culturally responsive spaces for students, so then we have to ask ourselves, what is the next step? What is *my* next step? These questions are important because *action* is important. It is not enough to read this issue and obtain the knowledge shared. We must take the knowledge, the experiences, the realities, and consider how to enact change.

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