Chapter 3

Moving with Respect to
Racial Diversity in Classroom Encounters

The United States was founded on racist ideas and behaviors, and these ideas and behaviors, while morphing, have existed throughout our history, including during the time of this study (Kendi, 2016). Also, throughout US history, including during the time of this study, there have been antiracist ideas and behaviors. During the time of this study, there was a resurgence of people and organizations who were invested in the fallacy of white supremacy, on the one hand. The massacre at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, happened in June of 2015. The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, was in August of 2017. On the other hand, as I mention in the introduction, the Black Lives Matter movement was gaining significant national attention. The protests in Ferguson had started, and, as the elections were gearing up, Black Lives Matter was playing a role. Racial tensions were (and are) high. In order to explore how the high school students in my LGBTQ+-themed literature courses used language, including written language, to move in terms of racist behaviors, I rely on particular understandings of race, racism, and antiracism, which I describe next.

Race, in and of itself, is a “social construction and not a fixed, static category rooted in some notion of innate biological differences” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 12). It is “neither stable nor consistent” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 2). According to Omi and Winant (2014), it is “being made and remade from moment to moment” (p. 264), and, as such, “it varies according to time and place” (p. 13). Still, race is a social construct of great consequence. “Race creates new forms of power: the power to categorize
and judge, elevate and downgrade, include and exclude” (Kendi, 2019, p. 38). In Kendi’s (2019) words, “Race is a mirage but one that we do well to see, while never forgetting it is a mirage, never forgetting that it’s the powerful light of racist power that makes the mirage” (p. 37).

Racism in the United States has been “shaped by a centuries-long conflict between white domination and resistance by people of color” (Omi & Winant, 2014, p. 3), and while racism is “institutional, structural, and systemic” (Kendi, 2019, p. 18), Kendi argues that racist (and antiracist) are labels better used to describe ideas and behaviors rather than a person or groups of people. A racist idea, he says, is “any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way” (Kendi, 2019, p. 20). In contrast, an antiracist idea is “any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences—that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group” (Kendi, 2019, p. 20). Omi and Winant (2014) also talk about antiracist projects as “those that undo or resist structures of domination based on racial significations and identities” (p. 129). That said, racist (and antiracist) can be used as labels to describe people if they are used “like peelable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos” (Kendi, 2019, p. 23). Some people's ideas and behaviors are relatively consistent over periods of time, creating the illusion of a tattoo, but it is an illusion, and, again, an illusion of consequence.

Antiracist projects are imperative. That they are essential for people of color is obvious, but they are also necessary for white people, or, as Coates (2015) asserts, people who imagine themselves to be white. According to Kendi (2019), “As long as the mind is racist, the mind can never be free” (p. 105). He further argues that even though “ordinary White people benefit from racist policies,” white people would benefit more from an “equitable society” (p. 129). Therefore, becoming antiracist is the “basic struggle we’re all in, the struggle to be fully human and to see that others are fully human” (Kendi, 2019, p. 11). The question then is, How do we become antiracist? Kendi (2019) says, “We know how to be racist. We know how to pretend to be not racist. Now let’s learn how to be antiracist” (p. 11). It is, however, one of those things that we must learn and relearn again and again. We cannot be antiracist, statically, but we can become antiracist, in perpetuity, with “persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination” (Kendi, 2019, p. 23).
Racist and antiracist behaviors, ideas, and projects have the effect of moving people in relation to one another. They can move people closer to people whom they respect and honor (and who respect and honor them in return) and farther away from those whom they do not (and, again, vice versa). In this chapter, I focus on white, Black, and Mexican American people and communities, knowing that these communities are multiple and variable, they are complicated and messy, and they are only a few among infinite others. I focus on them knowing that they are not only racialized communities but also national and ethnic communities among many other kinds of communities, but I focus on them here anyway because the students did in our conversations about race. I examine how students used language, including written language, to move closer to and farther from racist ideas and behaviors to reflect on the consequences of such movement in schools and classrooms.

More specifically, I start by looking at how white people pushed Black people out of classroom and school communities, effectively racializing those communities in ways that are aligned with the fallacy of white supremacy. I then consider how Black people pulled themselves into the embrace of Black communities to protect themselves against racist ideas and behaviors. I then look beyond Black and white communities and focus on Mexican American communities. Next, I explore how students discussed the differences, tensions, and power dynamics within their own racialized communities before finally examining the ways that some students who imagined themselves to be white (Coates, 2015) struggled to remove the “peelable name tags,” in Kendi’s (2019) words, of “racist” and to earn the right to wear the ones of “antiracist,” sometimes with the encouragement of others wearing “antiracist” name tags in particular moments in time.

**White People Pushing Black People Out**

White people pushed themselves away from racially diverse communities and reified their immersion in white communities—even communities invested in the fallacy of white supremacy—by refusing to engage in conversations about race and racism or refusing to do so in ways that implicated them in racist dynamics. That is, they refused to use and examine their own language around race and racism. An explicit example of this is from when the first group of students, most of whom were white and
only one of whom was biracial Asian and white, were discussing *Brooklyn, Burning* (Brezenoff, 2011), a novel in which neither the main character nor the love interest is identifiable in terms of gender. I asked, “Are the characters raced, in your mind?” Two students said “no,” then another, who was white and queer, said, “God. Quit. Don’t do that. We haven’t even figured out what gender they are.” Thus, this student moved actively to shut down the conversation about race (Schey & Blackburn, 2019b).

Other times, the effort was more subtle. In the second-semester class, which was more racially diverse, we were discussing *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) and focusing on a journal prompt asking the students to consider what Ari and Dante considered to be “Mexican,” including why Dante did not feel Mexican enough. After some conversation, John made a move to locate the novel historically. Even though the novel is set in the late 1980s, John connected it to the late 1960s and early 1970s and the “iconic hippy.” He said, “They didn’t really judge people based on race at all. But they’re one of the only generations that can honestly say, ‘I don’t judge people by race.’” Because I feel even people who [say they] don’t do [that] now, subconsciously do.” I understood his “they” to refer back to his use of “iconic hipp[ies],” indexing a particular kind of white person. Further, I understood John as praising these white people for not “judg[ing] people by race,” but, to push this a bit further, I heard him as praising white people for being color-blind, a term and concept I assumed was unfamiliar to him and therefore did not use in our conversation. Still, John evaded talking about race himself by lauding white people who claim color-blindness, as if to say, “If I cannot see race, then there is nothing to talk about.” In these ways, some white students sometimes strove to make themselves more comfortable in whiteness and, in doing so, erased people of color by refusing to see them. It was a metaphorical genocide. Here, John located himself solidly among white people, and, more specifically, not the color-blind white people of the hippy generation but contemporary white people who “judge people based on race.” He did not move there; he was already there. By staying there, he effectively shut down the possibility of future antiracist encounters.

One way that white people push themselves away from Black people, in particular, is by imagining them as angry or upset (Ahmed, 2010, 2014). Whether this is a conscious act is irrelevant, because either way it is an act of consequence, a racist behavior. By imagining some Black people as angry or upset, some white people feel entitled to push them away, refuse
to engage with them, or dismiss what they are saying. I should also say that I am not dismissing the value of anger. Many times, people, particularly people of color, have good reason to be angry in our racist society. And, as Ahmed (2012) says, “Anger could open up the world” (p. 171). What I am talking about here, though, is different; it is when (white) people misinterpret Black people as angry as a result of their racist expectations.

This happened, albeit discreetly, in one of our class discussions. We had just read Huey P. Newton’s 1970 speech to the Black Panthers entitled “The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements” (BlackPast, 2018), a text suggested to me by Lance McCready. Desiree, who identified as “Black and proud,” was the first to speak up to discuss the text. She quoted part of the text, saying, “‘I have hang-ups [myself] about male homosexuality’ and not female sexuality.” She said that this was “still relevant today.” Another student took up Desiree’s comment, saying, “I’m glad you brought that up,” and extended Desiree’s point. Then Abbot, one of two white, straight, cisgender young men in the class, tried to explain why Newton may have “hang-ups about male homosexuality.” He said, “Well, I mean, to a certain extent, it does make sense, because I’m assuming they’re mostly talking about straight men who think that way, and if you think about it, he’s not into men. So, if it’s two females, it’s just two of what he’s into, so it would be easy to understand why.” He went on to consider the issue from alternative perspectives: “But at the same time, it’s like—it would be okay if you felt that way but just didn’t have a problem with male homosexuality but didn’t engage in it. But a lot of these people truly have no problem with female homosexuality but actually have bias toward male homosexuality. And it really doesn’t make sense. It kind of makes it seem like they’re barbarian or something.” Abbot was, it seems to me, grappling not only with Newton’s stance but also his own, particularly when he used “you.” When he switched to “these people,” though, he seemed to separate himself from men who are homophobic against other men but not women, men he considered to be “barbarian.”

At this point, Desiree had an immediate reaction that is neither visible nor audible on the video recording of the class but that I noted verbally: “You had a reaction to that. What were you going to say?” And she quickly said, “No. Never mind.” Then Kristy, a white young woman in the class, responded almost immediately, “I think, like, in a nicer way what Abbot is trying to say is like—.” Whether or not Kristy was defending Abbot from Desiree is impossible to tell, but that Desiree understood her in this way was evident by the fact that she interrupted what Kristy
was saying to explain, “Oh, I wasn’t upset,” at which time Kristy spoke over Desiree, who was still speaking, to say, “No, I know what you’re saying,” which seemed all but impossible since Desiree had not said it. She had elected not to. Desiree continued to explain, “It was like, he was saying something, I was going to say something, but then he finished his sentence, so then I didn’t have to say something.” Here, Desiree clearly understood Kristy as having perceived her as upset and clarified that this was a misperception. Kristy effectively pushed Desiree away from her, even pushed her out of the conversation, moving herself into a conversation with Abbot, another white person. In this way, Kristy constructed the class, at this moment in time, as an anti-Black one. This encounter, then, was one that only opened up possibilities of racist encounters and closed down possibilities of antiracist ones.

Such racist behaviors happened school-wide, as well. The school held a series of panels to discuss race. There were three panels during my time at the school, one in 2015 and two in 2016, with the third being a follow-up to the second. The day after the second race-themed panel, in February of 2016, school started slowly because there had been an ice storm overnight. As students trickled into my room, I asked about the previous day’s panel. When I initiated the topic, there were just two seniors in the room, a young Black woman named Jenna and a young white man named Darren. They told me about the format, how it started with student performances and followed with a student panel answering only a few questions read by two teachers. Jenna listed the students on the panel, all of whom were Black, although not all African American. No one described the audience, but it was likely as racially diverse as the school’s student body, the majority of which (about 56 percent) was white.

Darren said the questions included “Why isn’t there a white history month?” and “Should we be treated equally or specially . . . based on [our] culture?” He described the questions as “honest . . . like if you could ask a Black person a question now, what would you ask?” In saying this, the assumed “you” is not only a white person but a white person who has done very little work to reflect on their racism. Jenna didn’t speak to the questions except to say she could not recall the third. When I asked whether the panelists seemed to be under attack, both Darren and Jenna said they were fine. However, Darren reported that “a lot of students [in the audience] did not respond well to [the panelists’ answers]. They felt like they were being attacked.” Later, in an interview with me, Delilah, who identified as Mexican American, described this panel as “terrible.”
She said that the panel had no diversity in that it comprised only Black students and that the audience was understood as white, not because it only included white people, which was not the case, but because that was whom the speakers addressed. She said,

It was more or less pointing fingers, and, like, “Oh, you did this to me.” And blah blah blah. And I’m just sitting here like, “None of us are slaves.” . . . Like, come on. Like, none of us are in shackles, getting our teeth checked. Calm down. Like, this is not about who did what. This is more or less to enlighten what happened in the history and how far we’ve come. Like, not about “You did this,” and, like, “No.” . . . Like, it was, it was bad. The whole school unraveled. And you could really tell the true colors. And it was like, being Hispanic, um, I’m kind of glad that I was. . . . Because, like, you could obviously see the division. Like—. . . the white kids, and the Black kids, and they just [mouth noise]. . . . And the people who are in the middle, like Asians, Hispanics, and everything else—they were just kind of like, “Eh, you guys are both crazy.” . . . “Can you guys stop?” . . . It was more or less like, we could just see the whole division.

When she said “none of us are slaves . . . none of us are in shackles, getting our teeth checked,” she moved herself to be with Black people, specifically African American people and their history of being enslaved by white people in the United States. However, she also moved above the Black panelists, as if she had authority over them, telling them to “calm down” and telling them what the panel was and was not about. Then she moved herself “in the middle” as a “Hispanic” person with Asian Americans “and everything else.” From this location, she saw both Black students and white students as “crazy,” implying her location was that of the uniquely sane. That she experienced this panel intensely is made obvious by her saying that the “whole school unraveled” in response to it.

Eventually, though, Delilah went on to move herself closer to white people, and, as such, she reported feeling threatened by Black people. She said, “Because [in] the first panel I was ignoring everything. . . . Because I even felt threatened. I was like ‘Whoah.’ Like, because my color, like I’m white obviously, like skin color. . . . But ethnicity-wise I’m not. So, it’s, I even felt threatened. I was like ‘Whoah, I’m white too, but I’m kind of
yellow. So I don’t know. . . . I felt really threatened.” Muñoz (2000) says, “The effect of Latinos/as is often off. One can even argue that it is off-white” (p. 70). This is how I understand Delilah to be describing herself when she refers to her white-yellow skin in relationship to feeling threatened by the Black panelists—as an “off-white” person, she felt threatened by Black panelists and therefore ignored what they had to say. She used her feelings as a reason for making racist comments and ignoring Black voices. Darren supported such feelings and actions by normalizing the questions and representing the panelists as attacking. These students pushed themselves away from Black communities and pulled themselves toward racist ones.

Let me be clear that none of these students were students I would have “tattooed,” to use Kendi’s language, as racist. But these were classroom encounters, moments in time, when racist ideas were evident, even if only upon analysis. And I share responsibility for these encounters. I was the teacher in them, and there was not some super antiracist intervention that I just excluded here to make a point. I pushed back some on John but not on the students in the other conversations. I felt some unease in those moments, but it was only upon analysis that I came to understand why. My understanding was developed through careful deliberation, which, for me, is slow at first. I get better and faster at it with practice, but at first it is slow. And opportunities were thus lost; opportunities for antiracist future encounters were prevented. And some Black students did not have time for this nonsense.

Black People Pulling Themselves into the Embrace of Black Communities

As I mentioned, Desiree identified as “Black and proud.” Her great-grandmother frequently told her the story of when she was Desiree’s age, seventeen, and “marched with Martin Luther King” on Washington. Moreover, Desiree actively sought and fostered relationships with other Black people who helped to raise her up. She said about Tumblr,

If you follow the right people and interact with the right people—like I have a lot of friends that are states away because they made a group chat for people who were Black and on Tumblr and I ended up joining it about a year ago. And some of these people are my best friends. Like I don’t, like I still talk
to them every day. Like every single day, like, we talk every single day, and they’re there for me when I need them, and I’m there for them when they need me. Like, we have each other’s number; we Facetime; I talk to these people all the time. So, Tumblr is like a safe place for me in a way. . . And, like, they talk about things other than just being Black. They talk about suicide awareness, trans awareness, and things like that. . . So, like, if you follow the right people, you get a positive reaction from stuff like Tumblr. And I love it. And they have this thing called Blackout, and it happens, I think, once a month. And, where you just post selfies of you, and it’s like and everyone reblogs it and everyone likes it. It’s because you’re, it’s because Black people don’t get recognized for being beautiful who they are. . . So we take a day on Tumblr. Or we’ll take a day on any, it’s every social media, and we do it to represent ourselves.

In these ways, Desiree fed her racial pride so that she could survive and thrive (Love, 2019) in our racist society. Of course, she brought these experiences into the race-themed panels, where she was in the audience. Desiree was not offended by the panelists; indeed, she supported them, but she was, understandably, offended by the question posed about “white history month.” In an interview, she praised one of the panelist’s responses to that question. According to her, the panelist answered, “There is a white history month. . . There is eleven months dedicated to [white people] and even this month [February], because people take it away from Black people because they want to know why, why isn’t this a month for other races.” Desiree reflected on this interaction. She said,

That [question] completely pissed me off because, one, I’ve sat in school my whole entire life, and I’ve learned about you guys’ history, and on top of that we don’t learn about the negative things white people have done . . . except for slavery, and then every year in February we talk about the same Black, we talk about . . . um . . . Dr. Martin Luther King, maybe Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman, like, we talk about the same, I’ve learned about the same people my whole entire life. If I didn’t research anybody else, I would not know. . . . When do you learn about our history? Like, the month is to learn about our history, and you guys still take that away from us.
Desiree thus captured tensions between Black and white communities, noting how Black people have to learn about white people all of the time whereas white people complain of just a single month of learning about the same Black people over and over again. In supporting the Black panelists, explicitly naming a few prominent Black people in US history, and talking about the importance of knowing about more than just these few, Desiree pushed away from ideas and behaviors associated with the fallacy of white supremacy and pulled herself into the embrace of Black communities. In doing so, she opened up possibilities of future antiracist encounters and a future of Black joy.

In an interview, Jenna and Khalil explained that it was the response to the panel that offended them rather than the question itself, as with Desiree, or the panelist’s answer, as with Delilah. Jenna, who identified as Black, could acknowledge Delilah’s experiences but could also recognize that Delilah’s were not universal. Jenna said, “Some people did [feel attacked], some people enjoyed [the panel], some people didn’t like it.” From her point of view, she could see that some people enjoyed it and even those who didn’t enjoy it did not necessarily feel like Delilah felt. But, again, for Jenna and Khalil it was the response that drew their attention. Jenna said the panel “started off a lot of wars from the school.” And Khalil continued, “Yeah, it was Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat. It was just war all around the school.” That they used the word “war” indicates that the response felt intense if not violent. They were particularly struck by a “white girl,” in Khalil’s words, who was, according to him, “friends with a lot of Black people.” She was pushing the issue of whether there should be a Black History Month:

Khalil: This one [white] girl. She went on Facebook and was like, “So you guys [Black people] are mad because you guys get 29, 28, 29 days of a year. Wow.” . . . And she was like, “But we [white people] don’t get any.” And I was like—

Dr. Blackburn: Every stupid day.

Khalil: Yeah. And she was like, “Well, what about in October, November, you know, the LGBT month; in April it’s autism.”

He went on to say what he would have liked to have said to her when he saw her in the halls but he would not because he did not want to get in
trouble at school. He would insult her, saying, “You’re not even cute,” but he would also educate her about the accomplishments of Black people, saying,

**Khalil:** First off, there are Black people who made the stoplight, the toilets, all this stuff, even peanut butter, and you eat peanut butter but you’re still, like, criticizing us. The bars in your face from your piercings, I’m pretty sure somebody had to help with that. I mean, you go to Africa, you actually see people with stuff in their face, so you’re pretty much—

**Dr. B.:** Mirroring African tradition.

**Khalil:** Yeah. [Shayla, a Black person who was on staff at the school] said when Kylie Jenner decided to put cornrows in her hair . . . But, you know, we do it, we’re known as thugs and all that. But she can go out there and do whatever she wants. . . . So, seeing her, I just want to tell her about herself, like . . . like “everything that you want, I already have.”

Khalil pushed the “white girl” who was “friends with a lot of Black people” away from Black communities by criticizing and ignoring her. This push was to keep her away from Black people so as to keep them safe from her racist behaviors. Khalil also pointed to tensions between Black and white people in saying how white people can do what Black people are criticized for with no negative consequences. But also, importantly, he pulled himself in with African Americans and Africans asserting pride in their accomplishments and contributions. Thus, both Khalil and Desiree, at this moment in time, pulled themselves into Black communities, refusing to accommodate the racist behaviors of white people.

Here, Desiree, Jenna, and Khalil moved toward Black communities and stood there. Their stances were like those we saw in the first chapter, when Parker, Sherry, and Simon, all of whom identified as queer and white, worked hard to move away from the hate they experienced in the homophobic and transphobic world to stand strong among those who embraced them for who they were in terms of their sexual and gender identities. They are not the same; stances defined by sexuality and gender are not the same as those defined by race, but these specific stances are similar in that they are preceded by movement and they hold the potential of movement toward future liberatory encounters.
Beyond Black and White Communities

Racism is, of course, not restricted to between white and Black communities. In fact, when Jenna reflected on the 2015 race-themed panel, she troubled this assumption:

**JENNA:** I know there are some students here that are, like, Hispanic, and like—it was somebody else, I forget what race they are—

**DR. B.:** Racial minorities that aren’t African American.

**JENNA:** Yeah. Like they felt like they were just talking about only, like, African Americans, and like they should at least have included, like, our race into it as well. . . . That’s why some people felt a little disappointed.

As a young Black woman, Jenna made space for the critique that other racial minorities were not represented in the 2015 panel, which comprised more than a handful of people. Some students’ advisory classes took up where the panel left off in this regard. Right after that panel, Darby, who identified as white, talked about how the conversation in her advisory class went. She said,

*We had a lot of different input, like, about that and about like being not just Black or white, like, we had kids that were talking about like, you know, like a kid named [Anou], he’s from Laos. . . . And people that aren’t from like—the people that are from different countries are like Asian and stuff like that—they even touched on like how the difference between them actually does matter, and that was really cool to hear people talk about it that weren’t like—it was cool to get a different perspective other than just, like, Black and white.*

I heard no mention of advisory discussions after the race-themed panels that followed and saw no evidence of increased racial diversity in them.
Moving with Respect to Racial Diversity

After the first 2016 panel, Jenna offered the same critique about racial diversity and said that others in the audience had said, “At least [they] could have mentioned other races than just, you know, theirs and their own opinion.” Darren suggested that the organizers tried, unsuccessfully, to diversify the panel, which comprised only Black students.

The next race-themed panel at the school was about a month later, and Delilah, who is Mexican American, characterized it at first as “great” and then later, in an interview, as “pretty good.” She then shared the following:

Delilah: We’re doing another panel at the end of this month of [inaudible]. Any—well, basically anybody really, they’re having another—no, like, I mean, um.

Dr. B.: So, broadening the discussion from Black and white to the other ethnicities. Okay, well, excellent. Let me know.

Unfortunately, this panel still had not happened by the end of the year. Delilah did, however, reference a panel that had already happened, one I had not heard of before. She said, “Me and [Nancy] were on the panel for the Latino side, and then some other people on the panel like [Adam] I think.” At first, I thought one of the two of us was just confusing tense, but then Kristy said, “I heard your guys’s stories.” Then, Delilah jumped ahead in time to the expected panel, the one that never happened, and said, “I don’t know, I’ll probably cry. You don’t want to know my stories.” Here, she picked up on the talk about Shayla’s stories, which I discuss more later in this chapter. Delilah acknowledged the power of Shayla’s stories and underscored the power of her own, saying she would cry and that they don’t even “want to know” her stories. But then, later in the semester, she asserted that the story of her family is “a story that needs to be told” and that she would be willing to come back even after she graduated to tell it. Delilah thus drew on her past encounters, growing up as a Mexican American in the United States, and she opened up the possibility of future antiracist encounters, offering to serve as a panelist at the school even after she graduated.

Jenna, Darby, and Delilah pushed themselves into racially diverse communities as they engaged in conversations about race that pushed beyond the Black-white dichotomy. Further, Delilah pulled others along with her. As a result of this pushing and pulling, there was movement.
Differences, Tensions, and Power Dynamics within Mexican American Communities

Just as differences and tensions, pushes and pulls, are not restricted to between white and Black communities, they are not limited to the spaces between particular racialized communities. In other words, these power dynamics exist within communities as well as between or among them.

In class we explored Mexican American communities in our reading and discussion of Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe (Sáenz, 2012). I recognize that to be Mexican is to be associated with a nation and that many races of people are associated with the nation of Mexico. But I also recognize that, as Omi and Winant (2014) state, “the ideas of race and nation [are] deeply connected” (p. 78). In this novel, being Mexican is more about cultural practices than citizenship in one country or another. So, I might instead talk about ethnicity. Darby, for example, said this about the novel: “The difference between how Ari and Dante, even though they’re [both] Mexican, is that [the book] like shows the difference . . . you think about ethnicity from the perspective of two people of the same ethnicity, which is really cool. Because I think that like Ari embraces his Mexican culture while Dante like rejects the Mexican stereotypes because he doesn’t fit into [the culture].” Similarly, Vic distinguished Ari and Dante’s feelings and thoughts about being Mexican in a journal entry in which she wrote, “[Dante] doesn’t feel all that ‘Mexican’ like Ari does” and followed this observation with a quotation from the book, in which Dante tells Ari, “I think Mexicans don’t like me.” Thus, this book provoked conversations about who counts as Mexican, who is Mexican enough, and how they, both the characters and the students, know. So, while I could focus on ethnicity here, I am reminded of Omi and Winant’s (2014) assertion that “being ‘ethnic’ turns out to be about whether and how much an individual or group can assimilate into or hybridize with whiteness” (p. 46). Further, Kendi (2019) states, “The fact is, all ethnic groups, once they fall under the gaze and power of race makers, become racialized” (p. 62). Such is the case with Mexicans in the United States now and in our conversations about Aristotle and Dante.

In these discussions, there was some awkwardness in terms of the potential of reifying stereotypes, which was appropriate considering the dearth of people able and willing to speak from their own experiences as Mexican Americans. In the first class, there was one white student who had previously lived in the southwestern United States in a predominantly “Hispanic” neighborhood. In the second class, there was one
A biracial student whose brother lived in a similar community. But the only Mexican American student who took the class did so in the semester where we ran out of time and could not read *Aristotle and Dante* at all. (I continue to be disappointed about this.) The awkwardness, in terms of the potential of reifying stereotypes, was evident when I assigned this writing prompt: “Ari and Dante talk a lot about what it means to be (or not be) Mexican. Point to places in the novel that give you insight into what it means to (not) be Mexican, according to them.” Yanika began sharing her entry with “Okay, um, I was really kind of nervous,” and I understood her nervousness as about being biracial, Black and white, talking about Mexican characters, and not wanting to stereotype them. In her journal, she said that the quotations she identified were from Dante’s perspective and they showed “how the stereotypes influenced his life.” She did not share this in the class discussion, though; instead she went on to reference one of the two quotations she selected. This one was from the part of the book where Ari jokingly tells Dante not to steal his truck and Dante responds, continuing the joke, “I’m Mexican. . . . I know all about hotwiring” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 279). This is something one Mexican American character can say to another in a jocular manner, particularly when both were created by a Mexican American author, but not something Yanika would say about them. Stephanie, the only biracial (Asian and white) student in the first class, talked about the same part of the book: “It seems like in the book the people in the younger generation, like Ari and Dante, [have] very like negative stereotype of Mexicans. Like where it says Mexicans hotwire your car and do all these really bad things ’cause they’re Mexican.” She did not recognize the humor between the boys and made clear that what she understood as their stereotypes were theirs and not her own.

Yanika talked about the importance of names and pointed us to the part of the book where Dante is generating a list of names for his expected baby brother. Dante lists Diego, Joaquin, Rafael, Maximiliano, and Ari says, “‘Those names sound pretty Mexican,’” and Dante responds, “‘Yeah, well, I’m shying away from ancient classical names. And besides, if he has a Mexican name, then maybe he’ll feel more Mexican’” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 269). Yanika explained, “Choosing those names was a way for Dante to kind of like protect his baby brother and like shield him from feeling the way that Dante feels, like he’s, like, not a good Mexican.” But, in addition to names, there were nicknames that Ari just knew and accepted but Dante had to decipher, which pointed to the issue of language more broadly. Yanika initiated this discussion:
YANIKA: Well, can Dante speak Spanish? Wasn’t there something about, like . . . ?

MAC: He said he couldn’t do it well.

YANIKA: What was he talking about when he was? I think that might be part of it.

DR. B.: Definitely.

YANIKA: Just not, not understanding or being able to, like, speak it, [inaudible] and use English.

DR. B.: Right. Yeah! Oh, no, I think the language was a huge part about it.

Names are parts of the larger linguistic practices that Dante feels make some people, like Ari, Mexican and others, like him, not Mexican enough.

Other cultural practices that do this sort of work are related to how people are raised and educated. In the spring 2015 class, for example, Kimberly, who identified as white, said, “I think also, like, how Ari’s mom was raised influences how Ari thinks about [being Mexican] a lot because Ari’s mom, like, really had to fight against all these stereotypes, and she said something like, ‘I’m educated; does that un-Mexicanize me?’” In this part of the novel, Ari’s mom tries to teach Ari that schooling is not owned by one nationality or another. Kimberly pointed to this section to show how explicitly Ari’s mom talks about being Mexican in ways that debunk stereotypes.

Yanika also tried to debunk stereotypes about being Mexican, but with particular respect to sexuality:

YANIKA: So, we’re talking a lot about—or at least I did—[inaudible] Dante, so I was wondering, like, if we learned that Dante likes boys—?

DR. B.: Yes, yes! Good point.

YANIKA: So, I was just wondering, like, does this play into—does that play into, like, being Mexican. Is there, like, a stereotype of, like, Mexicans aren’t gay, or something?
Moving with Respect to Racial Diversity

Dr. B.: That's exactly right. That's exactly right. That is exactly right. So it's [inaudible] machismo, and it's the idea that men are men, right? So that there's no—that means desiring women, it means being tough, it means being stoic, you know, like, keeping your emotions hidden, and so that machismo thing is absolutely a part of, um, some Mexican cultures. I'm not trying to stereotype them by saying that is the—that is a value.

CARTER: Being macho?

Dr. B.: Yeah, yeah, it matters. It matters.

MAC: Didn't Dante question that, like, when he was excluding Ari on the trip, he was like—they were talking about what they wanted to eat, and he's like, “Oh, I want to get menudo,” and he was like, “Yeah, well I guess you’re a real Mexican.” And he's like, “A real Mexican likes to kiss boys?” and Ari's like, “I don't think that's an American invention.”

YAN I K A: Right. I forgot about that.

Please know, I am not and was not saying that Mexican culture is inherently machista, rather that machismo emerged as a theme in the text that students explored dynamically. Here the class both acknowledged the stereotype that being gay is not a Mexican thing and is a thing in the United States and disrupted that stereotype by drawing on the language of a character in the book. Carter, who identified as Black, pushed the disruption further. She wondered why being Mexican mattered at all, and I pushed the class to think about whether it did, and if so, why:

CARTER: I'm just, like, what does it matter, like, so much—if they actually classify themselves as being Mexican, why does it matter?

Dr. B.: So what do you think? Why does it matter?

CARTER: I don't know.

Dr. B.: To you, you're saying it doesn't matter, right?
Carter: Right, it doesn’t matter, like, if you’re, like, Mexican enough, like, or you’re American enough, or if you’re Canadian enough. It doesn’t—it doesn’t matter, . . .

Dr. B.: Carter’s questions are rhetorical, so she’s like, “It doesn’t matter if you’re Mexican enough,” . . . but for some reason it matters to them, so what is it about it that matters to them?

It’s a question that was raised in both classes that read the book, and one that was responded to, in both classes, by drawing on personal albeit tangential experiences.

Rhys, who identified as white, reflected on their experiences living in New Mexico in a predominantly Latino community. They said, referencing their journal,

Rhys: In the younger generation of Mexicans, there’s a thing that goes around where they’ll be like, “Oh you’re not Mexican,” and generally if you don’t speak Spanish . . . and you’re light skinned, you’re not—

Dr. B.: You don’t count as real Mexican.

Rhys: Yeah, you’re not. People will actually, like, bully you when you’re younger if you’re not Mexican enough and it is a huge race battle, kind of, between what kind of Hispanic or Latino, or whatever you want to call it, you are.

Thus, Rhys explained that in some communities being Mexican enough came with real, embodied consequences for young people. It could make the difference between being bullied or not.

Yanika drew on her brother’s experience to respond to Carter’s rhetorical and my literal question directly. She said,

I don’t know, like, why it matters to [Ari and Dante], but I have, like, kind of [inaudible] it. So my brother, he bought a truck, and he packed up his truck to move it to Arizona, . . . and the area where he’s buying his house there are a lot of, like, Mexicans, or like Spanish-speaking people, so like, when he bought this truck, he was like, um, “It’s kind of Mexican,” like,
“I’m going to fit in with this truck,” and I was like, I don’t really know what he’s saying. [laughs] Like, what does that mean? But it’s like a big, red truck, and it was also a Ford, like, yeah, so [inaudible]. Because he thought that would make him fit in or something.

In this way, Yanika explained that being Mexican enough came with embodied consequences for her adult brother, too, even though he was not Mexican. These consequences were not about being bullied, but they were about fitting in to a community to which he was new.

Across these conversations, students both pulled themselves toward and pushed themselves away from Mexican American people. Darby pulled herself toward Mexican Americans by engaging in the story of nuance and complexity regarding Mexican American identities, which she said is “really cool.” Rhys and Yanika pulled themselves toward Mexican Americans by drawing on their and their families’ experiences in close geographic proximity to such communities. Yanika pulled herself toward Mexican Americans, first, by being careful and checking her potential racism and, second, by recognizing the importance of names, language, and sexuality in terms of existing within a racialized community. Kimberly recognized the importance of education in Mexican American communities. Stephanie and Carter, however, pushed themselves away. Stephanie did this by failing to understand the joke between the boys out of fear of being racist. Carter did this by wondering why the characters’ Mexican American identities even matter. What I am not saying is that Stephanie and Carter were racist against Mexican Americans and the others were not. Instead, I am saying, in these moments in time, Darby, Yanika, Rhys, and Kimberly pulled themselves closer to understanding and embracing diverse Mexican American communities, whereas Stephanie and Carter did not. In moving closer, those students opened up opportunities for future antiracist encounters.

Differences, Tensions, and Power Dynamics within Students’ Own Racialized Communities

Examining the nuances of the racialized communities represented in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (Sáenz, 2012) provoked the classes to discuss such complexities in their own communities. Just
as Dante doesn’t feel Mexican enough, Carter didn’t feel Black enough, as she shared in the following exchange:

**Carter:** Actually, now that I think about it, I get that. Especially because like, like there’s a high stereotype of what kind of, like, music Black people are supposed to listen to. I’m like, I don’t think this—I meet this requirement at all, like, I don’t like—I’m not into, like, this scene, like entertainment-wise. I don’t like the same styles of dress or anything like that, like. I just don’t meet them at all, and so like, yeah, that does like center me away, like especially when I went to a predominately Black school, I was like, “I can feel the hate radiating off of all these people toward me” because of—simply because of, like, I just don’t—I don’t really . . . I didn’t meet this stereotype [of] Black people that all of, like, like the majority of the school met, and, like, I don’t know. It did cause a lot of problems for me when I went to school.

**Dr. B.**: So how being Black was constructed in particular context didn’t align with the way you expressed being Black.

**Carter:** Yeah!

Carter’s account resonated with Vic.

**Vic:** I, like, relate to that a lot because in middle school I also went to a predominately Black school, and, um, it was—it makes—it makes you feel a little bit uncomfortable. I was very uncomfortable because I did not, like, I didn’t speak the same, I didn’t know what slang terms, I didn’t curse, like, at all. I was such a good kid, and, like, it was ridiculous. I just wasn’t very, like—I don’t know. I didn’t really like rap music, all like that.

**Dr. B.**: So you kind of weren’t kind of meeting the expectations?

**Vic:** I was not meeting expectations.

**Dr. B.**: And how did it feel?
Vic: It just—hey, you can definitely feel left out; you definitely, um, it's harder to make friends, and, like—I just got this, like, all the time, whenever I would just hear, “Are you even Black?,” like, “You’re such a white person.” And stuff like that.

Both Carter and Vic identified as Black, but both of them had experienced, in school, feeling not Black enough in predominantly Black contexts, to the point of having their racial identities doubted and even being hated. Both seemed to experience both a push and a pull in relation to Black people and communities. They were rejected by some Black people but seemed to want to find and be in Black communities, just not with those who rejected them.

Yanika, as a biracial young woman, reported getting “both sides of it.” She said,

It's weird, like, I get both sides of it, . . . people don't really, like, hate me if I don't, like, do something. They're like, “Oh, okay,” so like, if I don't know a slang term some people will be like, “Oh, well, that's because you're white.” . . . They, like, rationalize it like, “Well, oh, well you're mixed, so you don't know that, but I'll teach you and now you'll know!” And, like, they're like, “Oh, did you hear that new Taylor Swift song?” I'm like, “No.” And they're like, “Well, that's because you're half-Black. But, you know, I'll play it for you and now you'll know.”

Whereas Carter and Vic conveyed feeling excluded as a result of not being Black enough as Black people, Yanika conveyed feeling patronized for not being Black or white enough as a biracial person. That she felt patronized rather than tutored per se was evident when I followed up about how she felt. She said, “It doesn't, like, hurt my feelings or anything because, I mean, they're not lying. I am, like, biracial, but I don't think that, like, I don't know something because I'm mixed. . . . That's not why I haven't heard the song yet. Like I haven't been home [to hear the song].” Like Carter and Vic, Yanika experienced both a pull and a push. The pull was in being taught what it took to be Black or white, but the push was in how this felt demeaning to her as a biracial person.

Yanika reflected on what she heard among the people of color in her class:
Yanika: Isn’t it weird when we have, like, so many examples of this stuff? . . . It’s actually kind of sad, like—

Carter: Right, right. It’s just, like, life though. . . .

Yanika: I’m just trying to live my life.

Carter: Free!

Yanika: That’s all I wanted to do.

Carter: Right! I did not sign up for this.

Here, Yanika and Carter acknowledged the desire to live their lives free of the constraints of racialized communities, not the communities themselves, and the disappointment in being unable to do so. Thus, they were not pushing themselves away from those communities as much as understanding the ways that they did not belong among them and, perhaps, underneath, trying to figure out ways they could. In doing so, they were not closing down a future in those communities, but nor were they opening one up. Instead, they were just wondering whether there were any possibilities.

People sometimes felt pushed out of racialized communities that they expected to be a part of, and this feeling was propelled by the internalization of the fallacy of white supremacy, that is, when a person of color has received so many negative messages about their own racialized community or communities that they start to believe and make use of those messages. In Kendi’s (2019) words, “Racist ideas make people of color think less of themselves, which makes them more vulnerable to racist ideas” (p. 6). Desiree alluded to the internalization of the fallacy of white supremacy when she said, “You’re either light-skinned and perfect or you’re nothing at all. Like the darker you are, the less you matter. . . . Because our community, like, since slavery, it was if you’re lighter, you’re a house slave, and if you were darker, you were out picking cotton. So, we’ve been taught that our whole lives.” Desiree, however, was actively rejecting such an understanding of herself.

Khalil, though, seemed to struggle with it, particularly, as a Black, gay young man. I read Khalil as African American, but when I explicitly asked
him about his racial identity, he said, “I’m Puerto Rican. I’m white. I’m Black. I’m Jamaican and Irish.” He explained that people often interpreted this to mean he’s African American, but he would respond, “Nope. Mixed, other.” In a later interview, he said that his mother was Puerto Rican and Black and his biological father, who was not who he called his dad, was white and Black. He reported that his biological father asked him why he didn’t “consider [him]self Black,” and Khalil replied saying, “First off, that’s what other people do, and I don’t like it because I know I’m more than that, and I don’t want to just be seen as, ‘well, because your dark skin, you’re Black.’ No. There’s more to me.” He explained that claiming this complex racial, ethnic, and national identity allowed him to understand his race beyond skin color. He said claiming a Black identity resulted in being stereotyped: “I think, like, that’s the hardest part about, the part of being Black, I think, because everybody put a stereotype. ‘Oh your dad’s not here, you guys are going to be on welfare and Section 8.’” Alternatively, by claiming a Puerto Rican identity, he could reject stereotypes of being “more privileged,” as one might when understood as white, or having “live[d] in the projects.” Instead, he said, “I feel going Puerto Rican, I’m just straight in the middle.” In doing so, he shifted from a racial identity to a racialized national identity.

However, in conversation about the first 2016 panel discussion focused on race, which centered around Black identities, Khalil seemed to move toward claiming a Black identity. Initially, Khalil stated, “I’m not even fully Black, but it upset me.” Thus, he described himself as only partially Black, but then he used first-person plural pronouns to indicate he included himself among Black people, noting that those who reacted to the panel were “criticizing us.” He went on to say that “we’re known as thugs.” Then he said, “People make fun of Black people because of how big their lips are,” and Jenna corrected him, saying, “Yeah, how big our lips are.” Khalil picked up on the correction and continued, “How big our butts” are. Thus, Khalil, with a push from Jenna, pulled himself toward Black communities across these conversations about being Black in a racist society.

But Khalil was not only raced; he was, in his words, “more than that.” When I asked him whether he identified as gay, he said, “Mhm. Very.” The first time we discussed being both Black and gay was in class early in the semester. He said, about Black people, “It’s a different race, period. No, but along with race, homophobia—like, Black people hate—they just hate gay people. So, it’s just, like, they see another Black gay guy and they
just automatically harass them. And then, you know, if you see a white gay guy, and they’re all straight and white, they might just ignore him. And they might say something slick, but it’s not as bad. And Hispanics, I don’t really know.” This led to Delilah talking about homophobia among “Hispanics,” which she tied to Catholicism. I then asked whether the homophobia Khalil experienced might also be tied to religion, and he said, “No, not really. Like, sometimes, but most of the time, no. It’s just douchebags. Like, what was it? One time I was walking and I was just—I had, like, shorts and sneakers on . . . and they were just making comments, and, like, . . . it’s just like, for what? I don’t even know you, but you see what you want, so just go ahead and start talking smack. . . . They still don’t know nobody, but they’re still talking smart.” Trying to disrupt what I had come to understand as a damaging stereotype, I asked the class, “Does anybody have a different experience around? Or is that consistent with other peoples’ experiences?” But Khalil responded immediately:

**KHALIL:** One thing they do, though—

**DR. B.:** Who’s “they”?

**KHALIL:** Like, Black people. They are so okay with lesbians. Their best friend could be a lesbian, but, like, if a gay guy walked by—

Here, he stated that lesbians were absolved from what he experienced as the homophobia of Black communities, and when he referred to people in Black communities, he used third person, “they” and “their,” effectively pushing himself away from Black communities and, importantly, the homophobia he understood to be within. Later, in our concluding interview, I asked him more about his description of homophobia in Black communities: “So, I just remember y’all talking about homophobia looks different in different racial and ethnic communities, and I think I heard, I might be wrong, but I thought I heard [Khalil] say, I think I heard you say that African American communities were more homophobic. But I might be wrong on saying that. And I, I guess I wanted a chance to unpack that. Like I want to talk about that.” Khalil replied by first talking about the homophobia he had experienced in his family and then more publicly. He said,
Okay, so. Um, my dad’s side of the family are more like, African American Black than my mom’s. So, like, I went out there this summer, and they finally got to seeing me after eight years . . . and my auntie, who I used to be very close to . . . I finally got to see her and I went to go hug her, and she just walked right past me. . . . And I was just like, okay, maybe she didn’t recognize me? Because when she’d seen me I was small. And then my uncle Tito, he recognized me, he was talking to me. But I was like, okay. But if I’d go on the street, and a random Black guy sees me, and he’s just like, “You’re a fag.” And, um, everything else. So, in the book that is not okay; I’m just like, “Thanks, tell me something I don’t know about myself.” . . . So I think, like, if I walk past a Caucasian person, they’re going to look at me and keep going. It’s not a problem. But like the whole African American Black, or the Latino-Hispanic, that also is like a big one . . . it’s like, the Latino race, they’re just like, “I don’t understand it.” . . . So they’ll probably get, think of stereotypes, have negative comments, but it’s not like when a Black person does it. . . . It’s just like, I feel like if I was to be harmed by somebody, it’ll be a Black person.

When I told him that I heard “a story grounded in pain and sadness. Like your aunt not hugging you,” he just said, “Yeah.” Thus, I came to understand his pushing away the Black communities that included his family members as about feeling pushed out of them. His auntie refused to acknowledge him.

In a later chapter on families and parents, I share an account by Kahlil in which his pastor’s wife pushed him out of the church for being too feminine. He pushed away from part of his family and from his church to protect himself from acts like being denied by his auntie and pastor’s wife. To make such a difficult push, he bought into some ideas based on the fallacy of white supremacy, like Black people being on welfare, in public housing, and more homophobic than other racialized people, particularly white people. Further, Khalil bought into the idea that if he were going to be harmed, it would be by a Black person. I am reminded of how fearing Black bodies is racist, regardless of the body that experiences that fear. This, Kendi (2019) argues, is “the real Black on Black crime” (p. 8). So Khalil pushed himself away from Black communities that he understood
as homophobic based on a history of having been pushed out of Black communities that he experienced as homophobic. This meant moving farther away from family, or, in Ahmed’s words, from home. Khalil’s past encounters led to the ones I observed during our time together. The ones I observed were thus propelled by pain and sadness and by a drive for self-protection. This pushing away effectively closed down potential futures with Black communities that included his family and home, at least for the time being.

Moving Back and Forth between Racist and Antiracist Ideas

Some white people in the school seemed to work to remove Kendi’s label of “racist,” with different degrees of effort and effect. Some racially privileged people were receptive to talking across differences regarding race and racism but only if they deemed those discussions acceptable in their minds. For example, after a follow-up panel prompted by the one in which panelists discussed “white history month,” I again asked how it went and was informed of the format. For this panel, there was a white man who was a teacher at the school and Shayla, a Black person who was on staff at the school. They answered questions posed anonymously by students. Darren said he loved it, that he thought it was really good. He appreciated Shayla’s stories in particular; he said, “Oh my god, her stories. . . . [They were] emotional, I like started crying. I was like, ‘Oh my god. I did not realize. I am so sorry.’” When I asked Delilah about this panel, she said, “I kind of thought it was great . . . it was more an actual educational, you know, meeting. . . . They were just talking. And it went smoother. Like there was no pointing fingers. . . . It was more of just like a story telling. . . . I’m pretty sure a lot people got more out of it . . . I know I did. . . . So, it was more better. I felt that ease.” It seems Darren and Delilah were more receptive to discussions about race and racism when whiteness was represented, when they included stories that did not directly implicate them, and when there was a smoothness or an ease for them. In other words, they wanted to learn about race and racism but only in ways that did not provoke too much discomfort. In this way, they struggled to let go of racist ideas and thus struggled to move from racist communities. In doing so, they closed down the potential for future antiracist encounters, at least in these moments in time.
Some white people strove to embrace antiracist ideas by calling out egregious racism. This was evident when the previous year’s panel focused on race, like the one discussed above, had racist fallout. The panelists for this one were the aforementioned white teacher, Shayla, a person from a nearby university, a pastor, and four students. Questions were submitted by students to their advisors, who passed them on to the facilitator, another teacher at the school. My students said the panel was mostly productive and positive, particularly the follow-up discussions in their advisories, but “there were some things after the panel that happened that were very problematic things,” according to Kimberly, a white student. She named a student, a white young man, who was a senior at the school, who “made a Twitter account just to post very awful things. . . . Some very racist comments and stuff.” It wasn’t until the next semester, when people were still talking about this race-themed panel, that I learned that the student had “put up like a picture of a monkey and was like, ‘that’s a Black dude;’” according to Mac, another white student. In the moment, students did not seem to know whether he’d be held accountable, and if so, how. Darby said, “If he does not get expelled, I personally am going to be really, really upset about it because this is like the eighth time that people have gone [to administrators] about him saying inappropriate things.” As it turned out, he was expelled. In this case, some white students were fervent in calling out egregious racism and expecting accountability. Thus, they moved toward antiracist communities and opened up possibilities of future antiracist encounters when the circumstances were egregious enough.

Sometimes people who were in a particular moment in time enacting antiracist ideas would try to change the ideas of those enacting racist ones. Again, consider Shayla’s story. Hilary, who identified as white, said that Shayla said she was “put in handcuffs . . . because they thought she stole a car. . . . But they only thought that because she was, like, Black.” This prompted the following interaction between Katherine, who identified as white, and Yanika, who identified as biracial, Black and white. From the start, Katherine asserted a racist stance, and Yanika challenged her to move from that stance:

**Katherine:** Well that was—that was kind of hard because—I meant, that’s still inexcusable; you shouldn’t jump the gun, but I mean if a car’s plates come up as stolen. . . .
YANIKA: But it was just crazy because she was talking about, like, the feeling of when she got, like, thrown up against the car and like—

KATHERINE: Yeah, that's what—that was a bit much.

YANIKA: And like, she was like, “And I’m standing there in handcuffs.” And then she started choking up, and then we all started crying.

KATHERINE: Yeah, that was sad; I know it was hard. I mean, yeah, it’s hard because there’s such—I think the thing that we talked about is that there’s a fine line between a racist and a cop trying to do their jobs. I mean, there are times when it’s clearly a cross. Officers aren’t, you know, always afraid. They could be racist too; it happens.

Here Katherine reflected on the challenges for the police officer and Yanika reflected on Shayla’s experience. Katherine found Shayla’s story “hard” rather than comfortable, but in talking with Yanika she could see how it was “sad” and “hard” for Shayla, too, and how police officers can be racist, even though, curiously, she separated racism and fear by suggesting that some police officers are racist and others are afraid. Thus, she suggested that the ones who are afraid are just doing their jobs when they inflict violence, which is a deeply flawed—and racist—argument. Still, these students pushed each other to think about how the other—either the police officer or Shayla, as a Black person under arrest—must feel, with Yanika pulling Katherine toward a less racist perspective. One might argue that Katherine was assuming a neutral stance, but as Kendi (2019) asserts, “there is no neutrality in the racism struggle” (p. 9). This pushing, though, provoked movement, however slight.

Katherine then went into an extended story about an airline that double-booked a seat. A white person was seated first, and an African American man was asked to sit somewhere else. The man refused. She said, “He, like, got so upset, where he’s like, ‘They were being racist; they were trying to move me to the back of the plane like it’s the back of the bus.’” I think she was trying to show how “we’re in such a sensitive state,” in her words, that people, like the flight attendant, can’t do their jobs without being called racist. I raised the issue of how we carry histories of racism around with us:
Dr. B.: The thing about that is, I think sometimes you bring into any single interaction a whole bunch of interactions from your past—. . . And so it’s not necessarily that that flight attendant was doing anything wrong, but I would want the flight attendant in that case—if there’s a white person and Black person, move the white person to the back of the bus, just because there’s not a history there.

KATHERINE: But it was a plane.

Dr. B.: I mean the plane, the back of the plane. I apologize, that was history.

KATHERINE: I don’t know. I feel like you can do whatever. I mean, I can see why you would want to move the white just so it doesn’t—

Dr. B.: It conjures this whole history of hate, you know?

Indeed, Ahmed (2012) argues, drawing on Audre Lorde, “Our bodies can remember these histories even when we don’t” (p. 171). John, however, argued that histories of racism should not shape our actions in the present day, saying, “I don’t see how exactly that becomes such a big thing; like, you didn’t even experience it firsthand. I know there’s a history and you read about it.” This is not surprising, considering how, according to George Yancy, quoted by Ahmed (2012), “‘white bodies move in and out of these spaces with ease’” (p. 41), so they are less likely to understand the importance of a history of racism.

I responded by explaining it wasn’t just histories of racism but current acts of racism as well. But, as a white person, I decided instead to draw on my experiences as a queer person. This is a problematic move, as Ahmed (2012) points out that “identification with sexual outsiderness is at the same time a disidentification from whiteness (a not seeing whiteness) that keeps whiteness in place” (p. 152). Still, that is what I did when I referred back to when marriage between two people of the same gender was illegal, which was less than six months prior to this conversation, and said,

It happens in my preservice teacher classes all the time—all excited about showing their ring and all, their engagement. And like—it’s not that they’ve done anything wrong, but I’m so tired
of hearing about an institution that excludes me that when they come in with that I’m just like, “Aw, come on,” you know? It’s not that they’ve said it seventeen times; it’s that I’ve heard it 17,000 times leading up to that interaction. So not relying on somebody else’s history, it’s my own personal history that that person doesn’t deserve to have put on them. But that—I also don’t—I can’t be expected to pretend that doesn’t exist. That’s not a realistic expectation. For me to pretend that—we call them microaggressions. So like when people do little things that, like, feel bad to you over and over and over again, they like build up and they cause people to like not get out of their seat or, you know, like whatever it is.¹

Then, in an effort to bring the conversation back to police brutality, I said, “the tricky thing about the—around the police job is there have just been too many fatalities,” and Katherine replied, “Yeah. I mean those are—to me, those are inexcusable.” In this way, Katherine was fervent in her rejection of what she and I understood as egregious racism but more ambivalent in her stance toward other racist behaviors. John, who also identified as white, shared her stance, and I worked to interrogate it. Thus, Katherine and John embodied racist ideas, in this moment in time, but Katherine made some moves toward destabilizing those ideas, with Yanika’s and my prodding.

Here, there was some standing firm but then some pushing and pulling from that stance. And even though there was not a great deal of movement, there was what I would call some teetering. Teetering does not open up potential future encounters like movement does, but it is more promising than a rigid stance that is neither preceded or proceeded by movement.

Sometimes, though, people espousing racist ideas talked with people espousing antiracist ideas and in doing so moved slightly from the former to the latter. One day, early in the third-semester class, we were discussing the film *Stonewall Uprising* in the History and Poetry unit. A question was raised about the difference between an uprising and a riot, which led to a discussion about the 1992 reaction to the acquittal of the police officers

¹ *Microaggressions* is a term coined by Chester M. Pierce (1970) to describe regular acts of subtle racism, particularly against African Americans.
who beat Rodney King in Los Angeles and then the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, as if echoing an unarticulated reference to All Lives Matter, Kristy said that anyone being proud is understood as an “asshole”; moreover, if she's proud as a white person, she is understood as racist. I asked whether there was any difference between being proud as a white person and being proud as a Black person. Grace, a white young woman, spoke up louder than I ever had heard her, and ever would hear her, as it turned out. She said, “Absolutely.” She explained that if she hears a white person say they’re proud, she thinks, “What do you have to be proud of?” but if she hears a Black person say the same thing, she's like, “You go girl. You know what’s up.” Abbot, who was white, said people should be proud of their accomplishments rather than their race by implication. Delilah, who was Latina, countered him, saying being proud of your race is about being proud of your history. I said people who are oppressed are proud of surviving and fighting against oppression.

At first in the conversation, I heard less listening and learning and more commitment to firm stances. Kristy and Abbot embodied racist ideas, whereas Grace and Delilah embodied antiracist ones, but when I asked Desiree how she felt about the conversation as a whole, she felt something give. She told me,

Yeah, I remember that conversation. Um, I was actually, that was the first time I actually had a conversation with people that weren't Black that actually was like, well how, like when Abbot was like, “Well, help me understand.” That was, like, the best moment for me because you never have a conversation, like I've never had a conversation with someone that wasn't Black who understood what I went through. Or who tried to understand. They just like, “Well it doesn’t matter; you should just get over” or “don’t say this” and “don’t say that.” But when Abbot said that and the whole class was actually, like, listening, and I was just, it blew my mind because it was the first time I actually had a civilized conversation about race with people. And they tried to understand.

From Desiree's point of view, at least some non-Black students were actively trying to learn antiracist ideas by actively listening rather than dismissing or constraining her as a Black person. This was not to say that they came to understand, just that they tried to understand. And in this moment in
time, Desiree valued that. In that way, these students tried to move away from racist communities toward antiracist communities with what Desiree experienced as earnestness. In doing so, they opened up the potential for future interracial antiracist encounters.

Ethical Movement with Respect to Racial Diversity in Classroom Encounters

I can certainly point to ethical movement, such as when Desiree pulled herself into the embrace of Black communities and opened up possibilities for Black joy and when Delilah drew on her experiences growing up as Mexican American to open up possibilities of educating others about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. And there are more examples of ethical movement, but I can also point to unethical movement, like when Kristy, who was white, pushed Desiree, who was Black, out of a racialized conversation and effectively closed down the possibility of an antiracist encounter. There are also examples of ethical and unethical stances. An example of an ethical stance was when Desiree, Jenna, and Khalil moved toward Black communities and stood firmly there, for support and strength and with liberatory potential and intention. An example of an unethical one was when John located himself firmly among people who “judge people based on race,” shutting down the possibility of antiracist encounters. To move my argument about ethical movement forward, though, I want to foreground an encounter that complicates my understanding of “ethical” as well as a collection of encounters that complicate my understanding of “movement.”

The encounter that complicates my understanding of “ethical” is the one where Khalil pushed himself away from Black communities that he understood as homophobic and thus distanced himself from family and friends who he experienced as homophobic. In some ways, I understand this movement as ethical, a move of self-protection, thus empowering. In other ways, I understand it as unethical because it came at such a great cost to him, thus disempowering. I will discuss his particular situation in much more detail in chapter 5, but here I will note that this encounter made me wonder about the degree to which one can characterize movement, stances, and encounters as ethical or unethical. I continue to do so because I think there is value in the work of it, but I carry the characterizations more tenuously than I did before.
Moving with Respect to Racial Diversity

The collection of four encounters that complicate my understanding of movement are when

1. Yanika and Carter did not move toward or away from racialized communities but paused to reflect on the ways they did and did not fit in with those communities;

2. Katherine and John teetered on a racist stance as they were pushed and pulled by Yanika and others;

3. Darren and Delilah struggled to let go of racist ideas; and

4. I, as the teacher, was slow to push back on students’ racism.

None of these encounters show movement, but they all show more than potential for movement; they show nascent movement, maybe. There is an agility, even if not fully actualized. There is a lack of ossification. Whether in reflection, provocation, or initiative, there is, in Ahmed’s words, some give.