# A Counternarrative or Merely a Narrative? Pre-service Teachers Understandings of Counternarrative Children's Literature

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## Abstract

This research utilized case study methodology to explore the ways in which White women pre-service teachers' perceptions of race and gender were informed by their reading of four counternarratives about Black girls and their participation in a book club. This study focused particularly on White women pre-service teachers as they make up the majority of the teaching force in the United States. Additionally, focus was given to White women pre-service teachers as the literature shows that White women tend to use "white talk" --or ways of talking about race that allows them to protect themselves from having a conversation about race, in turn performing Whiteness. Through interviews and four book club sessions focused on counternarrative children's literature, the pre-service teachers had an opportunity to discuss their perceptions of race and gender. The findings show that while counternarratives are typically thought to be utilized to undo dominant thinking, the pre-service teachers did not experience the counternarratives as counternarratives – the study highlights the conscious and unconscious moves made by the White pre-service teachers to find themselves in counternarrative material.

*Keywords:* Whiteness, Counternarratives, Pre-Service teachers

## Introduction

Now more than ever, there is a pressing need to examine the racialized and genderized backgrounds of pre-service teachers. We are living in a time that calls for teacher education to be diligent about supporting pre-service teachers to unlock their understandings of themselves and others in the context of race and gender, if not as well in terms of sexuality, class, religion, and other areas of identity (Jordan, 2018). As a Black woman teacher educator, I am dutifully committed to supporting pre-service teachers in understanding how their position as raced and gendered people impacts their future classroom practice. Throughout my quest to understand pre-service teachers' conceptions of themselves in courses and supervision practices, I promote the use of counternarratives to uncover their conceptualizations of particular factors such as race and gender. Counternarratives are stories of people of Color and marginalized people told for the purposes of exposing the truth about particular communities and individuals in order to disrupt the dominant narrative (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner & Howard, 2016).

Presented is a study of what happens when counternarratives are not understood as counternarratives, but rather a narrative for everyone. Through book club sessions, I sought to understand how participants' perceptions of race and gender were informed based on their reading of counternarratives about Black girl characters, written by Black women authors. The participants of this study saw the expression of skin color, agency, hair, and sexuality as equally experienced by all girls and women regardless of race. Throughout the study, four White women pre-service teachers from one mid-Atlantic teacher education program participated in four book club sessions focused on four children's literature books which presented counternarratives of Black girl characters. The pre-service teachers performed their Whiteness in conscious and unconscious ways that resulted in the four counternarratives being held in in close proximity to their own experiences, and ultimately losing the power to stand as a counternarrative. Rather than critically interrogate notions of race and gender, the pre-service teachers evaded moments of race in order to find themselves in the counternarratives and engaged in conversations of gender.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two theories: critical race theory (CRT) and critical White teacher studies. "CRT calls for deeply contextualized understandings of social phenomena. Critical race theorists insist on providing a context to make sense of what transpires, to fully elaborate a story, and to make evident complexity" (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 11). It is important that teachers of Black students and other students of color understand the importance of the notions of race and gender in education, as well as in society, making these themes explicit in their classrooms and work towards becoming race-conscious pedagogues. Scholars of CRT have determined the use of storytelling as a contributor to illuminating the

complexities that exist within our society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner & Howard, 2016). CRT allowed me to uncover and interrogate the complex nature of the social constructions and understandings of race and gender held by the participants. While critical race theory is the primary guiding theory for this study, critical White teacher studies add to the theoretical framework; to facilitate an understanding of how race and gender are conceptualized and understood by the White women pre-service teachers. Critical White teacher studies makes apparent the presence and function of whiteness (Jupp, Berry & Lensmire, 2016; Lensmire, McManimon, Tierney, Lee-Nichols, Casey, Lensmire, & Davis, 2013) where as Critical Race Theory centers the normalcy of race and racism in America and can be understood through counternarratives.

An important element of this study is the notion of performance. Performance is an act. People, rather actors, take to a stage to present a narrative that is scripted—a speech act (Denzin, 2001). The presentation of the self is performative. Performance is embodied by the performative I. The performative I is established by a biography or a historical context of a named person. As we speak and write, our words are impregnated with performativity, which allows for the narrative to exist as an embodied and evocative text. Performances, then, are sites of performative behavior—enacted ways of being a racialized or genderized person (Butler, 2013; Chadderton, 2013). The performativity of the self as raced or gendered is constantly changing, depending on the performance. Denzin (2001) argues that race "cannot exist outside of the performative discourses that produce it" (p. 246)—meanings of racial identity can change depending on the "actor" in the performance. The participants in this study used the situational location of a book club setting – the performance – to present their performative of whiteness.

## Literature Review

In order to situate this study and understand how White pre-service teachers discussed notions of race and gender through use of counternarratives, the review of literature will include research relevant to this study on white pre-service teachers, teacher education, and critical children's literature.

### Critical White Studies, Whiteness, and White Pre-Service Teachers

Whiteness can be understood as a core set of values, attitudes, and/or lived experiences that have created identifying markers of domination (Giroux, 1997). McCarthy (1998) cautions against defining whiteness as racially isolated from other factors. Whiteness can be understood as a social, political, and historical construction that gives unearned privilege to White individuals either consciously/unconsciously, intentionally/unintentionally, or explicitly/implicitly (Laugther, 2011, McCarthy, 2010, DiAngelo, 2011). Gilborn (2005) goes further to define whiteness as performative in that the "actors" of whiteness rarely recognize its existence or their role in "repeated iteration and re-signification" (p.9) because it's constantly being performed, allowing whiteness to function in an invisible way. Through a historical perspective, critical race theorist Cheryl Harris (1993) contends that whiteness has been shaped and maintained by the exclusion and deemed inferiority of Blacks; "whiteness was premised on White supremacy" (p. 283). Whiteness is then understood as a dominating principle, a principle that structures locations like schools in its image.

Acknowledging the role White teachers may play in reproducing racial ascriptions in schools is to confront their whiteness and understand the dichotomy that is created because of it. In order for White teachers to discontinue the reproduction of racial inequality they must "unlearn those histories, ideologies, values, and social relations" (Giroux, 1997, p. 299). The literature suggests that whiteness may serve as a hurdle that prevents many White teachers from engaging in instruction that is built on cultural and/or racial understandings because the visibility of one's whiteness is resisted or avoided (Galman, Pica-Smith, & Rosenberger, 2010; Giroux, 1997; Haviland, 2008; Lewis, 2003; Ringrose, 2007, Sleeter, 2001). Haviland (2008) describes White teachers' performance and maintenance of their whiteness (consciously or unconsciously) either by denying, resisting, or ignoring its existence.

**Teacher education and White pre-service teachers.** The number of White middle-class females is increasingly large in traditional teacher education programs. This study focuses on White females because they contribute to the majority of the teaching force (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Recognition of White superiority and dominance is necessary for White pre-service teachers to transition towards becoming more culturally or racially conscious educator (Helms, 1993; Howard, 2016; Sleeter, 2001; Ullucci, 2011).

Mazzei (2008) argues that when White pre-service teachers are faced with challenges of discussing issues of race and racism, silence is often their form of communication. McIntyre (1997) terms this form of communication as "white talk." McIntyre posits that White pre-service teachers discuss race by using silence and other forms of defensive communication strategies such as: derailing conversation, evading questions, dismissing counter arguments, withdrawing

from the discussion, remaining silent, interrupting speakers and topics, and colluding with each other in creating a 'culture of niceness' that made it very difficult to 'read the white world' (p. 46). The role of teacher education then is to cultivate learning spaces that strategically provide White pre-service teachers with opportunities to explore how their attitudes and understandings of themselves and others as racialized beings impacts their future classroom practice.

**Counternarratives in Children's Literature/Critical Children's Literature**

The study presented here particularly situates counternarratives in children's literature as a potential vehicle for deconstructing racial ideologies. Critical children's literatures in the form of picture books or chapter books are uniquely positioned to enhance critical interactions with text (Wiseman, 2013). Similarly, Wolk (2004) states, "picture books can be catalysts for children to make personal connections" (p. 31) to various social issues. However, it is unlikely for students to use books in this way or for the text to function in an educative way if teachers have not made moves to make personal connections to various social issues. This study contributes to the field and the missing literature on the effectiveness of counternarratives for White pre-service teachers in deconstructing their understandings of People of Color.

## Method

This study focused on using counternarratives to engage four White women pre-service teachers in conversations about their perceptions of race and gender as it pertains to Black girls/women. The primary research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do readings of counternarratives about Black girls/women influence how White women pre-service teachers discuss notions of race and gender?
2. How does participation in a book club influence White women pre-service teachers' perception of race and gender, if at all?

Book clubs are a useful format that allows for rich dialogue and learning from others who are similarly connected (Beck, 2012). A case study research design was used to capture the bounded system of the book club sessions. Merriam (2009) contends that case study is best fit for this type of qualitative research because it can be used in combination with other methodologies to create a more "in-depth description and analysis of the bounded system" (p.40). Merriam defines case study methodology as useful for exploring a phenomenon by getting as close to the subject or unit of analysis as possible in order to create theory, emerging themes, or reason for an occurrence. The use of case study highlights how the use of children's literature books in a book club format provide White women pre-service teachers the opportunity to explore their conceptualizations of Black women.

**Sample, Data Collection, and Analysis**

**Sample**. For this study, the discussions of White women pre-service teachers enrolled in an elementary education master's program from one Mid-Atlantic university were explored. For this study purposeful criterion sampling was used based on the typical population of teachers. 82% of teachers in the United States are White female (NCES, 2015) and more White females enter teacher education programs than People of Color (Jordan, 2018). The sample selected was convenient because the participants were selected from the university where I was an adjunct faculty member at the time of the study.

**Sample criteria and selection process.** The four criteria defined in this study: (a) participants must be pre-service teachers enrolled in the elementary education master's program; pre-service teachers are defined as not having licensure, (b) participants who identify as White women, (c) participants who have engaged in conversations about the current racial and social issues facing the United States, and (d) participants indicate an interest in social justice education.

Upon consulting with the director of the elementary education master's program about the purpose of the study, a short demographics survey along with a letter about the study was emailed to all enrolled students in this particular program. Demographic survey responses were received from six pre-service teachers, but only five pre-service teachers followed through with the initial interview. Four participants were purposefully selected to be the primary focus of the study; the remaining participant was to serve as a replacement if any attrition occurred. A letter about the research and a consent form were provided to the participants upon selection. The participants were notified that their participation in the study did not influence their academic standing in their preparation program and that direct quotes would be used in this research study, but pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity. Table 1 provides a descriptive summary of each of the participants. The descriptions were created based on the responses provided to questions asked during the interview.

Table 1 provides a summary of each of the participants:

| Participant | Description |
|---|---|
| Emily | Grew up in a small, predominately White, mid-Atlantic town. She did not experience much racial diversity while growing up and was inundated with many racist images and comments supported by her family. Eventually, she entered the Navy and credits the Navy for beginning to shape her understanding of diversity and her understanding of herself as a raced person. Emily expressed still experiencing difficulty sharing her thoughts or challenging those of others because she doesn't want to be seen as disagreeable. |
| Laura | Grew up in predominately White, Southern city. She did not experience much racial diversity while growing up and experienced racist speech at home, particularly with her father's parents. Laura would ignore racist statements by her grandparents and school friends when heard. Laura expressed comfort with discussing social issues with people who are more like her. |
| Rose | Grew up in a predominately White New England city. She did not experience much racial diversity while growing up and experienced racist speech with her grandfather. Rose would ignore racist statements she heard because she believed they did not affect her. She expressed not having a problem discussing race, gender, or other areas of difference, but it would depend on the context and the person if she would choose to engage. |
| Summer | Grew up in a predominately White city in the Piedmont region of a mid-Atlantic state. She experienced some racial diversity while growing up. Summer believes she is very aware of race dynamics in this country and is interested in international perspectives. Summer expressed having a sense of herself as a raced person and what that may mean for other people to interact with her, but typically refrains from having too deep of a conversation on social issues if she doesn't know where the other person is coming from. |

**Data Collection**

**Interviews**. Subjects participated in two semi-structured interviews for this study, one prior to the start of the book club sessions and one after the last book club session. Semi-structured interviews were used because they provide the freedom to "respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). The first interview occurred in person before the pre-service teachers were given the books to be read. During the first interview, the pre-service teachers responded to questions that helped to frame their conceptualization of race and gender.

Patton's (2015) interview guide approach was used to format the questions. The interview guides included the questions to be asked in each interview to ensure consistency amongst each participant. Each interview was recorded and lasted no longer than 90 minutes. Notes were taken during the interview to facilitate asking follow-up questions to understand the participants more completely.

**The book club sessions.** The pre-service teachers were provided with the children's literature books used for the study. They were expected to attend all four 90-minute book club sessions in order to fully participate in the study. The sessions were conducted over a seven-week period. The four books present a counternarrative particular to Black girls and women; the authors present storylines filled with words, images, and figures that add to understandings of Black girlhood/womanhood:

1. *One Crazy Summer* (2010) by Rita Williams-Garcia presents the story of three sisters who travel to California to join their mother who has moved to be part of the Black Panther Party. While in California with their mother, they take part in a learning experience that allows them to experience the Panther movement

firsthand. The girls are given a new sense of pride and agency about being Black in America during their trip to Oakland, CA.

2. *No Laughter Here* (2004) by Rita Williams-Garcia presents the story of young girl Black from Queens, NY who experiences female genital mutilation. Williams-Garcia expressively presents a story that grapples with race, gender, geography, religion, psychosocial development, and sexuality.
3. *The Blacker the Berry* (2008) by Joyce Carol Thomas explores the palette of complexions of Black people. The book is a compilation of poems that provide the reader with a sense of empowerment about their skin color.

a. *Nappy Hair* (1998) by Carolivia Herron. This book has raised much controversy in the literary world, so much so that the book is not carried in stores. It's a short picture book that discusses the perceptions of Black hair within the Black community. Herron displays the tension that exists for young girls with nappy hair who are looking to exist in a society that they weren't meant for. The narrator of the text highlights hair as an attribute used to define Black girl/woman identity.

The book club sessions did not serve as a space for modeling teacher practice of using the selected children's literature books; the sessions solely functioned for the purposes of discussing their perceptions of race and gender as it was presented and informed by the text.

## Analysis

A process of line-by-line open coding analysis was used for the first round of coding of the transcribed data (Charmaz, 2014). Line-by-line coding allowed for closer examination of the data. The theoretical framework was used to generate a list of themes to be used as codes for the second round of coding (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), some of those codes included understanding of counternarrative, background knowledge, performance of gender, and performance of race, and relatability to the book. The initial codes were then matched with a corresponding theme; the grouped information was used to create another set of themes. Three themes emerged for this - experience of the counternarrative, conceptualizations of gender, and universality.

## Findings

Prior to the start of the book club sessions, I met with each of the participants for an interview to gain insight into their experience with personally navigating a social issue, followed by more specific insights into their experience with personally navigating race and gender, and how they view race and gender being connected. Based on the interviews, the pre-service teachers expressed an understanding that race has meaning, but the meaning is created and perpetuated by People of Color. Additionally, they could refer to how women of Color are thought of differently in comparison to White women:

**Emily:** Too often they are presented as irresponsible. Women of Color are successful business women, but you never hear stories about that.

**Laura:** Um, there's a lot of objectifying…their intellect isn't discussed.

**Rose:** I mean, you can look at any sitcom, the way they're portrayed. Their presented as super sassy. I don't think it's a bad thing, but that's portrayal.

**Summer:** I think about politics, and how White people, especially White women talk about Michelle Obama.

The pre-service teachers articulated that race, and the connection of race and gender, are most present and notable for People of Color. As White women they did not define the connection in broad terms that would also include them.

In each of their interviews, the pre-service teachers spoke of meanings of race in their lives passively. The pre-service teachers seemed to not have an awareness of the ways in which they perform their whiteness. Their performances of whiteness manifested through varying notions of ignoring their privilege, shielding or protecting themselves from implicating their role in race related situations, and taking to a colorblind stance:

**Laura:** My grandparents say things all the time, that's their generation. Growing up they tried not to say anything in front me and my sister, but you know that's just the generation. I just ignore it.

**Emily:** Where I'm from, the rebel flag is predominant. People still seem to think it's okay to fly that flag, even if it makes no sense at all because we were in the North anyways. There's a lot of miseducated people (laughs). I get frustrated, but I don't say anything.

**Rose:** My grandfather is pretty racist. So just hearing how he would talk would be. Just stemming from a young age hearing him talk about any race… I would just sit there. I wasn't going to say anything. I actually don't talk to him at all now. He's a tough personality.

Although, each participant made mention to family members bringing up the topic of race—they never engaged in discussions about meanings of racialized concepts or race relations in their neighborhoods, schools, or otherwise. The descriptions provided by participants indicate that they were more passive listeners or bystanders in conversations about race – a performance of whiteness. During the book sessions, the pre-service teachers continued to perform their whiteness through varying levels of "White talk"—derailing the question/changing the topic, colluding, and silence during the book club sessions.

The remainder of this study is presented in the order the books were read and discussed in the book club session. For each of the books, direct questioning and open-ended discussion took place. Each session began with a general question regarding what they thought of the book, followed by how they responded to the counternarrative of the book. Throughout each of the book club sessions, the pre-service teachers interpreted the counternarratives as dominant narratives. Their unconscious performance of whiteness allowed them to evade notions of race or the intersection of race and gender and focus on what they understood as universal messages in each of the books. For the pre-service teachers, gender had more of a presence in each of the books and the messages attached to gender could be applied to all people rather than the book standing as a counternarrative expressing Black woman identity.

Three themes emerged from this book club study - experience of the counternarrative, conceptualizations of gender, and a rhetoric of universality:

*Experience of the counternarrative* - The pre-service teachers experienced the counternarratives as dominant narratives. The stories read did not present as narratives that were particular to Black women. They were able to think of themselves similar to the characters in the books.

*Conceptualizations of gender* - The pre-service teachers conceptualized their understanding of the books from a gender point of view. The main characters in the books were girls, thus they were relatable. Additionally, the books were easier to discuss from a perspective as women because they are aware of their womanhood on a daily basis.

*Rhetoric of universality* - The pre-service teachers discussed the books from a colorblind stance, they did not see race as they read the text, which allowed them to experience the counternarrative as a narrative that was also theirs. Additionally, because they did not see race and were able to easily relate to the story, they understood the books as having a universal message that could be useful for all children.

### *One Crazy Summer* - Experience of the Counternarrative

The first book club session proved to be eye opening for the pre-service teachers and myself in terms of how much history was unknown to these four White women. As the pre-service teachers read through this text, they were more drawn to understanding the history of the time period – 1960s – and the Black power movement associated with the Black Panthers. The pre-service teachers indicated not knowing the definition of a counternarrative and were certain they had never been exposed to one. Upon defining counternarrative as a narrative that is particular to People of Color or people who are not part of the dominant narrative, the pre-service teachers spoke to possessing a lack of knowledge about the Black Panthers and having a poor perception of the group based on what they have viewed in movies. The following responses are the pre-service teachers' responses to being asked how they experienced the counternarrative presented in the book. The pre-service teachers admitted to learning that the Black Panthers were a radical group interested in causing strife within American society. Reading this book, they had a different understanding of the Black Panthers and their mission and commitment towards empowering Black people:

**Emily:** …And even my perception of the Black Panthers, just like my stereotype of what it was—as a violent, radical group. And then I was like, *Wow, I wish I had learned who these, like, Bobby Hutton and Huey Newton [were]*. Like these names of people, like, why didn't I ever—I know Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, and that's about it. And then I was like, *Oh, so they weren't so radical or such a*—I always kinda saw it as they were more violent than the other civil rights activists. And learning that what I was learning wasn't necessarily true. And I just assumed they were the radical [version] of Martin Luther

King and the Civil Rights Movement. And now I'm like, *Wow, they were educating, and they welcomed anyone, and I had no idea of any of that.*

**Rose:** I think also while reading this, I don't know a lot about the Black Panthers, um, so it was all pretty new to me. It definitely gave, like, a different history. Like, you hear about the Civil Rights Movement, but like you said, you don't hear about the Black Panthers. It definitely gave a different look into it. Um, I thought it was interesting, it gave a different perspective for me. It educated me more because I didn't know anything. So that was good.

**Laura:** Same.

**Summer:** I don't know a lot either.

During this particular book club session, I served as a resource for filling in gaps for the pre-service teachers about the particular time period and other Black groups committed to the empowerment of Black people. For example, the pre-service teachers were not aware that Malcolm X was not a Black Panther, but that he was in fact part of The Nation of Islam, a group they did not know existed. This suggests that they are not aware of multiple counternarratives.

The pre-service teachers clearly stated that they experienced this counternarrative—One Crazy Summer—as a learning tool because they were introduced to a different understanding and history about the Black Panther Party. But as the book club session continued, the four women had a difficult time responding to race-based questions or questions that challenged them to think of themselves as raced and gendered people. One Crazy Summer is a text that required a lot of background knowledge about The Black Panthers in order to truly engage in a conversation or reflect on the presence and meaning of race during that time period. The pre-service teachers' difficulty with responding to race-based questions may have been related to their lack of historical background knowledge. Seemingly, as discovered in their interviews, the difficulty may have been due to the fact that the pre-service teachers spoke to meanings of race as being more appropriately understood by People of Color. Race doesn't have an apparent presence in their worlds, which limits them in being able to openly discuss meanings of race and the intersection of race and gender (Howard, 2016). Emily and Laura, however, were able to recognize their whiteness:

**Emily:** Their whole experience is way different than mine would've been. They were constantly, like, people thought negative[ly] about them.

**Laura:** I feel like they were being super conscious of themselves being Black. Like when they went to the airport and got on the plane. They were like, *There's no one else like us here.* Well yeah, but what's her name—Delphine? Like, she took that as a, I don't know, a responsibility for herself to make sure she didn't cause a scene or anything because they didn't want to give themselves a bad name. That would never be a thing that anyone *[pause]* like, never would occur to me.

Both Emily and Laura were able to express how the experience created by the author contrasted with their experiences growing up. In this way, they identified how whiteness is typically performed in their lives. Emily was aware that negative thoughts are not typically held about her, and Laura indicated not needing to be highly conscious of how her race or presence is perceived. During this particular moment, they were able to challenge themselves to think about how being White influences or impacts their life. This was expected for Emily, because she began to question her whiteness during the initial interview, but this was a bit of shift from how Laura presented in her interview. During the initial interview, Laura indicated not questioning dynamics of race within her community or with her family—she was more or less oblivious to race having function for how people live. While Emily and Laura admitted the experiences of these young Black girls would be different from their own, Rose and Summer did not attempt to discuss how they saw themselves as raced people while discussing the text with the group. Rather, Rose and Summer performed their whiteness by discussing race as outside of themselves and changing the topic to something more comfortable and relatable:

**Summer:** So, you have the scene where Von, who is it? Colors in the doll? The middle sister, Vonetta colors in Fern's doll and sort of that battle. It makes me think of American Girl dolls and how they have, like, you can do the "me" doll.

**Rose:** It's funny you say that thing about the dolls cause when I was in kindergarten I had an obsession, I only wanted Black dolls because I wanted diversity in my collection. I would always ask for them.

Further questioning about the image, the author created about Black girls truly pushed the pre-service teachers to perform their whiteness in ways indicated by previous studies. As they were answering questions, the pre-service teachers

derailed the conversations by changing the topic, colluding with each other when the conversation was derailed by discussing the new topic, or choosing silence (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Glazier, 2003; Mazzei, 2008). These three behaviors continued during the discussion of the other three books. The pre-service teachers were able to conceptualize notions of gender while reading, especially with regard to mother-daughter relationships (which is a major theme in this text). For this book in particular, the pre-service teachers responded to historical aspects and expressed their newfound knowledge about the Black Panthers. During the next book club session where we read *No Laugher Here*, the pre-service teachers were comfortable discussing notions of gender, sexuality, their understandings of normal cultural practices, and avoiding the presentation of Black girls and women.

The pre-service teachers confidently stated that they experienced this counternarrative—*One Crazy Summer*—as a learning tool because they were introduced to a different understanding and history about the Black Panther Party. *One Crazy Summer* is a text that required a lot of background knowledge about The Black Panthers in order to truly engage in a conversation or reflect on the presence and meaning of race during that time period. With regards to this book, the pre-service teachers' performativity of whiteness manifested through their understandings of history. They held a myopic view of the Black Panther Party that influenced how they engaged with the text.

***No Laughter Here* – Conceptualizations of Gender**

Even though during the interviews the pre-service teachers expressed their belief that women of Color are viewed differently and even hyper-sexualized in some instances, while reading this book they did not respond to the message of sexuality or how sexuality is culturally and racially constructed. The pre-service teachers spoke to what they found to be "normal" in their eyes and spoke of their experiences as gendered people. The pre-service teachers were compelled through the reading of *No Laughter Here* to discuss and judge cultural practices or attitudes and behaviors of a particular group.

In response to being asked to discuss the author's presentation of Black women through the two women matriarchs, one African and the other African-American, the pre-service teachers responded by calling into question what was normal to them as White women who grew up in a Westernized society:

> **Emily:** You know, I think about—well if this was banned, I mean—if we were one of the countries that banned [female circumcision] and it still happened, is it better for us to get safe practices for them doing it? I mean, it's like abortion—people are still going to do it. It's just going to be way more dangerous. *[Inaudible]* So like, I'm really conflicted. Well, first of all, I don't really understand it enough to tell this family that they shouldn't have done this.

Whereas, the other pre-services teachers were very opinionated in saying these particular practices were wrong and needed to be corrected because it didn't fit into what they believed to be right:

> **Summer**: I actually wrote [in my journal] about this a little. I have a huge problem where, yes, we should be respectful of other cultures, but when it comes to harm, violation—especially for young girls who don't have a voice or don't have a choice in this—I think that is where we can start passing judgment and have a worldwide outcry. And there should be, absolutely. I really have a problem with—just because you're an outsider, you can't come and try to stop something from happening. Like the mom, like Akilah's mom does… or tries to do. Like, how did she not get removed from that family [by social services]?
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> **Rose:** It's also the mom saying, you're not Nigerian, you wouldn't understand. But this young girl had never really lived in Nigeria, she lived in England until she was eight and then lived in America. It's like, yes, that's her background and that's her culture, but none of her friends are going to be going through this. This isn't something that she will really be seeing except for when she goes back to Nigeria.
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> **Laura**: It's not like it was related to her life.
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> **Rose**: It would be different if she was still living there and this was just something that they all did. And saw her friends going through it, too. But she's going to be the only one that she's seeing go through this.

For Rose, Summer, and Laura, particular practices are only "valid" and "warranted" if you still live in that country or associate in social groups (i.e., friends) who have the same cultural practices. Their responses are closely linked to the old adage: If you are in America, then learn our ways and act American.

While the *No Laughter Here* book club session allowed the pre-service teachers to speak about their views on appropriate cultural practices, that were impacted by notions of race, this book truly allowed them to connect as women

and discuss common experiences shared as women. Three of the four pre-service teachers engaged in a conversation about experiences had as they went through puberty:

> **Summer**: Oh, me too. You would have to do the walk of shame to the bathroom. Like where do you hide your tampons? Like, where do you? I was afraid of tampons.
> **Rose**: And, like, going to CVS was a horrifying experience because you get there and hope, *I [hope I] don't get the male cashier. He's going to know!*
> **Summer**: Oh, I know. Even my dad he's like, "Is it like a woman thing?" My dad does not get involved in any of that stuff, he's in a household full of girls—my three sisters and then my mom. *[Inaudible.]* It's like on "7th Heaven," where they have the dad and he goes out and buys the pads. I was just horrified.
> **Rose**: I told my mom she wasn't allowed to tell my dad. I was like, "You cannot tell Dad! This is horrifying!" I don't know why but looking back now I don't know why getting your period is such a horrifying, scary event. It absolutely was to me. I cried in the bathroom.
> **Laura**: Well, it's how it's portrayed.
> **Rose**: Right.
> **Summer**: I also think that boys can be pretty cruel and ruthless when it comes to that. Or even with girls, if you get your period too early. Like when her mom was talking about "We're early developers." And [Akilah]was like, "No I just want to be on time. I want to be normal. I want Victoria and I to get it at the exact same time." There's this idea that if you're too early or too late, what does that say about you?

This book club session, more than the others, lent itself to discussions of womanhood and coming of age. The unconscious performance of whiteness provided the pre-service teachers' the space to conceptualize normal social practices that were colored by a racial-cultural understanding. For the pre-service teachers, engaging in a conversation about their bodies and the changes experienced while going through puberty allowed them to forge a connection as women. This connection is what guided them during the discussion, their experience as women is also what connected them to the text.

### *The Blacker the Berry* – Rhetoric of Universality and Experience of Counternarrative

The discussion around *The Blacker the Berry* finally incited talk about race and pushed the pre-service teachers into an unfamiliar territory. Particularly written for Black children of all shades, the poems in *The Blacker the Berry* are written in free verse by different children, sharing their experience of being Black in response to their skin tone. The poems are clear and concise in their messages for empowering Black children to find themselves in one of the poems and create a bridge for expressing their experience. Laura, Summer, and Rose, rather than speak to these Black children's expression of themselves as Black individuals and how they believe the world views them, performed their whiteness. For Laura, Summer, and Rose, the book of poems were merely an exposition of universal messages of love and acceptance. For them the presentation of racial dialogue in the poems didn't resonate because as White women they are often not presented with needing to unpack how the world around them views the color of their skin – they are the universal message of standardized beauty and normalcy. So, for them, rather than speak to issues of race and racial ascriptions based on color, they comfortably spoke to love and accepting who you are.

Counter to this, Emily questioned whether or not White children would really get the message of love and acceptance from the book since they are not present in the book nor the title. But the voices of the other three women were so strong and passionate—about race not having meaning and the book having a universal message—that Emily was silent for most of this discussion. Her silence wasn't a clear expression of whiteness as it's been detailed in other studies (Glazier & Seo, 2005), but rather, Emily's silence signaled disagreement with the other pre-service teachers. Emily's performance of whiteness is atypical; she's not silent because she's uncomfortable with engaging in the topic of race, she's uncomfortable because she doesn't want to show other White people that she wants to pushback. As referenced in the description (Table 1), she attempts to speak about race, but she avoids the topic. Others can read Emily's silence as passive agreement. With regard to Emily, I define passive agreement as her not actively participating or resisting against what others around her are doing or saying. Eventually, Emily's silence is provoked because the other pre-service teachers were shifting the book from a counternarrative to one that is universal. Emily asks a very clear question about how White children would respond to this book as pushback to it being seen as inclusive of all children:

**Emily:** I wonder how the White kids would react in the class? I would be curious if when you read it and talk about it, they notice they're not in it. Or if they would [not]. I like that I'm not in it, and I always see myself.

Laura responds in a way that protects White children:

**Laura:** We've read some books in my class that are about Black kids or others. And my class is mostly White kids. It's mixed, but predominately White. But no one has ever picked up on [race] or *said* that they have picked up on it. They're just like, "This is a great book."

Laura attempted to respond to Emily's inquiry by defending that White children don't pay attention to the race of characters in books because their concern is simply whether the book is a good read. She initially dismisses Emily's suggestive question about how would White kids respond to a counternarrative since they are not pictured in the text nor is there a relatable storyline connected to their life. I rephrased Emily's question to Laura:

**Researcher**: But are the messages [in the books read in class] counternarratives? So, something like this, where the narrative is pretty much about trying to empower Black *[pause]* kids of Color who have heard this story over, and over, and over again about how un-beautiful [they are], or how they're not accepted because of skin tone. Whereas a book just about making friends and it just *happens* to be a Black kid who is trying to make friends that's something that's relatable to— *[Laura interrupts]*

**Laura:** They are mostly books that are universal.

As the conversation progressed during this session they all admitted to being uncomfortable as White women discussing race with a person who was not White. They found their race to be an inhibitor to having conversations centering race. It's worth questioning, whether they would have engaged in the conversation in a more critical and thorough way had I been a White woman researcher. They possibly viewed me as expert and made a choice to engage the conversation of race carefully because they felt they were unable to engage in a way that was valuable. Rose stated, when lacking an understanding, "it's in poor taste to ask questions."

As White women, they believed there were boundaries to what they could say, and to whom they could say it. It was more appropriate to stand by a colorblind position and be inclusive of all children, rather than ascribe to a color-conscious stance:

**Rose:** I think you would have to address that with any type of kid's insecurities about themselves. Just be happy with who you are and not worrying about what other people think. And try not to change yourself.

**Laura**: Yeah that sounds—

**Summer**: Yeah, I think I agree. You're beautiful because of who you are on the inside, so you're beautiful of the outside as well. And everyone is unique and different, and that's what makes us. We read this book about autism to the class—it didn't actually say the word "autism"—and everyone is different and has a different way of being themselves and that's okay. And that's what makes the world great.

**Emily**: I think it's hard because they get the messages from so many places. And to talk about it with them, I think it's something hard. And I feel like the answer is, yeah, everyone is different, but I know there are some people who have deep hurt because of something someone said about them. But I know for me, like, if someone says something, I can go find me on TV or something. If you say something to someone who has never seen someone that looks like them, I think it's hard because I can't feel what they feel. I can't see—I just think it would be really hard.

**Summer**: I also don't know how [talking about standards of beauty and race] would sound coming from me.

Listening to their exchange, it was clear they struggled with the idea of talking to students about race. As a whole, the pre-service teachers would rather shield students from messages associated with their features, rather than engage them in conversations that would be more difficult for them to handle as White teachers. As budding teachers, they would choose to provide blanketed statements of acceptance rather than instill a sense of love and acceptance for their Blackness. The pre-service teachers took the book's message out of context and appropriated them to fit all children, including White children. They—with the exception of Emily—believed the book could be used to teach children to accept who they are and to not be overwhelmed by insecurities, with the assumption that being Black is an insecurity. The pre-service teachers

were clear this book was a counternarrative, but they asserted that the book could be used to teach a universal message of acceptance. Even with context provided to them about social constructions, they continued to perform their whiteness by derailing the conversation and making sure the conversation didn't cross the illusory boundary line into discussing race.

***Nappy Hair* – Experience of the Counternarrative, Conceptualizations of Gender, and Rhetoric of Universality**

Central to this book club was having pre-service teachers read the messages presented to Black girls about their hair, skin tone, and sexuality in order to understand their perceptions of race and gender. Presenting them with a book like *Nappy Hair* was relevant to engaging them in a storyline that was not theirs. Similar to the other three texts, rather than engage in a conversation that centered on understanding the counternarrative, the pre-service teachers (with the exception of Emily) found a way to include themselves. Although, the pre-service teachers had no context for the word "nappy" and they were only familiar with the term because of Don Imus[1], who, in 2007, referred to the woman's basketball team from Rutgers University as "nappy-headed hos", they determined the book was merely about hair:

**Rose**: I thought it was funny!
**Summer**: It's really just about acceptance of hair. Hair acceptance.
**Laura**: Yeah.
**Rose**: It's about accepting who you are and being cool with it.
**Summer**: Like one nap of her hair is the only perfect circle in nature. It's so sweet, you know, like your whole family is telling you how perfect you are. And— *[interrupted by Rose]*
**Rose**: And it's like God made her that way . . . Like, it's definitely an overreaction that someone had to lose her job because she read a book about a different type of hair . . . From my personal connection, it's *[inaudible]* because I have difficult hair. It's taken me 25 years to find a shampoo that I can wash my own hair with. I see it as obviously I have a different type of difficult hair than the girl in this story. But that was my connection, I get hair problems.
**Laura**: Yeah. Like where they talked about it crunches when they comb it. And I was like, "Oh that's so funny." My roommate used to yell at me about my hair making noise when I brushed it. And she would be like, "That's not normal." Not that my hair is anything like this.

Rose, Summer, and Laura comfortably engaged in a conversation about hair problems and how they felt this book appealed to them as White women. Emily nodded along, offering up issues that she has with her hair, which as noted earlier – Emily straddles between colluding and presenting silence as disagreement. To assist the pre-service teachers in discussing the book as a counternarrative, context was provided.

**Researcher:** Hair, along with the other four topics discussed during the book club sessions, is a familiar narrative for Black women. Historically, hair is focused upon as a determining factor for how people see you or accept you; "the straighter your hair is, the better off you will be." Similar to notions of skin tone, "the lighter you are, the better." Essentially, the Whiter you are able to perform—embody whiteness—in your Black skin, the better. Not only is hair and skin tone about standards of beauty, but it has been associated with one's status and continued growth. Messages of what is socially acceptable have been preached to Black women for centuries.

The author of *Nappy Hair* wrote about the protagonist of the story being able to speak the King and Queen's English, but yet she has nappy hair. The message conveyed in one portion of the book that other people will define you, by your hair. Three pre-service teachers missed the message conveyed by the author; the main character persevered beyond other people's thoughts about her, regardless of her hair. Emily, however, seemingly became uncomfortable with the way the other pre-service teachers were discussing the book as having universal appeal. Rather than continue to perform her whiteness by colluding with head nods of agreement, she broke her silence by adding that this book would not be something she reads in a classroom because she's uncomfortable and doesn't know enough about this counternarrative to integrate it into her classroom:

[1] See http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-fires-don-imus-over-racial-slur/

**Emily:** It could get a lot deeper than just a "book" that I'm reading. And I need to be educated on that—rather than I'm just trying to be cool with my students, but really it just has a lot deeper context than hair. That's my opinion.

Rose, Summer, and Laura did not outwardly disagree with her but did not validate Emily's thoughts. They continued to discuss how the book is about acceptance—acceptance of who you are and what you look like—a storyline to which all children can relate. And while Rose, Summer, and Laura were comfortable in their colorblind stance and appropriated the book to fit their beliefs, Emily was not.

Rose eventually confided that she wouldn't read it in classrooms of predominantly White children, even though she took a universal stance to reading the book:

**Rose**: Like, I'm not going to bring this book into a class that's 98% White kids. That would seem a little weird. But maybe it would be good for the one person that's different. I don't know. It's hard to say.
**Researcher**: If it's a book that only talks about hair issues, right?
**Rose**: Mm-hmm . . .
**Researcher**: And you said you had some sort of connection to it just in terms of dealing with difficult hair—*[Rose interrupts]*
**Rose**: Right.
**Researcher**: You would still feel uncomfortable in— *[Rose interrupts]*
**Rose**: Just because of the story of the teacher getting fired. That's honestly the number one reason why I feel uncomfortable in reading it.

Rose was adamant the book was merely about hair issues and simply accepting how you look. I attempted to push Rose to dig into her own thinking of why she wouldn't read the book to White children. She became defensive in her reasoning and claimed that she doesn't want to be fired for reading this book because it's happened to someone else in the past. Rather than admitting that she wouldn't read the book to White children because it's not their narrative, she performed her whiteness by becoming defensive. Her statements negated that she believed this book to be merely about hair, she eventually admitted to not knowing what the word "nappy" means, where it comes from, or why it is so jarring:

**Rose**: I didn't really think it was like a— *[speaker interrupted]*
**Summer**: Is that an appropriate term?
**Laura**: I don't think I have a lot of experience with hearing it or seeing it or using it. So, for me it was like, this is a cute book about this little girl and they're talking about her hair and how great it is. And it didn't even occur to me, which sounds horrible. I just feel ignorant because that didn't occur to me.
**Rose**: The only thing I can think about is when we talked about that radio guy.
**Me:** Don Imus.
**Laura**: That's the only time I think that I heard it being used.
**Rose**: I honestly don't even know what "nappy" means.

The fact that Rose comfortably inserted herself into a narrative that wasn't hers without knowledge of what the word means, says that reading counternarratives is not useful enough for engaging her in critical conversations about narratives that are not hers. Rather, she is not sensitive to counternarratives—or the selected counternarratives for this study—having messages that are particular to Black women. The selected counternarratives for this study did not allow her to witness that Black women have a different lived experience than she does, the narrative in *Nappy Hair* and the other books were relatable to her as a woman—she has a shared story with the characters for that reason. Rose, Summer, and Laura read this book through their lens as White women. They did not read the empowering message that the Black woman author created for Black girls who may engage with the book. Even though they were aware the book was a counternarrative and could see that the pictures and the words evoked very different meanings for them as White women, they worked diligently to find meaning for themselves**.** Summer believed that their reading of the book as a narrative that fits them as White women is based on their personality traits, or who they present to the world on an everyday basis. It's not recognized that their whiteness and their limited experience with People of Color—Black women in particular—was the reason why they understood *Nappy Hair* and the other books as having universal messages.

## Discussion

The pre-service teachers who participated in this study resisted and articulated the messages of these counternarratives as having universal appeal. I make the shift from colorblind to universality because the participants were aware of race but felt inclined to insert themselves into a narrative that was not theirs. These four White pre-service teachers articulated understandings of acceptance, self-love and self-confidence that all women grapple with. Through the performative space of whiteness afforded to the participants, they were able to, unconsciously and consciously use strategies to avoid challenging their perceptions of race and gender as the characters experienced it by asserting that the equalizer between them and the characters in the text absent of race was womanhood.

### Experience of the counternarrative

This study was particularly focused on the use of counternarratives to shift conceptualizations held about Black girls and women. In this instance, the selected counternarratives seemingly were not impactful enough for the pre-service teachers to examine their ideas of Black women or race writ large. While it has been articulated through critical race theory that counternarratives are a vehicle for dismantling oppressive ideologies held about People of Color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), it should be noted based on this study that not all counternarratives will serve this purpose. The counternarratives explored for this study did not prove to be impactful for moving the pre-service teachers beyond their colorblind perspectives. Providing direct and explicit teaching of the concept in the books through historical and cultural connections prior or during the book club sessions could enhance the impactful nature of the counternarratives.

The four women allowed for their lens as White women to shape how they understood and discussed the book. "White-talk" was prevalent in how their experience of the counternarrative was captured. "White-talk" is defined as a strategy that protects White individuals from having to deconstruct their own identity and allows one to shy away from having "challenging" conversations about the presence of race in a situation (McIntyre, 1997). If and when pre-service teachers are presented with narratives that counter or pushback against dominant frames of thinking, they should be positioned to deconstruct conscious or unconscious notions of superiority. It's this move of truly accepting a counternarrative as a counternarrative that deviates from reliance on "white talk" or other defensive communication strategies that prevent White women pre-service teachers from moving toward a more race-conscious practice of education.

#### Conceptualizations of Gender

The book club sessions allowed the pre-service teachers to connect with each other in a way that allowed for understanding of another's perspectives as it related to gender. Speaking to their concepts of womanhood was seemingly comfortable or safe because they experience being women on a daily basis; they were better able to discuss notions of gender as opposed to race. When White women have discussions that sidestep race—that of others' or their own, they are maintaining a position of privilege (Glazier, 2003). This position of privilege allowed participants to avoid engaging in conversations about an understanding of difference across race and culture but rather to have conversations of commonality as it relates to gender, in this case being women.

#### Universality

Finally, the last theme of the book club sessions is universality. Arguably, universality means encompassing race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. While colorblindness means ignoring race, that race lacks existence—we're all the same. The pre-service teachers recognized the texts were racialized, but the presence of race did not matter; they understood the counternarratives as having universal messages of acceptance, self-love, and self-confidence, messages that apply to everyone because race was not a consideration. Since race does not exist, then the counternarratives lacked the power of being counternarratives, and a universal message was applied.

#### Limitations and Further Study

One of the primary limitations of this study is the professor-student relationship that existed with one of the participants. Emily was a student in my diversity education course. My knowledge of the way she discussed issues of race and gender prior to the start of this study and her knowledge of my teaching of these two social issues may have influenced how she participated in the book club. Another limitation of this study was accounting for my voice and perspective as a Black woman teacher educator interested in White women pre-service teachers' discussions of race and gender as it relates to Black girls and women. As the only Black woman present during the book club sessions, I had to be

conscious not to present myself as a person with an authoritative voice on the Black woman perspective, in order to maintain my presence as a researcher.

In order to advance this work, further study focused on developing pre-service teachers' discussion habits of social issues through direct and explicit teaching would help to increase the impactful nature of counternarratives. The counternarratives in the study presented here didn't provoke the pre-service teachers to discuss the social issues presented in the text, mostly because they did not have the cultural, historical, or social connections to do so. Teaching the social issues as they are presented in the books, followed by book club sessions could shift the conversations to be more focused and would limit "white talk".

## Conclusion

The intention of this study was for each of the four counternarrative books to draw up critical conversations about race, gender, and the connection of race and gender Instead, the pre-service teachers settled into a place that allowed them to shield their vulnerability by discussing what they knew and what was seemingly most apparent in identifying who they are—notions of gender. Teacher education must be more diligent, creative, and deliberate about creating more opportunities for pre- and in-service teachers to engage in critical and meaningful discussions about race.

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