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On the street where I live: Mapping a spectrum of antiracist messages and meanings

Carla Chamberlin

The Pennsylvania State University, Abington College, USA

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Corresponding Author:
Carla Chamberlin
crc5@psu.edu

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a critical media analysis of antiracist messages from both teaching and research perspectives. Antiracist discourse of public media (yard signs and websites) was collected in two communities in the Northeastern United States in 2020 and are discussed here, first as a site of social construction of antiracism, and second as a model for pedagogy. As a critical media analysis, this study reveals antiracist messages on continuums from passive to active, low-risk to high risk, self-oriented to other-oriented, and detached "not racist" postures to actively antiracist stances. These continuums encourage interrogation of what it means to be antiracist as an individual and as a community. As a model for pedagogy, this study provides a flexible yet structured activity that asks students to observe messages where they live, interrogate the complexities of antiracism within their communities, and reflect on their own participation in antiracist work.

Keywords: *critical media analysis, antiracism, civic participation, media literacy, antiracist pedagogy*.

INTRODUCTION

In this article I describe critical media analysis as a flexible yet structured pedagogy for examining stories about race in popular media, with particular attention to antiracist messages in local communities. This study and pedagogical practice grew out of a need to respond to current crises in public health, democratic processes, and racial justice. My undergraduate courses focus on identity, language, and culture, and include assignments that explore media messages in crowded urban spaces. With access to these public spaces restricted by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, my attention turned to the streets where we live and publicly displayed messages of support for social justice at the grassroots level. Ostensibly, these messages seemed to be uncomplicated displays of affiliation and support for racial equality. As I walked through different neighborhoods, however, I sensed more nuanced meanings that required reflection on the racialized past and present of each community. I thought about where I stood within these communities and their antiracist discourses, and I wondered what my students were seeing, thinking, and feeling about antiracist messages as they moved through their neighborhoods.

In the following pages I share my study as an intersection of critical research and pedagogy. I do not seek definitive results, but I aim to position myself and my students simultaneously as researchers, learners, and subjects of inquiry (Kress, 2011, 2020). I first explain how examination of antiracist discourse aligns with goals of critical media literacy; I then introduce selected antiracist work as grounding for an analytical framework. I present observations of media collected in two communities and offer two levels of discussion: one based on interpretations of these local media as sites of meaning making, and the second positioning this study as a model for pedagogical practice. Overall, I argue for interrogation of media as an ongoing iterative process, and I call for reflection on individual civic participation.

Critical media literacy and antiracist media

Media literacy education has a rich and multidisciplinary history that includes coding and decoding information, textual analysis, design, production, media consumption, semiotics, propaganda, digital and technical literacies as well as an understanding of how media shape human environments (Hall, 1980; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; McLuhan, 1964; Potter, 2019). In recent decades, media literacy has taken a critical turn to focus on how media produce, maintain, and disrupt social structures of power (Freire, 1970; Masterman, 1985). Critical media scholars examine the role of media as powerful storytellers who frame issues to serve an agenda, (mis)represent individuals and groups, and often disenfranchise minorities (Hobbs, 2010, 2020; Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007; Lewis & Jhally 1998; Macedo & Steinberg, 2009). Kellner and Share (2005) connect media literacy to critical pedagogy and multicultural education:

> There is expanding recognition that media representations help construct our images and understanding of the world and that education must meet the dual challenges of teaching media literacy in a multicultural society and sensitizing students and the public to the inequities and injustices of a society based on gender, race, and class inequalities and discrimination. (p. 370).

This dual challenge of teaching students to critically interrogate media as well as the social realities created through media is where critical media literacy meets antiracist education. At this intersection, antiracist discourse can be analyzed as both rich multimodal texts *and* as representations of larger social narratives. This approach looks not only at the explicit and implicit content of messages and the symbolic nature of meaning, but also asks how mediated messages construct realities of inclusion or exclusion, forge relationships or deepen divides, and ultimately create opportunities for civic participation (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013).

Interrogating antiracist messages through critical media analysis affords opportunities to develop a "critical consciousness" needed to transform constructed realities of race (Freire, 1970). For this transformation to occur, we need to ask, what are antiracist messages and what kinds of realities do they construct? The answers to these questions will certainly depend on who and where you are. As a teacher at a majority minority college in an urban area where socioeconomic disparities blatantly reflect racial inequities, the increase of antiracist messages in the public sphere reflect movement toward equity. Antiracist discourse is more visible than ever. Schools and business are publishing antiracist declarations and pledges, Black Lives Matter signs are dotting neighborhoods, and community institutions and organizations are hosting events to increase awareness of racism.

Certainly, this visibility is a positive sign; however, not all antiracist discourse conveys the same meanings.

Word choices, metaphors, imagery, and design all contribute to the intensity of messages and the ideas they represent (Fairclough, 2010; Kress 2010). Moreover, critical discourse analyses of narratives of migration, culture, and bilingualism have shown that dominant narratives of humanitarianism or social justice support assimilation and homogenization through ambiguous statements that obfuscate racism (Archakis, 2021; Lentin, 2018; Motha, 2014; Piller, 2016; van Dijk, 1992). Weaver (2011) uses the term "liquid racism" to describe how racist humor contains shifting and simultaneous, layered expressions of antiracism, ambiguity, and racism. The antiracist messages that I encountered as I walked through different neighborhoods seemed to embody this fluidity. My next step was to problematize these messages as embedded within social contexts and larger social narratives of what it means to be antiracist.

Connecting inquiry to antiracist work

Though many voices contribute to conversations of what it means to be antiracist, I chose accessible and popular works of Ibram X. Kendi, Robin DiAngelo, and Eddie Glaude Jr. as grounding for this inquiry. Their works are discussed and debated in public forums and academic circles, and I introduce their discussions of binary thinking and systemic, structural racism in some of my classes. In her discussions of white fragility, DiAngelo (2018) asserts that many people tend to proposition racism as a binary – either you are racist or you are not – and these labels are attached to morality – either you are a good person or a bad person. Through this binary lens, participating in actions that maintain racist policies and practices means owning up to being a bad person. This sets up a defensive reaction that prevents a "good" person from believing that they could be complicit at *any* level in systemic racism. Moreover, binary thinking also plays a role in what Kendi (2019) refers to as the "I'm not a racist" stance, referring to the belief that disavowing blatant racist actions and espousing the idea of equity, is proof enough that one is "not racist." Kendi asserts, however, that there is no such thing as "not racist." We either act in ways that support systemic and historically rooted racism *or* we work against it through antiracist actions. Though coming from different perspectives, both Kendi and DiAngelo point out the danger of polarized and simplified thinking. Conceptualizing antiracism as a label or state of being denies the term the action, work, and commitment it entails.

Part of that work requires confronting the term "white supremacy." For many it conjures up images of the Klu Klux Klan, Nazis, or skinheads – dangerous and extreme instantiations of racism. When such groups are seen as the default representation of white supremacy, then denying affiliation with any white supremacist beliefs or actions is construed as a display of antiracism. But these are only extreme manifestations of white supremacy. Glaude (2016) discusses white supremacy as a mindset, an assumption among White people that their way of living is the norm and anything different is deficient or deviant. Glaude sees white supremacy as manifest in the "value gap" in which the lives and experiences of people of color are not valued as much as those who are White.

We see examples of this all around us through language expectations that conform to White "standard" English (Phillipson, 2009; Piller, 2016), cultural competencies based on Western White ideologies (Ailon, 2008; Signorini et al., 2009), and educational policies and practices that privilege experiences of White students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2021; Kubota & Lin, 2009).

There is a danger that antiracist work will be reduced to commodification and performance. In the past decades, I have seen words such as "multiculturalism" and "diversity" lose their meaning as processes and norms only to be transformed into quantifiable, marketable entities, or superficial "celebrations" of difference (Au, 2017; Gorski, 2008; Sleeter, 2014). Will public pledges of antiracism suffer the same fate? In a culture that validates and rewards symbolic displays and performance, we must question the intention behind antiracist messages. Liberal antiracist movements cultivate, in some cases, displays of "toxic positivity" that gloss over a history of white supremacy with idealistic calls for racial harmony as well as propagation of the "White savior" mindset that maintains power inequities (Au, 2017; Gorski & Parekh, 2020; May, 1998; McLaren, 2018; Nieto, 2017). If antiracism is conceptualized as mere performance, then it loses its ability to initiate and sustain change.

In addition to teaching students how to observe the world around them, ethically collect data, and methodically analyze and interpret their data, media literacy and critical race theories must seek to *practice* and equalize rather than just interpret (Croom, 2020). What we teach cannot be transformative unless we go beyond the superficial (Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Mihailidis (2019) calls for civic media literacies that invoke imagination, caring, persistence,

emancipation, and critical consciousness as community values. By asking students, and ourselves as educators, to look closely at the places where we live and work and to observe antiracist messages in context, we might reinterpret our roles and reimagine our communities. Focusing on antiracist discourse in local environments is an *intentional* step that Mihailidis calls for to help build "constructive pathways that connect critique and inquiry with actions and reflection" (2019, p. 102).

Research intentions

This study is about process. The intention is not to classify actions of individuals or communities, but to show that antiracist media are nuanced, contextual, and provide space for reflection on civic participation. I am guided by the following research questions:

1) How can critical media analysis incorporate an antiracist interpretive lens for interrogating media?

2) How do local histories and demographic profiles shape interpretations of antiracist media?

3) How can critical media analysis inspire reflection on civic participation?

4) How can critical media analysis of antiracist media be incorporated into our pedagogy?

As the research questions suggest, this project merges critical research and critical pedagogy. Consequently, I present the methodology (locales, data collection, analytical framework), observations (findings), and discussions that focus on the critical media analysis first as a method of interpretation (RQ1 and RQ2) and second as a path to critical, reflective pedagogy (RQ3 and RQ4).

METHODOLOGY

Locales

Pleasant Heights and Lincoln Hill (pseudonyms) are both places where I spend time and have personal connections. In 2020, I watched both communities respond to the murder of George Floyd, a presidential election, and a pandemic. I began taking photos of yard signs, window displays, storefronts, porches, billboards, bulletin boards, and other public media that conveyed antiracist messages. I define antiracist discourse in this study as publicly displayed messages that convey support for racial equality or confront racist practices. The similarities and differences I observed in different neighborhoods inspired me to take a more systematic approach to collecting images in order to share these observations with students.

Lincoln Hill and Pleasant Heights share reputations as community-oriented places to live, but they differ in several ways. The median household income based on zip codes is $121,671 in Pleasant Heights and $96,034 in Lincoln Hill; higher education levels in both exceed the national averages (American Communities Survey, 2020). The median home values are $549,000 and $375,000, respectively (www.realtor.com). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), the total populations based on zip codes are similar (27,851 in Pleasant Heights and 28,192 Lincoln Hill), but racial demographics in the zip codes differ: Pleasant Heights is 94% White, 2% Asian, and 1.5% African American; Lincoln Hill is 58% African American, 34% White, and 5% two or more races. Lincoln Hill has a history of being one of the most racially integrated neighborhoods in Philadelphia. In an effort to preserve community and economic stability in the 1950's, residents decided that, rather than feel "threatened" by the Black migration from the South, they would look for ways to welcome African Americans and promote an interracial community. Professionals and well-educated African Americans chose to live there in part because of the neighborhood's community spaces and organizations for interracial dialogue. The community has been both criticized and lauded for its history. For example, socioeconomic diversity was not a part of this integration, leaving the neighborhood vulnerable to gentrification (Perkiss, 2014). Within a two-mile radius, Lincoln Hill has a library, small bookstore, food co-op, train station, cafes, elementary school, parks, farmers' market, and other local businesses. Similarly, Pleasant Heights has a walkable area with cafes, restaurants, boutiques, a bookstore, schools, train station, cinema, farmers' market, library, and museums. Pleasant Heights is known as the birthplace of famous writers, philanthropists, and artists, and boasts several historic buildings and landmarks. It has an active historical society and neighborhood association. Popular realty websites characterize both areas as "desirable" places to raise a family or retire.

Data collection

The data comes from two main sources: 1) signage in yards and windows and 2) homepages of community organizations in the two communities. Data was collected between March and December of 2020. Offline, I selected residential streets (all with sidewalks

for pedestrians) near the centers of both communities, each encompassing a similar number of contiguous residences (single and multi-family units: Lincoln Hill, n = 179, Pleasant Heights, n = 171). For storefront signage, I included the business districts of the communities, both of which feature small, locally owned shops and restaurants. I did not include commercial business districts on the peripheries that are occupied almost exclusively by national chains. Online data for this study includes the homepages of nonprofit community organizations' websites. These websites serve as a voice and representation of the neighborhoods. They have no obvious commercial, institutional, or religious affiliations. The decision to focus on analog signage and limit online resources was intentional. Garcia (2019) reminds us that although digital platforms can bring people together, it is our relationships and actions in the analog world that are ultimately liberating. Garcia argues that hateful and emotional messages online pull our attention away from our present places and times. "In emphasizing the parts of ourselves over *there*, we've lost focus on a present *here and now*. It is within this context that I believe we must be focusing on analog literacy in a moment of digitally mediated oppression," (p. 192). Although Garcia refers to racist and vitriolic digital content, I believe that antiracist discourse offline is a powerful, physically embodied platform for community building.

Analytical framework

The data analysis consists of guiding questions informed by critical media analysis and an interpretive continuum informed by antiracist work. The guiding questions draw on discourse and semiotic analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2000; Kress, 2010) as well as critical media analyses that I have used in the past (Chamberlin, 2018: Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2003, 2012a, 2012b; Hobbs, 2010; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). I refer to these questions when looking at my collected data. When preparing students to complete a critical media analysis, I select questions appropriate for each class. Figure 1 provides examples of guiding questions.

Objective questions:
What specific nouns, verbs, and adjectives are used to convey antiracist messages?
What metaphors are present?
What background knowledge is needed to understand this message?
What languages, dialects, styles, and levels of formality are used?
How do linguistic features convey authority, credibility, sincerity, etc.?
Who created these media, for whom, and using what format(s) for dissemination?
Whose voices are represented and whose are absent?
Interpretive questions:
How do imagery and text convey emotions (sense of urgency, affiliation, anger, etc.)?
Is this message part of a one-time reaction to specific events, is it part of a larger commitment to being proactive, or both?
Do these media convey a performance or a show of sincere support, resistance, or commitment to change?
How does the locale affect meanings and interpretations?
How have activism, social justice, and antiracism been historically framed within this community?
How do the data connect to the presentation of oneself, the business, or the organization as "not a racist" or as actively working against racism?
Do the messages acknowledge the existence of racism?
How does this antiracist discourse confront or disrupt white supremacy?

Figure 1. *Guiding questions for analysis*

After questioning the data, antiracist messages can then be interrogated through the frameworks provided by Kendi, DiAngelo, Glaude, and Gorski introduced earlier. Instead of fixed categories, I use continuums of "action" and "relationships" (see Figure 2). Continuums provide an anchor for interpretations and discussions while allowing for movement and an ambiguity of undefined boundaries. The goal is not to situate examples on a fixed point, but to show how they move around depending on who is interpreting the messages, what the neighbors are doing, the history of the community, and how antiracism is defined (Archakis,

2021; Weaver, 2011). Through continuums, antiracist media can be seen as part of complicated decision-making processes by individuals enacting their roles and relationships within communities (Carpentier, 2016). "Actions" refer to how messages are interpreted as being linked to behaviors and actualized practices, whether the actions involve risk-taking, and who benefits from the action. The "relationships" continuum asks if the messages convey recognition of white supremacy and one's role in maintaining or challenging the status quo. Using continuums to examine antiracist discourse is meant to reveal nuances, movement, and complexity, *not* to define developmental stages or evaluations. It is meant to be an iterative and reflective process that serves as a catalyst for reimagining.

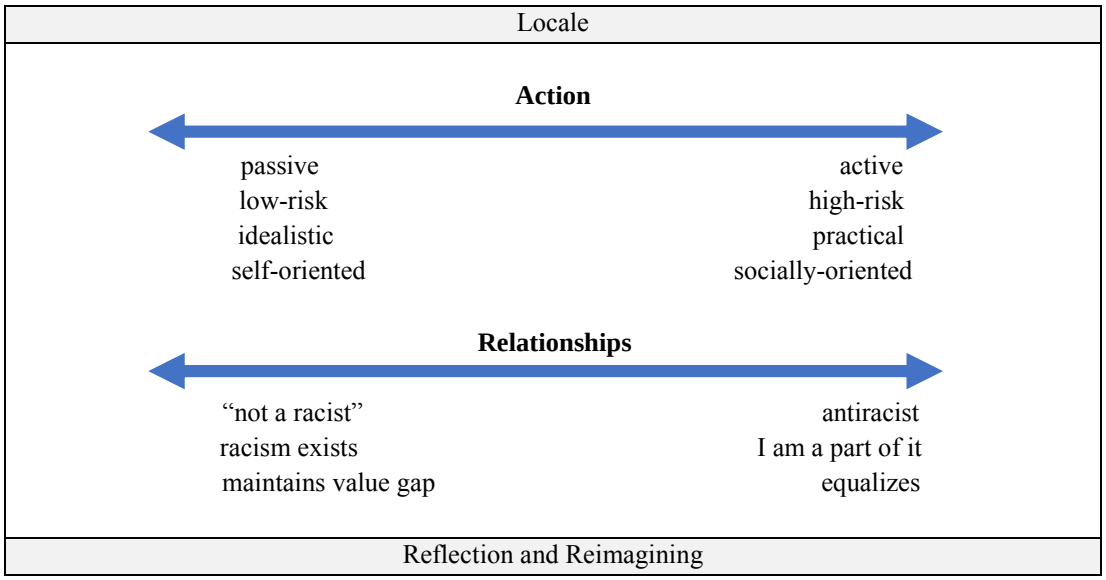

Figure 2. *Two continuums: A working model for antiracist media analysis*

OBSERVATIONS

In this section I share my collected data from Lincoln Hill and Pleasant Heights. I share this data (in part or whole) in class discussions or as an example for class projects. I encourage students to interpret and discuss these examples and then go out and collect their own data on the streets where they live. I emphasize the importance of documenting everything they see, not just selective examples.

Antiracist media in Lincoln Hill

Objective observation of the signage in Lincoln Hill reveals a mixture of hand-made and professionally printed messages (Figure 3). Images of a fist are used as a direct reference to the Black Lives Matter movement. Black Lives Matter is displayed alone or with mention of locale ("Philly"), websites of activist organizations, or references to violence and power.

Figure 3. *Yard signs in Lincoln Hill*

Posters in shop windows (see Figure 4) make direct references to antiracist messages or practices and mention employees as participants (one displays names of employees, the other says employees have all signed a pledge).

The neighborhood organization in Lincoln Hill maintains a website for the community. The homepage screenshot in Figure 5 reveals direct references and links to community events that address antiracism. The language evokes metaphors of change, movement, growing, and persistence (Rebirth...Looking back...renewal in the 1950's...where we are today...Race *Still* Matters). The announcements refer to a series of eight conversations addressing racial issues. The language of this homepage invokes positive actions (new ideas and solutions...calls for equal access...overcoming racial barriers), and race is connected to specific topics (history of the community, healthy environments, and voting). Readers are referred to as "Dear neighbors" and asked to "Please join us...".

Figure 4. *Shop window signs in Lincoln Hill*

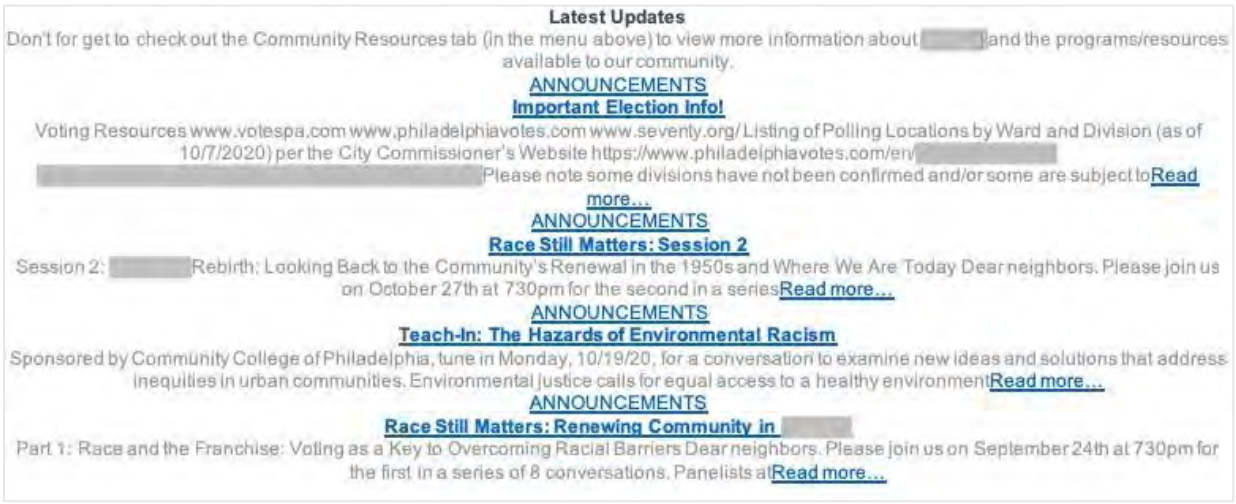

Figure 5. *Neighborhood organization website in Lincoln Hill*

Antiracist media in Pleasant Heights

Signage in Pleasant Heights (Figure 6) includes Black Lives Matter embedded within other messages. There were many handmade signs with the message "we are all in this together" in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only one pre-printed "Black Lives Matter" sign appeared in the neighborhood (not pictured). All signage that referred to antiracism, including "Black Lives Matter," also included messages of unity, love, abortion rights, science, human rights, and immigration. The most popular signs were "Hate has no home here" and the "We believe..." followed by a list of social, environmental, and political justice issues. The only "Black Lives Matter" yard sign I saw in Pleasant Heights disappeared before I was able to take a photograph of it. Many of the "We believe" and signs about unity were displayed alongside political signs. After the election in November 2020, only a few signs remained. Local stores, boutiques, restaurants, and bars, posted signs of solidarity for healthcare workers, support for small businesses, and proclamations of collective strength in overcoming the pandemic, but not one sign conveying antiracist messages appeared in the business district.

Figure 6. *Yard signs in Pleasant Heights*

Figure 7. *Neighborhood organization website in Pleasant Heights*

The homepage of the Pleasant Heights neighborhood organization (Figure 7) does not include any direct references to antiracism. The use of "we" evokes a collective identity for those who can help that is separate from those who need assistance. The plea for help is divided into four equal categories (in terms of presentation in the layout): victims of domestic violence, food insecurity, COVID relief (in general), and help for local healthcare facilities. The only active link is for the COVID-19 response.

Taking action is defined in terms of making a donation to a Go Fund Me page or volunteering to "serve your neighbor." The use of "just" in "We just need to be connected" implies that solving a systemic social problem hinges only on ability to connect. The only direct action referred to is making a financial contribution.

DISCUSSION

Discussion 1: Interpretations of antiracist media in two communities

This discussion focuses on the research questions one and two: how can critical media analysis incorporate an antiracist interpretive lens, and how do histories and demographics impact interpretations of antiracist media? For each neighborhood I discuss interpretations

of media through the lens of the continuums and through the contexts of place.

Interpretations of antiracist media in Lincoln Hill. The proliferation of Black Lives Matter signs, complemented by a smaller number of "Hate Has No Home Here" and "Love is Love" signs, can be interpreted as promoting focused action or as taking a strong stance on antiracism. Rather than posting signs that mediate antiracism by listing it alongside other social justice issues, the residents of Lincoln Hill display Black Lives Matter signs, both hand-made and professionally printed. Signage includes direct references to power imbalances, recognizing systemic racism and structural inequities that need to be confronted. Some of the signage in Lincoln Hill also connects Black Lives Matter to activist organizations. A sense of social orientation and action is conveyed. On the continuums, we might place signage in Lincoln Hill toward the more active and socially-oriented side, offering some practical information to encourage action. The signs from shop windows, both handmade and printed, directly confront racism and implicate the business and employees as participants in social change. The hand-made sign names employees individually, and the preprinted posters in other shops state that all workers have signed an antiracist and anti-profiling pledge. On the continuum this could be a mixture of self-oriented performance and other-oriented action. Overall, in Lincoln Hill, risk-taking seems high, with both residents and businesses acknowledging race directly. However, given the history of the neighborhood as a place of liberal activism, antiracist signage may be more of a norm than an aberration, involving, perhaps, little risk of criticism or challenge from community members.

The community website echoes this social orientation and highlights individual commitment to learning and change. Residents are encouraged to attend a series of discussions, refamiliarize oneself with the history of the community, and connect race to environmental justice and voting. On the continuum of relationships, this homepage implicates all residents as participants in a racist system and conceptualizes participation as active dialogue. "Dear neighbors," "Join us," and "Don't forget" all set an inviting and inclusive tone.

The residents of Lincoln Hill, though espousing more direct, socially oriented antiracist discourse must also reconcile themselves to the gentrification driving Black residents to the peripheries of the neighborhood, which border lower-income neighborhoods. Are all residents of Lincoln Hill expected to assimilate to certain expectations in order to feel welcomed, or is diversity accepted at many levels (education, profession, income)? The history and reputation of Lincoln Hill clearly affects the community's orientation to antiracist work on the continuum, but it does not exonerate it from idealistic visions of past integration and the threat of future gentrification.

Interpretations of antiracist media in Pleasant Heights. Yard signs in Pleasant Heights include messages of antiracism, such as Black Lives Matter, embedded within other messages of social justice and unity. The simple black and white, easily recognizable bold font of Black Lives Matter signs are replaced by "Black Lives Matter" written in other colors, in more subtle fonts, and are presented alongside other messages. Black Lives Matter is never the only message. Calling attention to human rights and social injustice shows clear evidence of benevolent intentions, however, combining multiple messages on a single sign dilutes the strength of each individual message. Conflating Black Lives Matter with other causes displays progressive credentials in a low-risk way, without going out on a limb. In a neighborhood that is over 90% White, this can be interpreted as a relatively passive display of idealism. This is not antiracism as much as it is taking a moral stance of being a good person who is "not a racist." This represents a self-oriented display or performance of one's progressive status. Lawson (2020) describes Black Lives Matter signs in her gentrified Portland neighborhood as ways to express a "not racist" stance and exonerate oneself from taking action to make the community safe for non-White residents. On the other hand, it could be argued that in Pleasant Heights where signs and flags to support local police forces are also commonly displayed, Black Lives Matter signs take on a different meaning if posted next to a neighbor's black, white, and blue flag.

The community website for Pleasant Heights indirectly addresses social issues such as homelessness, poverty, violence, and healthcare but offers no opportunities for activism and engagement. A practical approach to social problems is monetized. The only active link is to a GoFundMe page where the enthusiasm to reach a financial goal is conveyed, yet details of how the money will be used specifically to address COVID-19 is not given. Activism is defined by feeling "connected," and connection is defined by helping those less fortunate. Raising and contributing money show laudable intentions but say nothing about equalizing (or even recognizing) the value gap. This hands-off approach to any social issue prevents community

members from seeing themselves as a part of an inequitable system. Instead, it positions those with cultural capital as outside the system, sympathetic and willing to help, but not guilty of supporting inequities themselves.

Like Lincoln Hills, Pleasant Heights' history and demographic profile affect how it can be seen on the continuums. The center of town boasts a monument to Union soldiers in the Civil War. In 2020, this space was co-opted by Trump supporters, mostly from outside the community. News media commented on Pleasant Heights as a bastion of Blue in a sea of Red. Antiracist discourse in this community may reflect progressive politics, but does this ideology translate to action? An article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* from September 2020, focused on the role of suburbs and surrounding communities in the fight against racism. Activists in suburban communities experienced both support and racist backlash in response to organized protests. "How does one gauge progress in towns that are home to so few people of color? Three months after the height of the protests, can activists measure whether the initial enthusiasm was performative or indicative of change to come?" (McCarthy, 2020, p. A1). Not surprisingly, the answers to these questions varied from town to town and person to person. The future of antiracism in towns such as Pleasant Heights is uncertain.

Lincoln Hills in some ways upholds its integrated past, mediated by subjectivities in regards to education level, income, and progressive politics. Overall, the community seems to be oriented toward action and recognizing white supremacy as a problem. Pleasant Heights' demographic makeup works against its ability to see itself as complicit in racist structures and attitudes. Yet, residents of Pleasant Heights who take risks by espousing antiracist messages call attention to racism and are perhaps trying to create a space for further action and change. All at once these communities embody contradiction, ambiguity, and fluidity. Their futures can be reimagined.

Discussion 2: Critical media analysis, reflection, and pedagogy

Reflections on what it means to be antiracist. Through this project I was forced to reflect on my position as an educator and citizen. When I was sharing the study with my students, we reflected on the meaning of locale, the affordances and constraints of modalities, and the definition of antiracist actions. I have been thinking about what it means to be a flawed human—an antiracist educator who is active in some contexts more than others, a scholar who has been trained to uphold academic traditions that advantage certain groups, and an individual who wants to do better. I admit that my first reaction was to read the displays of antiracist rhetoric in Pleasant Heights as insincere performances by those who need to feel morally superior. Honestly, I am not completely over that sentiment. But I have to interrogate my judgement. I need to think in terms of the continuum and the locale. Maybe this is how active antiracism starts in this place, at this time—with one neighbor putting a sign in their yard in response to a pro-Trump rally. In light of vandalism and stealing of BLM signs around the country, posting a yard sign may be an important symbolic action. And maybe I can do more to facilitate the next steps.

This project also highlights the need for problematizing interpretations and modalities within specific locales. Individual motivations and actions cannot be discerned through yard signs and websites, but the history and climates of our neighborhoods, as well as our own identities, do affect how we interpret meaning. How do antiracist movements begin in different neighborhoods and how can momentum be sustained? Reflection on media platforms is also important. Which audiences are reached through signage and which ones through websites? How can websites be designed to convey a sense of action and commitment? We should think of what different modalities mean to different community members and ask ourselves who is actually doing the work. Does the dissemination of antiracist work depend on volunteers, and how do these volunteer efforts compare or contrast with other organized endeavors in the community?

Critical media analysis of antiracist discourse, perhaps most importantly, leads to reflection on how we legitimize "actions" as antiracist or racist within places where we live and work. In our communities, action seems to be conceptualized as fund-raising, awareness, and workshops. On our campus, my students and I have collected digital images and printed ephemera that document antiracist pledges, activities, events, and courses. On the continuums, the data represent consistent, socially-oriented efforts to address racism. As members of the institution, however, we should question how our efforts, decisions, and initiatives serve to equalize the value gap. How can programs and events change traditional academic norms to be more inclusive? How can efforts to increase awareness or our participation in workshops lead to sustainable changes that eliminate social inequities? How can the campus

infuse antiracism as civic engagement throughout the curriculum? We are not the first to ask these questions, and today, more and more educators and students are calling on their institutions to make real change (Kishimoto, 2018; Lee, 2015). Critical self-reflection must be the ongoing partner of critical media analysis in the effort to translate antiracist discourse into meaningful social change.

Pedagogical considerations. Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods. People do not say they are from Philadelphia, but instead from the Northeast, South Philly, Port Richmond, West Philly, etc. Neighborhood and suburban identities carry connotations of race, socioeconomic class, education, language, and culture. Studying the communities where we live and work provides context and meaning to antiracist discourse and asks us to position ourselves as citizens with potential roles to play. Analog and digital media that are produced locally emphasize the here and now but also remind us of the historical embeddedness of race. The depth of historical analyses depends on the course, but census information and the Mapping Inequality website, a site dedicated to the redlining maps of the New Deal era, are good places to start. When accessible, community spaces such as libraries and recreation centers, markets, and local businesses can offer insights into local history as well as expand modalities for critical media analysis.

The modalities included in this study emerged during a pandemic, national election, and upsurge in protests for racial equality. The yard signs and websites shared here are only a beginning. Classroom activities can expand the range of modalities, both analog and digital, used to disseminate antiracist messages and reach different audiences. When I presented my images of signage in a recent class, I anticipated a preference for digital media, but students claimed that "activism" online consists of posting a photo with a message about social justice to a like-minded group of friends and waiting to see how many "likes" it garners. Students reacted more strongly to the handmade signs. We then discussed the affordances and constraints of different media platforms in social activism. These kinds of conversations are important to have when using critical media analysis as pedagogy. My study was generated by my experiences at a specific time and place; likewise, our students can examine platforms and modalities they see as having influence on their lives. The possibilities are wide and numerous; however, the focus on locally-generated media is a feature worth preserving in order to link these activities to students' potential participation as engaged citizens.

In addition to meaningful contextualization, the beauty of critical media analysis of antiracist discourse is that it provides both structure and flexibility. The amount of misinformation and propaganda that infiltrates our mediascapes today deepens my commitment to teaching students how to observe the world around them, collect data objectively, and understand the ideologies that frame media production and interpretation. Moreover, through such projects, we can teach students to be self-critical. I advocate for the use of continuums for interpreting data because they provide a systematic method of interpretation and allow for fluidity and contradictions that are inherent in human behaviors. I used "actions" and "relationships" as the labels for my continuum, inspired by the work of Kendi, Glaude, and DiAngelo, as these readings aligned with my current courses. In my classes on language teaching and linguistic diversity, I would shift the analytical frameworks to reveal, for example, how antiracist discourse reflects neo-colonial relationships of power, or nations' and schools' language policies and practices (Alim, et al., 2016; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Motha, 2006, 2014; Piller, 2016). Continuums would then reflect concepts such as high/low language prestige, monolingualism/multilingualism, and the acknowledgement of race as part of language teaching. In advanced classes, students should help to create the analytical frameworks. In any case, an underlying structure should be defined.

The format of this project can also be adapted to wide audiences and classroom needs. I present an assignment like this to my classes as a multi-step investigation, leading them through a process similar to the study described in this paper. The assignments include opportunities to share the outcomes of the studies as well as individual reflections. Students can write formal papers, produce podcasts, create photo displays, collaborate as groups, or work individually. In small classes, I ask students to collect data individually then combine it for group discussion and interpretation, followed by individual reflections. This flexibility is essential to meaningful learning.

Critical media literacy as social justice pedagogy is not without constraints. My limited time with students is a challenge to the transformative goals of this pedagogy. I typically see students for one semester and have few opportunities for follow-up after the semester ends. Some students are involved in organizations on and off campus where they continue to interrogate their roles as antiracist activists. Despite the reflective dimension of this activity, not all will seek opportunities to take

action. Until community engagement and civic media literacies are consistently incorporated and valued in all levels of schooling, critical media analysis and reflection may only provide a first step.

Concluding thoughts

My overall reflection on these two communities leads me to what Mihailidis refers to as a "persistent mind-set" that strives for long-term engagement through multiple modalities and "developing pathways that embrace complexity" and "respond to failure and setback" (2019, p. 116). Looking closely at antiracist discourse where we live allows us to see where we've been, who we are, and what we imagine for the future. We need to continuously confront complexities in a world that systematically simplifies and reduces everything to easily packaged, attention-grabbing sound bites, memes, or logos. We must create, encourage, and support ways for people to participate in antiracism as an ongoing activity, not a commodity. Moreover, the study of Pleasant Heights and Lincoln Hill reflects the challenge of antiracist media to reimagine relationships and forge sustainable actions without reducing antiracism to episodic activities or badges of moral integrity.

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