Applying Affective Reader Response to Richard Wright's *Native Son*: An Invitation to Racializing White Discomfort

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This paper proposes an approach to teaching about race in literature in the secondary English language arts (ELA) classroom using an affective reader response framework. Drawing from Coleman's (2021) application of affective reader response for surfacing the "ordinary affects" of ELA educators, I combine this framework with Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides' (2019) antiracist literature instruction to consider how providing space for white students to attend to their racialized, embodied, and affective reader responses can allow for the naming of white discomfort in the reading of a text centered around Blackness. I illustrate how I would apply this literary lens in my own positionality as a former white educator in a majority-white suburban school using Richard Wright's *Native Son*, a text that elicited white discomfort from my students in the past. I conclude with a proposed lesson plan for teaching the opening of the text, incorporating both spaces for the teacher's own modeled affective reader response and for white students to engage in this framework communally.

> *Initially while reading* Native Son*, I had felt sorry for Bigger. Being a young black man in 1930s Southside Chicago is a terrible hand to be dealt… As Bigger develops, we see him turn from an innocent young man to a criminal with no concern for his actions… I began to see Bigger as an unhinged man. In the story, Bigger is given the opportunity to make something of himself when he becomes the driver for the Daltons, but instead lets his resentment of the upper class lead him to killing two women. Though he is the main character, in my eyes Bigger's actions are unforgivable and build a grossly negative narrative.*

This reflection, written by a 10th-grade student in my American literature class, surfaces a problem of practice I encountered as a white educator teaching in a majority-white suburban context. This written response to the end of Book II of Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*, addressed my prompt, "How are you labeling Bigger in your mind and why? (i.e., I see Bigger as…. because….)". Students, especially white students, *felt* reactions such as discomfort, disgust, or distance in response to Bigger Thomas, the young Black male protagonist of the story, as Wright's prose placed them inside the mind of the character. Like the student above, their feelings towards Bigger often shifted from pity to disgust and rejection as the narrative unfolded. Often, those expressed feelings (in written responses, in class discussions) were paired with particular embodied responses

(e.g., a palpable tension in the room before starting a discussion of scenes that brought racial conflict to the fore, shifting eyes and bodies in seats) that signaled to me a discomfort with this text that challenged mainstream conventions around how we discuss race in the United States. At the time, I worked to layer in more historical context around red-lining and the criminal justice system to support students to see the continued impact of the racism witnessed in *Native Son* on Black Americans today. I sought to provide opportunities for students to make connections between their own experiences and positionalities and their responses to the text (such as the prompt above), and openly discuss why they are seeing Bigger in particular ways while maintaining grounding in the text. And yet, I never felt that I fully created the conditions for white students to delve deeply into their discomfort. Thus, the paper that follows proposes a lesson plan that takes up a reader response theory that attends specifically to affect, with a focus on a racialized text. I see this approach as having a lot of potential to address the following questions raised by the above problem of practice: How can I as a white educator support my white students to examine the origins of their discomforted affective responses to a racialized text? What possibilities for developing racial literacy are afforded to high school-aged white readers by reading texts that raise discomforting questions about race in the United States?

I approach this work with the belief that literature provides a crucial space where young people can encounter people with different experiences than their own. Reading has the power to widen an individual's worldview by providing new lenses on society and culture, expanding one's "social imagination" (Moya, 2016). For Moya (2016), the practice of close reading can "serve as an excavation of, and a meditation on, the pervasive sociocultural ideas of the social worlds, as well as the worlds of sense, within which both authors and readers live" (para. 6). For white students, who are used to seeing their identities reflected in the stories (Picower, 2021), reading literature by and about people of color can begin to disrupt the normative whiteness that surrounds them. Social media movements like #WeNeedDiverseBooks, #DisruptText, and #CurriculumSoWhite have not only raised awareness of issues of representation in literature, but have shifted practices in children's book publishing (The WNDB team, 2023) and teachers' classroom practices (Ebarvia et al., 2020; Picower, 2021). However, just bringing in books that represent a diversity of racial and cultural experiences is not enough. Asking students to make individual text-to-self connections between literature and their own lived experiences, as has often been the way reader response theory is applied in classroom practice, is also not enough (Lewis, 2000). Educators need to make space for students' varied embodied and affective responses (e.g., flight/fight/freeze response, expressions of sympathy or discomfort) to the content of what they read. I argue that explicitly attending to affective responses both of individual students and the classroom community during literature study must be an explicit part of classroom instruction, especially when teaching literature that directly addresses issues of racism in the United States in predominantly white spaces. Such an attention is necessary to prevent color-evasiveness moves (e.g., denying that race impacts a character's experience, refusing to see how one's own positionality influences one's reading) that may arise from white discomfort in particular. Educators have a responsibility to support students towards and through affective responses, rather than solely having responsibility towards

students' reading comprehension and literary analysis of the text.

Before educators can invite student responses, teachers must first unpack their own responses to literature and attend to the ways in which their intersecting identities influence those responses. For white teachers seeking to bring African American literature, such as Richard Wright's *Native Son*, into the curriculum, attending to how race mediates reader response from white bodies is key. Building on a transactional theory of reader response (Rosenblatt, 1994), Coleman (2021) advocates for addressing the affective dimensions of literary engagement for ELA educators to unpack the *literacy normativities* (Pritchard, 2016) that shape their imaginations. Coleman (2021) argues that considerations of affect are of critical importance because English teachers' imaginations are habituated by the *literary whiteness* (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019) of their English education programs, as well as their own K-12 schooling experiences. In this paper, I propose an extension of Coleman's (2021) work with affective reader response, suggesting how his reflective approach for English educators to recognize and theorize their affective responses to literature can be used to inform white educators' work with racialized text in high school classrooms. Drawing from my own experiences as a white high school English teacher, I propose how I would revise my approach to teaching the opening of *Native Son* in my 10th grade American literature class to encourage my white students' attention to their own affective reader responses, especially feelings of discomfort, with the aim of increasing their racial literacy.

Theorizing How Attending to Affective Reader Response Can Contribute to Developing Racial Literacy

This paper draws upon affective reader response theory (Coleman, 2021) to consider how racializing my reading and teaching of *Native Son*, a text centered around representations of Blackness, to attend not only to ideological but also embodied responses as white readers widens the potential for sense-making about race. One of the purposes of this sense-making is the development of racial literacy (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Stevenson, 2014). This work seeks to answer Park's (2012) questions: "How can readers be supported in becoming critical, in 'breaking with ordinariness and stock responses' (Greene, 2001, p. 28)? How can they become more aware of the assumptions that shape their response to literature?" (p. 194). I wish to extend this second question further to consider: How can white readers increase/develop racial literacy through tracing their affective, embodied responses, especially responses of discomfort, to texts highlighting the Black experience in the United States? In this section, I start by reviewing my understanding of racial literacy and then connect that theoretical understanding to affective reader response theory.

Racial Literacy

My understanding of racial literacy is rooted in racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 2014), which explains how race is both a social construction (race as "illusion") and an embodied reality (race as "essence") with material consequences. For Omi and Winant (2014) race is "a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies"

(p. 110). Race is created through racialization, "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (p. 13). Omi and Winant's theory also encompasses "resistance to such oppressive practices [which] also involves the creation of social categories of difference" (p. 12). Through this lens, we can see that while race is socially constructed as a tool of oppression, racialized groups can also develop practices in resistance to oppressive meanings that provide meaningful identities and group affiliations. For psychologist Howard Stevenson (2014), studying the coping mechanisms of Black people to racial stress and the racial socialization practices used by parents of Black children provide a way of understanding how to develop racial literacy, which he defines as "the belief in and ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful encounters" (p. 19). By focusing on how racism is experienced in daily face-to-face interaction, not just on macrosystemic forces, Stevenson (2014) argues that educational institutions and individuals can engage in explicit racial socialization strategies that help move people beyond racial stress (p. 22). Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz (2021) offer a more systems level consideration of racial literacy. They define racial literacy as "a skill practiced when individuals are able to probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race as it intersects with institutionalized systems" (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021, pp. 13–14). I see these two approaches to racial literacy as compatible as they draw attention to racism operating both on the individual level (racism as embodied experience in racial stress and coping mechanisms in response in Stevenson) and systemic level (recognition of existence of racism in institutionalized systems from Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz).

For white reader responses to text in ELA classrooms, racial literacy is an important skill linking these levels. On one level, racial literacy encompasses one's individual embodied affective response to what is encountered in the text in the act of reading. On another, it addresses the communal experience of reading and discussing the text in a classroom and managing the racial stress of navigating how to talk about one's racialized experience of the text. Finally, racial literacy links both the individual and communal response to an understanding of institutionalized racism as the context in which all these dynamics are occurring, from the construction of the text to the in-the-moment felt experience to the sense-making through communal discussion. In a context where white racial ideology predominates, which I see as the prevailing paradigm in U.S. school systems that position whiteness as the norm, unpacking other ways of seeing racial dynamics in the United States is crucial. In the next section, I will contextualize affective reader response theory in relationship to reader response theory, as well as explain why this approach is particularly suited for developing racial literacy as defined above.

Affective Reader Response Theory

Affective reader response builds on reader response theory's focus on transaction between reader, text, and context to bring in a critical reading of affect in the reading act. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reading and writing disrupts previous literary theory paradigms that located the meaning derived from literature solely in the text. Instead, Rosenblatt (1994) posits that:

> every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context… The 'meaning' does not reside ready-made 'in' the text or 'in' the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text (p. 1063).

This dynamic view of reading locates agency for meaning-making in the particularities of reader, text, and circumstance coming together to produce an interpretation. Rosenblatt (1994) sees implications for this view of reading for teaching, namely that educators "should have as [their] first concern the creation of environments and activities in which students are motivated and encouraged to draw on their own resources to make 'live' meanings" rather than treat teaching reading as "a dissociated set of skills" (p. 1082). Thus, English educators who embrace a reader response approach often emphasize pedagogical strategies that encourage readers to make connections to texts out of their own lived experiences. However, this approach has garnered critiques that these practices place too much emphasis on individual readers' transactions with text. As Lewis (2000) illustrates in her study of white rural teachers' discussion of the children's book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Curtis, 1995), she argues that a focus on personal identification in reader responses' application limits our understanding of aesthetic reading. Instead, she explains that for white readers encountering "culturally conscious [books that] . . . deliberately set out to recreate a uniquely Afro-American experience, primarily for a Black audience" (Sims, 1983, p. 22), this transaction can still result in an aesthetic reading that accounts for the social and political dimensions of the text. Her call for applications of reader response theory in elementary classrooms that "addresses the social and political dimensions of texts and invites students to take pleasure in both the personal and the critical" (Lewis, 2000, p. 264) is one that helped turn reader response scholarship towards a critical lens, a necessarily frame for discussing reader response in relationship to race.

To engage with reader response around race, educators must attend to not only individual student responses to transactions with text but consider how those responses are situated within the whole class context. More recent reader response scholarship has emphasized communal response as a way of pushing back on the "overemphasis on the personal and an underemphasis on the sociopolitical" (Simon et al., 2018, p. 178). Park (2012) forwards a critical and communal reader response pedagogy from her qualitative study of three afterschool book clubs with adolescent girls. She argues that the opportunity to make reader-to-reader, as opposed to solely reader-to-text, connections has the potential to facilitate critical reading in the secondary classroom when paired with structures for critical engagement modeled by the teacher. Simon et al. (2018) illustrate how "decentering the individual reader in reader-response and relocating meaning in the collective act of situated interpretation" can result in "provisional and fragmentary" discussions and sense-making that resist the neat and cohesive interpretations often demanded in the ELA classroom (p. 179). Coleman (2021) sees these defamiliarizing interpretative acts as productive, as they draw readers' attention to the literacy normativities (Pritchard, 2016) that underly individual readings. Specifically, by attuning to "ordinary affects," communal reading can "spotlight

literacy normativities that regiment acts of reading, writing, and imagining in classrooms" (Pritchard, 2017, as cited in Coleman, 2021, p. 255). Thus, affective reader response marries a collective approach to meaning-making and a critical attention to affective changes during the reading act that unveils the sociopolitical factors that unconsciously habituate our reading. By surfacing and naming what often remains submerged and affectively experienced, affective reader response affords new critical interpretative possibilities in the ELA classroom.

Coleman's (2021) study traces the affective reader responses of an inquiry group of queer educators to examine the norms within teachers' imaginations revealed by these ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007), such as comfort/discomfort and familiarity. Coleman's (2021) theorizing of affective reader response is grounded in a "'pragmatic-contextual' approach to affect" (p. 256). As a literacy educator and researcher just beginning her exploration of affect theory, I find myself drawn to Wetherell's (2012) concept of affective practice, which "focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do. It finds shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations rather than simple lines of causation, character types and neat emotion categories" (p. 5). As a methodological tool, viewing affect as "*embodied meaning-making*" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 5) provides a way into tracing how bodies are implicated in our sense-making activities. For my consideration of how white readers (both teachers and students) respond to race in text, understanding the role of the body in these responses is key. Because bodies are racialized, we must consider how our bodies, not just abstract intellectual concepts, are implicated in racialized response to text. Rather than attending solely to the transaction between an individual reader, an individual text, and a singular context, as a more traditional reader response theory approach might, affective reader response draws attention to how these racialized and embodied responses do not just remain within an individual. As Ahmed (2004) explores in her work around affective economies, she theorizes that "emotions are not simply 'within' or 'without' but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and world" (p. 117). By analyzing how emotions "align individuals with communities . . . [and] mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119), we can begin to see how individual affect has broader socio-political implications, especially in relation to racialized sentiments. For example, a white reader of *Native Son* brings not only their own experiences as a white person to the text, but may carry with them dominant narratives around race relations in 20th century America (such as a narrative of racial progress since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s) that animate their responses in ways they may not explicitly articulate. While Coleman's (2021) focus is on ELA teachers and teacher educators using affective reader response as a tool to attune to their own "shifts in emotionality" while reading to then "analyze these affects as effects of literacy normativities" (p. 257), I believe this framework has great potential for use with students in high school ELA classrooms, particularly in attending to their affective response to the role of race in literature. Such an approach could provide a path towards developing racial literacy, both as "the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that address racial inequity and bias" (Price-Dennis & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021, p. 22) and to explore and resolve their own racial stress (Stevenson, 2014) when encountered in the learning space of a classroom setting.

Literature Review

Affect, Whiteness, and Teacher Education

Much of the research considering affective response to discussions of race has occurred in the context of work with white pre-service teachers and often explores the challenges of such an approach. For example, Matias and Zembylas (2014) write about how teacher candidates' expressions of "care" often mask emotions of disgust for the Other, shaped by whiteness ideology. Similarly, Picower (2009) found in her work with white pre-service teachers that her students rely on "tools of Whiteness" that are emotional, ideological and performative to protect the hegemonic stories of white supremacy. For faculty of color, white student resistance is bound up with questions of authority (Ohito, 2016; Rodriguez, 2009; Tatum, 1994). After recounting several incidents of white resistance to her antiracist approach, Rodriguez (2009) concludes that "that understanding emotions are critical in not only getting students to understand their own subject positions but also in gaining a deeper understanding about how teachers of color deal with student resistance" (p. 503). While Rodriguez (2009) draws upon critical race theory and autoethnography to make sense of her experiences and does not engage with affect theory, her descriptions of critical incidents with students' white arrogance and entitlement weave in felt experiences that point to her embodied sense-making of these racialized moments. Instructors' own discomfort with the emotional responses of students to pedagogies of discomfort can lead them to engage in non-productive strategies to alleviate the tension created (Zembylas & Papamichael, 2017). While this work highlights the challenges of addressing white educators' discomfort and resistance to discussions of race, the necessity of expanding white educators' racial literacy to prepare them to have these conversations with students also rises to the fore.

This body of research does provide hope for the possibilities of change in white pre-service teachers' commitment to whiteness through making space to address the role of affect, emotions, feelings, and embodied experiences. Working in the tradition of critical whiteness studies and emotionality studies, Matias and Mackey (2016) used self-reflective tools to shift white teacher candidates understanding of how to be effective antiracist pedagogues. Their course was organized around "emotional phases" designed to explicitly address the emotions that often arise in the class and theorize emotionality as a core course concept. While positioned in emotionality studies and not affect theory, this approach provides one way of considering socially framed experiences for white students when encountering racial concepts in the classroom. In contrast, Ohito (2016) draws from an affective approach that considers how attuning to affects like discomfort enabled her to "examine the attachments among emotions and bodies as vectors of (anti)racism, thereby elucidating how White supremacy functions—and can be challenged—intra- and inter-personally" (p. 456). Using a *pedagogy of discomfort* (Boler, 1999), Ohito (2016) and pre-service teachers moved through a racialized affective moment around a student's reading of "troubling language" (p. 459) in a course text. Through her own affective and embodied reactions to the classroom moment, as well as students' blog posts reflecting on the moment, Ohito

(2016) unpacks the significance of sitting with "the somatic sensations borne of discomfort" and the learning that happens when allowed to "linger in our feelings about racial oppression" (p. 462). These authors conclude that white educators must be prepared to engage in self-reflection and get comfortable with discomfort if they are to be able to teach in antiracist ways in their own classrooms.

Pedagogies of Discomfort

Boler and Zembylas have extended on Boler's earlier work (Boler, 1999) around *pedagogies of discomfort* to address how white discomfort specifically requires a decolonial and critical affective approach to address (Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Zembylas, 2018). By examining "how white discomfort comes to be experienced and dismantled within broader affective, material and discursive assemblages of race, racism and whiteness" (Zembylas, 2018, p. 86), scholars considering the intersection can put forward pedagogies designed to support students in working through and making sense of their discomfort as situated within broader socio-political contexts. This work acts against *affective injustice* (Zembylas, 2022), by acknowledging humans as affective beings. However, teachers seeking to invite antiracist dialogue into the classroom in meaningful ways must be aware of the ways in which "whiteness has an affectivity that creates certain attachments" and that while discussing race is necessary to counter racism, these discussions are "also the most uncomfortable and, therefore, face... the most resistance, particularly from Whites" (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013, pp. 155, 159). Providing ways through resistance and discomfort becomes crucial for movement towards racial literacy to occur.

Blackness, Literature, and Reader Response in Secondary Classrooms

My choice to focus on Richard Wright's *Native Son* is informed by the need to contend with how the American literary canon, as it is taught in high schools, continues to center whiteness. This idea is not new. Nobel-winning author Toni Morrison (1993) wrote *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* to surface the ways in which race haunts the great works of American literature, even if whiteness and Blackness are left unnamed in the text. She argues that this white male literary canon that makes up the uniquely American national literature relies upon "a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence," a term she uses "for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (Morrison, 1993, pp. 5–7). Her interest comes from her position as a writer within a racialized society that has assumed a white readership for American literature and the impact "that assumption has meant to the literary imagination," particularly to constructions of "literary whiteness" and "literary blackness" (Morrison, 1993, p. xii). While Morrison's scholarly inquiry is positioned in dialogue with literary critics in the United States, these same concerns have bearing on the treatment of American literature in the high school classroom. Yet much of this curriculum has been "white-washed," or framed to leave whiteness as the unspoken and assumed norm in literature. Scholars have framed this pattern of selecting white-centered

texts and teaching through a white lens as curricular racism (Picower, 2021), perpetuated by a majority white teaching workforce ill-prepared to see the harm they perpetuate through unconscious replication of the white education they received. Scholars have posited that alternative ways of reading, such a reading through a postcolonial or critical multicultural lens, can be a way of reorienting our students' understand of the purposes of reading towards reading for social change (Yenika-Agbaw, 1997). How to do so in spaces where the majority of students are white is an under-studied but critical area (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019).

Nevertheless, literature has been a core way in which ELA educators have introduced "race talk" into the secondary classroom. Thomas (2015) provides classroom discourse analysis of two teachers' race talk strategies in a racially diverse high school to show how educators address "race talk dilemmas," which she defines as "moments in conversations about race that have the potential for conflict" (p. 155). While both teachers use their introductions to the literature they are teaching to assert that race matters, they and their students also employed "tactics of discursive silence, evasion, and 'sidestepping'" (Thomas, 2015, p. 171) during some of the more contentious conversations. Similarly, Borsheim-Black (2015) identifies challenges and opportunities of using an antiracist pedagogy with literature. She identifies the ways Discourses of Whiteness operated at the individual, institutional, societal, and epistemological levels throughout a white educator's teaching of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Building on this work, Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) put forward their framework for antiracist literature instruction for white educational contexts. As part of this framework, they identify racializing white readers' responses as a key way to push back on white readers' misreadings of Blackness in literature. In their chapter introducing racialized reader response, they provide an example of white students failing to discuss the role of race in Kwame Alexander's novel-in-verse, *The Crossover*. When Borsheim-Black drew students' attention to this fact, numerous students said "the book did not 'seem Black'" and that they had not realized the characters were Black until asked this question (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 34). Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides (2019) provide revised versions of class reader response questions that ask readers, "How does my racial identity and the racial discourse that dominates for me, together with the text and context that I am reading through right now, affect my literary interpretations?" (p. 46). Their aim with this approach is to:

> help White readers understand that Whiteness operates not only as a racial category but also as a racial ideology that organizes the way people see the world. It aims to make readers aware of the ways texts, as well as their responses to texts, are shaped by this racial ideology (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019, p. 46).

By combining this approach to the racialized nature of white readers engaging with Black text with Coleman's (2021) attention to the affective and embodied dimensions of reader response, I believe that my proposed practice can support both white educators and students to engage in the reflective work needed to sit with the discomfort raised by race talk around literature.

Teaching *Native Son*: Contending with Whiteness

A Note on my Positionality and Context

I come to this conversation on teaching about racism through literature as a white woman-identifying educator with six years of teaching experience in a wealthy suburban district in the Northeastern United States. Raised in majority white spaces, my own white racial identity journey took until college to fully begin. My first semester of freshman year, I took a first-year seminar titled "Black Literature/Black Liberty" that traced Black literature in the United States from the colonial period through the Harlem Renaissance. The opportunity to closely read the brilliance of Black authors and scholars, witness the diversity of the Black experience through literature, and discuss American racism in a multiracial classroom began my journey towards considering race and literature. As I pursued an English education degree, I committed myself to a social justice orientation, which I saw as an approach that provided students of all backgrounds opportunities to talk about issues that matter in the world, especially as related to race. When I had the opportunity to take a job at a school that serves a majority-white population, I was determined to teach in ways that raised the important conversations that I only had access to in college.

My district was located in the suburbs of a major Northeastern city in the United States and served a majority-white but demographically shifting population. Within the six years I taught, the percentage of students who identified as Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander increased from 14% to 28%, while the population of students identified as Black dropped from 5% to 2.9%. Below 5% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. The high school is a public, comprehensive school, serving over 2,000 students. I had the opportunity to teach Grades 9-12, but spent the most time with 10th grade American literature, later changed to American Voices, and was involved in curriculum revisions to the course to align with Learning for Justice's Social Justice Standards (SPLC Learning for Justice, 2017).

During my six years in the classroom, whiteness operated as the norm against which I had to actively push, both within myself as a white educator and within the educational system. As a first-year teacher, I found that the required reading list I inherited reflected a white male perspective on the American experience, plodding chronologically from Nathaniel Hawthorne's look back on Puritan foundations of America in his 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, through Mark Twain's look at slavery through the eyes of a white southern boy in 1885's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to F. Scott Fitzgerald's meditation on the American dream in 1920s New York City in *The Great Gatsby*. While Richard Wright's *Native Son* provided the curriculum with a Black author of a whole class novel, his perspective felt tokenized to me by the lack of representation earlier in the year's books, a feeling I did not know how to resolve that first year of teaching. These concerns were later affirmed by an Asian-American student of mine who wrote a letter to the school board two years later about the lack of diverse literature in the American literature curriculum, illustrating the harms of this literary whiteness for students of color in particular. With each year teaching the American literature course, my team of American literature teachers would discuss revising the curriculum. We did so

each year, removing texts (such as Twain's Huck Finn), making room for others (Celeste Ng's 2017 novel *Little Fires Everywhere*), and expanding the supplemental texts we placed our core books in conversation with. The unit on Native Son received the most revision each year, as I tried various approaches for how to teach a book about racism in a majority white space. I went into each year teaching the book a mix of nervous and excited. I was nervous for how students would respond and how those responses might ripple out in class dynamics, and excited for the possibilities to make connections to current issues around racism and injustice. The question that followed me was how to do the text justice and avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes—how to make sure my students whose lives were so removed from Bigger Thomas' in the Southside of Chicago *got it*.

Race in American Literature: Richard Wright's Native Son

As a high school English teacher, I taught Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* for six years as part of the tenth-grade American literature curriculum. The story follows Bigger Thomas, a nineteen-year-old Black boy in 1930s Chicago who gets a job as a chauffeur for the wealthy white Dalton family. Bigger encounters Mary Dalton, the communist-sympathizing heiress daughter whose attempts to befriend Bigger unnerve him. Through a series of unfortunate events, Bigger accidentally kills Mary in a haze of fear at being found alone in her bedroom while she is inebriated. The subsequent sections of the book follow as Bigger lays claim to the death of Mary as a murder thrown in the face of white society, dodges authorities by playing on racist and anti-communist sentiments, murders his Black girlfriend Bessie, and is ultimately captured and undergoes a trial where the prosecution plays on racist tropes, depicting Bigger as less than human and demanding the death penalty. Each year, I found the book a troubling read, featuring physical and sexual violence and trafficking in racial stereotypes through its deeply flawed main character. As Richard Wright explains in his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born," this was by design. He wrote that his purpose in writing this book was to create a story "so hard and deep that they [readers, particularly white ones] would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (p. 454). Bigger is an allegorical character: "*what had made him and what he meant* constituted [Wright's] plot" (p. 454). And what had made him was American racism of the 1930s:

> he is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out... Bigger [is] an American product, a native son of this land (Wright, 2005, p. 446-447).

With this context in mind, I came to see *Native Son* as a book that provided rich opportunities to explore both the individual and systemic impacts of American racism with the majority-white students in my tenth-grade American literature class.

Over the years, I developed an approach to teaching *Native Son* that involved applying various literary lenses—including formalist, reader-response, feminist, Marxist, and biographical/historical theories—to the text. This approach was both a product of the time of year (the book was usually taught around March, when literary theories had been overviewed and tried out in a short story unit)

and students' reaction to the text. Because of the horror of Bigger's actions and his interior narrative about those actions, students would focus heavily on debating his mental state or grappling with their complex reactions to the character. Literary theory became a way to help students position those reactions within a broader tradition of literary interpretation and start to make sense of the myriad of factors that might be at play (e.g., gender, class, historical context). Early on, I used a theory relay activity introduced in Appleman's (2015) *Critical Encounters in Secondary English*, a stations activity where students explored reader-response, historical/biographical, gender, and social class as lenses on the text. For the reader response station, students identified their own reader characteristics and textual characteristics that impact response (i.e., "What personal qualities, experiences, or events relevant to *Native Son* might influence your response?"), and then composed meaning statements based on their reading transaction (Appleman, 2015, p. 46). I thought and hoped this activity would provide the space for students to reflect on how their raced, gendered, and classed identities shaped how they made sense of Bigger's actions. However, I found that my white students sometimes would not name whiteness as a part of their lived experience that might influence their response to a book focused heavily on race relations in America. Over time, I evolved the activity to instead present various lenses at different points in the reading to provide students with practice looking at text through a variety of perspectives. I was still left dissatisfied with how I had approached reader response as a way for students to reflect on how their own personal qualities, lived experiences, and socially-constructed identities might be shaping their experience and response to *Native Son*.

When teaching the opening of this novel in the past, I used a formalist approach, where students would consider the use of symbolism, the depiction of space, the early characterization of Bigger Thomas and his family, and so on. The formalist/New Criticism approach to literary analysis was popularized in the 1920s and still dominates many secondary classrooms today, even though the academy has put forward numerous other literary lenses that focus on cultural critique (Appleman, 2015, p. 5). This perspective attends to "issues of form and convention", relying on close reading, or "a detailed and subtle analysis of the formal components that make up the literary work", as its primary method (Appleman, 2015, p. 158). This approach is often contrasted with reader response pedagogies that privilege personal connections made to the text. The Common Core State Standard's focus on close reading has reinforced this approach in many classrooms, sometimes with a rigid view that the reader should maintain "diligent attention to the text and nothing but the text as a self-contained entity" (Hinchman & Moore, 2013, p. 443). This focus has raised concerns among literacy scholars advocating for a multiplicity of approaches that reading will be reduced to "the acquisition of knowledge and expanding students' experiences and perspectives, not the aesthetic response of the reader, the appreciation of the text structure, or the author's craft" (Serafini, 2014, p. 300). While I am turning away from a purely formalist approach in the lesson described below, I still embrace close reading as the method for this approach. By attending to the formal components of the text through close reading, students can affix their affective responses while reading to specific moves made in the literary work. Students' affective reader response is enabled through an expansive close reading that provides readers space to

"discern how a text's discourse positions readers according to race, class, gender, and other social markers" (Hinchman & Moore, 2013, p. 443). Centering students' affective responses is crucial for bringing students close to the text and embrace the discomfort, rather than situating their reading from an analytical arms-length distance that a formalist reading encourages.

A Practitioner Intervention: Using Affective Reader Response to Interrogate White Discomfort

In the proposed lesson plan described below, I apply Coleman's (2021) description of affective reader response to surface the white discomfort that I often saw arise during my students' readings early on in *Native Son* and set the stage for students' racialized affects in response to textual moments that may be racially fraught for white readers later in the novel. I focus here on how I would use affective reader response to revise my students' engagement in reading the opening of *Native Son*. This lesson would come after pre-reading activities designed to provide students with the conceptual tools to name key ideas such as white privilege, white discomfort, and racial literacy. Students would be given space to reflect in writing on their positionality vis-à-vis Richard Wright's essay outlining his purpose. I would explicitly name that Wright writes with a wealthy white audience in mind and aims to evoke particular affective responses, especially in this audience.

I imagine introducing the opening scene as one that evokes a range of emotions in readers, as well as the idea that by examining our affective responses (and how they shift), we can come to understand where our interpretations of the text may come from. I would project Coleman's (2021) affective reader response chart (see table 1) and conduct a think aloud while typing in my responses in the chart as I read the first page of the story. I would start by naming what I am feeling, then considering what led to those feelings in the moment. For example, I might identify experiencing discomfort at the tone used by the mother with her children, identifying quotes such as "A woman's voice sang out impatiently: 'Bigger, shut that thing off!'" and "'Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing on my hands today and I want you all out of here.'" (Wright, 2005, p. 3) as the text that led to that feeling in the moment. I would describe how that discomfort plays out in my body, as a drop in my stomach and a tightening of my chest, or as a restlessness and inability to sit still or continue focusing while reading. After completing my reading and think aloud for the first two pages, I would answer the question, "What are potential origins of those feelings personally? (e.g., identities, histories, experiences)" (Coleman, 2021, p. 272). For the quote above, I would share how my own white, upper-middle class upbringing influenced the ways that my parents talked to me, where demands were couched as questions. By making visible my affective reader responses for my students, I would surface the racial normativities that impact my engagement with *Native Son* early on (e.g., white norms around communication, negative media representations of single Black mothers). This kind of modeling of a readerly vulnerability by the teacher can open space in the classroom for students to engage in such vulnerable acts in their own attention to their affective reader responses.

Activity would shift from teacher modeling of affective reader response to

student affective reader response and collaborative sharing, an extension beyond Coleman's (2021) imagined application of this framework with English teachers and teacher educators to ELA students themselves. Students would have their own charts to complete as they read through the conclusion of the opening scene individually (where Bigger kills a rat that is terrorizing his family's small apartment), reflecting on their feelings, the textual moments that evoked those feelings, and the potential personal origins of those feelings. By attending to individual affective experiences of this opening scene, students will be positioned to see how "affective reader responses register as subjectively situated, embodied meaning making elicited during acts of reading, and importantly, these felt experiences register across levels of intensity" (Ahmed, 2014; Massumi, 2002, as cited in Coleman, 2021, p. 256). For white students, I imagine feelings of discomfort or shock might arise in how they are making meaning of the Thomas' living situation and the violence of the rat's death. However, this affective reader response framework also leaves space for other kinds of responses, such as a sense of connection to the characters (e.g., perhaps students see similarities in the sibling dynamics between Bigger and his younger siblings) or a sense of disconnect or distancing (which the question about potential origins of feelings can help to unpack, perhaps as a form of evasion).

After making space for this individual reading, reflection, and interpretation, students would then be invited to engage in communal and critical reader response (Park, 2012). In paired reader response dyads, students would share whichever portions of their affective reader response they felt comfortable bringing into their joint conversation of the scene. In this way, affective reader response can be a powerful tool for students to, first, name the felt experience of reading this text; and secondly, identify where those feelings might be coming from. Students would be prompted to consider how they are making sense of this opening moment in the context of their own lived experiences, their understanding of the author's purposes based on prior class discussions, and their predictions for the characters and the book moving forward. I would explicitly name that this affective reader response framework is one that we will return to throughout the unit to make sense of our felt experiences of the novel, with a particular focus on how race comes up for us as individual readers and as members of this classroom community making sense of the book together. For texts that surface complex affects mired in hard histories—in this case, the legacy of racism in the United States—affective reader response can provide a framework for surfacing and openly discussing students' affective experience of the text in ways that encourage the development of racial literacy through the exploration of racism on an individual and structural level.

Because I am applying affective reader response to a high school classroom with adolescents, rather than with pre-service and in-service ELA educators, certain teaching moves would be a necessary precondition for successful application. Critical to students' affective reader response dyads and whole group discussions being productive spaces would be pre-established trust and community built within the classroom to enable students to be comfortable sharing such intimate details of their reading lives with one another. During the discussions, I would listen in on student conversations to synthesize at the conclusion or use a digital tool like a word cloud to anonymously gather key feelings shared by students to surface the multitude of affective responses present in the class. Because this

framework asks students to be vulnerable in revealing normally private parts of their reading act with others, I would emphasize the importance of non-judgment and a curious approach in any of our conversations. By modeling this inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and by engaging in one-on-one conversations with any students who express resistance or break community expectations, I hope to inculcate such a classroom environment. However, I also want to acknowledge that the ability to engage in this work may vary for different students and providing individualized approaches based on where students are in their own racial identity journey might be called for. As with any teaching act, I would respond to the students in front of me, tailoring the spirit of the activity to meet students where they are.

The activity would close with an individual reflection on Coleman's (2021) question, "What do my feelings reveal about how I read the world?" (p. 272), as well as one specific to race: "How might my racial identity and racialized experiences shape how I read Bigger's world?" Finally, students would be prompted to reflect on what critical questions or desired future actions were raised by this activity. For example, a white student who experienced shock at Bigger's violence towards the rat might raise a question about how media portrayals of "the scary Black man" trope might be shaping their image of Bigger as they read. The purpose of this prompt is to position students' affective responses not as deterministic, but open to change. For example, my feeling of discomfort at Bigger's mother's tone can be shifted, especially as I gain an appreciation for the love she has for her children through subsequent encounters in the book. I would not ask students to share this reflection, but instead would keep it as personal piece of writing. This reflection lays a foundation for students in a majority white space to consider how they are approaching a text that centers a young Black man in a different time and place than their own, as well as attune them to their affective responses throughout the reading. I imagine using the affective reader response chart throughout our reading, alongside the other literary lenses mentioned earlier, as a way of grounding students' interpretations in a deep understanding of their racially-inflected affective responses to the text. By jotting their affective responses throughout and regularly meeting in their dyads to debrief those affective responses, students will have a chance to trace their evolving felt and embodied meaning-making process with the text. I would provide students with reflection prompts that would ask them to analyze their responses across the text and examine patterns that emerge at the intersection of their affective response and textual content. Such an approach, paired with direct instruction and supplemental reading about critical concepts and historical context, would make possible deeper understandings of how students' own racial histories and identities evoke particular affective responses that can be interrogated for their normativities. Ultimately, the ability to "read, recast, and resolve [these] racially stressful encounters" (Stevenson, 2014, p. 19) in text provides white students with opportunities to expand their racial literacy.

Table 1[1]

Affective reader response chart		
What am I feeling?	**What led to those feelings in the moment?**	**What are potential origins of those feelings personally? (e.g., identities, histories, experiences)**
Reflection: What do my feelings reveal about how I read the world? (e.g., literacy normativities)		
Action: What critical questions emerge from attention to how I am feeling in this moment (Whitelaw, personal communication, November 13th, 2023)? What responses might I desire for myself in my reading in the future?		

Conclusion

In the lesson plan outlined above, I have sought to extend Coleman's (2021) affective reader response work with ELA educators to the context of working with white high school students. To support young peoples' meaningful responses to Black literature and to have that literature provide opportunities to develop young peoples' racial literacy, educators must also attend to the affective dimensions of white students' reader response. I believe that by shifting from a formalist to an affective reader response approach to the novel's depiction of race in the opening for my white students' reading of *Native Son*, the responses to Bigger's later actions would be more nuanced and attuned to how students' racial identities were habituating their responses. What the literature and my own example show is that teachers' and students' affective responses to race in literature are intimately intertwined. In challenging conversations about race, educators may fall back on formalist interpretations of the text rather than allowing themselves and students to sit with uncomfortable feelings. This dynamic occurred in Borsheim-Black's (2015) case study, where the focal teacher set the antiracist objective as students "'understanding institutional racism,' which framed racism as a concept to be learned and assessed, rather than a belief to be changed" (p. 426). As demonstrated in Ohito's (2016) complex, embodied, and emotional interaction with students, the class was able to make sense of a moment of racial tension only after being given space to write, reflect upon, and debrief this "hot spot" of racial discomfort. I believe that an affective approach to reader response has the potential to shift conversations about race for young people in ELA classrooms.

While my focus has been on my context as a white educator working with white students in a majority-white educational space, I believe that the use of affective reader response in high school ELA discussions of race has promise in other contexts. A discussion of the possibilities, as well as the implications of this work for students of color in majority-white spaces, is important but outside the scope of this article. I also want to acknowledge that I provide this lesson plan from a place of reflective practitioner inquiry, rather than as a practice tested with students. I believe that affective reader response holds a great deal of promise for addressing the white discomfort that can arise during reading and

1 *Note.* Adapted from Coleman (2021)

discussions of texts that explicitly engage with race and hope that this inquiry prompts others to take up this framework in their own contexts. I am left with the following questions to guide further inquiry and study around bringing affective reader response to an explicit focus on race in secondary ELA classrooms: How can teachers' own modeled affective responses open opportunities for young people's own vulnerability in examining their identities through their affective responses? How can educators meet young people where they are in their vulnerability around their racial identities?

These questions about how to support white students' in processing their affective reader responses, especially around texts focused on race, have implications beyond the classroom. On April 7th, 2022, Bucks County, Pennsylvania librarian Samantha Hull testified in front of Congress as part of the hearing on "Free Speech Under Attack: Book Bans and Academic Censorship." In her testimony, she argued that "the ability to learn about and appreciate the diversity of human experience, perspective, and opinion is crucial to gaining a sense of belonging," and that books are one means to gain that access (Hull, 2022). Rather than removing books that elicit a reaction, as has been many school districts' response to so called "anti-CRT" and "anti-LGBTQ" legislation introduced in 2021 (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2022; Friedman & Johnson, 2022), Hull (2022) advocated for students' strong reactions to "be the start of a conversation with their family or trusted adult about the topic that caused the reaction." In the face of groups like Moms for Liberty—a Florida-based far-right anti-government group presenting themselves as a parental rights organization who oppose LGBTQ+ and racially inclusive curriculum—attempting to limit children's exposure to discussions of racism in American history, sexuality and gender diversity, and other "divisive topics" (Moms for Liberty, n.d.), Hull (2022) argued for a learning environment that "fosters open-minded communication" that enables young people to "consider what [a book that makes you uncomfortable] might be trying to teach you and what you are fighting so hard not to learn." While Hull spoke from her position in the library, these same questions around responding to discomfort (Applebaum, 2017; Ohito, 2016; Zembylas, 2018) raised by reading literature applies to the secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. As Appleman (2023) reminds us, in the midst of these "new culture wars" where pressures from both the right and the left have led books to be removed from shelves and curricula, English educators have a duty to engage in nuanced ways with the questions that these texts raise.

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