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Complicated Positioning: Gender, Whiteness, and Teaching Sherman Alexie

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Abstract

This article is part of a larger, national study that examines how secondary English teachers have responded, through their teaching, to news of Sherman Alexie's serial sexual misconduct. Examining interview data from 18 participants—9 who still teach and 9 who no longer teach Alexie—this study considers how teachers draw upon their gendered and raced identities to shape their curricular decision-making related to Alexie's work. Findings indicated that teachers emphasized their positionality as women and their whiteness when making curricular decisions. Those emphasizing gender framed their curricular decisions through a storyline of agency and solidarity with other women. Those emphasizing whiteness thought carefully about seeking other Indigenous authors to replace Alexie. Still others chose to teach Alexie with a business-as-usual approach, citing a felt hypocrisy tied to whiteness. They wanted to avoid critiquing the marginalized and oppressed. The authors end with implications for English Language Arts teachers and for future research.

Keywords: Literature Pedagogy; Gender; Whiteness; Teacher Identity

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"How big is the gulf between where I'm from and who I am? We've been asking that question frequently since our study began, wondering what shapes how we know, how to account for these influences, how to resist them, knowing when you can't."— Brandon, Research Journal

"At the time that we began data analysis, I found myself involved as a witness in an investigation of a male professor at my own university for sexual harassment. I couldn't help but think of this man in the same light as Alexie. I found myself struggling, full of questions. . .I questioned being raised as a Southern White woman and if the ways I had been socialized were obstructing my views"—Ashley, Research Journal

"Why is it, then, that I have wrestled with using Alexie's writing and life to facilitate these conversations in my classroom? As a parent, I continue to ask myself about my responsibility and what I owe my family. What world am I working to create for my daughter, and how, if at all, do my curricular and instructional decisions influence this?"—Mike, Research Journal

The three authors of this article are white English teacher educators – one woman and two men. The work of Sherman Alexie, particularly *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), resonated with us for many years and appeared frequently in our undergraduate and graduate courses. Teaching the novel was a small way we attempted to de-center whiteness in the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum and model critical text selection practices for our mostly white students before they entered the classroom. Many students found *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (*True Diary*) engaging, even transformative, and chose to teach it in secondary contexts upon graduation. Doing this work with pre-service teachers felt especially important because ELA curricula have consistently excluded and mis-represented Indigenous Peoples and People of Color (IPOC) (Stanbrough et al., 2020).

Beyond our ELA teacher education courses and programs, Alexie enjoyed widespread popularity for over a decade. In 2008, Blasingame observed that "Sherman Alexie has found his way into the hearts of people all over the world. He appeals to everyone, all sorts of people, all sorts of readers" (p. 72). *True Diary,* likewise, achieved canonical status in the young adult

literary world, punctuating Alexie's literary reputation with the 2007 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and the Kirkus Reviews Best Young Adult Books of 2007. The semi-autobiographical coming-of-age tale follows Junior growing up on a Spokane Indian Reservation and his complicated relationship with home, identity, and a surrounding white world. Although published in 2007, the book still enjoys immense popularity with students and teachers alike. Malo-Juvera and Hill (2018), for instance, found that *True Diary* remains near the top of young adult texts taught across educational settings: fourth in middle school, second in high school, and second in college.

The steadfast relevance of Alexie's work is significant because ELA curricula remain largely a body of literature written by white men (Dyches, 2018; Stallworth et al., 2006). His continued presence, while worth celebrating, also speaks to a troubling tokenism, which Van Alst (2018) notes is "actions which are akin to literary colonialism" (para. 2). Only a handful of authors of Color (e.g. Zora Neal Hurston, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin) are allowed to survive on reading lists (Stanbrough et al., 2020). We will return to the harmful effects of this lack of diversity in the canon later, but suffice it to say that such a dearth damages both students of Color who do not see themselves represented as well as white students whose privileges are reproduced.

In 2018, news broke publicly that Sherman Alexie had sexually harassed numerous women, many of them Indigenous, and exploited his power as a literary celebrity. We were shocked and heartbroken to hear this news, yet hardly surprised given the number of famous and powerful men who had been exposed by courageous women as part of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements. Leading up to these upsetting reports, we regularly taught Alexie in our courses. After learning of Alexie's serial sexual misconduct, we questioned his place in our syllabi and

truly struggled with how to proceed. The quotes from our research journals at the beginning of this article illustrate snapshots of the myriad tensions we feel from our own social locations. Like George et al. (2024), we also thought deeply about why we use young adult literature in our teacher preparation contexts. We wondered: Will pulling his work silence valuable conversations about gender-based violence with our students, future teachers themselves? If we keep Alexie on our reading lists, what messages will that send to students about our values? Will his presence be a form of curricular violence against women? How might our Indigenous students feel if we remove a celebrated Indigenous author from our curriculum? How does our identity as white teacher educators influence how we think about these choices and, moreover, how our choices are read and experienced by students? These questions and many others guided our thoughts about what teachers can and should do when a celebrated author abuses power and celebrity, harming others in the process.

Given the popularity of Alexie's work and the increasing public attention to gender equity and gender-based violence created by the #MeToo movement, we wondered how secondary English teachers were responding in their curriculum to Alexie's serial sexual misconduct. In particular, we wanted to know whether teachers were teaching or excluding his work and why, including the institutional, social, curricular and personal factors shaping their choices. With these issues in mind, we designed a study that included a national survey and follow-up interviews to understand how and why secondary English teachers were responding to the Alexie question in their curriculum. As we coded and interpreted the interview data, we noticed that many teachers used gendered and raced talk to frame their decisions as emanating from a social role and the perceived commitments, restrictions, and possibilities tied to such a role.

Many participants, for instance, explained their decisions regarding Alexie through a "small story" framework (Bamberg, 2006) that began with declarations of identity – "as a woman," or "as a white person," or "as a white woman." We wondered what these declarations of positioning were accomplishing. How might they shape one's interpretation of and navigation through the #MeToo movement, and – more specifically for our purposes – influence instructional decisions regarding Alexie? In her work on white teacher identity, Johnson (2013) used a post-structural, performative framework to argue that teachers can re-inscribe *and* interrupt normative scripts for identity through daily classroom decisions, including text selection. Given the prevalence of racial and gender positioning in the interviews, particularly in relation to text selection and problematic authors, we returned to the data, wondering how participants were framing their instructional choices through identity – and, importantly, how they were re-inscribing or interrupting whiteness through their choices. The following question guided our inquiry: How do teachers draw upon their identities to shape their curricular decision-making?

English Teachers and Text Selection

Almost three decades ago, Thornton (1991) described teachers as curricular gatekeepers who make decisions about what is included or not in the classroom. Because teachers exercise power and influence over student learning, it is vital to better understand why and how teachers make decisions regarding curricular materials. Watkins and Ostensen (2015) found that teachers often frame their text selection decisions as thoughtful, accounting for student needs. This perceived student-driven rationale is, however, sometimes in conflict with how curricular decisions are made in light of local mandates, accountability, and availability issues, and it fails to account for the reasons teachers make exclusionary decisions. Others point to myriad reasons

teachers exclude specific texts from their classrooms, including concern over content, fear of pushback (Stallworth et al., 2006), and beliefs about the social relevance of specific materials (Friese et al., 2008). Teachers also use their preferences as readers and familiarity with specific texts as criteria for inclusion and exclusion (Applebee, 1993; Friese et al., 2008).

A variety of research (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1999; Delpit, 2006) suggests that teachers' positionalities also influence instructional practices, especially for white teachers working with Indigenous students and Students of Color. An ability to examine one's positionality, philosophy, and teaching can positively impact one's teaching (Nieto, 2009). Conversely, the inability to reflect and understand oneself presents consequences for teaching and learning. Research points to many negative consequences of unreflective practice, including positioning students – especially those who are culturally and linguistically diverse – in deficit ways (Gitlin et al., 2003). Holding onto static beliefs of students can also negatively impact teachers' relationships with Students of Color and their ability to fulfill the critical aims of education (Lesko & Bloom, 1998).

It is important to acknowledge that English teachers' text selection occurs in the context of curricular violence that misrepresents and excludes marginalized people, including IPOC. Three decades ago, Stotsky (2010) noted that literature pedagogy in American schools was characterized by a "total subservience" to British, canonical authors (often white, often male) -- a trend that continues in the present (Dyches, 2018; Schieble, 2014). Stakeholders argued that exposing students to canonical literature that purportedly offered "the best that has been thought and said" (Arnold, 1993) was essential for "cultural literacy" (Hirsch, 1988) and effective citizenship. The ELA canon is a product of a sociopolitical power struggle that centers "classic" and "traditional" literature written by white men and, at the same time, "marginalizes the

histories, voices, and experiences of certain sociocultural groups" (Dyches, 2018, p. 241), including IPOC (Stanbrough et al., 2020). Because the canon is constructed as natural, inevitable, and beyond reproach, the discourses of power that shape and maintain its allure often go unnoticed and unexamined (Dyches, 2018). Canonical ideology, furthermore, influences the construction of and persists in reform policy that shapes ELA teachers' text selection. Schieble (2014), for instance, found that texts written by "European male authors" were overrepresented in the Common Core State Standards text exemplar list. Although English teachers have agency to disrupt violent and normalizing bodies of knowledge, their choices occur in a sociopolitical and curricular context that erases marginalized identities while positioning canonical literature as essential

Other issues influence teachers' text selection as well, such as perceived controversy of given material and instances of self-censorship (Daly, 1998). Misco and Patterson (2007) found that teachers—preservice teachers (PSTs) in their study—often make preferential decisions to teach only what they see as comfortable, and thus less controversial, issues. One cross-disciplinary struggle has been to reach agreement on what constitutes "controversy" (Hess, 2002). Others (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Miller-Lane et al., 2006) describe disagreement on whether teachers should even bring their views and beliefs into the classroom. Teachers may choose to avoid controversial issues altogether at the risk of appearing too political. Engebretson (2018) argued that by shying away from controversial issues in the curriculum, teachers risk losing "the essential piece of educating for a future democracy" (p. 40) and thus actually make a political decision, one that is often silencing and marginalizing. Because curriculum and text selection reproduce stories of who and what has value, it is vital for educators to reflect on

instances of preemptive or self-censorship, who is served and silenced by these decisions, and who is protected and made vulnerable.

This is especially important in the contemporary context of rampant book banning and censorship, on the rise since 2021 (Sachdeva et al., 2023). Many states, such as Iowa and Florida, have passed book-banning laws related to LGBTQ+ authors and topics and authors of Color. These laws, intentionally ambiguously worded, create climates of fear and uncertainty with respect to text selection, a climate that influences teachers' curriculum reasoning. Miller et al. (2024) even note a spillover effect across state boundaries. Teachers working in states without local or state-level restrictions self-censor because of fear and a perceived climate of restriction due to policies passed in other states. One of the most salient features of the book banning era, unfortunately, is teachers' fear of doing what they know is best: making available and teaching texts that represent and honor diverse ways of living and being in the world. The stakes, as Miller et al. (2024) note, are high: "American educators are working in an era of state legislative and district-level book bans that overwhelmingly target Black authors, LGBTQIA+ authors, and histories that seek to tell often-ignored stories in K–12 curriculum" (p. 13).

A recent National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of literature use in the classroom suggests a disturbing trend in text selection (Chae & Ginsberg, 2025). While 80 percent of the more than 4,000 responding teachers report some levels of freedom in text selection, they continue to teach many of the same canonical works of literature as in decades past, while feeling less comfortable and holding less interest in teaching about LGBTQ+ related topics through literature. The rise in state and local-level book banning undoubtedly is a key variable in these trends. While fear is a spillover effect, so is resistance to censorship. We need exemplars of teachers and librarians talking back to local and state policies or maneuvering

around them (Cockcroft, 2023). Sachdeva et al. (2023) argue for developing teachers' "embodied capital" – long-term dispositions that support intellectual freedom and access to information – as an antidote to self-censorship in troubling times.

Our work aims to contribute to the literature by examining the influence of teachers' identities and positionalities on their curricular choices, specifically the work of problematic author Sherman Alexie. Overall, and especially in our current context, more research is needed to understand how and why teachers approach problematic issues or authors. Do they self-censor discussion surrounding problematic authors – especially men – via excising the work from the curricula or teaching the work as usual? What forms of embodied capital – a disposition towards intellectual freedom, critical conversation, and transformative inquiry – take shape via curriculum decisions in our current context?

Critical Whiteness Studies and Positioning

In our exploration of how teacher identities affect curricular decisions, Whiteness emerged as a central material concept. We thus draw on Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) as our theoretical framework to help us understand the ways individuals position themselves within the structures of schooling and society and especially how they call upon intersectional identities. Crenshaw (1989) initially framed intersectionality to note "how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis" (p. 140), especially as related to the interpretation of Black women's experiences.

Critical Whiteness Studies builds from Crenshaw's (1989) work and allows space for considering how race and gender overlap in nuanced ways to affect individuals' experiences. This framework helped us discern further how teachers were both interpreting the Alexie

situation through their social positions, particularly related to gender and race, and how those interpretations affected their instructional decisions. Researchers have, for years, suggested that teachers' professional decisions are influenced by who they are as individuals (see, for example, Gee, 2001). Teacher identity formation is a dynamic and ongoing process influenced by shifting personal and contextual variables (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Britzman, 2003), suggesting the need for ongoing reflection, self-assessment, and questioning of beliefs, assumptions, and truths (Smagorinsky et al., 2004).

Because the participants we focus on in this article identified as white and operate within the dominant institution of Whiteness while also often questioning and disrupting that system, we explicitly situate our work in the second wave of Critical Whiteness Studies (Lensmire, 2017; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Berchini, 2019). Rooted in the work of Scholars of Color who identified the social construction of Whiteness and explored endemic racism such as W.E.B. Dubois, CWS defines Whiteness as a system that "created, reproduced, and normalized white supremacy" (Twine & Gallagher, 2008, p. 10), where white supremacy refers to the privileging of white bodies and to the creation and oppression of 'others.' The second wave of CWS emerged as a reaction to its initial era in which white people were categorized as uniformly resistant and race-evasive. Scholars in the second wave proclaimed, however, "pigeonholing White people in essentializing ways does little to alter the racist frameworks that structure society" (p. 5). Instead, this phase of CWS challenges white people to "stop *always* and *only* looking to people of color in our learning and thinking about race" (Tanner, 2019, p. 184) and instead to reflect on the complicated nature of Whiteness as a dominating system that socializes them as well. The second wave posits a more complex mode of being in which nuanced identities are recognized and in which there is room for disrupting oppressive ideologies. As Schieble (2012) writes, such

a lens allows us to "view white identity construction as complexly located within an assemblage of Discourses" and "makes space for white people to perform alternative identities" (p. 214).

Jupp, Berry, and Lensmire (2016) further delineated White Teacher Identity Studies, which they note developed alongside CWS in the 1980s and 1990s. The first wave of this branch "documented and critically emphasized White teachers' articulation of race-evasive identities" which "served to describe, substantiate, and document White teachers' evasions, resistances, and denials of the saliency of race, White identities, White privileges, or whiteness inherent in knowledge and social institutions" (p. 1159). Positioning became apparent in the studies from this era, tracking how individuals discursively shielded themselves from recognizing racism and complicity. For example, McIntyre (1997) detailed a "culture of whiteness" (p. 121) that often characterizes the speech of white women. Haviland (2008) drew on discourse analysis to illustrate how teachers maintain power by engaging in "White educational discourse" that is "powerful yet power-evasive" (p. 44). And, Frankenburg (1993) documented the "discursive repertoires" (p. 139) of the women in her study which ranged from those that were unseen and focused on sameness to those that were "race cognizant," and acknowledged "that race makes a difference in people's lives and . . . that racism is a significant factor in shaping contemporary U.S. society" (p. 157). Such women often positioned themselves as feminists or politically left when sharing their thoughts.

Extending the investigation of white talk and positioning in CWS, we also draw on positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), a tool that affords exploring how speakers locate and identify themselves in a social interaction. In conversation, "positioning can be understood as the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (p. 16). A person calls upon a position to

demonstrate for others how they are describing their role, and they use socially recognizable roles to make their stance easily known. For instance, the role of a teacher is easily understood and solicits general agreement in terms of the duties and responsibilities of the one embodying the role. Conversations and, subsequently, positions typically follow a storyline "which is usually taken for granted by those taking part in the episode" (p. 6) and positions can "emerge 'naturally' out of the conversational and social context" (p. 18) or they can be asserted intentionally. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) noted that "deliberate self-positioning occurs in every conversation where one wants to express his/her personal identity [and] achieve specific goals" (p. 24-5). We found positioning theory a valuable heuristic when our participants expanded on their positions as teachers to include details of their individual and social identities, particularly their whiteness and gender. As conceptualized by Johnson (2013), teachers can reinscribe or interrupt the dominant racial and gendered subjectivities available to them.

Thus, we consider white teachers capable of both reinscribing *and interrupting* whiteness. Rather than placing white teachers in uniformly deficit ways – always race- or color-evasive in ideology and classroom practice – we rely on CWS, particularly the work of Lensmire (2017), Jupp and Slattery (2010), and Berchini (2019), to view white teachers as complex, capable of reproducing domination or of going "off script" and advancing anti-racist aims. Our study focuses on teachers, white women in particular, selecting or not the work of a popular and problematic Indigenous male author of color, and particularly the identities and positions that validate or problematize their choices.

Methods

The current study is part of a larger research project examining the curriculum choices of secondary ELA teachers with respect to the work of Sherman Alexie (Cook et al., 2022). In the

broader research, we distributed a survey to secondary ELA teachers across the United States. We then conducted follow-up interviews with a sample of those who responded. We further describe our approach below.

Participants

77 secondary ELA teachers (grades 6-12) returned our survey. Of these 77, 63 initially agreed to be contacted for an interview. Of the 18 interview participants we selected (see procedures), two identified as men and 16 as women. Likewise, 16 identified as white, one as Black, and one as Indigenous. Participants chose the interview format (phone or virtual) and were given questions ahead of time. One participant chose to send written responses to our interview questions because of scheduling difficulties.

Materials

We created two interview protocols, one for teachers who no longer taught Alexie and one for those who continued to teach him. We asked questions that explored participants' reasoning behind their decisions to include or exclude Alexie's work ("Why have you decided to teach Alexie's work in your class?" or "Why have you decided to stop teaching Alexie's work in your class?"); questions exploring important changes made to the curriculum in the wake of Alexie's sexual misconduct ("Have you changed your approach to teaching Alexie? If so, can you describe a specific change?" or "What does your curriculum look like now that you no longer teach Alexie?"); questions exploring the determining factors in their decision ("What are the major factors influencing your decision to remove Alexie from your curriculum?" or "What are the major factors influencing your decision to keep teaching Alexie?"); and questions exploring tensions or contradictions with continuing or suspending the teaching of Alexie

("What do you think you are gaining or losing by (not) teaching Alexie?"). Each of the interviews followed a semi-structured format and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Procedures

To distribute the survey, we posted or sent via email a research study announcement to 1) the social media accounts and email listservs of professional organizations concerned with the teaching of English 2) other ELA teacher educators in our professional networks with a request that they forward our announcement to secondary ELA teachers who might be interested in participating and 3) our own professional social media accounts.

In selecting and recruiting interview participants from the pool of 63, we strove for diversity, especially with regard to geographic location, grade level, type of school, and, to the extent possible, gender and racial identification. Another important criterion for interview selection was that the teachers had previously taught Alexie's work *and knew* of his serial sexual misconduct. For instance, using the survey responses, we filtered and did not recruit teachers who 1) had not previously taught Alexie but knew of his sexual misconduct and 2) had previously taught Alexie but seemed unaware of his sexual misconduct.

In this article, we focus on the interview data because the conversational form allowed participants to reason at length about their teaching decisions, including how their identities influenced their decisions to include or exclude Alexie's work. Of the 18 teachers we interviewed, nine remained committed to teaching Alexie, and nine made the decision to no longer teach him. We wanted a similar number of interviews across the two categories (teach, no longer teach) to ensure that various perspectives within them were represented. Additionally, this equal breakdown closely approximated the percentages of those who continued to teach and those who no longer chose to teach Alexie in the larger survey. We used three cycles of

recruiting (from the pool of 63 participants) over a period of six weeks before 18 participants agreed to be interviewed. For teachers who no longer taught Alexie, we invited nine who expressed an interest in being interviewed, and all nine agreed. In contrast, we invited 32 teachers who still taught Alexie before nine agreed to be interviewed.

Methodology, Data Reduction, and Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We used the qualitative coding software Dedoose to collaboratively code the interview transcripts. To develop a code book for consistent and reliable data analysis, we began with open coding on two select interview transcripts. We then met as a research team to compare and refine codes from the open coding process. This helped us generate an initial code book. We then coded two interviews separately using the codebook, meeting afterward to further refine and build axial codes (Saldaña, 2016). All transcripts were coded by two members of the research team who met to discuss code agreement. The entire three-person research team met weekly for six months to discuss emerging themes and preliminary analysis.

One thematic code that emerged across the interviews was *level of conviction*, a code we applied when participants described the degree of their commitment or decisiveness with respect to teaching Alexie. When examining this code in more detail, we noticed that participants, particularly white women, framed their decisions using explicit self-positioning (Frankenberg, 1993) that highlighted the role gender and racial identity played in their curricular decisions. These instances of explicit self-positioning – "as a woman" or "as a white person" – became sub-codes related to positionality. We returned to the data set and re-coded for positionality, specifically 1) how participants self-identified and 2) how that identification connected to their choices regarding Alexie. This resulted in another set of sub-codes that clarified the relationship

between positionality and decisions regarding Alexie's work. These sub-codes included "solidarity", "inclusion", "removal", "refusal", and "hypocrisy." The sub-codes surfaced tensions within the positionality codes and became the focus of our analysis. Overall, the organization of our codes and our coding processes allowed for nuance and fluidity across the data set because the positionality codes – "as a white woman," for instance – were connected to different, sometimes contradictory, decisions regarding Alexie's work. The fact that positionality means different things to different people and leads them to make different, sometimes contradictory, curricular decisions reflects the theoretical insights of second-wave whiteness studies (see Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Jupp et al., 2016) – namely that white people are capable of both reinscribing and interrupting dominant identity scripts through ordinary daily actions, including text selection.

Researcher Positionalities

As previously stated, all three researchers in this study identify as white and cisgender, two as men and one as a woman. Our stories of personal struggle with the Alexie issue open this article, illustrating that though we are all white, we have complex intersectional identities that have affected our work. Brandon and Mike consider how their work as white men and as parents challenges them to interrogate the impact of their own curricular decisions, while Author 2's own experiences with sexual harassment as a white woman conflict with her commitment to inclusion and diversity. All three of us prepare PSTs to enter grades 6–12 classrooms. Within our programs, we use young adult literature (YAL) and prioritize the critical study of texts and the contexts and societies texts reflect and circulate within. Each of us has taught Alexie's work in the past, in high school and teacher education classrooms with both undergraduate and graduate students. Since learning of Alexie's sexual misconduct, we have, each in our own ways, truly

struggled with how to proceed as teachers. We recognize and appreciate the pull from all sides – to drop Alexie entirely; to teach his work through the lens of gender and power; or to teach his work as a powerful piece of literature separate from his personal life. In fact, our own struggles are what brought us to this research. While two of us have chosen to remove Alexie, at least temporarily, from our courses, we continue to question our motivations and appropriate paths forward. Mike, for example, has received questions about Alexie's absence, both from students who are aware and those who are unaware of the allegations. Ashley's experiences with sexual harassment as a white woman conflict with her commitment to inclusion and diversity. She has continued teaching his work to engage students in discussions of sexual assault, rape culture and patriarchy, which have not always gone well. Student push-back and concerns over further harming students who are survivors of sexual assault continue to complicate our decisions. We also struggle with how our whiteness mediates our classroom decisions and this research more generally. Following the tenets of CWS, we recognize that small story positioning related to gender and power can be potentially liberatory but also hide relations of power and domination. We tried to be sensitive to these realities during the coding and analysis process. We wrote reflective memos after our analysis sessions that incorporated insights from CWS in relation to the data we encountered and our own positionality. These reflective processes helped us notice when our interpretations about motivations might be misguided – for instance, we wondered many times if there were other reasons why a teacher might continue to teach Alexie with a business-as-usual approach, reasons that might upend any easy interpretations about teachers reproducing gender violence or silencing discussions through exclusion.

More generally, we continue to wonder if we, three white teacher educators, are the best people to be undertaking this work in the first place. Aligned with CWS, we are trying to

understand how we both collude with white supremacy and disrupt it in our daily teaching and research lives. It's not an accident that most of our participants are white women. In addition to echoing the demographics of the profession, our professional networks are white; mainstream and national organizations for teaching English are mostly white. Voices are missing from this work, and we recognize those limitations. We hope that sharing a valuable but incomplete story through this manuscript leads to the sharing of more stories and experiences from others.

Findings

We have organized the findings regarding gendered and racial positioning separately. Along with many of our participants, we recognize that the decision to keep teaching Alexie or not is an intersectional problem. However, for clarity, we have opted to first show findings related to gendered positioning, followed by racial positioning grounded in acknowledgments of whiteness. The gendered positioning was explicit, emanated from feminist commitments, and led to varied pedagogical decisions regarding Alexie's work. We felt it best to separate these throughlines so readers could see the various ways participants used small stories related to gender to explain and think through pedagogical choices. Next, we present the problem of whiteness and teaching Alexie. These participants viewed their decisions as a kind of curricular double-bind: Alexie underlined the problem of at once expressing solidarity with women and undoing the whiteness of standard ELA curricula. We return to an intersectional framing in the discussion and implications section.

Gendered Positions & Teaching Alexie

In this section, we examine how participants used gendered talk to position themselves relative to their curricular decisions about Alexie's work. "As a woman…" served as both a mechanism of deliberate self-positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) and small story

narrative (Bamberg, 2006) that created multiple and even conflicting storylines of agency. Participants framed themselves intentionally as women, which led to varied curricular decisions about Alexie's work. Often, the stance was used to express solidarity with and advocate for other women, including students. Participants relied on the phrase "as a woman" to create their storyline and establish the social position, recognized by the interviewer, that they wished to maintain. These gendered positions were often marked by a "willful" advocacy (Guyotte et al., 2020) that took different forms in the classroom. Some teachers removed Alexie from the curriculum as an explicit move of solidarity with other women. Others used Alexie's life and texts to directly confront issues of gender-based violence. In these two stances, following the work of Truman et al. (2020), we find a pedagogy of "no", a refusal to accept the normative and patriarchal logic of curricula and positioning of teachers. A third stance, unique compared to the other two, was closely connected to gender-based vulnerability: keeping Alexie in the curriculum but staying silent about his sexual misconduct as a way to protect themselves and their students from ridicule in classrooms full of men. This third stance underlines the sexism that undergirds curricula and schooling and, thus, the need for willful and strategic advocacy and activism (Guyotte et al., 2020).

Solidarity through Removal

For many of the women in our study, removing Alexie from the curriculum was a way to express solidarity with other women, to tell and perform a storyline of agency in the classroom, troubling "the notion that women are always already victims" in relation to the sexual misconduct and violence of men (Johnson & Kerkhoff, 2018, p. 5). One participant who elected to stop teaching Alexie noted, "my position as a woman makes me more aware of trying to call out harassment or, in this case, somebody misusing their power […] I suppose as a woman, I just

feel I need to be aware of these things and take things seriously." Situating herself discursively *as a woman* communicated a socially recognizable role. For this teacher, removing Alexie's work from the classroom was a way to acknowledge that a man "did terrible things" to other women and to actively respect those who have suffered from gender-based violence and harassment. Another teacher similarly noted that removing Alexie from the curriculum aligned with her "pro-woman" identity, supported her commitment to believing women who came forward, and advanced her professional goal of creating positive learning environments for young women on her campus.

> I'm also somebody who's pretty strongly pro-woman and somebody who thinks we should believe women when they come out with these allegations […] And especially with some issues our girls are having and just the treatment of some Native American women in general [we] want to portray more positive relationships or healthy relationships in the things we read […] women should be respected and treated right basically. So that has probably added a little bit to my choosing not to teach him.

This teacher's perspective mirrors Alsup's (2019) conception of teacher identity as a holistic yet evolving relationship between personal and professional selves. It was out of the question for this teacher to leave her personal commitments to believing women out of her professional decisions related to Alexie – an author she and her students enjoyed. Her personal and professional positioning equated to removing Alexie. Echoing this perspective, another teacher said that excluding Alexie's work was a difficult decision but ultimately reflected her alliance with survivors of sexual misconduct and assault: "the heart of the issue for me is just yeah, how can I ... What is supporting survivors of sexual violence, sexual assault, what does that mean for me as a consumer of whether it be art, or literature or teaching tools, what does that

mean for me?” For this teacher, not giving an abuser a curricular platform showed solidarity with survivors. For this group of participants, removing Alexie’s work from the classroom emerged from a pro-women, pro-survivor, pro-#MeToo stance and was consistent with what Ball and Forzani (2009) call the “moral imperative of the role” of the professional teacher (p. 500). During the interviews, they used small stories to create and maintain holistic teacher identities (Alsup, 2019) and to interpret their actions through those themes, a blend of personal commitment and professional vision.

There were some participants, however, who avowed a pro-women, feminist identity who regretted removing Alexie from the curriculum. Like the students in Spanke’s classroom (2018) who had read *Absolutely True Diary* and engaged in critical conversations about the author’s misconduct, our participants wondered what good it would do to “censor art in the name of advocacy” (p. 104). Alexie’s continued visibility might, they thought in hindsight, have led to meaningful learning about #MeToo, gender, and power.

> He just kind of disappeared from our curriculum. Or my curriculum anyway. And so there's never been any discussion of why we're not teaching him anymore with the students or whatever. I had that conversation, kind of one on one, with some students who have asked or brought up *Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. But, you know, he's just kind of gone. He did some things that were wrong and that's why we're not teaching him anymore. So I guess, I don't know […] let’s just not disappear him with no discussion either.

For a handful of participants, removing Alexie had the opposite effect of the one intended. Instead of serving as an explicit move of empowerment and solidarity, his removal silenced critical dialogue with students about #MeToo, gender-based violence, and the politics of

instructional decisions. For others, removing Alexie's work remained a "willful" and intentional stance to interrupt patriarchal culture and curriculum (Guyotte et al., 2020) – they had no second thoughts.

Solidarity through Inclusion

Thinking through the complications of Alexie's work "as a woman" did not always mean removing his texts from the curriculum. Like the students in Spanke's (2018) classroom, some teachers in our study felt one could *still* teach Alexie and fight "for the rights of women and the victims of abuse" (p. 104). Thus, positioning oneself "as a woman" was a nuanced stance across our data set. Speaking explicitly from the perspective "as a woman," these teachers believed that keeping Alexie could center conversations about sexual assault and gender-based violence. Describing herself as "a huge supporter of the #MeToo movement" and as having experienced gender-based harassment, one teacher said,

> I'm really glad that the women who were his victims spoke out […] I'm really glad [that] people are being called out. This is a real thing that happens in women's lives all the time. And I think it's part of a larger, important discussion about violence against women and people who fall outside the spectrum of normal sexual identity. So I don't take what he did lightly at all […] it really bothered me. But, I definitely still plan on using him [Alexie]. I think it's important to give credence and make space for discussions about sexism and sexual violence and the sort of exploitation of power that goes on with people in […] the creative field where women are so vulnerable and the hierarchy is predominantly male.

For this participant, teaching Alexie aligned with her identity and was completely consistent with personal commitments to survivors and the #MeToo movement. Giving his work space in the

curriculum allowed for important conversations “about sexism and sexual violence” and gendered hierarchies in the creative arts. Similarly, another teacher positioned her decision to teach Alexie as one aligned with her personal commitments to feminism and #MeToo. Teaching Alexie facilitated crucial conversations with students about victim-blaming and consent. She noted that

> being a strong believer in the #MeToo movement and feminism […] I really wanted to see what my students had to say about some of these issues. Using Alexie’s text, we talked about #MeToo, we talked about consent and what that means, we talked about victim blaming [...] they even brought up Brett Kavanaugh's hearings, and it was a whole big class talk of pretty much everything else that's going on at that time. Which was great, and super powerful for me to just witness them talk about that.

Another teacher viewed her gender identity as the main reason why she wanted to open up conversations about sexism, #MeToo, and gender violence through Alexie’s text. Noting that “as a woman” she is “targeted” by men like Alexie, she felt a particularly powerful obligation to make his work visible: “I wonder if I was a male if I would feel the same way? But I think that as a woman I feel more comfortable in some ways, because I'm the gender that is targeted by Alexie, basically, in saying let's look at this together and see the problems.” For these teachers, positions related to their feminist identity became the vehicle through which to narrate meaningful classroom action or possible action related to Alexie’s work.

The participants taking up the two stances noted above used text selection intentionally to interrupt normalized and gendered identity scripts of academic women “passively encountering problems [and] making sacrifices” (Guyotte et al., 2020, p. 3). Their identities were closely allied to a collective refusal to say “no” to teaching Alexie or to refuse pedagogies tied to the

"patriarchal logic" of normative curricula (Truman et al., 2020, p. 2). Reflecting on "no" and refusal as a literacy practice, Truman et al. (2020) argue that "moments of no can create a lot of space: to draw a breath, to open out and open up the potential for something else to happen" (p. 1). These teachers were creating and enacting identities of possibility through refusal.

Vulnerable Inclusion

Other teachers continued to teach Alexie but did so because they felt and continue to feel vulnerable, primarily *because of* their gender identity. One teacher, for instance, felt that her identity as a woman made her vulnerable in the context of talking about Alexie's sexual misconduct and, more generally, gender-based violence and sexism with her students.

> As a CIS gender, heterosexual, privileged woman, a lot of my advocacy and social justice work is around areas where I have power. So I have class power, I have race power, I have sexuality power, so those are the issues I'm often asking my students to think about more critically [...] I feel like my gender advocacy is pretty... My students are getting a pretty low-key version of it[. I'm] reserved in areas where I feel like I have less social power, and maybe more vocal in areas where I feel like I can use my privilege to advocate for others.

Having less "gender power" compared to her "race power" and "sexuality power" prompted her to avoid conversations about the author's sexual misconduct. Her role-based and personal positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) created an identity that was vulnerable in particular ways around gender-based issues, leading her to exclude discussions of the allegations with her students. She kept teaching Alexie as if nothing had happened.

Other participants expressed gender-based vulnerability when imagining teaching Alexie and talking about his sexual misconduct in class discussion. They feared, in particular, that

young men might undermine these conversations with dismissive comments and make other students feel unsafe. One teacher committed to teaching Alexie and discussing gender-based violence wavered at this prospect: “There's a bit of hesitation [when I] think about male students who will be like, ‘Oh, well she's just being a victim, and women's rights, blah, blah, blah.’” Continuing this line of thinking, another teacher worried that discussing Alexie’s misconduct would provoke the ire of young men.

> I can see instances in which, maybe trying to address this as an issue would lead some students to claim that it's not an issue which I think could spiral quickly into something that I'm not comfortable dealing with in my classroom. Well, I'm envisioning a few students, probably male students, making that comment. Then, I'm envisioning the reaction of other students, probably primarily female […] It was quickly turning into a situation where I could see it just becoming a fight […] I feel like it would become a situation where I would have to look at a kid and be like, how do you not see this is wrong?

A convenient interpretation (Berchini, 2019) would suggest that these teachers, out of fear, have “given up” a feminist project or activist stance by avoiding the topic of Alexie’s sexual misconduct (Guyotte et al., 2020). However, a more fruitful and interesting reading is that these teachers are thinking and living strategically in patriarchal contexts where (the threat of) sexism and gender violence is ever-present. An important piece of this context includes normative ELA curricula that systematically position the perspectives of men as essential and foundational for citizenship and enlightenment – as dangerously beyond reproach.

Whiteness, Diversity, and Teaching Alexie

Beyond gender, racial positioning played an important role in the choices teachers made and in how they justified their choices relative to Alexie's work. Whether teachers expressed confusion or a firm commitment to teach or not teach Alexie, whiteness came up frequently: in particular, the participants' whiteness and the whiteness of curricula. Participants often positioned themselves "as a white woman" or "as a white person" wanting to express solidarity with other women by eliminating Alexie from the curriculum. Their feminist commitments, however, were complicated by their awareness of whiteness – they were reluctant to censor an Indigenous author. Responses to this dilemma were varied. Positioning themselves explicitly as white, some teachers eliminated Alexie but were intentional about finding replacement texts that honored Indigenous voices. Others kept Alexie because they did not know of other Indigenous authors and wanted to keep their curriculum diverse. Still others, calling attention to their whiteness, felt hypocritical at the thought of censoring Alexie, especially given the visibility of problematic white men in the curriculum. Similar to Johnson's (2013) work on white teacher identity performances, our teachers "confound[ed] static, deficit portrayals" of white teachers who are "deficit, resistant, naive, and ignorant" (p. 6). Teachers in this study used text selection to both "counter and reinscribe what it means to be a White teacher" (p. 9), in the process complicating dominant, monolithic scripts of white teacher identity.

The recurring story noted above – of white women wanting to eliminate a problematic male author but hesitating at the thought of censoring an author of color – is represented in the following excerpt.

> I suppose my position as a woman makes me more aware of trying to call out harassment or, in this case, somebody misusing their power. I'm not Native American, so I wasn't

> thinking of it in racial terms, particularly, but I can see that somebody might say that you as a white person just chucked this particular Native American book out of your curriculum [...] I have other Native American books [and] we've done some different things in the curriculum this year so it's not like we just sort of decided "we're just not going to do Native Americans anymore." But, yeah, I suppose as a woman, I just feel I need to be aware of these things and take things seriously.

For this teacher, leaning into her commitments "as a woman" to eliminate Alexie and "call out" harassment is made easier because she included other Indigenous authors. Another teacher noted the demographics of her students – a significant number "Native American" – complicated the decision-making process: "So, I'm white and I'm really aware of that where I teach[.] That does [add to] my thinking a little bit more of whether taking Alexie out of the curriculum is the correct thing to do or not." She decided to remove Alexie, ultimately, because of her "pretty strongly pro-woman" identity and her commitment to believing women when they come forward with allegations. This teacher seemed aware that canceling Alexie may reinscribe the whiteness of curricula in her school context (Truman et al., 2020), but decided that as a woman who "tak[es] allegations seriously" removing Alexie was of utmost importance.

Going further, another teacher noted that taking action regarding Alexie surfaced tensions between feminist commitments and undoing whiteness. Removing Alexie from the curriculum, she felt, might be viewed as "white gatekeeping" by her students and school community.

> I don't think he's worth keeping. I just think that there needs to be a plan of replacement […] Out of 45 teachers, I'm one of seven white teachers. That also influences my decisions regarding who is being represented in my curriculum. I have to be hyper-aware

> […] am I gatekeeping as a white person saying I'm not going to let an Indigenous author in the room? Am I allowed to make that decision? Those things factored in.

Later in the interview, she noted that removing Alexie from her library "forced me to branch out. He's off the shelf […] I have had to do research on who are some other Native American authors that middle school readers could read. They're out there. And that's something I'm still trying to figure out." Following a similar theme, another teacher reasoned that Alexie's downfall could be viewed as an opportunity for white teachers to explore other Indigenous voices: "[Sherman Alexie is] the most prominent maybe Native American author, but he's not the only one, of course. He's not the only 21st-century one, or late 20th-century one […] there are plenty of other Native American authors, particularly Native American women authors, or queer Native authors who are like waving in the distance saying, 'You know, hey, we're here too.'" For these participants, the Alexie scandal provided an opportunity to learn more about Indigenous authors but also exposed the shortcomings of an (ELA teacher) education steeped in whiteness (Berchini, 2019). Alexie was the most prominent and, often, the only Indigenous writer they studied – a form of tokenism that attests to the continued absence or misrepresentation of IPOC in ELA curricula (Stanbrough et al., 2020; Keeler, 2018). Keeler (2018), warning of this danger, noted, "reliance on a singular perspective and narrative has its limits" (para. 50) and can, in fact, produce harm by reinforcing harmful stereotypes and views of IPOC. Yet, as one teacher in our study shared, "he was number one. Everybody knew who Sherman Alexie was. We could check that [racial] box."

For many teachers in our study, saying "no" to Alexie surfaced a whiteness problem – they had never learned about other Indigenous authors in their (English teacher) education. Saying no, for some, also presented an opportunity to undo whiteness and patriarchy (Butler,

1999) through the ordinary act of text selection. These teachers were willing to dwell in "white discomfort" long enough to "subvert, counter, and even exceed the raced subjectivities" (Johnson, 2013, p. 31) made available by white (teacher) education by seeking out stronger connections to Indigenous writers.

For other teachers, any feminist commitments were muted compared to the obligations they strongly felt as white people to keep teaching Alexie, more or less as they always had, as if the allegations didn't exist. They cited a strong feeling of hypocrisy connected to their whiteness. One teacher reasoned that had Alexie been white, her decision to keep him would have been completely different: "if it was just another white man I might be more apt to write it off [...] the thing that makes me less willing to take him out is because he is a Native American author." Another teacher likened eliminating Alexie to oppressing the oppressed. In curricula full of problematic white men, censoring Alexie would be hypocritical, a "strange irony that we expect the oppressed not to oppress, and hold them to a higher standard." Others noted that their decision to keep Alexie was tied to a sense of duty and moral obligation "as a white person." One teacher, for instance, said, "As a white person, yes, I would say that it [keeping Alexie] is more tied to my belief that we need to look at people who have been underrepresented and oppressed and lift them up instead of moseying along with our white narrative." These teachers understood eliminating Alexie as reifying an already heavily white ELA curriculum. In wishing to maintain what they viewed as a progressive white teacher identity, they opted to keep teaching Alexie. More concerned with interrupting dominant scripts of white teacher identity (Johnson, 2013), they remained relatively unconcerned about Alexie's sexual misconduct.

For others, teaching Alexie was more influenced by what they did not know "as a white person" than by any overt commitment to maintaining a progressive white teacher identity.

These teachers expressed regret at not knowing (m)any Indigenous authors, which influenced their decision to keep Alexie in the curriculum. One participant, a white woman, noted "it's my own fault [...] I don't know that many texts." Another teacher argued that problematic, canonical authors remain curricular fixtures because some teachers rely too heavily on familiar texts instead of reading widely. "I think a lot of teachers maybe struggled with Alexie because that was one of the books that they taught, right? Like what are you teaching this year? I'm teaching this book and this book and four books a year -- that's great." In her work on the influence of institutional structures on teacher identity, Johnson (2009) noted that some teachers choose to "just hold on" and maintain the status quo in terms of the daily habitus of the teacher life, including text selection. For some participants, the daily habitus included white curricula and limited knowledge of authors of color. They "just held on" and taught the texts they were used to, even if the authors of those texts were problematic men.

Discussion and Implications

Across the data set, we found teachers using text selection to disrupt the dominant identity scripts of both whiteness and gender, attesting to Johnson's (2009) argument that "[t]here is wiggle room" for teachers "to refuse their lines" (p. 161). Several of our participants refused normative scripts of gender performance in academia, what Guyotte et al. (2020) describe as "passively encountering problems[,] making sacrifices," and not disturbing the waters (p. 3). Many of our teachers positioned themselves as women who willfully and self-consciously used text selection to advocate for other women and disrupt the patriarchal logic of ELA curricula—even if they gave up a beloved author or deconstructed his pedestal through critical teaching approaches.

Other participants explicitly viewed their decision to teach or not teach Alexie in gendered *and racial* terms. Some teachers viewed the situation, understandably perhaps, as a sort of curricular double-bind. Can one express solidarity with women and still teach Alexie? Can one undo whiteness and eliminate an Indigenous author? Those teachers who navigated these tensions used the Alexie problem as an opportunity to learn more about other Indigenous authors with powerful stories to tell, in the process pushing against both the whiteness (Dyches, 2018) and selective tokenism (Stanbrough et al., 2020) of ELA curricula that misrepresent and harm IPOC. Critiquing the tendency to rely on one author, Van Alst (2018) noted, "Europeans have been incapable of seeing the diversity of nations and communities and people in this hemisphere… One isn't going to be good enough anymore" (para. 10-13). The participants' refusal of Alexie created opportunities for something else to happen in their ELA classrooms, perhaps a rethinking of one representative writer.

As reflected in our participants' struggles, the question of whether or not to keep teaching Alexie is an intersectional problem and should be approached as such to minimize curricular exclusion and violence. Our data suggest that teachers grapple with intersectional positioning and, as a result, foreground their gendered or racialized identities. This raises important questions for researchers. What do we make of the teachers who felt it was their duty "as a white person" to keep teaching Alexie? Were these teachers, unwittingly perhaps, also reproducing patriarchy and gender-based violence in their classrooms by keeping him on a pedestal? And what about the teachers who refused to teach Alexie because of their feminist commitments and gender identity? Did they marginalize and silence an important Indigenous voice? How might teachers make space for both commitments in their classrooms – commitments to de-center whiteness *and*

promote gender equity and respond meaningfully to gender-based violence? These questions warrant further consideration.

Whereas studies with white teachers often reveal that teachers use “white talk” and “white educational discourse” to deflect racism, we found that teachers positioned themselves in complex ways relative to their whiteness (Haviland, 2008). Many teachers in this study – echoing the arguments of critical whiteness studies scholars – positioned themselves as white and aware of the responsibility to select texts whose authors and characters would represent the identities and interests of all students (Lensmire, 2017; Berchini, 2019). In particular, those who refused Alexie often viewed their decision as an opportunity to study other Indigenous writers. We think this is a hopeful sign and further evidence that white teachers can interrupt the whiteness of the literary canon, a small but positive step towards dismantling racial oppression in schools (Berchini, 2019). Our study also suggests that some teachers who identify as white women use text selection and positioning to create a storyline of agency and to identify as a particular kind of teacher – one who often wants to create solidarity with other women and an inclusive curriculum of diverse voices. We find hope in these storylines of teachers who bring their deepest commitments to gender equity to the classroom – a move that will benefit every student they teach.

We must also interrogate the text selections and decisions of some of the teachers we encountered in this study – while taking into account the contextual nuances of the workplace that influence the decisions teachers make. If teachers continue to teach Alexie with a business-as-usual approach, we worry that this sends powerful and negative messages to students. Will powerful men ever be held accountable for their actions? In a world that recently re-elected a President credibly accused of sexual assault (PBS, 2024), this question needs to be asked

consistently and with conviction. Our students need to believe that the answer is “yes” and that our ELA classrooms can be a place of accountability. We as teacher educators can do more in our classes and programs to advance the “embodied capital” of teachers in the form of taking intellectual freedom and critical, difficult conversations seriously. In the case of Alexie, this might take the form of keeping his work in the curriculum but being sensitive to the abuses that have transpired, the women who have spoken out against him, how patriarchy pulses through the literary industry, and how consumers and teachers might resist. Or, it might take the form of thoughtful and reflective replacement of Alexie with other Indigenous writers – a process that our students might take part in and reflect on themselves.

We recognize that a limitation of this study is that we are lacking the black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) voices in our participant pool. Future research should explore how teachers of Color engage in text selection as related to problematic authors and identity. Our study does indicate, however, that there is a vital role that identity plays in curriculum selection for this sample. When teachers name the connections between identity and curricular decision making, they help their students and communities understand pedagogy as always already political and value-laden. Teachers bring whole selves (Alsup, 2019) to their work, and personal commitments can be a driving force for change.

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Ashley S. Boyd is a professor and chair for the Department of Teaching and Learning at VCU. A former secondary English language arts teacher, Ashley's scholarship examines practicing teachers' social justice pedagogies and their critical content knowledge and explores how young adult literature is an avenue for cultivating students' critical literacies. Dr. Boyd addresses educational inequities and opportunities for social action through qualitative research and analysis. Prior to joining the School of Education at VCU, she served in several administrative roles, including Director of undergraduate studies and Director of university general education.

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