Race Talk in the Classroom:
Whiteness, Emotionality, and Antiracism

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Dedication

To my family, especially to Jack and Greta.
Abstract

Like many classroom teachers, I long understood antiracist pedagogy as white privilege pedagogy (McIntosh, 1988), where students must confess to their privilege to embrace antiracism. By leaving young white people with untenable models of understanding themselves as raced beings, this work has, to put it generously, come up short. Using critical ethnographic methods, I seek to make better sense of these sincere shortcomings by locating them in historical (Allen, 2012; Roediger, 1991) and emotional (Boler, 1999; Trainor, 2008; Zembylas, 2006) contexts.

I worked with ten white high school students over the final five months of their senior year. We attempted to work through the constrained and paradoxical ways they understood race and race talk. We worked through their struggles with the languages and patterns of race talk, their inadequate schooling on race, and their inability to manifest their antiracist values. I find that the discourses available to them, in particular white privilege pedagogy, limit their capacity to both imagine themselves as antiracist actors and take up antiracist actions. I suggest that by examining and unpacking the discursive binds attendant to their race talk (Pollock, 2004), and by making visible the historical and emotional contexts of their understandings of themselves as raced beings, educators can more effectively guide young white people toward antiracism.
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Chapter One

An Introduction

If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness? … We could say that any project that aims to dismantle or challenge the categories that are made invisible through privilege is bound to participate in the object of its critique. We might even expect such projects to fail, and be prepared to witness this failure as productive.

—Sara Ahmed

What I tried to do

I began teaching as my first job out of college. I was 23, idealistic, and I was hired to teach English in the high school from which I had graduated, affording me a false sense of competence. I brought with me my own expensive education, full of well-meaning and earnest teachers who worked to open my eyes to racism with, presumably, the best tools available. It was in the classroom that I came to appreciate, if not fully understand, the racisms inherent to American society. My students were almost entirely white like me, and I was a dangerous combination of good intentions and confidence.

As a white high school teacher, I used to believe that a kind of binary logic would overcome stubborn racisms. I believed that there were really only two ways to interpret racial inequality: either structural racisms cause racial inequality, or races are inherently unequal. Clearly my white high school students would not want to make that second claim, so my work on race should be relatively straightforward. I was to introduce them to racial inequalities so that they would recognize the structural racisms that I had recognized.

One of the first units I developed when I began teaching honors English to 11th graders involved Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (2003) and most of the first chapter of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993). My pedagogical goal was to contextualize
Bigger’s actions in their oppressive racist structure using Freire’s vocabulary and concepts from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this way I sought to foreclose the argument that racism is over. I believed if I could somehow demonstrate the existence of structural racism, handily identifiable using Freire, my students would be convinced. I believed I had “solved” the problem of teaching white kids about racism; I just had to prove the systemic nature of racism.

My classroom looked the way I believed it was supposed to look. My students were quiet, watchful, and circumspect in what they shared out loud, which I read as respect for and engagement with the subject matter. These were honors students, which meant they typically acted like they enjoyed English class, were “good” students, and were primarily white. They tended to be the kind of student who did their reading and handed their assignments in on time. They also tended to dutifully follow directions and desired to get the answers right. In most cases they were very easy to teach.

Yet our conversations about race followed a predictable and troubling pattern. A few students, often supported by a few others, would express skepticism about or resist outright my contextual read of *Native Son* in what became familiar ways. Some white students, typically young men, would push back by citing statistical or anecdotal exceptions, questioning the reality of these racist systems, or make non-verbal moves like exchanging knowing looks or side comments. I felt I could sometimes witness my lessons fail their sense of right and wrong, having come up against the rules of fairness, or their personal experiences of social power. The young white people also had a seductive common sense on their side. Their appeals to post-racialism, the wealth of LeBron James or Oprah, or the struggles of working-class whites, had a canny irrefutability to them.
In response, I or another “woke” student, typically a young woman, would counter them with the zeal and sincerity of any convert. Yet our arguments relied on less visible legacies of historic racisms and structural violences against which practiced counter-arguments were ready to hand. Sometimes these exchanges took on an implicitly personal tone, with the more aggressive comments mostly coming from students arguing that we must acknowledge white privilege. These students chastised their classmates. I recognized that I had sanctioned these comments and knew that they turned other students off. I also struggled to censure them. I worried I would embolden the other side or shut down the student herself. Everyone, including me, was anxious, on a knife’s edge during these conversations.

Commonly, these cross-ideological exchanges concerned language. A brave student might offer a question or observation and refer to “colored people.” I would interject and try to explain “people first” language, how “colored people” has become derogatory, how I understood (truly!) the slip of tongue, but that the phrase was not appropriate. I took pains to name this as an innocent mistake, even if another student responded first, but the damage was always already done. That student became suspected of being racist.

I understood my white students during these conversations in one of two ways; they had either already acknowledged the reality of systemic racism, or they needed to do so. I had little awareness of white students beyond these terms. Those who needed to do so fell along a continuum of resistance in my mind, from those who had not been paying attention to those who spent too much time in the darker corners of the internet. By and large these students and I got along well; I prided myself on being asked one year to be
the faculty advisor for a young conservatives club. But during our work with race, I oriented myself across a battlefield from them. My attitude could best be described as evangelism, as distasteful as that is to me. I believed I was doing god’s work.

The students needing convincing seemed identifiable if not by their spoken resistance, then by their physical posture. I looked for students who would avoid eye contact, doodle in their notebook, or make side comments to other students. I spent a great deal of energy carefully surveilling my students during these conversations, and I tended to over-surveil the young men. Occasionally I was surprised to read a conservative reflection from a young woman, and I was slow to recognize the biases of my criteria.

In many ways I believed I was “winning” at antiracist pedagogy. Our conversations mirrored and referenced national political discourses around race, which was exactly what I thought should happen. I was dealing with a difficult topic using a text some would consider impossible for most high school students. When I shared this work with colleagues and friends, I was praised for facilitating “open dialogue” about race.

I felt delighted when the conversation maintained a basic decency, as though that alone meant success. Moreover if these conversations were working, and I was making them work, I must be a good teacher. Much more importantly, by doing this work I was a good white teacher. I talked about this work with false modesty, humble-bragging about how challenging the work was, or complaining about how few students seemed affected by it. I was always affirmed about how hard it was, and that I was doing “good work.” In reality, it made little difference how effective my pedagogy was; so long as I was taking up this good work I was a good white teacher. This was a long sought-after relief to be sure, and it all but assured that the unit would remain in place with only cursory changes.
Yet even when these classroom conversations seemed to edge toward recognizing racism, or rather when the class make-up was such that those arguments prevailed, I felt unsatisfied, as did many students. We appeared to have arrived at a hard-fought goal, though it certainly didn’t feel that way. Even outspokenly antiracist students seemed caught; they knew that “not being racist” wasn’t enough, but they struggled to come up with anything to do beyond that. The overwhelming feeling after almost all of these conversations, those that went well and those that went poorly, was stagnation. We never seemed to get anywhere.

**What Happened**

In a dynamic familiar to many teachers who do classroom work with race, very few, if any, students converted. Further, very few white students seemed new to the conversations and white privilege model about race. Most came into my room having encountered some kind of antiracist pedagogy, often the “Invisible Knapsack,” and had their opinions of white privilege ready to hand. The students who accepted the antiracist framework of white privilege, those who identified as white allies especially, nodded along to classroom activities detailing racism and were vocal in small and large group conversations. They reinforced my lesson plans and occasionally provided additional stories or information to strengthen the case for the existence of racial inequality. Yet while these students, who typically brought their views with them, seemed to represent progress, it didn’t seem adequate. Even if they fully embraced their privilege, that move in itself didn’t seem to resonate much in their lives. I was also suspicious of their profession; it seemed too easy. I wondered if they were only trying to say what they were
supposed to say, or trying to alleviate their white guilt with no further purpose. I felt a nagging doubt that I was rehashing difficult conversations in unhelpful ways.

Problematically, as the goal of the unit was to convert reluctant white students to an antiracist paradigm, the students who resisted played the essential role of object-to-be-acted-upon and converted. When they shared arguments or concerns, I listened only so I might recognize and rebut them. A few students pushed back out loud, but most students stayed quiet during these exchanges. As the teacher facilitating these conversations, I was meant to be an impartial referee. Yet I needed students to resist out loud so I could provide my counter-arguments. Without verbal resistance, my role as converter was undermined.

At best, I engineered my lesson so the students provided these lessons to themselves and each other through research projects and presentations. At worst, I was asking them to mobilize white guilt to police their peers’ dissonant white voices into acknowledging white supremacy. My pedagogy was not interested in why these students resisted. At the time I failed to appreciate the complex and powerful forces behind white student silences and resistances, factors I now believe to be helpful in making sense of a wide range of aberrant student behavior in conversations about race. Had I not been bewildered by my own placated anxiety about race and my whiteness, I certainly would have recognized the structural shortcomings of this unit earlier.

My teaching lacked a critical perspective which could redirect my work toward examining dominant ideologies and whiteness itself. I struggled to escape the binary logic of neoliberal ideology, where one either was or was not a racist. Tellingly, not once during my early years of working to address race did I think to shift our focus away from
people of color, away from a privilege model that highlighted the subjugation of non-whites, casting whiteness as conqueror which must, out of guilt, atone for or return its ill-gotten gains. So long as I was engaged in white privilege pedagogy I didn’t have to confront antiracism at all. It took careful study, reflection, and conversation with scholars to recognize potential antiracist pedagogy unbound by neoliberalism.

Ultimately, whom I thought I should be as a good white person enabled and constrained my pedagogy. I believed my role as a white person was to convince other white people that racism was, like, a bad deal. I wasn’t always clear on how bad it was, or in what ways it was bad, and I gave suspiciously little thought to what might happen if I actually managed to convince other white people (to say nothing of how to encourage those who had already confessed). To be gentle with myself, I was following the example of my white educators and colleagues, all wise and compassionate teachers. We were all doing the work we knew to do, and while we celebrated each other, we also pushed through resistance from students, parents, and occasionally our co-workers or administrators. Doing any kind of antiracist work, any kind of social justice advocacy takes courage and tenacity and is worth celebrating. It is only in hindsight that this practice became self-evidently flawed, and it is only from this experience that I was able to develop my antiracist practice.

I believe the unit worked because it worked for me, and it similarly suffered from my limited self-awareness and limited understanding about the mechanisms of whiteness. I, like almost all of my students, was white, had attended a private, Catholic, and white grade school before this private, Catholic, and white high school. I had lived in white neighborhoods my entire life. The same expensive (and mostly white) college education I
received almost certainly lay ahead of them. The methods of white privilege pedagogy were accessible, familiar, and, especially now that I was on the other side of the classroom, tolerable. By paying careful attention to my students as well as by applying my own experience as a white student, I became skilled at facilitating these conversations and working to convince resistant students. I recognized these skills by how adeptly I was able to respond to student resistance, by my command of racial histories, statistics, and anecdotes, and by the affection my students and I (mostly) felt for each other throughout the work.

Yet despite becoming more and more practiced in this pedagogy, I felt like I was becoming more skilled at a failing venture. I felt like I was in a futile arms race with resistant students, where every argument served as something to counter without any argument ever landing. While I knew that my work in teaching *Native Son* was to locate Bigger Thomas as a native son of his oppressive environment, I became caught up in my role as a facilitator of these conversations and maintained little self-awareness of our work.

During my years of attempting to engage students about race, I was hindered by many of these dynamics, occasionally of my own doing. When I tried my hand at the white privilege model of racism early in my career, where antiracism was available to me as McIntosh’s knapsack (1988), I found little success; very few students converted. I regularly contended with protesting students, who persuasively called upon Western neoliberal notions of individuality and fairness, with the sinking feeling that however wrong I believed their conclusions, I couldn’t explain why. As a classroom teacher I often found myself struggling to articulate the differences between a conservative embrace of
individualism and meritocracy which celebrated colorblindness as an antiracist position, and on the other hand a slightly more progressive celebration of color and the confessions of white racism as antiracism, to students too anxious to truly listen.

**I Felt Stuck**

While I comforted and exonerated myself by blaming white supremacy and assuring myself that I was fighting good fight, I believe this strategy fell short and caused potential harm to my resisting students year after year. Because the white privilege model permits only two positions, students were either antiracist, which they performed in my *Native Son* unit by sympathizing with Bigger, or they were racist. Those skeptical of my antiracism must have quickly recognized that regardless of their reasoning, their position was unacceptable in my classroom. These white students often left the room angry and defensive – and no wonder, they were being attacked! And worse, the attacks intolerably came from either a teacher or other students who believed that they were sanctioned by the goodness of antiracism. Because their vocal resistance, resistance that I sometimes dragged from them to enable my role as converter, caused them to be targeted as racist, an indelible accusation for a white person, most of the students struggling with antiracism, and many who did not, sought refuge in silence.

I was both sympathetic and critical of this position because I would have been one of those silent students in high school, bothered by racism but too afraid to speak out against it. I’ve also had vocal students psychologically check-out for the duration of a unit or conversation on racism. Many students mastered a prisoner’s blank, impassive face to deflect both inquisition and discipline. To my righteous battle-ready mind, the antiracist position was a relatively simple one to take, and vocal resistance was honest, if
in need of correction. Silence seemed like a coward’s way out. Because there was an
obvious cost of resisting the antiracist position (accusations of racism), the only
explanation available to me, per the model of white privilege, for why so many students
chose to take that risk was that they clung to their privilege. I forgot, or ignored, that all
people want to be good, and that there must be goodness on offer from a white identity
that denied the existence of white privilege.

There is an urgent desire within my white students, within myself, to feel safe,
especially while talking about race, in no small part due to these kinds of conversations.
Both available positions were fraught: those who resisted risked being shamed as a racist;
students who confessed risked alienating themselves in their white guilt from white peers.
Yet both choices available to white students also offered goodness and safety, either the
good, guilty, whiteness of confession and alignment with the antiracist curriculum, or the
good, however shameful, alignment with whiteness. I did not recognize that the
resistance of white students likely came from a desire for goodness in the eyes of their
white parents and white society. Thandeka (2001) describes how young white people are
forced to choose between the human connection of inter-racial relationships and the
comfort and familiarity of their white family and society. The loss of those relationships
causes white shame, says Thandeka. The two available identities in my classroom
required that they face that decision again. Understandably, some white students were
unwilling to make that choice publically; the risks were too great.

Further, because of the potency of being accused of racism, students were
understandably hesitant to volunteer anything that might put them at risk of being
accused, and simultaneously eager to discover racism elsewhere in the world, including
within their peers. The intense social pressure to be not racist encouraged students to point the finger at others to avoid blame themselves. My students and I were both on the watch for anyone who spoke out of turn, either by denying the impact of Bigger’s racist society or by blaming Bigger too severely for his antisocial thoughts and actions. This fostered a tense, accusatory atmosphere that occasionally erupted. When a white student named Sheila wrote in an online forum that if Bigger were white, his racism would put him at the head of the KKK, this pressure erupted. A student of color asked that she apologize and she was quickly stigmatized as racist. Sheila seemed to become socially isolated and transferred to another school the following year.

By perpetuating the false binary of racist and antiracist put forward by the white privilege model, I had, unwittingly, deployed the social pressure of racial anxiety to police the classroom discourse and it had gotten away from me. While our discussions about race often felt like successes (or forgivable failures) to me, the opposing threats of white guilt and white shame had made honest classroom conversation about race all but impossible, and posed real risks to my students. There was safety in silence.

**Overview of Dissertation**

This project is a culmination of my work to get smarter about whiteness. I gathered a group of white high school students for a series of interviews and conversations about race and whiteness. Ten of us met 13 times during the spring of their senior year of high school. I worked to make sense of these conversations in the context of the histories of whiteness and race as well as with help from race and whiteness scholars.
In the following chapters, I work to make sense of my classroom experiences so that I can learn from them and develop more effective teaching strategies. Chapter Two chronicles a history of race and whiteness in the United States, challenging the dominant narrative of a free, equitable country with small racial digressions. This chapter also explores the literature on schooling, goodness, emotion, as they relate to race and whiteness. This history, alongside my work with goodness and emotion, provides a more helpful framework for understanding what was happening in my classroom. Chapter Three first considers the challenges of these historic and contemporary racial constructs on conducting research, which help explain the challenges I faced as an antiracist teacher. I then recount my research methods as well as my experiences conducting the study. Chapter Four works through race talk, specifically the patterns of race talk participants shared and described, including how participants understood and critiqued their schooling, available racial discourses, and their own racial discourses. Chapter Five focuses on participants’ underlying racial frameworks, which clarifies how my students positioned themselves. Chapter Six explores participants’ conflicted and fraught emotions around race and race talk, especially the roles of white shame and trauma. This work in particular helped me make sense of the dynamics of my classroom described above. Chapter Seven concludes the study by revisiting and reconsidering what antiracist pedagogy can look like.

Resmaa Menakem begins his book *My Grandmother’s Hands* (2017) with a caution, inviting us to pay attention to our bodies as we engage with work on trauma and race, to notice feelings of constriction and thoughts along the lines of, “I’m not like that; I’m a good person” (p. xiii). This caution neatly frames classroom work around race. For
white people to effectively approach their own whiteness, we must engage with a suppressed self resistant to examination. Success in this project on whiteness might feel like failure, like a painful shift out of ourselves. Our antiracist work becomes possible as we permit ourselves to question what goodness means, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable to these new meanings.
Chapter Two

A Brief History of Whiteness

Making sense of the historical context for whiteness is, I believe, a necessary part of creating a critical white identity. I hope to delineate the historical development of whiteness in colonial America and the United States to better understand and make sense of the sometimes opaque or slippery workings of contemporary whiteness. I begin with the deployment of whiteness, an invented social category, as a form of social control in colonial North America and the tumultuous inception of the United States. Next, I trace the workings of whiteness through the 19th and early 20th century, where its ambivalent relationship with the racial other shaped changing performances of white racial identity. I then examine the arbitrary boundaries of whiteness during the immigration waves of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The chronology of whiteness concludes in the post-war US when neoliberalism subsumed explicit racism in favor of ideologies that served to obscure and de-historicize this history of whiteness and race. I examine this through multiple scholarly interpretations. Subsequently, I review studies on whiteness in educational contexts, specifically high schools, which typically lack a theoretical foundation of whiteness. This chapter concludes with a brief overview of the literature on whiteness and emotionality.

There have long been cultural and moral associations with “Black” and “white” within Western ideologies. As far back as the 10th century, names could become “white” again, tales were populated by “fair-haired” heroines and “raven haired” evil step mothers, as well as direct metaphor in poetry, where “everye white will have its blacke / And everye sweete its sowre” (Dyer, 1997, p. 61). Dyer argues for a long held prejudice
against darker colors, including dark skinned peoples, and these predate the profound social chasm manufactured as race. On the other hand, while it is nearly impossible to trace the origins of a white / Black dichotomy in the Western imagination, Merlin Stone (1976) has made the case that this binary originates with Hebrew and Christian societies, who deployed them to suppress matriarchal communities. These communities did not share the view of the world divided between heaven and hell, good and evil, or black and white. Further, Stone argues that the positive view of serpents and fertility figures such as the half-goat half-man Pan were co-opted as evil in Hebrew and Christian mythologies, undermining the matriarchic authority. This suggests that the linking of whiteness with goodness and Blackness with evil could be, in part, a function of Western patriarchy, rather than an innate human quality.

**Whiteness as the Other, Conflicted**

In this section, I trace the foundations of race and whiteness through the very start of our country in colonial America. Whether the origins of race are traced to Portuguese cartographer and historian Gomes Eanes de Zurara in the late 1400s (Kendi, 2016) or to the 1600s halls of Virginia’s House of Burgesses (Allen, 2012), the heritage of whiteness is rooted in class tensions and mechanisms of social control. For Kendi, this early mapmaker generated racist depictions of Africans to drive Portugal’s nascent African slave trade; this was Kendi’s prime mover of slavery as a raced institution. Allen, meanwhile, traces the origins of whiteness to the exploitation of European and African laborers by the economic elite on 1600s Virginia Company tobacco plantations. These exploited workers lived, loved, worked, and celebrated side by side, and even aided in each other’s periodic escapes. Side by side, they rebelled against their inhumane
treatment in Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676. This, Allen argues, is where the first vestiges of race, particularly whiteness, appear.

A group of around 400 families, in a colony of more than 25,000, had deployed every means at their disposal in pursuit of profit from the founding of the colony in 1616 until Bacon’s Rebellion in 1687. After the rebellion of African and European laborers nearly succeeded, the elite, dramatically outnumbered as the 1% of the age, sought to disempower the laboring class by targeting their class alliance. The elite encouraged colonial European laborers to identify as “white” like themselves, rather than as economically oppressed, shifting the economic animus of working whites into a racial animus directed at their African peers, thereby safeguarding their wealth and status. Like their ruling class counterparts in England, and for similar reasons, the colonial elite enlisted a “yeoman” class.

Allen’s analysis begins a century earlier in England, where he explores how the English elite practiced the methods of social control they deployed in colonial Virginia. Allen details how landowners, the elite of newly capitalist, 16th century England, sought to remove themselves from the unpleasantness (and danger) of enforcing social control while maintaining this control over their laborers. This task became more and more urgent as these English landowners used every means at their disposal, legal, illegal, and not yet illegal, to increase the labor pool and drive down wages (including a short-lived attempt at slavery in the 1550s). The English yeomanry came from a class of modest landowners and businessmen. They served as moderately prosperous civil servants (called “Overseers of the Poor”), who, when called upon, would rise up at the call of the king to protect their modest corner of the status quo against the landless rabble. Francis
Bacon called them “tame hawks for their master, and wild hawks for themselves” (quoted in Allen, p. 18). In other words, the English yeomanry served the needs of the wealthy at the expense of the poor in exchange for a modicum of authority and power of their own. The yeomanry of Colonial Virginia served the same purpose, but with one crucial difference: the social divide was what we experience as race.

The Virginia Slave Codes of 1705 sought to advantage European cum white labor over their African cum Black confreres (as one critic protested at the time, they sought to “Afix a perpetual Brand upon free negros and mulattos” Allen, p. 242). These codes, passed by the colonial elite, mandated that land-less whites serve in slave patrols, permitted the naked whipping of Blacks (while whites could be whipped clothed), and seized Black property and redistributed it to the poor whites, all while blaming Blacks for their poverty and celebrating whites for their work ethic. Given token material advantage for their whiteness and an important affiliation with the wealthy white elite, this white yeomanry embraced their role; by the early 18th century, every county in Virginia had a white, armed, slave patrol serving the economic and social needs of the elite. Forbidden from social exchange with their African peers, these European laborers, newly white, began forming a racial identity around a repudiation of those who were not white, without a clear sense of who that was. The Virginia planters had successfully created a proletariat divided against and policing itself by creating something new; race.

Whiteness, loosely helmed by those in the position of acting in their economic interest, continued to manufacture and deploy racial difference as an economic foil in prerevolutionary America. In his history of whiteness and labor, Roediger (1991) explains how the “prehistory of the white worker begins with the settlers’ image of
Native Americans” (p. 21). This served to justify land dispossession and contributed to the settlers’ image of themselves as “‘hardworking whites’ in counterpoint to their imagination of Indian styles of life” (p. 21). This is the extent of his treatment of Indianness in making sense of white working class identity. Roediger comes dangerously close to attributing some aspects of racism to working class whites. He locates early racializing influence of capitalism on white workers to late colonial and early revolutionary America, missing the critical influence of the racialized social control of the Virginia Colony painstakingly detailed by Kendi and Allen. Without their analysis, it would be tempting to accept a superficial origin of racism within poor and working class whites, ignoring the economic circumstances driving them. As I will detail below, locating racism within poor and working class white communities has been and continues to be a common deflection used by more educated middle and upper class whites.

Philip Deloria’s Playing Indian (1998) notes Indian play within 17th and early 18th century racializations of whiteness. Deloria, concerned with how white American men have deployed Indianness throughout history, theorizes two axes on which Indianness existed for whites: white American men made use of Indianness as insiders to imagine deep historical roots on the new continent while simultaneously figuring Indians as outsiders and illegitimate possessors of the land; second, Indians could be figured as legitimizing, possessing an “authentic” Americanness or as obstacles, inhibiting modern society. For example, before the revolution, Indianness as legitimate insider served the ruling class intent on fomenting unrest under British rule. Colonists protesting logging and hunting restrictions in addition to tea taxes protested masked as “white Indians.” Later, when working class white men had won the Revolutionary War for the elites and
failed to realize their promised financial standing and property ownership, they again expressed their discontent as “white Indians,” though their interests were no longer aligned with those of the ruling class. Elites, for whom the revolution was successfully in the past, responded with newsprint and published stories to deploy images of the outsider, obstacle, “savage” Indian to discredit the protesters and quell this discontent.

White working class’ old world Tammany celebrations, often multi-day bacchanals commemorating a fictionalized Indian Chief, also clashed with elite’s need for productivity and discipline, so they “replaced carnivalesque revolution-tinged Indian celebrations with sanctioned holidays in which Indian play transformed the wildness of the Revolution into an obedient patriotism” (Deloria, 1998, p. 68). Further, the newly independent ruling elite secured and justified their control of property by offering, speciously, that poor whites “held property in [their] own labor” (Thomas Paine quoted in Roediger, p. 45). Without the secure economic footing promised them after the war, working class whites struggled to understand their social role and position in the new United States. As the newly white colonists knew themselves by the Blackness they rejected after Bacon’s Rebellion, working class whites took up, in acceptable and unacceptable ways, the contradictory images of their racial others. Indianness, foretelling Blackness, became potent with “enormous iconographic flexibility” (Deloria, 1998, p. 29), providing the colonists the canvas on which they would strive to create a new (white) American identity.

Slavery also functioned as a powerful metaphor. Colonial elites, seeking to convince white workers to join the revolution against the British, claimed that the white working class was held in “political slavery.” Similarly, slavery was later used by
wealthy anti-abolitionists who threatened northern white workers with “wage slavery” (Roediger). The comparison was bimodal; a promise of property and liberty drew white men toward their hopes, while slavery as Blackness, a somewhat tenuous relationship through the last half of the 18th century, drove white men from their fears. In these ways, whiteness became an identity defined by what it was not, taking on and casting off the partial habits and customs of those who became the racial other, often regulated in the interest of the ruling class as a mechanism of social control. While the ruling class temporarily benefitted from a subdued and focused workforce, there were significant costs to the psyches of white people. By constricting the sanctioned identity play and development of white working class identities, expressions of solidarity, mockery, ritual transition, celebration, and mourning became masked as Indian societies and Blackface Minstrelsy. Whiteness was created and sustained apart from any social means of understanding the self in the world outside of the needs of capitalism.

Ultimately, Indianness and Blackness remained powerful and necessary semiotic tools available to white Americans, as racial historian Eric Lott summarizes:

The special achievement of minstrel performers was to have intuited and formalized the white male fascination with the turn to black, which Leslie Fiedler describes this way: “Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhoods as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negros, and only then are we expected to settle down to being what we really are: white once more.” (1995, p. 53)

Whiteness, having helped to establish the United States, then took on new work to sustain itself.

**Whiteness as the Other, Masked**

In this section, I explore the ways whiteness shifted toward a more formal masking process facilitated by and for white elites. Perhaps the largest missed
opportunities for racial solidarity, like the repressed Tammany celebrations, were Black Election Day and Pinkster celebrations. Lott (1995) and Roediger (1991) describe these weeklong celebrations of Black culture celebrated by working class whites and Blacks, “a time in which rural and urban populations mixed in cities under black leadership” (Roediger, p. 102). Pinkster, the Dutch celebration of Pentecost, was an opportunity for enslaved and free Blacks to socialize, perform carefully satirical jabs at whiteness, and earn money by singing and dancing. These freedoms were threatening to civic authorities who regulated and ultimately shut down these celebrations. The singing, dancing, and theatrical performances of Blacks were replaced by Blackface minstrelsy.

The 1820s represent the hardening of white worker identity through new and established mechanisms of racial representation. Northern white workers desperately distanced themselves from their Black economic counterparts in the south, trading “master” for its Dutch translation “boss,” and channeled their economic and social anxieties through Indian and Black masking and identity play. The doubledness of Indian identity appropriation can also be seen in Blackface, where working class whites combined an identification with and an aversion to Blacks in their past and labor, respectively, an ambivalent dualism that persists today. The boundaries of whiteness, importantly, lived within the tension of this binary of identification and aversion; failure to abide by these boundaries meant forfeiting whiteness.

For Lott (1995), Blackface performance, racist as it was (and, meaningfully, remains), was primarily concerned with the creation and maintenance of white raced, and white classed, identities. As he argues, “the elements of derision involved in Blackface performance were not so much its raison d’être as an attempt to ‘master’ the power and
interest of Black cultural practices it continually developed” (p. 113). Though less central to his study than Roediger’s and Allen’s, Lott does argue that the formation and upkeep of racial ideology have been informed by class anxieties, driven, though by no means controlled, from above by wealthy elites acting in their own economic interest.¹

For Lott, Blackface and the models of whiteness it generated were highly ambivalent. Blackface came to account, through longing masked by ridicule, for specific agrarian behaviors Europeans gave up to become white. Minstrel shows provided a sanctioned context wherein northern whites could engage with what they surrendered to become white through a theatrical play with Black culture. Lott describes how after northern whites initially encountered Black performers in marketplaces and the carnivalesque election day celebrations mentioned earlier. These modes of Blackness were then commodified and appropriated by white performers who, in Blackface, performed culturally Black songs in minstrel shows; a voyeurism of “the culture of the dispossessed while simultaneously refusing the social legitimacy of its members, a truly American combination of acknowledgement and expropriation” (Lott, 49). This masked longing can be seen in Irish immigrants singing “Tis Sad to Leabe Our Tater Land”, an unsanctioned and unpatriotic nostalgia for their homeland and foregone agrarian lifestyle made permissible through a metaphorical ‘Blackening’ of dialect, tone, and Blackface itself (Lott, p. 95). By appealing to and temporarily satisfying the immigrant longing for a pre-capitalist, pre-factory culture and lifestyle, minstrel shows articulated and ultimately worked to assuage economic divisions among whites by deploying racial ones. The class

¹ For a thorough, heart-breaking take on how economic interest drove slavery, as well as how slavery shaped contemporary economics, see Edward Baptisté’s 2014 text *The Half Has Never Been Told.*
anxieties of wage earning whites became soothed by their tenuous sense of racial superiority.

The ongoing class threats confronting white wage earners embodied in racist caricatures of Blackness and slavery obstructed a clear view of all they had lost. This necessary tension demanded a precise representation. Deloria, Lott, and Roediger all note an obsession with authenticity that permeates the identity play of white working class men, who, having severed ties with their agrarian, autonomous pasts, yearned for cultural footing. Deloria articulates this most eloquently; “because those seeking authenticity have already defined their own state as inauthentic, they easily locate authenticity in the figure of an Other” (p. 101). As mid-19th century immigrants (Irish, German) celebrated their heritage in Blackface, whiteness began to blur while Blackness became pointed and singular; whiteness needed specific representations of Blackness because only within and against Blackness could whiteness see itself. The “authentic” Black American, along with their culture, was being bought and sold by whites into stereotypes so durable they came to inform later Black performers themselves. Yet the close association of the whitening audiences with the Blackness they celebrated and mocked raised the specter of a unified proletariat once again.

The constant threat of Black identity play was the fomentation of transracial, classed identification, uniting wage-earning whites with free and enslaved Blacks against their mutual oppressors. This threat, fed by the racial interchange, however tortured, of identity play, was mitigated by the ridicule and fabricated threat of Blackness. By the 1840s, performances conspicuously pointed to the dangers posed by freed Blacks to the wages of white workers as well as the threat foreigners posed to republicanism, in an
effort to secure racial divisions. Minstrelsy ultimately flirted with but never overcame these racial divides. Interracial class solidarity was repressed by capitalism, as I explore next.

The labor riots of the 1830s and 40s, violently acted out on Black bodies and Black institutions, for Lott, demonstrate the dual and conflicted work Blackface does here; “minstrel productions suggested the class obstacle to a labor abolitionism while they relied, in making that suggestion, on an interracial identification it was the purpose of the riots to negate” (Lott, p. 135). Roediger also laments the failure of minstrelsy to engage the class unifications that lay just beneath the surface. Roediger wonders “how America, for African Americans and working class whites, might have turned out differently if the same social energies and creativity poured into Blackface entertainment had instead gone into the preservation and elaboration of Negro Election Day?” (p. 127).

I, too, am compelled by the loss of this potential interracial celebration, which is so foreign to me as to be almost unimaginable. I, like those working class European immigrants, feel the strain between my anxiety over the assurance of wealth, the security from molestation attendant to whiteness, and my desire for—what exactly—a festival I can’t imagine? I struggle so hard to see beyond what I fear losing that I’m kept from recognizing what I’ve already lost.

Ultimately, as other race theorists (Morrison, 1992; Dyer, 1997) also note, “for white Americans the racial repressed is by definition retained as a (usually eroticized) component of fantasy” (Lott, p. 149). Commonly today, the white person’s initial (or only) encounter with Blackness is to spectate Black athletic or musical performance, where it is explicitly permissible to recognize the Black body “as natural, erotic, sensual
and animal” (Fanon quoted in Lott, p. 150).\(^2\) This objectification was generated and reinforced by the hosts of 19\(^{th}\) century minstrel shows, as well as PT Barnum’s “Freak Shows” (Frost, 2005). Both contextualized a theatrical exchange so that audience, white, was distinct from “performers,” non-white. Without the Barnum’s framing of the “savage Indians” on display, the “white folks” he addressed would simply be standing in a room with other people. He and minstrel show hosts, more common in the later minstrel period of the 1850s – 1920s as minstrelsy came under more official control, created white people as spectators, and objectified the people they were to examine.\(^3\) The simultaneous barrier and easy access represented by the minstrel and freak-show hosts serves to other and exoticize the non-whiteness on display while tempering the fascination with mockery and control. Again, this importantly managed the white audiences’ identification with and ridicule of the Other. Like the emperor needed his courtiers, whiteness depended on the racial Other (Lensmire, 2014). The flexible iconography of racial Others upon which whiteness relied served to police the boundaries of whiteness, so that whiteness remained an unstable target into the 20\(^{th}\) century.

**Vying for Whiteness**

In this section, I explore the mutable boundaries of whiteness around the turn of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Because whiteness policed the boundaries of power and access throughout American history, whiteness itself has been a contested space. From the late 19\(^{th}\) century through World War 1, immigrant groups routinely eschewed their ethnic heritage in pursuit of an elusive dream, often vying against each other for access to

\(^2\) For more on the minstrel lineage of hip-hop, see Lhamon’s 1998 book *Raising Cain*.

\(^3\) I’ve also wondered about the legitimating racial role played by the Black back-up bands and bandleaders to white late-night TV hosts, including Kevin Eubanks to Jay Leno, The Roots to Jimmy Fallon, and Jon Batiste to Stephen Colbert.
whiteness and its socio-economic advantage. In *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998), Matthew Frye Jacobson tracks the sometimes absurd contortions made by whiteness to naturalize immigrants from desirable European origins as US citizens (importantly, there was no process to include or exclude the immigrants themselves until the Immigration Act of 1924). Through the early 20th century, Italians, Jews, Eastern and Southern Europeans all straddled the boundary between white and Black. This is evident in legal histories. In one case, a Jewish man accused of raping a white girl was “whitened” by nature of the darker skin of his accuser. In another, a Black man’s conviction for miscegenation was overturned in *Rollins v Alabama* because of the indeterminacy of the whiteness of his sexual partner, who was Sicilian (Jacobson). When Senator Sumner attempted to deracialize Naturalization Acts in the 1870s by removing the word “white,” his colleagues jokingly agreed, provided they excluded “persons born in the Chinese Empire … in Asia, in Africa, or any islands of the Pacific, nor to Indians born in the wilderness” (Jacobson, 1998, p. 73). Yet whiteness could not always be earned.

A pair of Supreme Court cases in 1922 and 1923 demonstrates how arbitrary and variable whiteness was during this period, as John Biewen explores on his podcast, *Scene on Radio*. In *Ozawa v United States*, Takao Ozawa sued on the basis of his white skin, claiming the Japanese were “free white people.” The court unanimously decided against him, arguing that whiteness originated in the Caucus region (Biewen, 2017). Yet when Bhagat Singh Thind, himself from Punjab, nearer to the Caucasus mountains than Scandinavia is, sued for citizenship in *Thind v United States* just one year later, the court unanimously ruled that “free white persons” extended to Caucasians “only as that word is
popularly understood” (Biewen). In the early 20th century, the evasions of whiteness had grown more official and explicit.

My Irish ancestors entered this power struggle when they immigrated in the late 19th and early 20th century and sought to gain citizenship and acceptance through whiteness. They were soon joined by immigrants from Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, immigrating Jews, and later Japanese, all permitted to vie for whiteness on some level. Confronted with an American nativism that condemned the Irish as bringing with them poorer labor conditions, disease, Catholicism, and other maladies, the Irish chose race over ethnicity and sought to detach themselves from their ethnic past, foreclosing affiliation with the Blackness associated with it in the process. Without a hope of changing whiteness, the Irish joined up to whiteness en masse, becoming so enmeshed in their role as yeomanry that the stereotype of the Irish cop persists to this day. For them, whiteness was attainable only by taking up the specific behaviors, attitudes, and discourses of whiteness. Once inside this rarified cultural space, looking out with disdain at their former comrades, they became safe.

Irish acceptance of whiteness foretold the modern social and economic mechanisms of white supremacy; access to whiteness as Americanism was dependent on a relentless repudiation of the humanity of the non-white Other, especially Blacks (Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 1991). They were told that to be successful they had act like the elite whites, giving up the churches, foods, and traditions which constituted their ethnic identities. Roediger puts it this way; “the white working class … began during its formation to construct an image of the black population as ‘other’ – as embodying the

4 Of course, the condemned, stereotypical, anti-industrial behavior of the Irish also persisted in the term “Paddy Wagon,” derogatory slang for a police van called upon to arrest drunken Irish.
preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for” (p. 14).
The Irish, like generations of immigrants who followed them, surrendered fundamental parts of their identity, what became celebrated in masked Blackface minstrelsy, for the promise of economic prosperity. This was a catastrophic, immeasurable loss chosen by those immigrants, who then traumatically imposed the loss upon their children. The work of whitening meant shedding an ethnic, authentic past in favor of a racial, and racist future (Jacobson, 1998). I delve into this loss in the next section.

**Whiteness, a Psychosocial Dilemma**

Before I explore the evolution of whiteness, race, and racism through the 20th and early 21st century, I want to spend a moment extending the theoretical work explored above in an effort to construct a contemporary psychosocial model of whiteness. Two towering African American writers, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, explore whiteness’s uneasy relationship with Blackness. Ellison, following Du Bois’ exploration of the woundedness and paralysis of whiteness after World War I, explores the great American hypocrisy of liberty fueled by racial slavery. Ellison proposes that the “whole of American life as a drama is acted out upon the body of a Negro giant,” and that Blackness was placed “outside of the democratic master plan, a human ‘natural’ resource who, so that white men could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization” (Ellison, 1953, p. 85). He, like Du Bois before him, recognized the role of Blackness in the American imagination as a foil to white accomplishment and failure. Similarly, Morrison (1992) recognizes the iconography of Blackness as a “category of imagery, like water, flight, war, birth, religion … that make up a writer’s kit” (p. x). Like the minstrel performers 100 years earlier, 20th century
whites scapegoat Blacks with a “blind fatality” that precludes a rational consideration of the effect race might have on a social situation (Ellison, 1952, p. 40).

These writers recognized how identity play had only shifted somewhat from minstrel characters, and now provided ground for white Americans to cultivate a mythic and imaginary understanding of itself. In a sentiment echoed decades later by whiteness scholars, Ellison summed up the complicated relationship, “perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man” (Ellison, 1952, p. 97). Predictably, this consolation was achieved at a great psychological cost to white people.5

Thandeka’s Learning to be White (2001) builds on Du Bois, Ellison, and Morrison, though she locates the origins of the psychic break of white ambivalence (Lensmire, 2017) within children, and names the potent mechanism by which whiteness is made: shame. As children who are to become white seek companionship or affiliation across racial lines, they receive negative responses, in the form of explicit or implicit disapproval or discomfort, which tells them to remain within their white contexts. For Thandeka, whiteness is formed by small, personal divestments of the self to remain within the safe social boundaries of family and community. Children “learn to think of themselves as white to stay out of trouble with their caretakers, and stay in the good graces of their peers” (p. 20). These divestments create shame, which forms an internal and external boundary against race mixing. In this way, whiteness is sustained by the creation of internal and external non-white zones, made off-limits by a caregiver’s disapproval or discomfort. These non-white zones become areas of fascination, a highly

5 To be sure, this cost in no way compares to or mitigates the great physical, material, and psychological costs the creation and maintenance of whiteness have inflicted upon people of color.
ambivalent blending of attraction and revulsion akin to Blackface performers. “The concrete ghetto [and other symbols of ‘Black culture’] thus becomes an objective symbol for both Euro-American’s racial fears and her or his desires for a community that does not judge, but embraces difference as good” (p. 26). This loss included the childlike exuberance of unselfconscious song, dance, and celebration, a deeply human authenticity. Like the wage-earning whites of the 1800s, contemporary white children are forced to choose between this authentic humanity and social acceptance. And like wage earning whites nearly 200 years earlier, the costs are profound.

I argue that this ambivalence within white people necessarily manifests in different ways in our modern era of de facto racism. This era begins, for Melamed (2011) and Mills (1997), shortly after World War II, as I explore below.

**Whiteness as Nonracist Goodness: Neoliberalism**

Racism has long been softened through selective and deceitful language, but it wasn’t until the dawn of the Cold War that explicit de jure racism became disadvantageous to the United States leadership, which suddenly found it’s racisms inconveniently in contrast with its Capitalist ideals. In response to Soviet accusations that capitalist United States was fundamentally unequal, whiteness took up “official antiracisms;” racism is individual, not structural, so that the US was innocent to its cause. Melamed (2011) argues that we are now within “a formally antiracist, liberal-capitalist modernity that revises, partners with, and exceeds the capacities of white supremacy without replacing or ending it” (p. 6-7). In this model, the solution to racist treatment lay in assimilationism, where people of color needed only eschew their deficit-laden culture

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6 While the Constitution clearly lays out the 3/5ths clause along with many other racist laws concerning slavery, the words “slave” and “slavery” are never used (Kendi, 2016).
and become white, as generations of European immigrants had done. Nevertheless, alongside the modern good nonracist white person, with all of their well-meaning and good intentions, “the genocidal sincerity of false empathy” was born (Vought, 2017, p. 133).

*De jure* racisms named white supremacy explicitly, through the now-condemned mechanisms of colonialism and genocide, where racial slavery and exploitation were accepted as norms, however contentious (Mills, 1997). These overt racisms have been replaced with more latent forms of racism, wherein, “because the discrimination is latent, [they are] usually unobservable, even to the person experiencing it” (p. 75). Because these *de facto* racisms function within a purportedly equal society, our “failure to ask certain questions” helps secure the Racial Contract, which has now “written itself out of formal existence” (p. 73, emphasis in original). In this way, the Racial Contract seeks to narrow our understanding of racism so that we can only recognize it in the past and isolated aberrations, rather than in our taken-for-granted social systems.

Moreover, with “racism as status quo” (Mills, 1997, p. 76), and by locating racism within individual attitudes and identities, good nonracist white people systemically underestimate the potency of present day racism in relation to past racism, and fundamentally misunderstand the mechanisms of racism and social policy. Reinforced by neoliberal ideologies of fierce individualism, the legal precedents mentioned below, and Melamed’s (2011) “official antiracisms” disseminated in “race novels” from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851) through *The Help* (2012), racism is popularly understood as discriminatory actions from individual persons or companies, for which that individual can confess,

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7 For more, see Matthew Frye Jacobson’s 1998 text *Whiteness of a different color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race.*
atone, and be welcomed back into good nonracist whiteness (Lensmire et al., 2013). It is these individual bad actors who, official antiracism holds, maliciously generate racist policies to create inequality. The reality is the opposite, as Kendi (2016) argues, “Hate and ignorance have not driven the history of racist ideas in America. Racist policies have driven the history of racist ideas in America” (p. 9). Good nonracist white people are complicit in misunderstanding these systems, allowing and, in many cases, encouraging them to persist.

It is hard to overstate how normal, how ubiquitous, how commonplace and common sense good white nonracism is. Good white nonracism reassures good White people of their goodness in books and movies with clearly demarcated heroes and villains, and in true crime stories with the law on “our” side. It’s comfortable white houses far from “dangerous” neighborhoods; it’s appreciating home values and growing savings accounts. It’s our faith in the criminal justice system, the police, the attorneys, and the prison system, working to put behind bars people who deserve to be there. It’s our trust in the electoral process, a government that’s looking out for our best interest, and even if it isn’t, it’s not like lives are on the line. It’s deploying the lethal “our” without explanation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). It’s Coate’s dream in Between the World and Me: “It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is tree houses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake” (Coates, 2015, p. 11). The Dream is the rotten heart of good white nonracism, innocently tucked into good nonracist whiteness.

When we fail to recognize the roots of our contemporary support of our legal and economic systems in the historical context of the legal and economic conventions of
racism, we can dangerously misrecognize both our history and ourselves. This misrecognition allows us to simultaneously condemn the legal structures of slavery, Jim Crow, and poll taxes while upholding contemporary legal structures of policing, incarceration, and voter disenfranchisement. We believe that our good White nonracism of today is somehow different from that of our history. We miss that, as I will detail below, the legal racism of our colonial past was upheld by good white nonracists. Our racial ideologies, while differing in meaningful ways from the racial ideologies from history, ideologies we might recognize as racist or even foolish, are foundationally the same.

History was not made by bad racists and good antiracists only. The bad racists depicted in books and movies have been the exception; the lion’s share of our society’s racisms have been upheld by good nonracist whites, while the antiracists of history have been marginalized as extremists (Malcolm X) or watered down to white-acceptable shadows of their radical selves (Dr. Martin Luther King). By examining nationalist formations, we can uncover the justifications that generated, sustained, and insulated the long and surprisingly consistent history of good white racism.

**Whiteness, Goodness and the Status Quo**

Most historical atrocities were committed in the name of the law, and our own are no different. Some of our most potent and damaging forms of contemporary racism are exercised in the name of being a good American. Saving and investing hard-earned money is the hallmark of good American whiteness. The good nonracist white people of the 1820s, much like today, were concerned with the financial return on their investments. Like today, they generated and purchased profitable securities based on
financially stable mortgages, now called mortgage-backed securities. They, like today, deregulated these instruments and saw speculation take off. These securities allowed investors across the world to greedily build strong but unsustainable returns for nearly a decade, before the entire structure, massively overleveraged, collapsed into a national economic panic with significant global implications, most severely punishing the poor and minorities. Whites similarly directed their anger at white elites, minorities, and domestic foreigners (Baptist, 2014, Kendi, 2016). The only difference between the mortgage-backed securities collapse in 1837 and the one in 2008 was the property being mortgaged; houses in 2008, Black bodies in 1837. In both instances, the assumption of a racially neutral financial system allowed good nonracist whites to invest without a concern for racial impact.

Second, American governmental programs of social uplift have, from the beginning, distributed this aid in blatantly racist ways. From the Virginia Slave Codes in 1705, to the New Deal and the GI Bill, which “gave birth to the White middle class and widened the economic gap between the races, a growing disparity racists blamed on poor Black fiscal habits” (Kendi, p. 358), to farm insurance claims in 2017 North Carolina (Beiwen, 2017), all scrupulously directed financial benefits to whites, who are then praised as self-made, and away from Blacks, who are then blamed in racist terms as lazy, incompetent, and immoral for their inferior economic conditions. With a supposedly impartial socio-economic structure in place, racists and nonracists alike looked for answers to the question of racial disparities. Rather than question the structures themselves as antiracists have, racists and nonracists each found their answer, at least in part, in the deficiency of Black people. Large portions of moderate and conservative
political platforms (cutting taxes and social programs) rely upon and perpetuate this myth (Haney López, 2013).

Finally, good, nonracist White people can ignore the recent history of sunset clauses and redlining and blithely accept that living in segregated neighborhoods is a consequence, however regrettable, of an impersonal market, rather than their choice to participate in and benefit from the long history of economic discrimination. I say this as a person who owns property in one of the most liberal and most White neighborhoods in Minneapolis. These structures are deeply entrenched in our social fabric and identities, which make them incredibly difficult, and incredibly necessary, to interrupt.

The argument here is to make more recognizable those who profited off of slavery, not the slave drivers themselves, or the Georgia-men who traded them domestically, but the northern and European financiers who were doing their level best to make money just like the rest of us. Baptist’s central argument is that racism and slavery not only profoundly shaped American capitalism but that racism remains deeply implicated in our economy. Michelle Alexander’s 2012 takedown of the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery except as punishment for a crime, The New Jim Crow, helps us recognize the ongoing financial exploitation of people of color, especially Black men. That, in 1898, a full 73% of Alabama’s state revenue was generated through convict leasing (Matthews & Cyril, 2017), is not at all removed from companies like Wal-Mart, Costco, McDonald’s, Bank of America, and Whole Foods profiting from the use of prison labor in 2017 (50 companies, 2017). Even without imprisoning Black folks, racist policing practices, such as in 2010s Ferguson Missouri, have been designed to excessively fine Black residents to generate income for the municipality, as determined
by a 2016 Justice Department investigation (Investigation, 2015). These policies were not hatched as racist fantasies. They were economically expedient with what were considered acceptable consequence.

Being a good nonracist white person, then and now, means believing and investing in the state and state economy as an instrument of good, or at the worst neutrality, while sustaining ignorance of their racist lineages. It also means believing in the inherent goodness of American education. For good nonracist white people, the “achievement gap” is attributed to cultural deficiencies, or, more charitably, to individual students, and occasionally teachers, as though a national opportunity gap between white students and students of color can be located in the classroom. Whiteness studies have sought to shift responsibility for this systemic inequality back onto the system itself by interrogating white supremacy.

Neoliberalism, Critical Race Theory, & White Privilege Pedagogy

As neoliberalism seeks to individualize and “unencumber” economics from the human systems that give our economy shape and meaning, Critical Race Theory (CRT) counters by recognizing and foregrounding the human racial biases that inform and define these systems. Originating as legal scholarship, “CRT challenges the use of the experiences of White, European Americans as the normative standard; rather CRT grounds its conceptual framework, in part, in the distinctive contextual experiences of people of color and racial oppression” (Majors, 2007, p. 846). Rather than naïvely presuming racial liberalism, as neoliberalism demands, CRT works toward racial literacy by bearing witness to the profound, systemic, and ongoing impact of race on our society and systems of education (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
CRT provides the theoretical foundation for the following critiques of three common white responses to race; colorblindness, colormuteness, and color celebrate.

Colorblindness, “the problematic conflation of race with racism that reinforces inequalities, hierarchies, and racial division while insisting that race does not matter” (Roberts, Bell, & Murphy, 2008, p. 337), is a hallmark of neoliberal ideology. Within colorblindness, as Bonilla-Silva writes, “whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomenon, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (2014, p. 2). By suggesting that race doesn’t matter, colorblindness suggests that noticing race, not racism, is the problem. This becomes especially dangerous when whites are race-less and race is bound up in non-whites. This is one way in which non-white people seem to present a racial problem simply by existing in certain spaces; noticing their mere presence flies in the face of colorblindness.

Analogously, in Colormute (2004) Mica Pollock explored how, in addition to purporting to not see race, we strenuously avoid talking about race (2004). This can lead to an almost fun-house maze of rules about race talk, including that “people do and do not belong to simple racial categorizations,” and that “race does and does not matter” (Thomas, 2015, p. 156). Further, “seemingly neutral statements about classroom structure, discipline, and academic achievement are infused with racial meaning and are a product of racial ideology” (Beuhler, 2013, p 631). Like colorblindness, colormuteness is a neoliberal maneuver intended to inoculate a white person against accusations of racism.

Recently, Robin DiAngelo contributed to this scholarship by suggesting that white people deploy a complementary maneuver to colorblindness: color celebrate (2018). DiAngelo writes that taking up the complimentary posture of celebrating
diversity serves the same defensive purpose, even to protect that person from the conversation itself. By claiming to be delighted by a new colleague of color, or telling a story about how a Black manager was “such a nice man,” DiAngelo argues that white people are maneuvering themselves into a position of safety from racial suspicion. Like a person who doesn’t “see color,” one who “celebrates” diversity intends to be beyond racial reproach.

These three maneuvers have been countered, in turn, by white privilege pedagogy (WPP). WPP has been dominated by McIntosh’s model of white privilege, the “Invisible Knapsack” (1988), where white people are meant to understand their whiteness as a set of unearned privileges, unknowingly carried around with them. Because of the predominance of the Invisible Knapsack (1988), race talk in high school classrooms has often been constrained to a debate over the existence and importance of white privilege (Perry, 2002). In other words, WPP often functioned as an unproductive rhetorical debate among anxious white people without providing them with the resources to move beyond it (Lensmire et al., 2013). WPP was by far the dominant model within which my participants made sense of race, race talk, and of themselves as raced beings, and it played a central role in my making sense of their race talk.

**Whiteness and Schooling**

There has not been a great deal written about whiteness in high school despite the heralds of Black American authors, such as Dubois, Ellison, Baldwin, and Morrison (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Tanner, 2014). Further, the literature that does exist on whiteness and high schools seldom contend with the history of whiteness detailed above. Most positioned and justified their work through Critical Race Theorists and, later,
Critical Whiteness Studies, citing theoretical work on whiteness.\textsuperscript{8} Contemporary whiteness studies, especially those focusing on high school settings, have rarely addressed whiteness using what I consider more generative theories of whiteness. Moreover, common sense structures of race, namely multiculturalism, race as commodity, and race avoidance through colorblindness and colormuteness, leave schools woefully underprepared and even counter-prepared to contend with race.

Most work on whiteness and race in high school do not root their theory of race or whiteness in a historical context, focusing instead on “how and why race mattered” in their research context (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 4). Much of the literature notes the shortcomings of recent scholarship on whiteness (Bucholtz, 2011; Perry, 2002; Trainor, 2008), though by failing to consider historical origins of whiteness and whiteness studies, they miss and misattribute foundational theoretical work (including DuBois, 1995; Morrison, 1992; and Thandeka, 2001). The authors note the functions and superficial social origins of whiteness and race but do not trace or historically locate these attitudes, many of which developed to serve the explicitly racial purpose they purport to uncover. For example, Matias (2012) calls for, but does not complicate, placing the burden of race on white people without a reckoning of how that burden has functioned historically. A knowledge of the violence enacted by working-class white men against bodies of color \textit{in response to} historical burdens, including lynchings, racial violences during the economic downturn of 1837, those attendant to minstrelsy, and the Draft Riots of 1863, would appropriately caution against celebrating a burdened white masculinity. Further, now that whiteness can be taken up explicitly, publically, in profoundly negative ways, what

\textsuperscript{8} Including Dyer, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Gallagher, 1997; and Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995. Only three texts (Matias, 2012; Schieble, 2012; Tanner, 2019) cited earlier work on the origins of whiteness taken up earlier.
young white people do with that burden can be dangerous. The history of whiteness is relevant for these reasons.

Five central texts provide a representative sample of the available literature on secondary schooling and whiteness: *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School* by Pamela Perry (2002); *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* by Mica Pollock (2004); *Rethinking Racism: Emotion, Persuasion, and Literacy Education in an All-White High School* by Jennifer Seibel Trainor (2008); *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* by Mary Bucholtz (2011); and *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* by Amanda Lewis and John Diamond (2015). I also include supplemental pieces on schooling and whiteness studies.

Of these texts, Perry (2002) provides the most comprehensive report on how white high school students generated, maintained, negotiated, and challenged their whiteness by contrasting the racial experiences and attitudes of white students attending a predominantly white high school with those attending a racially diverse high school. This study focused on student behavior and interviews. Bucholtz (2011), like Perry, focuses her study on students, particularly the public identity construction of white students. Pollock (2004) and Lewis & Diamond (2015), on the other hand, explore the racial effects of school structures more systemically. Finally, Trainor (2008), by closely examining student language and emotion, explored the ways in which schooling structures can unintentionally create and maintain racist attitudes among white students.

The texts put forward similar definitions of whiteness, including whiteness as: “fickle, multiple, and contradictory” (Perry, 2002, p. 3); invisible, normed, socially
constructed, and “American;” (Bucholtz, 2011, p. 16); and as a commodity, as privilege commonly interpreted as something students do or do not acknowledge and central to their development as a racially literate person (Perry, 2002; Bucholtz, 2011; & Matias, 2012). Pollock (2004) and Trainor (2008) understood whiteness as a part of white identity, though not necessarily a driver of students’ adherence to whiteness. This final treatment of whiteness is central to critical whiteness theory, and to making clear sense of student attitudes, language, and behavior (Lensmire, et al., 2013).

At this point I’d like to spend a moment detailing some of the more common arguments made about whiteness in secondary school. At all or primarily white schools, white students struggled to define whiteness or appreciate its significance, fitting Bourdieu’s definition of “doxa:” “that which goes without saying because it comes without saying” (quoted in Perry, 2002, p. 78). They also tended to avoid raced language in favor of more ethnic terms such as “African American” and “Caucasian” (Bucholtz 2011; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). However, for students at Clavey, the more diverse school in Perry’s (2002) study, whiteness was both visible and “neither taken for granted nor unmarked for white European American youth” (p. 44).

Perry (2002) found that incautious exposure to racial difference can create seemingly contradictory sentiments. Unlike white students at Valley Groves, white students at Clavey, because of their exposure to racial diversity, graduated from school with “an appreciation for racial-ethnic diversity, stereotypes of whites as oppressors, white privilege,” but also “beliefs among whites that their experience at Clavey made them more “racist’” (p. 163). Second, white students at both schools resisted the model of white oppression for themselves, though they did take up a contrary victim position,
despite evidence of the serious and obvious inequalities favoring whites. This permitted white students to reify white hegemony in meaningful ways (being anti-affirmative action, supporting aggressive policing, etc.). While white students at Clavey, echoing Zora Neal Hurston, felt most white against a Black backdrop, the only time Valley Grove students confronted their whiteness was during college admissions. Finally, while whiteness was normed as a matter of course at Valley Groves, it became normed at the more diverse Clavey through academic tracking, which consistently funneled white students into honors classes (Perry, 2002).

Social Power in High School

What most of these studies miss, and what Trainor (2008), and to a lesser degree Lewis & Diamond (2015), name, is that few white high school students attend to the power structures in which they are privileged (access to accelerated courses, parental financial access, lack of official surveillance), while they closely attend to the more salient social power structures in which students of color are in positions of power, including constructs of toughness, coolness, and dominant musical and stylistic modes. As Trainor put it, “students do not appreciate the systemic nature of privilege because they do not experience privilege systemically” (2008, p. 135). Social capital in high school can be distributed in favor of students of color, especially in the eyes of marginalized white students, and can contribute to resistance. Yet even resistant white students want social parity with their peers of color. As Trainor points out, failing to recognize the sincere desire for camaraderie within white students’ claims such as “my

9 St Ann’s also struggles with the racial impacts of tracking.
ancestors never owned slaves,” leaves us without the emotional tools for unpacking such sentiments (2008, p. 25).

White student resistance can be more productively understood as originating outside of the protective or possessive stance to which it is commonly attributed (Lensmire et al., 2013; Trainor, 2008). When presented with the false dichotomy of confessing privilege or being racist, white students reasonably protest. These are students who might lack ethnoracial pride and are targeted for their whiteness regardless. Trainor’s proposal, that some aspects of racism originate in misapplied emotionally held beliefs, often reinforced through schooling, offers new antiracist approaches.

By focusing on emotion and persuasion, Trainor (2008) reconsiders the racist discourses of high school students. “I began to see that the persuasive power of racist discourses cannot be explained by what is generally understood as “racism” – that is, negative attitudes or feelings toward non-white people arising from ignorance, lack of empathy, or a desire to maintain race privileges” (p. 23). Her interest in the origins, rather than examples, of racist thinking gave her new insight into why high school students remain persuaded by racist thinking despite ample evidence to the contrary. She identifies a number of schooling processes that contribute to racist beliefs, particularly official notions of what racism means, what she calls the “misapplication of emotionally held beliefs” (2008, p. 5). For example, defining racism as discriminating based on race can lead to a host of racist discourses, including colorblindness, white racial victimhood, and reverse racism. This can also support the rejection of antiracist ideologies as discriminatory.
Trainor (2008) lists common school “rules” embedded in the official antiracisms of multiculturalism, alongside their unintended consequences for antiracist work:

1) Rule: we have to respect everyone the way they are.
   Unintended Consequence: don’t change the way I am.

2) Rule: be cheerful!
   Unintended Consequence: don’t bring me down with your social justice.

3) Rule: conversation means debate, which requires open-mindedness.
   Unintended Consequence: everyone is entitled to their equally valid opinion, and every conversation has two equal and opposite sides.

As she points out, it is difficult to be both morally outraged and open-minded about racism. Trainor also describes a familiar pattern in which students resist antiracist discourses by “overextending the rules of tolerance” (p. 113). In other words, they employ a whitewashed, individualistic multiculturalism in place of a critical systemic perspective. Teachers and students are thus limited to understanding racisms as situational exclusion and discrimination based on race. Rather, as she suggests, “We need to see student racism as a mediated emotioned phenomenon that emerges from and responds to the routines and culture of schooling” (p. 102).

All of these studies offered similar sets of classroom and school-wide practices to combat the racial risks inherent in whiteness, including an awareness of youth culture, surfacing race in official discourses (Perry, 2002; Pollock, 2004; Bucholtz, 2011; Thomas, 2015), and encouraging complex considerations of race and identity, fostering communities of difference; what Fine, Weis, & Powell call “equal status contact theory” (quoted in Perry, 2002, p. 197). Another common takeaway was that racism was
informed by a “feedback loop … whereby social structures and stereotypes of different youth influenced behaviors that, in turn, reinforced or “proved” the need for racialized social structures and the veracity of the racial stereotype” (Perry, 2002, p. 176). Further, the literature cautions that we must sensitize ourselves to the possibility that we may think we are supporting diversity while we are working against it (Mills, 1997; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). These strategies hold. Yet, with the added dimension of Trainor’s emotioned perspective, we have two added cautions:

1) “Addressing such students will require getting beyond metaphors that equate white racial identity with tangible assets and moving toward seeing whiteness as a series of ongoing emotioned strategies and negotiations—as a process” (p. 139)

2) Echoing Critical Whiteness Theory, we need to move beyond the “real time racism” model of catching students saying and doing racist things (p. 15).

Contrary to the suggestions of Thomas (2015) and Thompson (2003), this is not work that can productively happen online, or as “debate.” Nor will racism “be ameliorated by increasing white students’ exposure to difference” through multiculturalism (Trainor, 2008, p. 139). Nor is the work without risks.

On the whole, our understanding of young white people remains constrained by superficial understandings of whiteness too often informed by the McIntosh’s privilege model. Current literature on whiteness in education has provided a nuanced set of observations, skillful descriptions of how young white people act, with only a few probing more deeply into making sense of white emotional states, including Trainor (2008) and Matias (2016). In the next section, I will explore white emotional states
through a more philosophical lens in an attempt to better make sense of white behaviors and attitudes.

**Whiteness and Emotionality**

There’s something else required to make sense of the strange and stunted ways white antiracism is taken up by the good, non-racist white students who populated my study. In working to make sense of my data, I spent time with scholarship on the genesis and impact of white feelings, in particular the feelings of the white participants interested in exploring race and antiracism, on their capacity to develop effective antiracist identities. I will argue that the racial discourses of neoliberalism and critical race theory, as taken up by schooling, discourages action by binding students within guilt and shame while simultaneously limiting potentially generative systemic changes. This is a result of well-intentioned teachers deploying the shame-centric WPP while unintentionally binding the topic of race with the historical traumas of racism.

Literature on whiteness and white affective movements have been concerned, appropriately, with the avoidance or erasure of the experiences of people of color by the deployment of white feelings, what DiAngelo referred to as “the weaponization of white women’s tears” (2018). Indeed, neoliberal models of multiculturalism, the “official antiracisms” described by Melamed (2011), have redirected antiracist efforts toward a more facile and ultimately counter-productive model of empathy wherein racial difference is annihilated by seductive myths of sameness. Teachers’ well-intentioned response to neoliberal colorblindness, undertaking an examination of white privilege, often reinforces the neoliberal value of individuality. Margolin argues that by “focusing on whites’ personal identity over institutional structures, … [and] by falsely claiming that
the confession of white privileges led to social action beneficial to blacks,” WPP “makes [whites] more complacent, more at home in an unjust world, and more comfortable in their whiteness” (2015, p. 1). Similarly, Lensmire et al. argue that the confessional model of whiteness leaves white people without meaningful antiracist possibilities, even when white people genuinely desire them (2013).

Because so few scholars, especially scholars of color, take up white emotionality, Matias’ (2016) *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education* is helpful in the context of this study. Matias’ approach to white emotionality is rooted in colonial theory, especially Fanon (1967), Memmi (1965), and Fromm (2000). I found her defense of emotion, in the face of calls for white people to “calm down,” important,

this kind of sentiment renders tears as useless, anger as non-instructive, and fear as irrelevant. The supposed uselessness of these often “unwanted” emotionalities then inadvertently renders the “wanted” emotionalities of love, hope, and human connection worthless too. That is the tragedy. (p. 2)

While she also addresses scholars of race and emotion I rely on, including Leonardo & Zembylas (2013), as well as concepts such as strategic empathy (Lindquist, 2004), troubled knowledge (Jansen, 2009), and pedagogies of discomfort (Boler, 1999), she diverges from Thandeka’s (2001) scholarship in ways I do not take up, in particular Thandeka’s work with white shame. These will be explored further in Chapter Five.

Megan Boler (1999) takes up the philosophical underpinnings of these concerns in “The Risks of Empathy,” where she critiques the self-other models of empathy and interpellation in Western thought. Boler describes using *Maus* (1986) to work through the Jewish holocaust with her undergraduate students and becoming alarmed when a student wrote that, having read *Maus*, he now understood the holocaust. For Boler, the presumption of sameness between her student and the victims of the holocaust
overwhelmed the unknowability of genocide, rendering it flattened, sterile, and knowable. She is also critical of an unspoken assumption of who are empathizers and who are empathized with, as in, “what would it mean to empathize across other differences; when and why, for example, should inner-city youths read Virginia Woolf or Wuthering Heights?” (p. 161).

Boler (1999) is concerned about what happens to action and responsibility within this Hegelian model of empathy. She argues that empathetic catharsis precludes action. Because that catharsis dismisses differences in the name of sameness, that which constitutes a challenge to the notion of innocence or goodness within the empathetic self becomes subsumed into the self through an empathy that values sameness over suffering. Here, suffering is not shared with so much as utilized by the listener, who, in this role, could be called a bystander or spectator. As Boler argues, others’ suffering serves as a socio-emotional voyeuristic experience for the listener, who has no relationship with or obligation to the suffering. Like fear experienced inside of a carnival’s haunted house, the feelings are simultaneously real and meaningless. This is the cathartic and consumptive empathy of neoliberalism.

Boler suggests that in order for empathy to generate change, it must hail the listener in such a way that the listener joins with the story and experiences its discomfort; what she calls “A Pedagogy of Discomfort.” Zembylas (2006) describes this as

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10 Lewis & Diamond offer an analogous critique of the fragility of white guilt when it is removed from the context of systemic racism, “Any guilt that privileged people might feel for others’ disadvantaged position is alleviated if they believe that those others have been justly excluded because of their own moral or cultural or biological defects,” as might be felt by white people living under the American delusion of meritocracy and removed from the experiences of people of color (2015, p. 163).
testimonial listening or witnessing. Witnessing becomes painful as it challenges the worldview of the witness, bringing them face to face with “some massive and previously unthinkable disaster or victimization,” which “shatters one’s worldview” (Zembylas, 2006, p. 314). Unlike the cathartic fear experienced in a haunted house, witnessing demands that the witness reckon with their role in a world that permits such violence to happen.\(^1\) The function of witnessing is to destabilize the witness in “a fundamentally powerful affective experience; affects operate on both the psychic and social level by challenging one’s agency to imagine oneself as an ethical and political actor” (Zembylas, 2006, p. 314). This reckoning demands that the witness either take-up action against the violence or relinquish their belief in themselves as “ethical and political actors.”

A Pedagogy of Discomfort therefore poses risks. “Such work [of pursuing justice] not only draws us closer to the suffering, it makes us suffer” (Hook & West, quoted in Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2008, p. 164, emphasis added). Zembylas adds that a “crisis is essential in order for bearing witness to occur” (2006, p. 320).\(^2\) Boler’s Pedagogies of Discomfort have been taken up by several scholars concerned with how discomfort can be achieved generatively and ethically (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Zembylas 2015). Each of these caution that the affective work of pedagogies of discomfort is fraught, “risks inflicting violence” (Zembylas 2015), and could lead to a hopeless despair. This is the terrible potential of trauma and being witness to trauma.

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\(^1\) This “anticatharsis” recalls Boal’s (1979) work in Theatre of the Oppressed, where “spect-actors” work to identify and eliminate the obstacles inhibiting action by the bystander/oppressed.

\(^2\) This work is profoundly influenced by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, who developed the theory as part of their work of passing on the stories of the holocaust of WWII.
I highlight the potential emotional injury of this process to provide a framework within which we can make sense of the intense emotionality of race talk without reducing white student emotionality to an attachment to privilege. To flesh out this potential space, I turn to theory on trauma and double-binds.

I have found two theorists who have explored trauma as it might impact white people in a white supremacist society, and one wrote about race in post-apartheid South Africa (Jansen, 2009). In “Knowledge in the Blood,” Jansen explores the racial dynamics of pre- and post-apartheid South Africa as a Black academic whose career bridged both. He argues “that black and white South Africans came into democracy carrying traumatic memories of the apartheid past” (Chinoyowa, 2013, p. 93).13 Significantly, Jansen maintains that young South Africans, white and Black, each carry particular images of apartheid as “knowledge in the blood,” even if it ended years before they were born. For Jansen, these “traumatic memories,” which need not be personally experienced, persist in damaging ways for both whites and Blacks.14

The other theorist is Resmaa Menakem, a Minneapolis professor of Social Work, who similarly explores how generational and individual traumas contribute to

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13 Chinoyowa (2013) also proposes that Theatre of the Oppressed can create spaces where a painful nostalgia can be subverted by imaging and enacting new futures.
14 According to Jansen (2009), some white South Africans maintained an identity of underdog, of resistance, during the height of apartheid, especially when confronted with potential racial equality. This is similar to white resistance in the US starting after the revolutionary war as described earlier, where some whites recall imagery of a past, real or fiction, where they struggled valiantly against the odds with God on their side, to claim "what is theirs" against malicious forces seeking to undermine them out of spite (Native Americans, terrorists who “hate our freedom”), in a space and time where those dynamics no longer apply (if they ever did) and have in fact shifted in favor of those whites.
contemporary racial tensions in the United States, examining white-body, Black-body, and police-body trauma. He describes the trauma of white bodies who have “watched others harm and kill Black bodies. They failed to prevent, stop, or challenge such attacks” (Menakem, 2017, p. 101). White racial woundedness is also addressed by Zembylas, “Some have been victims of racism and others are injured because they are persistently perceived as perpetrators. But there is variability and complexity in the stories narrated by these individuals. A pedagogy that takes into consideration the variability of emotional injury asks students to engage with the injuries of both themselves and others and to consider what injury demands from oneself and the other.” (2012, p. 119, emphasis in original)

Jansen (2009), Menakem (2017), and Zembylas (2012) all suggest that working through white emotionality is a necessary aspect of antiracism. If we hope to develop young white people into effective antiracists, we must work through the significant emotionality attendant to race talk.

The other text on trauma I found useful is The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk (2015). Menakem’s work provided a lightly trod path as I explored the impacts of trauma described by van der Kolk, including ambivalences, attraction and revulsion, a struggle to articulate thoughts and feelings, and learned helplessness. We are well-cautioned by the criticisms of whiteness studies that we not finish our antiracist attempts with whiteness centered, but, through recognizing and addressing white woundedness, work to heal systemic racism. Carrying forward that caution, these models of white emotionality provide generative frameworks within which we can better make sense of the behaviors of young white people. It is to this end that I take up white emotionality.

**Conclusion**
This historical perspective makes possible understandings of the workings of whiteness that can serve to better make sense of the experiences and behaviors of young white people. The dynamics of whiteness described in each historical time period continue to “work,” making each essential for a deeper understanding of what it means to be white today. Further, thanks to more recent scholarship it is possible to complicate our understanding of whiteness in helpful ways. I brought these new understandings of whiteness to bear on my research, as I explore in the following chapters.
Chapter Three

The Story of the Study

Introduction

Nearly all of my white students are among the more recent generations of white Americans who no longer have access to an ethnic heritage, and largely, within an identity vacuum, must now take up whiteness. In this climate, part of researching how young white people make sense of their whiteness necessarily involved probing into what “goes without saying” concerning whiteness (Bourdieu, 2000). In this chapter, I detail the theoretical foundations of my research methods, beginning with the context within which whiteness and white supremacy continue to evade recognition and thrive. I then describe the research project itself. Finally, I situate myself within critical theory and critical research methods.

Theoretical Framework: Challenges of Examining Whiteness

The Challenge of Neoliberalism

By fixating on individualism and meritocracy, neoliberalism sought to lay the responsibility for social maladies at the feet of those suffering from them. Within this ideology, minoritized groups succeed or fail according to their hard work alone, and any attempt to recognize systemic inequalities is treated as a hostile attack on America. In its pursuit of individuality, neoliberalism pretends that race is irrelevant. Racial identity, at the center of American life from the very beginning, became an uncomfortable reminder of our shameful past or a forbidden reminder of our racist present. In this way, colorblindness has been a dominant “official antiracism” in the modern United States (Melamed, 2011). Guinier puts it this way, “In the 1950s prejudice was understood as an
aberration in individuals who disregard relevant information, rely on stereotypes, and act thoughtlessly. Prejudice was a function of ignorance. Educated people, it was assumed, are not prejudiced” (2004, p. 116). Roughly speaking, Critical Race Theory (CRT), in an effort to surface persistent racisms that recognize and explain systemic racial inequality, responds to the erasure of race by presuming the significance of race in all social encounters, “in all of its various permutations” (Delgado, quoted in Ladson-Billings, p. 264, 2000). For better or worse, one of the more commonly recognized constructs of CRT in educational contexts has been Peggy McIntosh’s “Invisible Knapsack” of white privilege (1988), as explored in Chapter Two. My classroom fit this description for years.

Thus, in the second half of the twentieth century, antiracist education and activism have pushed back against the post-war neoliberal hegemony. As a result, race talk can often seem bound within a dichotomy. On the one hand, race is an insignificant identity marker in an equal America, wherein “if you talk about race, you must see race, and if you see race, you must be racist” (Castagano, 2008, p. 329). On the other hand, race is an important social factor that helps to make sense of an unequal America. This dichotomy dangerously limits white racial identity development for young white people.

Furthermore, for my white students, race has been an inescapable, relentless social construction. However, because of the white silence around race (Castagano 2008, Applebaum 2016), encounters with race are often implicit, for example casting in television commercials, musicians, and racial demographics in football, tennis, media personalities, and politicians. In a neoliberal, hyper-individualized culture, these raced moments are unmarked and unheeded, and consequently lost opportunities to build racial awareness and sensitivity.
At the same time, a typical young white person will encounter race explicitly only through schooling, where pedagogically unsupported encounters can become challenging or possibly traumatic memories, hardening them against examining race (Menakem, 2017). For years my white high school students shared their early memories of race as tense lectures or films on slavery and the civil rights movement, which depicted Black bodies as recipients of unimaginable violence, flesh bludgeoned by batons and fire hoses, skin rent by police dogs. Their other academic exposure to race has come through “debates” about contemporary issues like Black Lives Matter or kneeling during the national anthem, treating these topics as though they had two equal sides. Further, teachers often deploy racism in “good/bad” terms, so that students may only choose between anti-white goodness and white oppressor. Thus, “the only legitimate white stance is that of the race traitor,” (Trainor, 2002, p. 633), risking the white backlash explored in Chapter Two. Worse, because of teacher discomfort, these classroom moments were often pedagogically unsupported impromptu arguments, leaving students feeling polarized and shaken. These images and conflicts, in addition to potentially resulting in secondary trauma, become durable aspects of their person, what Bourdieu called their “habitus” (2000).

The Challenge of Available White Modes of Being

Therefore, young white people can feel bound within the discourse formed by neoliberalism and CRT. Broadly speaking, there are three possible positions available to young white people. The first is colorblindness, “the problematic conflation of race with racism that reinforces inequalities, hierarchies, and racial division while insisting that race does not matter” (Roberts, Bell, & Murphy, 2008, p. 337). The second is white guilt
and shame. White guilt and shame are a consequence of the confessional model described in Chapter Two. White racial trauma, which the Reverend Thandeka (2001) describes as childhood familial threat when white children cross unspoken racial boundaries, complicates shame and guilt creating emotional binds explored in Chapter Six. Megan Trainor (2008), in her study of emotion and race in education, describes the binds this way,

student responses to the constructions of whiteness encountered in their texts and, in turn, their own constructions of whiteness were rhetorically delimited in problematic ways by an essentialized whiteness that critical pedagogy, sometimes unwittingly, set in motion. (p. 641)

A third possibility, white ethno-nationalism, has been increasingly taken up by disaffected whites who have been encouraged to blame racial and ethnic minorities for the economic fallout from neoliberalism. Race scholar Charles Gallagher presciently worried that white people might begin to take-up whiteness as “an explicit carrier of group interests,” in 1997. The election of Donald Trump is only the latest stage in the resurgence of white ethno-nationalism. This third option alone speaks to the need for effective antiracist pedagogical intervention and support. I found that the white privilege model of race and racism figures prominently in each of these positions.

**The Challenge of Racialized Moral Psychology**

In addition to the socio-emotional struggle that teachers and young people experience in classroom education about whiteness, there are also sociocultural constructs which work to thwart young white peoples’ close examination of race and racism. White people are insulated from the experiences of people of color through Western epistemologies that favor specific ways of knowing. Vivian May’s *Pursuing Intersectionality* (2015) offers a useful toolkit for unpacking these hegemonic ideologies.
May explains how, in situations of inequality, dominant ideologies generate “an agreement to know the world wrongly” (p. 190), which then limits available meanings and values to those of the dominant group, while disregarding “the interpretation, reception, and overall perception of knowledges generated by disenfranchised groups” (p. 208). For white people, this means that non-white experiences, especially of racism, become not only difficult to see for witness, but that white people “gain an “immunity” to stories and evidence not corresponding to established ideas” (Code, quoted in May, 2015, p. 191). This has led well-intentioned white people to profess an abstract acknowledgement of racial discrimination with only a limited ability to see it. May further explains, “the exclusions and erasures embedded in the universal are obscured by an array of knowledge conventions, state practices, and political norms that mask or render illegible these bald-faced contradictions” (p. 192). It is precisely these “knowledge conventions, state practices, and political norms” which constitute a “racialized moral psychology” that antiracist pedagogues must address.

These racial norms explored by May confound what it means to be a good white person and to live a moral white life. Charles Mills (1997) conceptualizes these norms as “The Racial Contract,” into which good white people invest themselves as members of the American social order. The Racial Contract normalizes racial inequality by obscuring its genealogy, so that contemporary racial disparities can be understood as temporary and exceptional, rather than historical and by design. The Contract also renders visible inequalities acceptable by “establishing personhood and subpersonhood,” (Mills, 1997, p. 53), where unequal social treatment of those deemed subpersons is rationalized and accepted. Historian Lewis Gordon called this “a cult of forgetfulness on a national scale”
wherein “the more the racist plays the game of evasion, the more estranged he will make himself from his ‘inferiors’ and the more he will sink into the world that is required to maintain this evasion” (quoted in Mills, 1997, p. 98).

Perhaps most insidiously, “the Racial Contract creates a racialized moral psychology. Whites will then act in racist ways while thinking of themselves as acting morally” (Mills, 1997, p. 93, emphasis in original). White people, because of the knowledges, practices, and norms of whiteness, will struggle to even recognize normative systems of racism, much less divest themselves from them. Recognition of racism, to say nothing of divestment from racism, will take intentional, personal, and sustained work. Throughout our history, and still today, it has been possible to be a good nonracist white person while socially, emotionally, and financially investing in brutally dehumanizing beliefs, instruments, and institutions. It is possible to blame Blackness as deficient while denouncing the centuries of ongoing oppression. As Frederick Douglass said: “When men [sic] oppress their fellow men, the oppressor ever finds, in the character of the oppressed, a full justification for his oppression” (Kendi, 2016, p. 199). Each of these challenges must be named, unpacked, and processed to productively address race.

**The Impact of these Challenges on Classroom Conversations about Race**

In addition to concerns of hardening young white people against race talk or promoting ineffective models of white shame or guilt, taking up race in the classroom raises its own concerns. First, for white students to confront race, they must “give up the notion of themselves ‘unproblematically as good whites,’” which can feel deeply threatening to those taught from an early age that being racist is one of the very worst things to be (Thompson, quoted in Ambrosio, 2014, p. 1379). Due to this threat, white
students often resist antiracism and antiracist pedagogy which positions them as racist, and will undertake logical and emotional counter-measures to protect themselves. In addition to colorblindness, colormuteness, and color celebrate, all explored in Chapter Two, these counter-measures are informed by the models of whiteness mentioned above, and can include:

1) deploying a fatalistic guilt or a scapegoating blame, “problematic binaries” of extremes that forestall conversation (Ambrosio, 2014);

2) heavily qualified agreement with antiracism, or deploying the force of facts – however cherry-picked (Ambrosio, 2014);

3) a “past-future orientation” to racism which avoids calls for action in the present (Kendi, 2016); or

4) what Applebaum (2016) called white silence, the result “when white students are exposed to the insidiousness of whiteness and when pedagogy interrogates white ignorance and white innocence” (p. 389).

Importantly, we can understand white silence in multiple ways. For example, Gaertner & Dovidio theorized “aversive racism;” a classroom practice where students are so loathe to commit an “unwitting transgression that could be attributed by themselves or by others to racial antipathy” that the risk of censure outweighs the moral right and they refuse to speak at all (quoted in Ambrosio, 2014, p. 1386). Classroom teachers and theorists both commonly read white silence as resistance. However, I believe we can productively read the silence as one of many forms of “stuck-ness” inherent to race talk.

While similar in ways not worth exploring here, Pollock’s (2004) colormuteness focuses more on patterns of silence and avoidance around race at a more structural level, while white silence tends to refer to the silence performed by white individuals.
in predominantly liberal white classrooms that I explore in Chapter Six. The deeply laid causes of these reactions to race talk, particularly racial shame, lie beyond the view of most high school teachers (who are overwhelmingly white). These complex reactions from students often become flattened to “resistance” so as to fit within teachers’ confessional models of antiracism.

That is an intimidating catalogue of the workings of whiteness. I am cautioned not only by these theories, but also the personal pedagogical experiences I detailed in Chapter One. Pedagogically I now take up whiteness in new ways, informed by the historical process of whitening and armed with an understanding of the white epistemologies which serve to protect whiteness. Like Kenney, “I needed to teach myself to see that which I had been trained not to notice. I needed to pay attention when my own anthropological questions met with resistance” (Kenney, 2000). As a researcher, I sought to better understand how these new perspectives might advance my understanding of the resistances of young white people.

**Methodological Frameworks**

Because whiteness deploys evasive maneuvers to protect itself, uncovering the workings of whiteness within myself and my research participants calls for a particular set of methodologies. Qualitative research treats knowledge as “constructed through the interaction between consciousness and the world” (Scotland, 2012, p. 12). It provides the epistemological footing on which to question taken for granted knowledges, as well as to better access and challenge mainstream neoliberalism as described above. As Gramsci wrote, this research work becomes “praxis of the present,” where participants are encouraged “to become conscious of their own actions and situations in the world”
(quoted in Lather, 1986, p. 257). In this way, research serves not only to collect information to be processed and reported by the researcher but importantly the conversations must raise awareness and develop capacity within the research participants themselves.

Because of this integral role, the qualitative researcher must carefully deploy the self throughout the research design, the data collection process, analysis, and interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). My role, particularly as a product of the same predominantly white high school, was to remain sensitive to my personal experiences with race and race talk so that their impact on this project could be understood and serve as guides to the participants as they become conscious of themselves “in the world.”

**Critical Methodologies**

Colonialism has meant more than the expropriation of goods and services. It has importantly included the essentialization of the Other. Colonialism objectifies the Other so colonizers could exploit and act exploitatively upon the Other, and more recently so the colonizer may take up the Other through appropriation (hooks, 1992). This exploitation has been made permissible by way of Western ways of knowing, what Foucault (1982) described as “rules of practice” which, to the West, are as invisible and unavoidable as water to fish. Viewing cultural others through a Western lens dominated the roots of anthropology and ethnography through the 19th and 20th centuries. In *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012), Tuhiwai Smith provides an example of the need for and the uses of critical ethnographic methods. She describes how depictions of non-Western Others as prehistoric obstacles standing between Europeans and their quests for
riches represented her as a non-Western Other; she was not within the sphere of “we” and “our” in those texts. This limiting view, this cultural genocide, permitted and even encouraged untold violence and exploitation; the West silenced victims of holocausts, voices unheard in our history books except as footnotes to the accomplishments of Europeans such as King Leopold II of Belgium who was responsible for the deaths of up to 12 million Congolese. We have not yet recovered from it. Our singular perspective attests to that. My use of “we” and “our” attests to that.

Critical research methods are not solely called upon to assuage the feelings of marginalized peoples or to challenge the legacies of historical figures. Critical methodologies are part of the scientific process to further our pursuit of understanding and being with the world through successive approximations; as Polkinghorne writes, “method does not give truth, it corrects guesses” (quoted in Lather, 1986, p. 259). A Western perspective has disallowed researchers from recognizing obvious truths, for example, misrecognizing women chiefs through translation assumptions (Tuhiwai Smith). Moreover, hopelessly narrow windows into people’s lives and cultures can generate objects of study akin to dioramas of mammoths and saber tooth tigers. We can’t see what we don’t imagine exists. In contrast, a critical methodology recognizes the Other as integral to the self. As Bakhtin writes, communication with the Other “brings the self more fully into being” which allows one to know the Other more fully; “the very being of [humanity] is the deepest communion…. To be means to be for another, through the other, for oneself” (Bakhtin, quoted in Madison, 2005, p.90).

Because colonization remains within the foundation of research, despite decades of working to decolonize the work, there remain powerful constructs I must address.
First, while I maintained control of the research questions and format, I involved and deferred to participants during the study to allow participants meaningful input. Second, I worked to make clear the ways in which the research project might benefit participants, while cautioning that their contributions would primarily serve to benefit future high school students (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Finally, I contended with a belief that participation in this project would constitute antiracism in itself, as though racism existed only as an individual malady remediable through conversation. These cautions informed several moments in the study which I explore below.

**Critical Ethnography**

A central concern of whiteness studies deals with how to guide white people toward an antiracism informed by an understanding of whiteness without reifying whiteness. To address this concern, I used critical ethnographic methods in my study. Namely, I sought to work “in response to the experiences, desires, and need” of the students (Lather, 1986, p. 267), in an effort to dispel the “false consciousness [that] is the denial of how our commonsense ways of looking at the world are permeated with meanings that sustain [our] disempowerment” (p. 265). Whiteness studies seek to undermine the false consciousness of whiteness.

In addition to recognizing the partiality and arrogance of the Western perspective, my perspective (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004), part of the work of qualitative research in general and critical ethnographic methods in particular has meant working to redress the profound, existential damage caused by the colonial mentality. At its heart, critical ethnography is a resistant, dialogic methodology that seeks, through dialogue, to move from “what is” to “what could be” (Madison, 2005, p. 5). Critical ethnography is research
moored to reality, a methodology to undercut non-critical research methods which value data over meaning, which seek only to understand, or even make more efficient potentially unjust systems. Critical ethnography recognizes and seeks to unpack the relationships among culture, power, and domination, so that it can recognize deep roots of inequality and injustice.

By recognizing epistemology and ideology as salient and culturally dependent determinants, critical ethnographic methods treat structures of social power and influence, as well as ways of knowing, as observable data necessary for making sense of social phenomenon. As Cohen Manion & Morrison (2000) explain, “the task of ideological critique is to uncover the vested interests at work which may be occurring consciously or subliminally, revealing to participants how they may be acting to perpetuate a system which keeps them either empowered or disempowered” (p. 30). An examination of whiteness requires a critical view of neoliberal ideology to see beyond the obfuscations and diversions of whiteness. Because whiteness, through the Racial Contract mentioned above, works to make itself invisible and normalized by justifying its murderous self-interest with racism, it can then only be adequately examined by discovering the “development of defensive strategies based on an essentialized understanding of whiteness” (Gallagher, 2000, p. 85) which obscure it. These can look like “avoiding words, making false starts, engaging in safe self-reflection, asserting ignorance and uncertainty, letting each other off the hook, citing authority, silence, changing the topic, affirming sameness, and joking” (Haviland quoted in Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 410).
It is impossible to examine these issues closely without narrowing focus. While I intended to trace the race talk of my white participants from their foundations to their implications, I was aware that how I read their words is not the only possible interpretation, and I acknowledged that as best I could.

**Research Design**

This study, then, was my attempt to work out these classroom dynamics by exploring how young white people talk about whiteness, race, racism, and antiracism. Further, I hope to better understand how popular racial discourses, including neoliberalism and white privilege pedagogy, inform these worldviews. Finally, I’m curious about the ways in which these young white people experience stuck-ness in the context of these racial discourses.

I chose St. Ann’s as my research site in part due to ease of access. I had well-established relationships with the school administration and its facilities. I was of the school culture and climate, having been both a student and a veteran teacher at the school. And, importantly, I had established relationships with my participants and their families, having taught all of them previously. My interest in and work on race and whiteness was familiar to both my students and the school community. My curricula have included units on race and, more recently, whiteness. I’ve been outspoken in faculty meetings, classrooms, and privately about racial issues. I have worked to make my convictions about the persistence of racism and the importance of addressing the topic of whiteness transparent pedagogically and professionally. All of this afforded an important and possibly necessary context within which I proposed this project to all parties. I recognized Hagerman’s (2018) anxiety of recruiting participants to a study about
whiteness and race, leading her to not mention whiteness and race until the study was underway. While I anticipated that the project would move forward, I was still relieved when I encountered no opposition from the administration, students, or parents.

St. Ann’s, like other schools and society as a whole, wrestled with the topic of race. The school’s long history was almost entirely white, so that while the student body has within the past ten years nearly doubled its proportion of students of color (to 25%), the school’s faculty, administration, alumni and (importantly) its generous donor network remain dominated by whiteness. I’ve heard from others and believe for myself that donors exert a modest conservative pressure on the school culture, a pressure felt, significantly, during recent conversations about what constitutes “appropriate” (read: white, masculine, corporate) hairstyles.

While the academic schedule and classroom curricula looked similar to those of other private Midwestern high schools, with an emphasis on competitive college preparation through accelerated and Advanced Placement courses, St Ann’s was, through its Mission Statement as well as its practice, dedicated to issues of social justice. This commitment was visible in a number of ways, including a multitude of service opportunities both during and outside of school. Students had opportunities to help build housing, serve weekly meals in homeless shelters, and volunteer at a day care for low-income families. As part of their religion courses, all senior students spent a few hours each week doing “service,” as it was called, at various “service sites” around town. These sites included crisis nurseries, shelters and drop-in centers for people experiencing homelessness, schools in low-income neighborhoods, and hospice care centers, among others. During the summer, St Ann’s participated in “Project Home.” Volunteer teachers
and students staffed a homeless shelter for families experiencing homelessness in the school commons area. The school also sent student groups on “Justice Education Trips” to Guatemala, Mexico, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, trips paid for by the students. I heard from students and others involved in their lives that these experiences were the highlight of their time in high school, and further influenced their career choices.

The influence of service-learning on white students’ attitudes toward people of color is mixed (Mitchell, 2008). “Service-Learning” opportunities like those listed above tend to be more available to students and schools with financial resources, both because the school must be able to support local day-trips, and because students must pay for extended travel costs. At St Ann’s, most of those engaging in service work were white while most of the recipients were people of color. It was entirely possible for a student of color to commute to St Ann’s affluent white neighborhood, only to travel with their classmates to their home neighborhood to provide service to their neighbors, as Coffee herself experienced on such a trip (2016). While white students can encounter racial difference in thought-provoking ways, this could be a white student’s only significant encounter with people of color. Ben 16 articulated this tension in his initial interview:

Kevin: So that's a moment where you feel like the shame is that you can leave, you're visiting in this place where people are struggling and then you kinda go home?

Ben: And how I can sort of derive a positive experience or like I supposed to be deriving some sort of positive experience from their pain.... And I was talking with some people about that - how we can sort of have this, we're spending thousands of

16 While two participants wrote to me saying they were “okay” with me using their names, all names are pseudonyms chosen by me.
dollars to have this sort of positive experience to sort of benefit off these people's pain, or not—I shouldn't even say pain. These people's disadvantaged lifestyle.... Like on one hand I kind of want to go out, experience the world and learn about these people, like gather insight like I did when I read *The Bluest Eye*, but on the other hand doing so kind of, [pause] I dunno, doesn’t it make it any better. No— the act of gathering insight doesn’t make it better. It kind of actually makes it a little worse. It’s kind of dancing on the ashes a little bit. (Interview, January 16, 2019)

The school’s good intentions and ongoing investment in whiteness was itself like a good white nonracist person; while it was aware of this dynamic and did work to ameliorate it, the problem persisted. Here Ben notices and is troubled by the exploitative quality of “spending thousands of dollars to have this sort of positive experience” with the same emotional investment as reading a book. Unfortunately, this type of encounter typified St Ann’s service-learning programs. Without the kind of critical service-learning Mitchell calls for (2008), “social justice [can become] a form of currency” sought after by privileged white students (Coffee, 2016, p. 33). For Coffee (2016) and Mitchell (2008), the currency serves neoliberal concepts of multiculturalism, rather than liberation.

**Research Participants**

While deciding to work with high school students was simple, choosing which students in particular posed challenges. For example, it was not obvious that studying whiteness would lead me to white participants. Yet racially-integrated conversations about race take considerable time and effort to move beyond white anxiety (Hagerman, 2018; Perry, 2002), and would create a different conversation dynamic than the one I hoped to foster, where white students feel “safe” articulating racial ideologies around
which they have discomfort. Besides, asking students of color to talk about whiteness would offer them very little, and would position them to contribute to my work and that of these white students at their own psychic and emotional expense. I decided to work with students who consider themselves white.

My second decision was whether to work with my former students or students I had not taught. I make no secret of my political views in my classroom, in as far as anti-oppressive, liberatory pedagogy can be seen as political (and it absolutely is). My former students know my values and my anti-oppressive pedagogy. Yet even teenagers outside of my community would not approach a conversation about whiteness “neutrally,” especially with a strange adult recording their every word. All research participants bring their complicated social realities to this work; there is no control in qualitative research, and my white students were no exception. Working with students (and their parents and guardians) to whom I am known allowed me to begin the research with a foundation of familiarity and perhaps some trust. I agree with Linder (2015) that “my prior relationships with the participants influenced the process of collecting data, both enhancing and limiting the study” (p. 541). Besides, emancipatory research calls for building within the research population the knowledge with which they might liberate themselves (Lather, 1986), and my project was “stanced” within political goals (Fine, 1994, p. 15).

I sought a group of students who had expressed a range of values and ideas about whiteness and race in my class. I also worked to balance gender and, as much as possible, political affiliation. I recruited students who, based on their classroom demeanor and participation, I believed to be amenable to participation in the project. I was constrained
by who choose to join in the project, by my partial knowledge of participants, and by their relationships with each other. That agreeing to participate in a study of whiteness and race talk might serve as a gateway and limit the ideological diversity of my participants was unavoidable, and ultimately generated meaningful insights into whiteness.

To identify potential research participants, I began by sorting through the list of my former students to identify and remove those I believed might consider themselves a person of color, along with one student whose parents immigrated from Germany. This was not nor did I set out to create a random sample of students. My first selection of students I believed to identify as white yielded me 51 potential participants. I removed potential participants for several individual reasons, including if I was currently teaching a sibling, or if I had relationships with the students’ families outside of the classroom. Additionally, one student had been involved in a racist incident two years prior, and another’s parent had complained about my unit on race last year.

I continued the selection process by eliminating students who had presented in my class as reticent conversationalists, assuming that their forthrightness on the topic of race would be similarly limited. For me, this was not the same as students who talked a lot or very little. I sought participants who, when they spoke, seemed willing to grapple thoughtfully and vulnerably with difficult concepts (Britzman, 1991). I also excluded three students with whom I had connected particularly well, hoping to reduce the pressure participants might feel to say what they thought I wanted to hear, as well as to mitigate biases I would bring. This reduced my potential participants to 26. Among these I included eight potential participants who had expressed either conservative political
views or views skeptical of antiracism or feminism, in so far as they understood or articulated such views; these were on the top of my list for recruitment. In this way, I imagined our conversations might resemble the conversations I’d had in my classrooms, if in a more “concentrated” way. I hoped to dive deep into the racial discourses of white high school students. I worked to generate a list of 14 former students who might serve as 12 research participants with two alternates.

I also consulted with the school administration, both to permit them a voice in the process, as well as catch any students who may present complications to the study process through some academic or behavioral issues. They raised no concerns about any of the potential participants. I began emailing the parents and guardians of potential participants in early January 2019.

The process of enrolling participants felt chaotic and fluid. I emailed the first set of ten parents and guardians at the same time, 10:30 AM on Friday January 4th; I had received IRB approval an hour earlier. Ultimately, my recruitment process yielded 15 parental / guardianship consents and four who did not consent. After contacting those 15 potential participants, two did not get back to me, two agreed to be study alternates, and one agreed in person but then failed to return my emails. In total, I contacted 19 potential participants’ parents or guardians and 15 potential participants. My study was conducted with ten participants, four senior women and six senior men. Most of the participants agreed enthusiastically, thanking me for the opportunity to participate.

Of those parents who declined to have their children participate, if they explained why, explained that their son or daughter already had a full schedule. Each expressed gratitude that I had invited their child to participate. Of the three participants who
received parental permission but did not participate in the study, none returned my
emails. If there was discomfort around the subject of my study, none was expressed to the
school administration or seemed apparent in any communication with me.

As I expected, undertaking the selection process was both exciting and full of
anxiety. I was nervous about negative parental reactions to my study or to studying
whiteness. I worried about how the group would interact. I kept notes in an online
journal, and periodically reminded myself of the interpretive nature of Fieldnotes
(Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011). Here I noted these concerns as I waited for responses
to my invitation, “Going through the names again, I have a moment of pause, concern,
I’m picturing these students’ tone of voice against the sensibilities of others. I’m also
nervous about actually undertaking the study, as though the months I’ve spent preparing
have left me unable to do the work” (Fieldnotes, January 4, 2019). Despite my nerves, I
was ready.

**Positionality**

As a white teacher who also attended this high school, my positionality is
particularly salient (Fine, 1994). St Ann’s had only recently reached 25% students of
color (SOC); when I attended the school enrolled around 5% SOC, which itself was an
improvement from previous decades. As a student, I recall an obligatory reverence
towards the horror of slavery (as well as the holocaust), though there was little mention of
race in our curriculum that I can remember. I recall an awareness of the concept of white
privilege and the model of McIntosh’s Invisible Knapsack (1989), though I took up that
understanding as a deficit model; that others had less, not that I had more. Additionally, I
remember a situation in my 10th grade advanced English class that typified an aspect of
race in the school that persists today. A Black student, the only in our class, had taken over the podium as a mock teacher. He did this playfully, without malice, but he was certainly pushing a boundary with our well-respected white teacher. He was out of bounds, playfulness aside, and I and others waited for our teacher to bring him back to order. Instead, our teacher watched his antics with a kind of grimace, unable or unwilling to enact even the light discipline required. This left a deep impression on me, in particular my teacher’s twisted smile, and the message to me as a white student was clear. Black students might be my classmates, but they operated under a different set of rules. Because they posed a dual threat (being perceived as physically threatening as well as a potential accuser of racism) to their white teachers, they could simultaneously get away with more and face harsher punishments than their white peers (Pollock, 2004). This incident and others like it sustained the culture of whiteness prevalent at St Ann’s.

In my study I recognize the inalienable subjectivity of the researcher. Qualitative research treats the researcher, the instrument of research in qualitative study as complex, mutable, socially positioned, and thus subject to interrogation like any other variable (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). My demeanor will play an important role in student sense-making (Thomas, 2015). Further, Critical ethnography assumes power as “a basic constituent of human existence,” so that there is only interpretation, no matter how much one might argue that the facts speak for themselves (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 309). I believe that, as a white person, as well as a life-long member of the community, my “insider status” meant I was well-positioned to examine whiteness with other white people (Kenney, 2000). I agree with Twine that insider research is not better or worse than so-called objective research, but that it is different (2000). As the researcher, an
adult, a teacher, and a race scholar (to say nothing of being white, male, cis-het, able-bodied, neural-typical and so on), I was in the position to exercise a great deal of power within the context of this research, and my methods sought to mitigate the risk that this power might be wielded incautiously. For example, I worked to defer to participants during our interviews and group work by participating in the activities alongside them, by asking permission to address or move on from a topic, and by inviting participants to pose their own topics and questions.

**Data collection and analysis**

To create a record of the interview and group conversations, I used a digital audio recorder for the initial interviews and both a digital audio recorder and a video/audio recorder for the group meetings as well as the final interviews at the end of the study. I transcribed and attempted to code these as I describe below. I wrote notes by hand before, during, and after each conversation and meeting, in addition to typing near-daily reflections in a field note journal running from the study development through the early portion of drafting this document. I tracked all correspondence with prospective and eventual participants, parents, and school administrators. I sought to create several avenues through which participants could share their thoughts and questions with me. In addition to the interviews and meetings, I invited participants to journal in notebooks I provided, to write questions and reflections on a Google Doc shared with me, and to post questions or reflections anonymously through an open question on Survey Monkey. In the end, these written responses were unevenly taken up and provided little data.

**Initial Interviews**
I conducted initial interviews between January 8th and 18th. Depending on scheduling, some of the interviews were conducted before school (7:00 – 7:45 AM) or after school (2:35 – 3:30 PM), with one interview conducted during an open period in the middle of the day. Having to schedule interviews and group meetings in the mornings before school limited how much time I was able to spend in each conversation.

It was quickly apparent to me that scheduling morning interviews, the time most participants were available, presented two drawbacks. First, participants often showed up understandably sleepy and late, sometimes up to 15 minutes after 7:00 AM. Second, because 7:00 AM was as early as I was willing to ask participants to start, our meetings could only go as long as 45 minutes, as the school day started at 7:45 AM. Interviews conducted after school typically ran closer to the full hour, with a few extending beyond that. While the after school interviews generated a larger volume of data, I found the morning interviews equally generative.

In the initial semi-structured interviews, I asked four main questions:

- what are participants’ early memories of encountering race,
- how have they encountered race in their lives today,
- how do they experience racial difference in different parts of their lives,
- how have they taken up or how they might envision antiracism.

The interviews were largely guided by each participant. I began by naming the questions listed above so that they might have some control over what and how they shared (Talmy, 2011). I sought a light conversational tone, though occasionally I pushed for more detail, always with permission, and always telling the participant that I was doing so. I often laughed and encouraged participants to laugh in an effort to move beyond the feeling of
being studied as part of what several students referred to as my “experiment.” I recorded these using a digital audio recorder and by taking notes. I decided against video recording the initial interviews in an attempt to reduce the participants’ anxiety as they entered the process. I also knew that I would record video for the group meetings and I planned to video record the final interviews as well. If a participant shifted in their seat or physically cued an emotional moment I followed up on their answer in an attempt to capture what had happened. All participants seemed to be on “high alert” during the initial interviews regardless of what we discussed, and I was asked to explain anything I wrote down as a note. For this reason, I erred on the side of transparency with participants and attempted to remember, rather than note, observations that might appear critical of a participant, e.g., when a participant appeared uneasy or when they seemed to struggle to answer a question. This is a possible capitulation to our shared white discomfort with the topic of whiteness and race (DiAngelo, 2018), though I believe it helped participants feel more comfortable sharing in the rest of the study.

I worked to be responsive to the data as I collected it so that early interviews influenced how I proceeded. I noted this from the seventh of ten interviews: “I’ve now had six interviews and I’m finding my protocol evolve, and I’m pretty heavily zeroing in on emotion, especially in my interview with Ali this morning” (Fieldnotes, January 15, 2019). With Ali, more than earlier interviews, I followed up answers with questions about what the situation felt like, asking for more detail about a story, or asking the participant to explain an expression I might have assumed a shared understanding of earlier. I believe this was in part due to Ali’s more emotive demeanor, or that she articulated less
confidence in her answers, causing me to pursue them further, both likely, in part, a function of gender dynamics between us.

With one exception, participants articulated more “liberal” attitudes on race and racism, saying that racism remained a serious problem, that they were hoping to learn more about how to address racism, and acknowledging that they had personal work to do to better address racism. Because I had attempted to recruit a diversity of opinions on race, this surprised me. I was momentarily concerned for the single participant whose frustration with what he described as liberal efforts to “shame white men into silence” was clear (Joel, Interview, January 18, 2019). I worried that more liberal members of the group would shout him down, though I also worried that discussion of his views would dominate the conversation and limit our examination of whiteness to the existence of racism. Joel ultimately did not attend any of the group conversations and did not explain why.

**Group Meetings**

The attendance of each group meeting fluctuated from three to nine participants. Joel did not attend any of the meetings and declined to conduct a final interview. When I caught up with him mid-way through the study he gave me a different email address with which to get in touch, though I questioned if that was the cause of his absences. His initial interview had confirmed for me his conservative social views (detailed below), and had he participated he would have been the only participant to take up the position that racism was not a concerning issue. The remaining nine participants attended most of the group meetings, though there was only one meeting everyone attended. I scheduled the
meetings in the morning from 7 to 7:45 AM when the first bell rang. However most of the meetings didn’t start until 7:10 AM, and thus only ran closer to 30 minutes than 45.

I believe that holding the meetings in the mornings before school had a small depressive effect on participation, though, as I noted, talking about race can have a similar effect, “The morning makes it a little challenging, at least it seems to be hindering some engagement, though that could certainly be a result of being hesitant to participate” (Fieldnotes, February 3, 2019). I proposed moving our meeting time to midday or the end of the school day, but too many participants were engaged in other school activities and would have been unable to attend.

During the first meeting, I introduced the project, including project parameters such as the kind of data I planned to collect, confidentiality, my research goals, and potential topics. Participants also shared how they identified racially, ethnically, and socially. For example, David introduced himself like this,

So, uh, I’m white, and um, I suppose, nationality based, definitely consider myself a Minnesotan like other people. Have that strong pride. I'm like very heavily German, somewhere like over 70 percent, but close, like my immediate family is kind of outlier in my larger group family. I guess like all my uncles and aunts and grandparents and cousins, they all live in the middle of nowhere, you know, the stereotypical, you know, like uh, you know, they all like the trucks and farms and all that stuff. My family are the only ones that really live in the city like, so it’s kind of weird being the only people at a family reunion that doesn't show up in a pickup truck. [laughter] (Meeting one, January 29, 2019)
For each of the following meetings I asked participants to think about the topic in advance and, if possible, to write notes about it in a Google Doc shared with me. Additionally, when there was an opportunity to end a few minutes early, I asked participants to jot down thoughts. Only three participants, Jenny, Ali, and Heidi, made substantial contributions to their online journal. In the second meeting we shared an early memory of race, and in the third we shared early memories of how we learned about race, either pedagogically in elementary school or, for example, on a trip to a Chicago museum with an exhibit on slavery.

Danny: [short pause] Sure. Had to be like, grade school. We were in Chicago and they had the exhibit on slavery. I was pretty young. My mom took me through it. She made it a really like, big deal. But like, I didn't really understand it, I just thought it was an exhibit, but, that [was] when I kind of first learned about racism.

Kevin: How did she make it a big deal? Like what did she, do you remember what she did or said?

Danny: It just really was like, all right, we're like, we're going to go into the exhibit right now, and we were like, cool, and we didn’t really talk really emotionally about it. (Meeting two, February 1, 2019)

After sharing on a particular topic, I often pursued where the conversation felt generative. This often meant following up with curiosities of my own, inviting participants to ask each other questions, or, as in meeting two, shifting to a related topic. After sharing memories I asked participants how these memories impacted them going forward in their lives. Ben shared that because these exposures to race were so rarely unpacked or discussed at all, it “kinda establishes this idea that not talking about it is the
right thing to do … it made the subject so inaccessible to me.” This unspeakability was then taken up by the group for the rest of the meeting. I noted afterwards that it felt like “the first meeting where the participants seemed to open a little more, to share without this heavy weight of performance and treading delicately” (Fieldnotes, February 5, 2019).

We discussed race and referential language, e.g., “Black” vs. “African American,” during our fourth meeting and how race has been taken up in their high school classrooms in the fifth, though the conversations frequently detoured to follow a particular memory or topic. For example, the group spent some time during the fourth meeting sharing their negative opinions about and struggles with white people who say they can experience racism. The sixth, seventh, and eighth meetings took up definitions of words like “white,” “race,” “racism,” though we ended up talking about social media and humor. For example, for much of the seventh meeting we discussed the hashtag #basicwhitegirl or how “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia” and “The Office,” both popular comedy television shows in the mid 2000s, each dealt with race in their first and second episodes, respectively.

For the ninth meeting, I lectured on the history of whiteness as catalogued in the previous chapter, and we took up what it might mean to examine white supremacy as white people. For remaining meetings, meetings ten through thirteen, we reviewed aspects of one of the central tenets of whiteness studies in which whiteness has been created and sustained to divide society for the benefit of the wealthy elite (Allen, 2012; Roediger, 1991). While I had shared this material the previous year when I taught most of the participants in class, I did not see clear evidence that these lessons had influenced participants’ worldview except in the most universal terms. I also pursued how
participants conceptualized anti-racism, particularly what anti-racism could look like among white people without people of color.

I struggled with exhaustion and feeling professionally burned out for the later group meetings, especially meetings 10 and 11. In meeting 10 this looked like me spending six minutes explaining historical mechanisms of whiteness or five minutes talking about land reparations, holding forth rather than inviting conversation. The following is from my reflection after meeting 11:

Tired as shit this morning, that’s part of it, the limited amount of energy I have to offer slows me down. I dramatically underestimated the impact of being sick all the gd time. Bah. Meeting today felt like a total bust. I appear, and feel, like I currently lack direction. I am low energy – they are low energy. (Fieldnotes April, 2, 2019)

The group’s responsiveness and my mood improved after this, and meetings 12 and 13 delved further into what being antiracist could look like. I posed the following questions to the group before meeting 12: “How might I look at and think about the United States as an antiracist white person? What might my values be as an antiracist white person?” (Electronic correspondence, April 8, 2019). These prompts generated very little in meeting 12, and most of the group seemed befuddled by the prospect of antiracist work without people of color. This gave me pause, as I had intended that the context provided by the history of whiteness would enable an antiracism focused on unearthing and disarming the toxicity of whiteness, though I had not proposed that to them explicitly. The group seemed more inclined to take this up in our final meeting. For example, Ken, who had espoused a colorblind attitude throughout our conversations, proposed the
following as an antiracist action focused on whiteness: “I would say looking at your past, like your family's past and stuff…. if you know who you are and how different you are and stuff, it can make you sensitized to other cultures and other people's past” (Meeting 13, April 16, 2019). The 13th and final meeting also served as a check out from our work.17

Follow-up Interviews

The final interviews were also semi-structured, ranging in length from 45 to 90 minutes. During these interviews, participants and I reflected on our work together. To prepare I reviewed their initial interviews and made note of generative moments from our group conversations. In some cases, the interview felt played out within 25 or 30 minutes. Sometimes we chatted for a while about college plans and sometimes we wrapped up early. For others, the interviews felt full and rich, and in two cases we met for two additional conversations. These conversations felt less formal than other parts of the study. This was perhaps due to the fact that the participants were graduating from high school in a week, so that their attention was now focused on their future.

In these interviews, I pursued how participants envisioned antiracist action, specifically how they might take up antiracism in their own lives. As part of this line of questioning, I asked what antiracism might look like within participants as individuals, or within participants’ white social and familial circles. I was, in part, following Gallagher’s suggestion that “our interviews must generate counter-narratives of whiteness which give respondents the opportunity to rethink the white scripts, those “unquestioned assumptions” about race that are constantly being written, rewritten and internalized”

17 A guide to the group meetings, including attendance, and topics discussed can be found in the appendix.
Several participants seemed caught off-guard by the question and had little to offer even when I asked how they might go about practicing antiracism. This, for example, is from a final interview with Ryan:

Kevin: what are some of the actions you could take to- yeah, to be antiracist? Do you have any thoughts along those lines?

Ryan: Mmm, I mean it does happen in conversation. That's one. [Pause] Umm. I struggle with like trying to think of like material –

Kevin: like, like give money?

Ryan: Well No, I mean no, I’m like trying to think of like material things I would actually like how change those minds, if that makes sense. (April 30, 2019)

Or this from my interview with David, wherein he struggled to imagine any successful antiracist action from white people:

David: Like I'd also say like, especially you can say like being in a group and talking about it can like help, but I'd say a lot like, obviously one, a lot of people wouldn't want to do that. But then I'd say like white people themselves would say like, oh, like that's, you know, that's, you can't talk about race. I feel like the white stereotype, it’s not a stereotype it’s the truth. The white thing about white people not wanting to talk about race, until, until that gets broken, I don’t feel like there’s really anything we can do, to be honest. (April 25, 2019)

I will address this struggle to imagine white antiracism in Chapter Six.

One point to come out of the interviews was that both the participants and I noticed that our group conversations ended up feeling pedagogical, or as they put it, “like a classroom.” This was part of my design, to generate a kind of classroom laboratory
where I could explore race-talk with young white people without the strictures of schooling, but it also reflected my conflicted identity within this space and with those participants. Reviewing video, audio, and transcripts of my data collection, I occasionally found myself wishing I would talk less. When participants reported that they found some of the meetings to be “like a classroom,” this mostly seemed to mean that they had hoped their conversation would sound and feel different from what they had experienced in other classrooms in ways they could not articulate.

**Transcription and Coding**

Much of my experience of making sense of the data I gathered aligned with the dissertation experience of Sharon Augustine, who eschewed coding and used writing as her “first analytic stance toward the data” (2014). Like Augustine, I began processing the initial interviews as I conducted them. I hoped to make sense of potential or generative themes in time to incorporate them into the rest of my study. I used Temi, an online automated transcription service, to create an initial transcript of all interviews and group meetings. I then reviewed each text to create a word-perfect transcript. Finally, I watched or listened to the recordings straight through with a hard copy of the transcript in front of me, making notes and highlighting passages to identify themes. I noted my process on February 2\textsuperscript{nd} in the following passage,

I transcribed the interviews. On the second or third listen through, I highlighted sections that stood out to me, at least a tiny fraction of them. Once the transcripts were to my satisfaction, I printed them and began processing them with my notes. From those notes I started a universal outline to identify themes. (Fieldnotes, February 2, 2019)
As noted by Kincheloe & McLaren (2005), this is an imperfect process subject to my biases as a researcher. Yet I found this method opened generative avenues for me. At the time I was especially drawn to how participants seemed to follow an unspoken set of rules when talking about race.

I struggled to organize the data from the interviews within an outline. In keeping with the qualitative nature of my work, the range and complexities of possibilities I might pursue was overwhelming and I struggled to represent the data “on paper” in a way that captured even the main concepts I found in the data (LaCompte & Preissle, 1993). In my mind, the data existed in a kind of matrix, where I could conceptualize the data as organized in several different ways. Each perspective offered some insights while limiting others. I began with an outline organized according to potential themes. Some of these arose because of my theoretical foundations, which informed the focus of my interviews. Some of these themes included participants’ early memories of race; boundedness; emotionality including anger, shame, and guilt; and the “rules” of racial discourse by which participants seemed bound. These important themes guided my inquiry in the group meetings. For example, I took up race talk “rules” and emotionality in ways I did not initially anticipate. At the same time, they did not satisfactorily represent the data I had. For example, I was interested in exploring the intersections of gender and emotion with race, of a more racially diverse upbringing and racial attitudes, of participation in athletics and racial attitudes, among others, and mapping these intersections was forbiddingly complex.

I decided to use another digital tool, NVivo, to help me organize and manipulate the data from the initial interviews to better understand these and other intersections.
NVivo provided a platform on which I could easily cross-reference data, so that I could shift between viewing data as organized by each participant to data as organized by theme, or by whatever other organizing principle I wanted to input. This required that I code the transcript data into what became 138 categories. This risked flattening the complexity of the data. I noted that more complex models of race and racism resisted coding “[Ben’s] interview is super challenging to code (which is a good thing I’m discovering) because his ideas are whole pictures unto themselves” (Fieldnotes, February 15, 2019). I found the coding process helpful insofar as it provided another method wherein I processed the data, but beyond that I struggled to maintain a coherent and consistent set of codes. Here again I took up Augustine by using my notes and ongoing analysis to drive the main themes of my study. Rather than the coding process being a machine that sorts, I worked through data as a series of collages, what Augustine called “assemblage” (2014).

This process was messy, though not careless. I used post-its to keep track of moments, intersections, authors, quotes, and epistemological reminders to myself, which I arranged on the wall behind my computer screen. I practiced thematic structures on a whiteboard. I color-coded the interviews, then reprinted and color-coded them again. I struggled to locate my theoretical foundations, Critical Whiteness Studies and Critical Race Theory, alongside my historical perspectives and the stories my participants shared. One aberrant interview threatened to dominate my analysis until my notes shifted to emotionality, and I decided to take it up in a different way. This process coincided and was influenced by the group meetings and final interviews. I found coding through
NVivo helpful in very limited ways and this process did not inform the themes I found most generative.

I ultimately organized the data through exploratory writing. I endeavored to narrativize, to make lucid the chaotic pile of notes and data in ways that permitted boundaries, however artificial, among comprehensible branches of stories. If I have been successful, participants’ interwoven experiences and stories will retain their multiplicity and complexity. Additionally, I intend the stories to invite you to “enter into a conspiracy with the storyteller, a politically based conversation about the relationship between world-at-hand and world-to-be-made, a sharing of ideals and ideas towards a possible future” (Barone, 2000, p. 256). Participants were cognizant of this future, even if they could not quite articulate it themselves.

Limitations

The cost of adaptability is constancy; a system cannot be both committed to unknown variables beyond its control and standardized at the same time. Interpretive studies are not intended to be generalizable, and the emancipatory focus of critical and interpretive studies tend to generate highly contextualized data. Because of this dependence on context, critical ethnography has a limited transferability. With a deeper attention to context, as well as the thick description required to meaningfully convey participants’ experiences and stories, there is also a greater risk of privacy violations for research participants (Scotland, 2012). Scotland also notes that despite critical ethnography’s attempt to “promote dialogical relations of equality between researchers and participants,” in schooling contexts, “teachers control the research agenda,” and “a high degree of obligation will exist for students to participate … consequently, issues of
collaboration, consent, coerciveness, and autonomy must be considered” (2012, p. 14). I was especially anxious about this final concern due to my relationship as a former teacher to my participants, and I took measures to combat these risks. In addition to selecting participants with whom I had no potential conflict of interest, I clarified numerous times that there were no “right” answers, and occasionally attempted to create openings wherein participants might feel more comfortable expressing themselves. For example, I sometimes risked sharing my own early experiences of race or my experience of racial difference in school before asking participants to share, as I believed the risk of determining their answers was outweighed by the benefit of opening potential topics of conversation. Additionally, I agree with Fontana & Frey that “interviewers can show their human side and can answer questions and express feelings” (2000, p. 711). The theoretical foundations of the study laid out in the previous chapter lent themselves to assuage this concern, as the focus was not on coercing confessions or trying to work out who was racist, but to complicate whiteness and examine how white people become white in a white supremacist society.

Qualitative research methods can retain vestigial attachments to objectivity. Member checks, as part of an internal validity audit of qualitative research (Merriam, 1995), allowed the research participants a yes / no input on the data but did not allow participants access to question or framing formation. In this study, participant ways of knowing are central, so that my research method afforded a flexibility wherein I could accommodate generative avenues of analysis. For example, I waited until after my first round of interviews to develop conceptual frameworks with which to map themes I would pursue in the study. My research questions did not inherently lead me to closely
examine “rules” of race talk or participants’ early academic exposures to slavery. However, both became early foci of investigation after reviewing the initial interviews, based not only on my observations, but also through member checks in early group meetings (Lather, 1995).

**Liberatory Aim of Critical Research**

There are questions as to the emancipatory effects of taking an ideological stance. Lather (1986) calls attention to catalytic validity, where the “success” of a study relied upon the study participants taking up action in the name of self-liberation. However, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) question if emancipation is possible through ideological reframing. Lather insists that it is not only possible, but obligatory for researchers to assert ideology in the name of liberation. This poses its own risk of over-determination, as researchers “impose meanings on situations rather than constructing meaning through negotiations with research participants” (Lather, 1986, p. 265), but critical researchers determine this risk to be less than that of ignoring unspoken and assumed discourses.

I also took seriously Lather’s call for liberatory effects of critical research (1986). Not only did I apply Critical Whiteness Studies as my theoretical foundation (Lensmire, 2018; Leonardo, 2004), I dedicated the later group sessions, especially sessions nine and ten, to discussing, in part, the historical context of whiteness laid out in the previous chapter. Following Critical Whiteness Pedagogy (Frankenberg, 1993), I hoped to provide the participants new ways of experiencing themselves as white people in a white supremacist society, including means to take up antiracism beyond confession and reducing people of color to projects waiting to be solved by white people. These efforts
became the data with which I make sense of the race talk of the young white people in this study.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this project is to better understand the structures and foundations of race talk of the young white people enrolled in this study, so that we can better undertake antiracist pedagogies. In this chapter, I detailed my methodologies and methods for making sense of how young white people talk about their whiteness. What follows is an assemblage of the data I collected from these conversations (Augustine, 2014).
Chapter Four

Schooling

Introduction

Race talk in high school is a tense performance of whiteness at the confluence of historical, national, and local discourses, wherein young white people must navigate the strict morality of white privilege pedagogy (WPP) using the purposefully deficient language of neoliberalism. Young white people are both authentically caught and authentically experiencing pain within whiteness so that any potential antiracism requires unpacking their experiences of whiteness and race.18

While I did not ask about political affiliation as part of my initial interview protocol, most participants used a liberal to conservative binary to assess the racial views of themselves and peers. I’ll follow this binary here. Roughly speaking, more liberal equated with more concern for race and racism, what Frankenberg calls “race cognizance” (1993), while more conservative meant a more neoliberal, individualist, boot-strap narrative view, with little consideration of social contexts. With these in mind, I attempted to enroll white participants with a range of beliefs about race with little success. Prior to the study, the women participants, Jenny, Heidi, Maria, and Ali, had all articulated racism as a serious problem, a more liberal view. Of the young men, Ben was the only participant I was confident held more liberal views. I knew that Joel, Ryan, and David had shared skepticism of systemic inequalities, more conservative views, in class the year prior. I was unsure of the views of Ken and Danny.

18 Whatever suffering white people experience due to white supremacy does not compare with or mitigate the ways white supremacy has harmed people of color in both individual and systemic ways over hundreds of years.
Importantly, Ken, Ryan, and David all shared how they had shifted their views from last year so that they were now more aligned with those who believed racism was a serious problem. David actually apologized for what he had shared with me during an interview last year, while Ken told me how he “used to be majorly Republican and now I'm more liberal, I care about more people” (Interview, January 16, 2019). Without Joel’s participation in the group meetings, the ideological diversity of my participant group was limited to “liberal” views. This demonstrated dynamics within liberal antiracist discourses that I take up later in this and the following chapters. That participants held more liberal views was likely conditioned by the topic of my study; potential participants could self-select out of the study if they felt that their views would conflict with the political zeitgeist of the enrolled group. Indeed, one potential participant and two enrollees asked who else would participate, and several participants suggested that having friends in the group was a contributing factor in their participation and candor.

By beginning with the linguistic elements of participants’ experience of race talk, I begin to examine participants’ suppressed reckoning with their role as white young people in a white supremacist society.

**Referential Language**

As language is central to our human experience, the available discourses of race talk profoundly influenced participants’ available ways of understanding race, racism, and themselves. I begin with an overview of the language participants employed to talk about race both because of the discursive baseline provided by such an examination and to highlight the central role language, or, in this case, the lack thereof, plays in our sense-making about race. For this discussion, I use the phrase referential language to include
the words or phrases participants used to describe or refer to race, racial issues, or racial identities.

Participants all expressed concern and confusion about how they were to undertake race talk, down to the language they would use to refer to concepts, groups of people, and individuals. We discussed how to define terms such as race, racism, and whiteness in our sixth meeting. After a few participants discussed race as socially constructed and appearance-based, Jenny observed, “just the fact that we don't know how to talk about it is just like a testament to what it is” (Meeting 13, April 16, 2019). Ben agreed, “I think it's intentional … the fact that we may struggle to answer that question is evident of how we're not really given a language to talk about race.” Ali then demonstrated this difficulty in a way that resonated with the rest of us,

Ali: Um, adding onto that, I, well for all of these it’s kind of hard to like put into words because like, I've never, I don't know, either. I think about it, like what is the right way to say it or what's the right way to think it? I guess? I don't know if there is a right way but,

Kevin: If there's a right one, I want to know what it is and then I’m gonna use it. Is that what you …

Ali: yeah, I could- I don't even know if there is, a right way of, I mean, there's a wrong way.

Kevin: What's that?

Ali: Um, I don't, I don't really know [laughter]. (Meeting Six, February 19, 2019)

Ironically, Ali is articulating a difficulty many white people encounter when attempting to talk about race, which is that white people are eager to say the “right thing”
without knowing what that is, and desperately fear saying the “wrong thing” without knowing exactly what that is either. This generated a bind where white people must participate in race talk and do not know how to participate in race talk. It extended to the seemingly simple task of talking about people in racial terms.

Perhaps as a consequence of this, there seemed to be a consensus among participants that the term “African American,” more ethnic than racial, felt safer than the term “Black.” Heidi mentioned that she might revert to using “African American” when she was unsure (Meeting Six, February 19, 2019). Similarly, Joel described why he felt he ought to use “African American” by naming “the feeling in society that you have to stay away from using words like Black” (Interview, January 18, 2019). Yet while “African American” seemed more safe, Jenny noted how white people don’t “call ourselves Caucasian American,” and Ben complicated the use of “Black” by noting that context and emphasis could render the word as derogatory or not (Meeting Four, February 12, 2019). Furthermore, attempting to avoid the term Black can be taken up in confusing ways. For example, Ryan referred to Black South Africans as “African American” twice in our initial conversation (January 9, 2019); he sheepishly corrected himself both times. In my own anxiety to “get it right,” I’m guilty of this slip myself. The anxiety over the language used to refer to racial groups can itself predominate race talk well before antiracism can be taken up, and can lead to counter-productive performances of antiracism among white people.¹⁹

I believe David correctly identifies the performative nature of the referential language we use,

¹⁹ I take up this feeling in an exploration of calling out, where white people publically call-out other white people on their racism, in Chapter Five.
David: Well, and this might be a bit of a, I don't know, maybe controversial, maybe not, but I think that the term African American is more used by white people than anyone else. It's, I,- yet again, I would say like maybe they're trying to be, you're trying to sound more virtuous or you know, woke, by trying to be overly, you know, like respectful to that.

Ben: They're overcompensating for something.

David: Yeah.

Maria: That kind of makes sense. (Meeting Four, February 12, 2019)

Because sense-making happens in large part through language, the lack of a coherent discourse around race limits participants’ capacity to understand not only race itself, but also their place within race. Unable to confidently put language to racial topics, young white people are left with little recourse but to either hide in silence and shame or anxiously perform a counter-productive rhetorical antiracism through calling out. Calling out, as explored in Chapter Five, is often a consequence of white privilege pedagogy, which struggles to generate antiracist action beyond classroom discourses among white people.

Moreover, because neoliberal education in high school is typically classroom-bound and oriented toward efficiency, students’ only available action is through language, often limited to the pedagogical language of the teacher (Freire, 1993). This leaves confessing to privilege or calling-out other white people as the only antiracist actions available to young white people. In the classroom, the only thing to do is talk, and there is not adequate language. I believe this language problem is foundational to the rest of the participants’ racial discourses.
Schooling

Schooling, the formal education these young people encountered in their mostly Catholic elementary schools and St Ann’s, was for the participants a nearly universal disappointment when it came to race. The group provided clear examples of curricular and pedagogical failings. Many noted how their teachers had filibustered race talk “conversations,” posed broad questions ill-suited to conversation, or noted how these conversations were entirely and sometimes conspicuously absent. Ryan summed up these shortcomings this way,

In elementary school, when you first learn about race, you learn about MLK and other civil rights people, you're automatically assumed you're not racist. And that’s that. There's no education about what race is. So you're saying, “Okay, good. You're in 2019 and you’re not racist, now go into the world.” So you have no idea about racism or about race and have no handle on how to go about it.

(Ryan, Meeting Eight, March 12, 2019)

Additionally, there were several specific ways in which participants’ schooling impacted their race talk.

Importantly, participants noted that race-talk in nearly all schooling contexts went emotionally and sometimes pedagogically unsupported. Many participants described early academic encounters with racism as witnessing physical violence inflicted upon Black bodies, typically in the fifth or sixth grade. This included images and videos of horrific violence that “disturbed” and “shocked” them, with one participant describing a scene as “scarred into my brain” (Meeting Three, February 5, 2019). In addition to

20 Sadly, this also seemed to be these white students’ primary encounters with bodies of color.
physical violence, Ben described an image of a plantation owners’ spreadsheet listing the values of human beings that “shocked” him.

In addition to these exposures, their high school teachers allowed space for discussing race in limited ways. These were often in response to controversial current events involving police brutality and Black Lives Matter protests, where the conversation became heated exchanges among the same few passionate students. In this way, much of these white student’s encounters with race talk in any form looked like violent imagery and conflicted, tense arguments with no opportunity to emotionally process these encounters. Participants emphatically noted the lack of follow-up conversations in school, among their peers, or at home.

The lack of socio-emotional support for young people encountering racism, even young white people encountering it in an academic context, seems to have significant and far-reaching consequences. Not only did participants evince a kind of stuck-ness within race talk, as I explore in Chapter Five, but the abrupt context in which “race” as a topic had been shared seemed to resonate with participants beyond their personal understandings of the subject. For one example, participants noted that these early encounters seemed almost designed to dissuade them from talking about race. As Ben observed, “we’re not given a language to talk about this. That's one of the reasons that the problem persists because we don't know how to talk about it. The institutions that would give us the language to talk about it don't have a vested interest in dismantling that system” (Meeting Eight, March 12, 2019). And, from Jenny, “it was always interesting, just the fact that we don't know how to talk about it is just like a testament to what it is” (Meeting Thirteen, April 16, 2019).
These encounters also aligned with how many participants seemed to understand the nature of race talk itself. Because schooling frequently used historical violence to impress upon students the importance and/or severity of racism, students seemed to link racism with physical violence, while potentially unlinking it from economic or structural racist violence. For example, Maria’s fifth-grade teacher censored film of police violence against civil rights protestors. I asked her what that was like for her,

I mean, [shifts in her seat] I mean at the time, I guess I didn’t really think much of it, just because like the entire movie was hard to watch already. So I mean, part of me, like, I guess I was like okay with it, but like I guess it just shows the reality that there’s much worse things going on, then, that we weren’t allowed to see happening. (Meeting Two, February 5, 2019)

Maria’s response shows her discomfort with having turned away from that violence, as though the only way a white person can appreciate racism is to bear direct witness to its physical brutality. Similarly, for Heidi, her schooling failed to adequately educate her about the civil rights movement by failing to show her the extent of the violence inflicted upon activists. “I feel like if we actually talked about it in school and not just like, ‘yeah, like here are all these great people from the civil rights movement.’ No, like, they should talk about the brutalities of it too” (Meeting Five, February 14, 2019). This shortcoming was remedied for her by watching the movie Selma (2014), which depicted that violence, as a senior in school. I explore this contradiction below.

Incidentally, that schooling presents racism in primarily historic, in addition to historical, terms, contributes to the alexithymia of race talk. In the same way high school students struggle to understand Nazi-era Germany with nuance and sensitivity,
uncomplicated white supremacy becomes overexposed and cartoonish. Racism becomes limited to the more extreme portrayals of violence and unambiguous prejudice seen in films like “The Help” (2011), “Hidden Figures” (2016), and “Django Unchained” (2012).\(^{21}\) White students have little choice but to identify with the uncomplicated white hero, leaving unexamined the ambivalences inherent to whiteness and antiracism. There is no conversation to be had other than a spectator’s awe and empathy, neither of which serve as a call to action.

Additionally, blaming schooling seemed to be one of the ways participants relieved their discomforting sense of responsibility. Participants criticized their schooling for not teaching material early enough, or because schooling didn’t provide enough analysis. However, their academic history sometimes contradicted that criticism. For example, Jenny shared with me that at her predominantly white Catholic grade school, “we had waited so long to learn about Malcolm X” in the seventh grade, having studied Martin Luther King two years earlier in fifth grade (Interview, January 10, 2019). When I asked participants if they had learned about red-lining, several were quick to say that they hadn’t until high school, as though by then it was too late. Additionally, in a small group meeting, Ali, Heidi, and David shared a somewhat rare and gleeful moment of ideological alignment by bashing their formal education on race. For example, on the racist war on drugs, David shared “I think I learned like at the very basics of it [the racist war on drugs] from school, but I learned most of it on my own,” and from Ali, “I learned

\(^{21}\) For a more in-depth examination of whiteness and film, see Richard Dyer’s “White” (1997) or Matthew Hughey’s “The White Savior Film” (2014).
that in Spectrum.\textsuperscript{22} I, I wasn't taught that at all before” (Meeting Five, February 14, 2019).

Similarly, David seemed to insist that race was not covered well even while encountering experiences where it might have been; ultimately he argues that if race is covered, it must be “forced,”

I mean obvi- yeah, like in my history class we talked. It was again like, bare bones. Like it was, it didn’t go deep. It was just ‘yeah, that happened’ … I think I took APUSH [AP US History] and obviously there we HAD to know like, why it happened, so I think- it seems unless it was forced I, we, it didn’t really get mentioned. (Interview, January 18, 2019)

At the same time, that participants had encountered these topics in the course of their studies complicates their claim. This demonstrates that truncated pedagogies about race and the lack of processing conversations both suggest, as participants noted critically, a model where racism looks like interpersonal violence located primarily in the past, disconnected (admittedly, like much of schooling itself) from our present lives. However, rather than believe that schooling considers racism undeserving of personal examination, participants were eager to note how their teachers and schooling itself had failed them by conspicuously avoiding the topic. Effectively, they recognized and were critical of neoliberal ideologies within their schooling while expressing similar ideologies themselves, as noted in the following section.

Finally, the structure of schooling itself, as has often been noted by critical education theorists (Britzman, 1991; Trainor, 2008; Vaught, 2017), discourages the kind

\textsuperscript{22} Spectrum is the name of a senior level social-justice oriented course at St Ann’s.
of analytical thought required to address complex problems like systemic oppression. These particular shortcomings were also not lost on participants. As Ben observed, “I feel like I’ve spent the last 12 years of my life sitting in a room thinking, spent with very brief periods of actually doing” (Interview, May 9, 2019). Maria shared a similar critique, 

I mean, with slavery it’s like ‘oh, they’re – written into the constitution now, they have the right to vote [false bright voice] and it’s better!’ and, um, civil rights, like, ‘they were protesting and things were- it was like, bad. But then, you know… they have more rights, [false bright voice] so it’s okay!’ (Interview, January 11, 2019)

Maria’s criticism highlights the dangerous effect of pedagogy homogenized and divided into discrete units. More dispiriting perhaps was the passivity she evinced in our final conversation, which I attribute, at least in part, to the structure of schooling itself,

It's really funny because in my head I was like, I hope this conversation continues or I hope it's something that's going to continue because I know I'm graduating within 10 days. Yeah. So I was just hoping that in the future it's something that it continues to be brought up. (Interview, May 10, 2019, emphasis added)

Maria’s sense of dependency over her official curricula to address race, rather than, say, raising the topic herself in any context, demonstrates her boundedness to official notions of race talk and lack of imaginative capacity to see beyond it.

Schooling was understood to be not enough, perhaps never enough. The excited agreement among Heidi, Ali, and David seemed aimed at self-exoneration, at least in part, by positioning themselves as knowers despite schooling. They attributed their shortcomings or missteps, not inappropriately, to their deficient education. In an
environment focused on unit-sized “problems” within discrete subject areas, important topics like racism can appear to be impossibly complex, which is how some participants talked about race. If antiracism means taking up action, schooling binds students as passive consumers of knowledge who mostly listen and only sometimes talk, with little or no control over curricula. The dynamics of these conversations can also problematically fall into common-sense patterns, such as valuing differing arguments equally.

**Both Sides-ism**

Nearly every participant expressed a desire for what they called “deeper” conversations, both within their classrooms and within this study itself. I pursued this several times before coming to understand that “deeper” suggested a desire to have a dialogue with both sides where students not only felt free to say what they want to say, but where they actively disagreed. This seemed to encompass a desire to hear from peers in an environment that centers teacher’s voices (e.g., “I feel like it's been very, I'm taught at, instead of learning with, others,” Maria, Interview, May 10, 2019), as well as a belief that a better understanding lies between differing views. This is congruent with a Hegelian (read: Western) understanding of knowledge production where “unbiased” and “neutral” mean the synthesis of two opposing perspectives, and that a conversation without debate or disagreement leads to facile or incomplete conclusions. Ken explained it this way,

> I just feel like disagreement brings like better ideas into the frame. It definitely opens up people's minds because if one person disagrees, someone else is gonna either agree or disagree, and then we’ll have, eventually we'll come to an
understanding of what we think it is and probably a stronger understanding than just, Oh yeah, I agree with you. (Interview, May 6, 2019)

Heidi shared a similar sentiment, “I value diversity in thinking, in how people think, I don’t think productive conversations can happen unless there’s push-back, or like, you hear from different perspectives or different sides” (Interview May 8, 2019).

This belief was also taken up in Meeting Five when David referenced the music video for “I’m Not Racist” (Lucas, 2017). He described the song and video this way,

A Black guy and a white guy sit down at a table and they're super stereotyped with both sides …. I felt like that's a, that would have, would for me be like a really good deep conversation with you to talk about both sides of it. (February 14, 2019)

Heidi agreed, though both were careful to note that, as Heidi said, “I think there's definitely problems on both sides that need to be addressed. But I don't know. I feel, I don't know, I feel like white people are more at fault, like have more problems that need to be addressed” (February 14, 2019). Here Heidi pushes back against what Margolin called “the myth of equivalency,” where “both sides” implies two equal sides (2015). However, this is secondary and did not preclude her calls for movement from both sides.

There are different ways to make sense of this desire to debate and challenge perspectives that participants described. Its effect has been pervasive in my own pedagogical attempts at race talk where racism and antiracism somehow stand equally matched in a detached, logical consideration of people’s very lives. This democratization of morality might be the inevitable result of intellectualizing race, of moving race out of reality and into the sterile classroom where rules like “fairness” and logic, rather than
complex social identities, govern sense-making. In “Rethinking Racism,” Jennifer Trainor (2008) explores how unspoken rules of schooling, such as needing to maintain a positive attitude, or what constitutes fairness, can have unintended consequences in terms of how students think about race and racism. I believe calling for both sides of a conversation about race could be an example of this slippage. It could also reflect a desire for more authentic engagement in race talk with their peers, where they have access to less bounded conversation. I take up this second possibility in Chapter Six.

Ideological diversity can be a strength. Yet taking up “both sides” of an issue subject to hegemonic pressures, such as race, inevitably skews in favor of the dominant “side” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Kumashiro & Ngo, 2014). As long as schooling continues to assert, as does St Ann’s in many cases, that we must consider all sides of an issue or conflict, students from dominant groups will have access to the discursive safety of dominant, oppressive ideological regimes in the name of “fairness.” Critical pedagogy is oriented to elevating the voices of the marginalized, not equal recognition (Kumashiro, 2002). While at least some participants recognized the inherent inequality of race, this group of participants, despite their progressive attitudes towards whiteness and race, remain subject to this view. In other words, participants’ stated understanding of systemic power structures did not prevent them from believing in a “fairness” that called for people of color to meet them halfway. Participants were also caught in common sense discourses of neoliberalism, as explored below.

**Colorblind / Colormute / Color Celebrate**

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23 The tense celebration of ideological “balance” in education (or in other sources of information) has a long history, explored in part by Lybeck (2015).
In a colorblind environment, noticing race, much less naming it out loud, violates the individualist neoliberal norms wherein a good nonracist person “doesn’t see race” (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000, p. 52). Because noticing race contradicts this ethos of nonracism, colorblindness has complicated the act of referring to a group of people. Despite this groups’ embrace of race as a topic requiring conversation, participants evinced considerable anxiety around how to talk about it, as explored earlier, and were not immune to the pressures of colorblindness.

While only two participants openly embraced a colorblind view,24 several shared anxieties about recognizing racial difference. Mica Pollock called this being “colormute” (2004). For Heidi, this meant an initial discomfort,

And it was kind of funny just because it's like these second graders doing this art project, but now that I'm thinking about this it, it kind of makes sense, but it would be like, “Jamari is the color of chocolates” or “Skye is the color of a peach” … to me it kind of seemed, it just seemed a little weird. (Heidi, Interview, January 11, 2019)

Similarly, Ali seemed to struggle with whether or not to recognize racial difference,

Um, I mean when I, I mean … when I go to work it's more diverse and … I, I have, I sometimes catch myself thinking about it, but like I usually don't think about, “oh I am talking to someone who is Hispanic or I'm talking to someone that is Black,” like it's just kind of like talking to another person. (Interview, January 15, 2019)

24 These were more conservative participants, Ken and David, who also, at different moments, recognized the social and systemic impacts of race and racism.
Participants also used vague modifiers to describe a situation in which race played an uncomfortable or indeterminate but important role, describing neighborhood segregation or academic differences as “odd,” “weird,” and “interesting.” In his initial interview, Danny used “odd” or “weird” a dozen times; for example, when talking about different areas of his neighborhood, he told me that “my mom has a rule you can’t go past there. Like, you can’t go there past 10 o’clock at night because it is, it’s weird,” or “depending on where you go it can get a little odd” (Interview, January 8, 2019).

Similarly, several participants hesitated to notice how racism manifested in their experience of tracked schooling lives, where students are divided into “honors” and “regular” courses in ways that often reproduce or magnify racist social effects, by telling me that what they were about to say “sounds bad.” A passage from my initial interview with David typifies this and is worth quoting at length:

David: I only had a couple classes that were not full of like, I guess, white kids, cause. It was either white kids or Hmong kids in my class. Because … this sounds really bad when I say it. Because I took like, a lot of the, uh, I guess African American25 students were more like … this sounds really bad I know, but they didn’t take like, the super like, high level classes like, my parents forced me into. So whenever I was in, like, super high level classes it was just white kids and Hmong kids.

Kevin: Yeah. Why do you- like, what’s, what’s happening when you say that?

You say ‘it sounds bad’ …

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25 Note how David uses “African American” rather than “Black,” an example of Heidi’s suggestion that in moments of uncertainty she might revert to “African American,” what David later noted is used by white people trying to sound more “woke.”
David: Yeah, it sounds bad. Because I'm not trying to say like, you know, they couldn’t do it, or that, but like, I mean it’s not like there wasn’t any—there definitely was, but yeah. It just- it sounds kinda weird to say that like, they didn’t want to be there or something. I don’t know.

Kevin: Well, I mean, you're just describing what was happening, right?

David: Yeah

Kevin: Like there was – these were the kids in the advanced classes and these are the kids who weren’t, and you noticed that there was a racial aspect to that. And I don’t hear you saying anything like ‘oh they couldn’t’ or whatever.

David: Yeah

Kevin: But it sounds like you're – you were just kind of nervous about saying that? Or hesitant ‘cause you didn’t want it to sound wrong?

David: Well, it’s cause I think there is sort of that stigma that, that you know, that they can’t do that or something. Or if- I suppose that’s probably what I was saying, what I was going to say. If there isn't like one particular group of people in sort of a, a higher place, not, not saying that like an advanced class is like a higher power, or anything, but in like a higher up place than, you know, there’s obviously something wrong going on if there isn't, if a particular group, if not everyone is represented in a particular group. (January 18, 2019)

As David notes near the end, there is “obviously something wrong going on,” and he demonstrated, as all participants demonstrated, a clear recognition of systemic racism, if not a functional understanding of their role in it or its impact. Yet here, and in similar passages from Heidi and Danny, participants struggled to articulate that these disparities
are due to systemic racism and, for fear of saying the wrong thing, or of sounding racist, they hesitated to name them at all. This is, I believe, a result of the colormute environment Pollock describes, where specific rules for talking about race disallowed the recognition of racial disparities. (2004).

However, my initial interview with Joel (January 18, 2019) suggests what might be another tension within participants’ race talk. After telling me that I “might not like” his statement, he described how there aren’t many Black kids in his advanced classes. I asked about his hesitation:

Joel: Kinda fits the stereotype. Um, the kids who are Asian and took, their parents put forth the money and the kids were willing to sacrifice their friends and all that to come here for a year and really like push through, are in these high level classes, [he slows here] and I don't see the same thing coming from Black kids. Um,

Kevin: So you noticed that, which I've also noticed. I think most people have noticed it, but you seem-

Joel: but you can’t actually say it.

Kevin: Well, yeah, what’s that about?

Joel: When a stereotype, … uh, … comes true, people don't want to hear it.

I wonder if part of David’s and others’ hesitation to name these racial stereotypes is anxiety about how others might read the racial disparities they identify. Joel seemed anxious that I would censure him as racist for articulating what was, for him, a kind of truth about race, while David seemed anxious that his observation would be read as that same racist truth even as he took great pains to clarify that that was not what he meant.
As Bonilla-Silva argues, colorblindness conflates race with racism, forestalling the very conversation necessary to dismantle the impacts of systemic racism (2014). In this case, not only are participants anxious to identify racial disparities for fear of saying the wrong thing, they also fear contributing to the racist misreading of social disparities by their peers.

Finally, DiAngelo’s work on the defensive and insulating functions of colorblindness and what she calls “color celebrate” were both apparent in participants’ race talk (2018). Color celebrate, a more “progressive” position, was more evident within this group than color blindness. Participants seemed to go out of their way to describe these interracial interactions positively. For example, “like it's such a diverse school and it's, I think it's really cool,” (Heidi, Interview, January 11, 2019); “Um, they talk about their culture a lot, which I think is cool because it's, it's mostly Hispanic. I think it's, it's interesting to learn about,” (Ali, Interview, January 15, 2019); “I was pretty good friends with one of the kids there … a couple of them were ethnically diverse and I felt like I was good friends with them” (Ken, Meeting Two, January 29, 2019) [emphasis added].

For DiAngelo, these linguistic maneuvers served to protect the speaker from racial reproach; as in, “how could I be racist, I celebrate diversity.” I agree with this reading. However, given Joel’s reading of racial disparities, I wonder how much of the care with which they refer to people of color and racial topics is not self-preserving signaling so much as responding to or forestalling potentially racist attitudes of their peers.

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While several participants struggled with language around race, Ken in particular used unfamiliar syntax when talking about race worthy of its own study. For another example, “John, he was pretty diverse at school. He had friends in the white, and Black. He didn't really think about that stuff” (Ken, Interview, January 16, 2019).
peers. There were only rare moments where participant conversation did not show a heightened sensitivity and unease. However, the exact causes of their sensitivity and unease deserve consideration beyond self-preservation.

**Beyond Self-Preservation**

In addition to the race-evasive concerns attendant to colorblindness and color celebration, these moments demonstrate the pervasive anxiety white people experience when talking about race, and little wonder. White race talk, rightfully under scrutiny after four centuries of racial oppression, is fraught with landmines, significantly landmines enforced through calling-out by anxious white peers, as I explore in the next chapter. However, participants seemed attuned not only to the landmines themselves, but also to the race-evasive moves their peers have employed to protect themselves. For example, during one of our group conversations David prefaced a comment about conversations with his friends in this way, “I've had plenty of discussions with a lot of, I’ve- this sounds so dumb to say, I have a lot of [he gestures air quotes] Black friends, but you know what I mean, [laughter] we do find it very entertaining” (Meeting Four, February 12, 2019). Incidentally, in our final conversation, David referred to these linguistic maneuvers, such as using “I have a Black friend,” as “race deflective,” a noteworthy insight in itself (Interview, April 25, 2019).

While much of participants’ race talk sounded like the conversation recorded by other whiteness scholars (Perry, 2002; Trainor, 2008), some of these discursive maneuvers did not align with recent scholarship about whiteness. Importantly, David’s consciousness about white discourses of “Black friends” complicates Matias’ (2016) argument that such a claim is a colorblind defense used by good white people.
Additionally, not once did participants explicitly celebrate the profession of white privileges as “signs of courage, selflessness, benevolence, and honesty,” as argued by Margolin (2015, p.8). Perhaps, because the participants were uniformly interested in working against racism, their white privilege was understood, taken-for-granted. In fact, participant introductions took on a kind of ironic self-awareness. Ken picked up on this by introducing himself as though he were at a self-help group, pausing for recognition (and laughter) after saying, “Hi, my name is Ken, and I’m white” (Meeting One, January 29, 2019). Participants seemed not only unburdened to the pejorative constructs of whiteness proposed by Matias (2016) and Margolin (2015), but familiar enough with them to use them for laughs.

Further, Matias (2016) argues that whites’ sometimes take up a facile antiracism by asking what they can do as a way to assuage their guilt and perform their goodness, as in “I feel bad after hearing what I heard and thus want to prove to everyone I am a good person” (p. 70). For Matias the question isn’t authentic. While these participants struggled to articulate antiracist actions, they did not perform their whiteness in this way. Nor did they take up counter knowledge, what Matias describes as questioning the lack of education on race, as a nascent antiracism. Rather, participants joked about how inadequately they had been prepared. Like their white privilege, that their schooling had misled them was assumed.

There remained significant overlap among participants’ statements on race and recent scholarship on whiteness. For example, Margolin (2015) highlights a need not only for “cognition,” which the white participants in my study clearly evinced, but also the “motivation” to surrender their whiteness, which several participants argued was lacking
(Heidi, David). What my research demonstrates is not that young white people are no longer subject to the fraught ambivalences described by whiteness scholars, but that some are highly sensitive and occasionally resistant to these ambivalences, however bound they remained by them.

Margolin’s critique ends with white privilege pedagogy, in fact it ends with the critique of white privilege pedagogy. Margolin closes by noting, “[whites] need a reason to give up so effective a way to publicly proclaim, without penalty, how good it is to be white,” i.e., through a confession of white privilege (2015, p. 8). I believe Margolin’s critique of white privilege pedagogy is well justified, as WPP “misunderstands white privilege as a cause rather than an effect of white supremacy” (Lensmire, 2018, p. xii). I do not propose that the young white people with whom I worked are not subject to the machinations of white supremacy. However, their ironic self-awareness signals a need for new understandings of the workings of whiteness. While Margolin touches on a powerful dynamic within whiteness here, I believe she misattributes the self-affirmation of “how good it is” to whiteness as a confessed identity (2015). Rather, my data and analysis show that high school students’ goodness resides not only in performing whiteness directly through confession but in performing whiteness through calling-out, through a kind of performative antiracism; a white, anti-white, antiracism. A whiteness through wokeness. I take up these ambivalent maneuvers in the next chapter.

Conclusion

27 I use “performative” here as Sara Ahmed does in her critique “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism” (2004), where the “performance” of antiracism through proclamations serves to reinscribe racist structures and norms.
As expected, there is no shortage of interrelated and contradictory issues with which to contend, and these are only a sampling of potential constructs and models of high school race talk. Progressing from language, which underlay the race talk in this study, I provided examples of how participants discussed their experience of schooling, including both sides-ism and the strained discourses of colorblindness, colormuteness, and color celebrate. I noted how participants both demonstrated and challenged scholarship around whiteness. Specifically, participants articulated sophisticated understandings of racial discourses, however bound they remained by them. To further explore how participants participate in and comment on these discourses, I shift my focus toward how young white people perform antiracism through calling out, beginning with how an individualized understanding of racism leads young white people to locate racism within individuals, including themselves.
Chapter Five

Antiracist (Im)Possibilities

Introduction

The previous chapter addressed the intersections of racial ideologies with participants’ schooling. Recognizing that each topic overlaps with the next, and that any categorization is false, this chapter shifts to the impacts of other racial ideologies, in particular how individualism fosters counter-productive performances of antiracism in calling out and in/out groupings within whiteness. In this next section, I explore the persistent role played by individualism, the deeply American belief that we succeed or fail according to our merits. Participants stubbornly maintained these views, seemingly without knowing it. Stories from David, Ryan, and Maria set this up.

Individualism

As neoliberalism shifts attention away from de jure structural racial practices, race, in addition to racism, becomes located within individuals. There were several ways participants demonstrated an individualized understanding of race and racism. David’s understanding of the systemic nature of racism was typical of the group. I asked, for example, if he struggled with racist stereotypes of Black people. He responded, “Well, I mean, of course. Like, that’s like, just a part of- uh, like, media and peers and all this stuff like crammed in there over the years, so obviously its there, but it’s just like, uh, you just gotta ignore it. Just be like- just treat ‘em like a normal person” (Interview, January 18, 2019). He also shared individualistic views of race, such as colorblindness, “One of my, I guess main beliefs in that sort of situation is just, the golden rule essentially. With race,
like, treat everyone like humans unless they give you some reason to not like them” (Interview, January 18, 2019).

David, like other participants, demonstrated some understanding of systemic racism and white supremacy, yet individualism dominated his and other participants’ understandings of race. For example, participants recognized how local property taxes generate unequal funding for public schools, yet their understanding of racism was more commonly understood to be personally injurious and emotional. This second example can be seen in participants’ concepts of antiracism, which seemed limited to interpersonal interventions. For example, “I haven’t been put in a situation where I feel like I've had to do anything yet” (Ali, Interview, May 10, 2019). Or one participant’s belief that claiming his nonracism was enough to become nonracist, “I keep pushing the idea that ‘I’m not racist, I promise.’ Like I don’t want to be labeled as that” (Ken, Interview, January 16, 2019).

Additionally, rather than recognizing structural inequality as the progenitor of race and racism, Ryan and David both described racism using a contagion metaphor, wherein racism spreads interpersonally like a disease, “All it takes is one person to find something about like some civil war, civil rights movement and it's one person to say I think I'm better than you. And then it starts all over again” (David, Interview, April 25, 2019). Even though participants expressed an abstract awareness of systemic racism, these understandings seemed muted by individualist perspectives when it came to concrete examples of racism and antiracist possibilities.

This underlay a third effect of individualist ideologies, that white people could never know as much about race as a person of color. For example, several participants
voiced concerns about discussing race among white people. As Heidi put it, “it's not supposed to be a conversation with just white people because white people don't experience racism” (Interview, January 11, 2019). That white people might perpetuate racism, and thus be implicated in the topic didn’t seem to apply.

Maria shared a related story about how her participation in a conversation about racism with people of color was limited to listening, which gets at the complicated interplay of individualism and whiteness,

I’ve had a couple [of conversations on race]. It hasn’t been in a classroom setting, it’s been more casual. It was in the costume room28 … and we were listening to, I say listen because there’s really not much that I can, there’s really not much that I feel like I can contribute to that conversation, just because I’ve never had those experiences. So, um, they were having a conversation about school and the teachers and I, like, I don’t know, the school, teachers, um, classroom settings, people being like ‘oh, can I touch your hair’ – things like that. Right? And it was very casual and I was- maybe I felt more at ease because I didn’t…have to, like I didn’t say anything regarding it. But it was very casual and I didn’t feel panicky, I was just listening to that, to their experiences and I didn’t feel anxious to talk to them. (Interview, January 11, 2019)

There are several considerations here. First, that Maria referenced this conversation twice more later in the study demonstrates how uncommon such experiences can be. This is not surprising; in a society where we are meant to be “beyond race,” noticing or talking about race is itself racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Second, to

28 I want to note the potential for antiracist work within the arts, in particular theater. I’ve heard from several students that the only two teachers who talk about race are the theater teacher and myself. See also Boal, 1993.
consider Heidi’s story alongside Maria’s reveals a bind, young white people simultaneously must and cannot engage in race talk with people of color. This ambivalence is informed, in part, by the linking of people of color with race. This bind is better understood alongside Maria’s feelings about the encounter.

Finally, Maria shared that because she didn’t feel called upon to participate in the race talk, she “felt more at ease” and “didn’t feel panicky.” Her participation was liminal; she both “didn’t say anything” and “didn’t feel anxious to talk to them.” I believe she felt comfortable being a witness to her Black friends share stories of the racism they encountered because she was not called to witness as a white person. In those moments, the Blackness of her friends’ experiences was salient while her whiteness was not, at least not within the conversation. The liminality of her experience permitted her to listen as an unraced individual to systemically oriented race talk. Maria seemed grateful to have been allowed to listen. Her gratitude could, unbeknownst to her, extend to her feeling exonerated; because she was not hailed as white, she did not feel implicated. She could listen and walk away. There is both possibility and risk in this. Her ability to listen without feeling panicky could permit her to access her whiteness in vulnerable and productive ways. Yet it could also, as it seems to do here, allow her to consume their experiences, feel bad about them without reflecting on her own whiteness. I explore witnessing, empathy, and antiracism further in Chapter Six.

So long as whiteness is unmarked and normed within neoliberal ideologies of individualism, race is, for white people, largely the purview of the racial Other, as in anyone who doesn’t identify as white (Fine, 1997). Their whiteness seemed to prevent their entry into conversations about race with people of color, both because white people
could imagine themselves as unraced, and because they had no way to participate without discomfort. Participants maintained an unsteady grasp on systemic antiracism. They recognized elements of racist structures and their complicity within those structures, but these recognitions were often cut short by neoliberal ideologies such as individualism.

Participants, including David, Jenny, Ben, Maria, and Ali, argued that the linkage between race as a topic and people of color had been forged in their race talk experiences, both official and unofficial, wherein all race talk centered around the lives or experiences of people of color. Because whiteness requires the abdication of ethnicity (and by proxy, race) to people of color, as taken up in Chapter Two, white people imagine they are raceless, and so cannot fully participate in race talk, especially with people of color. Further, because WPP positions whiteness as guilty individuals in need of absolution, there is no legitimate space for whiteness within race talk other than personal apology, which, like in Maria’s situation, is often inappropriate.

As a result, white people can feel out of place in conversations about race. Ryan put it this way, “I think race, like when we talk about race, it’s always about a minority. I think if you’re white, like you’re just white, but like when you talk about race it’s always African Americans and Indian Americans, whereas you don’t hear about Italian Americans” (Meeting Six, February 19, 2019). In our final group meeting, Jenny identified a depressive effect of this perspective, “because we rely on other races to make our identity, so it’s like when we’re asked to think of how our race would respond, we don't know” (April 16, 2019). Recognizing the exploitative pastiche of whiteness, Jenny was able to identify its recursive effect on white conceptions of whiteness as well as race talk. Whiteness is then imagined as a void, a social nothing, and white people can pretend
they are “normal,” racially unaffiliated individuals, without a foothold in conversations about race and racism.

Further, taking up whiteness as a topic seemed to pose its own risks. Participants feared that should they gather as white people to talk about whiteness, they would risk being seen as white supremacists rather than antiracists. For example, when I proposed they might start a whiteness book club, Ben was uneasy, “forming a white book club or the term “white book club” really to me doesn't sound good” (Meeting 12, April 9, 2019). Similarly, Ryan and David argued white people would refuse to participate in such a group for fear of being misread as racists (Interview, April 30, 2019; Interview, April 25, 2019). Participants feared that any white-oriented antiracist work would be equated with the white supremacist exclusion they wanted to work against.

When I asked how they talked about their participation in this study, many confessed that they did not talk about it outside of limited casual conversation with their families; indeed, outside of my class and this study, none of the participants had ever encountered race talk about whiteness. Here again participants were in a bind; to address racism they must talk about whiteness, however, because of the social structures of race and whiteness, they could not talk about whiteness. As Ryan said in our initial interview, “It just, it feels like we [white people] shouldn’t be here, like we should be talking about this, but we shouldn’t, but we need to” (Interview, January 9, 2019). So long as “race” is an embodied quality of specifically “raced” individuals, white people will struggle to locate themselves within race talk in the productive ways necessary for antiracist change.

Together with the models of schooling explored in Chapter Four, individualism and the fraught relationship between whiteness and race limit antiracist possibilities.
White participants’ understandings of racism included aspects of structural inequalities, yet articulable notions of race remained individualistic, so that antiracism was limited to confession and personal interventions. Without potential and actionable antiracisms, and without clarity on what, precisely, constitutes racism, personal interventions, however well-intentioned, contribute to the punishing and self-defeating discourse of calling-out.

**Call-out Culture**

While calling out generates public awareness in ways that can bolster important social movements, notably the #metoo movement, which generated changes in the movie industry in 2017, the impact of calling-out is complex and controversial.\(^{29}\) I believe it is possible to read all anxiety about race talk, including referential language, colormuteness, and color celebrate, as being motivated by the fear of being called out as racist.

Participants expressed more concern about being called out than in working against racism itself. As Ken observed, “I think if you have a few ethnic people in your classroom, I get really scared to say any views that I have because I might offend them” (Interview, January 16, 2019). As Perry noted, the fear of offending someone is as often a self-interested fear of being perceived as racist than of hurting someone’s feelings (2002). These anxieties were sometimes visible as awkward performances of nonracism, where participants conspicuously noted their lack of racism by celebrating diversity as noted in the previous chapter. As noted by Winans (2017) and as I take up in Chapter Six, the emotional function of white students’ rhetorical positionings are too often read as resistance, and “can function as a site of engagement and possibility” (p. 475).

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\(^{29}\) Me Too was introduced as a social movement over a decade earlier by activist and sexual assault survivor Tarana Burke, a Black woman. This history has been inadvertently eclipsed by white actors.
Moreover, individualized antiracist work can only amount to individualized censure, as more complex conversations about social structures are foreclosed. It is an environment that, as David put it,

creates this power structure in which the more you call-out people, the higher up you are in that social structure. You have people desperately looking for anything that can be deemed as racist or offensive in any way, just to increase their social status; “Hey, look, I'm more woke than you. I call-out more racism than you do.”

(Meeting 10, March 26, 2019)

In her initial interview, Jenny suggested a similar motivation, “it could also be someone that's just trying to like hide their thoughts in a way they are doing something and raising awareness where you just don't know their intentions at all” (Interview, January 10, 2019). In other words, calling out is born, at least in part, out of self-preservation, or as an attempt to secure an antiracist identity (Lensmire, 2017). Further, in an environment where being called racist is the worst, and possibly only, committable racist sin, race talk itself becomes the embattled space, so that calling out constitutes antiracism to the exclusion of broader personal responsibility and social action. As David said, “you just wait for some person to say the wrong thing and then it's a free for all” (Meeting Four, February 12, 2019). Here again, available models of racism leave young white people with little rhetorical footing and few actionable antiracist options.

As with other aspects of race talk, participants were somewhat aware of the shortcomings of the discourses available to them. In Meeting Four, Ben questioned his own tendency to judge white classmates who argue that white people can experience
racism. In doing so he inadvertently provided an example of how gleefully savage calling out can be.

Ben: yeah, um, so when people say that to me, my gut reaction is like, “what a fucking idiot.”

[loud laughter, nods, crosstalk]

Maria, others: I was thinking the exact same thing!

Kevin / Ben: OK- let’s not- it’s common-

Ben: I do not, I do not let that thought stay in my head. Because that's just, that's an awful thing to say about a classmate.

[laughter continues, Maria leans back eyes closed, Heidi leans forward, both laughing hard]

Ben: I do not let myself sustain that sense because that's very toxic and it's not good.

Kevin: [to Heidi] And you said something interesting, you, I think you said, “I think he's a good person.”

Heidi: yes, [small laugh]

Kevin: And it seemed like him saying-

Heidi: [covers her mouth laughing] that sounded bad now that you say that.

(February 12, 2019)

Here, in our conversation about race talk with other white classmates, Ben shared his struggle to remain open-minded to those who disagree with him in certain ways, in this case, those who believe white people can experience racism. Several other participants leapt upon this as a sanctioned opportunity to position themselves as “better
than” those less woke white people by laughing and joking. While I experienced the same
rush of recognition, he and I both attempted to challenge this response. I was reminded of
a similarly toned comment Heidi had made as part of her attempt to reconcile a white
classmate’s racist views. Raising it in this context highlighted to Heidi what seemed to be
her sense of moral superiority over a classmate, which, when examined, became
distasteful.

However, Heidi also believed the corrections were her moral responsibility. In her
final interview, I asked Heidi what it might be like if she chose to not correct someone,
I’d probably feel mad at myself because that person is going to continue in this
world, and not like me saying this one thing is going to change their view, but it’s
gonna make me feel bad because this person is going to continue in the world,
with what I think is not the whole picture [laughs] or I’ll feel like I’ve done an
injustice for myself; but also for that other person, because that person is not
hearing the other side of that. (Interview, May 8, 2019)

Again, while participants articulated understandings of the structural, historical, and
contextual nature of racism, their performed understandings of race often fell into the
same individualized construct embraced by white privilege pedagogy.

Other participants, even those who called out others, recognized the dangers of
calling out. Ben and Ali both struggled to reconcile their desire to correct people with the
risks of those corrections. Ali suggested those corrections should happen “not in a way
that almost attacks them for thinking the way … but then again we do need to go deeper
but, like a gentle approach” (Meeting Five, February 14, 2019). Ben shared that he would
correct someone only if he could do so without being “an ass about it” (Interview, May
16, 2019). While David most vocally critiqued call-out culture, most participants expressed concern, frustration, or both, with call-out culture. Indeed, calling out seemed to be at the nexus of participants’ understandings of, and anxieties about, race talk.

Rather than addressing race talk as one part of systemic racism, calling-out can be limited to discursive exchanges among white people. Locating racism within individuals serves to circumscribe race talk. The antiracist goal of engaging in race talk, then, becomes to censure race talk, effectively depressing conversation about race. Ali described the fear of being called out like this, “you don't want to say the wrong thing. So it's, I've never been corrected because I've never gone into detail with it. I've never had a very deep conversation about it with someone else” (Meeting Five, February 14, 2019). According to Linder (2015), this fear leads to “inauthentic relationships with people of Color, a distinct barrier to engaging in antiracist behavior” (p. 545).

Lensmire (2017) found similar dynamics among white people, where “the threat of being labeled a racist stifled not just racist talk, but other talk that might not be racist but could be labeled that way” (p. 35). For his white interviewee, has had the effect of pushing all race talk underground to a “basement subculture” where, around a poker table, white people could be celebrated for pushing back against PC culture. In my initial interview with him, Ken shared a story which mirrored that almost exactly. Ken described how his group of mostly white male friends would, periodically, share jokes, attempting to find increasingly offensive jokes on a range of topics including race.

Ken: I know that I don't think a lot of people do this and it doesn't happen all the time, but every now and then it's like you get this refresher, you know? Like every
month or so we just spend like 30 minutes doing this, you know? Looking online at jokes.

Kevin: Interesting. And you say a refresher? What does that mean?

Ken: Well I feel like it happens and then you get old of it pretty fast. Like you've heard all these jokes before.

Kevin: The fun kind of runs out.

Ken: The fun kind of runs out. So yeah, I think it also, the racism gets to you over time. I feel as though that happens. Like you start thinking about it.

Kevin: So it's kind of like you share jokes for a while and after a while, it's both like there aren't anymore and, like, “I feel kind of too dirty to keep going,” and then it sort of leaves the conversation for a month or something.

Ken: You start talking about something else, nobody speaks of it. (Interview, January 16, 2019)

Like the basement subculture Lensmire (2017) explored, these sessions followed particular rules. While the rules seemed designed to keep the peace among participants, though they also importantly remind us that these are performances of whiteness doing specific work. In addition to responding to call-out culture, these could serve as whitening rituals for Ken and his friends. As Ken described, “You want to make somebody laugh around you or you like, some people want to see people hurt and it's, it's all based on like either building or pushing away somebody. Like, building relationships in a way that, like, they find you funny” (Interview, January 16, 2019). Lensmire explained it this way, “For me, Frank was pointing to the potential for any talk about race to be used in a struggle, among white people, over who is and who is not considered a
“good” white person” (2017 p. 40, emphasis in original). In this way in/out groupings (explored in the next section) within whiteness can cut multiple ways.

Because calling out can simultaneously contribute to and inhibit antiracist efforts, addressing calling out is both complicated and necessary. For example, helpful critiques of calling out must not be assumed to be critiques of antiracism. David, who took up antiracist beliefs, was attuned to and frustrated by what he described as “virtuous” white behavior,

I think it's like people- like you have white people who try, who try to appear more virtuous by not letting others talk about race…. They get to feel like they’re the protector of, you know, Black people or something. But really it's just doing harm. (Meeting Eight, March 12, 2019)

In addition to David, Joel spoke strongly against call-out culture. In our first and only conversation, I asked him who did the calling out in his experience. “There's a group that seems to be mostly white girls who are willing to be outspoken about these topics and will jump on anyone who comes near to them” (Interview, January 18, 2019). Joel described this group as people who have “taken humanitarian efforts to heart,” a phrase seemingly devised to soften his pejorative view of the group he saw so negatively.

While these criticisms could suggest comparable underlying attitudes towards racism, like the contrast between David’s and Joel’s concern about noticing racial disparities in academic contexts noted in Chapter Four, David’s concern seems to align with the stated antiracism objectives of calling out, while Joel’s seems to stem from his negative view of the political aim of calling out. These two more conservative participants, who have both experienced being called out, demonstrate how problematic
calling out can be. Superficially, both David and Joel could each appear resistant to antiracism in the eyes of their peers or a high school teacher, yet David embraces antiracist ideas while Joel rejects them. Despite this difference, each could be read as resistant within the binary of call-out culture.

To more effectively facilitate race talk, we as classroom teachers would benefit from stepping away from the individualized call-out environment and instead provide more space to views superficially at odds with our understanding of antiracism. We must resist the temptation to take participants’ criticisms of what we believe is antiracism as shorthand for their more deeply held beliefs about race. Further, like my self-interested critique of other less woke white people, we risk enforcing the neoliberal individualized understanding of racism if our calling-out is not accompanied by self-implication and systemic reflection.

Like much of antiracist action, call-out culture cannot be an end unto itself. Calling out has been credited for building awareness and action on issues such as sexual assault on college campuses (Vemuri, 2018). Other thinkers remain critical. “It isn’t an exaggeration to say that there is a mild totalitarian undercurrent not just in call-out culture but also in how progressive communities police and define the boundaries of who’s in and who’s out” (Ahmad, 2015, p. 2, emphasis in original). A “forever shifting” set of language and terminology police these boundaries in highly public arenas like classrooms or, more commonly now, social media. These boundaries perpetuate a facile and, as Ben would say, reductionist, antiracism, while functioning to uphold white supremacy in historical ways, as I explore below. Ultimately, as Jamie Utt wrote, “being told to f*ck off or being berated doesn’t exactly inspire me to self-reflect, to consider how I can be
better and do better. … We must take up the long, difficult, often emotionally-exhausting work of calling them in to change” (2015, May 25).

**In/Out Groupings Within Whiteness**

An in/out boundaries of white progressivism were evident among participants. Within the context of the study, so far as I could tell, only David and Ken were censured by the other participants, though Joel would likely have been censured as well had he participated in the meetings. For Ken, following his description of an experience with people of color in a group meeting, the video recording showed Jenny glancing at me, while Heidi exchanged glances with Ali, in what I interpreted as a moment where they believed Ken had potentially crossed a discursive line (Meeting Two, February 15, 2019). For David, the censure was verbal. As he shared his skepticism on an example of cultural appropriation, Heidi raised her hand and disagreed, the only such exchange in the entire study (Meeting Six, February 19, 2019). These moments contrast with an exchange early in Meeting Four (February 12, 2019). For a senior project, Ben was investigating referential language and in checking in with the group, he asked why people chose the descriptor “African American” over “Black or “negro.” There was a three second pause wherein no one batted an eye before Ben clarified that no one uses “negro” anymore, whereupon we all released the tension with loud laughter and jokes. We then cheerfully moved on. Had Ken or David stated this, I’m confident the reaction would have been different.

Participants’ willingness to entertain Ben’s use of the word “negro,” even for those few seconds, demonstrated that he was *in*, that other participants recognized his position as a potential authority on what may or may not constitute racism. In the absence
of people of color, Ben was positioned as a racial expert, so that if he used the word “negro,” his use was assumed to be justified and beyond censure. Meanwhile, David and Ken, censured by other participants, were out, at least, more out than the other participants. More broadly, all participants seemed to understand an “in/out” divide among their peers, between those who took up the liberal perspective that racism was a problem requiring antiracist work, and those who, for whatever reason, (or seemingly in whatever way), disagreed. In a clear expression of a bind, David told me that the only productive conversations about race involved those who were “out,” in that those were the white people needing to learn more and be converted. However, only those who were “in,” who already appreciated systemic racial issues, would attend such conversations, so that they would be preaching to the choir, so to speak (Interview, April 25, 2019).

As I noted earlier, despite my attempts to recruit white participants with a range of views on race, the nine participants who constituted the bulk of the study all viewed racism as a serious problem worthy of their attention and effort. Despite this alignment, or perhaps as a result of it, there was a fissure based not on who embraced antiracism and who did not (as would have been the case had Joel participated), but one seemingly based on the relative woke-ness of the participants (as David suggested there would be). David, Ken, and Ryan had all expressed more conservative views before the study and would likely have been recognizable as such to other participants. Indeed, Ben mentioned to me later that he was surprised at Ryan’s more liberal perspective within the study (Interview, May 13, 2019). Their responses were therefore surveilled differently; even though they shared the goal of fighting racism, their views were inherently suspicious because of their being “out.”
Finally, despite being censured by other participants as being “out,” David’s embrace of antiracism was as cogent as any participant’s. Indeed, it’s possible he was censured because of his insight; his legitimate criticisms of calling out as counter-productive could have been read as resistance to antiracism, and therefore deserving of censure. “Policing the boundaries of who’s in and who’s out” embraces close-mindedness where new ways of thinking are required (Ahmad, 2015, p. 2, emphasis in original). It also has a long history within white supremacy.

This practice of carefully policed boundaries within a group of white people echoes early processes of whitening itself, where whiteness in the 18th and early 19th centuries was treated like a resource to be held as property and protected, as described in Chapter Two. The power of whiteness has always been rooted in and wielded through its contestability and opacity. By requiring that Irish immigrants take up wage labor, racism, and nativism to gain access to whiteness, white elites enfranchised the Irish at the expense of their ethnic identities and class solidarity, to the benefit of the elites. In this way, white supremacy maintained itself by redirecting Irish anti-American sentiment away from those in power and toward those less powerful than them, namely Black laborers (Roediger, 1991).

As racism shifted from a de jure to de facto role in society and multiculturalism and colorblindness, which served to submerge racist structures of power, became “official antiracisms” after WWII, racism became located in the less educated, so that a person’s capacity to declare their antiracism served as their token of good white nonracism (Melamed, 2011). Here, rather than legally disenfranchising those who fall outside of whiteness in de facto white supremacy, those who are “out” become culturally
and economically disenfranchised, as written about extensively in the wake of the 2016 presidential election. Nonetheless, the mechanism of white supremacy is the same. The artificial partitioning of good whiteness and whiteness’ complementary loathsomeness, along with the capricious boundaries of call-out culture, mimic the earlier divide of white from Black, and each serve to direct negative energy away from power holders.

In keeping with the view that racism does not “get better” on its own, but rather adapts to the social norms of the day, whiteness no longer needs to explicitly alienate people of color. Rather, white supremacy can be maintained, in part, through uncritical call-out culture, a whiteness through wokeness, where antiracist action feebly stalls through anxious white performances. Within a social context where race talk happens, members of the group will, over time, come to understand their position in a hierarchy of racial awareness in part because of the public nature of calling out. That race talk itself, in its contestability, volatility, and intensity, can determine the social and moral status of white people among their white peers deserves closer attention.

As pedagogues we must be cautious that our antiracist work does not, as white privilege pedagogy has, contribute to this binary. By constructing a conceptual binary based on verbal and public confession, WPP divides students into two groups, those “good” white people who have confessed to their privilege, and the “bad” white people who have not. The goal, then, within this project is to exact a public confession, rescuing resistant “bad” students by transforming them into “good” students who confess (Lensmire et al., 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000). Conceived as a classroom operation, WPP depends upon this fatuous in/out divide among white students, where teachers determined

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30 See White Trash (Isenberg, 2017) and Hillbilly Elegy (Vance, 2018).
to impart the severity of racism (as a demonstration of their own white goodness) cajole “bad” students to convert, and might even enlist “good” white students to convince their reluctant classmates.

As a novice pedagogue working against racism, I embraced this divide, however uneasily, feeling both bound to it as an available antiracist practice and convinced that there must be better options. The inevitable result was a classroom speciously arranged according to how seriously young white people took up confession, with those confessors who were “in” most emphatically on one side, and the rest, positioned as socially and morally inferior, on the other. As teacher, I oscillated between addressing myself to the “bad” white students in hopes of “correcting” them, and attempting to facilitate dialogue between the “good” and “bad” white students, so that the “good” one might, through logic or shame, convince the “bad” students to embrace confession.

I also cannot deny a seductive insularity I experienced in these conversations. I felt somewhat justified prioritizing my antiracist efforts ahead of students’ well being, as though the shame felt by resistant students was itself evidence of antiracist work. Solely by nature of facilitating those conversations, I was beyond reproach. I was “in.” My classroom was an arena wherein I could be unchallenged, confusing, as Freire said, the authority of knowledge with my personal authority (1993). More insidiously, working within this binary felt clear and definitive. It felt good. This clarity now causes me to pause. White moral superiority, I believe, lies close to white supremacy, wherein my moral outrage became centered, and, like in confession and calling-out, re-centered my whiteness in dangerous and narcissistic ways. When whiteness is not centered in the name of de-centering it, antiracism isn’t served, white supremacy is.
Rather, we might try “calling in,” as Loretta Ross wrote in a recent *New York Times* op-ed titled “I’m a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic.”

We can change this culture. Calling-in is simply a call-out done with love. Some corrections can be made privately. Others will necessarily be public, but done with respect. It is not tone policing, protecting white fragility or covering up abuse. It helps avoid the weaponization of suffering that prevents constructive healing. (2019)

This is counter-cultural, and will take time and effort to resist the toxicity of calling out. But moving against white supremacy with love rather than anxiety can help shift the conversation beyond white self-reflection.

**Good White Nonracism, Bad White Antiracism?**

Individualism, calling out, and in/out groupings within whiteness each affect participants’ conceptions of antiracism as noted above. There are several additional ways of thinking that seemed to get in the way of participants’ imagined antiracisms.

In his review of the history of race and racism in the United States, Kendi noted three stances taken up in response to racism: segregationist, assimilationist, and antiracist (2016). Following this, I explored good white peoples’ responses to racism in terms of nonracism and antiracism, where nonracism can be understood as neoliberal multiculturalism, such as learning more about people of color, rather than exploring and dismantling systems of racial oppression. This follows Leonardo & Zembylas (2013) where,

“Non-racist” becomes an identity, even a badge of honor, whereas anti-racism is arguably a political pledge, a form of race labor, to combat racism before it ossifies into an identity. To the non-racist, it is something one is; to the anti-racist, it is something one does. (p. 156)

Most participants’ response to racism, especially the more conservative members, fit the description of a nonracist. However, despite anxieties about discussing whiteness,
these more conservative participants were also more comfortable than liberal participants with taking up whiteness in the pursuit of antiracism. The more liberal participants resisted this possibility and expressed stark ambivalences about antiracism, which seemed simultaneously accessible and hopelessly out of reach to them. Those more liberal participants were left feeling pessimistic or apathetic about antiracism. In this section I explore how different participants discuss antiracist possibilities, in particular how participants’ political ideologies seemed to inform their sense of what seemed possible.

To begin, Jenny explained feeling caught between the belief that she could take up antiracism and a worldview that positioned her as powerless,

Jenny: It’s kind of like, I don't know, I feel like because I don't know what to do, it's kind of like degrading or like, [I] kind of feel like, like I feel like there's not much I can do but there is.

Kevin: There isn't much, but there is.

Jenny: Yeah. [laughs]

Kevin: Yeah, what's that about?

Jenny: I feel like being like or not like I'm not a politician or whatever, like there's not much I can do, but there is, like it's not- And I hope like other people feel like they can do something. I don't know. It's kind of a weird feeling.

Kevin: Yeah. Yeah.

Jenny: Cause it's like, I don't know, you feel like guilty for not doing anything but you want to do something. (Interview, January 10, 2019)
Jenny, like the other participants, recognized her implication in whiteness and racism, meaning that “not being a politician” was not an adequate response to racism. Further, I believe her use of “degrading” gets at the emotional toll of remaining responsible without feeling empowered. Ali made a similar comment about antiracism in her final interview,

Um, sometimes I feel like I should know that I should do something. I don't even know. I just, I feel like there's something right in front of me that I know I should do, but I don't know what that is. (Interview, May 10, 2019)

She shared this despondently, as though her own personal goodness were also just out of reach in front of her. Both examples could more hopefully suggest that these young white people are still learning about race and that with time, they will come to a better understanding of how white supremacy can be resisted. Indeed, this is how I read their situation. Yet they do not express optimism here about developing an antiracist identity, nor do they suggest that they have more to learn.

In contrast, while Ryan struggled in similar ways, he did not seem nearly as affected by feeling caught. In fact, as we explored this bind he began laughing,

Kevin: You're laughing a little bit. What do-

Ryan: I don't know. This- when we talked this was the one I had the most difficulty with. It's just hard to think of specific ideas cause, you can be, not racist, but it's basically like going out, and as a white person trying to be antiracist is, it's like a whole different thing, I feel like…. I think it’s very easy to not say the n-word, all these things, and then just carry on with your life. And I think to me it's very difficult to go one step further. (Interview, May 15, 2019)
Ryan seemed struck by how “one step further” actually represented an ideological shift, “a whole different thing” as he put it, between not being racist and being antiracist. I interpret his laughter as responding to both the absurd failure of his schooling on race and how daunting antiracism, when it begins to come into view, actually is. Similarly, David shared clear insights about his and his peers’ struggles with antiracism and struggled to identify antiracist actions he might take up. Yet he, like David, seemed able to name and accept the broader context of this bind.

I think a lot, you know, like you say racism and it's like this, you know, big evil word up in the clouds. If everyone says, you know, “I'm not racist, it's other people who are doing this.” Like it's hard to, cause, like it's not like I could go through my day, like as a white person, do all the stuff I normally do and then just every so often point out “that's an oppressive thing, that's an oppressive thing. You shouldn’t do that.” … Like what's something small that you could do? And I'm just like, I have no idea. Like what's something small as I think that's, I think that's kind of because like white, like if you're in the culture of whiteness you kind of have this protected aura were like you don't really ever need to like change anything. So when the time comes where it's like okay think of something you can change, you got nothing. (Interview, April 25, 2019)

While each participant struggled to name what they could do to address racism, I was struck by the differences between how participants who seemed “in,” like Jenny and Ali, and those who seemed “out,” including David and Ryan. While David and Ryan seemed equally bewildered by antiracism, they did not seem to take that bewilderment personally the way Jenny and Ali did. It is possible to read David and Ryan’s relative
comfort with their struggle as disinterest, or emotional distance; that Jenny and Ali identified as more liberal, and as women, could also suggest this. However, the uneven ways participants seemed comfortable taking up whiteness complicates this.

Moreover, the more conservative participants, including Ken, Ryan, and David, were all more comfortable exploring whiteness as deficit as well as an antiracist possibility. In our sixth group meeting, I asked participants to share, as I put it, “what's hard about being white or, or what being, like, what is lost, or missing as a, as a white person?” David began by raising the negative impact of the American melting pot on white people,

I feel like if you, you know, become white, it's kind of like the whole, you're thrown into the melting pot kind of thing. You know, like, uh, sure someone can be like, you know, German or Irish, all, you know, different kinds like that. But I feel like, if you're white, you're just lumped into the overarching group of white people and whatever nationality you had is lost.

Ryan continued,

I think there's something about culture being gained when you're in the minority or oppressed group. It's kind of like, we need our culture to rise up. I think white people just don't really need that. They don't need the culture to rise up, to like, band as one. So I think that's kind of impacts that.31

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31 This view risks an over-identification explored in chapter 6; we are cautioned by Minnie Bruce Pratt,

I was using Black people to weep for me, to express my sorrow at my responsibility, and that of my people, for their oppression: and I was mourning because I felt they had something I didn't, a closeness, a hope, that I and my folks had lost because we tried to shut others people out of our hearts and lives. (quoted in Boler, 1999, p. 165, emphasis in original)
Finally, Ken added, “I mean like David, Ryan both said, I think you lose a lot of culture when you become white, and a little bit of your personality too, there’s certain stereotypes of which race you are.” These views could reflect the historical perspectives of the development of whiteness, including Thandeka’s work with whiteness as loss (2001). Additionally, they lend themselves to Logue’s argument white privilege should be counter-read as perilous as well as beneficial (2005).

These views were not taken up by the groups more liberal members. Ben, while not disagreeing, complicated these deficit views, “If I propose like thinking of whiteness as a loss rather than a privilege, if I propose that to someone who is not white, I would, in effect, step on a mine.” Ali agreed (Meeting Six, February 19, 2019). I share this caution, and I believe it is well placed. Even these comments raise significant concerns, as noted. However, we are reminded that there is no perfect antiracism (Kumashiro, 2002) and that critically taking up whiteness does allow for antiracist possibilities (Jupp & Slattery, 2010).

As a final example, I invited participants to share something tangible they could do to address racism in our final group meeting. Several participants shared self-improvement possibilities, including reading, “train yourself to push back on negative stereotypes regarding other races” (David); “write down your thoughts” (Jenny); and “just talking about racism and letting yourself be wrong. Just going into it with the idea that you have something to learn” (Ben, Meeting 13, April 16, 2019). Despite whiteness

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32 As a caution, participants’ expressed understandings of potential antiracisms in no way commit them to action. Further, for young white people, learning more about whiteness, race, and racism, are legitimate and meaningful steps they can take to develop their “race cognizance” (Frankenberg, 1993). Like white privilege
being a central focus on the study, Ken was the only participant to suggest that exploring his white ancestry could be an antiracist act.

I would say looking at your past, like your family's past and stuff. They won't always generally go positively for you, but if you know who you are and how different you are and stuff, it can make you sensitized to other cultures and other people's past. It could also go the other way (Ken, Meeting 13, April 16, 2019).

Ken’s willingness to embrace whiteness as a potential antiracist topic contrasts with the more liberal participants, whose reluctance stemmed from their fear that they might be censured for proposing, as Ben put it, that “whiteness is a loss rather than a privilege.” Yet Ken did not, and nor do I, propose that whiteness’s losses offset its privileges, or that they could not exist side-by-side.

That examining whiteness as a deficit was so distasteful to participants who expressed a sincere desire for antiracist possibilities is striking. Like the more liberal participants’ fatalism about antiracism, there seemed to be little ambiguity in this rejection. In so far as more conservative participants explored this, they were ignored or cautioned by the rest of the group. Because of this, I wonder how liberal discourses of whiteness might negatively affect participants’ senses of antiracist possibilities. All participants were similarly bound by available discourses, including the necessary severity of racism alongside white moral responsibility explored earlier. Yet the more liberal participants seemed more mired in this bind. What if aspects of good whiteness, confessionals, however, these can serve as a safe stopping point well before participants take steps to make change.
including feeling bad about racism, get in the way of antiracism? Is it possible that more liberal white participants are beholden to the approval of their liberal white peers in ways that prevents antiracist possibilities? Do they so fear taking up antiracism in ways that might be perceived as insincere or ill-intentioned that they struggled to take it up at all? Perhaps there is a point at which the worse young white people believe racism to be, the more they see it as this “big evil word up in the clouds,” as David said, the less capable they feel to do something about it (Interview, April 25, 2019).

It is not surprising that other well-intentioned white people feel similarly bound and express similar anxieties. In their study of how colorblindness is taken up by white rural teachers, Lee-Nichols and Tierney noted how, “by fearing that they might get things wrong and harm the students of color in their classrooms, these white teachers are always already made as confused, uncertain, or, worst of all, racist by the discourses available for talking about race in their communities” (2018, p. 57). These young white people seemed similarly “always already” positioned within challenging or impossible discourses of race talk, even among their white peers. Participants seemed governed by the gap between the available discourses of neoliberal individualism and the systemic nature of race and white supremacy, and hindered by the anxious antiracist performances of their white peers.

Without the language of systemic racism with which to name their feelings and

33 I emphasize again that taking up white people taking up whiteness in the pursuit of antiracism is fraught, and can prove detrimental. And this could be a moment to, as Trainor suggests, “embrace discourses that we might have once preferred not to honor, even with our gaze” (2002, p. 648), within the context of conversations about race among white people. Zembylas (2012) clarifies, “The focus is to use strategic naivety and empathy to draw out students who hold what we might consider uncritically hegemonic positions – to provide a connection with, however temporarily, to “views that one may find unacceptable or offensive”’ (p. 120). I explore this further in Chapter Six.
experiences of race and racism, white people are left with inadequate and sometimes inappropriate languages and ideologies of individualized actions and repercussions.

**Conclusion**

So long as racism is taken up within a hyper-individualized neoliberal context, prejudices, including racism, are divorced from the social structures which perpetuate them. These structures would serve as ballast to the isolating personal struggle with race. By recognizing the social context wherein white individuals might gain perspective on their internalized white supremacy, they might be better able to work against it. Without contexts, young white people are left to reckon with racism individually. Unable to locate the origin of their racist thoughts outside of themselves, they are likely to consider themselves as the origin of these unwelcome thoughts, miring them in guilt and shame.

As Althusser explains, through interpellation, “persons choose to identify with the ideologies that “summon” them; in turn they understand themselves to be the source, rather than the effect of that summons” (quoted in Britzman, 1991, p. 223). Individualism not only decontextualizes the experiences of people of color, it sequesters white people from potentially helpful collective understandings of their internalized white supremacy, along with the potential for collective healing. In other words, white privilege pedagogy has undervalued the impact of emotion and troubled knowledge, especially among members of the oppressor group, in ways that have, at a minimum, alienated white people from anti-oppressive possibilities.
Chapter Six

Antiracism and Emotionality

Introduction

In this chapter I expand my analysis of the emotional maneuvers taken up by white people. I try to make sense of participants’ anger and deep uncertainty. I look to resources on empathy and trauma to better access the sources underlying participants’ emotions related to race.

What’s At Stake

Joel was the study’s erstwhile tenth participant. He and I had an initial interview, wherein he shared his frustrations with race talk,

So, when people talk about all this crap that’s gone down and like with the civil war, I’m kind of wondering what the hell do you expect me to feel or do about it. Like yeah it was tragic but that was 150 years ago and my family wasn't even here. So you can’t even guilt me into the old white plantation thing. It's like I literally had nothing to do with this and you're gonna blame me because of my skin color and expect me to feel bad about it. (Joel, Interview, January 18, 2019)

I want to take seriously Joel’s question, “what do you expect me to feel about it?” I believe the question is important; teachers, myself included, do not seem to have clear outcomes in mind when addressing racism. For myself, I wanted my learners to appreciate the horrors of historical racism and to recognize the contemporary manifestations of those horrors, often by reading and watching accounts of Black bodies subjected to violence. To answer Joel’s question simply, I wanted them to feel bad about it. Yet I also needed them to feel bad about it in recognizable ways, so that I would know
that they felt bad. That way I could determine the success of my pedagogy. So perhaps what I wanted was for them to *seem like* they felt bad about it. In a way, the worse they seemed to feel, the more successful my pedagogy, and the better I was permitted to feel as an antiracist educator. In my classroom, like in many others, learners who failed to effectively perform in this way were considered resistant holdouts in need of convincing. They were resisting antiracism, and sometimes subjected to calling out as explored in Chapter Five.

Like critiques of white privilege pedagogy (WPP), which identify its failure to take up antiracism (Lensmire et al., 2013), Gardner (2017) is critical of exposing young people to depictions of violent racism, “Now, so many years later, I ask, “What did our teachers expect us to gain from the exposure?’” (p. 338). For Gardner, the crisis happens with young Black students. I believe the concern applies, broadly speaking and in different ways, to young white people encountering depictions of racial violence in the classroom, particularly when those exposures are so poorly supported. Many of my study participants described their early encounters with race as vivid and uncomfortable memories of images or videos of racial violence. Deborah Britzman (2000) calls these histories “difficult knowledge,” which can be understood as “those moments when knowledge appears disturbingly foreign or inconceivable to the self, bringing oneself up against the limits of what one is willing and capable of understanding” (Simon, 2011, quoted in Zembylas 2014, p. 392). Unsurprisingly, because of the sensitive and emotional nature of the knowledge, effectively deploying difficult knowledges in the context of high school classrooms presents significant challenges.
Insofar as we have used historical racisms to teach about race, I believe white privilege pedagogy can and has misapplied these knowledges. As reviewed in Chapter Two, WPP seeks to counter the assumption of racial equality inherent in neoliberal colorblindness. Unfortunately, WPP, itself an incomplete stand-in for critical pedagogy, is often deployed in clumsy ways by anxious white teachers (Chubbock & Zembylas, 2008). This pedagogy can take the form of subjecting students to violent or traumatic histories, often without emotional or even pedagogical support. Further, I believe these exposures can cause young white people to associate race talk with these exposures, hardening them against race talk out of self-preservation.

These exposures can look like unsupported encounters with depictions of racial violence, or they can look like Heidi’s belief that scenes of violence on the Edmund Pettus Bridge were a necessary part of her antiracist education, that they “should talk about the brutalities of it too” (Meeting Five, February 14, 2019). I’m also reminded of Maria’s guilt for not wanting to witness more violence inflicted upon civil rights protesters of the 1960s. Not only did participants share (and commiserate over!) troubling stories of these encounters, they seemed to believe that they were helpful or even necessary parts of their antiracist education.

By exploring how participants articulated their emotional experiences of race talk, I hope to better understand how guilt and shame have interacted with their sense of themselves as antiracists. This examination must also consider how participants seemed positioned by the discourses available to them; namely, how white privilege pedagogy
has influenced what participants believe they ought to feel. Additionally, I’m curious about the role of performance within WPP.

**Responses to White Privilege Pedagogy**

Broadly speaking, there are two potential movements learners can make in response to white privilege pedagogy; they can take up the difficult knowledges of racism, which are most readily available to them through shame (I’m white, therefore I’m complicit and must confess to privilege), or they can reject them. These responses and their effects are explored below.

**Rejecting WPP**

Those who reject the premise of white privilege pedagogy are frequently read as resistant to the object of the pedagogy, antiracism, rather than the pedagogy itself. Before undertaking this work, I had understood this rejection as signaling a range of beliefs, including (to my shame) self-centeredness, conservatism, and myopia, along with the rejection of antiracism. However, because this pedagogy about racism has been focused on forcing a kind of crisis where young white people are asked to consider themselves as failures and perform shame, rejecting WPP can be a form of self-protection, in addition to upholding neoliberal post-racial attitudes. It can also, as I explore below, signal resistance and critical thinking.

Joel, Ryan, and to a lesser degree David all rejected the premise of WPP. For Joel, there was no space in the antiracist pedagogy he had encountered to deal with historical

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34 While guilt and shame are distinct emotional experiences, most participants seemed to use the terms interchangeably. Indeed, the phrase “white guilt” can suggest a state of being rather than remorse for a specific action (“I feel ashamed of my internalized racism” rather than “I feel guilty for laughing at a racist joke”). While I acknowledge that this oversimplifies what are often complex emotional maneuvers, for this analysis I will focus on shame.
racisms without a personal responsibility in the form of guilt or shame. His unwillingness, for whatever reason, to take up WPP seemed to extend to antiracism itself. That historical racisms inform contemporary inequalities was eclipsed by his rejection of the guilt being asked of him. Essentially, he rejected white privilege pedagogy’s premise as well as its aim. To him, WPP is likely comparable to or indistinguishable from antiracism itself. Because he chose to not participate in the rest of the study, I was unable to explore this further with him. Yet the vitriol with which he rejected WPP speaks to an emotional underpinning, likely informed by repeated encounters with being called-out by classmates and lectured by teachers. Joel’s language indicates his anger at being told to feel guilty for historical racism, “you can’t even guilt me into the old white plantation thing,” and “you’re gonna blame me because of my skin color and expect me to feel bad about it” (Joel, Interview, January 18, 2019). It’s not hard to imagine the teacher or classmate to whom he is responding, or how these conversations might push Joel to take up being “out” with a wounded pride (or even, in an extreme case, to explore the reactionary shelter of white nationalism). Moreover, Banks (2016) showed how intense emotions like anger can become deeply intertwined with race as a topic, so that his anger is likely triggered by the idea of race itself, further foreclosing conversation.

Thus WPP itself can, over repeated exposures, pose a threat to young white people skeptical of WPP. Contributing to this, multiculturalism and some antiracist teachers like myself have weaponized the threat of being called racist (along with the internalized fear of being racist by accepting that racist thoughts or feelings imply that one is racist) as a way to impart the severity of racism. WPP has deployed the historical injustices of slavery or Jim Crow as a cudgel. In other words, we have relied on the
internalized anxiety of white people to believe that we teachers are doing a “good job” of teaching about race. Students who resist this, in addition to “needing convincing,” might be taking refuge from an assault by being willing to reject the “goodness” of a confession of white privilege and the acceptance of white guilt that accompanies it.

As explored in Chapter Four, Joel espoused views on race that some might find offensive and racist, including that there are biological explanations for the achievement gap in education. As far as these views represent the mainstream prejudices and racisms antiracists seek to address, Joel’s rejection of WPP represents a significant failure to address them effectively. Despite not pursuing the study, Joel had agreed to participate and was forthcoming in his initial interview. Had there been space within the pedagogy he encountered, I believe his desire to learn and grow (shared by all of us) could have generated positive change.

Ryan, on the other hand, rejected WPP without also rejecting antiracism by advocating for action without guilt,

On the white guilt thing, I’m not, like I’m not waking up every morning saying “I feel bad for like, things in the past” because, I didn’t, like, I didn’t do that, it’s not on my hands. So, don’t, it’s not me thinking “I feel bad for this.” It’s like when I see, would see an injustice or something, it’s not like, because I'm white, this is an issue. It’s…this is an issue because of things that happened in the past not tied to me? Does that make sense at all? (Interview, January 8, 2019)

In my initial analysis Ryan’s perspective seemed, as I wrote at the time, “dangerously close to colorblindness” (Fieldnotes, June 5, 2019). I don’t believe that holds. Rather, I think Ryan has positioned himself as a potential antiracist actor outside of WPP, which
would call upon him to take up guilt and shame for his whiteness. This leaves him relatively unencumbered as he considers antiracism. Yet even as he positions himself as an antiracist actor, he seems uncertain at the end of his comment. I wonder if this meant that he sensed that by not feeling guilty for being white he might be running afoul of WPP.

Perhaps more importantly, resistance to official discourses (particularly pedagogies) is exactly what’s called for in critical pedagogy. This recalls Trainor’s (2002) examination of how critical pedagogy problematically others those who resist it. As she points out, not only does this foster an us/them binary, it alienates resistance, the action at the heart of critical theory. I cannot afford to lose students who resist my pedagogy when their resistance is the mechanism I hope to cultivate. Indeed, becoming an antiracist in a racist society is, in some ways, the ultimate expression of resistance. Yet, problematically, WPP suggests that successful antiracist teachers must convince resistant students of white privilege, leaving little or no room for resistance. This is perhaps the largest failing of WPP as well as how we can make sense of its popularity among teachers. WPP focuses on developing white goodness in sanctioned ways, specifically through confession and supplication. This positions students as beholden to their more knowledgeable (and morally superior in woke-ness) teachers. In contrast, the kind of empowered, resistant, antiracism needed to overcome white supremacy is exactly the kind of resistance we don’t want them to show us in our classrooms.

**Taking up WPP**

The more liberal participants seemed almost eager to take up white privilege pedagogy, as explored in Chapter Five. However, taking up WPP rarely seemed to
translate to even potential antiracist action. Those who took this up tended to do so in one of two ways. Some participants, including Heidi, took up multicultural empathy through literature and film. Others expressed feeling caught as I explore in the following section. Yet they all seemed hopeless in the face of racism.

Because pedagogy about racism has been focused on forcing a crisis where affects of shame and guilt, not antiracism, were signs of success, students were to feel bad and do nothing. This is evident in Heidi’s struggle to answer my question about what she can do to be antiracist during our final conversation,

Heidi: Hmm, that's a hard question. So like, what's something like I could do?
Kevin: Mhmm.
Heidi: or just like, what I- Okay. Hmm. I think …
Kevin: it can be hypothetical.
Heidi: Yeah. Well I think … for me I think, definitely … like … I'm not, no, that's not how I want to word it. I think a place to start would be to, yeah, I guess recognize more like art work or books or TV shows. Just things in my life that are around me that are by people of color. (Interview, May 8, 2019)

Despite Heidi’s demonstrated understanding of systemic racism, commitment to antiracism, and her ease with calling out her peers, she is unable to identify any antiracist action aside from cultural consumption.

Given the dominance of Melamed’s (2011) official antiracisms of the 20th century, where consuming narratives of racial others itself functions as antiracist action, this is not surprising. Moreover, not only are students to feel bad and do nothing, students who take up WPP are being “good” by following the official guidelines of the classroom.
In contrast with the potential for resistance to lead to antiracism, taking up WPP seems to align with being a good nonracist white person. By discouraging resistance and celebrating official curriculum, to say nothing of call-out culture, WPP can push students to cycle back to ineffectual, good nonracism of official antiracisms. As Leonardo & Zembylas wrote, “To the non-racist, it is something one is; to the antiracist, it is something one does” (2013, p. 156).

That WPP often results in white consumption of cultural Others in the name of empathy raises additional concerns. Boler (1999) challenges using literature or film to encounter the Other. First, she cites the “untheorized gap between empathy and acting on another’s behalf” (p. 157). For Boler, “passive empathy absolves the reader through the denial of power relations” (1999, p. 161). This risks erasing the differences between people of color and whites through an over-identification. This is one of several ways whiteness serves to maintain white supremacy within the guise of progressive racial movements, in this case by cloaking white inaction with powerful yet unwarranted feelings of kinship with people of color.

Further, like Boler’s (1999) concern regarding the self-focused responses generated by empathy, Zembylas (2006) cites how white Australians struggling with past mistreatment of aboriginal peoples can mobilize shame to ease their sense of isolation. “In other words, our shame means that we mean well…. Those who witness the past injustice through feeling ‘‘national shame’’ are aligned with each other as “well meaning individuals’” (pp. 318-319, emphasis in original). I saw this dynamic with my participants as members of the “in” group, who aligned among themselves against those not “in.” Here again, “well-meaning” can stand in for antiracist action. Having taken up
the difficult knowledges presented by white privilege pedagogy without empathetic consumption of films and texts like “The Help,” Ben represents a second possible position alongside Heidi.

**Ben Feels He has Always Already Failed at Antiracism**

Ben seemed sensitive to the concerns raised earlier and positioned himself outside of the in/out binary of WPP. He also rejected potential identification with and objectification of the subject of that shame by arguing that service-learning can be, as he put it, “dancing on the ashes” (Interview, January 16, 2019). Yet despite his keen insight into how shame hindered his pursuit of antiracism, he also seemed no closer to taking up antiracist action than other participants.

He and I spent several conversations exploring this. For Ben, shame both preceded and followed his failures to take up antiracism. Ben took up shame and race within his senior research project. He explored how unexamined shame allows racism to persist, suggesting that, as he put it, “a national examination of shame would overcome white supremacy.” He explained,

> I was never like, or for the longest time, I didn't really have the vocabulary to talk about that stuff and that was kind of why I didn't. And so, I didn't have the vocabulary, so I felt ashamed about that, so I didn’t contribute. And I didn't contribute, so I felt ashamed about that so I didn't contribute again and it was, like, a positive feedback loop. (Interview, May 9, 2019)

Ben described feeling like he had always already failed at antiracism, and that that sense of failure is durable. His sense of having failed at antiracism leaves him ashamed, and his shame inhibits him from taking up antiracism. I believe the loop he describes is common
among other liberal white participants, and helps explain the boundedness they experienced. For example, Ali’s paradoxical sense that “there's something right in front of me that I know I should do, but I don’t know what that is” (Interview, May 10, 2019), or Jenny’s “there isn’t much I can do, but there is” (Interview, January 10, 2019) could be explained in this model. A shame feedback loop could be a natural result of taking up difficult knowledges within white privilege pedagogy, which encourages feelings of guilt and responsibility without directing white people beyond those feelings toward action.

In my second conversation with Ben a week later, we continued to explore how shame intersects with his antiracism. Specifically, we discussed his attendance at St Ann’s as a privilege about which he felt ashamed. Our conversation laid out the process by which he became bound within shame and is worth quoting at length. Ben started by clarifying that his decisions are always contextual.

Ben: I feel like something that I never communicated is that I am very much a product of my upbringing and very much a product of like media, the media I consumed. So the parties I align with, the people I aligned with. I don't know. I'm no, I do the things that I don't like sometimes. … Most people see that mold that like, that they're born in, that they're a product of, that they exist as, they see that as like- any effort to push them out of that is like a, even by themselves, is an act of hatred.

Kevin: Mm. What's an example of that?

Ben: Hmm. So, [12 sec pause]

Kevin: I don't think you're wrong.
Ben: Yeah, I want to find a good example. So if I, think to myself, um, me going to school here is like the product of a racist system. Which, I know it is, but also I have a responsibility to myself and my mom to go here because she has sacrificed a lot for me to go here. And, um, it could be good for me. … So, and sometimes it feels like, like to push me out of that, like, headspace, my justification for coming here and it seems like it's an attack on me, not as an attack on my actions…. 

Kevin: So the hatred part is, you have questions about or concerns about attending the school for the whiteness, the racism, all that. Um, [breath] uh, so, but that can feel like an attack on you, because you're here and you're getting things out of it.

Ben: Yes. …

Kevin: And that that's kind of um, awful to feel. [laughter]

Ben: Yeah. And rather than, I think it's usually the side, that the side that's motivated to attack me is this side that offers what some would say is the only way to relieve, the only true way to relieve that self-hatred.

Kevin: Which is,

Ben: Humanization through deconstruction of racism.

Kevin: Okay. So what would that look like in this specific case?

Ben: Me wanting to go to a public school because it is genuinely better than this school. Actually. I don't know what genuinely better means.

K: Let’s stick with you wanting to go to another school. So you haven't done that.
Ben: I've not gone to another school. I want-

Kevin: I assume you're probably not going to do that before you graduate. So here you are, you have an option, which has its own complications of course. And you don't take it.

Ben: Yes.

Kevin: What does that feel like?

Ben: It feels [8 sec pause] feels like, damnit, I've thought about this so many times. I've just, feel like it's not desensitized, but it's something different. I just feel, like my gut is like, “Well, I'm going here.”

Kevin: So yeah, that makes-

[crosstalk]

Ben: Apathy.35

Kevin: a lot of sense.

Ben: Apathy.

Kevin: But that, does it, is that a shift in you? Apathy that comes after some, uh, self-antagonism?

Ben: Yes.

Kevin: Okay. What else? Where else does the apathy, what else is the apathy masking or covering or treating?

Ben: Um, hmm. [18 second pause, I make a note] My inability in- my past failures to address racism. (Interview, May 13, 2019)

35 Importantly, this is not the racial apathy Forman & Lewis described as “not caring and not knowing” (2006, p. 175).
In short, the shame Ben describes about his ongoing privilege (ie, his accrual of the spoils of white supremacy) could only be mitigated by an act of self-hatred, acting against he and his mothers’ interest. This impasse leaves him in a familiar apathy, as in, he always already feels ashamed of his inaction. In this exchange, I was not satisfied that “apathy” was the ultimate result of not taking up the antiracist possibilities he encountered. Ben was not an apathetic person, and I suspected that his apathy was doing important work. Indeed, his apathy served as an anesthetic for his “past failures to address racism,” protecting him from feeling like a hypocrite or bad person for not only failing at antiracism, but *continuing to fail* at antiracism.

Further, that he describes attempting to push oneself out of the mold they’re born into functions as an “act of hatred” aligns with Thandeka’s (2001) exploration of white shame. For Thandeka, white identity development involves the creation and maintenance of internal and external “non-white zones” policed by familial and social acceptance. Moving beyond whiteness, then, threatens that acceptance by invoking shame. Yet the shame explored by Thandeka is rooted in external shame, invoked by family or caregivers, and while Ben mentions that his potential move to a public school could negatively impact his mother, it is his desire to attend the public school “because it is genuinely better” that constitutes what he calls “humanization through the deconstruction of racism.” I passed over this in our conversation, yet its contrast with Thadeka’s work with shame is notable. Transferring to a public school is not enough. Ben suggests that he must *believe* that the school is a better option for him, implying that what must be different is not only his external situation but his internal one. His shame is rooted not only in his failure to take up antiracism, but also in his failure to be a certain kind of
antiracist. Even his motivations were suspect. His commitment to antiracism had to be total, inside and out, or he failed. Ben noticed and attempted to resist this totalizing mentality, “purity is nonexistent. I feel like I’ve come to that conclusion in other spaces but not this one. I feel like up until now it's sort of been like, I've had to accept all of it or none of it” (Interview, May 22, 2019). Ultimately, rather than coming from his white family and friends, his sense of shame is self-imposed.

This is another example of how these participants’ experiences and understandings of race talk are meaningfully different than the literature. For example, Matias (2016) pushes Thandeka further, “If in whiteness the ideal self is one that internalizes narcissism, entitlement, and false racial kinship with other Whites, then nothing is more shameful than when that false ideal is threatened by reality” (p. 88). This was absolutely not the case here. Ben’s shame came from his struggle to repudiate that whiteness in the right way; he likely would have welcomed a reality which definitively threatened that whiteness. Additionally, the participants of my study evinced none of the redemption Margolin (2015) critically attributed to the profession of white privilege. Rather, the shame several articulated came not from a recognition of their white privilege but from their failure to enact the antiracism they felt was their responsibility. It’s not that these participants had out-grown these models, but that the models seemed to no longer apply.

**Stuck Within Guilt and Shame**

That white participants discussing race and antiracism experience guilt and shame is hardly a new concept. Further, it is well documented that these feelings do not translate

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36 This was, incidentally, Ben’s last day of school. He chose to stay for an additional interview after seniors’ early release.
into antiracist action (Lensmire et al., 2013). Yet more is happening here. Linder’s (2015) observation about shame hearkens calling-out and is helpful,

Feelings of guilt and shame are commonly associated with White identity development (Helms & Cook, 1999/2005), but the participants in this study described the ways in which their guilt and shame fueled their fear of appearing racist, resulting in inaction related to antiracist work. (p. 544)

Participants in my study certainly feared appearing racist, yet their inaction also seemed informed by their feelings of guilt and shame themselves, outside of the fear of appearing racist. Feeling shame itself seemed to limit participants’ ability to even think about race and seemed innate to the topic itself, as though they were always already positioned as guilty or ashamed when the topic is raised. As noted earlier, Banks (2016) discovered that “thoughts about racial and ethnic groups are so engrained in American society via anger” that overt political appeals are not necessary; being angry was enough to reinforce a political belief (p. 637). I suspect there are similar mechanisms at work with guilt and shame.

In the same way the racial discourses explored in chapter five confounded participants’ efforts to take up antiracism, the emotion of race talk, specifically guilt and shame, left participants feeling stuck. While participants were able to identify potential avenues of antiracism, their struggles to take them up dominated our conversations. Jenny followed her comment “there’s not much I can do, but there is” addressed earlier by adding, “you feel like guilty for not doing anything but you want to do something,” (Jenny Interview, January 10, 2019). Similarly, Ali struggled to feel effective at antiracism, saying, “there’s always something more to be done? There’s always that like, you know when you like leave and you forgot something, like you know when you need to go on a trip and you’re like, I forgot something. It’s kind of like that to me” (Ali
Interview, May 10, 2019). Ali also shared that she felt guilty when she didn’t notice something someone else called out as racist, as though, like Ben, she needed to recognize every possible problematic thing to assuage that guilt. These feelings of being stuck or inadequate were common among the more liberal participants and seemed central to both participants’ available antiracisms and their sense of themselves as good white nonracist people.

To better explore this, I turn back to Ben, who articulated feeling stuck a bit more clearly than other participants. For example,

I consume media that encourages that sort of, ideal, like with those sort of ideas that people should be not only aware of their race but race, power, sex, that they should be, but they should be always trying to diffuse it…. But at the same time, they sort of mean like, or I sort of perceived that I should be ashamed of [pause] like at EVERY single instance where I’m not actively diffusing it. I don’t know, I don’t know what I’m saying. It’s hard. It’s hard to place. (Interview, May 9, 2019)

While still caught in it, Ben was able to externalize and name this stuck-ness expressed by Ali and Jenny. Not only did he feel he ought to be working against oppressive systems, but that, like Ali, any moment in which he was not working against those systems was shame-worthy. Complicating this further, Ben struggled with shame in that he experienced it, knew it wasn’t helpful, but also felt obligated to maintain it. “But at the same time I sort of don’t want to, just because I feel like if I get rid of it completely, I just, I won’t be motivated to not be racist” (Interview, January 9, 2019). This view was shared by several participants. Yet when participants spoke about what actually shifted
their views, personal conversations (Maria, Ali), or fact finding (David) helped them change, as I explore in Chapter Seven.

Ben and I also sorted out that the antiracist action he ought to take up was obscured by his lack of certainty over what exactly that should be,

Ben: I believe that it’s an impossible task for me to be this [pause] sorta to be constantly aware, and it shouldn’t be, I don’t know, I’m conflicted. … Because I don’t know. I couldn’t be constantly secure that everything I was doing is justified. Okay. Yes. I cannot do that.

Kevin: Right, but in order to not feel shame for being white,

Ben: I need to constantly be justified.

Kevin: Yeah. Well, that’s a bind, isn’t it?

Ben: It is a bind. (Interview, May 9, 2019)

For Ben, that he contributes to (and feels ashamed of) those racist, sexist, classist patterns is as unavoidable as his whiteness. That he contributes to these patterns is consistent with critical pedagogy (Kumashiro, 2002). That he needed those feelings to take up antiracism, or that his antiracist actions must be constantly justified, however, are not. Yet both are typical of the emotional positionality of several participants who shared what seemed like forbiddingly difficult standards for their antiracism. Further, while I’m not sure what Ben meant by “media” that encouraged him to be “always trying to diffuse” his privileges, I wonder how a pedagogy focused on instilling a sense of the horror of racism without any clear actionable changes has contributed to this. I wonder if his feeling stuck in shame is exactly what white privilege pedagogy invites him to feel.
Guilt and shame themselves were thus a messy constellation of mutable boundaries and unspoken rules around race for these liberal white young people. In particular, the liberal participants’ sense of themselves as antiracist seemed closely linked to these feelings, as if feeling shame in and of itself indicated that they were doing the right thing. Zembylas (2013) helps make better sense of this.

More importantly though, it has been argued that the discourse of critical pedagogy establishes and maintains its own disciplinary affects (Yoon, 2005); that is, it functions as a ‘pedagogy of affect’ that mobilizes dominant tropes, especially in anti-racist pedagogies (Worsham, 2001). These dominant tropes are associated with certain affects such as commitment, devotion, and faith that may become normalized and even repressive (Ellsworth, 1989). In other words, if these affects are not present among teachers or students in the context of critical pedagogy, then an anti-racist pedagogy may be considered a failure. (p. 178)

In other words, feeling bad within the context of white privilege pedagogy, or perhaps more accurately appearing to feel bad through affective performance, about racism can both indicate and constitute antiracism; if you don’t seem ashamed of yourself, you’re doing it wrong and deserve censure. Good white students are to confess their privilege as a performance of empathy led by shame, the better the good white student, the more durable the shame. Again, I took this up as a classroom teacher in a race to the bottom, where the worse everyone seemed to feel, the better I was doing.

Complicating this, Zembylas is addressing a failure of pedagogy, where students and teachers could hold the pedagogy responsible. For these participants, the pedagogy, however imperfect, was not ultimately a failure; they were. This indicates an increasingly challenging emotional load on young white people. Further, the more participants took up white privilege pedagogy, the more they seemed to link the affects of guilt and shame to

antiracism. In fact, insofar as WPP has been official curricula, students could perform shame and guilt to earn better grades. Moreover, shame and guilt, like schooling itself, function individually, so that each good white person wrestled within these binds on their own. The conservative participants, less beholden to WPP, were not bound in the same way.

**Boundedness**

For Ben to both attend St Ann’s and not attend St Ann’s to fulfill his idea of being good (as a son and as an antiracist), is a double bind. If he leaves, he risks feeling shame for letting down his mom, though not because of whiteness. If he stays, he risks feeling shame for not being antiracist. The bind leaves him feeling, as he described, apathy, which serves as a temporary, and likely helpful, salve for his anxieties and shame. Again, Ben and other participants did not seem ashamed of being white; they seemed ashamed of having *always already failed at antiracism.*

There were multiple contradictory injunctions about antiracism that left participants in binds. I highlighted several of these in the previous chapters. Some arose from assumptions shared by participants, including: we must fix racism, racism is too large and complicated to be fixable; we can’t be positive that an antiracism action is justified, we must be justified to take antiracism action; we can only talk about race and racism with people who are “in,” it only helps to talk about race and racism with people who are “out;” and that we can only participate in race talk when we are certain of ourselves, we cannot be certain of ourselves within race talk. Others were shared explicitly by participants, including: we must understand the experiences of POC to fix racism, we cannot fully understand the experiences of POC; we cannot talk about race
and racism with other white people only, we cannot talk about race and racism with POC; we need to teach race and racism when kids are young, we cannot teach race and racism to young kids; we can’t stay white, we can’t be any other race; and finally shame and guilt motivate us to talk and not talk about race, to act and not act.  

That participants seemed caught up in so many binds surprised me. I had not looked for nor anticipated this, but the binds were unavoidable. I was also not prepared for how fraught antiracism would be, or that so many participants with seemingly sincere antiracist beliefs would be so lost trying to take it up. I believe double bind theory alongside emerging research on trauma can help explain this. Double bind theory was originally proposed as an explanation for schizophrenic behavior by psychiatrist Gregory Bateson in the 1950s (Gibneyt, 2006). While no longer thought of in this context, it remains a powerful discursive construct, and it remains crazy-making. Double binds can be understood in basic terms using the context of white privilege pedagogy in a classroom,

1) You must accept your responsibility for racism; you are racist.
2) If you don’t accept this, it is because you are resisting, and thus racist.
3) You cannot point out this contradiction. If you do you are resisting, and thus racist.
4) You can’t leave the situation.

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38 Pollock’s *Colormute* (2004) identified a set of paradoxical aspects of race talk in similar terms. For example, “we don’t belong to simple racial groups, but we do” and “race doesn’t matter, but it does” (pp. 13-14, emphasis in original).

39 Importantly, double binds are commonly experienced by marginalized groups, e.g., people of color or women are encouraged to share their experiences in “safe spaces,” only to be told “watch your tone,” or be denied entirely.
Further, and more insidiously, “the context is organized by the avoidance of punishment which usually takes the form of withdrawal of love, the expression of hate or anger and other manifestations of the principal theme of abandonment” (Gibneyt, 2006, p. 50). For Bateson, the avoidance of punishment and withdrawal of love took place within the context of family systems. What carries over, especially in the classroom, are the power dynamics underlying this, “the double binds ‘work’ because someone has power over someone else, or at very least (and hardly ‘least’), someone has the right to define the operant context for another person” (p. 55). The operant context, in this case, is white privilege pedagogy.

I explore shame and double bind theory to better understand the context in which young white people are choosing whether or not to take up antiracism. I believe it can help us recognize how we as teachers can get in our own way. I have struggled to make sense of resistant white students outside of a framework that positions them as “attached to their whiteness” in ways substantially at odds with their peers. Making better sense of the social and emotional contexts can create space for exploration where there had only been space for judgment. Double bind theory similarly “does not ‘blame’ the family nor the parents, nor does it imply malicious, deliberate intent to those involved in the communicational maze” (Gibneyt, 2006, p. 51). The solution to double-bind problems, relevant to teachers as the perpetuators of them, is to avoid creating them in the first place. I explore this further in the following section.

**Trauma**

Like double bind theory, applying trauma frameworks to high school race talk can offer helpful models for understanding student responses to antiracist pedagogies.
Further, practices that mitigate the effects of trauma can be easily applied in the classroom and offer their own benefits. Before I proceed, I want to caution that the racial traumas of people of color and those of white people are not comparable, and that discussing white racial traumas risks treating them as such. I hesitate to use the language of trauma at all for several reasons, including that the language of trauma can essentialize complex experiences in unhelpful ways, and that applying the language of trauma can recall other examples of trauma such as assault or genocide, suggesting comparability.

Yet much of participant behavior and language around race talk aligned with the behavior and language of victims of trauma. I neither want to undervalue trauma as experienced by survivors of sexual abuse and assault or survivors of genocide nor can I dismiss the startling similarities evinced between white students discussing race and trauma survivors. I believe the conceptual framework of trauma can help race theorists and classroom teachers better understand and address race talk.

Menakem explains trauma as a defensive maneuver, “trauma is the body’s protective response to an event—or a series of events—that it perceives as potentially dangerous” (2017, p. 7). Bessel van der Kolk (2014) details how traumas can be retained within the mind and body, and are expressed in seemingly unlikely ways. He researched how engaging with the source or trigger of trauma can disengage Broca’s area, the language center of the brain, while intense emotions from that experience come rushing back. A person experiencing this cannot therefore reason their way out of it. Rather, they are in thrall to their traumatic response, often not even aware that it is happening. Then, “after the emotional storm passes, they may look for something or somebody to blame for it” (p. 45). Further, Van der Kolk explains how these feelings are largely beyond our
control, and “as a result, shame becomes the dominant emotion and hiding the truth becomes the central preoccupation” (p. 67). Finally, because trauma is located away from language within the mind and body, it is resistant to remedies focused on talking.\footnote{Indeed, Van der Kolk heads this section “Alexithymia: No words for feelings” (2014, p. 100).} As he explains, “no matter how much insight and understanding we develop, the rational brain is basically impotent to talk the emotional brain out of its own reality” (p. 47). These dynamics have been readily observable in participant’s race talk.

Van der Kolk’s work with trauma overlays and can help make sense of my white participants’ struggles with race talk. For young white people, I believe repeated exposure to WPP combined with various double binds could generate these kinds of trauma responses. As noted earlier, these responses include ambivalences, attraction and revulsion, a struggle to articulate thoughts and feelings, and learned helplessness, all of which were on display among participants. Moreover, the schooling environment, oriented almost entirely around talk, can be particularly poorly suited to respond. Because “recollection without affect almost invariably produces no result,” the more we intellectualize racism the more we freeze it into place (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 184).

Menakem (2017), a social work scholar, takes up trauma in specifically racial contexts, exploring the racial experiences of Black bodies, police bodies, and white bodies. For Menakem, “white Americans have experienced this trauma in multiple ways. They watched others harm and kill Black bodies. They failed to prevent, stop, or challenge such attacks” (p. 101). In this way, white Americans’ failure to take up antiracism itself can be a form of trauma, creating the paralyzing shame of having always already failed discussed earlier. This overlays the pain white people can experience when
confronted with the reality of their racial fear of Black bodies. Additionally, because a colorblind environment or attitude links people of color with race and noticing race is being racist, exposure to Blackness itself *can feel like being accused of racism* (Zembylas, 2013). These constitute a mounting emotional load on white students worth considering as we ask them to participate in race talk, and can help us make sense of and work alongside white racial denial, professed ignorance, or avoidance.

**How This Helps**

The framework of trauma offers foundational models and strategies for mitigating the difficulties experienced by young white people in the context of race talk. For Van der Kolk, healing involves:

1. finding a way to be calm and focused,
2. learning to maintain that focus in response to images, thoughts, sounds, or physical sensations that remind you of the past,
3. finding a way to be fully alive in the present and engaged with the people around you,
4. not having to keep secrets from yourself, including secrets about the ways you have managed to survive. (2014, pp. 205-206)

As he explains, these goals overlap and are best pursued in tandem. Similarly, Menakem (2017) suggests practicing mindfulness and self-soothing strategies when undertaking race work to help recognize and mitigate overwhelming self-protective measures our bodies enact in response to race talk. Finally, Van der Kolk suggests that working against the secrecy and shame of trauma means “knowing what they know, and feeling what they feel” (2014, p. 27). This reinforces the need to facilitate, cautiously and contextually, problematic race talk.

Practicing mindfulness and maintaining awareness of the emotional impact of race can help address the anxiety participants described while potentially lessening the paralytic effect of the double binds attendant to their race talk experiences. Before young
people are confronted with the difficult knowledge of our racial history and present, our antiracist work would benefit from working to detoxify, though not necessarily make “safe,” our classrooms. Strategies developed to calm the autonomic nervous system for those struggling with trauma can be effective tools for moderating white reactivity during conversations about race.

Additionally, Menakem’s (2017) distinction between what he calls clean and dirty pain can help us navigate challenging emotions. For Menakem, “dirty pain is the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial” taken up by those unwilling or unable to confront these struggles in a healthy way. Dirty pain only “create[s] more of it for themselves and others” (p. 20). Clean pain, on the other hand, is pain that is metabolized within our emotional selves and is expressed through vulnerability. For myself, I tend to articulate vulnerable feelings as judgments, as in “I feel attacked,” rather than as an articulation of my emotional state, as in “I feel defensive.” Even writing these statements feels different to me, “I feel attacked” orients me outward, while “I feel defensive” redirects me inward. This is the fundamental difference between clean and dirty pain. While dirty pain protects us by closing off the world, clean pain positions us as open, receptive and ready to learn. While these are especially useful in guiding students through challenging conversations, we can all benefit from developing these practices.

Van der Kolk’s (2014) work with trauma draws similar conclusions about openness, “communicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized” (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 237). I wonder if this kind of open communication might be what participants

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41 Leonardo & Porter (2010) explore how “safe” spaces in classrooms, by failing to question “for whose safety,” typically serve to protect white students from experiencing productive racial discomfort as well as to silence the experiences of students of color.
had in mind when they called for “deeper conversations” among their peers about race.

Additionally, Van der Kolk recognizes the power of art, especially theater, to counter the paralysis of trauma,

Trauma is about trying to forget, hiding how scared, enraged, or helpless you are. Theater is about finding ways of telling the truth and conveying deep truths to your audience. This requires pushing through blockages to discover your own truth, exploring and examining your own internal experience so that it can emerge in your voice and body on stage. (2014, p. 337)

Several theorists have embraced theater to better explore race, notably Tanner (2014) and Snyder-Young (2010). Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed (1993), as explored by Simpson (2008), is similarly well-suited to race work.

Ultimately, by developing our and young people’s capacity to both understand and be mindful of emotions, we as teachers can foster classrooms better suited to the challenging work of race talk. There is no single guidance for addressing race with anyone, including young white people. Because race and race talk are so contextual and experiential, there are likely as many successful strategies as there are young white people. Moreover, strategies shift with our understanding of ourselves as raced people, so that antiracist strategies from 20 years ago, such as white privilege pedagogy, are now rightfully criticized and built upon. That said, the stories in this project can offer approaches that could be more helpful. We cannot hope to develop a static platform from which we can enact antiracism in “teacher proof” ways, but we can empower teachers to foster healthy environments suited to difficult conversation in order to address them more deftly in their own contexts.

Conclusion
I write this during what are likely the early stages of a worldwide pandemic. To slow the spread of the virus, most of the world is wrestling with how to “socially distance” from those they love while carrying on being mothers and fathers, friends and neighbors. We are simultaneously bored and anxious, a paradox we are slowly learning to abide. Many of our ways of coping are now impossible or dangerous. And, once again, our society is wracked with divisions along the typical lines. In addition to the solidarity of shared experiences, however individually experienced, there is apprehension, misdirection, and all too familiar patterns of racist scapegoating and disproportionate harm to communities of color. White people seem both less affected by and less resilient to the social, economic, and physiological effects of the virus. In the way any crisis enables clarity, it is possible to witness the failures of our economic and social structures in real time; that a “return to normal” is neither possible nor desirable. Perhaps part of what we, especially white people, can take away from this is a heightened awareness of ourselves, and the not-so-hidden ways we are all interconnected.
Chapter Seven

Conclusions

Introduction

I began this dissertation in my classroom, where I struggled to enact the antiracist pedagogies I had inherited. With the help of the histories, insights, and critiques of whiteness from Chapter Two, as well as the work of research scholars outlined in Chapter Three, I spent five months with 10 courageous young people exploring race. I cannot overstate how much I learned from the participants’ work during this study. In Chapter Four, the participants and I worked through how they could or could not talk about race, as well as the origins and sustainers of those constrained discourses. I considered the depressive effects of these discourses, especially calling out, in Chapter Five. Chapter Six then took up the role of emotion in how these young white people did and did not take up white privilege pedagogy and antiracism, including how they became bound within those discourses.

Here, I conclude this work with a consideration of how we might shift away from bounded racial discourses to more generative positions. It is my hope that we may no longer feel overwhelmed or complacent about white supremacy, but that we can recognize and address it with some clarity and conviction. As I explore below, I believe we’re closer than we think we are.

What Can We Do? We’re Closer Than We Think

Trauma, Testimonials, and Empathy

In the previous chapter I focused on how white privilege pedagogy can seek to disarm students without fully understanding what in them feels vulnerable and in need of
defense, sometimes leaving them bound and hopeless. Asking that white students confess to being racist or exposing them to racism without adequate support has not led young white people to take up antiracism as intended. I used to believe that, armed with the right set of arguments, I could convince my white students of racism, as though whiteness and white identity rests upon logic and reason, as though the entire history of whiteness is a manifestation of logic and reason rather than a panicked denial and desperate need for acceptance. Rather, if whiteness is, in part, a set of emotioned maneuvers, then resistance to antiracism is also a set of emotioned maneuvers, itself in part a reaction to protect a vulnerable self. Attempting to force students to recognize the reality of racism as we see it, as white privilege pedagogy suggests, fails to recognize these contexts, and can pose unnecessary risks. Zembylas argues,

> Critical pedagogues need to be more critically aware of the emotional consequences when they categorize individuals into ‘oppressors’ and ‘oppressed’; failing to understand how students’ emotional attachments are strongly entangled with traumatic historical circumstances and material conditions will undermine teachers’ pedagogical interventions. (2013, pp. 179-180)

By acknowledging this, classroom conversations about race can be reframed as working alongside resistant students, rather than working against. Menakem’s (2017) work with racial trauma is useful here. Antiracist work can benefit from trauma-aware classrooms as well as the introspection and self-awareness that comes from his work. As he concludes his book on trauma, Van der Kolk cites the poet Auden, “Truth, like love and sleep, resents / approaches that are too intense” (2014, p. 127). I believe this can be a helpful reminder when addressing race.

Additionally, as explored earlier, exposing young white people to the suffering of others in hopes of an empathic call to action has stumbled or even backfired in our
individualistic culture. For years, my own unit on race meant reading *Native Son* (2005) and asking students to contend with Bigger Thomas’ harsh reality. I hoped the intensity and violence of the story would force students to confront this soberly, or that Jan Erlone, the narrative’s well-intentioned but ignorant white character, might reflect back to them their own good though inadequate intentions. Our conversations often looked like tense exchanges among my white students and I, all of us caught up in our own anxiety. I hoped for a dialogic classroom where they might encounter antiracist opinions and witness racism through the text in transformative ways. This pedagogy “worked” in the limited ways explored in this project, and can benefit from new perspectives.

To begin, I turn to Megan Boler’s (1999) critique of the assumption that empathy leads to action, and her call for testimonial reading and listening, conveniently addressed to *Native Son*. She argues that the insight we are to draw from Bigger’s story is not from him, or even from what we feel, but from the ideologies underpinning those feelings.

To experience rage and shame on Bigger Thomas's behalf is not sufficient; nor is it sufficient to see racism as a “stain” and “infection that prevents a common humanity” (Nussbaum 1995: 96). Recognizing my position as “judge” granted through the reading privilege, I must learn to question the genealogy of any particular emotional response: My scorn, my evaluation of others’ behavior as good or bad, my irritation - each provides a site for interrogation of how the text challenges my investments in familiar cultural values. As I examine the history of a particular emotion, I can identify the taken-for-granted social values and structures of my own historical moment which mirror those encountered by the protagonist. Testimonial reading pushes us to recognize that a novel or biography reflects not merely a distant other, but analogous social relations in our own environment, in which our economic and social positions are implicated. (p. 170)

Boler’s critique undermines the presumption that *feeling bad* about racism is the same as antiracism while maintaining the essential role played by emotion in challenging social constructs like race. Boler calls for a “Pedagogy of Discomfort,” wherein, as explained in Chapter Two, empathy must hail the listener in such a way that the listener
joins with the story and experiences its discomfort. This leads to what Dominick LaCapra calls “empathetic unsettlement,” where the student “reactivate[s] and transmit[s] not trauma but an unsettlement that manifests empathy (but not full identification) with the victim” (quoted in Zembylas, 2006, p. 321).

Essentially, Boler (1999) and Zembylas (2006) identify two emotioned mechanisms at work in my antiracist education requiring adjustment. First, Boler’s critique of the failure of empathy addresses my and other’s use of literature and film as stand-alone and self-explanatory lessons on race. The call for a more critical approach to these texts does not forbid their use. Rather, through empathetic unsettlement and other pedagogies of discomfort we hope to moderate our students’ identification with the racial Others they encounter through stories, so they neither over-identify with nor disengage from those narratives. We’re not wrong to use these texts; we also need to complicate them. Second, despite underestimating our personal complicity and emotional work, we teachers understood the power and necessity of emotion in learning, especially when attempting to convey racial realities. In this way, our efforts to convey racial injustices through emotioned encounters were incomplete pedagogies of discomfort. We weren’t getting it right, but we weren’t too far off.

As demonstrated in this study, our students are likely more aware of these shortcomings and more prepared for more effective methods than we imagine. For example, like Boler’s critique of empathy, Ben saw through and was critical of service projects that assumed his encounter with racial others could be an uncomplicated “learning experience.” Further, even participants sympathetic to the antiracist project of our clumsy pedagogies of discomfort, like Maria or Ali, took these up uneasily. This is to say that our
own unease with these pedagogies, as well as those of our students, was well-founded and deserves our recognition. We have not been hopelessly lost in the dark. Beyond refocusing existing classroom work on race, I found two concepts striking and would like to conclude with them.

**Strategic Empathy**

In her work with emotion and economic class, Lindquist (2004) took up what she calls strategic empathy. She explains,

> What made this strategy work, I think, was my willingness to make myself strategically naïve in two moments: first, in seeking advice about how we should conduct discussions ... and then later, when (working hard against my own emotional need to negatively evaluate some of the perspectives I was hearing about the war) I worked to communicate empathy for their positions as affective responses. (pp. 203–204, emphasis in original)

I and other teachers have used her first step, appearing to open the ground rules governing class conversations, to help generate ownership and participation. Yet, even when I knew better, I have resisted her second moment of naivai where she affects empathy for their positions. I have felt responsible for the discourse of my classroom, as if I gave sanction to every unchallenged remark. I believe I was mistaken in two related ways; I was overestimating my own importance as arbiter, and I was treating the learning space as mine rather than as a collaborative space. To be sure, shifting toward a collaborative learning space takes time and effort, as teacher-centric classrooms remain the default setting for many students. Developing student or project-centric classroom work fosters an environment where teachers have the flexibility to serve as guide, permitting students to flesh out racial misconceptions with less risk of those views metastasizing. Strategic empathy is the pedagogical tool that gives teachers discursive access to both these spaces as well as so-called resistant students.
Perhaps more importantly, attempting to convince someone of racism or any other emotionally held belief simply doesn’t work, as anyone who has tried can attest.\(^{42}\) I had the opportunity to ask David, a participant whose views on race had shifted, what had changed him. “A huge thing that really changed me was, it was not really finding new perspectives, but it was seeing how wrong a lot of this stuff I believed was. So it really wasn't that I was pushed anywhere” (Interview, April 25, 2019). This suggests that antiracist pedagogy is better served by finding ways to draw out student’s racist beliefs through strategic empathy, in hopes that these misinformed views wither under scrutiny.

Strategic empathy problematically raises the risk of potential harm to SOC in these conversations when we ask them to tolerate, even for a short time, hurtful ideologies. I have no simple answer to this. Our work here must be as sensitive as any other classroom work regarding race. Strategic empathy offers the possibilities of both a classroom not oriented toward the teacher as well as pushing through unwelcome perspectives.

**Radical Hope**

The second concept, in a way, addresses this tension. In his exploration of white emotion and affect, Zembylas is concerned about how difficult knowledge can be productively addressed (2014). He recognized that empathetic encounters with difficult knowledge are moments of crisis, and that students encountering difficult knowledge can fall into despair not unlike the boundedness described by participants in this study, and not unlike the despair we might feel after a lengthy encounter with race. Zembylas cites Britzman’s work on the possibilities of hope within pedagogical encounters with trauma,
“How can the curriculum be organized, she asks, in a way that does not provide closure but rather the possibilities to repair traumatic experiences” (2014, p. 394). This is the very problem confronting classroom teachers as we work to shift our antiracist pedagogies away from despair and boundedness and toward what Farley (2009) calls “radical hope” (quoted in Zembylas, 2014, p. 391).

Farley, a history scholar, is addressing the crisis faced by the educators of children confronted with difficult historical knowledge. These educators typically move to protect the innocence of the child, yet Farley points out that “no matter how meticulous one's pedagogy and no matter how well planned one's response, the adult cannot predict the child's question, nor the meanings that child will make from the knowledge one offers in response” (2009, p. 543). Farley calls upon a way of making sense of historical injustice applicable here, as we attempt to shift our pedagogy from its dead-end to hope. She identifies our desire to make sense of historical wrongs pedagogically by imbuing them with meaning, so we might learn from them. She cites Lévinas, who “finds hope in the opposite trajectory, that is, in the impossibility of making from past trauma a moral lesson; what is hopeful, for Lévinas, is to preserve the “uselessness of suffering”’” (p. 547). This pedagogy “resists epistemological certitude and so challenges educators to consider how both pedagogy and learning are touched (and so constituted) by uncertainty, disruption and conflict in ways that reason, or a “pedagogical moment," cannot school away” (p. 547). In other words, in so far as our objective has been to make pedagogical sense of historical racism, we have encountered dead-ends. We cannot “make use” of suffering. Our pedagogy benefits from embracing the ultimate unknowability of racism, as well as the “uncertainty, disruption and conflict” inherent to
learning. We benefit from saying “I don’t know.” To locate our pedagogy in uncertainty is a radical hope.

Reassuringly, this hope echoes a central tenant of critical pedagogy, that education must work to identify and alleviate oppression (Kumashiro, 2002). Similarly, Boler argues that empathy does not necessarily lead to awareness of how to engage in action to bring change. Therefore, a critical exposure to discomfort or suffering and pain – that is, one which promotes not only knowledge but also action for change – is needed. (Zembylas, 2015, p. 172)

This work must be action- and resistance-oriented. As explored in this study, schooling as most of us know it is hindering rather than helping this pedagogy. Antiracism will depend on moving beyond traditional modes of education.

**Future Work**

There are several potential avenues of future study. First, while planning this study, I had little sense of the role of emotion or embodiment on white students’ race talk. Additionally, while I understood white privilege models of racism to be unproductive, I did not anticipate the depressive effect it would have on white students’ capacity to imagine antiracism, or that those who resisted it would seem more able to examine whiteness. Spending more time unpacking the felt experiences of white people as they encounter or participate in race talk could provide valuable insight. I believe that interoception, our sense-making process of understanding our bodies, can be a powerful tool in our fight against white supremacy.

Second, I remain curious about how gender and class intersect with whiteness. My participants shared their thoughts and experiences as members of a social group, which shaped their understandings and discourses. I wonder how gender and class operate within whiteness to shape individual attitudes about race. While threads of
thought on gender and whiteness were taken up in my study, I believe they could provide additional insight on antiracist work. I am eager to delve more deeply into these interconnected topics.

Finally, this work ought to dedicate time and energy to better understanding young white people who think of themselves as conservative and have resisted white privilege pedagogy. Not only can we better understand the counter-productive work being done by this pedagogy, by making sense of their resistance we can work to redirect that resistance toward white supremacy, likely its more appropriate target.

I propose the following questions as guides to future work: What is the relationship between white privilege pedagogy, gender, and being a “good” student? In what ways can the resistance to white privilege pedagogy be repurposed by antiracist educators? In what ways can embodiment and emotional competence work benefit antiracist work? And finally, what will it look like to guide other white teachers beyond white privilege pedagogy; what has it looked like for me?

I believe these questions are best answered through in-depth interviews and critical discourse analysis, so that researchers can allow participants to excavate deeply held notions of the self and the world in nuanced ways. Because of the workings of whiteness explored in Chapter Three, accessing these beliefs will take the time and trust of all involved. My confidence in young people to undertake this work is all the more resolute after this study. I believe they are best positioned to guide the rest of us is recognizing, deconstructing, and working against white supremacy.

Conclusion
To conclude, I return to my conversations with Ben. First, I hope we can benefit from the hindsight Ben shared on the perceived failure of his presentation on racism and shame, “I don’t think I really communicated that the awkwardness that some people felt was just as notable as whether we were all like super bright [and] productive” (Interview, May 9, 2019). Antiracist work does not abide pedagogical units or rubrics, and our work cannot be evaluated in those terms.

Second, near the end of an afternoon conversation, I asked Ben how he managed to be so open about his own thinking on race when his peers so clearly struggled to do so, At first I got a few positive responses to just being honest. And then that sort of triggered me to just be honest as a defense mechanism. Like I would be honest, just bluntly honest, in the hopes that my honesty alone would make me worthy of some sort of acceptance. (Ben Interview, May 13, 2019)

I had thought Ben was somehow emotionally at peace with race, or possessed astonishing courage in his willingness to be vulnerable, but as he explained to me, he wasn’t defenseless; his vulnerability was a kind of defense. I’m reminded that we are all in this work together, and that while some of us have studied race academically, we all wrestle with it. Additionally, my white antiracism cannot be dependent on the approval of some governing body of racial authority, including people of color. As hooks (2003) wrote, “Anti-racist white folks recognize that their ongoing resistance to white supremacism is genuine when it is not determined in any way by the approval or disapproval of people of color” (quoted in Tanner, 2014, p. 196).

At the same time, like many of the participants, Ben demonstrated an impressive embrace of vulnerability and uncertainty, the qualities that should guide our antiracist
work. As a final reflection, I asked Ben what was on his mind at the end of one of our conversations,

Ben: So right now I feel like I've kinda … You know how like in movies when they, like you see, or on TV shows when you see like pigs hanging up in like a slaughterhouse, like in a freezer, they slice open the bellies and the guts come out?

Kevin: You feel like all of your guts are out?

Ben: Well, not just guts, but thoughts.

Kevin: Yeah. And it's kind of a, a mess?

Ben: Yeah, it’s kind of a mess. But I kinda like it. I’ve been kind of telling myself to like that feeling just because I know it's good.

Kevin: Uh, I mean, I imagine it's, vulnerable. Yeah?

Ben: Yeah.

Kevin: I mean I wouldn't want to be, I wouldn't want to be one of those pigs. [laughing] I guess, in that metaphor,

Ben: Yeah, I guess not. What's getting eaten, then, in this metaphor?

Kevin: What's getting eaten?

Ben: Yeah. What is being eaten.

Kevin: I guess- whatever, I mean if we follow the pig thing, whatever's left after all the thoughts come out. I don't know how true that is.

Ben: Huh. Yeah, that feels right. (Personal Communication, 5/13/19)

Here Ben recognizes the importance of what I miss; important aspects of race work lie beyond our thinking selves, beyond our language and reason. Menakem agrees,
For the past three decades, we’ve earnestly tried to address white-body supremacy in America with reason, principles, and ideas—using dialogue, forums, discussions, education, and mental training. But the widespread destruction of Black bodies continues. … It’s not that we’ve been lazy or insincere. But we’ve focused our efforts in the wrong direction. We’ve tried to teach our brains to think better about race. But white-body supremacy doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies. (2017, pp. 4-5)

Our antiracist work must follow it there.
References


Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: Relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. *English Language Teaching, 5*(9), 9-16.


Appendix

This is a catalogue of the group meetings, including date, time, attendance, and an overview of the topics discussed.

1) Meeting One
   a. Date: January 29, 2019, before school.
   b. In attendance: Ali, Ben, Danny, David, Heidi, Jenny, & Ken.
   c. Topics covered: Introductions.

2) Meeting Two
   a. Date: February 1, 2019, before school.
   b. In attendance: Ali, Ben, Danny, David, Heidi, Jenny, & Ken.
   c. Topics covered: Early encounters with race.

3) Meeting Three
   a. Date: February 5, 2019, before school.
   b. In attendance: Ben, Danny, David, Jenny, & Ken.
   c. Topics covered: Early memories of schooling on race.

4) Meeting Four
   a. Date: February 12, 2019, before school.
   b. In attendance: Ali, Ben, Danny, David, Heidi, Jenny, & Maria.
   c. Topics covered: How is race talked about.

5) Meeting Five
   a. Date: February 14, 2019, before school.
   c. Topics covered: Calling out and schooling on race.

6) Meeting Six
   a. Date: February 19, 2019, before school.
   b. In attendance: Ali, Ben, David, Maria, & Ryan.
   c. Topics covered: Definitions of racial terms, whiteness as loss.

7) Meeting Seven
   a. Date: February 22, 2019, before school.
   b. In attendance: Ali, Ben, Danny, David, Heidi, Jenny, Ken, & Maria.
   c. Topics covered: Racial humor, stereotypes of white people.

8) Meeting Eight
   a. Date: March 12, 2019, before school.
   b. In attendance: Danny, David, Heidi, Jenny, & Ken.
   c. Topics covered: Definitions of racial terms, color blindness.

9) Meeting Nine
   a. Date: March 22, 2019, before school.
   c. Topics covered: Overview of history of race.

10) Meeting Ten
    a. Date: March 26, 2019, before school.
    c. Topics covered: Review history of race, short meeting.

11) Meeting Eleven
a. Date: April 2, 2019, before school.
b. In attendance: Ben, Danny, David, Heidi, Jenny, & Maria.
c. Topics covered: Antiracist possibilities.

12) Meeting Twelve
a. Date: April 9, 2019, before school.
c. Topics covered: Antiracist possibilities.

13) Meeting Thirteen
a. Date: April 16, 2019, before school.
b. In attendance: Ben, Danny, David, Jenny, Ken, Maria, & Ryan.
c. Topics covered: Antiracist possibilities among white people.