Whiteness Interrupted: Examining the Impact of Racialized Space on White Racial Identity

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ABSTRACT
What does it mean to be white? This fundamental question stands at the heart of the interdisciplinary field of critical whiteness studies. Critical whiteness studies (CWS) epistemologically and theoretically upends traditional approaches to the study of race and racial inequality by averting the critical gaze from racially subordinate groups and focusing it upon the racially dominant group. Although insightful and highly influential, CWS has not sufficiently incorporated racialized space as a theoretically meaningful concept. Far too often, critical whiteness scholars speak of racial categories and racial experiences in board, spatially generalized terms. My dissertation moves beyond the general question of what does it mean to be white, and instead asks a more specific question: what does it mean to be white in nonwhite racialized spaces? In order to answer this question, I use the responsive interview model to interview 32 white teachers from a hyper-segregated, predominantly black school district in Upstate New York. Contrary to the nearly ubiquitous notion that whites do not see or think of themselves in racialized terms, my interview respondents not only saw themselves as distinctly white, but they also spent a considerable amount of time thinking about what whiteness meant for their personal and professional lives. My findings also show that, within nonwhite racialized spaces, whiteness does not operate as the raceless norm, but instead functions as the racialized other. For the teachers involved in this study, this particular spatial dynamic engendered an experiential and epistemological shift in racial status. As the cultural and numerical minority within predominantly black schools, my interview respondents developed a hyper-sense of racial victimization, one that was specifically at odds with their construction of racial victimization throughout society, writ large. Lastly, interview data also show that racialized space, while highly determinative of racial experience, has a noticeable, yet limited effect on racial ideology. Implications for society today and race relations going forward are also examined.
Whiteness Interrupted: Examining the Impact of Racialized Space on White Racial Identity

By

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WHITENESS INTERRUPTED: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF RACIALIZED SPACE ON WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY

Marcus Bell

“As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name.”

George Lipsitz, The Possessive Investment in Whiteness.1

“Sometimes I just want to stand up and shout, ‘look, I’m white ok, get over it!’”

Rebecca Darling, Brick City High School.2

Introduction

What does it mean to be white in America? This fundamental question stands at the heart of the interdisciplinary and burgeoning field of critical whiteness studies (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Hill, 1997; Yancy, 2012). Gaining academic legitimacy only within the last few decades,3 critical whiteness studies (CWS) epistemologically and theoretically upends traditional approaches to the study of race by averting the critical gaze from racially subordinate groups and focusing it upon the racially dominant group (Morrison, 1993). In the context of the United States, this shift has led to a substantial, and sustained, empirical investigation into a variety of topics, including white racial identity, white racial discourse, and whiteness as a site power, privilege, and prestige. From philosophy to psychology, legal studies to education, and sociology to history, critical whiteness studies empirically interrogates whiteness and white supremacy, and it does so across the disciplinary spectrum (Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Harris, 1993; Helms, 1990; Jacobson, 1999; Leonardo, 2009; Lewis, 2004; Lopez, 2006; McIntyre, 1997; Mills, 2007; Rodiger, 2006; Tatum, 2013; Yancy, 2012).
Although insightful and highly influential, CWS has not sufficiently included racialized space as an empirically meaningful concept. For example, what happens to whiteness once it has been made visible to white people? That is, what happens to white racial identity once whiteness, or the seemingly normality of whiteness, has been interrupted? While there are several exceptions, much of the current CWS literature fails to address these questions directly (DiAngelo, 2011; Gallagher, 1997; Hartigan, 1999, 2005; McKinney, 2005; Perry, 2002). My dissertation breaks from this norm by investigating how whiteness functions, and is understood by whites, after it has experienced what Charles Gallagher (1997) terms a momentary minority status (p. 7, emphasis added). In order to do so, I investigate whiteness that is spatially situated in nonwhite racialized spaces. Specifically, I focus on the numerous ways that white teachers make meaning of, experience, and discuss whiteness and white racial identity in urban, predominantly black schools.

Even though all space is racialized space, for the purposes of this study, I define nonwhite racialized space as those spaces where white racial consciousness cannot be escaped because it is de-normalized, or made explicit, by the people within said spaces, or even the physical spaces, themselves. Whereas segregated white neighborhoods and racially segregated white schools are, indeed, racialized spaces, due to the invisibility of whiteness, these kinds of neighborhoods and schools are broadly conceived, by whites, as just neighborhoods and schools, respectively. They are rarely interpreted as white neighborhoods or white schools – racialized spaces – even though, numerically, culturally, and socially speaking, that is exactly what they are. That is, these neighborhoods and schools are never racialized because whiteness is not made visible, and therefore, white racial consciousness is mostly dormant. In nonwhite racialized
space, however, racial consciousness, specifically, white racial consciousness, is heightened by the physical dimensions, cultural mores, and interactional practices of that particular space.

In order to demonstrate the importance of studying the impact of racialized space on whiteness and white racial identity, I briefly recall two real life events that occurred in the recent past. In the first, I retell the way the (then) four year old white son of my partner racially described the lead character of the movie *Annie*. In the second, I share a story about my time working at an urban, predominantly black school in Washington, D.C. Specifically, I detail an incident that involved one of my white colleagues characterizing whiteness as a disadvantage. With these stories, I hope to show that, in many instances and for many people, whiteness, indeed acts as the invisible norm and does not need to be explicitly named. Conversely, however, these stories also show that, within certain racialized spaces, whiteness is not normative at all, but instead is the mark of the racial other. For many academics, and actual white people, themselves, this latter point is a strong departure from the prevailing American norm of whiteness as the default racial category.

**Story #1**

Thomas, the (then) four year old son of my partner, is a very outgoing and talkative kid. Like many kids his age, Thomas, who is white, is learning about the world around him and is therefore always asking questions. His parents are divorced, so he splits time between them, spending five nights a week with his mom and two nights a week with his dad. As far as I know, I am the only person of color that has a meaningful relationship with him. One day after he had awoken from his nap and had lunch, Thomas asked his mother if he could watch a movie. The two of them had a brief back and forth about how he watched too much television, then agreed that he could only watch a movie if he would forego watching television for the rest of the day.
With that, Thomas wasted no time and went to his movie drawer. After rummaging around for a minute or two, his eyes lit up and he eagerly reached in in the drawer and removed a DVD. Thomas stood up, holding out a DVD, and stated “I wanna watch black Annie.”

In 2014, Columbia Pictures released a remake of the 1982 musical film, “Annie.” Although the musical numbers and overall plot between the two movies were similar, there was one noticeable difference. Whereas the lead character in the original 1982 version was white, the 2014 version of Annie featured a young black girl as the lead character. Thomas had never seen or even heard of the original Annie, so to him, the most recent version of Annie was the only version that existed. Still overwhelmed with excitement, Thomas began to describe the movie to me in great detail. He talked about mean characters, funny characters, “cool songs and a crazy dog.” What was interesting, however, was that every time he referred to the lead character, he called her “black Annie.” Neither I nor his mother inquired as to why Thomas chose to racialize Annie in this manner, but what is salient – and particularly relevant to this project – is that he has never, prior or since, racialized a white TV or movie character the way he did with “black Annie.”

Story #2

Mrs. Wilkes, then a 29 year old English teacher and colleague of mine at Capitol Heights Charter School, angrily walked into my classroom during one of my planning periods. She was visibly upset and on the verge of tears. At the time, Mrs. Wilkes and I were the only staff members under the age of 30, so, somewhat out of necessity, we had developed strong friendship. On this particular day, she was upset because she had just come from a meeting with the mother of one of her students and the school principal. According to Mrs. Wilkes, she had just been made to sit through 40 minutes of being told how racist she was and how she didn’t
like black people. As a proud liberal who had purposely chose to teach in an urban, predominantly black school, Mrs. Wilkes – who is white – was outraged that anyone would ever accuse her of engaging in racial discrimination. After proclaiming that she was raised not to see color, Mrs. Wilkes surprised me when she looked me right in the eyes and flatly said, “I’m telling you, Mr. Bell, you’re so lucky you’re not white.”

Although initially confused and taken aback, very quickly my confusion turned into curiosity. I asked Mrs. Wilkes to elaborate further, and she did so by telling me that she, and many of the other white teachers in the school, felt that they were often mistreated and disrespected by the predominantly black student body, as well as their families. What is more, according to Mrs. Wilkes, the reason for this mistreatment and disrespect had nothing to do with them as individual teachers, but everything to do with the fact that they were white. That is, for these teachers, Capitol Heights was more than a school that primarily served poor black kids, it also served as a space where being white was a racial disadvantage. Conversely, in this setting, being black was a racial advantage, one that Mrs. Wilkes suggested was a factor in the overwhelmingly positive relationship that I had with black students and their families. I asked Mrs. Wilkes if she honestly believed she would be better off as a black teacher as opposed to a white teacher, and after a brief pause, she responded, “in this school, absolutely.”

**Whiteness Interrupted: From the Raceless Norm to the Racial Other**

In reflecting upon these stories, two things stand out. First, racial socialization, or racialization, is as powerful as it is pervasive, particularly in a society that is as racially segregated and racially stratified as the United States (Charles, 2003; Feagin, 2010; Logan, Stults, and Farley, 2004; Massey, 2007; Massey and Denton, 1993). Without explicit instruction from any of the adults in his life, Thomas – by age four – had already constructed, implicitly
accepted, whiteness as the default human category, as the raceless norm. By invoking and re-invoking “black Annie,” he has already engaged in the processes of discursively othering people of color, while simultaneously normalizing whiteness. This process is what sociologists Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin describe as children using racial and ethnic categories to define oneself and others (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001). For when Thomas looks at and understands Annie to be “black Annie,” he is doing far more than racially describing an actress playing a character in a movie, he is also describing himself, and other white people, as normal (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001).

Second, Mrs. Wilkes’ explicit reflection on, and discourse about, both, what it felt like to be white and the consequences of being white, is contrary to the idea of whiteness as the raceless norm (Dalton, 2008; Dyer, 2007; Frankenberg, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006; Wildman and Davis, 1997). If whites rarely think about what it means to be white, what accounts for Mrs. Wilkes’ articulation of whiteness as a disadvantage? For her, being white was more than a simple demographic classification and it certainly was not invisible. In fact, for Mrs. Wilkes, within a predominantly black school, whiteness did not function as the raceless norm, but instead functioned as the racial other. She was white and, from her vantage point, that fact alone, subjected her to racial discrimination. Thus, for Mrs. Wilkes – and according to her, many of the other white teachers at Capitol Heights – not only did whiteness become visible, but it did so in a way that bolstered their perception of white racial victimization.

When stepping back and taking a macro look at the racial context surrounding Thomas and Mrs. Wilkes, the former, with me being the lone exception, is virtually surrounded by white bodies, while the latter, at least within Capitol Heights, was surrounded by black bodies. Furthermore, the neighborhood where Thomas spends most of his time is over 90% white, while
the student population at Capitol Heights, then and now, is close to 100% black. This realization led me to question whether or not racialized space affects the way whiteness is perceived – or not perceived – by whites, and whether nonwhite racialized space interrupts those processes that would otherwise lead white people to see themselves as just normal. As I surveyed critical whiteness theory, it became increasingly clear that racialized space, or racial context, was an underutilized concept within the broader critical whiteness literature (Hartigan, 1999). Although, in a general sense, the United States is a white dominated and white normative space, there are specific physical spaces where whiteness, while still dominant, is not normative at all. One such space, as clearly articulated by Mrs. Wilkes, is the urban, predominantly black school.

**Whiteness, White People, and Racialized Space: A Brief note on Terminology**

Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to *whiteness* and *white people* on a fairly regular basis. Therefore, it is necessary to flesh out how they are both conceptualized within the broader critical whiteness literature. While the terms “white people” and “whiteness” are inextricably linked, they should not be used interchangeably (Hartigan, 1999; Lipsitz, 2006; Tuana and Sullivan, 2007; Yancy, 2008). At their most basic levels, one term refers to individuals while the other refers to a system. Those individuals that fall under the racial classification of white, are, in the eyes of most, deemed white people. Although people of color have been able to pass for white throughout most of American history, the point is that being considered white was, and is, synonymous with being accepted into the dominant racial group. That is, to be racially classified as white is to be a member of the racial majority, which, in turn, imbues one with a set of racial privileges, including the privilege of just being normal (Frankenberg, 2006; Kaufman, 2001; Lipsitz, 2006; McIntosh, 1988; McKinney, 2005; Rothenberg, 2008).
On the other hand, whiteness is a system. This system, built on the historical foundation of white racial domination and maintained through institutional racism and white privilege, is fundamentally distinct from white people. Said distinction is most pronounced when analyzing and assessing the impact of racial discrimination on the day to day functioning of the United States. While individual whites can be racially prejudiced and even act in racially discriminatory ways, whiteness, as a system, “is racial domination normalized” (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010, p. 37, original emphasis). In this sense, within a white identified and white supremacist society, the systematic domination of people of color seems normal, as opposed to being the result of unequal power relations (Bell, 1992; Feagin, 2010). As a result, institutional efforts to promote racial equality, such as affirmative action, are considered by many whites – and some people of color – to be a blatant example of reverse discrimination because it challenges the system of white racial domination (Bobo, Charles, Krysan, and Simmons, 2012; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Lipsitz, 2006; Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo, 2000; Steeth and Krysan, 1996).

Also, it should be noted that, as a system, whiteness is more than an individual racial identity and it represents more than a collection of whites (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997). Looking at the historical arc of race, racism, and racial inequality in the United States, whiteness has been the gold standard for what it means to be American (Gotanda, 1991; Hill, 2008; Feagin, 2010; Wise, 2007). Many social and political battles have been fought to protect whiteness from outside incursions, and akin to private property, whiteness has been granted the legal authority to exclude (Hale, 1999; Harris, 1993; Lopez, 2006). Many immigrant groups, including a number of those who are automatically taken as white today, had to effectively work towards whiteness, enduring vitriol and discrimination from the dominant group along the way (Jacobson, 1999; Painter, 2011; Roediger, 2006). In this sense, whiteness should not, indeed, it cannot be
conceptualized in the same way as blackness, brownness, etc. As the normative system of racial classification – the default category – whiteness is severely implicated in the maintenance and reproduction of institutional racism and white privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Leonardo, 2004).

Finally, racialized space needs to be deconstructed. Despite the fact that all space is racialized space, the very term “racialized space” can unwittingly reinforce whiteness as the invisible, raceless norm. If space is only racialized once it becomes occupied by people of color, then the implication is that whiteness – and thus, white space – is not racialized, it is just normal. As mentioned above, the de-racialization, or normalization, of whiteness is already too often the case. This particular research project, and my work in general, is meant to disrupt the process of white racial hegemony by making whiteness both visible and meaningful as a racial category. In order to contest, as oppose to reinforce, the process of white normality, I use the term “nonwhite racialized space” as much as possible throughout this dissertation. By specifically designating predominantly black schools and other black spaces as nonwhite racialized spaces, I hope to make clear that predominantly – and even exclusively – white spaces are also racialized spaces. Again, all space is racialized space. This includes those spaces that are devoid of people of color.

Still, even using the term “nonwhite racialized space” is not without specific problems. One such problem is that the term, itself, reinforces a white framing of society. That is, while it accurately identifies white space as racialized space, it also situates race and space firmly in the white imaginary. Do black students see their schools as black schools or just schools? What about black parents, are urban schools racialized from their perspective, or do they see them as normal? At this time, these are not questions that I can answer, though, by using the term “nonwhite racialized space” to describe schools with predominantly black student bodies, I make the implication that these particular schools are racialized from all perspectives. On the one hand,
such a process is unavoidable, as this project specifically interrogates whiteness from the vantage point of whites. On the other hand, however, this process is incredibly problematic because it centers the white racial imagination. Incorporating racialized space into the critical study of whiteness is theoretically and methodologically complicated, yet the specific limitations mentioned above should not obscure the impact that racialized space has on racial identity.

Statement of the Problem

How does immediate racial context affect the way that whites see themselves and understand their lives, racially? Put succinctly, how does racialized space affect white racial identity? Focusing on what John Hartigan Jr. calls the “localness of race,” I incorporate racialized space into the critical study of whiteness by focusing on whites that spend a significant amount of time in nonwhite racialized spaces (Hartigan, 1999, p. 13). Similar to Mrs. Wilkes, my research participants spend a considerable amount of time in spaces that, at least numerically, are dominated by black bodies. While scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum have shown that whiteness, in a general sense, is difficult for whites to see, few scholars have attempted to understand whiteness in geographically specific, nonwhite racialized spaces (Dalton, 2008; Dyer, 2008; Frankenberg, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006; McIntosh, 1988; Morrison, 1993; Yancy, 2008). Thus, even with the proliferation of critical whiteness studies in the last two-plus decades, very little is known about racialized space and its impact on whiteness and white people.

Too often, critical whiteness scholars speak of racial categories and racial experience in broad, generalized terms (Hartigan, 1999; Lewis, 2004). In this sense, whites are whites, blacks are blacks, Latinos are Latinos, so on and so forth. This pattern incorrectly paints a bio-deterministic, or essentialist, portrait of race that implies that all lives within any given racial group are the same. To the extent that demographic variation is examined within racialized
experience, it is typically done so along other prominent sociological classifications, such as class, gender, and increasingly ability and sexual orientation (Collins, 2002; Frankenberg, 1993; Newitz and Wray, 2013; Pattillo-McCoy, 2000; Wilson, 1987; Wray, 2006). While beneficial, even these studies generally fail to utilize racialized space as a meaningful concept. That is, the lived experiences of individual members of any given racial group may vary along the lines of class, gender, and sexual orientation, but in the existing literature, these lives seem to be lived out within a static, racially monolithic context (Hartigan, 1999; Lewis, 2004; McKinney, 2005).

Also, while making a significant contribution to the literature on racism and white privilege, critical whiteness scholars have largely failed to systematically examine the awareness and experiential nature of whiteness after it has been made visible to whites. What happens to whiteness once the veneer of normalcy is stripped away and its racialized dimensions laid bare? How do whites respond to being seen, being addressed, and from their perspective, being treated as white? Even though scholars have been especially adept at detailing the way whites conceptualize whiteness, generally, they have been less successful in examining how whites conceptualize whiteness after they have been recognized as white. By incorporating nonwhite, racialized space into the study of whiteness and white racial identity, this dissertation examines, both, the social construction whiteness in nonwhite spaces and the conceptualization of whiteness after is has been made visibly meaningful to whites themselves.

**Purpose of the Study**

In order to critically interrogate the effect(s) of nonwhite racialized space on whiteness and white racial identity, I utilize qualitative methods to study the daily experiences and discursive practices of white teachers that currently work in urban, predominantly black schools. Employing an inductive methodology, I conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 32
white teachers that currently work in a hyper-segregated, urban school district (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Using their own words as data, I demonstrate how white racial identity functions locally, and at times, differently from what would be expected based on the broader critical whiteness literature. Furthermore, all the teachers that participated in this study grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods, currently live in predominantly white neighborhoods, and have predominantly white social networks. As such, they are ideal research participants for this particular study (Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

By analyzing the racialized experiences of white teachers that work in predominantly black schools, I am able to compare the racialized experiences, racial ideologies, and discursive strategies used by whites while occupying majority status versus when they are occupying minority status. That is, I directly juxtapose how these white teachers think, feel, and talk about race in a broad, more general sense, with how they think, feel, and talk about race when situated in predominantly black schools. This alone, represents a significant departure from the existing research literature because, as mentioned above, many critical whiteness scholars depict whiteness as a static reality that is devoid of spatial variation. To the extent that variation is explored, again, it is typically done so in regards to socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation. Even in these accounts, however, racialized space is virtually ignored, as most of the acknowledged variation is attributed to classed and/or gendered dimensions of whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Isenberg, 2017; Newitz and Wray, 2013; Wray, 2006).

While the majority of my interview respondents were white females, I do include the racial experiences and racial discourse of white men as well. Furthermore, all of the teachers that participated in this study are from affluent socioeconomic backgrounds. Qualitative methods are not designed to render large scale generalizations about any given phenomena or any given
population (Creswell, 2013; Katz, 2001, 2002; Small, 2009; Williams, 2000), but I include this information to illustrate that, at least within this sample, gender made little difference in the way that white teachers experienced and expressed their whiteness within nonwhite racialized spaces. For white women and white men alike, their whiteness only became meaningfully visible once they began working in predominantly black schools. What is more, for both the men and women of this study, white visibility was routinely manifested in the form of white racial victimization. Thus, within predominantly black schools, space was the most salient factor in determining how white teachers experienced, interpreted, and made sense of their lives, racially.

Research Questions

In order to critically examine the impact of racialized space on whiteness and white racial identity, I use the following questions to guide my study:

*How do white teachers make meaning of their whiteness, and in what ways does this meaning change within urban, predominantly black schools?*

*What are the processes of racial socialization for white teachers working in predominantly black schools, and how do these processes affect racial identity formation?*

*How does nonwhite racialized space affect white racial ideology and white racial discourse?*

Site of the Study

*The Demographic Gap*

In 2014, for the first time in American history, the majority of public school students were nonwhite. Although white students still constituted the single largest bloc of public school students, collectively, the percentage of nonwhite students superseded that of white students. As a whole, slightly more than 50% of all public school students are now students of color. This new majority-minority status of public school students is not congruent with the racial (and gender) homogeneity of public school teachers. While a slight majority of all public school
students are nonwhite, over 80% of all public school teachers are white.\textsuperscript{6} In 24 states, the percentage of white public school teachers eclipses 90%, with 14 of those states surpassing 95%.\textsuperscript{7} According to a 2014 study by the Center for American Progress, a significant gap in the percentage of white teachers versus nonwhite students exists in almost every state in the country, and these “demographic gaps” are even larger within districts than those within states.\textsuperscript{8} Neither the trend of an increasingly nonwhite student body or that of a predominantly white teaching staff shows any signs of reversing (Johnson, 2002).

In tandem with the rapid re-segregation of public schools (Clotfelter, 2011; Denton, 1995; Kozol, 2006; Logan, Stowell, and Oakley, 2002; Orfield, 2001; Orfield and Eaton, 1997; Orfield, Frankenberg, and Lee, 2003), the demographic disparity between teachers and students has led to a number of schools in which the teaching staff is predominantly white, while the student body is predominantly nonwhite (Howard, 2006). The racial disparity between teachers and students in many public schools, along with increasing patterns of school segregation, ensures that a number of white teachers will spend a significant amount of time in what they interpret as nonwhite racialized spaces. Scholars have consistently shown that such racial disparities often lead to the overrepresentation of students of color in disciplinary trouble within urban schools (Ferguson, 2000; Gregory and Mosely, 2004; Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010). Yet, comparatively, less is known about how this emergent dynamic impacts white teachers. Specifically, we currently know very little about the effects of racialized space on white racial identity. My dissertation addresses this, and other shortcomings, directly.

**Central City School District**

I situate my study within Central City School District (CCSD),\textsuperscript{9} a severely impoverished, underperforming, and hyper-segregated school district in Upsate New York. CCSD has a student
body that is over 70% nonwhite. In fact, 53% of the students in CCSD identify as African American. Also, the pattern of housing segregation in Upstate New York – in 2010, for example, the Brookings Institution ranked Central City as one of the most segregated cities in the United States – has led to a similar pattern of school segregation. Together, housing and school segregation have left a number of CCSD schools predominantly black, predominantly Hispanic, or predominantly white. For example, there are several CCSD schools in which African Americans comprise more than 90 percent of the student population. Other schools, too, have upwards to 60, 70, and 80 percent African American student bodies. It is from these particular schools – with an African American student population of 60% or higher – that all of my interview respondents were chosen.

Looking at broader, macro-level patterns, Central City School District, as well as the surrounding city, has experienced rapid deindustrialization and depopulation over the past decade, a pattern of which, again, has led to deep patterns of racial and economic segregation. These larger city level patterns have resulted in numerous schools that are predominantly black and predominantly poor. Thus, many of the teachers that I interviewed for this study work in schools that experience high levels racial segregation and concentrated poverty. For many of my research participants, spending significant amounts of time in an impoverished space, interacting with impoverished people, was just as seldom and just as jarring as spending significant amounts of time in nonwhite spaces with nonwhite people. Still, while the effects of concentrated poverty on the social construction of whiteness is a topic worthy of investigation in its own right, the primary concern of this dissertation is how nonwhite racialized space affects white racial experience, or what Ruth Frankenberg once called “the racialness of white experience” (Frankenberg, 1993, P. 1). Given the specific gaps in the critical whiteness literature – and the
specific research questions I seek to answer – the Central City School District represents an ideal site for this study.

Racial Space vs. Racial Context

Physical space can come in many forms, sizes, and environments. Put simply, there are scales to space. So, in terms of scale, while homes are spaces, they pale in comparison to entire neighborhoods. Similarly, neighborhoods are not of the same scale as entire cities, states, or countries, all of which can, and often are, racialized. Take countries, for example. Countries in the European Union are broadly conceived as white, while those in Central and/or South America are broadly conceived as nonwhite. Furthermore, even if a particular country, as a whole, is racialized in a specific way, the country in question may still harbor specific spaces that are racialized in opposite or completely different ways. Since its inception, the United States of America has largely been conceived as a white country, yet, within the United States, you have urban barrios, urban ghettos, Chinatowns, and Native American reservations, all of which are associated with various nonwhite groups. With this in mind, it is important to think about scales of space, as well as the multitude of ways that physical space can be racialized.

Applying this mode of thinking to predominantly black schools allows me to differentiate between the physical space of the school, itself, and various spaces within the school. As I will detail in chapter four, without exception, the teachers I interviewed described their respective workplaces as “black schools.” These descriptions left zero ambiguity as to whether or not my interviewees saw their schools as racialized spaces. Still, within these “black schools” – these racialized spaces – there could be found those spaces that were not black. Owing to the overwhelmingly white teaching and administrative staffs at these particular schools, teachers’ lounges, for example, where not constructed as racialized spaces, even though they existed
within so-called “black schools.” Thus, while entire schools were described as racialized spaces, the vast majority of experiences detailed and discussed in the pages to come took place within individual classrooms. More than any other physical space, the classroom, teeming with back bodies, was conceptualized as a black, or otherwise, racialized space.

Even though they all worked in schools they considered to be black, and the schools, themselves, were located in neighborhoods they considered to be black, for the teachers I interviewed, the quintessential racialized space was their own classroom. While urban neighborhoods contextualized urban schools – and urban schools contextualized individual classes – the weight of nonwhite racialized space was most clearly felt when white teachers found themselves alone in majority black classrooms, filled with students who routinely looked at, and discussed, life through an explicitly racialized lens. That is, from the perspective of my interview respondents, the scale and scope of racialized space was not uniform across urban schools, up to and including the very neighborhoods in which urban schools are located. Thus, in the chapters ahead, even though I use “racial context” and “racial space” interchangeably, I want to be clear that individual racialized spaces – of varying scales – are part of the overall racial context, which is much broader than classrooms, schools, and even space, itself.

To this very point – on the broader dimensions of context – the Central City School District has and maintains an overwhelmingly white power structure. That is, while schools within this district have majority black student bodies, they also have predominantly white teaching and administrative staffs. Even though the former may be more numerous, the latter enjoys considerably more power, influence, and decision-making authority. Thus, despite the fact that my interview respondents conceptualized their respective schools as racialized spaces, the overall school context remains one in which whites, as opposed to nonwhites,
disproportionately occupy the top rungs of a status hierarchy. Therefore, each one of my interviewees works at a school where it is more likely that whites make the rules, whites set the curriculum, and whites ultimately decide who has the right to physically be in the school. So, while Central City schools may hold numerous nonwhite racialized spaces, they are part of a broader social context that, in terms of power and authority, remains dominated by whites.

**Brief Overview of the Dissertation**

The first three chapters of my dissertation consists of this introduction, a comprehensive literature review, and a breakdown of my research methodology and time in the field. I utilize chapters 1-3 to introduce and contextualize my study, explaining how – and why – I selected my research questions and summarizing the methods I used to answer them. The next three chapters, 4-6, are my data chapters. Chapter four, *Becoming White*, focuses on white racial awareness. I compare and contrast the way white teachers talk about whiteness inside and outside of predominantly black schools. I also introduce the concept of spatial socialization, a process that, for my interview respondents, interrupts the normality of whiteness. Chapter five, *The White Race Card*, analyzes the social construction of racial victimization. Here, I examine the way white teachers think about and discuss the significance, or insignificance, of racial discrimination in the contemporary United States. This chapter pays special attention to the spatially-specific and racially correlated variation in how white teachers construct the legitimacy of racial victimization. Chapter six, *Race-Conscious Whiteness*, takes the discursive and experiential contradictions from chapters four and five and examines them, directly. This chapter uses my interviewees’ own words in an attempt to reconcile the differences between stated racial ideologies and actual racial experience. The ways in which teachers make sense of these contradictions are also examined. Lastly, chapter seven concludes the dissertation by
summarizing my core findings, highlighting the limitations of the study, and suggesting possibilities for future research.

**Reflexive Statement**

It is not lost upon me that, as an African American, it may come across as somewhat peculiar for me to speak empirically about the racial experiences of whites. Neither is it lost upon me that, as a man, it might come across as somewhat paternalistic for me to speak empirically about the lived experiences of women. Lastly, as a black man, it is not lost upon me that there exists a complex, and at times, tortured history between African American men and white women in the United States. No matter how conscientious and reflexive one claims to be, there is no surefire methodological way for researchers to completely shield their own experiences and perspectives from the study of race, class, gender, or any other form of identity (Collins, 2002; DeVault, 1990; Fonow and Cook, 1991; Smith, 1987; Smith, 1999; Twine and Warren, 2000; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). For this study, each of my interview respondents were white, and the vast majority of them were women. The racial incongruity between myself and my interview respondents, as well as the gender incongruity between myself and most of my interview respondents, was more than noticeable to me, and on numerous occasions, was verbally expressed by the interviewees, themselves.10

These twin factors, each relevant in their own way, both shaped the way I conceptualized, approached, and ultimately, carried out this research project. Starting with research design and continuing through data collection and analysis, I never lost sight of the external and contextual dynamics that had the potential to unwittingly influence my decision making processes and interpretation of results. To be clear, I am not making the claim that, in some sort of bio-deterministic or essentialist fashion, we as human beings are beholden to our various racial or
gender classifications. It has long been established in the social and physical sciences that race and gender are social constructions, subject to change depending on place, time, and power relations (Butler, 1990; Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Gould, 1996; West and Zimmerman, 1987). What I am claiming, however, is that the way I and my interview respondents experience, interpret, and discuss racial and gender phenomena, to a large degree, is influenced by our social positioning within a stratified society.

When interviewing white teachers for this project, there were times when their words made me cringe. Permeated with racial stereotypes, at best, and racial vitriol, at worst, many of the statements made by these teachers were hostile to black people and their perception of black culture. For some, this hostility seemed to bubble just beneath the surface of their words, while for others, the prefixes “this might sound bad,” or “I have nothing against black people, but,” served as ominous precursors to a litany of racially insensitive, and downright racist, commentary about black students and their families. As someone that has experienced overt and covert racial discrimination first hand, there were several occasions where I found myself thinking, “this person should not be teaching black children.” The separation of my personal thoughts and feelings from my role as a researcher, while not always easy, was something I focused on and took great strides to maintain. Still, even as write these words, I cannot be 100% sure that I have been completely successful in this endeavor.

As my interviews proceeded, something unexpected happened. The complexities of race, racial identity, and racial discourse began to stand out in ways that were hard to make sense of, particularly given the anti-black sentiment that was expressed earlier in my respective interviews. Many of the teachers that made disparaging remarks about black students, later in the same interview spoke of black students with great fondness, empathy, and compassion. The same
teachers that made me cringe early in the interview, made me smile with their genuine concern and encouraging marks later in the interview. Though not always in the same order, or in response to the same questions, the presence of both racial animus and racial compassion could be found in nearly all of my interviews. In a very real sense, the teachers who participated in this study seemed conflicted, and at times, even confused about their own feelings towards, and their relationships with, the black students in their respective schools and respective classrooms.

Many of the statements and stories that you will read in the following pages can, and will, come across as racism. In some cases, this will undoubtedly be the case. In the majority of cases, however, these seemingly racist statements reflect real people trying to grapple with the day to day logistics of a difficult job, all while making sense of a racial identity that is experientially unfamiliar to them. Put differently, these words exemplify members of the dominant racial group desperately trying to restore, and get back to, a state of the racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2011; Omi and Winant, 1994). Similar to the meeting that caused Mrs. Wilkes to burst into my classroom at Capitol Heights, white teachers were often forced to confront their racial identity as a defense against charges of racism. Lashing out was but one of many defense mechanisms that white teachers used to shield themselves from racialized stress (DiAngelo, 2011). This is not to make excuses for teachers who hold onto or express racial stereotypes, but it is incredibly important to remember, just as I had to, that context matters. Put differently – and germane to this particular study – racial context matters. In the pages to follow, I aim to demonstrate exactly how it matters, and in the process, make a significant contribution to the existing critical whiteness literature.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

“To what extent has sociology influenced general conceptions of race, and to what extent has the field itself been shaped by racial meanings and racial conflict?”

Howard Winant, The Dark Side of the Force.¹¹

“Central to the meaning of whiteness is a broad, collective American silence.”

Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness.¹²

Introduction:

The United States of America was founded as a formal state of white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2010). From our founding fathers to our founding documents, it was legally established that, in order to be privy to the rights and amenities of American citizenship, one had to be racially classified as white (Glenn, 2002; Nash, 2010; Zinn, 2003). For example, the Naturalization Act of 1790 – one of the first laws ever passed by the United States Congress – specifically limited American Citizenship to “free white persons” of “good character” (Glenn, 2002; Haney-Lopez 1996; 2006; Zinn, 2003).¹³ Even though, or perhaps, because of, the residents of the newly minted United States included white indentured servants, African slaves, free blacks, Asian immigrants, white women, and Native Americans, lawmakers believed their most pressing need was to racially, economically, and sexually define the terms of citizenship (Glenn, 2002; Haney-Lopez; Loewen, 1995; Nash, 2010). Thus, from its very inception, the United States was conceived as a white country designed for the betterment and benefit of white people, specifically white men (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2010; Zinn, 2003).

Over the course of two-plus centuries, the United States grew from a nascent agricultural society to the most powerful nation in the world. For the vast majority of this timeframe,
America operated in an overtly white supremacist manner, doing so under the banners of freedom, equality, and “justice for all” (Allen, 2000; Baptist, 2014; Hochschild, 1995; Omi and Winant, 1994). The historical contradiction between American discourse and American practice, particularly as it pertains to race, has led to the systematic normalization of white superiority. That is, over the course of American history, white social, political, and economic domination has been normalized, constructed as the natural outcome of a meritocratic, free market process (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010). Since its founding in 1892, American sociology has been complicit in this reality, positioning white domination as normal and, at times, lending “scientific” credibility to white racial supremacy (Lander, 1973; McKee, 1993; Morris, 2007; Smith, 2012; Zuberi, 2003; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Thus, race, both in society and the academy, was a “problem” that was exclusively ascribed to people of color.

Sociology, as well as other social and physical sciences, were not immune to the broader culture of white supremacy, and thus, operated from the standpoint of white racelessness and nonwhite pathology (Gould, 1996; McKee, 1993; Morris, 2007; Winant, 2007; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). As such, the racial classification of white was, for the most part, beyond the realm of study or critique, while, conversely, nonwhites – including many European ethnic groups – were largely seen as a problem that needed to be solved. For the latter group, such a demarcation made them the constant subject of scholarly scrutiny and scientific inquiry (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Jacobson, 1999; Gould, 1996; Lander, 1973; McKee, 1993; Morris, 2007; Roediger, 2006). This led to decades of race scholarship that focused entirely on nonwhite groups, leaving the contours and complexities of racialized whiteness virtually unexplored. With rise and proliferation of critical whiteness studies in the 1980’s and 90’s, however, this decades long process began to change in fundamental ways (Winant, 2007).
In this chapter, I briefly map the history of sociological theorizing about race and ethnicity, including a discussion about the nearly ubiquitous focus on racial and ethnic minorities by early sociologists and other social scientists. Next, I review the relatively recent rise and development of critical whiteness studies. This includes sections on European ethnic assimilation, whiteness as the invisible norm, whiteness as a structural advantage, and whiteness as a racial standpoint. I also discuss the limitations of the existing critical whiteness literature. Later in the chapter, I review the literature on race and space, particularly focusing on the desegregation and re-segregation of public schools in the second half of the 20th century. By mapping the various processes that led to the double segregation of many inner-city communities, I show how certain physical spaces, such as the ghetto – or urban schools – for example, have epistemologically and experientially developed their own racial identity. I conclude the chapter with a brief review of all topics discussed.

Although each of the topics I cover in this chapter are, in their own way, relevant to this study, they are not equally salient, and thus, they receive unequal attention. That is, the review of some topics, such as white privilege, will be more complete and more comprehensive than other topics, such as the culture of poverty. Also, it should be noted that, due to spatial constraints, no section will include an exhaustive review of its primary subject matter. Still, from the rise and academic acceptance of critical whiteness studies to the epistemological racialization of physical space, each individual topic will be presented in a detailed and thoughtful manner, and its overall importance to this study will be made clear. Incorporating racialized space into the critical study of whiteness is a complex endeavor, one that necessarily draws from multiple disciplines. In this chapter, I present a literature review that takes said complexity into account and provides the proper context for the remaining chapters to come.
The Sociology of Race in America: A History of White Invisibility

Sociology has a long and distinguished history of applying the tools of the discipline to the study of race and ethnicity in America (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Omi and Winant, 1994; Winant, 2007). Although the American Sociological Society (now the American Sociological Association) was founded in 1905, in reality, people from numerous backgrounds have studied race and ethnicity going back to at least the 18th century (Calhoun, 2007). Ever since the first department of sociology was formally founded in 1892, sociologists have employed a multitude of theoretical paradigms and research methodologies to study, analyze, and report on the realities of race and ethnicity in the United States. This has led to over a century of racial theorizing about the nature of races and the causes of racial inequality. Unfortunately, for the overwhelming majority of this history, race scholars have reflected the broader epistemology of ignorance, treating whiteness as invisible and focusing almost exclusively on the racial and ethnic other (Alcoff, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Doane, 2003; Mills, 2007; Morris, 2007; Winant, 2007).

Race and Biology

Race, as it is commonly understood today, has not existed for most of human history. As Desmond and Emirbayer note, race “has a very recent origin; it obtained its modern meaning only in the late 1700s” (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010, p. 51). In the context of a rapidly expanding, global capitalist order, race was invented (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Du Bois, 1903; Zinn, 2003). Whereas European and African indentured servants, in addition to African and indigenous slaves, were initially the source of cheap and unfree labor, eventually, race was socially constructed in order to prevent a collective class consciousness from forming amongst the exploited masses (Feagin, 2010; Zinn, 2003). Thus, whiteness and non-whiteness – with
various European ethnicities in between – became the dominant paradigm through which human
difference was conceptualized (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Jacobson, 1999). Based on little
more than rudimentary phenotypical differences, racial variation was said to be rooted in nature,
rendering certain racial groups biologically superior, or inferior, to others (Smedley, 2007).
American society reflected this belief in all facets of life, including academia.

Sociologists writing about race in early twentieth century America often did so in
biological, and quite frankly, racist terms (Morris, 2007; Winant, 2007). As Aldon Morris writes,
“during the first two decades of the twentieth century, both the natural and social sciences made
explicit claims backed by ‘scientific proof’ that black people were biologically inferior” (Morris,
2007, p. 505). In regards to the “the founders of American sociology,” Morris notes that they
“accepted the view that blacks represented a lower species clearly inferior to whites” (Morris,
2007, p. 505). In this sense, sociology joined other social, natural, and pseudo sciences in lending
academic credibility to the idea that blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities constituted an
inferior form of human species (Gould, 1996). Different academic disciplines, from statistics to
biology, from criminology to the now discredited phrenology, all, reinforced the idea of
biological differences between races (Gould, 1996; Matthew and Desmond, 2010).

Well known philosophers going back to Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant,
Voltaire, and Montesquieu, all adhered to a biological view of racial hierarchy (Goldberg, 2002).
Prominent criminologists, such as Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri, and Charles Carrol, theorized
that some races were biologically born criminals (Carroll, 1900; Gibson, 1998; Lombroso,
1876).15 Carolus Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, devised a racial typology that dived human
beings into four distinct groups; Americanus, Asiaticus, Africanus, and Europeaeus (Smedley,
2007). Prominent statistician, Francis Galton, who believed that all human behavior was
hereditary, fathered and promoted eugenics, a movement that advocated for human evolution through selective breeding and forced sterilization (Gould, 1996; Lynn, 2001; Reilly, 1991). While there were numerous exceptions, “science authoritatively legitimated that which had been developing throughout Europe’s colonial conquests and America’s enslavement of Africans; the notion that nonwhite people were naturally inferior in nearly every conceivable way” (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010, p. 94; Montagu, 1964).

Operating from a standpoint that blacks and other nonwhite groups represented distinct, and inferior, human species, early sociologists treated racial inequality as something that could be explained by nature. Owing to biological differences, it was claimed that whites were superior in “corporeal form, intellectual capacity, and physical beauty” to nonwhites, especially blacks (Winant, 2007, p. 544). With white supremacy as their epistemological framework, the impetus for these early scholars was to study and learn as much as they could about the characteristics, defects, and overall life outcomes of racially inferior, abnormal groups (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Gould, 1996; Muhammad, 2011; Winant, 2007). In a somewhat dialectical relationship, the work of early race scholars was used to justify widespread discrimination against nonwhite groups, which, in large part, resulted in the very living conditions and life outcomes that were presented as scientific evidence of nonwhite biological inferiority (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Winant, 2007). Biological theories of race and ethnicity, or bio-determinism, did not go unchallenged.

Race and Social Structure

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries – as biological theories of race and ethnicity were still dominant – a cadre of social scientists began to push back on the idea that different races constituted distinct human species (Du Bois, 1899, 1903, 1935; Morris, 2017; Winant, 2007).
These scholars took a more critical approach to studying race and racial inequality, rejecting biological explanations of racial hierarchy. Instead, scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois, Jane Addams; Ernest Burgess, Robert E. Park, St. Claire Drake, Horace R. Clayton, Gunnar Myrdal, and Everett Hughes, to name but a few, looked at features of American society, including discrimination, poverty, and urbanization, as more viable explanations for the persistence of racial inequality (Addams, 1912; Duneier, Kasinitz, and Murphy, 2014; Drake and Clayton, 1945; Du Bois, 1899; Hughes, 1963; Myrdal, 1944; Park, Burgess, and McKenzie, 1925). In essence, it was argued, the way in which society was structured – providing rights and opportunities for some, while restricting them for others – was the root cause of racial inequality. Proponents of this view would marshal a mountain of empirical evidence to substantiate their respective claims (Winant, 2007).

For social structural theorists, in order to fully understand the complexities and contradictions of race in the United States, it was not enough to make simple, rudimentary comparisons between whites and blacks (Matthew and Desmond, 2010; Omi and Winant, 1994; Smedley, 2007). Basing theoretical conclusions about race and racial inequality on nothing more than life outcomes – particularly in an unequal and racially stratified society – for these new scholars, was premature and empirically baseless (Drake and Clayton, 1945; Du Bois, 1899; Goldberg, 2002). If one racial group was prioritized and supported, institutionally, it stood to reason that individual members of said racial group, on average, would be more successful and fare better than members of those racial groups who were targeted and/or ignored, institutionally (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Matthew and Desmond, 2010). The causes and consequences of racial inequality, according to this new line of thinking, could be found, not in biological assumptions, but in social structural conditions.
One of the first challenges to biological theories of racial variation was offered by W.E.B. DuBois in his pioneering study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). Du Bois, referred to by some as the father of American sociology (Anderson, 1996; Gabbidon, 2010; Morris, 2017), pointed to the social conditions faced by African Americans – such as the north Atlantic slave trade, poverty, unemployment, and racial discrimination – as an explanation for the overall positioning of African Americans in the American racial hierarchy (Anderson, 1996; Gabbidon, 2010; Du Bois, 1899). Du Bois fiercely rejected the predominant notion that blacks were biologically inferior to whites, and in doing so, forcefully introduced social structure into the study of race and racial inequality. According to Du Bois, black inferiority did not explain the social and economic condition of blacks, writ large, but rather, it was the social and economic conditions that explained the apparent inferiority of blacks (Du Bois, 1899; Morris, 2007).

Other scholars joined Du Bois in using social structure to reject the biological and genetic explanations of racial inequality. For the first half of the 20th century, the iconic Chicago School of sociology pioneered the urban ethnography, using immersion and direct observation to analyze the causes and consequences of urbanization (Bulmer, 1986; Deegan, 1988; Matthews, 1977; Ocejo, 2013). For multiple decades, the Chicago school dominated American sociology, producing hundreds of studies on African Americans and European immigrants, the latter of which, at that time, were not yet racially classified as white (Dunier, Kasinitz, and Murphy, 2014; Roediger, 2006). Similar to Du Bois, members of the Chicago school highlighted the various ways that social structure, and not biological inferiority, accounted for the living conditions and life outcomes of racial and ethnic minorities. While a necessary corrective to biological theories of racial difference, the introduction of social structure still, for the most part,
focused on the racial and ethnic other, all but ignoring the racially dominant group (Blumer, 1986; Deegan, 1988; Morris, 2007; Winant, 2007).

As the 20th century marched on, particularly after southern and eastern European immigrant groups successfully assimilated into the American majority, the academic focus on racial minorities only intensified. For those European immigrants who had previously faced ethnic discrimination, their successful transition to whiteness all but eliminated the stain and stigma of the ethnic other (Brodkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 1996; Jacobson, 1999; Roediger, 2006). Once the boundaries of ethnicity fell, non-whiteness, as it is commonly understood today, became the dominant prism through which scholars studied racial inequality in the United States. Although social structural theories of racial inequality – which by then had supplanted their biological predecessors – were dominant amongst sociologists, a new line of thinking would soon take the debate in new directions. Beginning in the 1960s, the culture of poverty, or some variation of its thesis, would play a central role in racial theorizing for the next 50 years.

The Culture of Poverty

Whereas biological and social structural theories were predominant for the first half of the 20th century, in the 1960s, the concept of culture was powerfully and persuasively introduced into the debate over racially inequality (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Harding, Lamont, and Small, 2010; Lewis, 1966; Moynihan, 1965; Small and Newman, 2001). While there has never been a consensus on how culture should be defined, there are, however, “(often) well defined concepts, such as frames or narratives, that in one way or another are recognizable as ‘cultural’” (Harding, Lamont, and Small, 2010, p. 8). Still, even ambiguously defined, the idea of culture as a meaningful factor in the maintenance and reproduction of racial inequality has remained salient for close to 50 years (Downey and Ainsworth-Darnell, 2002; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986;
Two studies in particular, both published in the 1960s, would set the stage for the, at times, contentious debates to come. The first, published in 1965, came to be known as The Moynihan Report, while the second, published a year later, firmly injected the culture of poverty thesis into the American lexicon.

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Assistant Secretary of Labor to the Johnson administration, issued his landmark study, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. More famously known as the Moynihan Report, Moynihan marshalled a litany of statistics that effectively argued that the legacy of slavery and segregation had, amongst other things, engendered a ghetto culture amongst black people that hindered their economic progress (Moynihan, 1965). One of the more prominent features of said culture, according to Moynihan, was the unique disregard for traditional (nuclear) family values, which was manifested in the dramatic rise of black, female-headed households (Moynihan, 1965). Moynihan argued that the abnormally high number of single parent households among black families, more so than white racism, was the primary reason that so many black people remained trapped in poverty. Although born of racialized slavery and overt racial oppression, the emergence of a ghetto culture among the black poor was the new, and more immediate, barrier to upward social mobility (Moynihan, 1965).

A year later, in 1966, the cultural anthropologist, Oscar Lewis, published *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty*. Building off his earlier work on culture and poverty (Lewis, 1959), Lewis immersed himself within a Puerto Rican family and migrated with them to and from New York City. In documenting the intimacies of their everyday lives, Lewis portrayed a family that had developed a specific cultural response – a culture of poverty – to the
sustained poverty they faced both in San Juan and New York (Lewis, 1966). This particular cultural response, while germane to surviving in the face of endemic poverty, was permeated with a set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices that were counterproductive to socioeconomic success. What is more, Lewis argued, the culture of poverty, and all of its negative consequences, would persist long after the structural conditions that created poverty had changed. That is, once adopted, the culture of poverty would keep families and communities poor, even after the barriers to upward social mobility had been removed (Lewis, 1966).

Although there were substantive differences between their respective theorizations, both Moynihan and Lewis conceptualized culture as something that developed in response to adverse material conditions and/or structural impediments (Lewis, 1966; Moynihan, 1965). Once developed, however, ghetto culture, or the culture of poverty, could – and often did – sustain itself outside of these conditions, preventing those who adhered to it from improving their lives, economically (Harding, Lamont, and Small, 2010). Speaking specifically about race, it was not biological determinism that held racial minorities back, it was their own values, beliefs, attitudes, and cultural practices that prevented upward social mobility (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 2008; Patterson, 2016; Steele, 1990). While, at times, pathological and self-defeating, the cultural practices of impoverished racial minorities were born out of very real structural inequities. With this being the case, however, it was the former, and not the latter, that was the more immediate hindrance to economic success (Harding, Lamont, and Small, 2010; Lewis, 1966; Moynihan, 1965; Ogbu, 2008). Thus, cultural explanations of racial inequality sought to challenge, or compliment, the biological and social structural theories that had previously dominated the field.

Giving the contentious and racially volatile nature of the 1960s, there was a fierce backlash to both the culture of poverty and the Moynihan Report (Jackson, 2007; Geary, 2015).
Although a full accounting of this backlash is beyond the scope of this project, the point I wish to emphasize is that the debate caused by Moynihan and Lewis shaped the research agenda on race, poverty, and culture for decades to come (Coates, 2015; Geary, 2015; Patterson, 2016; Wilson, 2009). For close to 50 years after their initial publications, scholars have debated the sociological merits and empirical validity of those claims made by Lewis and Moynihan, respectively (Berger and Simon, 1974; Bobo and Charles, 2009; Hannerz, 1969; Harding, Lamont, and Small, 2010; Valentine, 1968). Still, even as a multitude of social scientists debated the utility of culture in the study of race and racial inequality, their critical gaze stayed fixed upon the racial other (Winant, 2007). Similar to the biological and social structural theories of the early to mid-20th century, cultural theories of racial inequality were applied almost exclusively to racial minorities.

New Racisms and Racial Formation Theory

Although cultural, social structural, and to a much lesser extent, biological theories of race and racial inequality are still prominent (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Patterson, 2016), the last 50 years has seen a dramatic rise in new theoretical perspectives on race, racism, and racial inequality. These new perspectives include, but are not limited to, intuitional racism (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967), racial formation theory (Omi and Winant, 1994), systemic racism (Feagin 2006), symbolic racism (Kinder and Sears, 1981; Sears, 1988), modern racism (McConahay, 1986), silent racism (Trepagnier, 2011), colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Carr, 2001), Laissez-Faire racism (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith, 1997), aversive racism (Kovel, 1970; Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986), racial resentment (Kinder and Sanders, 1996), split labor market theory (Bonacich, 1972), everyday racism (Essed, 1991), social dominance theory (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999), and neighborhood effects (Sampson, 2013; Sharkey, 2013; Wilson, 1987). I describe several of these theories in greater detail next.
Since the early 1970s, a host of new theories about race and racial inequality – the new racisms – have sought to explain the persistence of racial inequality, particularly in the post-civil rights era (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2001; Brown et al., 2003). These theories traverse numerous social science disciplines, including sociology (split labor market theory, systemic racism), psychology (aversive racism, social dominance theory), social-psychology (everyday racism, laissez-faire racism, silent racism), and political science (symbolic racism, racial resentment). It is not my intention to define the theoretical tenets of each of these new racisms, nor do I intend to review the empirical evidence supporting, or refuting, their individual claims. I mention them here, however, because these new theories of racism were some of the first scientific attempts to sufficiently incorporate the actions and perspectives of whites into their respective theoretical frameworks. That is, they sought to explain the role that white people, in their collective thinking and behavior, played in the maintenance and reproduction of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Many of these new theories of race, racism, and racial inequality are still prominent today.

In 1986, sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, frustrated with what they termed the racial “reductionism” of most theories of race and racism, introduced what has become one of the more powerful theoretical models of race in America; racial formation theory. Racial formation theory, they posited, was a much needed corrective to the litany of race theory that had the unfortunate and misguided “tendency to reduce race to a mere manifestation of other supposedly more fundamental social and political relationships such as ethnicity or class” (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 2). According to Omi and Winant (1994), “most racial theory,” up to that point, failed “to capture the centrality of race in American politics and American life” (p. 2). They went on to note that the “inability to grasp the uniqueness of race, its historical flexibility
and immediacy in everyday experience and social conflict,” severely limited the ability of most race theory to fully understand and decompose the complex, and often “messy,” reality of race, racism, and racial inequality in the United States (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 2).

Omi and Winant (1994), defined racial formation theory as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 55). According to them, race was always historically situated, politically contested, and part of the larger racial ideology. Furthermore, by showing how race was central to American civic and political life, racial formation theory gave race theoretical primacy, equipped with its own logics, discourses, structures, and representations (Omi and Winant, 1994). Also, racial formation theory explicitly linked social structure and cultural representation together to form a broader, more expansive understanding of race. The “building blocks” of racial formation theory are racial projects, which were defined as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 56; original emphasis). Thus, racial projects stand at the heart of how race is understood and enacted in the United States, both historically and today (Omi and Winant, 1994).

Racial formation theory has been a staple in sociological research for close to 30 years (HoSang, LaBennett, and Pulido, 2012). Like the new racisms mentioned above, racial formation theory looked beyond the lived experiences and life outcomes of racial minorities, and instead sought to create an expansive theoretical paradigm that could better explain the complexities and historical salience of race in the United States (Omi and Winant, 1994; Winant, 2007). After a century on focusing primarily on the racial and ethnic other, race scholars, to varying degrees, finally started to incorporate white people and white agency into their theoretical and empirical
analysis (Doane, 2003; Kolchin, 2002; Twine and Gallagher, 2008). Still, shifting the critical
gaze to white people, was not necessarily the same as shifting the critical gaze to whiteness.
Beginning in the 1980s, a cadre of scholars, from a number of disciplinary backgrounds, began
placing whiteness at the center of their analysis. In the decades since, critical whiteness studies
have proliferated – both inside and outside of the academy – making not only white people, but
whiteness, itself, a focal point of racial analysis (Kolchin, 2002).

**Seeing White: The Rise and Development of Critical Whiteness Studies**

In 1993, the late Ruth Frankenberg wrote what was to become one of the foundational
readings in critical whiteness studies, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of
Whiteness*. Frankenberg noted that “‘whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are
usually unmarked and unnamed,” and that “it is crucial to look at the ‘racialness’ of white
experience” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). According to Frankenberg, up to that point, whiteness as
a racial category had been given a free pass, and thus, needed to be subjected to scholarly and
critical scrutiny (Frankenberg, 1993; Morrison, 1993). Similarly, Woody Doane (2003) notes
that the historical “downplaying of ‘whiteness’” has resulted in a “one-dimensional perspective
on race relations, a sociology that by its neglect of the identity of the dominant white group has
treated majority-minority relations as if were necessary to understand only one actor” (p. 4). In
this sense, both Frankenberg and Doane challenged their fellow race scholars to broaden their
critical gaze and abandon the nearly unilateral focus on nonwhites.

For over 30 years, scholars have taken up the call to study the “racialness” of whiteness,
effectively upending the study of racial inequality in the United States (Delgado and Stefancic,
1997; DiAngelo, 2011; Frankenberg, 1997; Kaufman, 2001; Leonardo, 2004; McIntosh, 1988;
Roediger, 1990). The last three decades has seen a proliferation of studies dedicated to the study
of whiteness (Anderson, 2003; Bodkin, 1998; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2012; Feagin, 2010; Frankenberg, 1993; Hale, 1998; Harris, 1992; Hartigan Jr., 2003; Hill, 1997; Ignatiev, 2008; Jacobson, 1998; Leonardo, 2004; Lewis, 2004; Lipsitz, 2006; McIntosh, 1989; McKinney, 2005; Morrison, 1992; Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, and Wray, 2001; Roediger, 1991, 1994, 2005; Wise, 2008; Wray, 2006). By explicitly making whiteness the center of their analysis, researchers from a number of disciplines – utilizing a number of research methodologies – have successfully shifted the theoretical and empirical focus from racially subordinate groups to the racially dominant group (Morrison, 1993).

There is no one academic discipline that can claim the mantle of critical whiteness studies. As mentioned above, scholars from the social sciences, the legal field, cultural studies, and the humanities have all produced works that interrogate whiteness in the United States and abroad. Beginning in the 1980’s, proliferating in the 1990’s, and continuing to this day, critical whiteness studies have reshaped the way many scholars think about, and analyze, race, racism, and racial inequality (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997). The success of critical whiteness studies comes with an important caveat: people of color have been engaging in the critical study of whiteness for over 100 years (Roediger, 2010). African American scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, James Baldwin, and Joyce Ladner, to name but a few, were critical of whiteness long before the field of critical whiteness studies gained recognition in the academy (Baldwin, 1965; DuBois, 1920; Ladner, 1973; Wells, 1893 ). The fact that CWS has only gained legitimacy in the last 30 years speaks to the domination of whiteness as an organizing principle, as well as to the epistemological erasure of white people as a meaningful racial category.

Still, the advent of critical whiteness studies has yielded a host of findings that have forcefully challenged the racial theorizing of the 19th and 20th centuries. As one sociologist put it,
“it’s probably safe to say that little of the pre-1960 sociological thinking on race and ethnic relations has gone unchallenged” (Doane, 2003, p. 4). Among their many findings, critical whiteness scholars have found that whiteness is largely constructed as the race-less norm (Dyer, 1997; Yancy, 2012), that whiteness is a form of structural privilege (McIntosh, 1988; Rothenberg, 2008), and that whiteness emanates from a particular standpoint, “a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society” (DiAngelo, 2010; DiAngelo and Allen, 2006; Frankenberg, 1993, P. 1). Scholars have also shown that white racial identity, today, is socially constructed from a pantheon of European ethnic identities, and how whiteness – akin to private property – has been granted the legal right to exclude (Harris, 1993; Jacobson, 1999; Lopez, 2006; Roediger, 2006). I decompose these and other findings next.

The Social Construction of Whiteness

Today, whiteness, like other forms of racial classification, is taken for granted (Allen, 1994; Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Frankenberg, 1997; Halley, Eshleman, and Vijaya, 2011; Lipsitz, 2006; McIntosh, 1989). For many Americans living in the contemporary United States, the idea that racial categorization is malleable – that it is something that changes over time – is one that is foreign or contrary to their understanding of the world. In this sense, white people are white people, they have always been white people, and they will always be white people (Allen, 1994). Put succinctly, whiteness, like race more broadly, is something that just is (Frankenberg, 1997). Of course, academics from both the physical and social sciences have challenged the idea of natural races, and have shown, empirically, how racial classification is the product of social, political, and economic forces corresponding to any given moment in any given time (Armelagos and Goodman, 1998; Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Fairbanks, 2015; Gould, 1996; Graves,
That is, race is a social construction (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Omi and Winant, 1994; Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, and Peck, 2007).

At different times and in different places, racial classification directly corresponds to broader social forces, including contemporaneous racial politics, economic environment, and accepted cultural mores (Bonacich, 1972; Feagin, 2012; Olzak, 1994; Omi and Winant, 1994). Thus, who is racially designated as white, and what it means to be white, varies across time and space. Racial formation theory – a sociological variant of social constructivism – is defined as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 55). According to racial formation theory, the boundaries of racial classification are always contested, as they are always connected to broader structures of power. Therefore, the temporal and spatial changes associated with racial classification are not linear and they do not follow a natural progression; they are born of conflict. (Omi and Winant, 1994).

Looking specifically at whiteness – the dominant racial category – the boundary of inclusion has not only been contested, but it has been legally protected, as well (Harris, 1993; Lopez, 2006; Roediger, 2006). While all racial classifications are social constructs, whiteness is unique because it is the archetypical construct, the standard by which all other racial groupings are judged, and more often than not, found lacking (Halley, Eshleman, and Vijaya, 2011; Wise, 2008). For centuries, many southern and eastern European immigrants, members of groups that are taken for granted as white today, were racially classified as the ethnic other, and as a result, faced their own form of discrimination (Rodiger, 2006). As ethnic minorities, the Irish, the Polish, the Italians, the Greeks, the Jews, and others, were treated as not quite white, effectively forcing them to earn their whiteness (Brodkin, 1998; Guglielmo, 2003; Ignatiev, 2008; Jacobson,
1999; Roediger, 2006). Doing so was not particularly easy because, as legal scholar Cheryl Harris notes, whiteness is imbued with property rights, among them being the legal right to exclude (Harris, 1993).

After decades of ethnic-based discrimination, southern and eastern European immigrants assimilated and eventually transitioned into the racial category of white. No longer considered *inbetween peoples* – less than white, but greater than nonwhite – these once despised immigrant groups successfully worked their way into whiteness, and were ultimately afforded the amenities, privileges, and investments associated with their new racial designation (Allen, 1994; Lipsitz, 2006; Painter, 2011; Roediger, 2006). Thus, even though various European immigrant groups faced ethnic discrimination for a significant portion of United States history, the discrimination in question first began to subside, then eventually faded into obscurity as white ethnics assimilated and became white people (Brodkin, 1998; Guglielmo, 2003; Ignatiev, 2008; Jacobson, 1999; Rodiger, 2006). Although ethnic heritage is still of great importance to millions of whites, today, the meaning assigned to white ethnicity, as well as its institutional treatment, has undergone significant changes over the last half of the 20th century.

The absorption and eventual inclusion of once despised European ethnic groups into the racial category of white demonstrates the fluidity of racial classification, and it also illuminates how social constructions are related to power (Omi and Winant, 1994). This is important because, while all racial categories are socially constructed, they are not socially constructed in the same way. As far back as colonial America, whiteness was constructed as something to work for, while non-whiteness was constructed as something to run from (Allen, 1994; Kendi, 2016). The juxtaposition of how whiteness and non-whiteness was, and is, socially constructed, has led to centuries of conflict and crisis in the United States. As one study concluded, “if people
understand race to be a real, fundamental, and biological fact of human life, the consequences for this thinking about race will shape our lives in multiple, profound, and very real ways” (Halley, Eshleman, and Vijaya, 2011, p. 56). In this sense, while race, itself, may be a biological fiction, the symbolic and material consequences of racial classification have affected millions of lives.

**Whiteness as the Raceless Norm**

Throughout the CWS literature, numerous studies have shown that, whereas non-whiteness embodies a certain way of being, whiteness, by comparison, is broadly conceptualized as regular, or just normal (Dalton, 2008; Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Dyer, 2008; Halley, Eshleman, and Vijaya, 2011; hooks, 1999; Kaufman, 2001; McIntosh, 1988; McKinney, 2005; Mills, 2003; Wildman and Davis, 1997). Demographically speaking, most whites are fully aware of the fact that they are indeed white, but beyond mere description, however, being so loses any racially specific meaning (Dalton, 2008; DiAngelo, 2012; Kaufman, 2001; Rothenberg, 2008). That is, as members of the racially dominant group, whites are socialized to view whiteness as little more than a physical characteristic, one devoid of any cultural or racially specific meaning (DiAngelo, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993; Irving, 2014; McKinney, 2005; Wildman and Davis, 2008). As Wildman and Davis note (2008), “Whites do not look at the world through the filter of racial awareness, even though whites are, of course, members of a race” (p. 317). Put simply, many whites are unaware of their lack of racial awareness.

The conceptualization of whiteness as the raceless norm – as opposed to a group-specific standpoint – has consequences beyond those for white racial awareness (Collins, 1997; Dyer, 2008; Harding, 1991, 2002; Lipsitz, 2006; Rothenberg, 2008). In the context of the racially diverse United States, this conceptual normalization renders white racial identity as race-less, or simply, American. Therefore, the term American, itself, is always already imbued with whiteness
as its epistemological framework (Hill, 2008; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007). Therefore, while in many ways invisible, whiteness is always implied (Yancy, 2008). It is implied in American discourse, it is implied in American culture, and it is implied in American institutions (Hale, 1998; Halley, Eshleman, and Vijaya, 2011; Hill, 2008; Leonardo, 2004). As a result, there is no need for a Congressional White Caucus or White History Month because whiteness is already implied in anything that is not explicitly racially designated as other (Wise, 2008). As the default racial category, whiteness does not need to speak his name (Dalton, 2008; Frankenberg, 1993; Irving, 2014; McIntosh, 1988; Wise, 2007).

Universalizing the uniqueness of whiteness, particularly within a white dominated society, grants whites with an ersatz form of ideological and racial purity, both of which, are not readily afforded to people of color (Jensen, 2005; Lipsitz, 2006; Leonardo, 2004; Wise, 2010). To this very point, Richard Dyer writes, “as long as race is something only applied to nonwhite peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as the human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (Dyer, 2008, p. 10). In other words, to be raceless in a racially stratified society, to position oneself outside of the classification of race in any real or meaningful way, is to render one’s identity pure, bereft of any racial predispositions or identity politics (Dyer, 2008; Lipsitz, 2006). Extracting racial meaning from whiteness gives it the veneer of objectivity, a posture that can not only engender a sense moral superiority in whites, themselves, but can also aid in the reproduction of colorblindness as the normative racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Sullivan, 2006; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007; Wise, 2010).

This latter process – the emergence of colorblindness as the normative ideology – leads to the erroneous conclusion that simply recognizing race is the same as racism itself (Brown et al., 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Carr, 1997). As such, it is often argued that racial inequality only
exists because of the continued, and wholly unnecessary, obsession with race on the part of people of color and their white allies (D’Souza, 1996; McWhorter, 2000; Steele, 1990; Sniderman and Piazza, 1995; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1999). Furthermore, studies have shown that a growing number of whites, including young whites, now believe that racial discrimination against whites is, at the very least, as big a problem as racial discrimination against nonwhites (Norton and Sommers, 2011; Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, and Sanchez-Burks, 2011). Looked at holistically, conceptualizing whiteness as the raceless norm limits white racial awareness, whitewashes white identity politics, and actively subverts contemporary movements for racial justice by appropriating and distorting civil rights discourse, particularly the discourse of colorblindness.19

Whiteness as a Structural Advantage

Sociologists Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer (2010) define white privilege as the “collection of unearned cultural, political, economic, and social advantages and privileges possessed by people of Anglo-European descent or those who pass as such” (p. 40). In her seminal article White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack, Peggy McIntosh (1989) remarked that “as a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (p. 30). For Allan G. Johnson, white privilege “grants the cultural authority to make judgments about others and to have those judgements stick. It allows people to define reality and to have prevailing definitions of reality fit their experience” (Johnson, 2005, p. 117). Often dubbed “the other side of racism,” white privilege is systematic, benefitting all whites, whether they want it or not (Kaufman, 2001; McIntosh, 1989; Rothenberg, 2008, p. 1).
Both a product and producer of white racial domination, white privilege is woven into the very fabric of American institutions (Brown, et al.; Kaufman, 2001). From public schools to political representation, from housing to healthcare, and from the labor market to the law, whites receive unearned advantages based on nothing more than being white (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2004; Lopez, 2006; McIntosh, 1989; Rothenberg, 2008). Over the course of several centuries, not only have these advantages accrued to the benefit of whites, but they have also been normalized, granting egalitarian legitimacy to policies and processes that are fundamentally unequal (Lipsitz, 2006). In this sense, white racial domination is often interpreted as natural, resulting from meritocratic outcomes, as opposed to racial oppression and racial advantage (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010). To this end, while it may be tempting to use white privilege and racial discrimination interchangeably, conceptually – and legally – speaking, this would be a mistake. As DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, and Post (2003) remind us, “discrimination is illegal, whereas favoritism is not” (p. 190).

In addition to operating at the institutional level, white privilege functions at the micro, or individual, level as well. One of the more consistent findings is that, in America, whites get to be individual people, as opposed to members of a racial group (Dalton, 2008; DiAngelo, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993; Kaufman, 2001; McIntosh, 1989; Wildman and Davis, 2015). That is, individual whites are not beholden to, or held accountable for, the words, actions, and beliefs of other whites the same way that individual people of color are beholden to, and held accountable for, the words, actions, and beliefs of other people of color (DiAngelo, 2012; Wise, 2008). For example, a common response to violent Muslim extremists is to subject the entire Muslim community to additional suspicion and criminal scrutiny. Conversely, however, a common response to violent white extremists is to scrutinize the personal characteristics of the individual
in question. In the latter example, rarely is the broader white community, or white culture, blamed, criticized, or criminalized for the individual actions of one of its members (Wise, 2008).

As a white dominated society, the United States is permeated with white privilege at both the institutional and individual levels. With that being said, it is important to remember that, for a number of reasons, white privilege does not affect all whites in the same way (Frankenberg, 1993; Hartigan, 2003; Lewis, 2004; Wray, 2006). For some whites, white privilege aids in economic success, while for others, the benefits accrued are more psychological in nature (Du Bois, 1935; Roediger, 1991). Also, the term white privilege is not meant to imply that all whites are automatically successful, or that those whites who are successful did not earn what they have. In fact, there are plenty of whites who face discrimination and hardships based on gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, and other demographic factors (Frankenberg, 1993; Hartigan, 1999; Lewis, 2004; Wray, 2006). Still, white privilege skews the playing field in favor of whites. It universalizes the particularity of whiteness and it legitimizes systems of oppression. What is more, even those whites who face discrimination along lines of class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., remain privileged relative to people of color from similar demographic backgrounds (DiAngelo, 2006; Hartigan, 1999; Wise, 2007).

Lastly, although white privilege is often conceptualized in a passive voice, described as something that benefits whites unsuspectingly, numerous scholars have examined the culpability of whites, themselves, in reproducing the existing racial hierarchy (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Foreman and Lewis, 2006; Hill, 2009; Leonardo, 2004; Myers, 2005; Trepagnier, 2006). For these scholars, white privilege is not something that happens by accident, but rather, it is actively reproduced by the discourse, actions, and non-actions of whites in the contemporary United States. As Zeus Leonardo (2004) writes, “the theme of privilege obscures
the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation is described almost as happening without the knowledge of whites” (p. 76). That is, far from being solely the result of past discrimination and contemporary race-neutral motivations, white privilege, as a form of structural advantage, is produced, reproduced and protected by the purposeful actions of many whites in the United States today (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Leonardo, 2004; Yancy, 2008).

**Whiteness as a Racial Standpoint**

Patricia Hill Collins (1997), writes “the notion of a standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences” (p. 375; original emphasis). She continues, “standpoint theory places less emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups than on the social conditions that construct such groups” (Collins, 1997, 375). Other scholars, too, have used standpoint theory to illustrate the myriad ways that groups, when occupying different strata within any particular hierarchy, have different standpoints from which they view, experience, and understand society (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1990). The accuracy of any given standpoint about any given site of inequality is directly related to structures of power, typically with dominant group members being unconscious of the lived realities and experiential perspectives of subordinate group members (Collins, 1997). Therefore, whiteness, as the dominant racial category, sits atop the racial hierarchy and carries with it certain blind-spots about the nature of race, racism, and racial inequality in the United States (Alcoff, 2007; Feagin, 2010; Mills, 2007).

When observing and analyzing issues of race and racism, the white vantage point has consistently been one from an experiential and epistemological distance (Alcoff and Sullivan, 2007; Mills, 2007; Rothenberg, 2008). Speaking racially, this distance is largely due to social positioning (Kaufman, 2001; King, 1991; Jensen, 2005). Whites, once formally accepted as
white (Jacobson, 1999; Roediger, 2006), have both, historically and contemporaneously, enjoyed a view of society firmly perched atop the tower of racial privilege (McIntosh, 1989; Rothenberg, 2008). As such, their observational vantage point has been systematically blurred by normative, ethnocentric blinders that are unique to them as members of the dominant racial group. As Peggy McIntosh succinctly puts it, “whites are carefully taught not to recognize privilege” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 291). The epistemological and experiential blind-spots associated with the white racial standpoint encapsulates what Charles Mills, and others, refer to as white ignorance (Alcoff, 2007; Applebaum, 2010; Mills, 2007; Ortega, 2006),

White ignorance has been theorized in several different ways. For philosopher Charles Mills, white ignorance is different from ignorance in general because the former is caused by race, or racial positioning, while the latter is merely a general lack of knowledge (Mills, 2007). He writes, “at all times (such as right now) there will be many facts about the natural and social worlds in which many people, including white people, have no opinion or a mistaken opinion…but we will not want to call this white ignorance, even when it is shared by whites, because race has not been responsible for these non-knowings, but other factors” (pp. 20, 21). In this sense, white ignorance is not due to the inability or lack of opportunity to learn about any given racial phenomenon, but rather, is due to the particular – and privileged – standpoint that emanates from the dominant racial position. What is more, according to Mills, due to its hegemonic status, white ignorance can, and often does, transcend white bodies, and is propagated by people of color as well (Mills, 2007).

For Linda Alcoff, white ignorance is more active. She writes, “[t]he problem is not explainable by a lack of access to resources for knowledge and information, nor is it a problem that decreases with the advantages of class. It is, or appears to be, a willful ignorance” (Alcoff,
That is, whites who remain ignorant to racism and racial inequality are making an active decision to not learn about, or even be remotely conscious of, the existence of either (Alcoff, 2007). Also, Alcoff highlights the myriad ways that members of the dominant racial group benefit from institutional racism, therefore maintaining a vested interest in seeing the world wrongly. Accordingly, white ignorance cannot be looked at with the same innocuousness, or innocence, as other types of ignorance because the very people who are most responsible for its perpetuation – whites – are direct beneficiaries of its continued existence (Alcoff, 2007). Far from being conspiratorial, Alcoff simply questions any passive explanation as to why so many whites fail to appreciate or acknowledge the reality of racism and racial inequality in the United States, both historically and today (Alcoff, 2007).

Other conceptualizations of white ignorance emphasize the way that it enables, and is enabled by, white privilege. Critical whiteness scholar, Barbara Applebaum, highlights two manifestations of white privilege: 1) systemic white ignorance and 2) white denials of complicity. She writes, “white ignorance will feel like knowledge to those who benefit from the system because it is supported by the social system as knowledge” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 35). That is, for whites, their particular understanding of society, no matter how divorced from the historical and contemporary reality, will be generalized as universal because it comports with the “facts” of the larger social system (Applebaum, 2010). In her critically acclaimed book, Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege (2006), Philosopher Shannon Sullivan talks about ignorance as a habit, and something that is unconsciously produced by white privilege. She writes, “Subconscious habits of white privilege can explain both how white domination is enacted ‘without thinking’ and how a person can be ignorant of her participation in
white ignorance. But the privilege in question is merely accidental” (pp. 43). In both of these versions, white ignorance is intimately connected to white privilege.

Whether willful or accidental, intentional or unintentional, white ignorance – along with the multitude of material consequences that accompany it – stems from the white racial view of society (Alcoff, 2007; Applebaum, 2010; Mills, 2007; Ortega, 2006; Sullivan, 2006). Sitting comfortably atop the tower of racial domination, the white racial standpoint is hegemonic, often presented as an objective barometer of racial dynamics, as opposed to nonwhite standpoints which are allegedly permeated with identity politics and racial predispositions (Collins, 1997; Harding, 2004; Lipsitz, 2006; Lott, 2001; Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, and Wray, 2001; Smith, 1990). Far from being an essentialist or bio-deterministic byproduct of white skin, white ignorance is a product of the power, privilege, and perspective that can, and often does, accompany whiteness in a white dominated society (Feagin, 2010; Frankenberg, 1993; McIntosh, 1989; Wise; 2008). As members of the racially dominant group, whites occupy a unique space in American life, one that directly impacts their view of themselves and the society around them.

Limits of Critical Whiteness Theory

Although the emergence and expansion of critical whiteness studies over the past 30 years has – contrary to the prior century of racial theorizing – led to the interrogation of whiteness and white racial identity, there still remains several limitations in the field as a whole (Andersen, 2003; Arnesen, 2001; Croll, 2007; Doane, 2003; Kolchin, 2002; Lewis, 2004). First, critical whiteness studies, at times, fails to adequately take demographic variation amongst white people, themselves, into account (Hartigan, 1999; Lewis, 2004; Wray, 2006). That is, a great number of scholars have used “whiteness” as a blanket term, flattening the very real experiential differences based on gender, class, education, geography, age, and sexual orientation. This poses
serious theoretical problems because masking intra-racial variation amongst whites can present a false and/or incomplete picture of whiteness and how it is manifested in the lived experiences of individual white people (Lewis, 2004; McDermott, 2006; Weber, 2001). As Amanda Lewis cautions, “scholars studying whites as racial actors” must figure out a way to do so without “essentializing race when talking about whites as a social collective” (Lewis, 2004, p. 640).

Second, with the exception of social-psychologists, not enough critical whiteness scholars have studied the contours and complexities of whiteness, quantitatively (Croll, 2007; Helms, 1997). Since its emergence as a viable field of study in the late eighties and early nineties, critical whiteness studies has largely relied on qualitative, historical, philosophical, literary, and legal studies (Best, 2003; Burke, 2012; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003; DuRocher, 2011; Frankenberg, 1993; Mills, 1997; Morrison, 1993; Rodiger, 1991; Lopez, 2006; Yancy, 2012). Comparatively, relatively few scholars have employed quantitative methods when studying whiteness (Croll, 2007; Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll, 2009; Helms, 1994; Helms and Carer, 1990; McDermott and Samson, 2005; Tolkerson and Hartmann, 2010). Although shifting demographics are rapidly changing the racial makeup of the country, whites still constitute the largest racial category in the United States. This will remain the case for decades to come. As such, until there is a robust quantitative literature on the dynamics of white racial identity and white racial experience, many of the conclusions reached by critical whiteness scholars – at least in terms of generalizability – will be limited in scope (Croll, 2007).

Third, far too many critical whiteness scholars produce work that unnecessarily separates white racial identity and white racial experience from white structures of power (Andersen, 2003; Bush, 2004; Doane, 2003; Lewis, 2004). Variously defined, whiteness – particularly in the United States – does not exist in a race-neutral vacuum, but rather, it exists in within a highly
racialized society marred by white racial domination (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2006; Omi and Winant, 1994). As Margaret Andersen notes, “one of the oddest things about whiteness literature is that most authors state that they situate their work in the analysis of privilege, but in most of this writing, there is hardly any mention of white racism, global capitalism, split labor markets, residential segregation, school tracking, and so forth” (Andersen, 2003; p. 28). She continues, “in the end, whiteness studies tells us little about the process of racial subordination, focusing instead primarily on white identity” (Andersen, 2003, pp. 28-29). Thus, critical whiteness studies needs to do a much better job detailing the white supremacist structures, institutions, and processes that contextualize white racial identity (DiAngelo, 2012).

Finally, as mentioned previously, critical whiteness studies has, to date, not sufficiently interrogated the salience and significance of racial context. That is, relatively little is known about the effect of racialized space on white racial identity and white racial experience. While there have been numerous studies – though, not nearly enough – that have paid theoretical and empirical attention to the gendered, classed, and ethnic variation within white racial identity, seldom have scholars explicitly examined the way whiteness is experienced, understood, and affected by nonwhite racialized space (Andersen, 2003; Brodkin, 1998; Frankenberg, 1993; Ignatiev, 1995; Jacobson, 1999; Kenny, 2000; Roediger, 2006; Wray, 2006). This particular shortcoming has led to a contextual overgeneralization in which whiteness, while demographically different, is spatially the same. To date, how racial space affects the experiential and discursive construction of whiteness, particularly by whites themselves, has received relatively little attention by critical whiteness scholars (Hartigan, 1999; McKinney, 2005; Perry, 2004). While my dissertation may suffer from many of the shortcomings mentioned above, it is particularly well suited to examine the intersection of whiteness and racialized space.
Despite its limitations (Andersen, 2003; Arnesen, 2001; Croll, 2007; Doane, 2003; Kolchin, 2002; Lewis, 2004), the field of critical whiteness studies has successfully, and forcefully, brought whiteness and white people into conceptual, theoretical, and empirical focus. Whether emanating from the social sciences or the humanities, from education or the legal field, critical whiteness scholarship has successfully shifted the “critical gaze” from racial minorities to the racial majority (1994; Doane and Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Hale, 1998; Harris, 1993; Hill, 2008; Leonardo, 2009; Lopez, 2006; Marx, 2004; Morrison, 1993; Perry, 2004; Picowear, 2009; Rodiger, 2006; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). To be clear, sociologists and other race scholars still routinely produce scholarship on racial minorities, but unlike that of centuries past, research today explicitly and intentionally investigates whiteness as a meaningful racial category as well (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Winant, 2007). In taking up the “racialness of white experience,” critical whiteness studies, despite its flaws, has taken the study of race, racism, and racial inequality in new and more innovative directions (Alcoff, 2015; Frankenberg, 1993, p.1; Kolchin, 2002; Leonardo, 2002; Twine and Gallagher, 2008; Winant, 2004).

Urban Education: The Making of a Nonwhite Space

George Lipsitz, writes, “opportunities in this society are both racialized and spatialized” (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 12). He continues, “the lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension” and that “the interconnections among race, place, and power in the United States have a long history” (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 12). In this sense, history does not happen in the abstract, it does not take place in a vacuum. History, and all of the consequences of history, actually takes place within physical space (Lipsitz, 2007, 2011). As a result, physical spaces, themselves – owing to people, processes, and power – can, over the long arc of history, become racialized (Anderson, 2012; Lipsitz, 2007; Mills, 1997). The barrio for
brown folks and the *ghetto* for black folks, for example, both attest to the racialization of physical space, as these terms, alone, routinely conjure images of specific, and often stereotypical, racial groups (Anderson, 2012; Lipsitz, 2007; Mills, 1997). Other scholars, too, have theorized about the racialization of space.

In his seminal book, *The Racial Contract*, philosopher and critical whiteness scholar, Charles Mills, writes, “the norming of space is partially done in terms the *racing* of space, the depiction of space as dominated by individuals (whether persons or subpersons) of a certain race” (Mills, 1997, pp. 41-42; original emphasis). He continues, “non-European space,” or racialized space, is “demonized in a way that implies the need for Europeanization if moral redemption is to be possible” (Mills, 1997, p. 46). In the context of the United States, “Europeanization” becomes “Americanization,” both of which, are synonymous with hegemonic whiteness (Mills, 1997). According to the racial contract, in the white imagination, certain racialized spaces – such as urban ghettos – are also problematized spaces, and thus, need to be solved or, at the very least, controlled. Such racialized and problematic spaces, it is argued, stand to benefit from (white) acculturation, and thus, requires actual white people to enter and interact with them in non-trivial ways (Mills, 1997).

Sociologists Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer (2010) write, “one of the most pernicious images of America is that the country is white” (p. 202). The conceptualization of America as a white country goes beyond symbolism, and it even goes beyond numeracy. The United States, after all, is a physical space, one subject to socially constructed geo-political borders (Lipsitz, 2011). As such, racial power, racial domination, and racial demography all are intimately connected with land, with actual physical space (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Lipsitz, 2011). If America is white, then the physical space that comprises America is a white
space, meaning that it belongs to white people. Given the racial and ethnic heterogeneity of the United States, however, white space – or that which is broadly conceived as white space – has been, and in many ways, continues to be, subject to constant challenge and protestation (Charles, 2003; Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Freund, 2010; Hirsch, 1998; Jargowsky, 1997; Kruse, 2007; Krysan, 2002; Massey and Denton, 1993; Meyer, 2001; Orser, 1997; Pietila, 2010; Satter, 2010; Surgue, 2005; Yinger, 1995).

The importance of space in American society cannot be overstated (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010, Meyer, 2001). Where one lives, where one works, what schools are available, indeed, where one is allowed to physically be, have all been the subject of racialized conflict in the United States going back centuries (Mills, 1997). Space, in the form of houses, neighborhoods, schools, parks, swimming pools, public transit, jails, movie theaters, cemeteries, and perhaps most famously, water fountains, has been racialized for the greater part of American history (Lipsitz, 2011). Furthermore, racial space, particularly that which has been designated as white space, has been enforced and defended with the force and finality of law. That is, in years past, unauthorized incursions by nonwhites into white space were far more than a mere disregard for spatial norms, but rather, they were, in fact, violations of the law (Anderson, 2015). This type of “criminal activity” was subject to formal and informal punishment, ranging from long prison sentences to actual physical violence (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010).

Education in the United States cannot be separated from the white supremacist context in which it was born (Adams, 1995; Anderson, 1988; Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Kaestle, 2011; Span, 2009; Watkins, 2001). American schools were founded for the enrichment and enlightenment of white males, and, as such, were originally conceived of as white spaces (Anderson, 2015; Leonardo, 2009). From school teachers to school curriculum, from school
policy to schools, themselves, race was central to the founding of education, and just as was the case throughout the broader society, whites – or a subset of whites – were the primary beneficiaries (Leonardo and Grubb, 2014). The white supremacist roots of education led to over a century of economic, political, and legal battles that were fought to determine who has access to schools, both in terms of education and the physical spaces, themselves (Anderson, 2010; Bell, 2005; Delmont, 2016; Kozol, 2005; Goldstein, 2014; Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Ogletree, 2004; Patterson, 2002; Shedd, 2015). While progress has been slow and incredibly unsteady, the conflict, itself, has linked race and place to schooling in indelible and seemingly endemic ways. 

Public schools, and more specifically, urban schools, are increasingly being associated with students of color (Pollack, 2013; Watson, 2012). Although 2014 marked the first time in American history that nonwhite students comprised a majority of public school students – a process that is projected to continue well into the future – the minoritization of urban education has been an ongoing process spanning the last half of the 20th century (Boger and Orfield, 2005; Chemerinsky, 2002; Tatum, 2007; Watson, 2011). Following the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, whites began employing a series of tactics to reinforce the color-line and protect racial segregation in public schools (Fairlie and Resch, 2002; Lassiter and Lewis, 1998; Leidholdt, 1997; Rossell, 1975; Taeuber and James, 1982). In order to defend public education as a white space, school districts took extraordinary measures, up to and including the closing public schools altogether (Delmont, 2016; Lassiter and Lewis, 1998; Lewis, 2006; Webb, 2005). This, in conjunction with other political and structural changes, led to adage chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs (Farley et al., 1978).

Following an initial period of massive resistance, the late 1960’s and parts of the 1970’s saw very real progress made towards school desegregation (Boger and Orfield, 2005; Clotfelter,
2011). As Hochschild and Scovronick (2003) note, school desegregation efforts “started slowly, but eventually transformed education throughout the south and in northern districts” (p. 36). That is, despite a widespread and multifaceted effort on the part of whites to maintain racial segregation in public schools – to preserve the white space – eventually, the weight of legal challenges, the momentum of the civil rights movement, and to a lesser degree, the liberalization of white racial attitudes combined to defeat this effort, leading to actual school desegregation (Clotfelter, 2011; Firebaugh, 1988; Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003). As Jim Crow came crashing down, schools all across the country, but particularly in the south, saw real and significant racial integration in public schools. Unfortunately, the years and decades since saw a fierce white backlash, which, in large part, led to a pattern of school re-segregation (Kozol, 2005; Ogletree, 2004; Orfield, 2001; Orfield and Eaton, 1996).

After a period of substantial and sustained racial integration in public schools, a series of factors led to their eventual re-segregation, a pattern that is still prevalent today (Delpit, 2006; Henderson and Brown, 2016; Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003; Kozol, 2005; Orfield and Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, and Lee, 2003; Tatum, 2008). One, was the white backlash mentioned above. Said backlash came in multiple forms, including the erection and expansion of racially segregated private schools, white flight from racially diverse central cities to racially homogenous surrounding suburbs, and a vocal, vicious, and at times, violent response to compulsory busing (Bobo, 1983; Delmont, 2016; Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003; Kruse, 2007; Lord, 1975; Sears, Hensler, and Speer, 1979; Taeuber and James, 1982). From former Jim Crow states, such as Virginia, Mississippi, and Alabama, to northern, ostensibly more tolerant states, such as Michigan and Massachusetts, whites engaged in hundreds of protests to compulsory busing, which came to symbolize integration efforts as a whole (Delmont, 2016).
Next, there was the conservative turn in American politics and the rise of the new right. With the success of the southern strategy, millions of formerly democratic voters shifted to the Republican Party, while, at the same time, the Democratic Party lost much of its political will to continue the fight for civil rights (Erickson, 2016; Feagin, 2012; Ferguson and Rodgers, 1987; Lopez, 2015; Steinberg, 2001).

Next, you had the success of desegregation efforts, themselves, which did usher in real and authentic school integration (Clotfelter, 2011; Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003; Orfield and Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, and Lee, 2003). The rise of integrated schools unnerved many whites across the country who, by and large, still objected to federal desegregation efforts. As black students became commonplace in formally all white schools, public support for civil rights sharply declined as whites – and some people of color – considered integration to be, at best, a failure, and, at worst, actively hurting their children (Erickson, 2016). Another response to successful desegregation efforts was the burgeoning train of thought that considered school integration to be an accomplished goal (Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003; Tatum, 2008). The notion that school integration had been achieved all but negated the need for federal enforcement of desegregation orders. Once states were relived of federal oversight, many of them, almost immediately, engaged in a process of school re-segregation that continues to this day (Clotfelter, 2011; Kozol, 2005; Orfield and Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Frankenberg, and Lee, 2003).

Other factors, too, contributed to contemporary school segregation and the concomitant conceptualization of urban schools as a nonwhite space. Over the course of the last 40 years, the United States Supreme Court issued a number of rulings that inculcated, and according to some analysis, accelerated re-segregation in public schools (Baugh, 2011; Sugrue, 2005). Two cases stand out. The first, *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), ruled that compulsory busing across district lines
was not permissible if it could not be proven that specific school districts actively engaged in racial segregation. That is, if racial segregation in a particular school district occurred “naturally,” as a result of the race-neutral decisions of parents and families, then the school district in question could not be subjected to busing or any other forced desegregation efforts. The *Milliken* decision was groundbreaking because, in the wake of the collapse of Jim Crow, or *de jure* segregation, it legally enshrined the legitimacy of *de facto* segregation, which is commonplace in the contemporary United States (Amaker, 1974; Baugh, 2011; Logan, Oakley, and Stowell, 2008; Sugrue, 2005).

The second case, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007), was argued over 30 years after *Milliken* and considered the constitutionality of voluntary desegregation efforts. *Parents Involved* consolidated two cases, one from Louisville, KY, and the other from Seattle, WA. At issue in *Parents Involved* was whether individual school districts could voluntarily use racial classification in student assignments in order to increase diversity and avoid racial isolation. In a rare 4-1-4 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that racial classification could be used, but only if it was “narrowly tailored” to “compelling state interests.” In this particular case, the state interests in question were increased diversity and decreased racial isolation. Ultimately, the voluntarily desegregation plans in Louisville and Seattle were struck down as insufficiently narrowly tailored to compelling state interests. Thus, the ruling in *Parents Involved* was a decision that set a difficult standard and erected a high bar for desegregation efforts, even those that are voluntary (Erickson, 2016; Fischbach, Rhee, and Cacace, 2008).

The *Milliken* and *Parents Involved* decisions – argued over 30 years apart – addressed involuntary and voluntary desegregation plans, respectively, both having a significant impact on the re-segregation of public schools (Delmont, 2016; Powell and Spencer, 2003; Tatum, 2008).
Though not the only Supreme Court decisions to consider the role of race in education,\textsuperscript{21} the aforementioned cases were highly consequential in determining which type of desegregation efforts were constitutional and which ones were not (Erickson, 2016). In doing so, the Supreme Court not only legitimated the validity of, and provided constitutional backing for, \textit{de facto} school segregation, but it also set an incredibly high legal standard for challenging segregation, particularly absent any evidence of intentional discrimination. Thus, in the contemporary United States, school segregation, no matter how extensive or widespread, is legally permissible when it is considered to be the result of “naturally” occurring phenomena, such as parental choice and/or neighborhood composition (Bonilla- Silva, 2006; Denton, 1995; Frankenberg and Orfield, 2012; Kozol, 2005; Leonardo and Grubb, 2014; Logan, Minca, and Adar, 2012).

Finally, school re-segregation and the deepening of white versus nonwhite racialized space was exacerbated by economic change. Contextualizing school desegregation efforts, white racial backlash, actual integration, and federal litigation, was a deindustrializing and rapidly changing economy (Wilson, 1978). Factory jobs that had characterized much of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century disappeared, only to be replaced by lower-paying service or retail positions (Jargowsky, 1997; Wilson, 1996). As manufacturing jobs left urban centers, affluent and upwardly mobile African Americans did so, as well, combining with the aforementioned white flight to produce many racially \textit{and} economically segregated inner city communities (Charles, 2003; Massey and Denton, 1993; Sharkey, 2013; Sugrue, 2005; Wilson, 1987). As these neighborhoods deteriorated and social problems, such as poverty, joblessness, and crime rose sharply, a new term – \textit{the urban underclass} – became a fixture in the American lexicon, both inside and outside of academia (Jencks and Peterson, 2001; Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987). As a result, urban schools developed a negative reputation, stereotyped as drop-out factories teeming with
black students and families who disregard, or even actively resist, educational achievement (Carter, 2005; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Fryer, 2006; Harris, 2011; Gibson and Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1978).

Many other factors, including social policy, immigration, demographic changes, neighborhood composition, and the rise of charter schools – to name but a few – also contributed to school re-segregation in the post-civil rights era (Clotfelter, 2011; Denton, 1995; Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003; Logan, Oakley, and Stowell, 2008; Reardon and Owens, 2014; Tatum, 2008). While such a detailed exposition of these processes is beyond the scope of this project, I mention them here because they all played important roles in racialization of urban schools. Now, over 60 years since the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision, racial segregation in public schools has increased significantly (Frankenberg and Orfield, 2012; Henderson and Brown, 2016). Unlike that of decades past, however, school segregation today is largely the result of de facto processes, and it intersects with, and is compounded by, economic isolation (Logan, Oakley, and Stowell, 2008; Wilson, 1987). Thus, the combination of racial segregation and concentrated poverty has powerfully reinforced the racialization of space, and since the late 70’s and early 80’s, the white spatial imaginary has broadly conceptualized urban schools as both racialized and problematized spaces (Lipsitz, 2011; Mills, 1997).

Conclusion

In the United States of America, there is a long and distinguished history of sociologists and other social scientists using the tools of empirical research to study and analyze the contours, complexities, and constraints of race and ethnicity. Unfortunately, this history has also been a troubled one, as science has both reflected and reinforced the white supremacist racial hierarchy that characterized most of American history. Though not unchallenged, eugenicist and
profoundly racist social constructions of race and ethnicity once permeated the social and natural sciences, leading to a host of “scientific results” that explained, rationalized, and justified racism and racial inequality. As time passed and we moved further into the 20th century, biological theories of race were replaced by structural ones, which, themselves, were forcefully challenged by the culture of poverty and other cultural explanations of racial inequality. Finally, beginning in the 60’s and 70’s, a slate of “new racisms” emerged, each presenting a different take on race, racism, and racial inequality. Through it all, the critical and analytical gaze remained firmly perched on the racial and ethnic other.

This all changed with the advent of critical whiteness studies. Beginning the mid-to-late 80’s, a cadre of scholars intentionally and explicitly trained their focus upon the racially dominant group. These early studies immediately spawned a host of other studies, which then proliferated into a fully-fledged academic field. Though people of color have been studying and writing about whiteness – and white people – for over a century, the field of critical whiteness is relatively recent, gaining academic legitimacy only within the last several decades. Still, a multitude of academic disciplines, using a variety of methods, have literally produced thousands of studies over the past 20-30 years, decomposing a range of institutions, from education to the law to science, itself. With the rise and expansion of critical whiteness studies, the scholarship surrounding, and about, race and ethnicity in America, was taken in new, more critical, and more innovative directions. Despite this influence, however, critical whiteness studies suffers from several conceptual, theoretical, and methodological limitations.

Finally, the importance of space, with notable exceptions, lacks significant attention within the existing critical whiteness literature. Physical space can have its own institutional and interactive dimensions, including its own history, its own political economy, and its own racial
identity. As such, physical space is exceedingly consequential in how people experience, understand, and make sense of their lives. Due to over 150 years of explicit racial conflict, public schools have become highly racialized spaces in the American imagination. For a variety of reasons, suburban is now synonymous with white, while urban is now synonymous with nonwhite. Compounding the explicit racialization of physical space, particularly over the last four decades, is the increasing economic stagnation and isolation of many inner city communities across the United States. Thus, for many whites and nonwhites, alike, urban neighborhoods, including urban schools, have become racialized, impoverished, and problematized spaces. It is these schools, these racialized and problematized spaces – and their effect on white racial identity – that are the central focus and ultimate driving force of this inquiry.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

“SCIENCE, IN its traditional construction, aims for abstract knowledge – timeless and universal – and the science-based professions draw their legitimacy from an abstract and impersonal notion of expertise.”

*Marjorie DeVault, Liberating Method.*

“Interviewing gives us access to the observations of others.”

*Robert Weiss, Learning from Strangers.*

**Introduction**

I met up with Bryan Palmer at a local café late on a weekday evening. A veteran social studies teacher, Mr. Palmer works at Pattengill Middle School; a school with a student population that is close to 90% black. Although we had spoken previously on the phone, Mr. Palmer was still a little unsure as to why exactly I wanted to interview him. I repeated what I told him over the phone, that I wanted to examine how white teachers experienced, understood, and talked about their lives, racially, within predominantly black schools. After expressing some concerns about getting in trouble for “not being politically correct,” Mr. Palmer seemed uneasy about opening up and discussing his school experiences. I reassured him that the interview was 100% confidential and that nothing he said would be traceable to him. Looking down at the floor, Mr. Palmer stood silent for a brief moment, then suddenly, with a big smile on his face, looked up and said, “well in that case, you should probably get comfortable, I have a lot to say.”

In this chapter, I discuss the methods and procedures I employed throughout my dissertation. Part one begins with a brief overview of qualitative methods as a whole. In this section, I highlight my specific research questions and elaborate on why qualitative methods are
best suited to answer them. In part two, I focus on my specific research design, including a discussion on purposeful selection and snowball sampling. I then proceed to discuss the specific method used in this study, in-depth interviews. In particular, I introduce the responsive interview model, conceptualized and developed by Rubin and Rubin (2012). Part three details entering and exiting the field, as I recall many of the obstacles and setbacks I faced in locating, contacting, and interviewing various research participants. I also summarize the insider/outsider dichotomy in qualitative methods, and discuss how this played a role in my interviews of all white and mostly female educators. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the methodological limitations of my research design.

**Qualitative Methods**

Renowned author and research methodologist John Creswell writes, “I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material” He continues, “the fabric is not explained easily or simply” (Creswell, 2013, p. 42). As opposed to quantitative methods, which are primarily concerned with *quantity*, at the root of qualitative methods is a question about *quality* (Berg, 2007; Dabbs, 1982). Qualitative methods do not seek to provide broad generalizations or causal linkages – which, to be clear, are both vitally important to social scientific inquiry – but instead aim to provide an in-depth understanding of human interactions and various social processes. As Berg (2007) notes, “qualitative research thus refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, character, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things” (p. 3).

By focusing on the *quality of something*, qualitative methods are especially useful in critically examining, and ultimately understanding, those social phenomena that do not lend
themselves easily to counts and precise measurement (Berg, 2007; Dabbs, 1982). While there are several drawbacks to such an orientation – namely the lack of representativeness and generalizability – there are also certain benefits. These benefits include an intimate understanding of people, places, and events, a firsthand account of various social processes, and the ability to analyze human interaction from multiple vantage points (Yin, 2011). Furthermore, qualitative research methods allow for inductive analysis, or the possibility of generating theory that emerges directly from the data itself (Charmaz, 2006; Glazer and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As a result, research studies that employ qualitative methods often end up in very different places from where they began.

Of course, this does not mean that qualitative researchers never engage in deductive analysis or make use of existing theory. To the contrary, not only do qualitative researchers routinely use theory to guide their studies, but qualitative methods, themselves, always rest upon an epistemological foundation (Crotty, 1998; DeVault, 1999; Smith, 1999; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Epistemology refers the nature of knowledge. As Michael Crotty states, epistemology is an understanding of “how we know what we know” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8; original emphasis). Inherent to any research methodology, in fact inherent to any theoretical perspective, is an epistemology that provides a “philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (Maynard, 1994, p. 10). Therefore, the flexibility of qualitative research allows for inductive and deductive modes of analysis that incorporate multiple theoretical perspectives and research epistemologies (Crotty, 1998 DeVault, 1999; Smith, 1999; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

In addition to the flexibility of qualitative analysis, there is also a multiplicity of actual qualitative methods (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011). A vast array of techniques,
including semi-structured interviews, standardized interviews, life-history interviews, focus groups, ethnography, ground theory, phenomenology, and critical discourse analysis, can all be subsumed under the banner of qualitative methods (Berg, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Emerson and Fretz, 2011; Fairclough, 2001; Gee and Handford, 2013; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Morgan, 1996; Weiss, 1995). Each of these individual methods possess their own epistemological foundation and are all compatible with a variety of theoretical frameworks (Crotty, 1998). Furthermore, research methodologists have produced a voluminous literature on the values, virtues, and vices of each of these methods (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Gubrium and Holstein, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Thus, scholars that utilize qualitative methods can choose from a pantheon of research techniques, theoretical frameworks, and analytical strategies.

The nuance and complexity of qualitative research – not to mention the multitude of qualitative data gathering techniques – enables scholars from a variety of disciplines to investigate a wide range of social scientific phenomena (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011). While qualitative methods may not be easily or simply explained, like any research methodology, they are especially ideal for certain kinds of research questions. More specifically, qualitative methods are quite suitable for problems, questions, or issues that need to be explored (Creswell, 2013). At its core, my dissertation is an exploratory research project. My research questions are designed to explore the everyday experiences and meaning making processes of white teachers that work in predominantly black schools, thereby gaining a more intimate understanding of the impact that nonwhite racialized space has on whiteness and white racial identity. Next, I re-present my research questions and discuss why they are best answered with qualitative methods.
Research Questions:

How do white teachers make meaning of their whiteness, and in what ways does this meaning change within urban, predominantly black schools?

What are the processes of racial socialization for white teachers working in predominantly black schools, and how do these processes affect racial identity formation?

How does nonwhite racialized space affect white racial ideology and white racial discourse?

Taken together, these questions are designed to explore the impact that nonwhite racialized space has on the way white teachers understand and talk about what it means to be white. By framing my research questions in a manner that differentiates between white and nonwhite racialized space, I am able to compare and contrast the various experiences, meaning making processes, and discursive strategies used by white teachers inside and outside of predominantly black schools. For example, is there is a difference between how these teachers experience and talk about whiteness in general, compared to how they experience and talk about whiteness in predominantly black schools? If so, what are they and what accounts for them? If white teachers see themselves as the racial norm outside of predominantly black schools, but see themselves as the racial other inside of predominantly black schools, this would indicate that nonwhite racialized space – and the people who inhabit said space – is highly determinative in how they experience and make meaning of whiteness. With few exceptions, this is precisely the process that is borne out in my interview data.

In order to examining how white teachers experience, make meaning of, and discuss whiteness inside and outside of predominantly black schools, the intricate fabric of qualitative research is not only ideal, but also necessary (Creswell, 2013). As Joseph Maxwell (2013) writes, qualitative methods are “flexible rather than fixed…and inductive rather than following a strict sequence or derived from an initial decision” (p. 2). The lack of theoretical attention given to
racialized space within the broader critical whiteness framework all but necessitates an inductive approach, one that is less concerned with testing existing theoretical processes, and more concerned with discovering new ones (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Glazer and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In this sense, each new step in the research process is guided by, and builds upon, previous steps. What is more, qualitative methods allow for methodological plurality and analytical flexibility. This type of methodological and analytical flexibility has been present throughout the entirety of my dissertation research.

**Overview of Research Methodology**

I started conceptualizing this project in the summer of 2013. At that time, I primarily focused on gaining a comprehensive understanding of how whiteness was socially constructed in a white dominated society. Upon a close examination of the literature, however, it became readily apparent that most of the literature on whiteness was decontextualized in that many of the empirical findings all but ignored the impact of racial context. From then on, I paid special attention to the incorporation and examination of racialized space. With few exceptions, the various notions that whiteness is invisible, the raceless norm, and racially meaningless, to name but a few, were ubiquitous throughout critical whiteness literature (Gallagher, 1997; McKinney, 2005; Morris, 2006). Thinking through this this particular limitation – the omission of racialized space – I developed this project further in the fall of 2013. It was during this time that I decided to focus on white teachers that work in urban, predominantly black schools.

After I decided whom to study, I then had to determine how best to study them. Because my prospective research participants all work in urban schools, almost immediately my thoughts gravitated towards urban ethnography (Anderson, 2009; Duneier, Kasinitz, and Murphy, 2014; Ocejo, 2013). As I continued to comb through the literature and work on my research design,
however, specific questions began to emerge and it became difficult to see how they could be answered by conducting an ethnography. This project is less concerned with thick description (Geertz, 1973), and more concerned with “people’s interior experiences” (Weiss, 1995, p. 1). Therefore, I decided that my research design needed to reflect my interest in the subjective construction and articulation of what it means to be white in nonwhite racialized spaces. I wanted my research participants to express their experiences in their own words, and thus, I decided that in-depth interviews were the best methodological choice for this particular research project (Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 1990; Weiss, 1995).

In-depth interviews can be conducted in any number of ways (Creswell, 2013; Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, and McKinney, 2012; Kvale, 1996; Weiss, 1995). These include the creative interview (Douglas, 1985), the survey interview (Converse and Schuman, 1974), the active interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997), the phenomenological interview (Seidman, 2013), the grounded theory interview (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Glazer and Strauss, 2009; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), and other narrative methods that, depending on the type of research questions, are well suited for empirical inquiry (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998; Maines, 1993; Riessman, 2008). Different interview techniques have different epistemological foundations, and thus, certain interview methods are best suited for certain analytical strategies (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). For this project, in order to maximize the benefits of inductive research and allow for the greatest amount of analytical flexibility, I employ the responsive interview model with a constructivist epistemological framework (Crotty, 1998; Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

Constructivism, Michael Crotty writes, “is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of
interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essential social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42; original emphasis). In this sense, meaning is far from objective, but is instead constructed by individual people based on their interpretations of their lived experiences. These experiences include interactions with other people and their own social environment (Crotty, 1998). Considering the reality that social environments are not static, that they change in terms of their structure, political economy, and racial composition, it stands to reason that individual experience, and the resulting construction of meaning based on said experience, changes as well. Thus, the way any one person constructs knowledge about their own lives may vary from one environment to the next. Constructivism allows researchers to account for the possibility of contextual variability (Crotty, 1998).

Given the fact that my dissertation explicitly examines the way white teachers – based on their experiences inside and outside of predominantly black schools – construct and discuss what it means to be white, I utilize constructivism as my epistemological foundation. The way white teachers experience and interpret what it means to be white throughout the broader society may be different than the way they interpret what it means to be white in predominantly black schools. Currently, there exists no theoretical, substantive, or empirical basis to assume that these experiences and meaning making processes are the same. Furthermore, to the extent that white teachers do experience and interpret whiteness differently in white versus nonwhite racialized space, a thorough examination of such spatial variation, or potential spatial variation, is sorely lacking in the existing critical whiteness literature. Little is known about how whites construct reality based on their experiences in, and interactions with, nonwhite racialized space. Thus, I find that a constructivist approach is the best epistemological framework to undergird my use of the responsive interview model, a research method of which I discuss in greater detail next.
The Responsive Interview Model

The responsive interview model is a qualitative research technique that is designed to enable the interviewer and interviewee to mutually construct data in a way that is beneficial to both (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). From the standpoint of the interviewer, you get rich and sophisticated data, while from the standpoint of the interviewee, you get a voice and the chance to play a meaningful role in the research process. Also, the responsive interview model builds off of itself throughout the stages of data collection. That is, each new step in the research process is a direct result from the previous step. New questions emerge from the answers given to old ones, and each additional interview purposefully incorporates the events, concepts, and themes from previous interviews. Still, the responsive interview model maintains enough openness and flexibility to make space for new events, concepts, and themes as data collection continues. This process is repeated until saturation is reached (Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

Drawing from diverse research methodologies, including grounded theory and other interview methods, the responsive interview model is flexible enough to incorporate multiple forms of analysis, yet, systematic enough to uncover significant theoretical and substantive processes. In their own words, Rubin and Rubin (2012) write:

*Responsive interviewing* is a specific variety of qualitative interviewing. It emphasizes flexibility of design and expects the interviewer to change questions in response to what he or she is learning. Responsive interviewing accepts and adjusts to the personalities of both conversational partners. The model assumes that what people have experienced is true for them and that by sharing these experiences, the researcher can enter the interviewee’s world. The researcher’s role is to gather narratives, descriptions, and interpretations from an array of conversational partners and put them together in a reasoned way that re-creates a culture or describes a process or set of events in a way that participants would recognize as real (p. 7, original emphasis).

Maximizing research flexibility without sacrificing empirical validity is a staple of the responsive interview model. The same is true for theoretical saturation, or the process whereby each additional interview provides little or no new information (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Together, maximum flexibility, empirical validity, and theoretical
saturation make the responsive interview model ideal for examining the meaning that white teachers give to their daily experiences in predominantly black schools.

There are four central features that characterize the responsive interview model. They are richness of data, conversational partnerships, the mutual construction of data, and analytical flexibility (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Conversational partnerships differ from other interviewer-interviewee relationships because it eschews any semblance of dominance on the part of the researcher, and it treats all research participants as partners in the research process. Similar to other critical epistemologies, conversational partnerships assume that real people know, and can speak to their own reality, better than any outside observer (Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). While this does not necessarily mean that interviewees are always attendant to historical and existing structures of power, it does mean that their experiences, and the way they interpret and make sense of their experiences, are real to them. It is incumbent upon the researcher to respect and value the way conversational partners experience and make sense of their own lives (Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

Also, during the responsive interview, at no point should the conversational partner feel hostility or any sense of antagonism coming from the researcher. With responsive interviews, the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee should remain cordial at all times and built on trust, especially when discussing sensitive material. In fact, by successfully establishing the relationship between interviewers and interviewees as one of a conversational partnership, the responsive interview model makes broaching and discussing sensitive material a lot easier than would otherwise be the case. One of the goals of the responsive interview, after all, is to provide conversational partners with a “congenial and cooperative experience in which the interviewee comes to feel understood, accepted and trusted as a reliable source of information” (Rubin and
Rubin, 2012, p. 7). Thus, in the responsive interview model, not only do conversational partners play an active role in the interviews, themselves, but they are also assured that their thoughts, feelings, and life experiences are taken seriously throughout the entirety of the research process (Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

Building off the idea of conversational partnerships, the responsive interview model is a research method in which both the researcher and research participants engage in a mutual construction of data. In this sense, scholars do not come into the interview with an expert/novice mindset, or with the intention of imposing their will on the research participants. To the contrary, as it is they who are recalling and interpreting their own experiences, conversational partners are integral to data collection, and ultimately, the type of data that is constructed (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). With this being said, however, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, while symbiotic, is not exactly equal. As Rubin and Rubin make clear, “the researcher determines the research problem and asks most of the questions, while the conversational partner provides most of the answers.” They continue, “what the conversational partner says shapes what the researcher subsequently asks” (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. 7).

In the responsive interview model, researchers have to be able to respond in the moment. While it is useful, and highly salient, to build off of the events, concepts, and themes from previous interviews – as well as the broader research literature – ultimately, each individual interview is its own entity, and each interviewee has their own “distinct experience, knowledge, and perspective” (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. 7). With this in mind, researchers have to be able to respond to what is being said contemporaneously, whether or not it comports with data that has already been collected. As new concepts and themes emerge, however, researchers are able to employ the constant comparative method, an inductive mode of analysis that constantly
compares new themes, or codes, with those that emerged in previous interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Thus, the mutual construction of data is an iterative process that leads to the collection rich and sophisticated data, while also providing conversational partners with a meaningful role throughout the actual interviews, themselves (Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

Taken together, conversational partnerships and the mutual construction of data often lead to a rich collection of events, concepts, and themes that provide a window into whatever phenomenon that is being studied (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The richness of data collected in the responsive interview goes beyond the surface of individual experience, and instead delves deeply into the interpretations and feelings engendered by those experiences. It is not enough for a conversational partner to merely recall a process or event that took place sometime in their life. The ultimate goal is to get them to share how they experienced it in the moment, how they responded to it, and how they make sense of it now. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to create an environment in which this type of data gathering is possible (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). With the assistance of conversational partners, the ultimate goal of the responsive interview is to construct nuanced, rich, and complex data that vividly, and sometimes intimately, illustrate how interview respondents make sense of and talk about their personal and professional lives.

Finally, building off of grounded theory, the responsive interview model employs a flexible, yet systematic, mode of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Rubin and Rubin, 2012; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). First conceptualized by Glaser and Strauss 1967, grounded theory, with its inductive approach, sought to counterbalance the methodological hegemony of deductive analysis in the social sciences (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). That is, rather than using quantitative techniques to test existing theories, grounded theory
posited that data, itself, should be the building blocks of theory construction. Several tenants of grounded theory include the constant comparative method, memo writing, and the strict belief that everything, from final research questions to the final theoretical model, should emanate from actual data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Straus and Corbin, 1990). Data analysis in the responsive interview model builds off the rich tradition of grounded theory.

**Purposeful/Theoretical Sampling**

As mentioned previously, my dissertation has a very explicit focus: to critically examine how nonwhite racialized space affects the social construction of whiteness, particularly by whites, themselves. More specifically, this project explores the way that white teachers experience, make meaning of, and discuss their personal whiteness within predominantly black schools. Initially, when I first sought to incorporate nonwhite racialized space into the critical study of whiteness, I did not have a clear idea as to how I should do so. I spent a considerable amount of time brainstorming and trying to come up with a suitable sampling frame that would theoretically and substantively answer the questions I had about racialized space and the social construction of whiteness. At one point, I stared making lists of different scenarios, occupations, and other physical spaces that, even if only temporarily, made white people the numerical minority, and thus, had the potential effect of making whiteness culturally incongruous to said physical space. Needless to say, the initial conceptualization of this project was somewhat difficult.

In thinking through different research possibilities, I recalled Mrs. Wilkes and how she and several other of my white coworkers back at Capitol Heights felt that being white worked to their disadvantage. Mrs. Wilkes expressed the belief that her personal whiteness was a hindrance, or barrier, to her overall chances of being a successful teacher. Again, Mrs. Wilkes was not referring to whiteness in a general sense, but rather, she was making a specific claim about a
specific physical space. According to Mrs. Wilkes, as the numerical and cultural minority, being a white teacher at Capitol Heights subjected her and other white teachers to racial discrimination. From then on, my thoughts about this project became increasingly clear. I decided to specifically focus on white teachers that work in urban, predominantly black schools. Given the aforementioned demographic gap between teachers and students in many urban schools across the country, I soon realized that studying white teachers in urban education presented me with an ideal, and theoretically relevant, sampling frame.

One of the benefits of the responsive interview model – indeed, qualitative methods in general – is the possibility of theoretical and purposeful sampling (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Charmaz, 2006). Although similar in application, there are substantive differences between the two sampling techniques (Coyne, 1997). Purposeful sampling is similar to theoretical sampling in that they both identify a specific subset of the population for study. The primary difference, however, is that while purposeful sampling seeks to gain a deeper understanding about the lives, experiences, and worldviews of certain individuals, theoretical sampling is more concerned with building a general theory about a specific process or phenomenon (Berg, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Coyne, 1997; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Ideally, though, both purposeful and theoretical sampling identifies and recruits a specific group of people that all have the unique ability to speak to a particular process and/or issue. Thus, the data collected from these individuals are considered to be reliable, rich, and relevant to the topic of study.

When utilizing purposeful and/or theoretical sampling, the aforementioned substantive differences should not be taken lightly. With that being said, however, many scholars have used, and continue to use, the two terms interchangeably (Berg, 2007; Coyne, 1997). While my dissertation explores a specific subset of the population – white teachers that work in urban,
predominantly black schools – it is not designed to build theory. From the beginning stages of conceptualization through numerous stages of data collection and data analysis, I wanted to examine how whiteness was socially constructed, by whites, in nonwhite racialized spaces. Although I designed this project with the explicit intention of gaining a deeper understanding of the impact that racialized space has on white teachers in predominantly black schools, I did not seek to generalize about racial space and racial identity more broadly. Thus, throughout this write-up, I feel comfortable using purposeful and theoretical sampling interchangeably.

Given the lack of theoretical and substantive attention paid to whites that spend significant amounts of time in nonwhite spaces, using a purposeful sample in the selection and recruitment of research participants made the most sense, methodologically. As Maxwell (2013) notes, with purposeful selection, “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 97). For this project, the selected persons are white teachers that work in urban, predominantly black schools, and the relevant information is how racialized space, or racial context, affects the way that whiteness is experienced, understood, and discussed by white people, themselves. Theoretically speaking, this purposive sample can speak to my particular research questions in ways that other whites – those who live, work, and network exclusively in white racialized spaces – cannot. After conceptualizing my theoretical sample, I then turned my attention to recruitment and formally entered the field to begin my data collection.

**Entering the Field**

“But why does it have to be white teachers?” Mr. Davis, a high school math teacher for more than ten years, repeatedly questioned why I specifically needed to interview white teachers.
Similar to Mr. Palmer, Mr. Davis came into our face to face interview with lingering questions about the purpose of my study. Unlike Mr. Palmer, however, Mr. Davis displayed a healthy skepticism, and even suspicion, as to why I wanted to interview white teachers, only, and not teachers of color. Although the vast majority of my interviews went well, Mr. Palmer and Mr. Davis were not the only teachers who showed up to the interview with questions. Despite my efforts, numerous conversational partners came into our face to face interview with lingering questions about why I wanted to speak with them. This reality led me to reevaluate my recruitment process, particularly the content of my preliminary phone conversations. I realized that I needed to be absolutely clear about, both, why I was conducting this research and why I wanted to interview white teachers from predominantly black schools. I also realized that interrogating whiteness by interviewing whites, themselves, would take an incredible amount of reflection, reassessment, and reflexivity.

In this section, I detail various aspects of my entry into and exit out of the field. Specifically, I discuss the recruitment of research participants, the actual interviews themselves, my coding and analytical strategies, reaching theoretical saturation, and my racial and gendered social positioning relative to my conversational partners. Each of these processes constitute a series of steps I took while trying to effectively navigate what was, at times, delicate terrain. Asking white teachers – many of whom who had never before openly discussed what it means to be white – about their personal whiteness in a professional setting, proved to be both surprising and intellectually stimulating. Conducting these interviews was an eye-opening experience, one that laid bare the complexity of social identity and the ways in which it intersects with research methods. I conclude the chapter with a brief summary and review of my methodological decision-making processes.
Recruitment/Snowball Sampling

In addition to using purposeful and theoretical selection, I also made use of a snowball sample (Berg, 2007). Snowball sampling – also known as chain referral sampling or respondent-driven sampling – while often times done out of convenience, is not necessarily a convenience sampling technique (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Heckathorn and Jeffri, 2003; Mutchnick and Berg, 1996; Penrod, Preston, Cain, and Stark, 2003). As Bruce Berg (2007) notes, convenience samples rely on “available subjects” or “those who are close at hand or easily accessible,” while snowball samples are a reliable way to “locate subjects with certain attributes or characteristics necessary in the study” (pp. 43-44). At its core, snowball sampling entails the intentional enlistment of research participants in the locating and recruitment of additional research participants (Babbie, 1998; Berg, 2007). For me, this process involved asking my conversational partners if they knew other teachers who fit the specified research parameters and would be willing to speak to me about the possibility of an interview.

In order to maximize the benefits of a snowball sample, I first had to locate and recruit research participants on my own. Thus, to begin, I turned to several personal acquaintances that met the requirements of the purposive sample. These acquaintances were teachers that I had met during my years living in Upstate New York. In my capacity as an after school volunteer and substitute teacher in the Central City School district, I became friends with several teachers who would later serve as my initial conversational partners. Three in total, I approached said teachers in the fall of 2014 and invited them to participate in, what was at the time, a research project for my Advanced Qualitative Methods course. After explaining to them why I was conducting this research, what my research questions were, and how I planned to proceed, they each agreed to participate in interviews. I then asked each of my newly minted conversational partners to
recommend other teachers who 1) fit the stated research criteria, and 2) might be willing to participate in this research project.

After gathering a list of names from each of my initial interviewees, I sent out an email solicitation to each teacher on the list. In my email, I introduced myself, explained how and where I obtained their contact information, and briefly described my research project. I closed my email solicitations with an invitation to speak on the phone, thereby affording me the opportunity to build rapport with each potential interviewee, and also giving me the chance to explain my research project in greater detail. As I mentioned previously, however, several research participants, even after our phone conversations, showed up to the interview still unsure about what to expect. Therefore, I redesigned my phone conversations to focus less on building rapport and more on better describing the purpose of the project. While I did not completely abandon my rapport-building efforts, I did give primacy to properly communicating why it was I wanted to interview white teachers from urban schools. This change paid off, as the majority of subsequent interviewees came into the face to face interview with a pretty good handle on why I wanted the interview to take place.26

My initial round of snowball sampling yielded a total of 24 potential interview respondents. Of these, 21 eventually agreed to sit down for an interview. As I began conducting interviews with this initial set of conversational partners, I enlisted their help in the locating and recruitment of others. With my interviews going well, I conducted another round of snowball sampling, only this time, I broadened the recruitment unit to schools. That is, I asked my respondents if they would be willing to put up recruitment flyers in their respective teachers’ lounges. This yielded an additional 17 respondents who agreed to be interviewed. After a final round of snowball sampling, 14 more teachers agreed to participate in the study. Including my
three personal acquaintances, 55 teachers agreed to participate in this study. Similar to the gender discrepancy in public teaching throughout society as a whole, my final sample ended up being heavily skewed by gender. Of the 55 teachers who agreed to an interview, 44 were white women and only 11 were white men.

The combination of purposeful, theoretical, and snowball sampling was very successful in locating and recruiting potential research participants. Together, these sampling techniques yielded a sample of over 50 educators that met the purposive sample, including a school nurse and a school librarian. My interview with a highly influential teacher, Mr. Marsh, would have lasting consequences throughout the rest of my time in the field. In fact, this interview, alone, led to a series of events that almost upended this project in its entirety. While I had initially secured 55 research participants, that number would dwindle down to 14 in approximately two months’ time. Due to the underlying racial politics of Central City School District – and one distrustful, yet influential interviewee – I abruptly found myself characterized as an “outsider looking to cause trouble.” I discuss this methodological dilemma, and the way I addressed it, in greater detail next.

**The Interviews: Making Conversational Partners across the Color (and Gender) Line**

From October 2014 to May 2016, I interviewed 34 teachers, one school nurse, one school librarian, and one high school principal, all whom are white, and, at that time, worked in urban, predominantly black schools. Over the course of 19 months, I met with teachers in a variety of locations, including coffee shops, cafes, public libraries, school classrooms, their homes, and on one occasion, a public park. Interviews ranged from 90 minutes to two hours. Even though I had spoken to each interviewee on the phone prior to meeting them face to face, the interviews, themselves, had almost a surreal quality to them. In a way, despite having recruited these
conversational partners specifically due to their race and profession, I was often surprised by the
overwhelming whiteness of teachers in urban education (Picower, 2009; Solomona, Patrick, et
al., 2005). It is one thing to read about the demographic gap between teachers and students in
urban schools,28 but it is something else entirely to give it a name, a face, and a voice. It did not
take long to realize that, in terms of a shared racialized, and for the most part, gendered
experience, I was definitely on the outside looking in.

Although there is a considerable literature on the importance of “insider/outside” status
when conducting qualitative research, there still remains to be a consensus on the best way to
handle demographic differences between researcher and research participants (Anderson, 1993;
Arendell, 1997; Baca Zinn, 1979; Best, 2003; Blee, 2000; DeVault, 1995; Gallagher, 2000; Hill,
2006; Merton, 1972; Naples, 1996; Stanfield, 1993; Twine and Warren, 2000; Waymer, 2008;
Williams and Heikes, 1993; Young, 2004). As a black man, the process of interviewing white
interview respondents – the vast majority of whom were women – about their personal
whiteness, presented me with several methodological challenges (Bulmer and Solomos, 2004;
Twine and Warren, 2000; Waymer, 2008; Young, 2004).29 What is more, scholars have
documented the reluctance of many whites to openly discuss race and racism (Bonilla-Silva,
2006; DiAngelo, 2012; Foster, 2013; McKinney, 2005). Navigating my outsider status, as well as
the sensitive nature of my research topic, proved to be much more difficult than I ever imagined.

As I reached out to potential interviewees, particularly after several had showed up to the
actual interview with lingering questions and concerns, I took great care to ensure that both my
reason for inquiry and my overall research design were presented in a clear and transparent
manner. I also took great care to explain to each interview respondent exactly why it was that I
wanted to interview white teachers that worked in predominantly black schools. For some, this
required multiple phone calls, and on two occasions, I was specifically asked to provide relevant literature on the overall concept of whiteness. In any instance where I felt the potential interviewee was hesitant about opening up and speaking about their racialized experiences in predominantly black schools, I did not pursue a formal interview until I was 100 percent sure that he or she was comfortable enough to be interviewed. When presented with questions during my phone conversations, I answered each of them openly and honestly, which, with one exception, led to a smooth transition from phone conversation to in-depth interview.

My first interview was with Leah Thompson, 33, a middle school art teacher of nine years. Leah, a single mom and one of my aforementioned personal acquaintances, has worked at two different schools throughout her career, both of which had majority black student populations. Leah invited me to her home on a weekday evening after she had put her son to bed. As I prepared for the interview – setting up my audio recorder and looking over my interview protocol – I could see that Leah appeared to be nervous. I double checked to see if she wanted to go through with the interview, and she reassured me that not only did she want to go through with it, but that she was also “kind of excited” to speak with me. When I remarked about her ostensible nervousness, she explained that she was more excited than nervous, and that she had been looking forward to the interview for quite some time. As I turned on my recorder and began to ask me first question, Leah blurted aloud, unsolicited, “please don’t make me sound racist.”

With these six words – “please don’t make me sound racist” – Leah voiced a concern that would cast a shadow over the entire data collection process. As my data chapters will show, with great specificity, teacher after teacher expressed thoughts and feelings about black students and their families that can be considered, at best, racially insensitive and, at worst, blatantly racist. A theme that reoccurred throughout the majority of my interviews was the idea that, as white
teachers speaking honestly about black students, their words would not only be looked at as racist, but could be used against them and even endanger their careers. This feeling on the part of many of my conversational partners caused me to begin all of my interviews, whether solicited or not, with an emphasis on confidentiality. I started each interview with an explicit effort to reassure each of my interviewees that nothing they said could be traced back to them. Again, with one exception, I was successful at gaining the trust of my research participants.

For the most part, the tenor and tone of my interviews followed a familiar pattern. First, the interviewee would express trepidation about speaking openly about race, whiteness, and urban education. Next, I would reassure them that the interview was 100% confidential and that nothing they said could be traced back to them. Then, slowly but surely, their comfort level with me and the subject material would grow, causing them to open up about their experiences as white teachers in predominantly black schools. Finally, the words, stories, and experiences would come in bunches, providing me with an in-depth and intimate portrait of how my conversational partners socially construct whiteness in nonwhite racialized spaces. Not only did my research participants go into great detail about a whole range of experiences, but they also, with the help of my probing, expressed and examined their interpretations of those experiences. In the end, this led to the collection of rich and sophisticated interview data.

Despite my outsider status – as well as the sensitivity of the subject matter – my interviews went exceedingly well, particularly after I successfully allayed any fears about confidentiality. Throughout the data collection process, I followed the steps outlined in the responsive interview model, taking the time to form conversational partnerships and mutually construct data. As my interviewees spoke, I listened carefully and paid close attention to their words. I made note of their facial expressions, discursive patterns, and general body language.
Also, as the interviews progressed, I took every available opportunity to build rapport with my respective interview respondents. Over and over again, I saw nervous interviewees transition into fully fledged conversational partners, and I witnessed their initial reluctance transform into a gregarious verbosity, one with little to no concern about potential consequences. Each successful interview bolstered my confidence, and in tandem with rich data, engendered a strong sense of gratification in the work that I was doing. Unfortunately, one interview, alone, threatened to upend my data collection and dismantle all the work that I had done.

**A Methodological Dilemma: Mr. Marsh and the Racial Politics of CCSD**

Mr. Marsh, a veteran high school teacher, was referred to me during my second round of snowball sampling. Via email, he answered a flyer of mine that was posted at his school. I spoke to Mr. Marsh on the phone a total of three times before he agreed to meet with me in person. During these conversations, we discussed the concept of whiteness at great length. I talked about how whiteness is conceptualized in the research literature, and I explained to him why I wanted to study whiteness within the context of predominantly black schools. At the time, I did not think much about these repeated inquires. Mr. Marsh was not the first respondent with questions about the concept of whiteness, and in every previous instance, the subsequent interview turned out to be very compelling and yielded very rich data. With Mr. Marsh, however, his questions did not come from a genuine interest in my dissertation, but rather, he was trying to gauge whether or not I was hired by the district to secretly study white teachers. As I would later find out, at some point, Mr. Marsh came to the conclusion that I was not who I claimed to be, and therefore, he needed to warn other teachers of my presence.

Going into my interview with Mr. Marsh, I had already conducted 26 interviews, which had all gone relatively well. What is more, Mr. Marsh, who had specifically asked me to provide
him with research literature, only agreed to be interviewed after he had reviewed the titles and other materials that I provided him. Therefore, I came into our interview expecting it to go similarly to most of my other interviews. I met Mr. Marsh a local coffee shop near his school. It was a Saturday afternoon, following what he himself had described to me as a “long and frustrating week.” As I often did, I arrived at the interview site about 20 or so minutes early. When I got to the coffee shop, Mr. Marsh, a tall and clean shaven man, was already there waiting for me. After formally introducing myself, we both ordered coffee and found a quiet, secluded place to sit down. I took out my audio recorder, my interview protocol, and a piece of paper to take notes, then we began the interview.

From the very beginning, I could tell that this interview was not like any of the others. As per usual, I began the interview by reiterating the fact that the identity of all research participants would be kept confidential. Normally, this reiteration led to a thawing of sorts, as it was often the catalyst for getting my interviewees to relax and open up about their experiences. For Mr. Marsh, however, my words provided little comfort. In response to my emphasis on confidentiality, he simply stated, “we’ll see.” His words, as well as the skeptical tone in which he spoke them, momentarily caught me off guard, forcing me to second guess my approach to the interview. The blank look on Mr. Marsh’s face gave me an uneasy feeling, but I stayed focused and went right into my protocol. I started by asking background questions, those designed to build rapport and get a sense of what led my interview respondents to go into education. As I was asking Mr. Marsh about any childhood experiences that may have caused him to want to work in urban schools, he cut me off mid-sentence and said, “come on, don’t you want to ask about racist teachers?”
At this point, that uneasy feeling returned and I could feel myself getting nervous. During our three phone conversations, I was never under the impression that Mr. Marsh harbored any sort of distrust or hostility towards me or this particular project, but as we sat across from one another, hostility and distrust was all that I felt. Building conversational partnerships is not meant to be an easy task, and the particularities of one interview, or interviewee, are not necessarily indicative of those to come. Still, I kept my composure, and instead of running from and/or challenging Mr. Marsh’s words, I decided to lean into them. For both conceptual and methodological reasons, I wanted to know why Mr. Marsh interpreted my dissertation as an inquiry into “racist teachers.” After all, if there was something I was saying or doing that presented my project as an investigation into “racist teachers,” then I wanted, and needed, to know about it. The following exchange came next:

**Me:** Is that what you think, that I’m out to study racist teachers?

**Mr. Marsh:** I don’t know, aren’t you?

**Me:** Actually, no. As I mentioned over the phone, I’m more interested in comparing how whites view themselves and their experiences, racially, inside and outside of certain racial contexts. For example, I...

**Mr. Marsh:** The whole thing just seems kind of sketchy.

**Me:** Sketchy? How so?

**Mr. Marsh:** It’s just, the timing of your project is a little too convenient for me. We had that report last year, and now, all of a sudden, you want to interview white teachers. And only white teachers.

**Me:** Well Mr. Marsh, I can assure that I have not misrepresented myself or my intentions in any way. These interviews are for my dissertation research, but if you feel uncomfortable in any way, then perhaps it’s best that we stop now.

**Mr. Marsh:** No, that’s not necessary, I’m happy to speak with you. I just don’t want any surprises six months from now, you know? I don’t want to see my name or my school on the news.

After this brief exchange, I double and triple checked with Mr. Marsh to make sure he was absolutely sure about going through with the interview. I wanted to be 100% confident that I
was not pressuring him to do something against his will. I also needed to be sure that the interview, itself, would not cause Mr. Marsh any emotional or psychological harm. Only after he reassured me for a third time that he was fine and did, in fact, want to continue with the interview, did I return to my protocol. As the interview progressed, I could not help but suspect that Mr. Marsh was holding back. In all of my previous interviews, even those that started off slowly and/or contained an initial bit of defensiveness, I was able to successfully build conversational partnerships that both I and the interviewee found to be fruitful and intellectually engaging. This was not the case with Mr. Marsh. I probed, asked follow up questions, and did my best to give him the floor, but I was rarely able to get more than one-sentence, and at times, one-word answers.

The fact that Mr. Marsh appeared to be reticent during our face to face interview was all the more puzzling because, during our numerous phone conversations, he had been extremely forthcoming. In fact, my initial contact with Mr. Marsh came in the form of an email that he sent to me, signaling his interest in what he then called "a promising research study." To the extent that Mr. Marsh did speak up during the interview, it was to question me about my views on concepts such as white privilege and the notion that white teachers cannot effectively teach black students. It became obvious to me that Mr. Marsh had reviewed the research studies I provided him, but it was also obvious to me that he questioned many of their findings. A substantial portion of our interview consisted of reviewing and discussing critical whiteness studies as a viable field of study, which made it all the more difficult to focus on the racialized experiences of Mr. Marsh as a white teacher in a predominantly black school.

My interview with Mr. Marsh lasted a little under an hour. Due to the muted way he answered most of my questions, I went through my interview protocol relatively quickly. As
opposed to a straightforward question and answer session, normally I would use a combination of main questions, follow up questions, and probes to engage my interviewee in conversation. With Mr. Marsh, however, I was not able to do so. Again, a significant portion of our conversation centered on the existing critical whiteness literature, and after I concluded that the interview had reached saturation, I decided to bring it to an end. I thanked Mr. Marsh for his time, and as I always did, asked if he knew of any other teachers that might be willing to participate in my research project. At this question, Mr. Marsh stood up, shook my hand, and flatly said, “maybe, I’ll get back to you.” He then turned and walked out the door. I packed up my supplies and headed home.

Even though my interview with Mr. Marsh was different from the others, all in all, I felt good about the data we constructed. The responsive interview model is inherently flexible, and thus, it allows for different types of interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). As I went over my interview notes, I wondered if Mr. Marsh had signaled a new direction in my data collection process, and if this type of interview was a sign of things to come. Answering this question proved to be extremely difficult, because shortly after my interview with Mr. Marsh, I received an avalanche of calls from previously committed research participants, all of whom expressed their desire to drop out of the study. First one, then five, then ten research participants dropped out of the study, then 15, then 20, then 30 had decided that they no longer wanted to participate. On and on it went, and – just as I said I would when I recruited them – I accepted their decisions, no questions asked. In a span of about 6 weeks, I went from having 55 research participants to only having 14.32

Once riding high and feeling good about my progress in the field, I soon found myself in a full blown panic. At that point, I had spent over a year locating, recruiting, and in many cases,
interviewing teachers from the Central City School District. I had sent hundreds of emails and made over 100 phone calls. I had flyers up in six different schools, and I was in the process of mapping out an interview schedule a full month in advance. I spent night after night transcribing interviews and sifting through notes. Given the suddenness in which so many research participants dropped out of the study, it became increasingly clear that external forces, those bigger than myself, were negatively affecting my ability to see this project through. The realization that a significant portion of the work I had done was, seemingly out of nowhere, rendered obsolete, caused me to consider abandoning the project altogether and moving on to something different. I needed direction. I needed answers. I needed help.

In the wake of what can accurately be called a mass exodus of research participants, I sought advice from multiple sources, including current and former academic advisers, as well as several members of my dissertation committee. After expressing my frustration and discussing the possibility of looking to another district – or switching projects entirely – I was advised that, given all the work that I had already done and the work it would take to start the process anew, it would be more practical to stay the course. In order to do so, I first needed to figure out why so many respondents rescinded their offer of participation. Reluctantly, I enlisted the help of my partner, Hayley, a teacher in the Central City School District who, to that point, I had purposely kept out of my study. Well connected within the district, Hayley asked around, and after a few weeks, she was able to ascertain why so many teachers had abandoned my study. Mr. Marsh had convinced a significant number of teachers that I was hired by the district to investigate “racism in white teachers.” He had essentially poisoned the well.

During my interview with Mr. Marsh, he referenced “that report last year,” which, in part, caused him to question the veracity of my study. The report in question, commissioned by
the State Attorney General of New York, found that 1) the Central City School District displayed
an overreliance on school suspensions to remedy behavior problems, and 2) black students, male
and female, were shockingly over-represented in those students facing suspension, and in some
cases, expulsion. Given the demographic gap within the Central City School District – as well as
the racial segregation in the city surrounding the district – the release of this report hampered
what was already a delicate relationship between parents of the black community and the mostly
white teachers who educated their children. As it turned out, I had unknowingly situated my
study within a school district that was rife with tension and mistrust that fell neatly along racial
lines. That is, my ability to recruit and interview white teachers was being challenged by the
preexisting racial politics of the Central City School District.

Getting Back In: (Re)Gaining Trust and Exiting the Field

Upon learning that Mr. Marsh had sounded the alarm about participating in my research
study, and the fact that many teachers heeded his warning, the frustration I had long felt about
the mass exodus of research participants briefly turned to anger and desperation. I knew that if
there was any possibility of me salvaging this project, in this particular district, I needed to act
fast. Not willing to go back on my word about questioning any participant that chose to leave the
study, I once again enlisted the help of my partner, Hayley. At my request, Hayley contacted
several school principles of whom she trusted, and provided them with copies of my curriculum
vitae, as well my contact information. Soon after, I received a call from one of them, Mrs.
Williams, who, as it turns out, worked at a school that housed one of my former research
participants. We spoke on the phone for over an hour, discussing a host of topics, including my
dissertation, school privatization, charter schools, testing, and re-segregation. In the end, Mrs.
Williams, who is black, intimated that I had gained her trust and that she would do whatever she
could to help me complete my fieldwork.

Mrs. Williams, Hayley, and myself, devised a strategy that included passing out my CV
and contact information, pushing back on the notion that I was a secret district hire, and directing
former and potentially new research participants to my graduate profile on the Sociology
Department’s website at Syracuse University. The goal was to, both, re-recruit some of those
teachers who had dropped out of the study and recruit new teachers altogether. Given the fact
that I used data from previous interviews to directly shape my interview protocol, I thought it
was imperative to get back in the good graces of some of those teachers of whom I had already
interviewed. The problem, however, was that I reassured each interviewee strict confidentiality,
so the idea of Hayley or Mrs. Williams simply approaching former interviewees was out of the
question. Ultimately, Hayley and Mrs. Williams helped me get recruitment flyers up in new
schools, while I made the difficult decision to touch base and reach out to several of my previous
interviewees.

Of the teachers who left my study, I had already interviewed 12 of them. In keeping with
the inductive orientation of the responsive interview model, each of those interviews had been
transcribed, analyzed, and used to update my interview protocol (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Even
though I had previously told my research participants that, if they chose to do so, I would not
question their decision to drop out of the study, I felt that I had little choice but to touch base
with many of them. Also, considering the fact that Mr. Marsh was in a relative position of
influence, I wanted to be sure that no research participant dropped out of my study due to outside
pressure or any other external forces. I was not going to reach out to all of the 40-plus teachers
who chose to leave the study, so I turned to my notes – from both the phone conversations and
actual interviews – and selected those teachers I felt would be more amenable to speaking with me again. I selected 15 teachers who I believed were most likely reconsider participating in the study, and reached out to each one of them. Of these teachers, 13 agreed to hear me out, including all but one of the teachers whom I had already interviewed.

I met with each teacher individually, and I came prepared. Armed with my CV, my college transcripts, my master’s degree, a list of references, graduate coursework, and a copy of my dissertation proposal, I was determined to verify both my identity and my background. I also emailed each teacher a link to my academic profile on the Syracuse University website. During these meetings, I never once mentioned Mr. Marsh. I simply explained to them that I knew there was some uncertainty about my purpose for wanting to interview them, and that my only goal was to assure them that I was being, as I had always been, completely honest with them about my intentions. Beyond that, if they so desired, they would never hear from me again. In all but one case, they agreed to rejoin the study. In most cases, my CV, college transcripts, and academic profile were the determining factors in teachers agreeing to rejoin the study. Despite my decision to re-contact several of the research participants who had decided to exit the study, ultimately, I felt comfortable in that A) I had made the right decision and B) I was successful in reestablishing the trust that was previously lost.

While I took it upon myself to reach out to former interviewees, Hayley and Mrs. Williams were both instrumental in putting me in touch with new ones. Once pointed in new directions, I went through the same process as before. First, I made contact with each new respondent via email, then I engaged them in phone conversations before requesting a face to face interview. The major difference this time, however, is that in my initial email, I directed each potential interviewee to my profile on the Sociology Department’s website at Syracuse
University. In conjunction with Hayley and Mrs. Williams vouching for me, my highly visible graduate profile – a profile that includes my picture – turned out to be very influential in the recruitment of new research participants. All told, I was able to recruit over a dozen new research participants, eventually interviewing six of them. Counting the re-recruitment of previous research participants, I successfully completed 32 interviews with white teachers from predominantly black schools.

After reaching theoretical saturation (see below), I exited the field. In doing so, I reflected upon my first real field experience, one that took me to great heights and even greater lows. The fact that I got off to such a fast start in locating, recruiting, and interviewing research participants, instilled in me a false sense of confidence, both in my ability to navigate the field and the overall straightforwardness of conducting qualitative research. The preexisting racial politics of Central City School District, particularly the ways they affected my fieldwork, painted a vivid picture of how qualitative research cannot neatly be separated from qualitative research participants. Everything, from my research questions to my research methodology, influenced, and was influenced by, the people and politics of my chosen field site. Although I successfully recovered and was able to finish on a high note, the process as a whole, was as challenging as it was rewarding. Fortunately, my data analysis – conducted simultaneously with my data collection – caused a lot less consternation and involved far fewer setbacks than my time in the field.

**Data Analysis in the Responsive Interview Model**

There are seven steps to data analysis in the responsive interview model (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). First, each interview is to be transcribed and summarized. Each summary should include “the main points expressed, along with the name (or the pseudonym) of the interviewee,
the time and location of the interview,” and “the reasons the interviewee was included in the study” (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. 192). Also, memos with interesting passages and notable quotes should be kept throughout each interview. Second, each interview should be coded for “relevant concepts, themes, events, examples, names, places, or dates” (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. 190). Third, relevant codes should be identified and sorted from across a number of interviews, culminating in a single data file and file summary of each code. These individual files, while not mutually exclusive, will each hold data pertaining to specific concepts, themes, quotes, events, etc.

Forth, the data within each file needs to be sorted, resorted, and summarized. During this step, excerpts between different subgroups should be compared to one another, and any similarities and/or differences should be noted. Fifth, after analyzing the original and resorted data files, a picture should begin to emerge, sometimes more than one. At this point, different pictures should be compared to one another, and it is up the researcher(s) to weigh each of them and determine which one best represents the process or processes under study. Sixth, each composite should be used to generate new questions for subsequent interviews, and any additional data should be contrasted, and possibly merged, with the already existing data files. Finally, researchers, particularly those seeking to generate representative theories, should determine how well their results generalize to other populations. This iterative process should be repeated until theoretical saturation is reached.

The steps in the responsive interview model are designed to ensure that interview data are analyzed in a systematic fashion. With that being said, however, data analysis in the responsive interview model is flexible enough to allow individual researchers to collect, summarize, and analyze their data based on the particularities of their individual research projects (Rubin and
Rubin, 2012). In this sense, while coding and comparing are always salient, making macro
generalizations and constructing new theories are not necessarily germane to every project that
utilizes this particular research methodology (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). With this in mind, I
designed this project with a very specific focus, to explore the way white teachers experience,
make meaning of, and discuss their personal whiteness in predominantly black schools, and
compare it to how they do so generally. Therefore, while my ultimate goal was to critically
examine the impact of racialized space on white racial identity, I did not set out to create some
all-encompassing theoretical paradigm that accounts for all whites in the United States. Next, I
detail how I applied these steps to my interview data.

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), data analysis is the process where you “work out
what your data say and mean” (p. 210). My interviews, pre and post Mr. Marsh, were remarkably
consistent in their tenor and tone. Informative, lively, and amicable in nature, the majority of
interviews yielded rich and sophisticated data. Even Mr. Marsh – the influential teacher who
nearly upended my dissertation – in his own, succinct way, provided data that was consistent
with the emergent concepts, themes, and events described by other white teachers. Still, in order
to understand and fully appreciate what the data said and meant, I needed to apply systematic
analytical techniques (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Using two different qualitative data analysis
software packages (NVivo and MAXQDA), I transcribed and analyzed each interview myself.33
Although my data analysis began immediately after I entered the field, it continued on well after
I concluded my final interview.

Based on a combination of my general research questions and the existing critical
whiteness literature, my first interview protocol was fairly open and somewhat abstract (see
Appendix F). While I knew that I wanted to discuss my interviewees racialized experiences
inside and outside of predominantly black schools – as well as the way they made sense of those experiences – I did not know how best to turn these questions into a high quality, in-depth interview. In keeping with the responsive interview model, I prepared a list of primary questions, probes, and potential follow up questions (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). I thought about my protocol, tweaked and refined it, and once I felt it was finally ready, I set up my first interview schedule. Returning to the first three teachers that initiated my snowball sample, I conducted my first interviews in the fall of 2014.

In the responsive interview model, a great deal of autonomy lies in the hands of the researcher (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Looking over my raw interview data, countless concepts and themes jumped off of the pages, forcing me to decide which ones to code and which ones to ignore. At first, I decided that I would take my time and code every possible concept and/or theme, thereby exploring every possible picture that could be painted by the data. I soon realized that such a position was untenable, and even though the data presented numerous options, I, as the researcher, would have to make hard choices and decide how best to proceed. As Rubin and Rubin note about the overabundance of concepts and themes in your raw interview data, “you cannot code them all, but you want to make sure you examine everything in your data that is relevant to your research problem” (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, pp. 194-195). Following this advice, I focused my coding on those concepts and themes that specifically addressed racialized space, white racial awareness, and white racial discourse.

As I continued to transcribe, summarize, and analyze interviews, it became readily apparent that one theme stood out above all others; a heightened sense of racial awareness. Permeated throughout my interview data was example after example of what I labeled hyper-visibility, a realization on the part of my conversational partners that their students and their
students’ families looked at them, first and foremost, as white (see chapter 4). Other concepts/themes, too, such as reverse racism and post-racialism, were ubiquitous throughout my interview data. White hyper-visibility, white racial victimization, and post-racial/colorblind discourse were dominant themes in my first set of interview transcriptions, examples of which were often offered voluntarily without any prompting from me. This repeated occurrence caused me to augment my interview protocol, making it more focused, more concrete, and more reflective of the emergent themes in my interview data.

My data analysis was relatively straightforward. Once I completed an interview, I would immediately transcribe and summarize it, making sure to include things like age, gender, the tone of the interview, my rapport with the interviewee, and where the interview took place. Next, I coded each interview, looking for relevant concepts, themes, events, examples, and notable quotes. With each additional interview, I compared and contrasted codes, looking for any similarities, contradictions, and emergent patterns within the data. Each code, spanning a number of interviews, was then given its own data file. I studied the content within each file, constantly comparing it to data from old and new interview transcriptions. By doing so, I was able to update and improve my analysis, incorporating new codes and augmenting old ones based on the data. After several rounds of comparing and contrasting codes across interviews, I reviewed and resorted each individual data file, using the new files to improve my protocol for any subsequent interviews. I continued this iterative process throughout the remainder of my time in the field.

Theoretical Saturation

Theoretical saturation is a trademark of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2003; Glazer and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As I mentioned previously, the responsive interview model draws much of its conceptual framework and many of its analytical techniques from
grounded theory (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Therefore, reaching theoretical saturation in my dissertation followed the same steps and took on the appearance of a grounded theory study. Glenn Bowen describes theoretical saturation – also referred to as data saturation – as the point “when the researcher gathers data to the point of diminishing returns, when nothing new is being added.” He continues, “theoretical saturation, in effect, is the point at which no new insights are obtained, no new themes are identified, and no issues arise regarding a category of data” (Bowen, 2008, p. 140). Thus, my ultimate goal was to get to the point where each additional interview provided no new insight about the impact of racialized space on white racial identity.

The only standardized aspects of my interview protocol were the opening section in which I asked background questions and the section that specifically focuses on white racial awareness. Beyond that, however, each version of my protocol, and thus, each interview, was predicated upon a combination of my previous data analysis and the contemporaneous interview, itself. While all but my very first interviews were heavily influenced by those that came before them, they each still retained a certain amount of sovereignty, owing to both the general structure and commensurate flexibility of the responsive interview model (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). This methodological design led to a superfluity of unstructured data that possessed both similar and distinct elements. These data were similar enough in that a composite picture began to emerge, yet distinct enough in that each additional interview provided new concepts and themes to incorporate into my analysis. This latter point became less and less the case over the course of my data analysis.

I spent close to two years sifting through hundreds of pages, including interview transcriptions, interview notes, file summaries and re-summaries. I analyzed various codes, excerpts, and analytical memos, both within and across interviews, and eventually, a composite
began to emerge from the data. For example, early on in my analysis, I documented a discernable pattern of teachers speaking about their racial identity strictly in terms of disadvantage. To the degree that my conversational partners noticed their personal whiteness – which in the majority of cases, coincided with their employment in predominantly black schools – it typically occurred when, from their perspective, they were being targeted and treated unfairly specifically because of their race (see chapter 5). As my composite emerged, I integrated its core elements into my protocol and tested it against new interview data. Initially, this iterative process yielded new insights and took my analysis in new directions, but as my interview total increased, each additional interview yielded little to no new information. After interviewing 32 teachers, I reached theoretical saturation and formally exited the field.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I highlighted the methods and procedures used in conducting my dissertation research. Starting with an overview of the strengths and benefits of qualitative methods as a whole, I then proceeded to discuss my research design and research methodology at great length. This included a review of my research questions, as well a detailed discussion about why qualitative methods were best suited to answer them. In addition to a thorough explication of the responsive interview model, I also discussed my research epistemology, my sampling frame, how I gained access to research participants, how I entered and exited the field, and the strategies and techniques I used to analyze my interview data. I also described, and elaborated upon, several major setbacks that occurred in the field, as well as the steps I took to overcome them and ultimately finish my fieldwork. In the next three chapters – the data chapters – I use empirical evidence to illustrate the numerous ways that nonwhite racialized space affects white racial identity.
CHAPTER IV

BECOMING WHITE: SPATIAL SOCIALIZATION AND RACIALIZING THE RACELESS NORM.

“I don’t know, being white is something we never really talked about in my house. It just never came up.”

*Candice Satter, Dwight Rich Middle School*

“Being a white teacher is something you can’t really avoid, you know. It follows you around at all times. It’s everywhere.”

*Candice Satter, Dwight Rich Middle School*

Introduction

When Leah Thompson started teaching in Walnut Middle School, she believed she had landed her dream job. For as long as she could remember, Ms. Thompson wanted to be an art teacher, and after student teaching in both urban and suburban schools, she had long since decided that she could make a much bigger difference working with urban students. Located in a predominantly black neighborhood, Walnut Middle School has a student population that is over 90% black. Therefore, the school, itself, as well as the surrounding community, are both permeated with black bodies. Although, as a physical space, Walnut Middle School has been racially segregated for quite some time, Leah was not prepared to deal with the highly racialized environment that Walnut represented, nor was she expecting the openness with which her new students recognized and talked about race. As she stated early in our interview, “it didn’t take long for me to realize that I was in over my head. To them, I was not their teacher, I was just another white person bossing them around.”

As discussed previously, whites in the United States are socialized not to see whiteness (DiAngelo, 2012; Hale, 1998; McIntosh, 1988). The invisibility of whiteness, particularly to white people, themselves, is, in part, what makes it unique in the pantheon of racial
classification. For many whites – and some people of color – the idea of whiteness as an organizing principle, as anything meaningful beyond mere description or demographic identification, is contrary to their understanding of race in the United States. Owing to racial socialization, race is something that belongs to people of color, making whiteness an empty category, one that is difficult for many white people to see, let alone discuss. This pattern held true for my interviewees, at least when discussing whiteness in general terms. As my interviews continued, however, my general questions about whiteness became much more specific, and inquiries about what it means to be white became inquiries about what it means to be white teachers in predominantly black schools. Almost immediately, it was readily apparent that nonwhite racialized space had affected my conversational partners in significant ways.

In this chapter, I examine the impact that racialized space has on white racial awareness. Specifically, I compare the ways that white teachers recognize, or fail to recognize, whiteness inside and outside of predominantly black schools. Based on my interview data, I argue that nonwhite racialized space exposes white teachers to whiteness by repeatedly recognizing, addressing, in many cases, treating them as white. For most of the teachers I interviewed, their sense of normalness, or racelessness, was effectively interrupted by their routine exposure to nonwhite racialized space. That is, the teachers who participated in this study underwent the process of spatial socialization, which, for them, was jarring and incredibly complex because it was in direct opposition to their socialization as the raceless norm. Just as their lives in white racialized spaces had socialized them not to see whiteness, their time in nonwhite racialized space re-socialized them to explicitly see whiteness, particularly within themselves.

In order to highlight the impact of nonwhite racialized space on white racial awareness, I structure this chapter comparatively. I start by presenting interview data that, consistent with the
existing research literature, demonstrate the invisibility, or racelessness, of whiteness in the white imagination. The interview data presented in this section were all derived from general questions about whiteness and white racial identity. Next, I introduce the concept of spatial socialization. White teachers underwent a spatialized re-socialization of sorts, one that caused them to become aware of their racial identity and the myriad ways it affected them as teachers. Finally, I detail the process of becoming white. In nonwhite racialized spaces, “normal” people became white people, and “normal” teachers became white teachers. I conclude the chapter by discussing my conversational partners’ various conceptualizations of whiteness, juxtaposing the way white racial identity was constructed inside and outside of predominantly black schools.

**White Racelessness**

In this section, I present interview data that demonstrate how, consistent with current critical whiteness literature, my conversational partners conceived of whiteness as the raceless norm. White racelessness, or white racial invisibility, took two primary forms; rhetorical incoherence and demographic deflection. Rhetorical incoherence emerged in both the structure and content of my interview data. When speaking in broad, or abstract, terms, the teachers I interviewed found it extremely difficult to articulate a coherent position on what it means to be white. Teacher after teacher had trouble talking about whiteness, struggling to speak in complete sentences and repeatedly admitting that being white was something they had rarely, if ever, given much thought. Demographic deflection, on the other hand, occurred when, in direct response to questions about whiteness, interviewees shifted the conversation to other demographic categories, namely gender and, to a lesser degree, ethnicity. Demographic deflection was prominent throughout my interview data. Rhetorical incoherence and demographic deflection, in conjunction with the existing CWS literature, highlight the degree to which whiteness remains
invisible in the broader white imagination (DiAngelo, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993; Hale, 1998; McIntosh, 1988; Morrison, 1993; Rothenberg, 2008; Yancy, 2012).

**I Don’t Know If I Ever Really Thought About It**

Well, I think that, um, hmmm, I would say, that's a good question. I think that I, through my life experiences, I do realize that life might be laid out for me some. Uh, being a white woman, although I find, I do, uh, there are issues that um, I don't know what I, I don't know. This is a tough question. I just want to, I want to make sure I, um, say what I want, um. Gosh, I don't know if I ever really thought about it. Wow, this is hard.

_Erica Marsi, 27_

In a general sense, my conversational partners did, in fact, conceptualize whiteness as the raceless norm. Throughout my fieldwork, interviewees routinely spoke in ways that reflected a white racial framing of society, one that reinforced themselves as individuals, and whiteness more broadly, as normal (Feagin, 2010). With few exceptions, the teachers I interviewed constructed whiteness as insignificant, as invisible, and as something that simply did not matter to them, or for them, in any real or meaningful way. For example, Allison Hall, a high school history teacher, described both whiteness and being white, in general, as something that held very little meaning to her. When asked to describe what it means to be white, Ms. Hall responded:

**Ms. Hall:** (Laughter) I don’t know, I guess it doesn’t, um, it hasn’t really meant anything. I mean, what does it mean to have brown eyes or be left-handed, you know? It may help describe you, you know, physically, but it doesn’t tell you anything about me, it doesn’t mean anything. I don’t think I really, or, you know (pause), I’ve never had to think about it I guess. I never really thought of myself as white, I’m just me (laughter).

For Ms. Hall, the very question, “what does it mean to be white?” immediately evoked laughter. Her response was so immediate that it almost seemed instinctive, as if it was a visceral reaction to a question that had not occurred to her in her 40-plus years of life. Ms. Hall did not consider being white as anything more than a demographic marker, something as meaningless
and insignificant as having brown eyes or being left-handed. Speaking in general terms, whiteness held zero meaning for her, neither as an organizing principle or as an integral part of her personal identity. Yes, Ms. Hall self-identified as white, but it simply did not mean anything. She happened to be white just like she happened to have brown eyes. Ms. Hall did not see herself as someone whose personal identity or personal experiences were influenced or affected by racial group membership. In fact, she left zero doubt about how she conceptualized her racial identity, or lack thereof, when she clearly and succinctly stated, “I’m just me.”

Ms. Hall, like the majority of my conversational partners, gave little thought to being white for most of her life. As a result, she, like most of the other teachers I interviewed, could barely articulate a cogent position on whiteness and what it meant for her, personally. Because it was something that my conversational partners, by their own admission, rarely, if ever, thought about, highly educated and well-spoken teachers consistently became verbally incoherent when asked to talk about what it means to be white. The very question, itself – what does it mean to be white – caused my conversational partners to speak in disjointed and convoluted sentences, interspersed with long pauses and bouts of nervous laughter. Similar to previous research findings, many of my conversational partners found it extremely difficult to speak lucidly about whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014). They stuttered and stammered throughout their answers, and they repeatedly giggled as they openly struggled to come up with an intelligible answer.

Hanna Walker, in her late 50’s and enjoying her first year of retirement, struggled considerably when asked about her personal whiteness. Rhetorically, Mrs. Walker engaged in a combination of laughter, long pauses, and stuttering, while ultimately failing to articulate a clear position on what it meant to be white. After several false starts and long pauses, Mrs. Walker
eventually asked if we could return to this particular question later in the interview, while also intimating that she would remain preoccupied with coming up with an answer.

**Q:** In your own words, thoughts, feelings, could you please tell me what it means for you to be white.

**Mrs. Walker:** (Long pause) I don't know if I ever really thought about it (laughing). Um (long pause), that's a tough question. Am I the only one that needs a little, um, a little time to think (laughing)? (Long pause), I don't know. Um, I never really thought about what it's like to be white because I've never been anything else. But I um, I don't know. We'll have to come back to that one because you're going to make me be up half the night thinking about what it means to be white (laughter). I don't know if I'm going to be able to stop thinking about it. That's an excellent question.

Mrs. Walker not only struggled to answer this question rhetorically, but she also began to squirm around in her seat, fidgeting and changing positions as she tried to think of a suitable answer to my question. Her combination of rhetorical and somatic uneasiness led me to double check and make sure she was 100 percent comfortable with this line of questioning. I asked if she wanted to take a break or move on to a different topic, but Mrs. Walker assured me that she was perfectly fine and ready to continue. As she would later reveal, her seeming frustration and uneasiness was not because of my question about whiteness, but due to her inability to answer “such a simple question.” We sat in silence for several minutes. I waited patiently while Mrs. Walker looked to the side and continued to ponder my question about her personal whiteness. Finally, shaking her head back and forth and looking me directly in the eyes, she through her hands in the air and said through laughter, “okay, I got nothing, I give up. Sorry.”

Some teachers hinted at white privilege, only to immediately minimize its significance, or subsequently attribute any advantage they possess to individual effort or some other process. Sophia Taylor, a middle school music teacher of eleven years, stumbled into an intersectional response after tacitly admitting to being privileged by whiteness. Seeking to clarify why she
believed her life “might be easier,” she shifted the focus from race to class, eventually introducing geography as a plausible explanation for the advantages she enjoyed growing up.

**Q:** In your own words, thoughts, feelings, could you please tell me what it means for you to be white.

**Mrs. Taylor:** Hmm, well, um I guess growing up, um, hmm. I mean, just a, hmm. I’ve never really thought about that question. Um, I just, I guess in some ways, I’ve had, you know. Wow, I’m really struggling with this question. Well, let me back up. I think that being white, um, for me, um, maybe things are a little easier for me. I mean, I really can’t say, but, you know, to be white, sometimes, I think sometimes we might have it easier. I mean, not all white people have it easier, my family has money, you know, so that definitely made things a little easier, plus it’s not as bad as it used to be, but uh, I, I don’t know what I’m saying. I had it easier growing up, but I’m not sure that race or being white, um, maybe that wasn’t really the reason. I mean we had other people, there was a black family on my block, you know. So, maybe it was the neighborhood. Oh my god, I must sound like a moron right now (laughter).

**Q:** Did you grow up in a diverse neighborhood?

**Mrs. Taylor:** No, not really. I think that one black family was the only one in the neighborhood (laughter). Um, but their kids had a pretty good life, too you know. They went to the same schools I did, they drove nice cars and wore name brand clothes. Everything was easy for them just like it was for me, you know. That’s why I brought them up.

Even though she did so in a somewhat clumsy manner, Mrs. Taylor put forth an intersectional explanation of advantage and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005; Weber, 1998; Wilson, 1987). While her initial response hinted at white privilege – “maybe things are a little easier” – she used the presence of one black family in her affluent neighborhood to pivot to more of a class-based, or economic, explanation of advantage and disadvantage. Tellingly, Mrs. Taylor’s long and convoluted answer was in direct response to a specific question about what it means to be white. Thus, even though an intersectional approach to studying identity and inequality is warranted, Mrs. Taylor was not trying to be thorough or comprehensive in her response, but rather, she was attempting to find a non-racial explanation
for why her life was “a little easier.” Also of note, the structure of Mrs. Taylor’s response was completely disjointed and extremely difficult to follow. She, like the majority of my interviewees, became rhetorically incoherent when trying to explain what it meant to be white.

Based on the existing critical whiteness literature, I was not surprised that my conversational partners struggled to talk about race in general, and whiteness in particular. This is an empirical pattern that can be found in many studies on white racial discourse (Applebaum, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; DiAngelo and Sensoy, 2014; Feagin and O’Brien, 2004; Gallagher, 2003; McIntyre, 1997; Mills, 2007; Myers, 2005; Sullivan and Tuana, 2007; Trainor, 2005; Warren, 2001). In the context of a white dominated society, one where whites not only comprise the numerical majority, but one in which they also hold a disproportionate amount of social, political, and economic power, both whiteness and white people are normalized (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2006; Lipsitz, 2006; Wise, 2007). As the default human category, whites do not see their lives through the prism of race, therefore, they are unaccustomed to thinking and speaking about their lives, racially (DiAngelo, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993). Thus, my conversational partners engaged in rhetorical incoherence, finding it extremely difficult to talk openly and explicitly about whiteness and white racial identity.

**Demographic Deflection**

Although most of my conversational partners struggled with discussing what it means to be white, they did, however, talk about other aspects of their identity. Specifically, teachers consistently discussed those personal traits they found to be salient to their overall identity. Though not to the same degree, two identity markers – gender and ethnicity – were invoked by my interview respondents in lieu of whiteness. That is, in direct response to my questions about whiteness and what it means for them, personally, my conversational partners routinely shifted to
a personal identity that was more visible to them. Given the fact that the majority of the teachers I interviewed were women, gender was the most frequent non-racial form of identity invoked during my data collection. Of all of my interviews with female respondents, 25 in total, only five did not volunteer their thoughts about being a woman. Although some of my conversational partners also volunteered their thoughts about ethnicity, gender was front and center, permeating a considerable amount of my interview data. Therefore, I highlight the way gender was used to deflect questions about whiteness and white racial identity.

I Have Thought About Being A Woman. Like A Lot

I really can’t tell you, that’s something I’ve never thought about, really. I don’t think I know a single white person who could give you a clear answer to that question. It’s funny, though, I have thought about being a woman. Like a lot. I always wonder how people see me. Do they see me as Melanie or do they see me as some random woman? That’s something I’ve thought about pretty much my entire life.

Melanie Scott, 49

Demographic deflection was common among the teachers I interviewed, especially the women. Teachers would deflect questions about whiteness with stories about gender, and to a lesser degree, stories about ethnicity. For example, Carrie Weaver, a middle school teacher, struggled when trying to talk about whiteness, but spoke clearly and openly about gender and how much it has impacted her life. When asked what it meant to be white, Mrs. Weaver immediately pivoted to gender and instead provided me with numerous thoughts and examples about what it means to be a woman.

Mrs. Weaver: Um, I don’t know. I honestly never think, I don’t really think of myself in terms of race, of being white, you know, I think of myself as more of a woman. I mean, being a woman is something I think about all the time. Even as a teacher, you know, I’m expected, women are expected to be teachers, but if you look at who the principals and vice principals are, they’re mostly men. I um, I just don’t see that as a coincidence.

Q: Why do you think you think about gender and what it means to you, but not about race?
Mrs. Weaver: Um, hmmm (pause), I don’t know, really. I just think of myself first and foremost as a woman. It’s right there, you know. I think when people see me they see a woman. When I look in the mirror, I see a woman. And as a woman, I’m certainly treated differently, I mean not always, but there are times when I’m treated unfairly because I’m a woman. So it’s definitely something I think about. Something I think about a lot. Being a woman is very important to me.

Q: Do you consider being white as something that’s very important to you?

Mrs. Weaver: Again, I just, I’m a woman. I don’t really think of myself in terms of being white. I just never have (laughter). I mean, I guess technically I’m a white woman, technically. But still, I think in reality, you know, at least for me, being a woman and dealing with all that being a woman entails, you know, being a working mom, um, is what I find to be most important.

Mrs. Weaver, while more explicit in speaking about the importance of gender, was emblematic of many of my other conversational partners. These teachers were not only keenly aware of gender – and the myriad ways it affected their personal experiences – but they also specifically invoked gender in response to my questions about whiteness. Broaching the subject of gender and gender discrimination was never random. In fact, in almost every instance where gendered experiences were volunteered without prompting from me, it followed a familiar pattern. After asking my conversational partners about whiteness and what it means to be white, they first would struggle to form and articulate a lucid answer. Next, they would pivot to gender, an identity that they found to be more central, and salient, to their day to day experiences. Finally, after I would attempt to steer the conversation back to race, my conversational partners would reiterate that 1) they have not given much, if any, explicit thought to what it means to be white, and 2) they have given considerable thought to what it means to be a woman.

Melanie Scott, a 49 year old high school science teacher, typified this process. A self-described “proud feminist bitch,” Mrs. Scott, going all the way back to her time as a middle school student, offered a bevy of personal stories about how gender affected her life. Very
attuned to various discriminatory processes such as the gender pay gap and rape culture, Mrs. Scott spoke of institutional patriarchy with incredible ease. Her rhetorical fluency diminished significantly, however, when I attempted to steer the conversation back to my initial questions about whiteness.

**Mrs. Scott:** Look, I’m a woman first, a woman second, and everything else third (laughter). When it comes to being white or whatever, I um, I just do even think about it. It doesn’t really mean anything, I guess, um, I think that, being a woman, it’s, being white, I don’t know about being white. But, I know I sound crazy, but stay with me. You want to talk about inequality, well let me tell you about being a woman. As a man, I don’t think you’ll be able to understand this. I’ve been fighting against patriarchal bullshit since I was 11 years old, okay. I got sick of people telling me that my future consisted of finding a husband and having kids. So I spoke out. I spoke out. At home, at school, wherever. If I thought people were treating me differently because I was a woman, I would let them know about it. I was this way as kid, I was this way in college, I was this way in my first marriage, I’m this way in my current marriage, and I’m still this way as a middle-aged adult. I’ve been a proud feminist bitch for a long time, and if people have a problem with it, that’s on them, not me.

**Q:** You say you’re a woman first and a woman second, but do you think your experiences as a white woman are different from those of women of color?

**Mrs. Scott:** I, hmm (pause). That’s an interesting question. I think as women, I mean, I think as a whole, women don’t get a fair shake. We never really have. When I think about how hard it is as a teacher, you know, a so called woman’s job, I just get so upset because people have no idea how hard it is, you know. So, I don’t know, I just think when people talk about things like racism or whatever, they should keep in mind that women are still women, and we’re always fighting an uphill battle.

**Q:** Just to be clear, in terms of lived experiences, do you feel like your experiences as a white woman are identical to those of women of color?

**Mrs. Scott:** I honestly can’t answer that question. I think, um, I have no reason to believe my experiences are dramatically different from say a black woman or an Asian woman. Maybe women from old money (laughter). Even then, it’s, um, I mean we’re still women, right. At some point, it will catch up to you, no matter what race you are.

Mrs. Scott’s experiences with institutional and interpersonal patriarchy, in part, have led to a heightened sense of awareness of gender norms, gender politics, and gender discrimination
in the United States. Although conceptuality and empirically valid, Mrs. Scott’s devotion to discussing gender and gender discrimination, particularly in response to my questions about race, was a distancing strategy, one used by numerous conversational partners to compensate for their inability to talk about whiteness (Case and Hemmings, 2005). Still, despite their attentiveness to the intricacies of gender, not one of the interview respondents who spoke openly – and for the most part, accurately – about gender, took racial variation among women into account when discussing discrimination and institutional patriarchy. That is, intersectionality, or the concept of intersecting, and at times, competing identities, was not something that my conversational partner articulated, even as they spoke easily and eloquently about the day to day reality of gender discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; Frankenberg, 1993; McCall, 2005; Weber, 2009).

While demographic deflection effectively acted as a distancing strategy, I, in no way, want to diminish or make light of the reality of gender discrimination, sexism, misogyny, and institutional patriarchy. Also, I, in no way, want to diminish or make light of the importance that many women assign to their gender identity. The teachers who spoke openly and honestly about the myriad ways that gender affected their lives, did so out of personal experience and a genuine concern about gender inequality. It was not, and is not, my intention to give racial identity and racial inequality primacy over gender identity and gender inequality. Again, the stories that my conversational partners told were heartfelt and highly emblematic of the past and present state of gender inequality, both in the United States and abroad. Therefore, the concept of demographic deflection should not be interpreted as a minimization of the very real salience of gender, gender identity, and gender discrimination.

With this being said, however, gender was consistently used as a distancing strategy (Case and Hemmings, 2005). Gender identity and examples of gender discrimination, while
extremely important, were volunteered as a deflection, a shield against my questions about white racial identity. Even when I tried to steer the conversation back to race – as I often did – my conversational partners would remain steadfast, delving deeper into the salience of gender and providing even more examples of gender discrimination. Tellingly, most of the women who volunteered this information were sociologically and psychologically aware of the dissonance that accompanied privilege, even as the displayed this very type of dissonance, themselves. So, while Mrs. Scott could accurately surmise that, as a man, there are certain gendered realities that I could never understand, she could not, however, bring herself to admit that, as a white woman, there are certain racial realities that she could never understand. Even after I explicitly asked her about the racial variation among women, themselves, Mrs. Scott continued to present womanhood as a uniform construction, using it to mask racialized experience and deflect my questions about whiteness.

White racelessness, particularly in the form of rhetorical incoherence and demographic deflection, was present throughout the entirety of my fieldwork. In keeping with the inductive approach of the responsive interview model, I augmented my interview protocol based on the responses of my interviewees, and even after doing so on multiple occasions, white racelessness continued to permeate my interview data. With each alteration of my interview protocol, white teachers continued to construct whiteness as normal, they continued to have a hard time articulating a coherent position on what it means to be white, and they continued to use demographic deflection as a distancing strategy. White racelessness, while a principal aspect of white racial discourse, more broadly, all but disappeared when the conversation shifted to predominantly black schools. That is, after undergoing the process of spatial socialization, my conversational partners transitioned from teachers to white teachers, and their racial awareness
and racial discourse changed accordingly. I define, analyze, and provide numerous examples of
spatial socialization, next.

**Spatial Socialization**

Spatial socialization is the spatially-specific, re-socialization of individual people about
rules, norms, and other social processes. Unique to a specific type of space, spatial socialization
has the effect of challenging, and in some cases, changing the cultural outcomes of previous
forms of socialization. For my conversational partners, spatial socialization within predominantly
black schools affected the way they saw, experienced, and made sense of whiteness and what it
meant for them, personally. Functioning in three parts, spatial socialization first entailed the
racialization of physical space. Every one of my interviewees explicitly identified their
respective schools as black schools. Second, spatial socialization involved white teachers
observing and taking note of how black kids spoke to and interacted with one another. My
conversational partners were routinely surprised by the openness with which their black students
talked about race. Lastly, spatial socialization resulted from the white teacher/black student
interactions that took place on a daily basis. Formally “raceless” teachers were seen as – and
treated as – white teachers by black students and black families, a process that eventually altered
the way they looked at and thought about themselves, racially.

**Everybody Knows I Teach at a Black School**

That’s funny, I only have to say the word urban and everybody knows what I
mean. Everybody knows I teach at a black school. All my friends, my parents, my
girlfriend, they all look at me like I’m crazy, you know. Like how can you work
at a school like that?

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*James Rhodes, 40*

Every one of my interview respondents came from schools with a black student
population of 60% or higher. In fact, the majority of the teachers I interviewed came from
schools with a black student population of 80% or higher. Brick City is a highly segregated city, which is subsequently reflected in the Central City School District. As mentioned previously, the CCSD has a number of schools with a predominantly black student population, with several schools being almost exclusively black. Still, in order to examine the potential ways that racialized space affects white racial identity, I first needed to be sure that my conversational partners, themselves, interpreted their respective schools as black schools. Therefore, the first part of this section details how white teachers racialized the schools where they worked. Every one of my conversational partners, without exception, thought of their schools as racialized spaces. Perhaps tellingly, the majority of my conversational partners specifically thought of their schools as black spaces.

Urban education is increasingly being associated with students of color (Ispa-Landa and Conwell, 2015; Myers, 2005; Pollack, 2013; Watson, 2012). Although 2014 marked the first time in American history that nonwhite students comprised a majority of public school students,\(^3\) the minoritization of urban education is an ongoing process that spans the last 60 plus years (Boger and Orfield, 2005; Chemerinsky, 2002; Omi and Winant, 1994; Tatum, 2007; Watson, 2011). Consistent with this trend, my conversational partners all considered the word \textit{urban} to be synonymous with \textit{black}. Ms. Jarvis, a relatively recent college graduate and middle school health teacher, expressed this very sentiment when discussing her professional experiences at a school that has a student population that is over 90% black.

\textbf{Q:} Do you consider Gdener Middle School to be a black school?

\textbf{Ms. Jarvis:} Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean, are you serious? (Laughter). We only have a handful of, um, white students in the school, and, um, I think that um, in my first couple of years, I’ve only had like four, maybe five white students. The rest of my kids come from more of an urban background, you know.

\textbf{Q:} When you say urban background, do you mean black or African American?
Ms. Jarvis: Oh my god, does that sound bad? (Laughter). I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it like, I didn’t mean to be offensive or anything like that, I just meant, um, (pause).

Q: No, no, no, I didn’t get offended at all. I’m just trying to be as clear as possible, so when I go over my notes later, I’ll know exactly what it was you were trying to say. This way, I don’t have to guess. It’s all about clarification.

Ms. Jarvis: Oh, okay. Well that’s a relief, (laughter). So, yeah, um, like I was saying. Most of my kids, pretty much all of my kids come from urban backgrounds. Um, and by that I mean they’re black (laughter), just to be clear. Like I said, this is my third year teaching and I can pretty much count all of the white students I’ve had on one hand, you know. Some of our students are immigrants, you know, but they’re like, they’re black too, so um, I would say yeah, Gardener is definitely a black school.

On multiple occasions throughout our interview, Mrs. Jarvis equated urban with black, the first time of which, she was unsure whether or not she had broken some unwritten rule of racial discourse. When I asked a follow up question, just to be sure that Ms. Jarvis was, in fact, referencing black students when she described kids from “an urban background,” her face turned red and she made a point to apologize to me for her ostensible racial faux pas. After I explained to her that my follow up question was for the sole purpose of clarification, she resumed speaking about the racial composition of her students, particularly about the fact that the vast majority of them – including those from an immigrant background – have been black. For Mrs. Jarvis, the overwhelmingly black student body of Gardener Middle was more than enough for her to conceptualize it as a black school, making Gardener a nonwhite racialized space.

For other teachers, it was more than the predominantly black student body that led them to think of their schools as racialized spaces. A theme that emerged early, and remained consistent throughout my data analysis, was culture, or the idea that various workplaces were dominated by a uniquely racialized, uniquely black culture. From speech patterns to modes of dress, from student attitudes to student behavior, and from “school indifference” to a “broken
family structure,” the teachers I interviewed routinely discussed attitudes, behaviors, and values that they considered to be examples of black culture. As Mrs. Edwards articulates below, her school was not only a predominantly black school, but it was also a school that “acted black.”

Mrs. Edwards: There’s a certain, um, a certain culture at my school. I think the kids (pause), um, the kids and the type of neighborhoods that they live in and the type of families that they come from, um, I think it’s more of, of what society might consider to be black culture. I mean, I don’t want to come across as racist or anything, but if I’m being honest, there’s a certain culture in the school that um, I believe is a result of the students that go there.

Q: You mentioned that society might consider your school’s culture to be black culture, is that how you see it personally?

Mrs. Edwards: I do. I do. I mean, look, you’ll have kids that don’t show up to school for two weeks, but when they do come back, they have brand new clothes, you know, brand new sneakers. You’ll have parents that will be front and center during the basketball game, but won’t bother to show up to parent-teacher conferences, you know. You have kids sagging their pants every day, and if you say something to them, they cuss you out. Then you call their parents and they cuss you out, you know. So yeah, I think the culture of the school is um, well (pause).

Q: Black culture?

Mrs. Edwards: Yeah. I think it’s unfortunate, but it’s the truth. Our students act a certain way, um, they act black almost in the stereotypical sense.

The idea that urban schools were permeated with black culture was, itself, an idea that was laden with racial stereotypes. Throughout my fieldwork, my conversational partners recited many of the troupes that have come to be associated with blacks and their commitment, or lack thereof, to the benefits of education. Chief among them, were the ideas that black students do not value education, that blacks, as a whole, cannot delay gratification, and that black parents placed a higher premium on clothing, shoes, and sports than they did on the educational success of their children (Cook and Ludwig, 1997; Downey, 2008; Downey and Ainsworth, 2002; Fordham and Ogbo, 1986; Harris, 2006; Majors and Billson, 1993; McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 1978). While
interrogating these stereotypes – as well as the impact they may have on urban education – is a worthy, and necessary, research endeavor, such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this project. I mention them here because, beyond a majority black student body, the explicit racial stereotyping of black student attitudes, black student behavior, and black community values all contributed to racialization of urban schools.

In addition to the sheer number of black bodies and the numerous examples of “black culture,” visual references to black historical icons draped the classroom and hallway walls of CCSD schools. Pictures of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Frederick Douglass lined the school hallways, and those of Barack and Michelle Obama could be found in various classrooms. These visual references reinforced the racialization of urban schools in the minds of my conversational partners. To them, their schools were black schools, and as one teacher, Mrs. Meredith, put it, “every month is black history month at my school.” In this sense, the physical space of the school, itself, was seen by my conversational partners as representing blackness, leaving zero doubt that, in their minds, their respective work environments were nonwhite racialized spaces. Taken together, the predominantly black student body, the perception of black cultural pathologies, and the visual representation of historical and contemporary black cultural icons all worked to racialize numerous schools throughout the Central City School District.

They love calling each other the N-word

I mean, just the way they talk to each other, you know. All you hear is nigga this and nigga that. Every day, day after day, ‘you my nigga,’ or ‘shut up, nigga.’ I don’t um, I hate to say you know, nigga, in front of you. I personally hate that word, but that’s pretty much all you hear some days. They love calling each other the n-word.

Alexa Boyd, 43
A second component of spatial socialization is the normalcy and consistency of explicitly racialized discourse. For my conversational partners, the relative ease with which their students thought about, broached, and discussed the subject of race, was initially jarring to them, and played a major role in their racial re-socialization. As employees of predominantly black schools, the same teachers who admitted to never having thought about race, were suddenly inundated with “nothing but race.” In stark contrast from the seemingly nonracial discourse that permeated the predominantly, and sometimes, exclusively white spaces they were used to, my conversational partners were exposed and re-exposed to explicitly racialized discourse on a daily basis. Unsurprisingly, the teachers that I interviewed were not expecting, and thus, were not prepared for, the constant barrage of racialized discourse that emanated from their students and their student’s families.

The racialized discourse that my interviewees initially found jarring was actually not directed at them, personally, but instead were the discursive exchanges between black students and their peers. The way that black students spoke to one another, especially their nonchalant use of the word “nigga,” caught many of my conversational partners off guard. For adults who had spent the vast majority of their lives in racially homogenous, ostensibly non-racialized spaces, the constant exposure to explicit racialized discourse within an explicitly racialized space, left many of them confused and uncertain about their new racial reality. Below, Candice Satter, a middle school math teacher, describes the first time she heard her students engage in explicitly racial discourse.

Ms. Satter: You wouldn’t believe how much they use the n-word. Even the girls. I remember walking to my class, 7:30 in the morning, and out of nowhere I hear, ‘fuck you, nigga.’ I mean, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to say that word to you, but, you know, it was shocking. I hadn’t even had my morning coffee and I’m already hearing racial slurs. I found myself getting really upset, you know. I mean I don’t
get it. Why would students, black students, you know, why would they be using that word? I mean, I hate using it even now.

**Q:** How did you respond to hearing that word for the first time?

**Ms. Satter:** Well, like I said, it was shocking. I turned around and it was a group of eleven and twelve year old girls. As soon as they saw me, they all stopped talking and looked at me like I was crazy. I didn’t know what to do. I had no idea what to say. So after a minute of standing there looking stupid, I just said good morning and walked away.

Ms. Satter described being shocked at hearing the word “nigga,” especially given the fact that she was in a school setting. Arguably one of the most debated and most reviled words in the English language (Asim, 2007; Kennedy, 2008; Rahman, 2012), “nigga,” was a word that initially engendered anxiety in my conversational partners. Over time, however, white teachers became desensitized to hearing it, and with each passing day, they grew more and more accustomed to hearing “students using racial slurs.” Due to the fact that such discourse was commonplace, my interviewees focused more on policing the racial discourse in their own classrooms, as opposed to addressing every instance of racial discourse throughout the school, more broadly. Ms. Satter, for example, bars students from using the word “nigga” in her classroom, but she tries to ignore it anywhere else in this school. That is, with the exception of her specific room, she now gives little more than a passing glance whenever she hears a student using the word “nigga.” In her own words, “if you stop students in the hall every time you hear that word, it would take you over an hour to get to the bathroom.”

The regularity with which black students called each other “nigga,” was not the only intra-racial discourse that challenged, or interrupted, the racial socialization of my conversational partners. Any number of recent events – from the election of President Obama to the death of Trayvon Martin – engendered an abundance of racialized discourse within their respective classrooms. Perhaps more disconcerting, was the realization on the part of white teachers that
they did not see eye to eye with their black students on any number of topics. Time and again, my interviewees found themselves at odds with their students about the racial motivations for, and racial significance of, various current events. For example, when Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012, many of my interviewees were surprised and eventually became frustrated by what they considered to be the unnecessary invoking of race into a tragic event. Multiple teachers specifically used Trayvon Martin as an example of students “injecting race” into a situation where it was not warranted. The differing opinions about the extent to which racism affected contemporaneous events, has, at times, led to tension between white teachers and black students. Such tension elevated the salience of race and strengthened the effect of spatial socialization.

Unfamiliar with the rules and mores of explicit race conversations, my conversational partners initially tried to downplay or ignore the persistence of racialized discourse between their students. Reluctantly, though, most of the teachers I interviewed found it impossible to avoid their students on matters of race, eventually deciding to engage them openly. Mrs. Doyle, a high school language arts teacher, described an incident in which she, after ignoring “cries of racism” for several days, decided to “take back” her classroom by addressing her students directly.

Mrs. Doyle: I wasn’t used to talking about race so much, you know. In my family, we just didn’t talk about it. It was never all that important. When I think about my students, I think it’s crazy how much they bring up race, it’s almost second nature to them. I mean, they see race in everything. I remember after the whole Trayvon Martin thing, or situation, um, the Zimmerman trial, for days on end, that’s the only thing the kids talked about. They weren’t interested in doing any work, they weren’t interested anything. It was just ‘fuck George Zimmerman,’ ‘fuck the police,’ ‘America is so racist,’ just racism, you know. So many cries of racism. Finally, I just didn’t want to deal with it anymore, I had to take back my classroom, so I just went for it.

Q: What did you do?

Mrs. Doyle: Well ignoring it didn’t work (laughter). I mean, you can only put your head in the sand for so long before you suffocate, you know. One day, there
was a group of students in one of my classes that kept talking about Trayvon Martin. Every single day, that’s all they talked about. So I just said something like, look, I agree, Zimmerman is a jerk, but that doesn’t make him a racist. He had a fair trial and they found him not guilty. Stop making everything about race.

Q: How did they respond?

Mrs. Doyle: Holy shit. You’d think I had just insulted their grandmother or something. The whole class just exploded at me. Every single one of them just lost it. They started yelling, I saw one boy crying. You know, it’s something I’ll never forget. After I don’t know, like 20 minutes or so, I finally got them to calm down. I told them I’d give them all a chance to speak. One of the girls, the ring leader I guess, she had these big, deep brown eyes and she looked right back at me, she said, ‘you know Mrs. Doyle, why do white people pretend nothing is ever about race?’

Q: Wow. Ok, so how did you respond?

Mrs. Doyle: Well at that point, I knew the jig was up (laughter). I could’ve tried to put my foot down, but this was a battle I probably wasn’t going to win, you know. So from that point on, I knew I had to engage them. Whether I wanted to or not, whether I agreed with them or not, when they talked about race, I talked about race. I had no choice.

Mrs. Doyle’s reluctant decision to discuss race with her students was exemplary of the way my conversational partners, as a whole, transitioned from ignoring racialized discourse in their classrooms and schools to engaging their students in highly sensitive, explicitly racial conversations. The majority of my interviewees were not only surprised, but to a certain degree, also dismayed by the amount of racialized discourse in their schools. For them, the degree to which their students spoke openly about race was indicative of a much larger pattern, one in which blacks and other racial minorities insisted on “making everything about race.” Again, as people who spent most of their lives intentionally ignoring race and rarely, if ever, participating in explicitly racialized conversations, the decision to engage their students on race was a very personal and difficult one to make. Even after my interview respondents decided to discuss race and racism in their classrooms, the majority of them found themselves disagreeing with their
students about to extent to which race, or racism, played a role in any particular incident, a new reality that heightened their sense of being a racial outsider.

For my conversational partners, their preconception of urban schools as racialized spaces was confirmed by the hyper-racialized discourse that permeated the physical buildings, themselves. The combination of racialized space and racialized discourse greatly affected the way white teachers thought of themselves, racially. Even though predominantly white spaces are, indeed, racialized spaces, the invisibility of whiteness, to a large degree, prevented my conversational partners from seeing them as such. The visible and discursive racialization of predominantly black schools provided them no such quarter. From black students calling each other “nigga” on a daily basis to the general insistence on “making everything about race,” explicitly racialized discourse permeated predominantly black schools, making the already racialized physical space all the more real. These two processes – racialized physical space and racialized discourse – were significant factors in the spatial socialization of white teachers in predominantly black schools.

**I’m Cool for a White Girl**

Don’t get me wrong, they still look at me as a white girl, but it’s a little bit different, I’m cool for a white girl. That’s what they always tell me, ‘Ms. J, I like coming to your class, you’re cool for a white girl.’ At first, I didn’t know how to take it, but you know what, after working at Gardener for three years, hell yeah, I’ll take it.

*Cynthia Jarvis, 24*

Working in a hyper-racialized physical environment and being routinely subjected to highly racialized discourse, while significant, comprised only two aspects of spatial socialization. While the racialization of urban schools and the racialized discourse within them, both, contributed to spatial socialization, nothing was more consequential than the daily interactions
between white teachers and their black students. From the first day of class, black students left little doubt that they looked at my conversational partners not as teachers, but as white teachers. To be clear, my interviewees were fully aware of the fact that they were white, and they were also aware that others, including their students, saw them as such. Yet, the extent to which race shaped the worldview and daily behaviors of black students – as well as their families – caused my conversational partners, for the first time in their lives, to take a meaningful and sustained look at themselves, racially.

Alexa Boyd, a middle school math teacher, has spent her entire career working in urban schools. For the last 12 years, she has been at Jackson Middle School, a school with a student population that is close to 80% black. During our interview, Mrs. Boyd volunteered that she was “super progressive” and had been “committed to social justice” her entire adult life. For Mrs. Boyd, teaching racially and economically disadvantaged students was a calling, and the idea of teaching at an all-white suburban school was simply never an option. Mrs. Boyd explained to me that she purposely enrolled in an urban education program, and, accordingly, she was well aware of the social problems that accompanied teaching in urban schools. What Mrs. Boyd was not prepared for, however, was the bombardment of, and bluntness with which, students characterized and confronted her as a white teacher. As Mrs. Boyd, herself, put it, “I was prepared for the poverty, the single-parent homes, the academic and behavioral issues, you know, but I didn’t think I’d have to defend being white every day. My social justice training didn’t prepare me for that.”

Throughout my interviews, my conversational partners repeatedly spoke of being taken aback, at best, or feeling racially discriminated against, at worst, whenever one of their students called or referred to them as white. Unlike the racialized discourse between students – calling
each other “nigga,” for example – or even engaging their students in explicitly racial conversations – such as the racial significance of Trayvon Martin’s death – the teachers I interviewed, with the exception of a few, could not get on board with explicitly, and meaningfully, being referred to as white by their students. Socialized in racially segregated, yet ostensibly colorblind environments, my conversational partners equated racial recognition with racism itself. Therefore, for white teachers working in predominantly black schools, getting called white in such an open and explicit manner was analogous to African Americans getting called a “nigger in public.”

Mrs. Marsi: Imagine that um, you know, you had a group of black teachers teaching at a Grand Ledge school or whatever. I mean, you know how it is out there, it’s pretty much all white people out there. Now, if the students were running around calling their teachers nigger all the time, I’m sorry, but it would be front page news. Nobody would allow that, you know.

Q: So, when your students call or refer to you as white, you feel like you are being subjected to racial slurs, is that right?

Mrs. Marsi: Yeah, definitely. I mean, maybe it isn’t the same as, um, you know, being called the n-word, but it’s still a racial slur and it still hurts. And it doesn’t go away. You don’t get used to it. You think you will after a while, but you don’t. It’s emotionally draining and it has absolutely nothing to do with teaching. It’s just, um, it’s just something we have to deal with, I guess.

Mrs. Marsi, like most of my interview respondents, was not used to, and therefore, was not prepared to handle, the explicit and intentional racial recognition that permeated her workplace. In fact, Mrs. Marsi likened her work experiences to a group of black teachers getting called nigger by white suburbanites. For Mrs. Marsi, getting called white was not merely a violation of ideological norms, but rather, it was an emotional shock to her person, one that she had to endure on a regular basis. This kind of reaction was commonplace throughout my fieldwork, as multiple interviewees became upset when recalling instances of getting called white, or, as one teacher described it, “being reduced to your skin color.” Just as they had done
previously – when discussing what it means to be white – many interviewees took long pauses when trying to discuss being openly recognized as white. Only this time, the pauses in question were not due to rhetorical incoherence, but rather, they were the result of my conversational partners having to recall painful memories.  

In the exchange below, Amanda Costa, a 34 year old social studies teacher who has taught in the Center City School District for 10 years, goes into great detail about how repeatedly getting called white by her students and their parents almost caused her to leave teaching altogether.

Mrs. Costa: It can be really emotional at times. Um, it’s like (pause), you put all this work into connecting with the kids. I mean, yeah, we’re their teachers, but you want them to like you, you want them to appreciate all the hard work you put in to helping them learn. And some of them do, you know. Some of them are appreciative, but they are few and far between. Most of my students just look at me as some white lady telling them what to do. That’s it. That’s all I am to them. It’s pretty much the same thing every year. No matter how hard I work or, you know, how, um, how many years I’ve been at the school or whatever, I’m still white. No, let me take that back, I’m just a white girl. That’s how they refer to me, you know. I’m 34 years old and I have a bunch of 13 year olds calling me a white girl every day. And to be completely honest, as bad as the students are, the fucking parents are worse. I don’t mean to swear at you, but oh my god. I can almost understand the students, at least to a degree, you know, they’re kids. But the damn parents have no excuse. You’re a fucking adult. Act like it.

Q: Could you elaborate?

Mrs. Costa: Yeah, so I remember a time when, well I have so many stories, but this one stands out. I was up for tenure and I was being observed. Perfect storm, you know. Things were actually going pretty well. I mean, I had a couple kids doing whatever the hell they wanted, but most of the kids were on their best behavior. I think they knew I was getting observed. So I’m right in the middle of a lesson when I had this parent, the parent of one of my worst students just burst into the class room. ‘Why the fuck did you suspend my son, he might get expelled.’ I couldn’t believe what was going on, you know, she was just yelling at me, cussing me out in front of the entire class. So I look over to VP (vice principal), you know, because he was the person observing me. He gets up and tries to intervene, saying 'ma’am, ma’am, calm down.’ But at this point, she didn’t care, she was out for blood. ‘I’m tired of you racist motherfuckers picking on my son.’ I mean it was just white this, white that. She pretty much accused me
of being some kind of Nazi, just because I kicked her son out of my classroom. Her son by the way, the reason I kicked him out of my class is because just the day before he called me a ‘stupid white bitch,’ ok. It was (pause), it was pretty rough. I thought she was going to attack me. After it was over, I just got in my car and left. Didn’t tell anybody, didn’t say anything to anyone. I just left.

Q: Wow. You just left the school?

Mrs. Costa: Yeah, I had to get out of there.

Q: Did you get in trouble? Were you reprimanded by your school?

Mrs. Costa: Not really. I mean my VP saw the entire thing. He saw how crazy she was. Besides, I didn’t really care at that point. I was pretty sure that I was quitting. The thought of going back to that school literally made me sick. It made me physically ill. But here I am, close to 10 years later and I’m still there (laughter).

Q: What changed?

Mrs. Costa: Well I need the money (laughter). It didn’t take me long to realize that my bills weren’t going to pay themselves, you know. Plus, that little fucker Jamal and his racist ass mom were banned from the school.

Although Mrs. Costa recounted an experience that would have been harrowing for any teacher, regardless of its genesis, she explicitly connected it to race. More specifically, Mrs. Costa attributed the anger and vitriol directed at her by this particular parent to, at least in part, the fact that she was white. While the above example was an outlier in terms of severity, Mrs. Costa and my other conversational partners were able to provide multiple examples of how, in their eyes, explicit racial categorization directly contributed explicit racialized conflict. In this sense, the incident that almost forced Mrs. Costa to leave urban education, while extreme, represented what my conversational partners believed to be an extension of the cultural, discursive, and racial othering that they experienced was white teachers. That is, before and above all else, their black students and their black students’ families saw them as white, a racial classification that affected their daily interactions and everything else that they tried or wanted to do as teachers.
Within predominantly black schools, my interview respondents, to varying degrees, underwent a racial re-socialization. Parents racialized their kids, students racialized each other, and both parents and students, along with the physical space, itself, racialized anyone with white skin. As a result, my conversational partners started to see themselves as meaningfully white. The racial designation of white not only affected my interviewee’s experiences as teachers, but affected their conceptualization as whiteness, as well. That is, owing to their experiences within predominantly black schools, the teachers I interviewed came to see whiteness as professionally consequential and personally significant. Predominantly black schools spatially socialized white teachers in a way that interrupted the results of their previous socialization, namely that whiteness is the invisible, raceless norm. For my conversational partners, the physical, discursive, and interactive dimensions of these particular spaces caused them to see whiteness in more complex and more certain ways. In short, spatial socialization caused my conversational partners to become white.

**Becoming White**

In this section, I use interview data to detail the consequences of spatial socialization and highlight the process of becoming white. In doing so, I juxtapose the various responses given to the question “what does it mean to be white?” with those given to the question “what does it mean to be a white teacher working in predominantly black schools?” In a remarkable and incredibly stark contrast, the very same teachers who had previously claimed to have never, or rarely, given any thought to whiteness, became consumed by whiteness within predominantly black schools. Also, the very same teachers who had trouble articulating a cogent position about what it means to be white – and in some cases, even speaking in complete sentences – became fluent in white racial identity, and were easily able to enumerate a variety of ways that whiteness
was meaningful to them and their various experiences. As the data will show, nonwhite racialized space illuminated whiteness for my interviewees in ways that shaped their experiences as teachers, as well as their respective conceptions of themselves as people.

The process of becoming white was symbolic interactionist in nature, primarily resulting from the disparate meaning giving to whiteness by white teachers and their black students, as well as the daily interactions between the two groups. Symbolic interactionism, a foundational theory in sociology, focuses on the meaning that we give to symbols and the way those symbols, in turn, affect our collective behavior (Blumer, 1986; Goffman, 1978; Mead, 1934). As a micro-level theory, symbolic interactionism analyzes the numerous ways that human agency shapes and reshapes the broader social world. According to symbolic interactionist thought, the way we come to assign, learn, and change the meaning we give to symbols is through interaction with others and various institutions. In a truly dialectical relationship, the meaning that we give to symbols shape our behavior, and our behavior – particularly in the form of interactions – is central to understanding and creating new symbolic meaning (Blumer, 1986; Goffman, 1978; Mead, 1934).

Becoming white followed an identifiable, symbolic interactionalist pattern. In three steps, teachers would go from never thinking about whiteness to routinely thinking about whiteness. First, white teachers began to see themselves as white. In contrast to the invisible norm, my interview respondents started to see themselves as the racialized other. Second, white teachers started to feel white. Owing specifically to their race, as well as, from their perspective, the hyper-racialized environment of predominantly black schools, white teachers began to feel uncomfortable, specifically whenever they found themselves as the only white person within any particular space. Finally, white teachers began to, in their own words, be white. That is, they
behaved, or performed, in ways that they believed would minimize the probability of them being accused of racism or racial discrimination, regardless of whether not it was pedagogically practical. Teachers also wanted to mitigate the effects of feeling white, which, for them, took on a negative connotation. These three steps – seeing white, feeling white, and being white – all intersected and worked in concert to racialize white teachers within predominantly black schools.

I started to see myself as White

There’s only so many times you can get yelled at for being white before your start to internalize it. Eventually you start to think of yourself as white first, and a person second. That’s exactly what happened. I started to see myself as white. Once that happens, you have to look for those moments that reminds you why you’re there. Like, oh yeah, I’m a teacher.

Amanda Costa, 34

Working in predominantly black schools had a significant impact on how white teachers looked at themselves, racially. From my first interview to my last, the contrast between how teachers talked about being white, in a general sense, versus how they talked about being a white in predominantly black schools, stood out for its contrast, its clarity, and its consistency. In answering the latter question, gone were the stutters and the nervous bouts of laughter, and, once situated within nonwhite racialized spaces, not one teacher claimed to have “never thought about” what it means to be white. Conversely, my conversational partners spoke clearly, and at times, concisely, about how whiteness shaped their experiences within predominantly black schools. That is, in terms of rhetorical clarity and thematic content, my interview respondents spoke in ways that ran counter to their previous statements, all within the same interview.

For example, Jessi McCormick, a high school English teacher who, previously in the interview, struggled considerably when trying to discuss what it means to be white, became completely sure of herself and what she wanted to say about teaching at a predominantly black
school. Mrs. McCormick went on to describe being a white teacher as something she thought about “all the time.”

**Q:** Earlier I asked you what it means for you to be white. Along those lines, can you tell me what it means for you to be white working in a predominantly black school?

**Mrs. McCormick:** Well this is something that I actually think about a lot. All the time, really. I feel like, that, um, as a white teacher, my kids are automatically suspicious of me, you know. I, I mean building relationships is a big part of being an effective teacher. It’s absolutely vital to build strong relationships with the students and their parents. But sometimes, you know, I think many of my students have a hard time trusting me. It can be very difficult. Not impossible, but harder than it needs to be.

**Q:** You say that, at times, your students have a hard time trusting you?

**Mrs. McCormick:** Correct.

**Q:** And do you believe this is because of the racial variation between you and your students? Do you believe it’s because you’re white and they’re black?

**Mrs. McCormick:** Yeah, I mean that’s a really big part of it. One thing I always tell my husband about my students is that they’re not shy about expressing their opinions. Seriously. Through all the stress and frustration they cause me, at least they’re honest. They’ll flat out say to me, ‘look Mrs. M, I don’t really trust white people’ or ‘nobody in my family trusts white people,’ you know. So I’m like, oh, well that’s nice, we’re going to have a great year (laughter).

**Q:** How do you respond whenever one of your black students admits to not trusting white people?

**Mrs. McCormick:** Well, I expect it now. It’s no big shock when I hear it these days. But um, to me, it simply means that I have to find a way in. Whether it’s sports, music, the Obamas, that’s a good one, they all love the Obamas, um, you have to be willing to put in the work. It’s not easy, believe me it’s not easy, but once a student drops their guard and decides to let you in, all the work you put in is worth it. Now you can teach.

Mrs. McCormick went on to describe some of the meaningful relationships she has formed with students over the years. Considered to be a necessary prerequisite to effective teaching, Mrs. McCormick attributes her success in forming relationships to the herculean effort
that she undertakes to overcome the distrust her students harbor towards white people in general. As she mentions above, building relationships with her black students, although not impossible, is unnecessarily difficult because of racial mistrust. As it turns out, for Mrs. McCormick, getting past the racially motivated barriers that are constantly erected by her black students requires her to think about and consider the various ways that whiteness has impacted, and continues to impact, the lives of her students. Mrs. McCormick makes this point later in the interview when she, rather concisely, states, “it can’t be a coincidence that so many of my students don’t trust white people. It’s my job to figure out why.”

Although Mrs. McCormick was unique in the way she made sense of whiteness in nonwhite racialized spaces, the genesis of her seeing whiteness to begin with – student/teacher interactions – was consistent with the genesis of white visibility for my other conversational partners. Mrs. McCormick thought about whiteness in an effort to better understand her students, particularly why so many of them distrusted white people. Other teachers, too, began to notice their personal whiteness through extensive interactions with black students. Ms. Livingston, a physical education teacher who works at a school that is close to 70% black, talked at length about seeing herself specifically as a white woman, as opposed to a woman.

Ms. Livingston: I’ve always taken pride in being a strong, independent woman. I mean come on, I’m a gym teacher. Not many students expect to walk into the gym and see me standing here. So being a woman, um, it’s something I’ve always thought of as important to who I am. But, after working here for six years, it’s a little more complicated now. I just don’t see myself as a woman, I see myself as a white woman, you know. When you’re standing in front of a gym full of black students, um it’s, impossible not to notice that you’re not quite in the club (laughter). It’s like, yep, I’m definitely white.

The more she interacted with her black students, the more Ms. Livingston saw whiteness as something bigger and more meaningful than pure demography. Seeing herself specifically as a
white woman, as opposed to a race-less woman, was the direct result of her experiences within nonwhite racialized spaces. Put differently, the racialization of predominantly black schools, including the students, the culture, and the physical space, itself, caused Ms. Livingston to look at herself racially, to see herself as meaningfully white. Furthermore, by positioning herself outside of the racial norm – as “not quite in the club” – Ms. Livingston placed herself squarely in the realm of the racial other. That is, within predominantly black schools, she is not only white, but she is different as well. For Ms. Livingston, the overwhelming blackness of her student body proved to be the most salient factor in her transition from a woman to a white women, from the invisible norm to the racial other.

The more my conversational partners interacted with their students, the more they realized that black students ascribed specific meanings to whiteness, including racism and privilege. As one teacher remarked about her nearly all black student body, “they think all white people are privileged snobs who don’t know anything about struggle. They think we all have it easy.” In this sense, no matter its gendered or classed dimensions, no matter its intra-racial variation, whiteness was privileged in the black imaginary. This is a reality that my conversational partners found to be shocking. In addition to being privileged, black students also conveyed to their white teachers their thoughts on white racism. Ms. Strodel, a 29 year old health teacher, was shocked to learn that her students, at least initially, saw her as racist, a revelation that helped her see whiteness in different, more meaningful ways.

Ms. Strodel: Ivory, she’s probably one of my favorite students, just flat out told me one day that she was happy I wasn’t a racist. And I’m like, why would you even think that, you know. She looks me right in the eyes a casually says, ‘because you’re white.’ Then she just walks off like it was no big deal. Meanwhile, I’m standing there shocked. I mean is this how she sees white people? Is this how they all see white people? I don’t know, it just got me
thinking a lot, you know, like, how am I supposed to respond? What am I supposed to do?

Even though Mrs. McCormick, Ms. Livingston, and Ms. Strodel reacted somewhat differently to seeing themselves as white, the process by which whiteness was revealed to them was largely the same. Prior to working in predominantly black schools, not one of them looked at themselves in racial terms. For all three teachers, whiteness symbolized normalness, and thus, remained invisible and conceptually insignificant. Once they began interacting with black students, however, they soon realized that whiteness, in the eyes of their students, was not only visible, but it was racially meaningful as well. To a great number of their black students, whiteness symbolized a combination of racial privilege and racial oppression, a sentiment that was outwardly expressed on a regular basis. Ultimately, whiteness, disparately symbolized, shaped the interactions between teachers and students. In turn, these daily interactions helped to create new meaning, constructing whiteness in a way that was visibly meaningful to my conversational partners for the first time in their lives.

_Sometimes it really sucks being the only white person in the room_

I’ve wanted to be a teacher since I was in the 4th grade. Believe me, people look at you funny when you’re a boy bragging about wanting to be a teacher. So I’m used to being uncomfortable, I’m used to being different, you know. I think it’s hard to make me feel uncomfortable or like the odd man out, but somehow, a group of 14-year-old boys, um, black boys, did it by the second month of school (laughter). I laugh now, but man let me tell you, sometimes it really sucks being the only white person in the room. That’s something I really wasn’t ready for.

_Clay Davis, 36_

Seeing whiteness was only the first step in the three-step process of becoming white. In fact, for my conversational partners, seeing themselves as white was the most benign stage in their spatialized construction of a racially meaningful identity. Although realizing that their black students saw them as white could be jarring, it was the way they felt after seeing whiteness,
themselves, that forced many of them to question who they were as people, as well as their ability as teachers. That is, after recognizing their own race as meaningful, my conversational partners subsequently realized that, within nonwhite racialized spaces, their feelings about whiteness, about themselves, and about their chosen profession, had changed significantly. They started to notice their surroundings more, and even though racial context was instrumental in helping them see whiteness to begin with, now, they started to feel white, particularly in the sense that they were racially out of place. Thus, feeling white – while as unusual and unique as seeing white – was far more consequential to the process of becoming white.

The fundamental difference between seeing white and feeling white is that the former pertains to racial (self) recognition, while the latter pertains to an emotional state resulting from interactions with specific people or reactions to specific events. It should also be noted that seeing white and feeling white were not mutually exclusive processes, and that they sometimes overlapped. Seeing white influenced how white teachers felt, and feeling white helped white teachers recognize their whiteness on a more consistent basis. As a result, my conversational partners routinely found themselves in situations where, based on the words and/or actions of their black students, the parents of their black students, or at times, even their black colleagues, they began to feel out of place specifically because they were white. This particular point is important because, for my conversational partners, the source of their discomfort and the driving force of their otherness, was being recognized and treated as white in nonwhite racialized spaces.

Mrs. Gray, a high school music teacher, recalled an incident that epitomizes the process of feeling white. I asked her if she had ever felt uncomfortable or out of place at work because of her race, and she immediately answered in the affirmative. Mrs. Gray told the story of how, during a rehearsal for a Black History Month celebration, one of her fellow music teachers – who
was black – started speaking openly and negatively about white people. Stunned and left speechless, Mrs. Gray remarked on how she felt both disgusted and guilty, not because of anything she had done, personally, but simply because she was white.

**Q:** Within predominantly black schools, have you ever felt uncomfortable or out of place due to your race?

**Mrs. Gray:** Yes. I’ve felt, um, there’s been plenty of times. I mean it happens pretty often, not like it used to, but it definitely still happens.

**Q:** Do you have any specific examples?

**Mrs. Gray:** Um, yeah. So normally every Monday we do community forum where we all get together as a community and kids perform and do things, you know, teachers talk and we go over things about the week or whatever. And normally during black history month, a lot of the music teachers always focus on, um, black heroes and black musicians that have, you know, affected our history, highlight them, the kids do speeches and learn their music and all that other stuff. Well, um, after a while, I started to feel uncomfortable. Um, at first, I never felt uncomfortable in the building, I always felt a part of them, a part of the school, a part of the community and, um, more and more, I just didn’t. It started feeling like I was an outsider or even an imposter. One year about three years ago, we had a new music teacher, um, who was black. She was young, she had just got out of college and she, she was up there, she spoke for like 25 minutes and I felt disgusting (pause). She, she made me feel like a bad person. She made me feel horrible, by what she was saying about white people and how we all are.

**Q:** What was she saying?

**Mrs. Gray:** She, um, she was like, she was kind of, and I guess, maybe this was my philosophy cause I look at people, I try to look at people and the fact that, you know, there are good and bad people no matter what color you are, you’re a good seed or a bad seed. And she was kind of making the assumption that white people are just bad seeds. And um, she was talking about white and black and was basically kind of like ‘don't believe what they say, you don’t need to embrace them or embrace their lies.’ I'm sorry, I don't remember everything because it was a few years ago and I may not remember everything, I don't know for sure exactly what she said and I don’t want to say the wrong thing right now, but, um, I do know that I felt very uncomfortable. She talked about white people in such nasty generalizations and um, I remember that people were nodding their head as she spoke. Right in front of me, you know. I, it just made me feel so uncomfortable, like I didn’t belong there. I felt really guilty, like I almost needed to apologize for being white.
Mrs. Gray’s experience of feeling white, of feeling like the racial other, typified the experiences of many of my other conversational partners, who, in similar fashion, attributed their feelings of discomfort to whiteness and the way it was symbolized within nonwhite racialized spaces. Already having recognized themselves as white – and oftentimes, finding themselves as the only white person in the room – the teachers I interviewed went into great detail about feeling “disgusting,” like “an outsider,” and how they otherwise “didn’t belong.” For Mrs. Gray, these feelings of racial otherness were sparked by what she deemed to be “nasty generalizations” about white people, espoused publicly by one of her black colleagues. Making matters worse for Mrs. Gray, was her observation that other adults in the room, the majority of whom were black, evidenced their support of said generalizations by nodding their heads in agreement, showing zero regard for her feelings or even her presence.

Beyond their black students, the teachers I interviewed spent a considerable amount of time talking about their interactions with black parents. Although they spent considerably more time interacting with students, for my conversational partners – and even with relatively limited contact – parents were just as likely to engender feelings of racialized discomfort. Of particular concern for parents was what they perceived to be a cultural mismatch between teachers and students, one that arose from having a predominantly white faculty at a school serving predominantly black students. That is, in the eyes of many black parents, whiteness – constructed in the form of white teachers – represented a fundamental lack of understanding of black students, black communities, and black culture as a whole. Compounding matters further was the willingness of black parents to express this sentiment at inopportune times, such as in front of students or even entire classrooms. According to my conversational partners, the cultural
incongruity between teachers and students, as openly expressed by black parents, not only made
them feel insecure as teachers, but uncomfortable as people, as well.

Kate Meredith, a middle school English teacher, epitomized this process by recalling a
litany of experiences that had accumulated over two-plus decades of teaching in predominantly
black schools. A veteran of over 30 years – all within urban schools – Mrs. Meredith had reached
the point in her career where she was starting to give serious consideration to retirement. Still,
even after all this time, Mrs. Meredith remembers, in vivid detail, the very first time a parent
questioned her ability to effectively teach black students. As Mrs. Meredith described this
particular experience, she became emotional and began to cry. I asked her if she wanted to take a
break or stop the interview altogether, but she insisted on continuing. I cite our conversation at
length.

_Q: You mentioned that parents have made you feel uncomfortable because of
your race, do you have any specific examples?_

_Mrs. Meredith:_ Oh god, yes (laughter). I don’t know how much time you got,
but I can talk about parents for hours. I mean, they’re the worst. Well, I probably
shouldn’t say that, some are amazing and very helpful, but some are hell-bent on
tearing down anybody that upsets their kid, especially if you’re white.

_Q: Can you elaborate?_

_Mrs. Meredith:_ Yeah, um, I remember my first year as a teacher. Here I am,
fresh out of college, bright-eyed and ready to change the world, and by the end of
the first week I was ready to quit and do something else. I’m pretty sure I went
home crying every day for almost a month. It was that bad. Um, I remember this
boy, Michael, he always gave me shit for no reason at all. I’m talking 8:30 in the
morning and he already has an attitude. So one day, we’re like 20 minutes into
class and he just starts being a jerk. He won’t let me take attendance, he’s yelling
at me, yelling at his classmates, so I just lost it. I yell at the top of my lungs, ‘get
out of my classroom and don’t come back.’ I didn’t want to be that teacher, I hate
teachers like that, you know, yellers, but I was over it. So he gets up, flips over his
desk and storms out of the classroom. I knew in the moment that I didn’t really
handle it well, but I just didn’t care, I was happy to see him go. A few of my kids
helped me clean up the mess and we got on with the day (long pause).
Q: Are you ok?

Mrs. Meredith: Yeah, I just, um, I should’ve known that it wasn’t over, but I was brand new to teaching, what the hell did I know? So um, later in the day, I’m sitting with my kids, setting them up in small groups, then all of a sudden, boom, this woman, this grown woman who I’d never seen before just burst into my classroom. She slams the door behind her and starts screaming at me in front of the entire class. ‘Why did you send my kid home?’ I was in shock. I froze. My mind went completely blank until I saw Michael standing behind her. So now I know it’s about to get crazy, and she just starts yelling all of these racist comments you know. ‘I’m sick of you white people always singling out my son. If you can’t handle black kids then take your white ass somewhere else.’

Q: Wow.

Mrs. Meredith: Yeah, I know. This was all in front of the kids. She was pretty much screaming at the top of her lungs, telling her son ‘don't listen to this white lady, she doesn't know what she's talking about,’ you know. It seemed like this went on forever, but um, finally the teacher in the class next to me, a black woman, she heard what was going on and came in the class and got her out of there. I looked at my kids and I just broke down. I completely fell apart. We have a bathroom in my class, so I just ran inside the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I didn’t even turn on the light, I just sat there crying. I was completely humiliated and I didn’t understand why. Did she really hate me that much? Did she just hate white people? I mean her son was a little shit and he didn’t deserve to stay in my classroom. Yeah, I maybe could have handled it better, but there is no way I deserved to be humiliated in front of my students like that (pause). I felt completely worthless (pause).

At this point, Mrs. Meredith’s voice cracked and she had tears in her eyes. I could see that she was visibly upset, I again asked her if she wanted to take a break. I even reminded her that if need be, we could stop the interview altogether. Mrs. Meredith shook her head and said it was ok to continue. Still, as she wiped tears from her eyes, I could see that she was still grappling with painful memories, so I waited before proceeding with the interview. We sat in silence for close to five minutes, during which time I gave serious consideration to ending the interview. Just as I was getting ready to call it off, Mrs. Meredith looked at me and smiled. She then asked, “are you ok?” At this, we both laughed, and the pressure I was starting to feel dissipated. I decided to continue the interview by asking a follow up question.
Q: How did you get past that experience?

Mrs. Meredith: It wasn’t easy, but I just focused on why I became a teacher. I took a few days off, you know. I took some time, my principal told me to take some time off, but then I realized I missed my kids. So I came back after a few days, and all of the kids had signed a card for me. It was a thank you card and um, it was just such an incredible feeling. I knew right then that I would never leave. For better or worse, these are my kids. This is my classroom and nobody is going to chase me out. I’ve been there ever since.

While the above example is somewhat extreme, it nevertheless captures the process by which white teachers came to feel uncomfortable, or in this case, “humiliated,” primarily because of their race and how it was used against them in predominantly black schools. Whenever a black student, a black parent, or even a black colleague specifically invoked whiteness when objecting to student-teacher interactions – or other day to day processes – it signaled to my conversational partners they were, to a large degree, being singled out because of their race. This process consistently led to feelings of frustration, humiliation, sadness, anger, and even guilt. The fact that these emotions were explicitly tied to race, all but ensured that, from the perspective of my conversational partners, whiteness, particularly the way it was symbolized within predominantly black schools, was the root cause of their treatment and subsequent discomfort. Thus, feeling white was not random, nor was it benign. Because it (mostly) resulted from negative experiences, to feel white was to feel mistreated, to feel white was to feel stigmatized, to feel white was to feel like the racialized other.

I Do Everything As A White Teacher

How can I be an effective teacher if I’m constantly looking over my shoulder? How do I know one of my students won’t misinterpret something I say and I get labeled a racist or that teacher that hates black students? You just never know for sure, so you have to be extremely careful. So I keep that in the back of my mind, you’re not just a teacher, you’re a white teacher. That’s how it is now, I do everything as a white teacher.

Leah Thompson, 33
Seeing white and feeling white were both highly salient steps in the process of becoming white. The third step – *being white* – moved beyond racial (self) recognition and feelings of racialized discomfort. Being white traverses thoughts and emotions and crosses into the realm of action, it encapsulates behavior, performance, and any manner of doing whiteness (Ahmed, 2007; Warren, 2001). For my conversational partners, being white was never an explicit process before they started working in predominantly black schools. In fact, reinforcing the invisibility of whiteness through personal behavior is a crucial, if not always conscious, characteristic of being white (Warren, 2001). As John T. Warren notes, “whiteness, while a systemic historical process that is diffuse and abstract, is also located through embodiment – through a repetition of mundane and extraordinary acts that continually make and remake whiteness, all while eluding scrutiny and detection” (Warren, 2001, p. 92). For white teachers in predominantly black schools, however, making and remaking whiteness while “eluding scrutiny and detection” was something they found to be virtually impossible.

Not only was whiteness easily detected within nonwhite racialized spaces, but it was scrutinized on a fairly regular basis. On the lighter side of such scrutiny, teachers were accused of talking “like a white girl,” or dressing “like a white boy.” As one teacher put it, “the kids get a kick out of the way I dress, they always make fun of me for dressing like a white boy.” Conversely, on the more serious side, teachers endured racially-based insults and accusations of discriminating against their nonwhite students. Also, as mentioned previously, whiteness was outwardly criticized by students, parents, and teachers of color for being insufficiently attuned to, and culturally incompatible with, the behavioral patterns and learning styles of black students. With their racial visibility in mind, my conversational partners were well aware that any aspect
of their behavior – from interacting with students to pedagogical practices – ran the risk of being interpreted racially, meaning that their actions could be attributed to their whiteness.

If being white, or performing whiteness, was typically comprised of unrecognizable and unintentional acts, the context of predominantly black schools rendered the process both recognizable and intentional. After recognizing themselves as meaningfully white, and subsequently experiencing the frustration, discomfort, and/or anger that, at times, resulted from feeling white, my conversational partners sought ways to accept the former while reducing the latter. That is, they made peace with that fact that whiteness, particularly their own, was suddenly visible to them, but they actively strategized and consciously acted in ways that minimized the likelihood of them feeling like the racial outsider. They also wanted to find the best way to connect with students, all while insulating themselves from charges of racism. In order to avoid confusion and confrontation, my interviewees often performed whiteness in a deliberate and purposeful manner.

The two primary ways that teachers performed whiteness were 1) compensatory and 2) protective. Compensatory ways of being white were comprised of behaviors that sought to compensate for the racial and cultural mismatch between teachers and students. Teachers engaging in this type of performance did so with the intention reassuring their students that they accepted, if not embraced, black culture. Whether authentic or inauthentic, spontaneous or staged, my conversational partners routinely described scenarios in which they lionized black celebrities, familiarized themselves with black music, and in some cases, even integrated “black vernacular,” or “black slang” into their own speech patterns. None of this was meant to be mocking or condescending towards the students, but rather, as Mr. Davis notes, “you want the kids to know that you understand them and you’re not judging them. Even if you have to fake it,
you want them to think what’s important to them is important to you. Otherwise you’re just some ignorant, bland-ass white person.”

For Mrs. Scott, her compensatory behavior started off as purely strategic, but after multiple years of teaching in predominantly black schools, it became something more. Initially, looking for a better way to connect in the classroom, Mrs. Scott enlisted her students to teach her “their lingo,” thereby facilitating better communication between teacher and students. As time went by, however, Mrs. Scott came to appreciate the way her students communicated with one another, and she found herself repeating their speech habits outside of the classroom. While Mrs. Scott purposely adapted to the cultural identity of her students in order to become a better teacher to them, she eventually “saw the complexity in the way they spoke to each other” and realized that “their communication style made more sense when you saw it up close.” As a result, Mrs. Scott, in her own words, sometimes speaks “like a 14-year old black girl.” When asked to provide an example, she replied, “I always find myself saying ‘now I’m Gucci’ whenever I’m in a good mood. I got that from the kids, you know. I’m Gucci means I’m good. My husband thinks I’m crazy.”

After performing whiteness for compensatory purposes, Mrs. Scott subconsciously integrated parts of said performance into her personal identity. For many of my other conversational partners, their compensatory performances started off strategic and they stayed that way. A major part of said strategy was to convince skeptical black parents that whiteness, or that being white, was not an insurmountable obstacle to reaching and successfully teaching their children. To accomplish this goal, my conversational partners performed whiteness in a way that reassured parents that they did, in fact, possess the requisite cultural competency needed to communicate and care for black students. These performances ranged from the playful – such as
secret handshakes with individual students – to the serious – such as openly promoting Black Lives Matter in their respective classrooms. Compensatory performances were designed to compensate for whiteness. Through various ways of being white, my conversational partners sought to bridge the cultural gap between black students and themselves, thereby becoming better teachers and reassuring skeptical black parents in the process.

The second, and in some respects, more serious way of performing whiteness, was for protection. That is, in order to protect themselves from accusations of racial discrimination – and to avoid getting branded a racist – my conversational partners closely monitored their behavior, always accounting for the racialized ways it could be perceived and interpreted by black students and their families. The teachers I interviewed routinely performed whiteness in an effort to avoid feeling white. Protectionary performances were not immediate. Teachers did not come into predominantly black schools knowing that they would routinely, and explicitly, be seen and addressed as white, nor did they realize that their behavior would constantly be scrutinized through a racialized lens. As discussed previously, before their exposure to nonwhite racialized spaces, the majority of my interviewees saw themselves as individuals who just happened to be white. After being spatially socialized, however, my conversational partners internalized their new role as white teachers, and subsequently adjusted their performances to avoid any and all forms of racialized stress (DiAngelo, 2011).

For Mrs. Weaver, mentioned above, the need to perform protectionary whiteness was learned through a traumatic experience that took place early in her career. In her third year of teaching – but first in a predominantly black school – Mrs. Weaver, in a bout of frustration, admonished her students for not working hard, and questioned whether or not they wanted to spend their adult lives on welfare. Initially unaware that she had did anything untoward, let alone
discriminatory, Mrs. Weaver would soon find out just how controversial her comments were. As she explained, the incident in question quickly grew out of control, and forever altered the way she performs whiteness in her school.

Mrs. Weaver: I like came in and we were thrown in, it was a brand new middle school so they had me teaching 7th grade. There was only one team of 7th grade teachers and everyone else was 6th and there was no 8th grade yet. So, it was just kind of transitioning and I was, there wasn't any kids that were white, at all. I think I had 130 kids, only African American kids and we had them for 90 minute blocks. I had only taught high school before and I didn't have too many years of experience at that even, and I remember that I was like oh my god, it was the hardest thing I ever done in my entire life. I think middle school, in of itself, and just um, you know, going into that, it was completely new to me, like the kids were a lot different than I would have ever expected in middle school and um, yeah. Just to make my year kind of really tough, they were really being bad for me and I was very frustrated and I think I was reading them a riot act or something, and I was just saying something like um, you know, you guys need to get things done, you need to work harder blah blah blah, and I said, you now, you need to get to college and get a good job, you don’t want to spend your entire life on welfare or something like that. I was trying to be like motivational, but I, they didn't take it that way and they pounced on me and they started like, saying that, um, that I was, like, being racist and being, you know, kind of turning the tables, sort of a mutiny, kind of turning the tables on me.

Looking for a way to simultaneously motivate her students, address their behavior, and quell her own frustration, Mrs. Weaver blurted out words that, intentionally or not, included a reference to the decades old stereotype about African Americans and their alleged dependency on welfare (Gilens, 2009; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001; Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman, 1997; Quadagno, 1994). Although Mrs. Weaver claimed to be oblivious to the racialized significance of her words, her students recognized it immediately and responded by “turning the tables” on her and staging a “mutiny.” Unfortunately for Mrs. Weaver, as she would go on to explain, the racial backlash from her comments would only get worse.

Mrs. Weaver: So I got very frustrated and after class I go down and talk to Florence, like oh my god that was just an absolute nightmare in there. I go, the kids mutinied me, you know what do I, she was a, you know, a black principal so I thought, ok, she can help me and she did, she was like, ‘listen, go get a coffee,
relax, this happens, just relax.’ So I come back the next day and she goes, ‘you have to leave.’ I go what do you mean and she goes, ‘you have to leave the school, you can't be here.’ So I go can I go to my room and get stuff? And she says, ‘no you have to leave.’ So I ask why do I have to leave? And she never really told me, so I left and I didn't hear from anybody. So, all of a sudden, Nelly Fisher, she was a returning teacher, she had retired and kind of returned to help out, she wrote me a letter and said that, you know, the kids had kind of said that I said that all black people are on welfare, and I'm like what, where would I have ever have gotten that in my entire life, I never would have even of known that statistic, like why am I trouble for that. So I was like twisted all around and then I got suspended for six weeks, with pay, but no one ever called me and asked how I was doing, you know, so it was like this huge horrendous, awful thing that happened to me. I didn't know if I was getting my job back, so I think that was the first time that I figured wait, this racism kind of could go both ways, like they sort of turned the tables on me really quick. And I realized from that day on, you got to be super careful, super clever, and super, you know kind of like, leveled off and that's what I've done ever since then. And I think I've been there now the longest of all teachers and I think it was that experience and that adaptation that I made that I kind of can do ok in that environment.

Even after Mrs. Weaver resumed teaching, she found that the negative reaction to her words went far beyond paid suspension. Despite her persistent claims to the contrary, invoking “welfare” while chastising her black students was seen as racially insensitive at best, and explicitly racist as worst. As a result, Mrs. Weaver developed a negative reputation, one that painted her as a teacher that harbored racial animosity towards her black students. She was not seen as a teacher who, under immense pressure, made a thoughtless and insensitive remark, but rather, she was a white teacher who trafficked in racial stereotypes about African Americans. This latter construction was especially prevalent amongst black students and black teachers. As Mrs. Weaver would go on to explain, this unfortunate incident soured her relationships with her black coworkers for years to come.

Mrs. Weaver Well remember how I was telling you about what the kids were accusing me of and I got suspended? Probably for two or three years, the black teachers in the building didn't talk to me. They kind of shunned me, they didn't look at me, they didn't invite me to little luncheons or picnics or anything like that. We were very separate for a long time and, um, really it was, I almost had to pretend to be someone I’m not, at least until I felt comfortable enough to open up.
And um, after they sort of got to know me and knew that I was not the evil one or whatever, they were like, ‘wait, maybe she wasn't being racist,’ and it started occurring to more and more teachers what was happening. So after a while they started, their eyes got a little bit more opened and they were fine, you know, I got them on my side.

**Q:** You say you had to pretend to be someone else, what exactly do you mean by that? Do you have any examples?

**Mrs. Weaver:** Sure. Well, now I watch every word that comes out of my mouth and sometimes I slip up, I have to admit. And I'd slip up no matter what, I would say like, you know, you're being an idiot or you know, cause kids just are, I say that to my own kids. But when I do and they still kind of pounce on me and call me a racist or whatever. Um, I find that I tend to play up racism more, you know, against blacks. I mean, I do think there’s still racism against blacks, but there’s racism by blacks too, you know. So I tend to play that up more, especially with black teachers.

After becoming a teacher at an almost exclusively black middle school, it did not take long for Mrs. Weaver to recognize her own whiteness, to experience whiteness as both a detrimental feeling and a genesis for racialized mistreatment, and to develop performative strategies that were designed to avoid such experiences. Protective performances of whiteness, for Mrs. Weaver, as well as my other conversational partners, included the careful monitoring of discourse, the careful monitoring of behavior, and presenting an artificial – or spatially appropriate – version of oneself so as to avoid the appearance of racial prejudice. Any actions that could possibly be perceived as racist were to be avoided at all costs. Any words that could possibly be connected to racial stereotypes about African Americans were to be stricken from the white lexicon. Lastly, white teachers learned to distance themselves from whiteness through spatially specific behaviors, such as overemphasizing their concern for racial inequality, and underemphasizing their belief in colorblindness and/or American individualism.42

Mrs. Weaver’s experience exemplifies the process by which white teachers came to see the need for – and ultimately adopt – protectionary white performances. This process typically
involved student-teacher interactions that were interpreted differently, falling almost exclusively along racial lines. That is, for white teachers, controversial words, actions, and interactions were seen one way, while for black students, these very same words, actions and interactions were seen in a different, highly racialized way. Once race became the focal point of any student-teacher conflict, my conversational partners felt misinterpreted, misrepresented, and unfairly subjected to anger and hostility, largely due to their race. In this sense, more than anything else, it was their status as white teachers – the racialized other – that engendered such a vicious, and for some, enduring backlash whenever conflict arose between white teachers and black students. As a result, the teachers I interviewed decided to do whiteness on their own terms. They developed performance strategies that were designed to protect themselves from what they perceived to be unfair and unnecessarily racialized forms of criticism.43

Discussion

In the broader critical whiteness literature, it is largely taken for granted that whiteness, as an organizing principle, is invisible to whites, and that white people rarely, if ever, think about their own race. What is more, it is argued, that due to the context of a white supremacist society, one in which whites enjoy political, cultural, and economic domination, the invisibility of whiteness leads to the normalization of whiteness, meaning that whiteness is socially constructed as the invisible norm, the default American, and the stand-in, or spokesperson, for the human race. Taken together, these interlocking processes present a false view of the social world, and, particularly for whites, it skews their perception, not only about the myriad ways that race and racism shape society, but also about themselves as racial beings. As Joe Feagin writes, “whiteness is so widely taken for granted that for many whites it does not require attention or explanation” (Feagin, 2006, p. xviii).
My interview data complicates this narrative by interrogating the social construction of whiteness in nonwhite racialized spaces. In interviewing white teachers that work in predominantly black schools, I did find considerable support for the normalization of whiteness, particularly when speaking about whiteness in a broad or abstract sense. When asked general questions about whiteness, my conversational partners – consistent with the critical whiteness literature – struggled mightily, both in structure and in content. Not only did they admit to never having thought about what it means to be white, but they struggled with basic sentence structure, as well. That is, highly educated and well-spoken teachers began to stutter and stammer their way through sentences, repeatedly pausing, and in some cases, starting over altogether. In terms of content, my interviews found it very difficult to articulate a coherent position, struggling to translate thoughts into words, and at times, making very little sense in their responses. Thus, at some point in the interview, nearly all of my conversational partners exhibited rhetorical incoherence, reinforcing whiteness as the invisible, raceless norm.

In contrast, when asked specifically about being white teachers in predominantly black schools, my interviewees answered in ways that challenged, and at times, completely contradicted the broad consensus within the critical whiteness literature. Where they stuttered, stammered, and struggled before, my interview respondents suddenly spoke in complete sentences, providing clear answers, quick responses, and a multitude of examples to illustrate the points they were trying to make. Here, the data suggests that being white is something that my interviewees thought about constantly, as it was highly salient to their day-to-day experiences as white teachers within predominantly black schools. For these teachers, whiteness, far from being invisible, became hyper-visible, and far from being normal, was clearly and firmly constructed as the racialized other. That is, within the context of predominantly black schools, being white was
both visible and meaningful, so much so that my conversational partners actively strategized about how best to navigate their personal whiteness in what, for them, often felt like a racially hostile environment.

Complicating matters further, is the fact that the effects of spatial socialization appeared to be localized to the particular space in question. The white racial awareness exhibited by my conversational partners within predominantly black schools did not follow them once they exited nonwhite racialized spaces. Each observation of, emotional response to, and conclusion reached about, whiteness, was in reference to past experiences. Still, even after making said observations, experiencing said emotions, and reaching said conclusions, my conversational partners struggled to talk about whiteness – or even talk, cogently – when initially asked what it means to be white. Only once they contextualized whiteness within nonwhite racialized space, when they couched themselves within predominantly black schools, were they able to recognize whiteness and discuss white racial identity, fluently. Therefore, the effects of nonwhite racialized space on white racial awareness are not straightforward or clear-cut, illustrating the need for more research on racialized space and racial identity.

Conclusion

The contradictory answers provided by my conversational partners – as well as the disparate ways in which they provided them – suggests that racialized space adds complexity to the already incredibly complex social category of whiteness. The twin notions that 1) whiteness is the invisible, raceless norm and 2) whites, themselves, do not consider whiteness to be a meaningful racial identity, are both incomplete. While, generally speaking, whiteness may be invisible or constructed as the raceless norm, in nonwhite racialized space, however, it can be highly visible and even constructed as the racialized other. The teachers I interviewed provided
data that supports and challenges the existing critical whiteness literature, meaning that racialized space – in this case, predominantly black schools – is an important, if under-analyzed variable in how whiteness is seen, understood, and experienced by whites in the United States, today. In order to gain a more complete, more nuanced, and, given the current and projected demographic changes, more relevant picture of how whites socially construct whiteness, scholars need to do a better job of incorporating racialized space into their analysis. This is especially true for scholars in the field of critical whiteness studies.
CHAPTER V
THE WHITE RACE CARD: EXAMINING THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACIAL VICIMIZATION

“I just get tired of people playing the race card all the time. I mean yeah, we still have problems with race, but there has never been a better time to be black in America. Stop making excuses.”

Dan Reed, Sexton High School

“Not to make excuses or anything, but the racism at Sexton almost makes it impossible to do your job. I’m sorry, that’s just the truth.”

Dan Reed, Sexton High School

Introduction

The race card. It is a term that is often used, but rarely defined (Ford, 2009; Williams, 2001). For some, the race card is a canard, a myth employed by those looking to make excuses and blame others for their personal, cultural, and even moral failings. For others, the invocation of the term “the race card,” itself, is a tool that is used to minimize the impact of institutional racism, and delegitimize the legitimate grievances of people of color (Wise, 2008). References to the race card can be heard in a variety of places, including cable news television and casual conversation. They can be heard in political ads, on talk radio, and even on college campuses (Ford, 2009; Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005; Lopez, 2015; Mendelberg, 2001; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). You can read about “the race card” in both online and print publications, ranging from ultra-conservative online blogs to the pages of the liberal New York Times. In addition to political and lay commentaries, social scientists, too, have spent considerable time analyzing the extent to which Americans believe in the existence and subsequent usage of the proverbial race card (Wise, 2008). Implicit within the debates and controversies surrounding the
existence, or non-existence, of the race card, is that its perceived usage is almost always exclusive to the domain of nonwhites (Collier and Horowitz, 1997; Elder, 2008).

Broken down to its most basic level, the race card is about racial victimization, or lack thereof. More specifically, accusations that people of color unfairly play the race card are, in reality, accusations of fraud. That is, accusing someone of “playing race card” is the equivalent of accusing them of lying, or at best, exaggerating about the impact that racial discrimination has on their life. It is a way to question or otherwise reject someone’s claim of racial victimization. Inherent to accusing someone of playing the race card, to questioning the authenticity of their claims of racial victimization, is the broader, more general belief that the United States is no longer marred by racism, at least not beyond the fringes of society (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Wise, 2010). Unsurprisingly, the extent to which people believe in, or question, the reality of racism in the contemporary United States is, in large part, predicated upon their racialized experiences (Irving, 2014; Tatum, 2003). This held true for my conversational partners, as their various perspectives on racial victimization corresponded directly to their lived experiences inside and outside of nonwhite racialized spaces.

In this chapter, I show that, similar to the spatial conditionality of white racial awareness, my conversational partners’ belief in authentic racial victimization was directly tied to their experiences inside and outside of predominantly black schools. As illustrated by the epigraph above, my interviewees expressed great skepticism about general claims of racial victimization, yet, when discussing their experiences within predominantly black schools, they made similar claims, themselves. Throughout my fieldwork, white teachers repeatedly accused African Americans and other people of color of “playing the race card,” chastising them for making excuses for their own shortcomings. Conversely, as the racialized other within predominantly
black schools, these same teachers described racial victimization as both a legitimate concern and a genuine impediment to personal and professional success. In shifting the spatial context from white to nonwhite, I also shifted the authenticity of racial victimization, leading to the development and articulation of what I term the *white race card*.

Just as I did in chapter four, I structure this chapter comparatively, allowing me to juxtapose interview responses to general questions with those given to questions about teaching in predominantly black schools. I begin by reviewing the way my conversational partners think about and discuss racism and racial victimization generally. With few exceptions, the teachers I interviewed questioned the existence of any “real racism,” and accused people of color of “playing the race card.” Next, I examine the racialized experiences of white teachers in nonwhite racialized spaces, paying particular attention to how they internalize and make sense of their status as racial outsiders. In doing so, I introduce and define the white race card, presenting interview data that show how white teachers attribute many of their difficulties, and in some cases, failures, to what they characterize as “racism against whites.” I conclude the chapter by discussing the spatially specific contradictions in my interview data, highlighting the various ways that racial victimization is socially constructed.

**The Race Card**

In this section, I describe how, with few exceptions, the teachers I interviewed were highly skeptical of general claims of racial victimization. Some teachers went beyond skepticism and outright dismissed the idea that racism plays a meaningful role in the contemporary United States. The race card, according to my conversational partners, is a two-pronged tool that people of color use to shield themselves from personal responsibility, and in the process, make white people feel guilty about being successful. The first prong is rampant, out-of-control political
correctness. Every one of the teachers I interviewed, to varying degrees, described political correctness as a problem, one mostly perpetrated by people of color. The second prong consisted of making excuses for personal failures. As opposed to taking personal responsibility for their lives, the theory went, too many people of color, instead, choose to make excuses or “blame the white man for their own screw-ups.” I conclude this section with interview data that summarily dismisses – sometimes angrily – the notion that anything close to white privilege exists in America, today.

**I Just Hate how Politically Correct We’ve Become**

You can’t really say or do anything anymore without somebody somewhere being offended, you know. It’s like every day now. Oh, somebody over here said something that was racist or somebody over there did something that was racially insensitive. Like what does that even mean, racially insensitive? I don’t know, I just hate how politically correct we’ve become. It’s out of control and I think it’s a way for people to avoid dealing with their own lives.

*Allison Hall, 44*

Dan Reed has been teaching at Sexton High School for six years. Described as a “straight shooter” and someone that I “should definitely talk to,” Mr. Reed was referred to me by more than one teacher in my snowball sample. True to form, one of the first things that he said to me during our interview was, “Look, I don’t know what you expect to hear from me, but I’m not the type to pull punches, I tell it like it is. That’s just who I am.” In “telling it like is,” Mr. Reed made it abundantly clear that he believed racism in the contemporary United States was all but extinct. While acknowledging those “neo-Nazi types” who live beyond normal society, Mr. Reed fervently lamented the “much bigger problem” of political correctness. As he demonstrated in multiple iterations throughout our interview, Mr. Reed saw political correctness as the “new, sophisticated way to blame white people for everything wrong society.” That is, in his
estimation, political correctness was just a more complex, more contemporary way for people of color to play the race card.

Other teachers had similar takes on the motives and usage of political correctness in the United States, today. Numerous interview respondents conveyed their disdain for our purportedly “new world of out of control political correctness.” Teacher after teacher expressed anger and frustration about always having to watch what they say – up to and including telling jokes – lest they be accused of being a racist. Tellingly, similar to Mr. Reed, other complaints about political correctness were explicitly conceptualized as attacks on whites, as another way to blame whites for the problems associated with communities of color. Denise Bradley, a middle school teacher of 9 years, made this point in the following exchange:

**Q:** You said that society has become too politically correct. What do you mean by that exactly? What does political correctness mean to you?

**Mrs. Bradley:** Well, um I’ve never really had to define, but you know, you can’t really say anything anymore without offending someone. I mean it’s gotten to the point where you can’t even make a joke anymore. A simple, harmless joke on Facebook can get you fired from your job. Seriously, that happened to close friend of mine. She told a harmless joke on Facebook and all of a sudden she was a racist. Somebody reported her and she ended getting suspended and eventually quit. I mean, to be honest, it’s like um, political correctness is a way to get back at white people, you know.

**Q:** Could you elaborate on that last point?

**Mrs. Bradley:** What, about being against white people?

**Q:** Yes.

**Mrs. Bradley:** Yeah, ok, um. Well, um, I hope I don’t sound racist or politically incorrect (laughter), but I think the people who complain the most about being hurt or offended or whatever, um, they’re not white. And not just that, but um, it’s white people who are always getting in trouble, you know, like my friend. So look, I think most of the people who complain about being offended are not white and they um, they’re always complaining about white people. They never complain about each other, it’s always white people. Sorry, I know that sounds bad (laughter).
Mrs. Bradley’s response makes explicit that which is often only implied, that political
correctness is a way for people of color to police the discourse and collective behavior of whites.
As she admittedly “noticed,” it was people of color who “complain the most,” and in her eyes,
being overly sensitive, or complaining, was one of the hallmarks of political correctness. More
specifically, political correctness largely entailed people of color, in conjunction with “overly
sensitive whites,” using faux outrage and public shaming to silence anyone, especially anyone
that is white, from ever being critical of them, even when such criticism is warranted. Many of
my other conversational partners conceptualized and spoke of political correctness in the same
way. For them, political correctness was less about addressing authentic claims of racial
victimization and more about punishing whites for being successful. As one teacher stated
defiantly, “we’re not living in the Jim Crow south anymore, so I’m not going to apologize for
having money, for having a good family.”

While the above examples explicitly connect political correctness to attacks on – and
accusations against – whites, my conversational partners also conceptualized the mere existence
of political correctness, itself, as a well-intentioned, yet blatant form of affirmative action.
According to my interview respondents, because “white people are always the bad guys,”
ofentimes, in an effort to be politically correct, blacks and other people of color are given
opportunities and rewards that they have not, in fact, earned. For example, when I asked Mrs.
Gray, a high school music teacher, what political correctness meant to her, she stated that
“political correctness is accepting the fact that things aren’t really going to be fair, that
sometimes, um, diversity takes the place of merit. It’s become more important to make sure that
you have an African American woman or a Hispanic man in a position of power. It doesn’t really
matter if they’re the most qualified or best person for the job.”
Mrs. Gray conceptualized political correctness as a sensationalized and stereotypical version of affirmative action. As such, her biggest objection to political correctness amounted to an objection to affirmative action, particularly when it benefitted people of color at the expense of whites. When I asked Mrs. Gray if she could provide any examples of more qualified whites being passed over by less qualified people of color, she was unable to do so. She paused for a long time, trying to think of an example, but she was unsuccessful. Even still, Mrs. Gray held fast to her position, stating that “I know that it happens. That may sound funny because I don’t have any personal examples, but if you look around, you can see that it happens.” I pressed Mrs. Gray to clarify what she meant by “if you look around,” and she proceeded to describe the greater visibility of people of color in positions of power. Again, however, Mrs. Gray was not able to provide any specific examples, and only spoke about political correctness as affirmative action in a general sense.

Defining political correctness as an attack against whites, as playing the race card, or even a version of affirmative action, was commonplace throughout my interview data. With this being the case, however, my conversational partners saved their harshest and most severe criticisms of political correctness for their students and their students’ families. Complaints about political correctness in the urban classroom were plenty in number and, at times, malicious in content. Because of the way it intersected with their professional lives, political correctness in the classroom caused my interviewees to speak of it with great disdain. Mrs. Nelson, a high school math teacher, exemplifies this tone when she discusses the proverbial “PC-game.”

Q: Do you have examples of political correctness in your workplace?

Mrs. Nelson: Yeah, I have plenty of examples. You can’t work where I work and not see political correctness (laughter). If you want to keep your job, you absolutely have to play the PC-game.
Q: Can you provide specific examples of playing the PC-game?

Mrs. Nelson: Um, ok so, like we have this new program, computer software that is supposed help the students learn Spanish. We had this whole PD series, you know, professional development where all the teachers had to go so we could see how wonderful this new software is supposed to be. So I was pretty pissed. It was three different PD’s on language and I frickin teach math, so I didn’t understand why I had to be there, but the part that bothered me the most was that most of our students can’t even speak English. Why don’t we teach them what a noun and a verb is before we try to move on to another language. Now this is something I could never say. None of us could. We were all thinking it, we all wanted to say it, but I guarantee you if just one of us dared to criticize Ebonics or whatever it’s called these days, we’d all be called racists. Parents who can’t be bothered enough to show up to parent-teacher conferences or send their kid to school with clean clothes, will be all over you if you say anything remotely critical of black people or culture, you know. So, again, if you want to work, you have to play the PC-game. You put up with it or you lose your job. It sucks, but that’s where we are.

Mrs. Nelson not only spoke about her students and her students’ parents negatively, but she did so in a particularly harsh tone. She was not merely angry at what she believed to be nonsensical social policy – using software to help students learn Spanish – or even the fact that she, a math teacher, was forced to attend a professional development series that focused on language arts. For Mrs. Nelson, her frustration was rooted in the skill level of her students, the misguided priority of parents, and the politically correct school culture that prevented her or any of her white colleagues from voicing criticism of either circumstance. To do so, according to Mrs. Nelson, was to subject oneself to accusations of racism and subsequently put one’s job in jeopardy. The possibility of losing her job, all in the name of political correctness, had worn on Mrs. Nelson over the course of her career, and as a result, she developed a racialized form of resentment that was reflected in how she talked her students and their families, both in content and in form.
Political correctness, although variously defined, was always conceptualized in a way that explicitly connected it to race. More specifically, political correctness was always conceptualized in a way that positioned it as advantageous to people of color and disadvantageous to whites. Furthermore, in the eyes of my conversational partners, political correctness was fraudulent. It was based on little more than hurt feelings and a misguided desire to see people of color succeed at all costs, even at the expense of innocent and more qualified whites. Political correctness was a form of the race card, and for some, it was the race card. In our new, collective consciousness, it was argued, political correctness is a way for people of color and their white allies to eschew personal responsibility and ignore their own culpability in the maintenance and reproduction of racial inequality. That is, political correctnesspunishes whites for their success, while it simultaneously ignores the failures of people of color.

**At Some Point You Have To Stop Making Excuses**

It’s always something, you know. We don’t have any money, my mom had to work, my dad is in jail. Oh, and racism. Racism, racism, racism. I’m not saying we don’t have problems, that racism is entirely gone, but the Civil Rights Movement was a long time ago. At some point you have to stop making excuses. Just get it done.

*Stephen Hayes, 28*

Lamenting political correctness was only one of the ways my conversational partners challenged the authenticity of racial victimization. The second, and in some ways, more visceral reaction to charges of racism, was to almost reflexively accuse anyone claiming to be a victim of racial discrimination of making excuses. In fact, the word “victim” was used pejoratively in a number of my interviews. To complain about racism was to be a victim, and to believe that racial discrimination was a material barrier to personal and professional success was to harbor what many of my interviewees referred to as a “victim mentality.” Also, in most of my interviews, my
conversational partners repeatedly accused people of color, and African Americans, in particular, of “blaming the white man” or “phantom white privilege” for ongoing racial inequality. The unfortunate reality and uncomfortable truth, according to them, was that certain racial groups needed to examine their own pathological culture and personal failings when trying to ascertain the genesis of contemporary racialized disparities. Any suggestion otherwise was considered to be a counterproductive and outdated excuse. I decompose this perspective in greater detail, next.

A Victim Mentality

The teachers I interviewed were highly skeptical of any claim of racial victimization made by people of color. This was true, both, in a general sense and about the mostly nonwhite students at their respective schools. As such, their collective skepticism led most of my conversational partners to delegitimize accusations of racism, dismissing them as mere excuse-making or indicative of a “victim mentality.” After it became readily apparent that the idea of a victim mentality was more than tangential to the discussion about racial victimization, I incorporated specific questions about the term into my interview protocol, hoping to elicit more specific answers about how this particular term was conceptualized and eventually utilized. Although it was not applied exactly the same way every time, there was more than enough consistency across interviews to conclude that my conversational partners had the same process in mind whenever they accused a person of color of possessing a victim mentality.

A victim mentality, according to my interview respondents, is a mindset that is self-defeating, particularly because it predetermines that others are to blame for one’s own circumstances. To complain about racism or racial discrimination is to consider oneself a victim, and to consider oneself a victim is to inherently make excuses for personal failures. Accordingly, black people and other people of color are never going to be completely successful in the United
States until they learn to reject the victim mentality and take control over – and personal responsibility for – their own lives. Alexa Boyd expressed this sentiment multiple times throughout her interview.

Q: I want to go back to this idea of a victim mentality. What exactly do you mean by that particular term?

Mrs. Boyd: Well, it’s like, um, it’s like this. If you always see yourself as a victim, if you think white people are always out to get you, then you’re setting yourself up for failure, you know. It’s almost like you have a readymade excuse for every time something doesn’t go your way, and as long as that’s in the back of your mind, ‘oh, I didn’t get the job because I’m black,’ then you’re never going to be successful. You’re never going to make anything of yourself.

Q: Do you believe that having a victim mentality is more of a barrier to people of color than racism or racial discrimination?

Mrs. Boyd: Absolutely. If you’re looking for an excuse to fail, you’re probably going to fail. You don’t need any help from me or any other white person. You have to change the way you see yourself.

Mrs. Boyd not only laments what she previously described as a self-defeating mentality, but she also believes that the mentality, itself, is more real than racism. Without hesitation, Mrs. Boyd unflinchingly and unequivocally opined that the so-called victim mentality – harbored by people of color – posed a greater threat to racial equality than the existence of ongoing racial discrimination. A similar dynamic was at play when my conversational partners scoffed at the idea that whites were responsible for the inequitable living conditions faced by African Americans and other people of color, today. Historically, racism in America has been associated with whites (Feagin and Vera, 2000), and in the mind of my conversational partners, broadly speaking, that is still the case today. Transitively, claims of racial victimization made by people of color are synonymous with claims of white racism. Thus, the vehement rejection of racial
victimization was, in part, fueled by my conversational partners’ need to defend themselves against charges of racism.

Scholars from a number of disciplines have shown that whites living in the contemporary United States hold a particular aversion to being labeled racist (Bobo and Klugel, 1993; Kimmel, 2013; Kinder and Sanders, 1997; Kinder and Sears, 1981; Sears, Van Laar, Carrillo, and Kosterman, 1997; Mazel, 1998; Sniderman and Piazza, 1995; Solomo, Portelli, Daniel, and Campbell, 2005; Vaught and Castagno, 2008; Wise, 2013). Racism, particularly in the United States, is associated with the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and other white nationalist groups that are overt in, and proud of, their hatred of the racial other. Correspondingly, many whites recoil at the notion that they, personally, could be associated with these and other white supremacists groups. This is a pattern that held true for my interview respondents. Throughout my fieldwork, many of the teachers I interviewed were humiliated and horrified by the thought of being accused of racism, or the charge that they engaged racially discriminatory behavior.

Racism is something that my conversational partners instinctively rejected, and it is something they denied as being relevant or meaningful to who they were as people. Thus, for my interviewees, excuse-making in the form of blaming whites was personal, as it labeled them as racists and challenged not only their integrity, but their moral worth, as well. Paige Vincent, for example, has been teaching in urban, predominantly black schools for 13 years, and to this day, she still struggles with the fact that many of her students, as well as their families, think of her as someone who does not like black people. In fact, it is a subject that caused her to get emotional during our interview, prompting me to ask if she was ok to continue.

Mrs. Vincent: I do this work because I want to do this work. I’ve always wanted to do this work. Being an educator is a big part of who I am. So when, um, you invest in kids, not money, but almost like yourself. You put yourself into these
kids and you want them to be successful, but then out of nowhere, almost without warning, bam, you’re a racist. A kid gets suspended, you’re a racist. A kid fails a test, you’re a racist. I’ve had kids show up after missing an entire month of school, a month, only to have their mom call me a racist because I tell her how far he’s behind. It’s very hurtful, especially when you think you have a great relationship with a kid and he calls you a racist. I mean, most of the time they’re just looking for an excuse, but getting called racist by kids you care about never gets easy to hear. It hurts every time (long pause).

After teaching in a predominantly black school for over a decade, Mrs. Vincent, to this day, still finds it “very hurtful” to be labeled a racist by her students. This is particularly the case when the student in question is one that she is close to and genuinely cares about. Even when it comes in the form of an excuse, Mrs. Vincent has a visceral reaction to being called a racist because she considers it to be an attack on her character. Similar to Mrs. Vincent, other interview respondents, too, considered racially-based excuses to be an accusation of white racism, but unlike Mrs. Vincent, they responded with anger and condemnation. Several teachers became visibly angry during this portion of the interview, chastising their black students and their students’ families as “unserious,” “lazy,” and “always looking to pass the buck.” On more than one occasion, I had a conversational partner explicitly refer to those making claims of racial victimization as “racial hustlers” or “the real racists.” In this sense, charges of racism were essentially a claim that all white people are racists, making the charge, itself, a racist generalization.

Blaming white racism for racial inequality, or “blaming the white man” for the personal failures of people of color – both considered to be racist forms of excuse-making – caused the majority of my conversational partners to become upset, angry, and frustrated. With few exceptions, the teachers I interviewed took claims of racial victimization personally, as if the existence of ongoing racial discrimination was indicative of white racism in general, as well as
an indictment of them as individual white people. Thus, when discussing racial victimization, the
anger exhibited by my interviewees was authentic, and the collective frustration they showed
resulted from a genuine confusion about how, or why, anyone could possibly think of or describe
them in racist terms. Relatedly, my conversational partners had strong reactions to, and had
much to say about, the idea of white privilege. Any insinuation that they, as white people,
enjoyed some sort of advantage by virtue of being white was met with strong resistance and stern
condemnation. I discuss these responses below.

White Privilege

Sociologists Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer (2010), define white privilege as
the “collection of unearned cultural, political, economic, and social advantages and privileges
possessed by people of Anglo-European descent or those who pass as such” (p. 40). Often
dubbed “the other side of racism” (Kaufman, 2001; McIntosh, 1988; Rothenberg, 2008, p. 1),
white privilege is systematic, benefitting all whites, whether they want it or not (Kaufman, 2001;
McIntosh, 1988; Rothenberg, 2008). Although white privilege benefits all whites, it is important
to note that all whites do not benefit in the same way (Frankenberg, 1993; Hartigan, 2003; Wray,
2006). For some whites, white privilege leads to economic success, while for others, the benefits
accrued are more psychological in nature (Du Bois, 1935; Roediger, 1991). Still, even those
whites who face disadvantage in other social categories, such as class, gender, or sexual
orientation, remain privileged relative to people of color in similar demographic standing
(Hartigan, 1999; Weber, 2001; Wilson, 1987). While the research literature on white privilege is
quite extensive, my conversational partners rejected the idea that their success resulted from
anything other than their own ambition, hard work, and determination, particularly within a
hyper-individualistic, ultra-competitive, and seemingly post-racial society.
Mary DeYoung, a high school teacher of 24 years, reacted physically when I broached the subject of white privilege. In response to my question about white racial advantage, she jolted forward in her seat and leaned in closer to me. Taking a sip of coffee at the time, Mrs. DeYoung began coughing and took a few minutes to catch her breath. After regaining her composure, Mrs. DeYoung wiped her eyes, which had tears forming as a result of her coughing, and repeated my question back to me.

**Mrs. DeYoung:** (wiping her eyes), I’m sorry about that.

**Q:** No need to apologize. You’re fine.

**Mrs. DeYoung:** Has my race worked to my advantage?

**Q:** Yes. Do you feel that, at any point in your life, you benefitted from being white?

**Mrs. DeYoung:** No. Absolutely not. Actually, I think maybe in the last ten years or so, things may have gone the other way a little bit. You know, maybe it can be better not to be white. Maybe, I don’t know, that’s probably going a little too far, but I know for sure that I’ve never benefitted from being white. I had seven brothers and sisters growing up and we pretty much had nothing. I mean we had to scratch and claw for everything we had. My parents worked extremely hard and they raised us to do the same, you know. We’ve all been pretty successful now, now as adults, but that’s not about being white, it’s because we were raised to know the value of hard work. So um, no, I don’t think me being a white person has ever been an advantage for me. I worked hard for everything I have. I earned this life. I resent that idea, you know, so-called white privilege or whatever. I think its offensive.

Mrs. DeYoung had zero patience for the concept of white privilege. Explicitly calling it offensive, she quickly became exacerbated by the idea that she had been given anything specifically because of her race. Mrs. DeYoung, stressing an individualistic view of society, emphasized the importance of hard work on multiple occasions throughout our interview. Race, or more specifically, being white, was irrelevant to her overall success, and anything she has that remotely resembles an advantage, is something that she, herself, has earned. Thus, with this being the case, bemoaning “so-called white privilege” was just another way for people of color
to make excuses for their own cultural and personal shortcomings. While Mrs. DeYoung only tangentially connected her disdain for the concept of white privilege to racial victimization, other teachers were much more direct. Mr. Reed, for example, was completely unambiguous when he remarked, “If you want to make excuses and stay in the ghetto your whole life, that’s on you. Don’t go crying about some bullshit phantom white privilege that doesn’t exist.”

Aside from taking offense and rejecting white privilege outright, many of my conversational partners tacitly admitted to its existence, only to then minimize its significance. That is, whenever one of my interview respondents acknowledged that they enjoyed a form of racialized advantage, they immediately followed said acknowledgement with an assertion that the advantage in question was, at best, trivial to the reproduction of racial inequality. In this sense, even if there were such a thing as white privilege, it played an insignificant role in determining who was successful and who was not. Therefore, broader patterns of racial inequality could not be explained by racial advantage. Racism, and thus, racial discrimination, and thus, racial victimization, were relegated to the past and, as far as my conversational partners were concerned, not a prominent feature of the contemporary United States. White privilege, or any suggestion that institutional forces accounted for the greater success whites enjoyed relative to people of color, was, for my interviewees, “just another excuse.”

As a group, my conversational partners were highly skeptical of claims of racial victimization. “Playing the race card,” which included a combination of out of control political correctness, harboring a victim mentality, and making excuses for personal failure, was routinely characterized as both unfounded and counterproductive. Furthermore, because my interview respondents interpreted charges of racial discrimination as accusations of white racism, they took any and all such charges personally, interpreting them as an attack on their character and their
overall morality. Thus, not only were claims of racial victimization simply not credible, but making the claims in the first place was inherently unfair, and even racist, towards whites. Although several teachers expressed sympathetic views towards the economic conditions faced by many of their black students, no such consideration was given to their race. As a whole, claims of racial victimization were not taken seriously by my conversational partners, particularly those made by black students and black families.

In the next section, I focus on the specific experiences of my conversational partners as white teachers working in predominantly black schools. Just as was the case with white racial awareness, the teachers I interviewed had exceedingly different positions on racial victimization inside and outside of nonwhite racialized spaces. That is, speaking more broadly, when discussing claims of racial victimization made by people of color, my conversational partners were skeptical at best and hostile and dismissive at worst. Conversely, when discussing their experiences as the racialized other within their respective workplaces, racial victimization became authentic, it became real, and for most of my interviewees, it was a testament to the salience of racism in the United States, today. The process of making claims of racial victimization and automatically constructing them as authentic – despite previous skepticism about such claims – is what I term the white race card.

The White Race Card

The white race card is both an accusation and a validation. On the one hand, it entails making explicit claims of racial victimization, and on the other hand, it entails validating those claims through personal experience. For example, the teachers I interviewed were eager to provide examples of what they considered to be racial discrimination perpetrated by their black students and their families. Some examples were general, others were specific, and still others
were less of an example and more of a generic statement. That is, some “examples” were ideological claims that could not be supported by specific personal experiences, but were accepted as authentic forms of racial victimization, nevertheless. The white race card was also an exception, a spatial exception. Contextualizing the now authentic claims of racial victimization were predominantly black schools, schools where black bodies were the racial norm and white bodies were the racial other. Therefore, the white race card was more than merely an accounting of racial victimization, it was specifically developed and deployed in direct response to spatial victimization.

**Spatial Victimization**

Spatial victimization is a spatially-specific claim of racial victimization. It involves accusations of racial discrimination that are all predicated upon being of a particular race in a particular space. In this study, the race in question is represented by white teachers, while the space in question is represented by predominantly black schools. Another feature of spatial victimization is that the specific claims of racial victimization are not made outside of the relevant space, at least not to the same degree or with the same level of specificity. Whenever a teacher claimed that being white limited or otherwise hindered their ability to be an effective teacher, they were doing so in reference to a particular space – predominantly black schools – as opposed to making a general claim about the country writ large. Thus, the most salient aspect of spatial victimization is space. For my conversational partners, space, or to be more precise, nonwhite racialized space, raised their awareness of, and their belief in, the authenticity of racial victimization, at least as it pertained to their own personal experiences.

Spatial victimization consists of three overlapping and interconnected processes. The first process – reverse discrimination – is based on the idea that whiteness acts as a badge of
inferiority within predominantly black schools. As such, due to their status as white teachers, my conversational partners claimed to be victims of reverse discrimination on a fairly regular basis. The second process – collective whiteness – is the idea that whiteness is a collective identity, essentially rendering all white people the same. For my conversational partners, it came as a shock that before all else, their students and their students’ families saw them as white, effectively subsuming their individual identities under a broad and stigmatized racial collective. Finally, the third process – black privilege – is based on the idea that black teachers have an advantage with black students and black parents. If whiteness was a badge of inferiority within predominantly black schools, then blackness was a badge of superiority. Thus, in the eyes of my conversational partners, their black colleagues enjoyed a specialized form of privilege.

**It’s like it’s Racism Against Whites, it’s Everywhere**

I hate to use this phrase, I really do. But it’s almost like reverse discrimination, you know. I never thought I would say anything like that, but I look around and um, it’s like it’s racism against whites, it’s everywhere. I’m not saying that happens every single day, but it happens often enough to be noticeable.

*Candice Satter, 35*

Every one of my conversational partners claimed that, at one point or another, and to varying degrees, they were the victim of reverse discrimination. In fact, the very term “reverse discrimination,” appeared in all but two of my interviews. Even in those two interviews, however, my interview respondents spent considerable time describing and discussing the racial discrimination that they have dealt with as the white teachers of black students. Some teachers were more vocal than others in their claims of racial victimization. These teachers were quick to label any perceived slight as an example of reverse discrimination. Other teachers, though, were more deliberate in their assessment of their racial experiences. These teachers took the time to consider non-racial explanations for their perceived mistreatment, only making claims of racial
victimization when nothing else made sense. Still, for all teachers involved, their experiences as white teachers in predominantly black schools included what they believed to be exposure to spatially-specific racial discrimination.

Reverse discrimination came from three primary sources: black teachers, black students, and black parents. To the surprise of most of my conversational partners, the first racial hostility they experienced came from their black colleagues, often before the school year formally began. For example, Mrs. Meredith recalled feeling like an outsider in a series of pre-school year professional developments that were required by the district. As the only white teacher on the 8th grade team, she felt as though her black colleagues purposefully kept her at a distance, leaving her out of much of the planning and decision-making processes.

**Mrs. Meredith:** Every year before the kids come, before the year starts, we have this whole series of PD’s. They’re mostly useless, but some of them are helpful, you know. But the team, the 8th grade team, we all agreed to meet afterwards to setup a basic framework to start the year. Um, we have to deal with the same students, so we all wanted to be on the same page in terms of expectations, discipline, you know, stuff like that. Well, from the very beginning I felt like I was an outsider, like they looked at me differently.

**Q:** Were these teachers black?

**Mrs. Meredith:** Oh yeah, I’m sorry. Yeah, my team was very unique. Out of all the teachers in the school, only six or seven of them were black and three of them were on my team. We had four-teacher teams and of the four of us, it was three black teachers and me, you know, the white lady (laughter). So, like I was saying, I was excited to get a game plan for the year because those first couple of weeks are absolutely crucial. But they didn’t include me. They wouldn’t listen to any of my ideas, they kept talking over me. Then, like a week or two after the year started, I come to find out that they had met several times without me. I mean, I know if three white teachers did that to a black teacher, she’d yell racism, and she might even be right. So the only reason I think they treated me like that was because I’m white, you know. I wasn’t one of them.

Unable to think of a plausible reason for her treatment at the hands of her colleagues, Mrs. Meredith felt excluded simply because she was white and her the rest of her team members
were black. It should be noted, though, that although she felt her team members acted in a racially discriminatory manner, she also emphasized that “at the end of the day, it was no big deal.” When it came to discussing racial victimization at the hands of their colleagues or other staff members, many of my conversational partners acted similarly to Mrs. Meredith. That is, they would tell a story that they felt constituted an act of reverse discrimination, then they would subsequently dismiss the severity or relevance of the story, characterizing it as “not that big of a deal.” Mrs. Thompson demonstrates this process when talking about the kitchen staff at her school.

**Mrs. Thompson:** Ok, so I don't know if this is that big of deal, but I was thinking of cliques in my school. The um, kitchen staff, all black women, they're hilarious, they're so much fun, but they have this, their own little clique and they only let people in that are black. They don't let, um, I honestly think they don't like white people. They'll give free food to other black teachers, they'll do all this stuff, but I'll go ask for change and they won't give it to me, they like won’t, I have to go ask my friend Anthony if he can go get me change for five dollars and he goes and gets it right away (laughter). But it's like, they have their own little clique downstairs and they're very, um, very evident in their likings, I guess, of other staff members and it's not white people. So yeah, I mean I like them. Like I said, they’re really funny, but they might just be a tad bit racist against whites (laughter). That’s fine. I just wanted to make sure I brought that up.

Here, again, Mrs. Thompson exhibited a bit of levity, even as she recalled what she clearly believed to be anti-white, racially discriminatory behavior. Mrs. Thomson laughed while recalling a time when she was unable to get change, simply because she was white. In fact, in an attempt to minimize the racialized actions of the kitchen staff, Mrs. Thompson labeled their behavior as “a tad bit racist.” While my conversational partners may have minimized and laughed off what they believed to be racially discriminatory behavior on the part of the colleagues and building staff members, they took a decidedly different tone when discussing the actions of their students and their students’ parents. All the levity, lightheartedness, and
dismissiveness that was present when talking about coworkers disappeared in their entirety when talking about black students and black parents. In the latter two scenarios, reverse discrimination took on a more and serious and more consequential form.

Ms. Western, a veteran high school teacher, recounted two stories, one that happened recently, and another that happened over 20 years ago in one of her first years of teaching. Each of these stories involved negative interactions with students, a negativity that Ms. Western attributed to reverse discrimination on the part of her students. In the first story – the more recent of the two – Ms. Western describes finding a racially discriminatory message carved into one of the desks in her classroom.

Ms. Western: You want to hear about what it’s like to be white at Northside, let me tell you about something that happened fairly recently. It just happened like a month or so ago. I was in a pretty good mood. It was Friday, we were done with testing for the year, and I was just, I don’t know, I was happy. Actually I was relieved, it was more relieved than happy, but anyway, I was in a good mood. So I’m cleaning up my room, you know, that’s always the last thing I do before I go home. I do a little bit of grading, a bit of prep for the next day, then I clean up bit, just the big most obvious stuff. I’m walking around the class clearing everything off of the students’ desks, they always leave stuff on their desks. Homework, quizzes, you name it. I once found a cell-phone. Anyway, there was this one desk with a huge stack of papers on it. I’m not going to say who it was, but um, this student always leaves stuff behind, but at the same time, he is one of my favorite students. When I grab the papers off of his desk, I see that um, carved into the desk, it says ‘I hate white people.’ And um, I was shocked. I know exactly who it was, you know. He had his head down the whole time, he was distant and not himself. And I know for a fact it wasn’t there before, and it just like that, my good mood was gone. So much for being happy. It pretty much ruined my entire weekend.

Ms. Western went on to discuss how seeing the words “I hate white people” carved into a desk made her feel. She talked about feeling both sad and anxious; sad because the message was carved into a desk in her classroom, meaning it was probably directed at her, and anxious
because she felt helpless to do anything about it. Even if she wanted to report her student to the school principle or vice principle – which, given her affection for this particular student, she did not want to do – she did not feel that anything of consequence would come of it because “he would just deny it was him.” Also, as she, herself, pointed out, the student in question was someone she admired. She felt as though she had a relationship with this student, and counted him among her favorites. The fact that this particular message came from him – which she later confirmed – added insult to injury, primarily because it led to Ms. Western taking it more personally than she otherwise would.

The second story happened over two decades ago when Ms. Western was a new teacher fresh out of college. It involved a both a student and a parent. According to Ms. Western, one of her students was disruptive to the point where it was “impossible to teach,” and when she called the student’s home, she was subjected to “a racist onslaught” by the kid’s mom. This one incident affected Ms. Western so deeply that it still impacts her decision-making process today, specifically when it comes to contacting parents about their children’s behavior. Calling home is something that she is reluctant to do, even under the most stressful and strenuous of circumstances.

**Mrs. Western:** Again, I’m not going to say any names or anything like that, but I was at my wits end. I stayed up all night working on my lesson plans and I had about three or four hours of sleep. I was literally exhausted. Three weeks into teaching and things were not going well at all. I felt totally unprepared to do my job. I might as well have just walked in off the streets and said here, hire me I want to be a teacher. I mean that’s how bad things were going. And this kid, I will never forget him for as long as I live. It’s like his sole mission in life was to make my life a living hell. He’s just disrupting the class all over the place. I tried to ignore him, just let him do his own thing, but he flipped over a desk and slapped a pencil out of another student’s hand. So I’m like, OK, I have a decision to make. I can send him to the office or try to handle it myself. I tried to handle it myself by calling mom, you know. Big mistake. As soon as she picks up the phone, she just
lays into me with this racist onslaught. All I hear is white this, white that. Why can’t you white people leave me alone. Why are you even here, you know. I’m like look lady, your kid is out of control, then she blows up at me. You know, swearing at me and calling me names. I actually ended up hanging up on her. I’m not going to sit there and listen to how awful white people are. So she ends up calling the school demanding to speak to the principal, and she said I was being racist against her. Excuse me, how was I being racist? She literally called me a dumb white bitch, and I never once mentioned race. Not once. This was reverse discrimination. And you know the worst part is that people automatically believed her. Nobody ever really said anything, but I could tell. People looked at me differently after that. So now, I hardly ever call home. Somebody’s life literally has to be in danger for me to even consider picking up that phone. But other than that, I’m not calling home. Nope, I won’t do it.

Ms. Western, in retelling her personal stories, demonstrated how many of my conversational partners interpreted their experiences, racially. Teacher after teacher recalled having been the victim of reverse discrimination, and subsequently feeling powerless to do anything about it. They remarked on having been called racial slurs like “cracker” and “white trash,” only to then see themselves as the ones branded as racist. They talked about being mistreated by their superiors for doing their jobs, which included warning, chastising, and even suspending black students. In this sense, being white prevented them from doing their jobs to the best of their abilities, because as white teachers, their interactions with black students were always scrutinized through the lens of race, a lens which unfairly assumes white racism. The combination of racial insults, racial powerlessness, and performance limitations constituted the biggest and most common form of reverse discrimination recounted by my interview respondents.

Still, for other teachers, reverse discrimination went beyond racial slurs and racialized criticisms of their job performance, and instead, manifested itself as a glass ceiling on potential job advancement. Several of my conversational partners believed that they were passed over for
job promotions by less qualified black teachers, and in one case, a less qualified white teacher “who pandered to blatant PC-culture.” Mrs. Edwards has been teaching in the CCSD district for close to 30 years. A few years back, she applied for a Vice Principle position at her school, a position for which she felt eminently qualified. As she went on to explain, Mrs. Edwards believes she did not get the job because of 1) her skin color, and 2) her refusal to compromise her standards in the face of racial politics.

Mrs. Edwards: It’s weird, it’s not as simple as oh I’m white so I didn’t get the promotion, I could have gotten the promotion. The thing is, because I am white, I have to go about it a certain way, I can’t really be who I am or the type of teacher I’ve been.

Q: What do you mean? Could you elaborate further?

Mrs. Edwards: Here, let me give you an example. My entire career, I’ve been a no-nonsense type of teacher. I have a reputation for being one and done, you get one warning and then you’re out of my classroom. But when I was interviewing for VP, they kept asking me my position on suspensions, uh, like suspending black kids. I don’t know what they expected me to say. I told the truth, if your behavior warrants suspension, you should be suspended. If you’re constantly disrupting the class, if you threaten or assault a teacher or another student, you have to go. Period. I don’t care what color you are. Later I come to find out that I didn’t get the job because of my position on suspending black kids. Mrs. Johnson, you know, the teacher who became VP, apparently was the right type of white person. She pandered to blatant PC-culture and I didn’t. She agreed to show favoritism to black students and I didn’t. She got the job. How is that not reverse discrimination?

Mrs. Edwards’s story, and subsequent interpretation of why she was passed over for vice principal, adds another layer to reverse discrimination. In her estimation – even though the effect could be mitigated by “pandering” – forcing white teachers to alter their behavior and put racial politics over and above the best pedagogical practices, was an overt form of reverse discrimination, especially when it pertained to job advancement. Looking at my interview data more broadly, a central component of spatial victimization – reverse discrimination – includes
racial exclusion, racial insults, racialized criticisms of job performance, and limitations on occupational advancement that are directly and indirectly influenced by race. A second component – collective whiteness – also played a prominent role in how my conversational partners interpreted and internalized their experiences as white teachers within nonwhite racialized spaces. I decompose this process next.

**Now He Just Hates White People, All White People**

Sometimes I would go home and rack my brain trying to figure out what I did wrong. Like, why is this kid so angry with me, you know. Come to find out, he had a run in with the police a year or two back and it went very badly. Now he just hates white people, all white people. I’ve known this kid for less than a month and he thinks I’m the devil. Just because I’m white.

*Bryan Palmer, 45*

Using herself as a conduit to elucidate the advantages of whiteness, CWS scholar, Robin DiAngelo, writes about what she terms, “psychic freedom,” or the freedom to see oneself as an individual. DiAngelo writes, “because I have not been socialized to see myself, or to be seen by other whites as having a race, I don’t carry the psychic burden of race.” She continues, “I don’t have to worry about how others feel about my race. I don’t have to worry that my race will be held against me” (DiAngelo, 2012, p. 151, original emphasis). Psychic freedom, then, affords whites an advantage not readily available to people of color. Whereas African Americans are held accountable for the actions of other African Americans, and Latino Americans are held accountable for the actions of other Latino Americans – to name but two examples – in the United States of America, whites are individual people, each beholden only to his or her own words, actions, or deeds (DiAngelo, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993; Jensen, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Kaufman, 2001; McIntosh, 1988; Rothenberg, 2008; Wise, 2008).
DiAngelo’s theory of psychic freedom is born out in my interview data, at least those data which pertain to white racialized spaces. When speaking in general or abstract terms, the teachers I interviewed presented themselves as individual people, unbothered and unburdened by the words and/or actions of other whites. That is, outside of nonwhite racialized spaces, my interview respondents were psychically free. When the topic shifted to predominantly black schools, however, white teachers lost their individuality and were subsequently subsumed under a stigmatized racial collective. In predominantly black schools, gone were individual teachers who just happened to be white, they were replaced by white people who just happened to be teachers. White people, as my conversational partners would quickly learn, were not individuals in the black imagination. In these nonwhite racialized spaces, white teachers were held accountable for the collective behavior of other whites, both inside and outside of the school setting. That is, in predominantly black schools, white teachers had become, in effect, burdened by race.

For the teachers I interviewed, the loss of psychic freedom, or what I term, collective whiteness, was facilitated by their interactions with various people of color in predominantly black schools. Collective whiteness is when individual white teachers were blamed, singled out, or otherwise held accountable for something another white teacher – or even another white person – did or said in another classroom or another place, altogether. At any given time on any given day, any individual white teacher could face anger and hostility from their black students, all because those particular students had a bad interaction with another person who was white. After repeated occurrences, my conversational partners became cognizant of the fact that they were looked at as a collective by their students and their students’ families. They became aware of the reality of collective whiteness, that they were judged, and ultimately treated, as a group,
one devoid of any real or meaningful differences. Collective whiteness is the conceptual and experiential opposite of psychic freedom, and for my conversational partners, the latter was normal and unremarkable, while the former became a primary function of spatial victimization.

Mrs. DeYoung spent the first 12 years of her career teaching at an exclusively white school in rural West Virginia. When her husband was relocated to Upstate New York for work, she followed and eventually found work in the Center City School District. After spending the entirety of her life in white racialized spaces, spaces she conceptualized as “normal,” Mrs. DeYoung was aghast, and, at least initially, confused by the hostility she faced from her black students. As a teacher new to the district, she had expected some student pushback, but it did not take long for Mrs. DeYoung to notice a pattern in the resistance she received from her black student body. To them, “everything was racist,” a charge that caught Mrs. DeYoung off guard, and eventually caused her to ask her team leader for advice.

**Mrs. DeYoung:** Um, uh, and, like, I can't tell you how many times, like in the first couple of weeks, if I told a kid that, you know they need to sit down or they need to leave my room because they called me a name or whatever, I was called a racist. Here I am, new to city, you know, new to the district, and suddenly I’m a racist. I hadn’t even learned half their names yet, but they were already convinced that anything I said to them was because, you know, they’re black and I'm white. I was really confused, like what did I do? Finally I had to ask my team leader if it was normal for so many students to call me racist, and he laughed. He said something like yeah, of course it’s normal, they think all white people are racists.

**Q:** At the time, was your team leader white, as well?

**Mrs. DeYoung:** Yes. Mr. Ball, he’s white. He’s actually a principle now.

**Q:** Nice. So, do your black students still call you racist today?

**Mrs. DeYoung:** Oh, yeah. All the time, I'm called racist all the time.

**Q:** Does it still bother you?

**Mrs. DeYoung:** Sometimes it does, but not really. They love to pull that crap, so I just try to ignore it.
Upon arriving in the CCSD, Mrs. DeYoung was immediately exposed to, and informed about, collective whiteness. Baffled by the consistency in which her black students labeled her a racist, Mrs. DeYoung sought clarification from her immediate superior. In her mind, nothing she had said or done had come close to constituting racist behavior, so the repeated charges of such were both hurtful and confusing. Unaccustomed to working with black students, it did not occur to Mrs. DeYoung that they were making a general assumption about her based on skin color. Conversely, Mr. Ball, an educator who was accustomed to working with black students, found it humorous that Mrs. DeYoung was attempting to find fault in her own individual behavior. By asserting that, “they think all white people are racists,” Mr. Ball was alluding to collective whiteness, the idea that all white people, ergo all white teachers, are essentially the same. Mrs. DeYoung’s somewhat dismissive attitude about collective whiteness, today, after a dozen years in the district, indicates that satiation may have taken effect.

Collective whiteness in nonwhite racialized spaces encompasses more than hurtful and confusing stigmata that are imposed on the racial minority by the racial majority. Getting called racist by black students and black parents was not the only way that collective whiteness affected the experiences of white teachers in predominantly black schools. It also affected relationships. White teachers found that their ability to form effective relationships with black students and black parents was, in large part, affected by the behavior of other white teachers. If, as was often the case, black students and black parents had negative past experiences with white teachers – or white people in general – my conversational partners found that the resulting generalizations were not only held against them, but they were taken out on them, as well. Thus, the personal characteristics and pedagogical practices of any one white teacher, while important, were always competing with the stigma of whiteness.
Mrs. Strodel, for example, spent a considerable amount of time talking about the “absolute need” to form meaningful relationships with students. Like the majority of teachers I interviewed, Mrs. Strodel believed that both the teacher and student benefitted from a trusting, mutually appreciative relationship. Also like the majority of teachers I interviewed, Mrs. Strodel believed that, regardless of her individual behavior as a teacher, she was beholden to the behavior of other white teachers, forcing her to compensate for people and processes that were outside of her control.

Q: Do you think the words, actions, or behavior of other white teachers are sometimes held against you? If so, how?

Mrs. Strodel: Yeah, a lot of the students keep you at a distance, especially at first. It’s like they see you as something you’re not. It’s like you’re a racist until proven not racist (laughter). When I look back on my life, I can’t think of anything I’ve ever said or done that’s racist, but the kids, the black kids, some of them look at me like I called them the N-word. They just don’t want to let you in. It’s like enjoying the company of a white person is out of bounds. Like they’ll lose street cred or something. You just have to stay at it, you know. Keep at them, keep showing them who you are, be true to yourself and eventually, they come around. Well, most of them come around, until the next year where you have to do it all over again.

Q: Is it the same or similar with black parents or guardians?

Mrs. Strodel: Yeah, parents are suspicious of you, I think, they tend to think, um, sometimes I think that they didn't have a very good experience at school or maybe with a white person, so like, they're suspicious right away, no matter who you are or even how you treat their kids. White is white, and like I said with the kids, if you’re white, you’re racist. Even when you call them on the phone to say something to them, you know, something nice, like calling to let them know their son or daughter is having a good day. A lot of the time, they just don’t want to deal with you. So I have to choose my words wisely when I call them. You know, I can't ever really say their kids did anything wrong, um, I say could you help me out, I sort of approach it that way until I feel comfortable enough to be up front with them. But most of the time, after I’ve gained their trust then it’s fine.

Mrs. Strodel went on to describe the process of having to prove she was not a racist as “demeaning and incredibly frustrating.” She repeatedly complained about how unnecessarily
difficult her job could be at times, all because of the racial mistrust that many black students and many black parents harbored towards white teachers as a whole. Making matters worse, according to Mrs. Strodel, is that the mistrust in question was predicated on a stereotype-laden caricature of white people, as opposed to the words, actions, and behaviors of her as an individual teacher. Even though Mrs. Strodel, for the most part, successfully navigated the racial mistrust in her classroom, the mere fact that she had to go above and beyond to do so was burdensome, worrisome, and most of all, a testament to the racial victimization faced by white teachers in predominantly black schools.

Like Mrs. Strodel, the majority of the teachers I interviewed found ways to work around racial mistrust, and successfully developed meaningful relationships with black students and black parents. Still, collective whiteness was not seen as some temporary barrier or momentary obstacle to be overcome. Rather, the process of lumping all white teachers together – and treating them accordingly – was seen as a racially discriminatory burden that was exclusive to white teachers. While many of my interviewees did admit to knowing other white teachers who occasionally expressed anti-black sentiment, they recoiled at the idea that said teachers or such sentiment should, in any way, be held against them simply because they were of the same race. Socialized as unique individuals, and accustomed to enjoying psychic freedom (DiAngelo, 2012), exposure to collective whiteness caused my conversational partners great personal and professional trepidation, ultimately contributing to their disparate interpretations of white versus nonwhite racial victimization.

**Black Teachers Have it Easier. They really Do**

It gets so frustrating sometimes. I work and I work and I work to build these relationships and I make glacial progress. I spend years working my ass off just to be accepted, you know, to get them to look at me as a professional, then a black
20-something, fresh out of college can just stroll in and automatically have everybody’s trust. I would kill for an advantage like that. That’s what it is, an advantage. I mean, black teachers have it easier. They really do.

*Denise Bradley, 31*

In addition to reverse discrimination and collective whiteness, there was a third component to spatial victimization; black privilege. It was not lost upon my conversational partners that if whiteness was a disadvantage within predominantly black schools, then, by contrast, blackness was an advantage. Acutely aware of how whiteness was conceptualized by many of their black students, the teachers I interviewed paid special attention to how their black colleagues were treated by, and interacted with, those very same students. The same was true for black parents. My conversational partners took notice of how black parents responded to black teachers, juxtaposing the respect and cordialness shown to them with the disrespect and mistrust that they, themselves, received by virtue of being white. Whether speaking about their relationships and interactions with black students or black parents – and despite their previous incredulity at the notion of racial advantage – my conversational partners expressed a strident belief in, and provided what they considered to be relevant examples of, black privilege.

Black privilege fell along three intersecting lines. First, there were those teachers who focused more on the physical embodiment of racial similarity. These teachers felt that their black colleagues were privileged because they reminded black students of a parent, an aunt, an uncle, or even a grandparent. Second, there were teachers who focused more on the cultural embodiment of racial similarity. These teachers felt that their black colleagues were privileged because they could leverage similar cultural backgrounds to build trust and maintain effective relationships with black students and black families. Finally, there were those teachers who focused on anti-whiteness. These teachers felt that black teachers were privileged simply because
they were not white. In this sense, being black was the archetypical representation of anti-whiteness, rendering everything else irrelevant. If you were not white, you were privileged. Period. These separate formulations of black privilege, while conceptually different, were not mutually exclusive, as there was considerable overlap among them.

Black privilege in the form of physical similarities was mentioned in all but three of my interviews. The idea that black students looked at black teachers as surrogate relatives, or relatives by proxy, was the most prevalent form of black privilege expressed by my conversational partners. The privilege of blackness, itself, of sharing the physical traits and characteristics of black students and their loved ones, according to my interview respondents, was both immediate and omnipresent. All black teachers, but particularly black women, reminded black students of someone in their lives, and thus, enjoyed a form of privilege. Mrs. Marsi demonstrated this line of thinking when imagining what it would be like to remind black students of “their mother or grandmother.”

Q: Do you feel that your job teaching in predominantly black schools would be easier if you were black?

Mrs. Marsi: Yeah, I mean, think about it. I think my voice would carry a lot more weight, um, I would have a lot more authority with certain kids if I looked like their mother or grandmother. Can you imagine that, that every time you see your teacher, every time she tells you to stop misbehaving and do your work, she reminded you of your mom? The black teachers in my school can do that, it’s not a hypothetical for them. I think it’s an advantage, a big advantage. I don’t mean to imply that it’s a bad thing, it can be, but it can be a good thing, too, for the students, I mean. But to answer your question, yeah, if I were able to remind my students of their mom of someone they’re close to, my job would be a hell of a lot easier.

As illustrated by Mrs. Marsi’s response, black privilege in the form of physical similarities was relatively benign. To be clear, my conversational partners did feel that physical
similarity was an advantage that black teachers enjoyed, but for most of them, it was an advantage that had its usefulness. Reminding black students of authority figures – particularly ones that they were related to – as Mrs. Marsi indicated, could “be a good thing,” in that it could be used to the benefit of students. That is, in the hands of quality teachers, black privilege could be an effective pedagogical tool that enhanced student success. Still, my conversational partners felt the existence of black privilege, in any form, was unfair to them, and thus, constituted a form of white racial victimization. As white teachers, they were, by definition, excluded from possessing, utilizing, or benefiting from black privilege. Therefore, though it was considered benign relative to other forms of spatial victimization, black privilege in the form of physical appearances could, and often did, lead to racial victimization.

Black privilege as cultural symmetry was conceptualized similar to black privilege as physical symmetry. In the eyes of my conversational partners, the cultural similarity between black teachers and black students could be both an effective pedagogical tool and a perceived form of racial discrimination. Black teachers, especially those black teachers that came from similar backgrounds, understood black students, culturally, speaking their language and even sharing their worldview. They have similar experiences, they have similar likes and dislikes, and they, to a large degree, look at and interpret society in the same way. If leveraged correctly, the thinking went, black teachers could use “black culture” to gain the trust of black families and build lasting relationships with black students. At the same time, however, black privilege was black privilege. It was an advantage that was exclusive to black teachers, and, despite the potential benefit it held for black students, it was still perceived as discriminatory against white teachers, making it an unfair, racially discriminatory practice.
The cultural embodiment of black privilege was somewhat unique because unlike its physical counterpart, culture could be learned by anyone, including white teachers. Although limited in scope, “black culture,” variously defined, is something that white teachers could incorporate into their educational toolkit. If you recall from chapter four, one of the ways my interviewees performed whiteness was by outwardly embracing what they perceived to be black culture. In doing so, they not only sought to protect themselves from feeling white, but they also desired a stake in culturally-based black privilege. White teachers wanted an “in” with black students, one that they could eventually leverage to become better teachers of black students. Ms. Jarvis, 24 years old and still in the early stages of her career, talked about the benefits of utilizing black culture as a pedagogical tool, as well as the limits of doing so as a white teacher.

Ms. Jarvis: It’s funny in a way. I think maybe because I’m younger, the kids look at me somewhat differently. I mean, they know I like hip-hop (laughter). We play fight all the time about Drake and J. Cole, you know, which one is better. They love talking about that, so I try to use it as much as I can to connect with them. It helps them relax around me. Most of the other teachers are older and they hate everything about rap music, so they can’t really use rap music to connect with the kids. I try to use it to my advantage as much as I possibly can.

Q: Does it work for you?

Ms. Jarvis: Sometimes, um, a lot of the time it does, but it’s not foolproof. At the end of the day, I’m still a white girl (laughter). There isn’t enough rap music in the world to change that fact.

Ms. Jarvis was well aware of how her age and, in particular, her personal music preferences worked to her benefit with black students. Being younger than most teachers, black or white, as well as a fan of hip-hop music, helped Ms. Jarvis access what she thought of as black culture, something that was not readily available to other white teachers. Ms. Jarvis especially used her affinity for rap music to her advantage, debating her black students about which artist is the best lyricist or has the best album. These debates were vehicles to engage her black students
in a way that gained their trust and increased their comfort level within her classroom. Like many of my other conversational partners, Ms. Jarvis believed that the key to being an effective teacher was strong relationships, and she used black culture as an “in” to build them with her black students. Even still, Ms. Jarvis was white, and as she stated above, being so carried certain limitations. Her access to – and overall effectiveness using – black culture was limited by her whiteness, meaning any advantages that accrued to her were limited, as well.

Throughout my fieldwork, my conversational partners described black privilege in the form of physical and cultural similarities in more nuanced and complex terms. Yes, the existence of such privilege was an example of racial discrimination, as it unfairly advantaged black teachers, but if utilized properly, it could actually be used to the benefit of black students. As educators committed to quality teaching, most of my conversational partners were willing to accept – albeit begrudgingly – physical and cultural forms of black privilege, considering it to be an “occupational hazard” or “necessary evil,” especially given the racial composition of their respective schools. All nuance, complexity, and acceptance completely disappeared when it came to the most visceral discussion of black privilege, that which was perceived to be rooted in an antipathy towards whites. Thus, the third form of black privilege – anti-whiteness – was the one most explicitly associated with racism and racial victimization.

It was one thing for black teachers to benefit from reminding black students of a loved one or sharing cultural dispositions, but it was something else altogether for black teachers to benefit from simply not being white. Although they were frustrated by all forms of black privilege, most of the teachers I interviewed were willing to accept that, relative to their black colleagues, they occupied an outsider status with black students, just so long as said status was not motivated by racial antagonism. Conversely, black privilege as anti-whiteness, was described
by my conversational partners as frustrating, hurtful, and professionally demoralizing. Anti-whiteness was different from other forms of black privilege because it was not about black teachers at all. Whereas black privilege in the form of physical and cultural similarities was about the positive traits of black teachers, black privilege in the form as anti-whiteness was about the negative traits of white teachers. While there is no neat or clear functional dividing line between anti-whiteness and other forms of black privilege, there was, however, a discernable difference in how white teachers described, and reacted to, what they perceived as anti-white hostility versus pro-black advantage. Although my conversational partners did, at times, implicate their black colleagues in anti-whiteness, for the most part, it was a process that pertained to black students and their families.

When predicated upon anti-whiteness, it was incredibly difficult for my interview respondents not to personalize and internalize the advantage enjoyed by their black colleagues. The fact that black teachers – even those of minimal quality – could take for granted that they would be accepted, trusted, and respected by black students and black families, signaled to my conversational partners that blackness was superior, and by contrast, whiteness was inferior. Because teaching children is both social and incredibly intimate, this particular form of racial victimization became personal, causing my conversational partners to be highly critical of themselves as people. For example, after teaching in an urban, predominantly black school for a number of years, Mrs. Clark now considers black privilege in the form of anti-whiteness to be a reflection of her personal character flaws.

Mrs. Clark: When I look at Carol and how the kids respond to her, I can’t help but think I’m the problem. I know she’s black and that, um, she has certain advantages that I don’t, but maybe it’s simpler than that, maybe it’s me.

Q: Many of the other teachers I interviewed felt that black students can sometimes distrust or mistreat white teachers without cause. Do you experience a
similar process? Do you feel that racial distrust affects the relationship that you have with your black students?

Mrs. Clark: Yeah, of course it does, but um, there are a lot of white teachers who manage to do just fine, you know. I mean, they deal with the same hostility I do. Some of their students hate white people, too, but they still have really good relationships with their kids. At that point, the only other reasonable explanation is me. What is it about me that, how can I put this? Um, what is it about me that makes being white worse? Does that make sense?

Mrs. Clark struggled to understand why she has had such a difficult time connecting with her black students. In her attempts to reconcile the complexity of race with her experiences as a teacher, Mrs. Clark took notice of her black and white colleagues. She acknowledged that Carol, a black teacher, was advantaged because she was not white, but at the same time, however, she also noticed that many of her white colleagues were successful teachers of black students. For Mrs. Clark, the presence of successful white teachers complicated the idea that whiteness, alone, accounted for her struggles as a teacher. Seeing no other explanations, Mrs. Clark looked inward, eventually coming to the conclusion that whiteness, along with her personal flaws, combined to limit her effectiveness as a teacher of black students. Other teachers went through a similar process, personalizing anti-whiteness to such a degree that it was not merely a facilitator of black privilege, but also, it was an indictment of them as people.

Black privilege as anti-whiteness also affected the way my conversational partners talked about teaching as a profession. Mrs. Edwards, 51, has been teaching in urban schools for over 20 years. A lifelong reader, Mrs. Edwards teaches language arts at Emerson Middle School, a school with a student population that is over 80% black. During our interview, Mrs. Edwards repeatedly lamented black privilege as anti-whiteness, describing it as “the racial sorting of teachers.” Mrs. Edwards, a veteran teacher with tenure, was not opposed to sorting, or ranking, teachers, but she believed the existence of such a hierarchy should be based on talent and overall
ability, as opposed to race. The latter, according to Mrs. Edwards, undermined public education and made a mockery of professionalism.

**Mrs. Edwards:** I’m a good teacher, a damn good teacher, and I’ve worked extremely hard to become one. I was completely lost my first year, but I never gave up and I’ve never even considered quitting. I just worked that much harder to become what my students needed me to be, and I’ve been at the same school for close to twelve years, while so many other teachers don’t even make it through the year. I know it sounds, I don’t know, conceited or whatever, but I’m good at what I do, and as a white teacher, that’s not always easy. There are so many students that are determined to make your life harder. They just don’t like white people. Then I meet their parents and I see why. They just think all white people are bad, all white people are racist, you know. You can tell right away, like on the first day. Oh, this kid has a problem with white people.

**Q:** Do you think your job would be easier of you were black?

**Mrs. Edwards:** That’s not even a question. Are you kidding me? I’ve watched so many black teachers get ahead and they weren’t very good at all. Believe me, I don’t want to come across as racist or anything, but this is my career, I take it seriously. So just like students give me trouble just because I’m white, they’ll suck up to black teachers just because they’re black. They have it much easier and I think it affects their teaching. In fact, it affects my teaching, too. The more we make racial exceptions for bad teaching, the less serious teaching becomes. Like I said, I work hard. I bust my ass and I want people to know it.

Mrs. Edwards, more so than most of my other conversational partners, was highly protective of teaching as a profession. For her, black privilege – in addition to being discriminatory against whites – was a direct assault on professionalism because it undermined the painstaking process of becoming an effective teacher. In her opinion, educators, regardless of color, should be judged as professionals only on their ability to teach children, and anything else, such as race, for example, should be excluded as a relevant or determining factor. Despite her desire to see teaching as more of a meritocracy, Mrs. Edwards expressed her belief that black teachers have an inherent advantage in predominantly black schools, an advantage that is primarily fueled by anti-whiteness. Accordingly, when asked if her job would be easier if she
were black, Mrs. Edwards answered in the affirmative with zero hesitation. For her, such a reality masked the shortcomings of many of her black colleagues, and it blurred the lines between effective and ineffective teachers.

Whether based on physical similarities, cultural similarities, or anti-whiteness, black privilege was a real phenomenon in the minds of my interview respondents. In predominantly black schools, white teachers were inherently disadvantaged, which, by contrast, meant that black teachers were inherently advantaged. Despite its potential benefits to black students, black privilege in urban schools was racially discriminatory against white teachers, making it a conduit for white racial victimization. In conjunction with reverse discrimination and collective whiteness, black privilege completed the process of spatial victimization, causing my conversational partners to deploy the white race card early and often throughout our interviews. In stark contrast to their previous skepticism, the teachers I interviewed found racial victimization to be much more credible when it affected them, personally, even as they continued to minimize the salience of racism in the lives of people of color. Next, I juxtapose and discuss the disparate conceptualizations of racial victimization, paying particular attention to the impact that racialized space had on racialized experience.

Discussion

“Playing the race card” is a phrase that is common in the contemporary American lexicon. It is a phrase that is meant to undermine claims of racial victimization, and typically, it is phrase used by whites in response to claims made by nonwhites. This pattern permeated my interview data, specifically when my conversational partners shared their general thoughts about racism and racial inequality. Almost reflexively, most of the teachers I interviewed scoffed at the notion that people of color, and African Americans, in particular, encountered any “real racism”
in their lives, today. The idea that racial discrimination played a meaningful role, or otherwise prevented blacks and other nonwhites from being successful, was, according to my conversational partners, a counterproductive excuse for personal failures and the logical result of a hyper-sensitive, politically correct culture. In lieu of “blaming the white man” for their life outcomes, people of color needed to take personal responsibility and “stop living in the past.”

Racial victimization, while characterized and described as questionable, if not fraudulent, throughout the broader United States, became unquestionably real for my interviewees within predominantly black schools. Nonwhite racialized space, just as it did with white racial awareness, elevated white racial victimization by making it hyper-visible to white teachers as they navigated the contours of race in an explicitly racialized environment. As the racial other within urban, predominantly black schools, white teachers experienced race from the perspective of racial minorities, and like many racial minorities, they often felt excluded and ostracized by the racial majority. As the racial other within urban, predominantly black schools, white teachers felt like their ability to become effective teachers – as well as the possibility for professional advancement – was unfairly limited by racial discrimination. Finally, as the racial other within urban, predominantly black schools, white teachers felt that their racialized disadvantage translated directly to racialized advantage for their black colleagues.

My interview data demonstrate the degree to which racial victimization, just like race, itself, is a social construction. Although often appearing to be self-evident – chattel slavery and Jim Crow Segregation, for example – racial victimization is always in the eye of the beholder. In their broader, more general construction, my conversational partners saw racial victimization as little more than a farcical attempt to make excuses for personal failures. In their personal, spatially specific construction, however, my conversational partners saw racial victimization as
an obvious and overt process that negatively affected them as people and undermined them as professionals. Furthermore, racism in teaching, either as unearned advantage or unfair disadvantage, was a grave disservice to all teachers because it boosted ineffective pedagogical practices, while simultaneously limiting highly effective ones. In this sense, even though black teachers ostensibly benefitted from being part of the racial majority, in reality, they, too, were victimized by racism in public education because teaching, itself, was under assault.

While racism in education had the potential to damage all teachers, including black ones, this chapter is about white teachers and their shifting constructions of racial victimization. This chapter is about the race card versus the white race card, detailing the skepticism directed at the former and the authenticity given to the latter. Additionally, this chapter is about the effect that nonwhite racialized space had on white racial experience. After recognizing themselves, racially, newly minted white teachers started paying close attention to how whiteness was treated by black colleagues, black students, and black parents. Put differently, spatial socialization, and the consequences thereof, gave way to spatial victimization, causing the latter to become real and authentic, even in the minds of those teachers who adamantly and aggressively denied its existence just minutes earlier. That is, depending on the place, time, and people involved, racial discrimination, and thus, racial victimization, was either questioned, dismissed, or accepted as genuine truth.

Conclusion

The data presented in this chapter highlight the degree to which racial victimization is socially constructed. The teachers I interviewed, and increasingly, whites throughout the United States, more broadly, construct racial victimization as a more pressing problem for whites than it is for people of color. This is especially the case when white racial victimization can be
affirmed through personal experience. Nonwhite racialized space changes the way whiteness is experienced, and it also shapes the way white people, themselves, perceive and understand racial victimization. For my conversational partners, experiencing racial discrimination first hand, living through it, personally, validated racial victimization, creating a space where even those teachers who decried or dismissed “the race card,” felt perfectly comfortable deploying the white race card. As the country gets darker and darker, it is essential for race scholars in general, and critical whiteness scholars in particular, to take theoretical and empirical heed of the changes in white racial experience, as well as the impact these changes have on the social construction of racial victimization.
CHAPTER VI
RACE-CONSCIOUS WHITENESS: NEGOTIATING COLORBLIND DISCOURSE AND WHITE RACIAL EXPERIENCE

“I was raised not to see color and that’s exactly how I’ve lived my life. I think we’d be in a much better place if we really were colorblind, you know, if we stopped making everything about race.”

_Amanda Costa, East Genesee Middle School_

“Race can’t escape this place. You’d have to be blind not to see it.”

_Amanda Costa, East Genesee Middle School_

Introduction

In the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896, the United States Supreme Court, in a 7-1 ruling, upheld the doctrine of “separate but equal,” thereby providing constitutional legitimacy for Jim Crow (Goldstone, 2012; Klarman, 2007). Justice John Marshall Harlan, in the lone dissenting opinion, wrote “in view of the constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our constitution is colorblind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens” (Carr, 1997; Hofstader, 1982, p.58). Thus, as far back as the 19th century, only three decades removed from slavery, racial colorblindness was being promoted from one of the highest levels of government. Today, in 2017, a majority of whites – as well as many people of color – subscribe to the racial ideology of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Foreman, 2000; Carr, 1997; Crenshaw, 1997; Forman, 2004; Gallagher, 2003; Gotanda, 1991; Haney-Lopez, 2007; Lewis, Chesler, and Forman, 2000). Racial colorblindness seeks to omit racial classification as a meaningful determinant of both personal identity and institutional functioning (Wise, 2010). Hence, people, the law, and especially social policy, it is argued, should adhere to a strict code of colorblindness, eschewing race-consciousness at all levels of society.
Related to, and in many ways, undergirding the idea of colorblindness, is the sincere belief that the United States has formally entered a state of post-racialism (Bobo, 2011; Feagin and Hernan, 2000). Since the conclusion of the Civil Rights Movement, but particularly within the last three to four decades, a broad swath of journalist, cultural critics, political commentators, and academics have loudly proclaimed that America is no longer marred by the white supremacy and racial discrimination of centuries past, and had reached a status best characterized by racial egalitarianism (Crouch, 1996; Love and Tosolt, 2010; D’Souza, 1995; Glaeser and Vigdor, 2012; McWhorter, 2008; Sniderman and Piazza, 1995; Steele, 1990; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1999). No longer burdened or bolstered by race, it is argued, all Americans – of all races and ethnicities – now have the freedom to pursue their dreams, and an equal opportunity to ultimately achieve them (Kaplan, 2011). As such, claims of racial discrimination, especially those that are made by nonwhites, are questioned, treated with skepticism, and, in many instances, dismissed altogether. This particular belief has only grown stronger in the wake of the election and reelection Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States (Jost, Ogletree, Parks, and Hughey, 2011; Lum, 2009; Tesler and Sears, 2010).

In this chapter, I examine the intersection between ideology, experience, and discourse. That is, I compare the racial ideologies of my conversational partners with their own experiences as white teachers within predominantly black schools. In the majority of interviews, I found that the two predominant racial ideologies, colorblindness and post-racialism, were explicitly and repeatedly contradicted by the way my interview respondents experienced and talked about race, particularly the way race influenced and affected their experiences as racial minorities. When confronted with these ideological and experiential contradictions, many teachers experienced what critical whiteness scholar, Robin DiAngelo, terms “white fragility,” a form of racialized
stress that can trigger a host of defense mechanisms (DiAngelo, 2011). As such, most of my conversational partners distanced themselves from their own contradictions, while a much smaller group confronted them, directly. In the end, I show how nonwhite racialized space, while important in regards to white racial experience, is less effective in challenging, or shifting, racial ideology.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. Part one focuses on what sociologist Joe Feagin calls the white racial frame, a framing of society that minimizes, rationalizes, and justifies racial inequality (Feagin, 2010). A central component of the white racial frame, racial ideology, is pronounced throughout my interview data, and part one of this chapter describes the two most common racial ideologies expressed by my conversational partners; colorblindness and post-racialism. Part two of this chapter looks beyond racial ideology, alone, and analyzes how it intersects with, and is contradicted by, actual racialized experience. That is, this section juxtaposes the idealization of colorblindness and post-racialism with the color-consciousness and hyper-racialism of my conversational partners’ various depictions of their own experiences within predominantly black schools. Part two also introduces the concept of spatial negotiation, the process by which white teachers made sense of their ideological and experiential contradictions. I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of the limited impact that racialized space – and racialized experience – has on racial ideology.

It should be noted that, because I focus on racial ideology and discursive contradictions, this chapter utilizes much of the same interview data that structured chapters four and five. Similarly, I touch on a number of concepts and themes that were discussed in previous chapters, revisiting them here in order to highlight their centrality to the racial ideologies of colorblindness and post-racialism. Although I return to several of the themes presented earlier – namely, white
racial consciousness and white racial victimization—they will not be utilized in the same way.

As presented in previous chapters, white racial consciousness and white racial victimization highlighted the importance of racialized space in the lives of my conversational partners. In this chapter, however, I use these concepts to illustrate the contradictory nature of racial ideology and racialized experience. For example, whereas chapter five examined the way racial victimization was socially constructed inside and outside of nonwhite racialized spaces, here, I question the merits of white racial victimization within the context of an ostensibly post-racial America. Thus, I use previous concepts in new and illuminating ways.

**The White Racial Frame – Colorblind Ideology and Post-Racial Discourse**

Joe Feagin defines the white racial frame as the “broad, persisting, and dominant racial frame that has rationalized racial oppression and inequality and thus impacted all U.S. institutions.” He continues, “the white racial frame is a centuries-old worldview and has constantly involved a racial construction of reality by white and other Americans, an emotion-laden construction process that shapes everyday relationships and institutions in fundamental and racialized ways (Feagin, 2010, p. ix, original emphasis). Feagin conceptualizes the white racial frame in a multifaceted and multidimensional way, accounting not only for institutions and interpersonal relationships, but emotions and other affective dimensions, as well (Feagin, 2010). As such, the white racial frame moves beyond cognitive or ideological processes, and explicitly addresses the visceral and emotional aspects of white supremacy. Lastly, the white racial frame also includes an expansive rationalization for racial inequality, one that has routinely been utilized in an attempt to reconcile the existence of white racial dominance in an ostensibly colorblind, egalitarian society (Feagin, 2010).
Throughout my fieldwork, my conversational partners routinely spoke in ways that reflected a white racial framing of society. For them, as mentioned in chapter four, whiteness was invisible, it was normal, and it signified little more than basic demography. Put differently, according to my interview respondents, whiteness, broadly speaking, is simply not relevant to the social, political, and economic standing of whites, relative to African Americans and other people of color. By positioning whiteness as a meaningless physical characteristic, my conversational partners were then able to ideologically attribute ongoing racial disparities between whites and nonwhites to the cultural and personal decisions of the latter, as opposed to the systemic racial advantage of the former. In doing so, white teachers – similar to the whites throughout the broader United States – constructed race in a way that denied the salience of white racial advantage and rationalized the existence and effects of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2010). That is, my conversational partners were extremely vocal in their belief in, and support for, racial colorblindness, along with the notion that America has reached a formal state of post-racialism.

In this section, I highlight two similar, yet qualitatively different aspects of the white racial frame; colorblind discourse and post-racial theorizing. First, I use data to show how my conversational partners routinely engaged in colorblind discourse throughout our interviews. Often paying homage to the way they were raised, multiple interviewees discursively embraced colorblindness as their prevailing racial ideology. Next, I show how my interview respondents also engaged in post-racial theorizing. Repeatedly invoking the name of “Barack Obama,” white teachers described the United States as a post-racial state. I conclude this section by introducing data that show how, with few exceptions and to varying degrees, my conversational partners believed that challenging the validity of either colorblindness or post-racialism was the primary
I Don’t Understand Why We Can’t Be Colorblind, it’s 2015

I’m not crazy, I know that there are still racists out there, on both sides, you know, but I really am confused about why that is. I mean, if we just saw each other as people, living, breathing people with feelings and emotions, we’d be a lot better off. We wouldn’t have so much hate. I don’t get why that’s a bad thing, I don’t understand why we can’t be colorblind, it’s 2015, you know. If we can’t get past race now, then we probably never will. It’s kind of heartbreaking.

Jessi McCormick, 42

As a group, my conversational partners were highly supportive of, and rhetorically committed to, the racial ideology of colorblindness. Across nearly all of my interviews, teachers expressed their fidelity to the idea that individual people should be treated as individual people, based not on their racial classification, but, as so many of them repeated, on the “content of their character.” Framing it cyclically, my conversational partners described colorblindness as something that everybody should be afforded, as well as something that everyone should adhere to, thereby ensuring that no individual person, of any race, would have to feel the sting of racial discrimination. Colorblindness was not considered to be merely a racial ideology, but rather, it was routinely presented as a moral imperative, one that was central the overall functioning and wellbeing of an egalitarian society. In this sense, colorblindness was not only good for individual people, but it was also good for society because it symbolized our commitment and dedication to the principles of fairness and equality of opportunity.

Ms. Livingston, a high school teacher of eight years, spent a considerable amount of time expressing her belief in colorblindness. Just under 30, Ms. Livingston was proud to be a member of a younger, “more tolerant” generation of people who refused to be burdened by race or racial
discrimination. Speaking at length about her personal racial ideology, Mrs. Livingston went on to describe racial colorblindness as an all-encompassing solution to past, present, and future forms of racial conflict. In response to a question about the potential effects of race or racism on her life, generally, Ms. Livingston went on a mini-tangent about colorblindness and the need for people in America, today, to finally “move beyond race.”

Ms. Livingston: Um, I don’t, I don’t think so. Let me think (long pause). Um, I can’t think of anything right now but, I can’t say for sure, you know. Maybe like, affirmative action. I didn’t get into every school that I applied to, so who knows, but, I think it’s funny you ask that question because we’re like so focused on race in this country. We’re obsessed with it. Which is unfortunate because it can really hold us back, all of us, you know. I don’t want to sound like some naïve white girl, but I think we should really do our best to be colorblind. Think about all the bullshit we’ve been through, you know, as Americans. Like, enough already. Let’s start treating each other as people and get past black, white, green or whatever. I mean, Martin Luther King was preaching colorblindness in the 60’s, and here we are all these years later, and everybody is still talking about race. To be honest, and um, this might come across as rude or mean, but I think some people like to use race as a crutch. Like, it’s just easier to blame something on race. I don’t know. I’m not saying it happens all the time, maybe it does, but I wouldn’t know. But, I’m still hopeful. I think younger people are doing better than anyone has before. We’re not perfect, but we’re definitely more tolerant than my parents and my grandparents’ generation, you know. We’re getting there, but we still have a long way to go.

Speaking about her life, generally, Ms. Livingston was unable to recall a specific instance or experience that she believed to be explicitly affected by race or racism. After sitting quietly for several minutes, Ms. Livingston spoke about the possibility of being a victim of race-based affirmative action, then she went on to discuss the dangers of our collective “obsession” with race, and the need for the country to finally move past it. Although Ms. Livingston admitted that younger generations are becoming more and more colorblind, she still believes that we “have a long way to go.” What was telling about this particular response was that it was unclear just how Ms. Livingston constructed colorblindness. Was colorblindness the solution to racial
discrimination ("think about all the bullshit we’ve been through"), or was it a way to de-
incentivize people of color from playing the race card ("some people like to use race as a
crutch")? Also of note, was the passive and almost laissez-faire way that Ms. Livingston
described past forms of racial discrimination. In her mind, slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of
institutionalized white supremacy was something happened to us, “as Americans,” as opposed to
a legally enforced racial hierarchy that benefitted whites to the detriment of racial minorities.

In response to several follow-up questions, Ms. Livingston went on to clarify that, for
her, colorblindness is a standard that society needs to be held to, but it is also something that
everyone, regardless of race or circumstance, needs to personally embrace. So, yes,
colorblindness should be the ultimate goal of institutions and the broader society, but it should
also be the goal of individual people, particularly people of color. Other conversational partners,
too, discussed racial colorblindness as a solution to the problems and conflicts generated by
“people on both sides.” That is, many of my conversational partners believed that whites and
nonwhites, alike, were guilty of violating the normative ideology of colorblindness. Mrs. Nelson
used the 2014 riots in Ferguson, MO\textsuperscript{47} as a prime example of how “both sides” spent too much
time thinking about race.

**Mrs. Nelson:** When you look at the riots that happened last year, it was
absolutely terrifying. The whole time, I kind of felt like both sides were looking
past each other. Nobody wanted to sit down and try to understand where the other
side was coming from. Nobody saw the other side as people, you know.
Unfortunately, I think, um, I think this is the natural outcome when the only thing
you see is race. When you see everything through the lens of race, there’s no
room for nuance, there’s no such thing as subtlety. If you’re a cop, you’re a racist,
and if you’re black, you’re a criminal. I was horrified seeing those images on TV
every night or on Facebook or whatever, but I can’t say that I was surprised. I
mean, seriously, when every single thing is about race, what do you expect? As
long as we constantly think about race, these type of tragedies are going to keep
happening.
Seeing the predominantly black residents of Ferguson, MO clash with predominantly white law enforcement officials was, for Mrs. Nelson, the horrifying, yet completely unsurprising outcome of a society that constantly thinks about race. Similar to Ms. Livingston, Mrs. Nelson sees the violation of colorblind norms as an issue that “both sides” need to address. The two of them, along with most of my other conversational partners, ideologically conflated the charge of racism with racism, itself. That is, while racial discrimination was bad, claiming to be a victim of racial discrimination was equally bad, as they both violated the norms racial colorblindness. In fact, the more my interviewees discussed their support for racial colorblindness, it increasingly became clear that in the new, ostensibly post-racial era, most of their ire was directed at those who focused on racial discrimination, or as one interviewee put it, “fixated on racism.” This particular form of racial colorblindness is quite common and quite problematic, for, as Julian Bond once notes, “to be blind to color is to be blind to the consequences of color” (Wise, 2010).

In his highly acclaimed book, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (2006), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes colorblind racism as an ideology that “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (p. 2). He continues, “Whereas Jim Crow racism explained blacks’ social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring, phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p.2). In this sense, whereas in the past, the discursive, ideological, and institutional contours of maintaining and reproducing racial inequality were explicit and overt in nature, today, these very same contours are cloaked in the language of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva,
Thus, without the blatant white supremacy of decades past, any ongoing racial inequality is the result of free market forces, natural occurrences, and black and brown cultural pathologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Carr, 1997; Desmond and Emirbayer, 2010; Wise, 2010).

Whether they were aware of it or not – and whether it was intentional or not – my conversational partners routinely engaged in color-blind racism. Teacher after teacher rationalized contemporary racial inequality in ways that completely absolved white supremacy, and white people, of any culpability in its maintenance and reproduction. In their discursive construction of colorblindness, my conversational partners attributed ongoing racial inequality to non-racial factors, making anti-racist activists and “social justice warriors” logistically superfluous and unnecessarily divisive. In repeatedly violating the norms of colorblindness, especially given the non-racial dynamics that cause racial inequality, today, people of color and their allies, it was argued, ran the risk of alienating whites and further undermining race relations moving forward. That is, my conversational partners could not talk about colorblindness without connecting it to race relations, more broadly. With few exceptions, the teachers I interviewed expressed their strident belief that accusations of racism, whether factual or not, were racially divisive, and therefore, did more harm than good. I detail this process next.

**If We Continue To See Color…Race Relations Will Only Get Worse**

You know, it’s bigger than um, racism or the possibility of discrimination, it’s also about how things stand between the races, you know. That might sound bad when I say it out loud, but what I mean is that, I don’t know the exact term, um, race relations or whatever, they’ve gotten a lot worse over the last couple of years. All these protests and riots about race, they’ve made things worse for everybody. I think that, um, if we continue to see color in everything, race relations will only get worse. You can’t call someone a racist and expect them to take your side.

*Jennifer Western, 48*
Abstaining from colorblindness – either as a means of anti-racism or an expression of personal identity – was described over and over by my conversational partners as racially divisive and a major contributing factor to “bad race relations.” As described by my interviewees, the outward expression of racial pride is reserved for people of color and, accordingly, is a double standard that would instantly get any white person labeled a racist. Also, as I discussed in great detail in the previous chapter, many whites equate complaints about racial inequality with accusations of white racism, therefore, to a large degree, they take such charges very personally. So, regardless of the facts on the ground, whether or not people of color actually experience racial discrimination, and irrespective of the history and genesis of racial pride, the majority of my conversational partners saw explicit forms of racial recognition as a blatant violation of racial colorblindness and a detriment to race relations more broadly.

Though not to the same degree, all but four teachers expressed a variation of the same sentiment; that violations of racial colorblindness did lasting damage to race relations between whites and nonwhites as a whole, and between whites and blacks in particular. The teachers I interviewed repeatedly described prominent civil rights activists such as Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and “that guy from Black Lives Matters” \(^{48}\) as racially divisive figures who have contributed to the deterioration of race relations between blacks and whites, today. Political figures, too, such as President Obama, Eric Holder, and Susan Rice were also mentioned by name as people of color who engaged in “divisive identity politics.” It should be noted, however, that belief in – and expression of – this particular sentiment was not the same across interviews, as it tended to fall along a continuum. On one end, you had teachers who believed racism against people of color was successfully eradicated in the 1960’s, and on the other hand, you had teachers who thought of themselves as potential allies. Still, 28 of 32 teachers, regardless of how
they felt about racial inequality, expressed their belief that color-consciousness was little more than a blight on contemporary race relations.

For example, on one end of the spectrum, Mrs. Masri, a teacher who often spoke of her students in empathetic terms, talked about how frustrating it was to have to “always deal with race” in her classroom. While Mrs. Marsi did acknowledge the barriers and social problems that are commonly associated with poverty, she did not feel that white people in general, and white teachers in particular, should be blamed for the “unfortunate” economic conditions faced by many people of color. According to Mrs. Marsi, the tendency of her black students to “bring up race for no reason at all” was counterproductive because it had the potential to make enemies out of allies. As she, herself, put it, “I’m not one of these people who pretends that we’ve reached some sort of racial utopia, but if your first instinct is to blame racism for all your problems, then at some point I’ll stop listening to you. I just get tired of it.” Thus, even as someone who was attentive to the economic conditions of her black student body, Mrs. Marsi became disillusioned by students who “focused entirely too much on race.”

Opposite Mrs. Marsi were those teachers who held zero sympathy for race-consciousness in the contemporary United States. Teachers on this end of the spectrum saw racism as a thing of the past, making colorblindness, in discourse and in policy, the appropriate, fair, and moral racial ideology. Teachers on this end of the spectrum were more than disillusioned by color-consciousness, they were passionately vocal about the lasting damage being done to race relations by so-called “social justice warriors.” Mr. Reed, for example, had one of the strongest reactions to those who make race the central component of their activism. In his estimation, any insinuation that race was still relevant in contemporary America was not only factually incorrect, but as he described it, it was also a “racist way to make white people look bad.” That is, it was
bad enough to mischaracterize race in the United States, but it was much worse to do so in a way that denigrated whites and did lasting damage to race relations in the process. I highlight our exchange on this matter below:

**Q:** Why do you feel that talking about racism is inherently racist against whites?

**Mr. Reed:** Oh come on, is that a serious question? If I say the word racist right now, you would probably think of a white guy wouldn’t you? I bet I could go up to 100 black people on the street, random strangers and people I don’t even know and ask them to described what a racist is, and I’d bet my house that every last one of them would say a white person. I bet they would even look at me as racist. Now you tell me, how is that not racism? Treating all white people like we’re the KKK is treating us a certain way just because of our race. That’s literally the definition of racism, and I’m sorry but when we talk about racism today, blacks need to look at themselves because they do more to perpetuate racism than anybody else. And then they turn around and wonder why race relations are the way they are.

**Q:** How would you describe race relations?

**Mr. Reed:** They’re horrible. And you know what, they’re only going to get worse. I don’t mean to keep going back to this, but you can’t keep talking about racism this and racism that and expect race relations to be good. You can’t keep bringing up race all the time. You can’t keep blaming whites for your own fuck ups. Just be an adult and own up to it. You can only blame us for so much before we say you know what, we’ll live our lives and you can live yours. Quite frankly, we’ll see who does better. Don’t call me the devil then expect me to like you. Sorry, no can do.

Mr. Reed, more so than most, was emphatic in his belief that color-consciousness was harmful to race relations, particularly color-consciousness in the form of racial justice advocacy. Any suggestion that blacks and other people of color were subjected to racial discrimination in the contemporary United States was, according to Mr. Reed, the equivalent to calling white people “a bunch of racists.” As a result, this specific form of color-consciousness was one that Mr. Reed – and many of my other conversational partners – took personally, making him feel targeted, or accused, by people he considered to be “race hustlers.” Race relations, then, were never going to improve unless blacks and other people of color desisted from accusing white
people of being racist, unless they adopted colorblindness as their prevailing racial ideology. Charging white people with racism, directly or indirectly, was a surefire way to turn them off to people of color. As Mr. Reed made plain in the above exchange, “Don’t call me the devil then expect me to like you.”

The contrast between Mrs. Marsi and Mr. Reed, while significant, should not overshadow the fact that, to varying degrees, they both believed that color-consciousness was detrimental to race relations between whites and nonwhites. While the two aforementioned teachers fell on opposite ends of the spectrum, most of my other conversational partners fell somewhere between them, with some closer to Mrs. Marsi’s position, while others leaned closer to Mr. Reed. Again, though, 28 of 32 teachers expressed a belief that explicit color-consciousness was racially divisive. That is, in violating the discursive, political, and cultural norms of racial colorblindness, people of color and their allies unnecessarily alienated whites and, in the process, did lasting damage to race relations, today. Whether agreeing with Mrs. Marsi, Mr. Reed, or falling somewhere in-between, central to this process was the sincere belief that the United States had successfully transitioned from a racist to a racism-free society. Put simply, my conversational partners believed that America had entered a formal state of post-racialism.

**How Real Can Racism Be In A Country With A Black President**

I find it funny that people still complain about race in this day and age. I mean, have they noticed the President of the United States? How real can racism be in a country with a black president, you know? It just seems foolish to say we’re racist as a country when the face of the country is black. Don’t get me wrong, I love Obama and I love Michelle, but doesn’t the fact that the first family is black kind of disprove racism?

*Paige Vincent, 36*

Undergirding my conversational partners’ support for colorblindness was their genuine belief that the United States had officially become a post-racial state. Even those teachers who
admitted that racial discrimination had not been completely relegated to the past, still believed that enough progress had been made to alleviate the charge that America is a racist country. My interviewees used a variety of examples to “prove” just how post-racial we have become. Some teachers pointed to the litany of black celebrities that are firmly entrenched in our national popular culture. Some pointed to the black professional athletes who now serve as role models for children of all colors, and still others highlighted the emergence of a black middle class and the rise and acceptance of interracial relationships. Several teachers even invoked Asian Americans and the model minority myth as their proof of American post-racialism (Chou, 2008; Ng, Lee, and Pak, 2007; Wing, 2007; Yu, 2006; Zhang, 2010). As the above quote illustrates, however, there was no greater “evidence” of America’s racial tolerance and racial egalitarianism than the election and reelection of Barack Obama as President of the United States.

Mrs. Edwards, without prompting from me, proudly proclaimed that she was a “traditional American” with “strong conservative values.” After spending a good deal of time criticizing President Obama for being “racially divisive” and “always playing the race card,” Mrs. Edwards then used his presidency as an example of “just how far we’ve come as a country.” Despite the fact that a majority of whites voted against President Obama in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, Mrs. Edwards was adamant that the existence of a black president negated the assertion that the United States of America was still a country marred by anti-black hostility and other forms of racial discrimination.49 For her, the mere presence of President Obama was enough to conclude that America had reached a formal state of post-racialism.

Mrs. Edwards: I’m sorry, I don’t mean to go on and on about the president, I don’t want to get too political, I know that’s not what this interview is about, but the last time I checked, he is black isn’t he? I mean, I may not like him or what he
stands for, his policies and all that, but I, I think he does symbolize something important about our country. If we can elect a black person as president, you know, to the highest, most important office in the land, then people can’t really use race as an excuse anymore. Like if Obama can become president, then maybe you can’t blame racism for why you didn’t finish school or why you don’t have a job, you know. The whole race thing is over.

Even though Mrs. Edwards disapproved of, then, President Obama – and often did so in harsh and hyperbolic terms⁵⁰ – she still believed that his presidency reflected positively on the United States, specifically as it pertains to race. Having an African American president, according to Mrs. Edwards, officially rendered the charge of racism obsolete. Neither dropping out of school, nor being unemployed, to name two examples, could be attributed to racial discrimination in a country that has a black president. While Mrs. Edwards did not specifically use the term “post-racial,” she spoke of the United States as a (white) racism-free state, and for her, the election a black president was the ultimate proof. Many of my other conversational partners also presented President Obama as proof of American post-racialism, including teachers who were broadly supportive of the president and his agenda.

In answering some of my background questions about what influenced him to go into education, Mr. Rhodes, whom I was interviewing in his own home, pointed to a picture of an elderly woman hanging on the wall and, with tears forming in his eyes, said “because of her, my mother. Everything good in me I got from her (pause). Sorry, she passed away last year.” Mr. Rhodes went on to describe growing up with a single mom and how she, owing to her deep faith, instilled in him a commitment to public service. This type of upbringing led Mr. Rhodes into education, and it also engendered in him a deep sense of progressivism. As such, he was a huge fan of President Obama. Although his feelings about President Obama were the complete opposite of those held by Mrs. Edwards, Mr. Rhodes, by and large, still reached the same conclusion about the racial significance of a black president. As he, himself, put it, “I think we’re
just about past race now or wouldn’t have Barack. We should focus on poverty, that’s a much bigger problem, I think.”

Mrs. Edwards and Mr. Rhodes were on opposite ends of the political spectrum, yet, for different reasons, they both saw the election of an African American president as the death knell for racism in America. For the former, President Obama symbolized the end of legitimacy for race-based excuses, while for the latter, he symbolized the need for a heightened focus on poverty, and less of an emphasis on race. Still, they, like many of the teachers I interviewed, used the presence of Barack Obama to bolster their belief in post-racialism. Other prominent and successful African Americans were also offered as examples of our new, ostensibly post-racial state. Oprah Winfrey and LeBron James were specifically mentioned in a majority of my interviews, while Jay Z, Beyonce, and Will Smith were mentioned in about half. Also, as cited above, a handful of interviewees brought up economics, pointing to the emergence of the black middle class as evidence of post-racialism. Next to President Obama and his family, however, the aggregate educational and economic success of Asian Americans – the model minority – was considered to be the strongest evidence of the end of racism in the United States.

In 26 out of 32 interviews, my conversational partners used Asian American educational and occupational success as an example of racial opportunity in this country. Repeatedly, the teachers I interviewed held up the “model minority” as proof that anyone, regardless of race, had the chance to make something of themselves, thereby proving that the United States had truly become a post-racial nation. Mrs. Hall, a high school history teacher, went into great detail about the history of racial discrimination faced by Asian Americans, and how, despite said discrimination, they are “the most successful racial group in the United States, today.” As she put it:
Mrs. Hall: Look, I’ve been teaching history for a very long time and I’ve studied it even longer. Anyone that pretends America wasn’t a profoundly racist country in the past is either blinded by political bias or too stupid to take seriously. We have an ugly, truly horrific racial past in this country, but that’s no longer the case. So, um, the idea that blacks are the only group that faced racism is laughable to me. Seriously, whenever I hear somebody blame slavery for their problems today, I laugh. You can’t take them seriously. Asian Americans faced just as much discrimination as blacks, but look at where they are today. I mean, um, they were brutalized, too. They were lynched in the west. Asian Americans were detained during World War II and they were even excluded from coming to America for a very long time. Yet somehow, Asians have the most education. Um, Asians have the best jobs and the make the most money, even more than whites. So it doesn’t bother me at all to talk about racism in the past, because that’s just it, it’s in the past. Today, I think racism is irrelevant. If you can’t make it today, then I suggest you take a good, hard look in the mirror before crying racism. It doesn’t work that way anymore, and that’s a good thing. It means we’ve made extraordinary progress.

As a history teacher, Mrs. Hall was well aware of, and had no problem referencing, past acts of racial discrimination. In fact, even though the majority of my conversational partners cited Asian Americans in their respective interviews, Mrs. Hall was one of the few teachers to specifically mention Japanese internment during World War II and Chinese exclusion during the 19th century. In doing so, however, Mrs. Hall engaged in what sociologists Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer term, the fallacy of undifferentiating difference; “a fallacy that takes hold of all the extremely diverse histories and social experiences of nonwhite groups and flattens them” (Desmond and Emibayer, 2010, p. 326). She does so with the specific intention of bolstering the idea that the United States has successfully transitioned from a racist society to a post-racial state. After all, if Asian Americans, or “Asians,” can triumph over discrimination, internment, and exclusion, all to become one of the most educated and economically prosperous racial groups in the country, then the country, itself, has successfully moved beyond race.52

Whether admonishing people of color for focusing too much on race, or asserting that the United States of America, institutionally, has moved beyond race, my conversational partners...
consistently utilized a white racial frame and, in doing so, engaged in colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2010). The teachers I interviewed professed an unyielding fidelity to racial colorblindness, and they did so, in large part, because they sincerely believed that the United States had officially become a post-racial state. Using the election of an African American president, the prominence and visibility of black celebrities, the emergence of a black middle class, and the aggregate educational and occupational success of Asian Americans as proof, my interview respondents contended that racial discrimination had finally been relegated to the past. In the next section, I juxtapose white racial ideology with white racial experience. In doing so, I present data that show how, for my interviewees, their belief in colorblindness and post-racialism was forcefully challenged by their descriptions and depictions of their various experiences within predominantly black schools. Despite their ideological and experiential contradictions, however, most of my conversational held fast to their prevailing racial ideologies.

**Spatial Negotiation**

In this section, I move beyond racial ideology, alone, and detail how it intersects with, and is contradicted by, actual racial experience. That is, I shift the focus from my conversational partners’ views on race, racism, and racial inequality, more broadly, to their actual lived experiences within predominantly black schools. In the former – as detailed above – my interviewees were highly supportive of the racial ideology of colorblindness, undergirded by their sincere belief that the United States has successfully become a post-racial nation. In the latter – as detailed in chapters 4 and 5 – my interviewees were extremely color-conscious, as race, for them, was a salient feature of teaching a predominantly black student body within an explicitly racialized space. This particular contradiction was similar to whiteness in that, absent external provocation, it was invisible to my interview respondents. Once brought to their
attention, however, my conversational partners struggled to make sense of their disparate positions, ultimately negotiating a compromise between their post-racial, colorblind ideology and their highly racialized, color-conscious experiences.

Unlike in previous data chapters, this chapter does more than highlight the contradictions that correspond to white versus nonwhite racialized space. Whereas chapter four compares white racelessness and white racial consciousness, and chapter five details the incongruent social constructions of racial victimization, this chapter engages my conversational partners by presenting them with their own discursive contradictions, asking them to make sense of their conflicting positions. To be more precise, I explicitly ask my interviewees to reconcile their aforementioned racial ideologies with their expression of white racial awareness and white racial victimization. Also, I explicitly ask my interviewees to compare their own experiences – and their discourse about their experiences – with how racial minorities describe and talk about their own lives throughout the broader United States. These questions were not designed to trick, trip-up, or unethically challenge my conversational partners about their contradictory stances, but rather, they arose after deep analysis of interview data, and they reflect a genuine interest in how white teachers reconcile what appear to be spatially-contingent, ideological and experiential contradictions.

This sort of approach to data collection took a bit of a deft hand on my part. Above all else, I wanted to protect my conversational partners from any undue harm or unnecessary stress. Therefore, I tailored my questions in ways that were not antagonistic or accusatorial in any way. I also wanted to avoid any passive-aggressiveness or ambiguity, so I needed to be sure that my questions were direct and straightforward. Next, even though a discernable pattern of discursive contradictions had emerged, there was never a guarantee that each indvivial interviewee would
contradict him or herself about colorblindness and post-racialism. Therefore, it was incumbent upon me to be on the lookout for said contradictions without forcing or guiding my conversational partners into them with my questions. Thus, I took detailed notes throughout my interviews, allowing me to be better prepared in the event of ideological and experiential contradictions. In their absence, however, I stuck to my protocol as much as possible. Lastly, because this particular line of questioning was incumbent upon each individual interview – as opposed to my existing protocol – I include longer passages of interview data in the pages that follow, thereby illustrating how said data was mutually constructed.

In the responsive interview model, data analysis and data collection are simultaneous processes (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Similar to grounded theory, I used data from completed interviews to structure and formulate new questions for future interviews, altering my protocol accordingly (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Glazer and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). After I completed and coded several interviews, I noticed that contradictory themes began to emerge in the data, namely that racial ideology and racial experience were talked about, and understood, in divergent ways. As a result, I altered my interview protocol to explore these themes further, upon which these discursive contradictions became even more pronounced. Finally, I decided to examine contradictory positions, directly, asking my conversational partners to make sense of ideological and experiential discrepancies. Although I presented my interviewees with discernable contradictions, at no time did any of them express displeasure or indicate that they felt mocked or tricked by this particular line of questioning. In the end, comparing ideology with experience by exploring spatially-correlated, discursive contradictions, proved fruitful, as it led to an abundance of rich, compelling, and sophisticated data, culminating in what I term spatial negotiation.
Spatial negotiation – the spatial reconciliation of ideology, experience, and discourse – is comprised of four primary themes: 1) the return of *rhetorical incoherence*, 2) *racial rationalization*, 3) *authentic grievance*, and 4) *reluctant recognition*. Rhetorical incoherence is identical to the rhetorical incoherence discussed in chapter four. When questioned directly, my conversational partners found it very difficult to make sense of, and talk about, ideological, experiential, and discursive contradictions. Racial rationalization is the process of rationalizing contradictory statements by blaming them on predominantly black schools – and the people within them – as opposed to attributing them to any personal or internal conflict. Authentic grievance is the process of delineating legitimacy to claims of racial victimization. By treating some claims as authentic, and others as fraudulent, my conversational partners were able to justify their skepticism of, and simultaneous belief in, the existence of racial discrimination, today. Lastly, reluctant recognition is the realization that racial status matters. That is, in comparing their racialized experiences to people of color, more broadly, many of my conversational partners reached the conclusion that race and racism were more central to the overall functioning of United States than they initially realized. I discuss each theme in greater detail next.

**What Am I Saying, Is This Making Any Sense**
I, um, well, maybe it might be different, I think, but why would it be different, you know. Well, it’s not so much that I didn’t think, that um, I didn’t think that racism was real, it’s just that, when you think about my job and what I do, I’m an outsider. But then again, what if, you know, outside of school, maybe I’m not an outsider, so it can even out some, at least, sometimes. What am I saying, is this making any sense? I have to be honest with you, this um, this is a little eye-opening.

*Chelsea Clark, 34*

Once exposed to their divergent responses to similar questions, with few exceptions, my conversational partners, once again, became rhetorically incoherent, struggling to speak in
comprehensible or even complete sentences. After spending the bulk of their respective interviews speaking lucidly about their experiences teaching in predominantly black schools, questions about their racial ideology compared to their racial experiences caused my interview respondents to revert to back to stuttering, stammering, and speaking in ways that were hard to understand. Furthermore, the content of the answers, themselves, oftentimes made little sense. The same false starts, long pauses, and nervous laughter that characterized my general questions about whiteness earlier in the interview, all returned towards the end of the interview as we mutually explored and tried to make sense of these patterned contradictions. In a very real way, the return of rhetorical incoherence signaled that many of my interviews had come full circle.55

Trying to make sense of how they, themselves, could violate their own deeply held beliefs about colorblindness and post-racialism was something that my conversational partners found to be an extremely difficult task. In fact, for nearly all of them, the contradictory ways in which they described race in society versus how they described race in predominantly black schools was, at least initially, invisible to them. Without explicit prompting from me, my interview respondents saw no inherent conflict in proclaiming that the United States had effectively moved beyond race, while simultaneously asserting that they were victims of racial discrimination. Similarly, my conversational partners saw no inherent conflict in suggesting that people of color needed to “get past race,” while simultaneously internalizing, and subsequently describing, whiteness as a disadvantage within predominantly black schools. Therefore, my first task was to make these contradictions visible. I did so by asking my interviewees about them, explicitly.

Bryan Palmer is a social studies teacher at Pattengill Middle School, which has a student population that is close to 90% black. He has taught at Jackson for 13 years. Mr. Palmer was
adamant that, “for the good of the country,” America needed to “finally move past race.” Unlike most teachers – teachers who, by and large, failed to even consider the possibility that racial discrimination was still a prominent feature of society – Mr. Palmer believed that, even if claims of racial victimization were true, people needed to deal with them in their own way without “dragging the country through the mud.”

Mr. Palmer: I think, with social media and everything, like when you see some of the things police officers are doing, that um, it’s, at least it’s clear to me, that yeah, some of the stories are true. You know what I mean?

Q: Could you elaborate further?

Mr. Palmer: Yeah, so to be perfectly clear, um, I don’t think racism as a whole is that big of a deal. People like to play that card a lot, but at the same time, I think certain individuals can still experience racism. Um, I think that, ok, yeah, sometimes a cop can be racist against a black guy or any one black person, but that’s not the same as saying that all cops are racist, you know. I think people who go through something like should find a way to deal with it in their own way. We don’t need a new civil rights movement. We don’t need protests or riots, um, we don’t need all these groups dragging the country through the mud every time a cop does something racist. It’s the exception, not the rule.

Although Mr. Palmer was willing to admit that cops could, at times, act in racist ways, he felt that such acts were the exception to the rule, and that protests, riots, and the emergence of a “new civil rights movement” was unwarranted. I noted many of these themes during the exchange, and I had them ready to use later in the interview when, in talking about being discriminated against by black parents, Mr. Palmer stated that “something needs to be done, I mean nobody knows what we go through. It should be national news.” Reading back to him some of his own words, I asked Mr. Palmer about his contradictory statements, causing him to become rhetorically incoherent.

Q: Earlier in the interview, when you were talking about police officers and how sometimes some of them can do something racist.

Mr. Palmer: Yeah, I remember.
Q: You said that victims of racist actions by police officers should deal with it in their own way, but now, when talking about your own experiences with racial discrimination, you said it should be national news. Do you feel that those two statements contradict one another?

Mr. Palmer: Um, well, no not really. I think that, when we’re talking about cops and what they do, it can be a very dangerous job, you know. But um, actually, I don’t know how that’s relevant (laughter). Um, so, I think that more people know about police officers, but maybe not enough people know about us, but then again, I hate when people fall back on race. So maybe, I think, um, maybe it’s somewhat consistent in that, um, race and what it means for teachers can be misinterpreted, you know, and sometimes with cops, you, you um, I, this is kind of hard (laughter). Um, I don’t even know, you know what, yeah, those are contradictory statements (laughter). Damn, how did I not see that?

In his disjointed and convoluted sentence, Mr. Palmer did make the point that while many people are aware of the problems with race and policing, far fewer are cognizant of the problems with race and teaching. As quickly as he broached this, quite reasonable, justification for his contradictory statements, he immediately backpedaled, stating that “I hate when people fall back on race.” Tellingly, Mr. Palmer, after trying, and failing, to clarify his reasoning, ended the above exchange with a question directed at himself, “how did I not see that?” Other conversational partners had similar reactions to realizing they had made contradictory statements and, by doing so, violated the norms of colorblindness and post-racialism. Mrs. Meredith, a staunch advocate of colorblindness, became rhetorically incoherent when I made her aware of her own color-consciousness.

Q: Earlier in the interview, you suggested that African Americans and other people of color that complained about racism focused too much on race and that they should be colorblind. But you also said that, I want to get this right, that being white ‘was a curse’ at your school, and that you face racial discrimination on a daily basis. Do you think, or feel, that you are focusing too much on race at your particular school? Should you just be colorblind at work?

Mrs. Meredith: Um, no, no, no. When I talk about being a white teacher, I’m not talking about race per se, but um, it’s more about, um, wait, that doesn’t make any sense does it (laughter)? Um, maybe I could let it go, you know, be colorblind or
whatever, but what would that prove? Who would, um, believe that I get called a white bitch 50 times a week? So to be colorblind, to see race, I mean to not see race, it’s hard because, um, it’s right there you know. I think it’s virtually impossible not to see race, I mean, again, it’s literally right there. I’m white, they’re not, everybody sees it, but I, I still just wish we didn’t have to focus on race so much. It’s bad. It’s bad for everyone. Nothing good can come out of it, you know.

Q: Right, but if everyone is seeing it, including you, does that mean that you, as well as your students, are focusing too much on race?

Mrs. Meredith: (Long pause). I guess it kind of does. I mean, I don’t think I’ve ever looked at it that way. I just, um, but thinking about it now, whenever I’m at work I do focus on race a lot. Hell, when I talk about work I focus on race a lot. That’s funny to think about. This is kind of surprising, startling even. I never saw that before.

The realization that she, at times, was, highly color-conscious, was something that Mrs. Meredith found to be “funny,” “surprising,” and “startling” all at once. Like Mr. Palmer, above, Mrs. Meredith was shocked to discover that, in describing white racial victimization, she was violating the norms of racial colorblindness. For Mrs. Meredith, such a discovery was extremely difficult to talk about. In fact, even pausing to collect her thoughts was not enough to prevent Mrs. Meredith from becoming rhetorically incoherent. At one point during the above exchange, she appeared to justify the need for color-consciousness (“maybe I could let it go…but what would that prove”), only to reaffirm her belief in racial colorblindness a few seconds later (“I still just wish we didn’t have to focus on race so much”). Even here, in an answer about discursive contradictions, Mrs. Meredith contradicted herself, signaling support for both color-consciousness and colorblindness within a few seconds time.

Like the rhetorical incoherence characterized before, the return rhetorical was caused by external forces. While the latter was brought on by repeated exposure to nonwhite racialized space, the former was engendered by my explicit questioning. In both cases, my conversational
partners lost the ability to speak in clear and complete sentences, making the content of their actual answers difficult to decipher. While nonwhite racialized space caused my conversational partners to grapple with whiteness for the first time, exploring their own ideological and experiential contradictions caused them to grapple with complexities of race and racial discourse for the first time. The straightforward nature and simplicity of “not focusing on race so much” became a lot less straightforward and a lot more nuanced when white teachers described their own racialized experiences within predominantly black schools. For my conversational partners, such nuance and said complexities were conceptually new, not easily understood, and, as demonstrated above, extremely difficult to talk about.

Believe Me, I Would Much Rather Not Talk About Race

The only reason race is relevant to me is because of where I work. That’s it. I don’t go around bragging about being white, and I sure as hell don’t go around complaining about racism. I’m not a victim. Believe me, I would much rather not talk about race, but it is what it is. I didn’t teach my students to hate white people, but some of them do. Am I supposed to pretend they don’t? Should I just be ok with that? So no, I don’t think it’s a contradiction at all. I really don’t see it that way.

Tiffany Edwards, 51

Although rhetorical incoherence, at times, made thematic coding somewhat difficult, there were still numerous themes that emerged from the data. One such theme, racial rationalization, is the tendency of white teachers to rationalize their ideological and experiential contradictions by blaming them on black students, black parents, and black schools. That is, rather than grapple with the reasons for, or meaning of, their discursive contradictions, many of the teachers I interviewed simply explained them away without accepting any personal culpability. If they, themselves, focused on race too much, then it was because of the racialized environments in which they worked. If they, themselves, asserted that race was important, then it was because black students and black parents made it important by consistently acting in racist
and discriminatory ways. Building on Robin DiAngelo’s concept of white fragility, I show how white teachers, in a reaction to racial unfamiliarity, rationalized their color-consciousness, all in an attempt to get back to their respective racial equilibriums (DiAngelo, 2011).

In 2011, Robin DiAngelo introduced the concept of *white Fragility*, defined as a “state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). Put differently, white fragility is a psychological frame, or state of mind, that incapacitates whites from handling racial stress (DiAngelo, 2011). As DiAngelo writes, “White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). Once this protective environment is breached, however, many whites find themselves in an increasingly uncomfortable, and at times, completely untenable position, causing them to seek refuge or find their way back to what is racially familiar. That is, racial discomfort leads to a host of defense mechanisms that are designed to restore the “white racial equilibrium” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). For many of my conversational partners, the white racial equilibrium was colorblindness and post-racialism, while their defense mechanisms of choice were racial rationalization, and, as discussed later, authentic grievance.

Taking the concepts of habitus and socialized subjectivity (Bourdieu, 1993), and applying them specifically to whites in the United States, DiAngelo describes, and interrogates, the *white habitus* and the *white socialized subjectivity* (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick, 2006; DiAngelo, 2011). One of the central features of the white habitus, in concert with the cultural, material, and numerical dominance of whites, themselves, is the ability to universalize the particular, or erroneously interpret white socialized subjectivity as a universal truth. To this very point, DiAngelo (2011) notes, “whites are taught to see their perspectives as objective and
When the white habitus faces outside challenges, or *interruptions*, from people of color, other whites, or in this case, me, they often find themselves increasingly uncomfortable, causing them to seek out ways to get back to what is racially familiar (DiAngelo, 2011). Thus, the unfamiliarity of explicitly violating the norms of racial colorblindness, at times, caused my interviewees react in defensive ways.

Mr. Reed – introduced in chapter five – was one of the more vocal critics of nonwhite racial victimization. As he stated during our interview, “I have no sympathy for people playing the race card.” Mr. Reed fervently believed in racial colorblindness, and he was dogmatically insistent that the United States of America had become a post-racial state. As such, there was no claim of nonwhite racial victimization that Mr. Reed found to be credible. When it came to white racial victimization, however, Mr. Reed had a decidedly different take, repeatedly admonishing Sexton High School for its anti-white, racially discriminatory culture. As he also said during our interview, “being white in this place is like being black at a Klan rally. Everybody hates you because of race.” When questioned about his discursive contradictions, Mr. Reed was incredulous, sticking to the post-racial script and shifting the blame to his black students.

**Q:** Earlier in the interview, you suggested that your black students and their families should spend less time focusing on race, but you also said that you, yourself, spend a great deal of time thinking about race at Sexton. Would you say that those are contradictory statements?

**Mr. Reed:** Absolutely not. Not at all.

**Q:** How do you differentiate between the two?

**Mr. Reed:** I just don’t think that it is, that they are. I, I, um, when you look at all the chances for success in this country, then you can’t say that race is a factor. You simply can’t. They’re so many opportunities out there, and black people or anybody else, um, they can do anything they want. Blaming everything on race is a copout. It’s just an excuse to make everything about race. It’s time to move on, not everything has to be a race thing.
Q: I understand. But my question is that if you feel that it is time to move on from race, how do you justify thinking and talking about race in regards to your job?

Mr. Reed: (Long pause). I think it’s different. I would never think about race if I didn’t work at Sexton. If I didn’t have to deal with getting called white all the time, race would never cross my mind. I never talked about race before I started working at that school. Never. I treat people as people, how they deserve to be treated. I take them as they come and everybody’s the same until I know otherwise. You can’t have that, um, that type of mentality, you can’t do that at Sexton. Race is everywhere, and I’m not blind, deaf, or dumb, so I have to adapt. I have to swim with the sharks sometimes. I’m still a teacher, you understand? I have a job to do.

Initially, Mr. Reed saw no contradiction between admonishing students for focusing on race, while he, himself, spent a great deal of time thinking about being a white teacher at a predominantly black school. Without any hesitation, he rejected the idea that he was acting in ways that were similar to the very people he had previously described as “race hustlers.” Only after a detailed follow-up question from me, did Mr. Reed realize the color-consciousness that permeated his own discourse about teaching at Sexton High School. Once this realization occurred, however, Mr. Reed found it difficult to cope with the resulting interruption of his normative racial ideology. That is, rather than make an effort to make sense of the possible implications of his ideological and experiential contradictions, Mr. Reed rationalized them by blaming his school. Thus, in focusing on race and racial victimization, Mr. Reed believed that he bore no responsibility, as he was simply responding to the people and processes of a particular racialized space.

Many of my other conversational partners also engaged in racial rationalization when confronted with their own contradictory statements. Ms. Livingston, who previously lamented our country’s obsession with race, was easily able to provide numerous examples of her own racial victimization within predominantly black schools. Furthermore, as a dedicated educator,
Ms. Livingston spent a significant amount of time devising different ways to perform whiteness, so as to better reach, and ultimately teach, her predominantly black student body. Thus, whether describing her personal experiences with racial victimization, or thinking about how best to use race as a constructive pedagogical tool, Ms. Livingston, despite her previous objection to obsessing over race, spent a considerable amount of time thinking about race, herself. I detail Ms. Livingston’s white fragility and subsequent racial rationalization in the exchange below.

**Q:** Earlier, you described the country as being obsessed with race, yet you also say that you think about race a lot, too. Does this mean that you’re also obsessed with race? I mean, are you also implicated in our collective obsession with race?

**Ms. Livingston:** (Pause). Um, I don’t know. This sounds weird, but I’ve never really thought about thinking about race (laughter). I guess, like I said earlier, I just was, um, the way I was raised was to treat everybody equally. I mean, I don’t have a racist bone in my body. My parents would be ashamed if I did, you know. So I just see people, I don’t see race. It’s kind of like, um, whenever I’m at work, maybe I might sometimes, but in all honesty, it’s about the person for me. I don’t care what race they are.

**Q:** To be clear, you’re saying that you try to be colorblind in your own dealings and interactions with people, correct?

**Ms. Livingston:** Yeah, that’s exactly right.

**Q:** What about when, as you mentioned earlier, it comes time to teaching black students? You said that you have to find the best way to be white. How do you reconcile a statement like that with your commitment to colorblindness?

**Ms. Livingston:** Um, well (long pause). That’s, I don’t know, that’s a good question. Damn, I don’t think I know how to answer that. Like, I feel like um, wow (pause), that’s kind of tough. I don’t really know what to say. I mean, um, I don’t want to come across as a hypocrite or anything (long pause). I just don’t think of myself as one of those people, you know. They make everything about race and I don’t. I guess I would say that, that they’re the same, but they’re not the same, you know. So, whenever I think about race it’s because I have to, you know. I don’t even mean to or really want to, but, um, like I said, I have to figure out a way to reach my students. A lot of them have their guards up, they don’t trust white people at all. So I wouldn’t be a good teacher if I didn’t think about race, at least when it comes to being better for my students. But um, I wanted to say that, um, I think it’s one thing to think about race, you know, when you have
to. When the situation calls for it. But I still think too many people use race too much. They do it just to do it, and that’s certainly not what I do.

When I asked Ms. Livingston to reconcile her contradictory positions regarding colorblindness and color-consciousness, her sense of normality was challenged and her racial equilibrium was shaken by her own words. The interruption of what was racially familiar – her fidelity to colorblindness and her objection to color consciousness – caused Ms. Livingston to engage in rhetorical incoherence, and left her puzzled about how best to answer my questions about her discursive contradictions. After taking a few minutes to consider her words, Ms. Livingston pivoted to racial rationalization, justifying her own preoccupation with race as an essential feature of quality teaching. As opposed to being “one of those people” who think about or “use race too much,” Ms. Livingston claimed to only focus on race when her job called for it, meaning that, if not for her particular line of work, she would have little reason to – and therefore, would not – focus on race. Being an effective teacher to black students, it was argued, required explicit color-consciousness, and, as a committed educator, Ms. Livingston acted accordingly.

White fragility comes in many forms, and the subsequent defense mechanisms that are utilized by whites, are therefore diverse in nature (DiAngelo, 2011). When confronted with their own discursive contradictions, my conversational partners saw their white habitus breached and their white socialized subjectivity interrupted. Rather than look for internal reasons as to why their racial ideologies differed significantly from their racialized experiences, many of my interview respondents, instead, engaged in racial rationalization, justifying their discursive contradictions by blaming them on black students, back parents, and black schools. In this sense, any deviation from racial colorblindness and post-racialism was caused by either white racial
victimization or the need to take race into consideration when devising the best pedagogical practices for teaching a predominantly black student body. Thus, racial rationalization became a popular defense mechanism, and it was repeatedly used by my conversational partners to restore the white racial equilibrium.

Before moving on, I feel it is important to emphasize that the term “racial rationalization” is not meant to undermine or question the veracity of my research participants in any way. Each of my conversational partners, from Mr. Reed to Ms. Livingston, can speak to their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences better than anyone else can, therefore it is not my responsibility, nor my intention, to invalidate their respective interpretations of their own lives. True or not, exaggerated or not, my purpose in referring to this particular process as rationalization is to highlight the various reasons given for making contradictory statements, namely personal experience. Using personal experience as a justification for engaging in color-consciousness or making claims of racial victimization, for the most part, is not a consideration that my conversational partners afforded African Americans and other people of color. In lieu of considering the experiential reasons why nonwhites might “obsess over race,” my interviewees simply assigned nefarious motives, neatly summarized by accusations of “playing the race card.” In their own lives, however, excuses became legitimate justifications, thereby making explicit color-consciousness an experientially – and situationally – valid practice.

**Here’s The Thing, When I Talk About Racism, It’s Because It’s Real**

Yeah, it may come across as a contradiction or maybe seem hypocritical, but here’s the thing, when I talk about racism, it’s because it’s real. I don’t make things up to make myself look good. I don’t want people to feel sorry for me and I sure as hell don’t want to be seen as a victim, ok. But when it happens it happens. If I, um, whenever I feel like there’s reverse discrimination at play, I point it out. But it’s not the same. If I say it was racism, then it was racism. Period.

*Mr. Marsh, 54*
Although racial rationalization was the most common response to interruptions of the white habitus, authentic grievance was, by far, the most visceral. That is, conversational partners expressed authentic grievance in seemingly instinctual, and exceedingly vocal, terms. Authentic grievance is the granting of authenticity, or the subjective granting of legitimization to claims of racial victimization. Accordingly, authentic grievance corresponds to the data presented in chapter five, addressing the extent to which ongoing racial discrimination is real or imagined in the minds of my interviewees. Many of my conversational partners, once confronted with their own contradictory statements, responded by separating real, or authentic, claims of racial victimization from fictitious, or fraudulent, claims of racial victimization. In the overwhelming majority of cases, racial victimization neatly corresponded to the racial classification of the person making the claim. Put differently, white racial victimization was unanimously treated as authentic, while nonwhite racial victimization, with little to no exception, was treated as inauthentic. I break down this process in greater detail, next.

How do you justify a fervent belief in post-racialism, while simultaneously claiming to be a victim of racial discrimination? How do you justify chastising people of color for playing the race card, while situationally engaging in the very same process? Based on their ideological and experiential contradictions – summarized in their own words – these are some of the questions that my conversational partners were faced with as we grappled with the intersection of ideology, experience, and discourse. Just as color-consciousness had done, previously, the explicit recognition of their own claims of racial victimization was enough to breach the socialized subjectivities and disrupt the racial equilibriums of my conversational partners (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick, 2006; DiAngelo, 2011). To be clear, my interviewees were well aware that whiteness acted as a disadvantage within their respective schools, but they abstained from, and at
times, objected to, characterizing their racialized experiences as victimization. As numerous
teachers stated, sometimes emphatically, “I’m not a victim.” My goal was to interrogate how,
and why, these teachers conceptualized racial victimization in such disparate terms.

Authentic grievance can be broken down into three categories, with the latter two
overlapping, yet remaining conceptually distinct. The first category is acceptance. Acceptance
was the unconditional legitimacy granted to claims of racial victimization, and for the most part,
it was reserved for white racial victimization. Categories two and three, skepticism and
aggression, respectively, were reserved for nonwhite claims of racial victimization. Skepticism,
while doubtful of the veracity of nonwhite claims of racial victimization, nevertheless, remained
open to the possibility of authenticity. That is, even though they were skeptical of widespread, or
systemic, racial discrimination, some teachers – typically younger and politically liberal – were
open to situational, or sporadic, instances of racism against nonwhites. Aggression, on the other
hand, was more emotional than skepticism, and teachers became angry at nonwhite claims of
racial victimization. These teachers – older and politically conservative – maintained their
fidelity to post-racialism, only deviating when accepting the legitimacy of white racial
victimization. I provide examples of each category below.

White racial victimization was unanimously granted legitimacy and authenticity. I found
it virtually unsurprising that teachers believed in the veracity of their own experiences, but I was
somewhat surprised that my conversational partners so easily accepted the claims of racial
victimization made by other white teachers. That is, given their fervent belief in post-racialism,
as well as the consistency with which they admonished people of color for playing the race card,
I expected a modicum of pushback against non-personal57 white claims of racial victimization.
This was not the case. Mrs. Darling typified this process. When I asked her about her disparate interpretations of white versus nonwhite racial victimization, she replied:

**Mrs. Darling:** It’s probably because, well, all I can say is what I go through and what I’ve been through. It’s not like I go around crying racism every day, but some days my kids are just out of control. They’re brazen with it, almost proud. ‘Yeah, yeah, I hate white folks’ or ‘I can’t stand white people.’ I mean, that’s racism isn’t it? So, I don’t know your life, I, I um, can’t say whether or not you face racism, but I know what I go through and it’s very real.

**Q:** This is actually a common theme in my interviews. Many teachers say they face racial discrimination in their schools.

**Mrs. Darling:** I believe them.

**Q:** Really, just like that? Are you at all skeptical about the extent to which other white teachers face racial discrimination in urban schools?

**Mrs. Darling:** No, I don’t think so because I see it. I see it with my own eyes how, sometimes a white teacher can be busting their ass, you know, and getting nowhere. Then a black teacher can just come in and snap their fingers and the kids automatically respond. I mean, I can’t say for sure, but I think that’s probably a race thing. Plus, it’s not like we never talk about it. Maybe not like this, but we know what’s going on in the school. I, it wouldn’t surprise me to learn that other teachers go through some of the same stuff I go through.

In her answer, Mrs. Darling displayed a high degree of acceptance, and to a lesser degree, skepticism. Due to her personal experiences – and those of her white colleagues – Mrs. Darling was perfectly comfortable accepting broader claims of white racial victimization as authentic. Also, Mrs. Darling implied that, although not to the same degree as our interview, she and her white coworkers discussed their respective experiences with racial discrimination. Conversely, using me as a representative of nonwhites, or at the very least, African Americans, Mrs. Darling was open to the idea on nonwhite racial victimization, but she would not fully commit to it (“I, I um, I can’t say whether or not you face racism”). The ease and comfort with which white teachers accepted other white teachers’ claims of racial victimization – based in large part on
their own racialized experiences – was surprising, and, with few exceptions, was not a consideration afforded to nonwhite claims of racial victimization.

Skepticism was exclusively relegated to the domain of nonwhite racial victimization. Typically younger, and self-identified as liberals, some teachers were open to the idea of sporadic instances of racism – particularly when it came to policing – yet generally remained skeptical of the existence of a broader, more systematic form of racial discrimination. These teachers acknowledged the possibility of individual acts of racial discrimination, but they rejected the interrelated ideas of institutional racism and white privilege (Feagin, 2006; Gallagher, 2003; Rothenberg, 2008; Wise, 2010). Ms. Jarvis, only 24 years old, explained her discursive contradictions this way:

**Q:** What would you say is the difference between a white teacher who claims to be a victim of racism, and a black teenager who claims the same thing? It seems like you believe one over the other.

**Ms. Jarvis:** (Pause). Well, it’s not that um, hold on a second, let me get this right (pause). So um, I wouldn’t say that I would necessarily believe one and not the other, but I would have to know the specific details, like what actually happened. Um, I think the reason it’s not the same, or the reason I don’t look at them the same, is because, sometimes I think the whole race thing is overblown. I think, um, that sometimes people don’t want to admit that they’re not good enough or smart enough, or whatever, you know, so they might fall back on race and just blame whites. I’m not saying that it can never be true. Some of these videos, these police shootings are devastating to look at, but, um, even still, when you think about how big we are, um as a country, I don’t think you can make any conclusions based on a few bad apples.

**Q:** Does that type of wait and see approach apply to white teachers in predominantly black schools?

**Ms. Jarvis:** Um (pause), that’s a really good question (pause). I would have to say that it doesn’t. Um, I know that makes me sound like the biggest hypocrite, but I know what I see and I know what I go through. I know what other teachers go through. I, I can’t really explain it. It’s like, it’s everywhere, it’s almost like the school system is just overly hostile. I know that sounds weird, but that’s the best way I can think of. It’s the schools, they just mess everybody up.
When asked to distinguish between two hypothetical claims of racial victimization – one white, one nonwhite – Ms. Jarvis accepted the former, while remaining skeptical of the latter. Like several of my other conversational partners, Ms. Jarvis referenced the litany of video and audio clips of African American men, women, and children being brutalized, and sometimes killed, by police officers, using them as an example of authentic grievance. Beyond those “few bad apples,” however, Ms. Jarvis still believed that too many people of color “fall back on race.” Also, and quite tellingly, although she did not possess the language or academic jargon to label it as such, Ms. Jarvis made an explicit reference to institutional discrimination. That is, in justifying her general acceptance of white racial victimization in predominantly black schools, Ms. Jarvis alluded to the schools, themselves. By claiming that “the school system is just overly hostile,” and that schools “just mess everybody up,” Ms. Jarvis was pointing to an institutional structure that, above and beyond individual people, was racially hostile, and even discriminatory, towards white teachers.

Although acceptance was primarily reserved for white racial victimization, and skepticism was exclusively reserved for nonwhite racial victimization, on the whole, they were both relatively benign. Aggression, on the other hand, was hostile and angry. Teachers within this category – typically, conservative, and male – became upset, sometimes visibly so, at nonwhite claims of racial victimization. Phrases such as “screw that,” “get over it,” and “I call bullshit” were just a few of the verbal responses to the idea of ongoing racial discrimination against African Americans and other people of color. The teachers who displayed aggression reacted viscerally, often taking zero time to consider my questions and responding immediately. Despite aggressively rejecting nonwhite claims of racial victimization, the teachers within this category were still very accepting of white claims of racial victimization.
Again, with zero hesitation, these teachers spoke of widespread racial discrimination against white teachers in predominantly black schools as a near certainty, even as they maintained their respective beliefs in racial colorblindness and post-racialism.

Ian Townsend, a veteran middle school teacher and a self-proclaimed “staunch conservative,” spoke of nonwhite claims of racial victimization in racially stereotypical and, at times, personal terms. Repeatedly admonishing “race pimps” and “social justice warriors” for “fanning the flames of racism and division,” Mr. Townsend rejected all claims of nonwhite racial victimization. When it came to talking about his own racialized experiences, however, Mr. Townsend consistently blamed his personal frustration and professional failures on “black racism.” For example, Mr. Townsend attributed his difficulty – and initial failure – to be granted tenure to his race, claiming that “it was nearly impossible for white people to succeed in that environment.”59 When I questioned Mr. Townsend about these discrepancies, he immediately engaged in the more aggressive form of authentic grievance.

**Q:** Earlier in the interview, you said you had no sympathy and no patience for people making excuses or playing the race card. Do you feel that you are making excuses or playing the race card when you describe racial discrimination against white teachers?

**Mr. Townsend:** No. No, no, no, no. I don’t think talking about my own experiences is playing the race card. That’s ridiculous.

**Q:** Do you think it’s possible that people of color who talk about racism are doing so based on their own experiences?

**Mr. Townsend:** I, no. How many bad experiences can there be? If that were the case, black people would have to experience racism every second of every day. No offense, but that’s how much they complain about racism. You always hear about that institutional racism bullshit, but if you look around, what do you see? You sure as hell don’t see slavery. You don’t see black people hanging from trees. No, you see affirmative action, you see black-only scholarships, you see a black president. Oh, and I don’t know if you’ve heard, but BET, black entertainment television, I mean what the hell is that? Could you imagine what would happen if there was a TV channel called white entertainment television? All the race pimps
and social justice warriors would flip out. They might even burn down their own neighborhood. Don’t get me started on that crap.

Q: Obviously you know your own experiences better than anyone else, but what about other white teachers who complain about racism, do you believe they are playing the race card?

Mr. Townsend: Come on. No. Are you serious? (Laughter). They hate us. They hate white people. Not everybody, that wouldn’t be accurate, but a whole lot my students simply can’t stand white people. And the parents are even worse. They don’t take responsibility for anything. They drop their kids off looking a mess, they’re looking a mess, and then they don’t want to be bothered, they want to be left alone all day, which is funny because it isn’t like they’re going to work, most of them are on some kind of welfare. If I or anyone else dare call home and disturb their precious slumber, then all hell breaks loose, especially if you’re white. If you want to know the truth, I’m actually surprised that more of us aren’t coming forward. There’s definitely a hostility directed at whites, today. And it’s not just in the schools, either, it comes from the top down. It comes from your president.

From being lazy to not caring about their kids, Mr. Townsend believed in – and was not shy about expressing – a multitude of racial stereotypes, particularly stereotypes about African Americans. He, and other teachers within the aggression category, were so wedded to black racial stereotypes that they refused to even consider the possibility of nonwhite racial victimization. When asked if blacks and other people of color were simply speaking to their own racialized experiences, Mr. Townsend immediately dismissed my question, instead asking, “how many bad experiences can there be?” Conversely, Mr. Townsend considered his own racialized experiences to be absolute. Despite his aversion to blacks and other people of color “playing the race card,” Mr. Townsend considered any insinuation that he, himself, was engaging in the same process by describing his own experiences to be “ridiculous.” Furthermore, due to the perceived anti-white atmosphere of his particular school, and, indeed, the country, Mr. Townsend had no trouble accepting the truthfulness of other white teachers who claimed to have experienced racial discrimination in urban schools.
Authentic grievance in the form of aggression – reserved for nonwhite claims of racial victimization – stood out because of the vitriol it engendered within some of my conversational partners. Time and again, many white teachers defended their discursive contradictions by wading deep into the well of racial stereotypes, accusing blacks and other people of color of playing the race card, and refusing to entertain their veracity. Teachers within this category were outwardly angered, not only by what they considered to be false claims of racial victimization, but also by the insinuation, or mere suggestion, that their own racialized experiences could be looked at within the same vein. As one teacher put it, “you can’t compare my life with some bullshit artist looking to play the race card.” Again, however, even though Mr. Townsend and many of my other interview respondents reacted viscerally to nonwhite claims of racial victimization – and being associated with such – they, without fail, accepted the legitimacy and authenticity of white racial victimization.

A different, and in many ways, more hostile response than racial rationalization, authentic grievance was yet another defensive mechanism used by my conversational partners to repair the white habitus and restore the white racial equilibrium. As longtime believers in racial colorblindness and American post-racialism, the teachers that I interviewed were shaken by the realization that, based on their own responses, they were neither colorblind nor post-racial, at least not the degree to which they had previously believed. When faced with their own ideological and discursive contradictions, many of my conversational partners engaged in authentic grievance, assigning legitimacy to claims of racial victimization that neatly corresponded to racial classification. Using acceptance, skepticism, and aggression, my conversational partners painted white claims of racial victimization as authentic, while remaining skeptical, at best, and aggressively rejecting, at worst, nonwhite claims of racial victimization.
Maybe There’s Something To This Whole Race Thing
It’s something that’s been bothering me, like I’ve done everything I could not to admit it to myself. Maybe there’s something to this whole race thing, after all. Being in the minority at my school has kind of opened my eyes a little bit. Is this how, you know blacks feel everywhere else? Do I make people of color feel the way I sometimes feel at work? The more I think about it, I realize that I probably won’t like the answer to those questions.

Sophia Taylor, 38

Racial rationalization and authentic grievance – both responses to white fragility – were by far the most common strategies used by my conversational partners when trying to account for their discursive contradictions (DiAngelo, 2011). A third response, reluctant recognition, is the deliberate and careful consideration of personal racialized experiences, specifically assessing how they may translate to the broader social world. The teachers who engaged in reluctant recognition paid special attention to racial status, questioning whether or not their personal experiences as the racialized other were applicable to racial minorities throughout the United States, writ large. Relatedly, teachers who engaged in reluctant recognition openly questioned if they, themselves, generally acted in ways that were similar to their black students and their families, particularly in white racialized spaces. These teachers, when faced with their own discursive contradictions, grappled with the various meanings and experiences of majorities versus minorities, thinking about race in more nuanced, more complex ways.

Teachers who expressed reluctant recognition were far less frequent, but they consciously made an effort to explore what their ideological and experiential contradictions meant for themselves, their respective belief systems, and for the significance of race, more broadly. That is, teachers in this category made spatialized comparisons, exploring the salience and significance of race through the lens of the racial norm in one context, and through the lens of the racial other in a different context. They recognized the uniqueness of predominantly black
spaces in their lives, and openly considered how their actions, experiences, and belief systems might be impacted, and shaped, by predominantly white spaces, which, for them, were much more commonplace. Although the number of interview respondents who engaged in reluctant recognition was relatively small, I include them here because, collectively, they not only produced complex and compelling data, but they did so by making considerations that ran contrary to the majority of the teachers in this study.

Before I present interview data, it is important to note that, even though some teachers recognized the importance of racial status, they did so reluctantly. The careful consideration of majority versus minority status did not happen automatically. In fact, in all but one case, my conversational partners only began to engage seriously with racial status after specific follow-up questions from me. Thus, their initial responses indicated that they, too, were discursively seeking out racially familiar terrain, only to reorient themselves in a more conscious direction after further discussion and deliberation. Still, reluctant recognition was real, and the teachers who engaged with it did so out of honest uncertainty and genuine self-reflection. They believed in colorblindness and post-racialism every bit as much as my other conversational partners, but when confronted with their own color-consciousness and hyper-racialism, they intentionally contemplated the meaning and significance of these various contradictions, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

Reluctant recognition entailed both majority and minority comparisons. Some teachers chose to analyze their role as the racialized other, focusing on the potential similarities between their experiences as teachers within predominantly black schools and people of color throughout the broader society. Conversely, other teachers chose to analyze their role as the racialized norm, focusing on the potential similarities between their black students within predominantly black
schools and themselves throughout the broader society. Others made majority and minority comparisons, with one teacher coming to the conclusion that “unless we get the chance to live in each other’s shoes, to see the world through each other’s eyes, we’re never going to get past race, and maybe we don’t deserve to.” As this particular quote indicates, reluctant recognition, tellingly, and perhaps accurately, often led to a deep sense of pessimism, engendering a negative outlook on race relations moving forward.

Mrs. Bradley, 31, has been teaching in a predominantly black school for close to ten years and, like most of my other conversational partners, expressed a strong belief in racial colorblindness. Although Mrs. Bradley claimed to be passionate about fighting poverty, she thought “the race thing” had largely been solved. Therefore, Mrs. Bradley, in addition to racial colorblindness, also believed in American post-racialism. Both colorblindness and post-racialism disappeared in their entirety once the conversation shifted to Mrs. Bradley’s racialized experiences as a white teacher within predominantly black schools. I asked her about this contradiction, and her response is captured in the exchange below.

**Q:** Earlier in the interview, you said that people who complain about race, or racism, are looking to make an excuse, and that we should all focus on being colorblind.

**Mrs. Bradley:** Yeah, well, yeah, I feel that way. I think it’s true.

**Q:** Ok, but you, yourself, complained about racism when describing your experiences at Taft Middle School. So, given your previous position, would you include yourself in those who use race as an excuse?

**Mrs. Bradley:** Well, no. I don’t think it’s the same. I um, (pause), I, I think I talk about my own life, you know. Like, when I told you about being called the dumb white lady, or when a parent asks to talk to a black teacher, I mean, that really happened. I don’t know what else to describe it. I mean is there another word? I don’t think any of that would happen to me if I were a black teacher, it’s because I’m white. To me, that’s racism. It’s not an excuse or anything, it really happened. It’s really racism.
Q: Well, along those lines, when a person of color recites a specific experience and describes it as racism, does that make it ok? Does relying on personal experience make talking about race and racism legitimate?

Mrs. Bradley: (Pause). I don’t know, like how do I know it really happened, you know?

Q: And what if someone said the same thing to you? What is someone assumed your racial experiences were exaggerated or even made up?

Mrs. Bradley: (Long pause). You know, that’s a really good question. I don’t think I’ve ever thought of it that way. I’ve never considered it from that perspective before. Like, I’m sure people would hear me talk about work and think ‘yeah right, she’s so full of shit,’ you know, but it’s true, I swear it’s true. In fact, I bet there’s some stuff I’m forgetting. Hmmm, that’s, that’s kind of awful to think about, like what if I’ve been wrong all these years? I mean if even half the things my students say are true, then I’d hate white people, too. And here I am dismissing them. Wow, this is kind of sad. I don’t know what to think.

Initially, Mrs. Bradley used authentic grievance to explain away her discursive contradictions. Without much thought, she stressed the seriousness, or authenticity of her own experiences, while literally questioning those of people of color (“how do I know it really happened?”). After several follow-up questions, particularly one that hypothesized the questioning of her own racialized experiences, Mrs. Bradley, for seemingly the first time, considered the possibility that her black students and other people of color were telling the truth about the significance of race and racism in their own lives. Taken aback, Mrs. Bradley put herself in the shoes of her black students and imagined how she would feel about white people, both those who engaged in racial discrimination and those who, for whatever reason, did not seem to care. Upon recognizing her potential error – “and here I am dismissing them” – Mrs. Bradley became sad, confused, and pessimistic, struggling to make sense of the nuance and complexities of racial status and racialized experiences.

Mrs. Clark took a different route to reluctant recognition, although the process and outcome were nearly identical. That is, Mrs. Clark focused more on majority similarities, but
only did so after follow-up questions and, like Mrs. Bradley, was left with a pessimistic view of race and society. After a back and forth about the merits of nonwhite racial victimization – both in terms of frequency and authenticity – Mrs. Clark remained skeptical about the extent to which nonwhites experience racism in the contemporary United States. Satisfied that I had reached satiation with that line of questioning, I prepared to move forward to the closing section of my interview protocol. At that point, Mrs. Clark surprised me and re-engaged on the topic of racial victimization:

Mrs. Clark: It’s just, I don’t know, I’ve thought a lot about this, and it’s weird. There’s some students that hate white people no matter what. It doesn’t matter who you are or what type of teacher you are, they’re just not going to like you. I’ve been called a white bitch, a dumb white hoe, a Becky, which I guess is code for white bimbo. But some students, I wonder whether or not they meant to be racist, or insensitive or offensive at all. Like I remember the first time a student told me that I was ok for a white lady, or white girl, I was cool for a white girl. At the time, all I could think was, well what the hell does that mean? What does that say about white people? Like I got really upset. I even sent her to the office. Now, thinking back just now when we were talking, I think she was trying to be nice, you know. Maybe she was giving me a compliment. This whole idea about contradictions, was I being overly sensitive? Was I being politically correct? I think I took a compliment badly and punished Anaya for no reason (long pause).

Q: You seem a little upset. Is everything ok?

Mrs. Clark: Yeah, I’m fine. I feel bad for Anaya. She never really liked me after that, and I think now I know why. Who can blame her? But um, I don’t know, it just got me thinking, um, maybe sometimes I say or do things that black people find hurtful, even if I didn’t mean it that way. Like, what’s the word? Intent, like what if intent doesn’t matter as much and it’s more about the effect or the outcome, you know? So maybe we as white people might say something we think is harmless, but from their perspective, it isn’t really harmless at all. Maybe it’s extremely harmful, you know. I guess I can see why people still might want to talk about race.

In recalling a racialized interaction with one of her black students, Mrs. Clark appeared to become visibly upset. For several minutes, she sat quietly in her seat looking down, prompting me to double check and make sure that she was ok. She assured me that she was fine, and then
continued to work through the racial meaning of her past experiences. Mrs. Clark openly grappled with the possibility that she, in the past, misinterpreted the racial meaning of a comment made by one of her students, and, in her misunderstanding, punished this particular student “for no reason.” Not content with re-litigating this one specific experience, Mrs. Clark connected it to race and society, more broadly, taking the time to differentiate between “intent” and “outcome.” That is, Mrs. Clark questioned whether she – in her much more common capacity as the racial norm – had ever said or done anything, regardless of intent, that was received as offensive or “extremely harmful” by racial minorities. The possibility, alone, of such an occurrence was enough to cause Mrs. Clark to take a much more understanding approach to color-consciousness (“I can see why people still might want to talk about race”).

Reluctant recognition is the process by which white teachers came to appreciate racial status in a more meaningful and introspective way. Teachers who engaged in reluctant recognition successfully, if only momentarily, extrapolated the racial significance of their experiences within predominantly black schools – as well as those of their black students – and applied to society more broadly, where the racial statuses of teachers and students presumably switched. Some teachers focused on minority-based experiences, while others focused on majority-based experiences. Yet, whether working from a majority or minority group standpoint, they all saw the importance of racial status, particularly the way it shaped racial experience and racial understanding. Reluctant recognition wanted perspective, not innocence or rationalization. Reluctant recognition did not assign legitimacy to grievance, but rather, it sought a greater understanding about racial grievance, itself, principally how it came to be interpreted so differently. Although few in number, the teachers who engaged in reluctant recognition
challenged themselves in ways that my other conversational partners did not, but in doing so, they came away with a much more pessimistic view of race and society.

**Discussion**

In chapter four of this dissertation, I demonstrated how nonwhite racialized space affected white racial awareness by making it visibly meaningful to white teachers in predominantly black schools. In chapter five, I demonstrated how nonwhite racialized space affected the way my conversational partners socially constructed racial victimization. In both chapters, there was a clear and discernable demarcation between the way teachers described themselves, and their experiences, within white versus nonwhite racialized spaces. This chapter, however, was structured differently. Rather than juxtapose spatially-specific racialized experience, I focused more on how white teachers made sense of, and talked about, their racialized experiences, particularly given the way said experiences ran counter to their professed racial ideologies. Thus, the primary theme that guided this chapter was the intersection – and negotiation – of ideology, experience, and discourse.

Consistent with whites more broadly, my conversational partners, both, endorsed colorblindness and believed that the United States had reached a formal state of post-racialism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2010; Kinder and Sanders, 1997). Using the rise of the black middle class, the visibility and popularity of black celebrities, the myth of the model minority, and, most especially, the presence of Barack Obama, my interview respondents argued that racial discrimination had mostly, if not entirely, been relegated to the past. As such, anyone violating the norms of racial colorblindness – for whatever reason and regardless of merit – were criticized for “making everything about race.” That is, from explicitly incorporating race into their personal identities to making claims of racial victimization, African Americans and other people
of color were rhetorically chastised for “focusing too much on race” and/or being “racially divisive.” For my conversational partners, colorblindness was much more than mere ideology, it was a moral imperative and the solution to ongoing, and unnecessary, racial strife. Similarly, aside from sporadic instances of individual racism, post-racialism was much more than a goal, it was a reality, one largely achieved through the activism of the 1960’s and 70’s.

Once the conversation shifted to predominantly black schools, my interview respondents eschewed colorblindness and post-racialism for explicit color-consciousness and a hyper-attentiveness to race and racial discrimination. In nearly all of my interviews, teachers would profess a fidelity to colorblindness only to speak vividly about the salience of race later in the interview. They would describe the United States as a post-racial state, only to then describe the prevalence of white racial victimization within predominantly black schools. Perhaps most telling, and sociologically compelling, was the fact that, with few exceptions, my conversational partners were unaware of these ideological and experiential contradictions. That is, even though white teachers experienced, thought about, and talked about the importance of race within nonwhite racialized spaces, they did not consider this behavior to be a violation of the norms of colorblindness, nor did they see it as a referendum of, or in contradiction to, American post-racialism. In order to interrogate the meaning of these particular contradictions, I first had to make them visible, which I accomplished through explicit follow up questions.

Once exposed to their own contradictory statements, many of my conversational partners experienced white fragility, causing them to respond in a variety of ways. Struggling with rhetorical incoherence, many of the teachers I interviewed used racial rationalization, authentic grievance, or a combination of the two, to mitigate their personal culpability in, and insulate themselves from, the salience and significance of “focusing too much on race.” Or, put more
plainly, after finding themselves ideologically unsettled, my conversational partners sought out a position that was racially familiar, they wanted to restore the white racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2011). Although some teachers examined their own contradictions by questioning what they meant for themselves and society, they were few in number, and thus, their responses were not indicative of my conversational partners as a whole. These various processes – with the lone exception of reluctant recognition – suggests that the durability of racial ideology is such that personal experience, itself, is not enough to challenge it in a serious and sustained manner. While nonwhite racialized space was enough to make whiteness visible and the race card palatable, for most of my conversational partners, it was not enough to shake them from their commitment to colorblindness and post-racialism.

Conclusion

On April 4th, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee. On November 4th, 2008, Barrack Obama was elected President of the United States, becoming the first person of color to ever hold such a distinction. A mere 40 years after the face of the civil rights movement was gunned down on a hotel balcony, American voters, in an Electoral College landslide, selected an African American to become the face of the country. In just four decades time, the United States has transitioned from a nation of explicit race-consciousness, symbolized by an overt system of racial hierarchy and marred by extreme racial conflict, to one characterized, described, and defended as post-racial, where the idea of racial colorblindness is praised and propagated as the prevailing racial ideology. The vast majority of my conversational partners subscribed to this point of view, deriding color-consciousness and hailing post-racialism, even in the face of their own racialized experiences. Going forward,
critical whiteness scholars need to produce scholarship that examines, and disentangles, the intersection between racial ideology, racialized experienced, and racialized discourse.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY IN A CHANGING AMERICA

“America is run, primarily by white, Christian men, and there is a segment of our population who hates that, despises that power structure.”

Former Fox News Commentator, Bill O’Reilly, May, 29 2007.60

“It’s a changing country, the demographics are changing. It’s not a traditional America anymore.”

Former Fox News Commentator Bill O’Reilly, November, 6, 2012.61

Introduction:

At the start of our interview, Mrs. Walker was visibly apprehensive. Repeatedly sipping her cup of coffee, she jokingly mused about swapping it out for wine. In a seemingly nervous voice, she looked at me and said, “I don’t know what you want me to say, I feel kind of nervous.” Compounding matters further was the fact that I was quite nervous, myself. Being one of my very first interviews, I felt uneasy about my abilities as a researcher and uncertain about my project as a whole. Shortly after the interview began, my discomfort felt justified, as Mrs. Walker gave short, one word answers and I, despite my best efforts, struggled mightily and engaged in my own version on rhetorical incoherence. As we continued our conversation, however, I started to find my voice. I paid close attention to Mrs. Walker’s responses, and I tailored my probes and follow-up questions in a way that facilitated a comprehensive and coequal construction of data. After our interview concluded, I sat looking over my notes when, to my surprise, Mrs. Walker tapped me on my shoulder. Once again looking me in the eyes, she smiled and said “thank you, I didn’t realize I had so much to say.”

Like Mrs. Walker, the majority of my conversational partners – sometimes unbeknownst to even themselves – had “so much to say.” For them, as white educators in predominantly black
schools, race was not something they could avoid, and whiteness, specifically, was not something they could ignore. Sometimes humorous, and at other times, harrowing, my conversational partners recounted a multitude of experiences that, all at once, confirmed, countered, and complicated many of the findings from previous studies. For decades now, critical whiteness scholars have challenged conventional scholars of race by asking one simple question; what does it mean to white? This dissertation adds to the existing literature by asking a similar, yet more specific question; what does it mean to be white in nonwhite racialized spaces. The answers were not only illuminating in an empirical or academic sense, but they also generated additional questions and, as I will discuss shortly, signaled potential problems and possible pitfalls for race relations in a changing United States.

In this, my final chapter, I summarize and review my dissertation in its entirety. In doing so, I demonstrate the salience and significance of racialized space on white racial identity. By interviewing white teachers who work in predominantly black schools, I was able to compare and contrast the way whiteness is experienced, understood, and discussed – by a subset of white people – in white versus nonwhite racialized spaces. This spatially contingent, experiential juxtaposition allowed me to analyze the intersecting and interdependent processes of white racial awareness, white racial victimization, and white racial ideology. Next, I elaborate on how my findings connect to, and what they mean for, broader social processes and race relations moving forward. How will whiteness be experienced in a country that has undergone drastic demographic and cultural changes, and how will white people respond? I place my findings within the context of these and other critical questions. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion about the contributions and limitations of this particular project, and I make suggestions for future critical whiteness research.
Summary: Incorporating Racialized Space into Critical Whiteness Studies

The first three chapters of my dissertation were designed to set the stage for the subsequent three. Chapter one detailed the genesis of my inquiry and introduced the study as a whole. In it, I described both my statement of the problem and the purpose of the study. I also introduced my research questions. Chapter two provided an extensive literature review of all relevant topics for this study. Such topics included a brief history of the sociology of race and ethnicity in America, the rise and expansion of critical whiteness studies, the limitations of critical whiteness theory, and a discussion about the racialization of urban education. Chapter three was a broad overview of my research methodology, including sampling techniques, sample size, data collection, data analysis, and an extended discussion of how I navigated and responded to the complications of conducting fieldwork in the Central City School District. I also explain why I choose to utilize the responsive interview model, an inductive research methodology that builds on grounded theory.

The next three chapters, 4, 5, and 6, were all data chapters that detailed the major findings from my analysis. Chapter 4, *Becoming White: Spatial Socialization and Racializing the Raceless Norm*, explored how white teachers were spatially socialized about race, whiteness, and white racial identity within predominantly black schools. More specifically, I examined how nonwhite racialized space de-normalized, or interrupted, the normality of whiteness. I also showed how white teachers, who, with few exceptions, seldom thought about whiteness in white racialized spaces, were spatially socialized to constantly think about whiteness in nonwhite racialized spaces. That is, for my conversational partners, their sense of normalness – as illustrated by their own words – was eroded by the explicit racial dimensions of their respective workplaces. As the numerical minority within predominantly black schools, the teachers I
interviewed saw themselves, not as the raceless norm, but as the racialized other. This was a process that ran counter to their past experiences, as well as their contemporaneous realities outside of these particular spaces.

Chapter 5, *The White Race Card: Examining the Social Construction of Racial Victimization*, explored the various ways that white teachers constructed racial victimization. In this chapter, I showed how the spatial socialization of white teachers led to a heightened sense of racial victimization. Within predominantly black schools, not only did whiteness become visible, but it also became a liability. To varying degrees, each of the teachers I interviewed described themselves as, at one point or another, having been the victim of racial discrimination in their respective workplaces. These experiences elevated the authenticity of racial victimization, even in the minds of teachers who, only moments earlier, expressed a healthy skepticism about the salience of racial discrimination in the contemporary United States. From repeatedly getting called racist by black students to being mistrusted and mistreated by black parents, most of my conversational partners constructed whiteness in predominantly black schools as a racial disadvantage, one that directly corresponded with black racial advantage, or black privilege.

Finally, in chapter 6, *Race-Conscious Whiteness: Negotiating Colorblind Discourse and White Racial Experience*, I compared the racial ideologies of white teachers with the way they described their experiences within predominantly black schools. In the former, with little exception, white teachers repeatedly professed a strict belief in colorblindness, and they routinely characterized the United States as a post-racial state. In the latter, again, with few exceptions, these same teachers were highly cognizant to the salience of race, as it was pronounced throughout their daily experiences as white teachers in predominantly black schools. I examined theses ideological and experiential contradictions by asking my conversational partners about
them, directly. I also asked my interviewees to reconcile their thoughts and experiences as members of the racial majority with their thoughts and experiences as members of the racial minority. On the whole, their respective interpretations of racial experience correlated with racial status, and, in almost every case, were in direct contradiction to one another. When explicitly pointed out to my interviewees, their contradictory responses led to a spatial negotiation between ideology and experience, as they rhetorically struggled to rationalize, justify, and make sense of their differing positions.

As a whole, I made racialized space – more specifically, the impact of nonwhite racialized space – the focal point of my analysis. The reality of racial segregation in neighborhoods and schools, in addition to the overwhelmingly white teaching staff in urban education, presented me with a unique opportunity to study racial experience in different, and even opposing, racialized contexts. Furthermore, given the salience of race in American society and American life, both historically and today, the racial disparity between teachers and students in our nation’s public schools is likely to be consequential for all involved, as well as the institution of education, itself. While this dissertation did not seek to address this issue, explicitly, I do believe my results speak to the broader racial dynamics – specifically the broader racial politics – that characterize America today. To be more specific, even though my sample size was small and was limited to white teachers from one school district, I believe my results can help to explain what can accurately be called a broad and multifaceted interruption of whiteness. While the claims I make below are subjective, as opposed to empirical, I maintain that my results are intimately connected to, and highly indicative of, the white racial politics of our current moment.
Discussion: Whiteness Interrupted and the Coming Crisis of Place

On the evening of November 6, 2012 – election night – before the presidential election had even been concluded, popular conservative pundit and then Fox News Commentator, Bill O’Reilly, proclaimed to several of his colleagues that “the white establishment is now the minority.” Far from being a value-free description or politically neutral observation, O’Reilly was lamenting the changing demographics of America, as well as the corresponding cultural shift that ostensibly ran counter to traditional, or normal, American values. These new Americans, blacker and browner, were, according to O’Reilly, not sufficiently devoted to self-reliance and hard work, and therefore constituted a voting electorate that was primarily concerned with government handouts, or getting “stuff.” Not only did O’Reilly express his concern about the darkening of the country, both demographically and culturally, he also displayed a wistful nostalgia, a pining for an America society of years past. That is, he showed his desire to return to a time where the voting electorate – whiter and apparently more self-sufficient – would have “roundly defeated” a presidential candidate like Barack Obama.62

O’Reilly wasn’t alone in exhibiting what critical whiteness scholar John T. Warren terms the Rhetorical Body of Whiteness,63 other commentators and political pundits chimed in as well. On his popular and incendiary talk radio show the day after the 2012 election, conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh claimed that “we’re outnumbered” and that “we’ve lost the country.” Comedian turned political commentator, Dennis Miller, in reflecting on the same election, stated that he liked the country “the way it was,” and bemoaned the possibility that “it’s not going to be like that anymore.” Miller went on to note that, “do I think it’s the America that I saw from 18 to 58, no I don’t…it’s not the America that I’ve grown comfortable with.” Ann Coulter, another popular political commentator, explicitly tied President Obama’s reelection to
racial demographics when she claimed that “Teddy Kennedy’s 1965 Immigration Act was specifically designed to change the demographics of this nation, I think Mitt Romney would have won last night if he had the same demographics Ronald Reagan had.”

The members of the 2012 republican ticket, themselves, also weighed in on the various causes of their electoral defeat. Current Speaker of the House and then Vice Presidential Nominee, Paul Ryan, in the aftermath of the election told a local reporter that he and his fellow republican were defeated, not because their ideas were rejected, but because of “high turnout in urban areas.” Even though this reasoning seems relatively benign, it is important to keep several things in mind. First, as discussed in chapter two, in the contemporary United States, the term “urban” has virtually become synonymous with black, or at the very least, nonwhite. Second – with the proper understanding of who he was referring to – Speaker Ryan essentially rendered the opinions and voting habits of nonwhite voters meaningless, especially in terms of what they meant for broader political preferences. That is, by juxtaposing black turnout with an electoral rejection of ideas, Congressman Ryan was essentially asserting that the non-urban, or white vote – which went about 60% for the Republican ticket – is the vote that really matters. In other words, it was not that whites rejected Republican ideas, but rather, it was that nonwhites had an unusually high turnout.

From Bill O’Reilly to Dennis Miller, from Ann Coulter to Paul Ryan, all of these reactions to, and rationalizations for, the 2012 election, expressed concern and trepidation over the growing presence and political power of nonwhites. Relatedly, in the world of zero-sum racial politics, this perceived increase in minority voting power was a direct, and ominous, indicator of diminishing white voting power. Thus, the growing presence of nonwhites not only increased white racial awareness, but it also fostered and precipitated feelings of loss, of
grievance, and – most germane to this study – racial victimization. That is, the expressed apprehension over shifting demographics and the nostalgic pining for a bygone era were both indicative of the fragile nature of whiteness, particularly in a changing and darkening America. It would be easy to dismiss these comments as individual and emotional responses to a heartbreaking electoral defeat, but four years later, on the overwhelming strength of the white vote, Donald Trump – a reality television star and former leader of the birther movement – was elected President of the United States.66

Despite having no political experience, at any level, and running on a platform that included white nationalism,67 Donald Trump won 304 electoral colleges votes, including victories in the traditional democratic strongholds of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. President Trump won white voters by a margin of 21 percentage points (58% to 37%), and subsequent analysis suggests that two of the biggest motivating factors of white Trump voters were “fear of diversity” and “cultural anxiety.”68 To date, even though the Trump administration has been marred by conflict and controversy, whites remain loyal, as they are the only racial group in which a majority of voters approve of the president’s job performance.69 Although the new administration has been overruled in the courts, has had high profile resignations and controversial firings, and has no major policy accomplishments, it has, amongst other things, ramped up deportations of undocumented immigrants, tried multiple times to institute a Muslim ban, and has taken steps to clamp down on “voter fraud” and revive the war on drugs.70 Thus, the President’s continuing support from a majority of white voters, I believe, is no coincidence.

One of the very first themes that emerged in my interview data was the impact that nonwhite racialized space, and nonwhites, themselves, had on white racial awareness. As detailed in chapter four, whiteness not only became visible in predominantly black schools, but it
became meaningful, as well. That is, as detailed in chapter five, in nonwhite racialized space, 
whiteness became a liability, a disadvantage, and the mark of the racial other. Given current and 
projected demographic changes, the United States of America – long considered to be a white, 
and thus, a normal space – is becoming racialized in the white imagination. While whites are still 
a highly segregated group, with each passing year, fewer and fewer spaces are exclusively white, 
and the future portends more of the same. From neighborhoods to schools, from popular culture 
to the actual presidency, the United States of America, for many whites, is rapidly becoming a 
nonwhite, and thus, racialized space. Consistent with my findings, this new reality has made 
whiteness more visible, and it has also fostered a greater sense of white racial victimization.

Beyond sheer numbers, the culture of our country is changing as well. Rap music is one 
of the most popular music genres in the country, even amongst white youth. K-12 school 
curriculums are becoming more racially inclusive, and many colleges and universities are 
introducing courses that are critical of whiteness. Harriet Tubman will soon replace, or join, 
Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill.71 The confederate flag has been removed from state 
capitols in the south, and, despite white protests, monuments of confederate “heroes” are being 
removed from public lands.72 Also, for a growing number of whites, and many nonwhites, as 
well, the specter of political correctness has all but stifled public dialogue about any topic that is 
considered to be sensitive or uncomfortable. This includes public dialogues about race.73 The 
culture of the country is changing, and, unlike that of decades and centuries past, the United 
States is no longer a country where hegemonic whiteness can be taken for granted. For a non-
insignificant subset of whites, these cultural and demographic changes are unnerving and deeply 
unsettling. Whiteness, like other systems of dominance, achieves its dominance by appearing to 
be normal. Whiteness interrupted, however, is something we currently know very little about.
In many ways, public schools, today, act as a harbinger for things to come. As mentioned previously, public education is now a majority-minority institution, meaning that there are collectively more nonwhite students than white students. To be clear, white students still constitute the single largest block of students, but they are slightly outnumbered by the combined number of nonwhite students. Also, even though public schools – particularly urban public schools – are inundated with black and brown students, the overall power structure of these schools, to a significant degree, is white. That is, teachers, staff members, security guards, counselors, nurses, principals, vice principals, and district administrators remain overwhelmingly white. So, while blackness and brownness may be overrepresented in terms of physical bodies, whiteness remains atop the status hierarchy, as actual white people yield a disproportionately large share of the power, influence, and decision-making authority. Other institutions throughout the country – indeed, the country, itself – are starting to experience similar processes.

As we move further into the 21st century, the United States will increasingly become blacker and browner. Racial demographics are changing the racial complexity of physical space, and as a result, a variety physical spaces are increasingly becoming associated with people of color. Just as is the case with public schools, however, demographics alone, say very little about power relations, and currently, there exists no projections that indicate that nonwhites will overtake – or even reach parity with – whites in terms of political and economic power any time soon. Still, the perceived racial identity of physical space closely mirrors the racial composition of the people who inhabit it. Thus, racial demographics can, and often do, facilitate the interruption of whiteness. This, I believe, will remain the case, regardless of structures of power, which, again, operate in ways that are institutionally and interpersonally beneficial to whites.
What this all portends for the future, I cannot say, but based on the responses from the teachers I interviewed, as well as the rise of white grievance politics, I am not optimistic.

There is no realistic way for me to predict the future of race relations in this country, but I am fairly confident that the various processes outlined, analyzed, and discussed in this dissertation will be replicated throughout the country more broadly. As demonstrated above, whiteness is being interrupted on a national scale, therefore, the consequences of whiteness interrupted – namely, white racial awareness and white racial victimization – will be national as well. Owing to intra-racial diversity, it is impossible to know how individual whites will respond to a changing America, but again, the rise of white nationalism and the election of Donald Trump are both signs of how some whites will respond. Complicating matters further is the fact that there are millions of whites who are openly welcoming of more racial diversity, while still others are somewhere in-between. If my interview data are any indication, however, white heterogeneity may shape, or mitigate, the aforementioned processes of whiteness interrupted, but it does not completely eliminate them. Finally, given the methodological limitations of this study (see below), there may be aspects of whiteness interrupted that have yet to be examined.

In the meantime, it seems prudent to pay attention to those spaces where nonwhite racialization has already taken place. These particular spaces could be institutions, such as urban schools, they can be certain neighborhoods, such as urban ghettos, or even entire states, such as those in the southwest. States like Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, and even Texas, are racing towards majority-minority status, a status that the state of California has already achieved. Although they each have their own internal politics, I believe that paying attention to white racial identity – and race relations, more broadly – within these states offer us a window into what is heretofore an uncertain future of whiteness interrupted. As it stands now, the best we social
scientists can do is wait, be vigilant, and take heed of the monumental importance of physical space, particularly the impact that it has on how race is understood and experienced, both for whites and nonwhites alike.

**Limitations**

Although I took numerous steps to ensure the conceptual and methodological rigor of my dissertation, there are, however, several limitations. First, while there are other physical spaces that are broadly conceptualized as nonwhite – prisons, jails, and urban projects, for example – in this study, I only focused on one such space, predominantly black schools. I have no theoretical or empirical reason to believe that professionals that choose to pursue teaching have the same motivations, backgrounds, and personal ideologies as those of prison guards or police officers. Thus, this project does not account for what quantitative researchers call “selection effects,” or those variables and attributes that are highly correlated with individuals who choose to teach in urban schools. By specifically focusing on white teachers in urban schools, this project has no way to account for those variables that might be unique to those teachers, and not necessarily generalizable to whites who spend significant amounts of time in other nonwhite spaces.

Also, this study only examines racialized space in a professional context, and thus, cannot theoretically or substantively speak to the impact of nonwhite racialized space that is more personal in nature. My conversational partners were all raised in predominantly white neighborhoods, currently reside in predominantly white neighborhoods, and with few exceptions, belong to predominantly white social networks. Therefore, even though nonwhite racialized space exerted a significant influence over how my interviewees saw themselves, racially, the influence in question is germane to predominantly black schools. That is, relatively speaking, my conversational partners spend considerably more time in white racialized spaces – which they
conceptualize as raceless – than they do in predominantly nonwhite racialized spaces – which they conceptualize as black, brown, or otherwise racial. What would happen if the impact of nonwhite racialized space extended into white social networks, white communities, or even white homes? This project is not equipped to answer such questions.

Next, looking at the school environment, itself, predominantly nonwhite schools are not all the same. To the extent that nonwhite schools affect the way white teachers understand, make meaning of, and discuss their personal whiteness, this study is limited because it only examined the effects of predominantly black schools, and it did so in only one school district. How would white teachers make sense of their racial identity and racialized experiences in predominantly Latino schools or predominantly Asian schools? My dissertation cannot answer these questions. Also, my interview respondents all come from schools that are not only racially segregated, but are also sites of concentrated poverty. The subsequent economic disparity between teachers and students poses several interesting empirical questions. How does socioeconomic status influence, and shape, the perception of what constitutes a nonwhite racialized space? Also, how does more affluent nonwhite racialized spaces affect the way white teachers experience whiteness and construct their respective racial identities? Once again, my dissertation cannot speak to these questions, empirically, as it was not designed to answer them or others like them.

Finally, my dissertation suffered from several conceptual limitations that directly affected the administration of my in-depth interviews. First, in conceiving this research project, everything, from my research questions to my research design, was inundated and influenced by what I – and the broader research literature – termed whiteness. This, in of itself, is not a problem, but when interviewing my conversational partners, I lost sight of the fact that “whiteness” is an academic term, one that “carries particular connotations and frameworks.”
While it was certainly appropriate to use the term whiteness when writing this dissertation, it was less certain, or even methodologically inappropriate, to use such a term when speaking with actual interviewees. Depending on how my conversational partners conceptualized it, themselves, they may have skewed their responses to fit a preconceived notion of the term whiteness. That is, by using an academic – and racially loaded – term when conducting my interviews, I may have unwittingly influenced the responses given by my interviewees.

A similar limitation revolves around the term “racism.” Throughout my fieldwork, I spent a considerable amount of time interviewing and talking to my conversational partners about racism. I asked them about the existence of racism, their respective thoughts and opinions on racism, and I even asked them about their various experiences with racism. Through it all, it never occurred to me that their respective conceptualizations of racism might be dissimilar to my conceptualization of racism, or that teachers might define racism differently from other teachers. As a result, there exists the possibility that, in our numerous discussions about racism, my conversational partners and I were thinking and talking about conceptually different processes. Without going back and re-interviewing each of my conversational partners – and subsequently making sure that we all conceptualize racism the same way – I cannot be sure that my interview data did not conform to my own interpretation of racism. Still, even with the aforementioned limitations, my dissertation makes significant theoretical contributions to the existing sociological and critical whiteness literature.

**Research Significance and Contributions**

My dissertation makes several contributions to the sociological and critical whiteness literature. First, where the overwhelming majority of critical whiteness scholars ignore racial context, this project explicitly examined whiteness that has been situated within nonwhite
racialized space. This is highly significant because my work challenges one of the more prominent and consistent findings within the critical whiteness literature, that whites do not see or talk about their own race. The viewpoint that situates whiteness as the invisible, raceless norm, is one that is nearly ubiquitous within the existing literature. To a large degree, my findings reinforced this viewpoint, as my interviewees did, in fact, construct whiteness as the raceless norm, particularly when discussing race in the United States, more broadly. Conversely, however, when asked about their experiences as white teachers within predominantly black schools, my conversational partners spoke of whiteness in hyper-visible terms, and they admitted to thinking about whiteness on a regular basis. This important finding suggests that the long-held position that whiteness is invisible, that it is raceless or normal, is, at the very least, conceptually, theoretically, and empirically incomplete.

Second, in addition to the paucity of theoretical and empirical attention given to whiteness in nonwhite racialized spaces, there, relatedly, remains a dearth of scholarly work on the processes of white racial socialization within these spaces. That is, if nonwhite racialized space made a discernable difference in how whites make sense of, experienced, and talked about whiteness – which it did – then what were the precipitating conditions and salient factors that accounted for said difference? Because the impact of nonwhite racialized space on white racial identity was the central focus of my dissertation, I was successfully able to document, and analyze, the socialization processes that made whiteness visible to those who were previously oblivious to its existence. That is, this research adds to the existing critical whiteness literature, not only by demonstrating that nonwhite racialized space makes a perceptible difference in how whites experience whiteness, but it also documents the spatial processes that, to a large degree, accounts for the difference in question. To date, very little work has been done in this area.
Third, the intersection of race and place allowed me to juxtapose my interviewee’s respective experiences as members of the racial majority and the racial minority. That is, I was able to compare and contrast experiences, ideologies, and discourses that emanated from the perspective of the racial norm with those that emanated from the perspective of the racial other. By interviewing the same teachers about their experiences in differently racialized spaces, I was able to make direct comparisons between the way white teachers viewed and discussed the realities of race from different standpoints within the racial hierarchy. To my knowledge, there are currently no studies within the critical whiteness framework that makes these types of experiential comparisons. Therefore, my dissertation also makes a significant contribution by highlighting the degree to which space affects racial status, the degree to which racial status affects racial experience, and the degree to which racial experience affects racial discourse. Each of these processes still require more scholarly attention.

Finally, my findings indicate that white racial ideology, while durable, may be more fluid than the existing literature would suggest. Though researchers have shown that whites often utilize the discourses of colorblindness and post-racialism as a means to uphold and reproduce racial inequality, less is known about how whites rationalize, and ultimately justify, explicit race-consciousness. For example, despite their expressed fidelity to colorblindness, recent opinion polls indicate that a growing number of whites see reverse discrimination – or racism against whites – as just as great or even a greater problem than racism against people of color. Very little is known about how whites make sense of this contradiction, as previous to my study, few scholars have studied it empirically. As demonstrated in chapter six, my work addresses this shortcoming by using my conversational partners’ own words as a means of making them aware of their ideological, experiential, and discursive contradictions. Thus, this study is one of the first
to reconcile colorblind and post-racial ideologies with white racial awareness and claims white racial victimization.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

In contextualizing my findings within the broader critical whiteness framework, several avenues for future research emerge, and they correspond directly to my specific limitations. First, as significant as my findings are, they come from teachers in only one school district. Future research that needs to look at a variety of school districts from different parts of the country. Furthermore, nonwhite racial variation needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the impact of racialized space on white racial identity. That is, future research that considers white teachers in nonwhite schools needs to consider predominantly Asian schools and, given their salience to the current political climate, especially predominantly Latino schools. With the former – broadly conceived as the model minority – and the latter – increasingly constructed as a racial and cultural threat – the possibility for research contributions and theoretical breakthroughs appear to be considerable. Lastly, at least pertaining to schools, future work needs to take socioeconomic variation into account. Many nonwhite students from middle class backgrounds also attend racially segregated schools, therefore, the impact of affluent nonwhite racialized space on white racial identity raises interesting empirical questions.

Looking beyond urban education, other professions, too, need to be considered. While each may present their own unique set of challenges, particularly related to access, studying white correctional officers that work in prisons or jails, white police officers that work in urban communities, or white social workers that primarily serve people of color, all seem to be worthwhile research endeavors. Even though neither of these hypothetical studies would adequately account for socioeconomic variation, selection effects, or any existing power
differentials between whites and nonwhites, they each, in my opinion, still have the potential to be theoretically and substantively significant. Also, professional spaces are not the only type of racialized spaces. In the future, critical whiteness studies should pay scholarly attention to whites who spend significant amounts of time in nonwhite racialized spaces due to personal circumstances. Friendship networks, residential environments, or even personal or intimate relationships, all serve as potential frameworks for the study of nonwhite racialized space on white racial identity.

Finally, future critical whiteness research needs to attend to the methodological limitations that currently exist in the field as a whole. To date, the overwhelming majority of critical whiteness work has been qualitative, historical, philosophical, or otherwise, narratively constructed. As discussed in chapter two, relatively few studies have utilized quantitative methods in the critical study of whiteness. Going forward, more quantitative research is needed to compliment, or empirically extend, the already robust historical and narrative-based critical whiteness literature. Also, within the pantheon of qualitative methods, itself, seldom have scholars ventured outside of the realm of in-depth interviews. This includes this very study. In the future, more studies that utilize ethnography and/or participant observation are needed to take the critical whiteness literature in new, empirically-rich directions. Lastly, considering the racial domination that contextualizes white racial identity, there remains a considerable need for public sociology and participatory action research.

**Final Thoughts: A Thank You to the Pioneers of Critical Whiteness Studies**

This dissertation, indeed, the field of critical whiteness studies, owes a tremendous debt to those scholars of color who pioneered the critical study of whiteness and white people in the United States. From Ida B. Wells to W.E.B. Du Bois, from James Baldwin to Joyce Ladner,
African Americans and other people of color – at times, for their very survival – were attentive to, and highly critical of, the contours, complexities, and contradictions of whiteness. As a result, they produced research that was both groundbreaking and prescient, work that spoke to the racial blind spots of academia, as well as those throughout the country, itself. Owing to the blatant and ubiquitous white supremacy of their respective times, countless critical whiteness scholars were marginalized, or in some cases, ignored, altogether, due to nothing more than the color of their skin. It is no coincidence that the field of critical whiteness studies only gained academic legitimacy once white people, themselves, took a sustained interest in studying whiteness. It was very unfair to scholars of color – and quite unfortunate for social science, in general – that their hard work and penetrating insights were marginalized by their peers. Sociology, other social sciences, and society, as a whole, would be much better off, today, if scholars from marginalized groups were taken more seriously in their time. To these pioneering scholars whose work greatly influences my own, and upon whose shoulders I proudly stand, I say this; THANK YOU!!!
APPENDIX A
(ENDNOTES)


2 “Denise Darling” and “Brick City High School” are both pseudonyms used to protect the identity of my interview respondents. In fact, with the exception of my own name and that of Syracuse University, all names of people and places listed in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

3 Although critical whiteness studies has been granted academic legitimacy only in recent decades, in reality, scholars of color – particularly African Americans – have studied and written about whites in America for several centuries.


5 According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2014, the percentage of 50.2% of all public school students were either Hispanic, African American, Asian American, American Indian/Alaska Native, or two or more races. 49.8% of public school students were white.

6 See the National Center of Education Statistics, [http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112_2013314_t1s_001.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112_2013314_t1s_001.asp).

7 Ibid.

8 See the Center for American Progress, [https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/report/2014/05/04/88962/teacher-diversity-revisited/](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/report/2014/05/04/88962/teacher-diversity-revisited/).

9 Central City School District is a pseudonym.

10 For a more detailed explication, please see chapter 3 on research methodology.


13 It should also be noted that women, white or otherwise, were not granted full citizenship rights at the founding of the country.

14 Although people of color have been studying whites – and whiteness – for over a century, the field of critical whiteness studies have only gained academic legitimacy in the last three decades (Baldwin, 1985; Doane, 2003; DuBois, 1920; hooks, 1992; Roediger, 1999).


16 An exhaustive listing of said debate is beyond the scope of this project.

17 This is by no means an exhaustive list. These studies, however, do provide a sufficient portrait of the breadth and depth of whiteness studies.

18 To be clear, many academics still focus their attention on nonwhites. Critical whiteness studies have by no means supplanted the study of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States.

19 For a more detailed discussion of the racial ideology of colorblindness, please see chapter six in which the majority of my conversational partners engaged in, and reinforced, these very processes.


21 Two additional cases, in particular, were instrumental in the school integration in the wake of the *Brown* decisions. The first, *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968), mandated that school boards must formulate actual school desegregation plans in lieu of the often farcical “freedom of choice” plans that were ways to get around or avoid compliance with the *Brown*. The second case, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* (1971), held that school busing could be used to achieve racial integration in public schools, even when schools were segregated because of neighborhood proximity, as opposed to racial classification. Collectively, the *Green* and *Swann* decisions made no distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* segregation.

22 As will be discussed in chapter four, my interview respondents broadly conceived of their respective work places as black spaces. More specifically, as “black schools.”

25 This is true of all research methodologies. How we interpret and understand what it means to “know” anything has a direct impact on how we view social science and social scientific research methods. For a detailed analysis, see Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research process*.
26 After I switched the emphasis of my phone conversations, my conversational partners rarely had questions when it came time for the actual interview. This turned out to be a successful tactical change.
27 Both the school librarian and the high school principal were former teachers that worked in predominantly black schools, so I felt comfortable including them in my sample.
29 For a more thorough discussion of the “insider/outsider” debate, see Appendix B.
30 The first instance was a younger teacher who had been out of college for only two years. She openly admitted that she was interested in attending graduate school, and that whiteness in education was something that she wanted to study in greater detail. The second instance was Mr. Marsh, who flatly stated that he would not sit down for an interview until he had better familiarized himself with the concept of whiteness. I provided them both with a comprehensive list of readings that included literature on whiteness in education, whiteness and the law, white racial identity, white racial discourse, the history of whiteness, and white anti-racism.
31 Although I had never met Mr. Marsh in person prior to our interview, I recognized him when I saw him because he described his attire to me over the phone.
32 Those dropping out of the study included teachers who had agreed to be interviewed and teachers whom I had already interviewed.
33 When I began transcribing interviews, I found NVivo to be extremely helpful. However, when it came to data analysis, I found the NVivo interface to be too complicated and unnecessarily burdensome. I switched to MAXQDA early on in the data analysis process. My last three interviews were transcribed by a transcription service.
34 All names, including teachers, students, and schools, are pseudonyms.
35 For a detailed analysis of how my interviewees addressed white privilege, see chapter 5, *The White Race Card*.
36 See http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/08/20/01demographics.h34.html
37 The interviewees who successfully accommodated to being called white were all young teachers who had recently begun their careers. Each of them had only been teaching for three years or less.
38 See chapter VI.
39 Grand Ledge is a pseudonym for a predominantly white, middle class, suburban school district just on the outside of Brick City.
40 Whenever I felt that interviews were becoming too painful for my interviewees, I would offer to take a break or stop the interview. Each time I did so, however, my conversational partner would insist that we continue.
41 Mrs. McCormick was one of my very first interviews, which is why I found her answers about teaching in predominantly black schools somewhat surprising. As I continued my fieldwork, however, a clear pattern emerged, and the disparate answers given by the same interview respondents, all based on context, was something that I came to expect.
42 I delve deeper into the spatially specific construction of racial ideology in chapter 6.
43 For more on how my conversational partners constructed white racial victimization, see chapter 5.
44 It should be noted that the term “the white race card” is not meant to impugn or question the veracity of my interviewees, but rather, it is meant to capture the impact that racialized spaces has on racialized experience, as well as the inherent contradiction of decrying racial victimization while making claims of racial victimization.
45 In 2011, for example, researchers at Tufts University and Harvard Business School found that whites “perceived more anti-White bias than anti-Black Bias” (Norton and Sommers, 2011, p. 216).
46 This particular line was an homage to Martin Luther King Jr’s famous 1993 “I Have a Dream” speech.
47 In 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed African American male, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer. Mostly peaceful protests, and some rioting, ensued after Wilson was not charged with a crime.
48 Described by his trademark blue vest, I was able to determine that the guy in question was DeRay McKesson, a prominent Black Lives Matter advocate.
49 For a good breakdown of voting patterns by race, see Ian Haney-Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
50 At one point when talking about President Obama, Mrs. Brooks refereed to him as a Muslim, and even indicated that she did not believe he was an American citizen. She also expresses her belief that President Obama was racially biased against whites.
51 Of the few teachers who mentioned Japanese internment of Chinese exclusion (four in total), they were all either history or social studies teachers.
52 Like many people, white and nonwhite, alike, Mrs. Peterson did not differentiate between race and ethnicity. She assumed all Asian and Asian American groups are highly educated and economically successful, which is factually inaccurate.
53 See chapter three in research methods.
54 Not every interviewee received these questions. They only arouse in the event of discursive contradictions.
55 The only difference between rhetorical incoherence and rhetorical incoherence 2.0 are the questions that caused them. The former was caused by general questions about whiteness, while the latter was caused by questions about discursive contradictions.
56 The word “victim” is my term. My conversational partners objected to the idea that they were “victims” of racial discrimination, even as they provided examples of victimization.
57 By “non-personal,” I mean racial victimization that is not experienced by them, personally.
58 To be clear, at no point were any of my interviewees aggressive towards me.
59 He moved to a new school and has since been granted tenure. Both schools have a predominantly black student body.
60 Bill O’Reilly made these comments on his radio show on May, 29 2007 in response to President George W. Bush’s push for comprehensive immigration reform.
61 Bill O’Reilly made these comments live on Fox News in reaction to what appeared to be – and eventually was – the reelection of President Barack Obama.
62 O’Reilly’s full comments in 2012 were “It’s a changing country, the demographics are changing. It’s not a traditional America anymore and there are 50% of the voting public who want stuff. They want things and who is going to give them things? President Obama. He knows it and he ran on it. And whereby 20 years ago, President Obama would have been roundly defeated by an establishment candidate like Mitt Romney. The white establishment is now the minority.”
64 For Limbaugh, see https://www.mediamatters.org/video/2012/11/07/limbaugh-were-outnumbered-weve-lost-the-country/191210. For Miller, see http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2012/11/07/dennis_miller_reacts_to_romney_losing_election_america_under_obama.html. Lastly, Ann Coulter made these comments on the Sean Hannity Program, November, 7 2012.
65 Congressman Paul Ryan made these comments to WISC-TV, a CBS affiliate in Wisconsin, on November, 12 2012 in his first television interview following his defeat as vice president in the 2012 presidential election.
66 The birther movement was a collection of right wing conservatives who questioned President Obama’s citizenship. That is, the birther movement rejected President Obama’s eligibility to be president.
67 Candidate Trump famously accused Mexico of sending over “rapists” and Murderers,” he questioned the impartiality of a federal judge based solely on his Mexican heritage, he proposed banning all Muslims from entering the United States, and he was endorsed by numerous white supremacists, including David Duke, the Alt-Right, and the Ku Klux Klan.
69 For a summary of various measures of President Trump’s job approval, see http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_trump_job_approval-6179.html.


74 These specific limitations were pointed out to me by Dr. Prema Kurien, who joined my dissertation committee after I had already defended my dissertation proposal.
(Not)Black like Me: Navigating the Color-Line in the Responsive Interview Model

Ever since I was a young boy, people have remarked that I “talk like a white boy.” In fact, my very first high school girlfriend, a person with whom I am still close, lacking even the pretense of subtlety, simply referred to me as her “little white boy.” She, like all of the other people who made fun of the way I spoke, did so playfully, as I never felt uncomfortable, offended, or the subject of genuine ridicule. Racialized assessments of my speech pattern were always made in jest, and they typically came from people I was close to or otherwise admired. Over time, particularly as I learned more about the complexities of race, racial identity, and dialect, I came to accept and internalize the broader racial implications of speech, and started code-switching between what I characterized as my authentic, or “black voice,” and my professional, or “white boy voice.” For this project, in hopes of assuaging any discomfort and gaining the trust of my potential and eventual interviewees, it was the latter speech pattern – my white boy voice – that I utilized throughout the entirety of my fieldwork.

In social scientific inquiry, there necessarily exists a critical interplay between various research methodologies, structures of power, and the demographic identities of researchers and research subjects, alike (DeVault, 1999; Smith, 1999; Twine and Warren, 2000; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Try as we may – and partially addressed in chapter two – sociologists and other social scientists have routinely influenced, and have been influenced by, the cultural, political, and economic contexts in which they carried out their work. Although time and maturity have, to a certain degree, mitigated these processes, it still remains the case today that the “social” in social science cannot be neatly separated from the “social” in social context or the
“social” in social interaction. Therefore, demographic variation between scholars and subjects, particularly in a historically and contemporaneously stratified society, is oftentimes just as integral to the research process as the collection, analysis, and dissemination of actual data. This reality did not escape me during my research design, and it certainly did not escape me as I repeatedly sat down to conduct interviews with people who looked nothing like me, and in most cases, had substantially different life experiences.

In this appendix, I detail the steps I took to overcome my (sometimes double) outsider status as an African American man conducting in-depth interviews with all white, and mostly female, urban school teachers. Also, I take time to detail how, despite my (sometimes double) outsider status, I initiated and sustained a discussion about the sensitive topics of race, whiteness, and white racial identity. Lastly, in order to clear up any confusion and answer any lingering questions about my methodological choices in chapter six – namely, my decision to press interviewees on contradictory statements – I breakdown the process of challenging interview respondents without being confrontational. That is, I discuss the ways in which I pressed teachers on their ideological, experiential, and discursive contradictions, all while maintaining a safe space for them to work through, and express, their thoughts and feelings in their own words.

**The Black Guy in a Blue Shirt: Informally Introducing Race into Formal Introductions**

When corresponding with potential interviewees via email and phone, I routinely struggled to volunteer the fact that I was black, even though, from research design to teacher recruitment, it was something that I had spent a considerable amount of time thinking about. In sifting through the existing literature, coming up with questions for my interview protocol, and contacting and recruiting teachers, the question of when to reveal my racial status never strayed far from my mind. It was one thing to get white teachers to open up about whiteness and their
respective racial identities, but it was something else altogether to get them to do so while sitting across from an African American man. While setting up a face to face interview during one of my preliminary phone conversations, on a whim and completely unplanned, I informed my interviewee that I would be “the black guy in a blue shirt.” Pausing to gage the response, I was immediately relieved when my newly minted conversational partner simply agreed and said thanks. Just like that, I had stumbled across a way to broach the sensitive subject of my race.

Working in my favor was the fact that my very first interviews were with personal acquaintances. Therefore, at least initially, the question of when to reveal my race was moot, as the answer was already known. Also, my utilization of a snowball sample – discussed at great length in chapter three – allowed conversational partners to, at least implicitly, vouch for my respectful manner and overall professionalism when reaching out to their colleagues. While I cannot be certain that any one conversational partner mentioned my race while participating in the snowball sample, I made the deliberate decision to operate under the assumption that they had not done so, forcing me to address the topic myself. After stumbling into the first voluntary disclosure of my racial identification, I turned it into a strategy and consistently repeated the process throughout the remainder of my fieldwork. Although this strategy turned out to be highly successful, there remains the ethical question of whether or not I engaged in deception. Put differently, did I give the false impression that I was white, when, in fact, I was not? The answer, at least to me, is not clear cut.

On the one hand, yes, in my initial phone conversations with potential interviewees, I purposely employed what I considered to be my “white boy voice.” It certainly can be argued that, by doing so, I deliberately gave teachers the impression that I was white. On the other hand, however, my “white boy voice,” to a very large degree, is simply the way I talk. As mentioned
above, I have been accused of “talking white” ever since I was a child, and thus, I did not manufacture a whole new speech pattern when engaging potential interviewees. So, again, although I spoke to teachers in what is often described as a “white dialect,” doing so did not require a wholesale change in how I speak normally. Complicating matters further, is the fact that race is a social construction. What does it mean to sound black? What does it mean to talk like a white boy? By automatically associating the former with broken English, and the latter with proper English, we run the risk of essentializing, or naturalizing, what are, in reality, social categories. In using my so called “white boy voice,” did I violate any ethical rules of social scientific research? That, I cannot say. What I can say is that, looking back, I am more than comfortable with the decisions that I made.

Research and Reflexivity: Overcoming Demographic Mismatch in Mixed-Race Fieldwork

According to critical whiteness scholar, Charles Gallagher, “never before in U.S. history has an honest and frank discussion about racism or racial inequality and its causes been so difficult to broach” (Gallagher, 2008, p. 163). Far from suggesting that past discussions about racism and racial inequality were somehow easy, Gallagher asserts that it is the contemporaneous white belief in, and fidelity to, colorblindness that makes similar discussions much more difficult today. In this sense, post-racialism in the white imagination effectively renders race obsolete in the contemporary United States. As Gallagher would later state, “as the majority of whites now see it, race has mutated from a social hierarchy that allocates resources and shapes life chances to one that is nothing more than a cultural identity” (Gallagher, 2008, p. 163). Indeed, as discussed in chapter six, the majority of my conversational partners, too, believed that the United States had successfully become a post-racial state. Already familiar with the research literature on white
racial attitudes before entering the field, I was initially concerned with broaching the subject of race with white teachers. As it turns out, my concerns were largely unfounded.

Interracial discussions of race – in this case, whiteness – are fraught with possibilities of consternation, confrontation, and general discomfort. Also, racial and cultural mismatch may, although not necessarily, lead to a genuine miscommunication about sensitive subject matter. With these and other adverse possibilities casting a shadow over the entire interview process, I was pleasantly surprised by how smoothly and how fruitful my initial set of interviews went. Upon meeting up with interviewees, I never dove right into the interview, instead taking some time to just talk and relieve any lingering tension. Also, as mentioned in chapter three, I held phone conversations with teachers prior to each face-to-face interview. Thus, between phone conversations and pre-interview dialogue, I spent a considerable amount of time building rapport with each teacher who participated in this study. This strategy paid off, as the vast majority of conversational partners, after a bit of reluctance, opened up about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in illuminating and, at times, emotional ways.

To this day, I cannot say for sure how, or why, my interviewees were so willing – and sometimes eager – to open up to me, but I do remember (falsely) thinking to myself that this whole qualitative research thing was easy. Some teachers took a bit more probing than others at the start of the interview, but with the exception of the aforementioned Mr. Marsh (see chapter 3), even reticent teachers eventually shared traumatic experiences and intimate thoughts about their reality as white teachers in predominantly black schools. I found that once teachers began opening up, there was virtually no subject that they were unwilling to discuss. Even after the upheaval surrounding Mr. Marsh and the mass exodus of research participants, the interviews, themselves, went precisely as they had gone prior to Mr. Marsh. At some point, typically early
on in the interview, conversational partners would make the personal decision to trust me, and short answers turned into long answers, and superficial responses transformed into deep, intimate, and revealing reflections.

For my part, I stayed true to the responsive interview model, never straying too far from its stated methods and procedures (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). My questions were not only designed to invoke thinking, but they were delivered in a welcoming, non-threatening, and non-confrontational manner. Furthermore, moving beyond the responsive interview model and thinking about qualitative methods more broadly, self-reflection is paramount and reflexivity is of the upmost importance. Both self-reflection and reflexivity were instrumental throughout my time in the field, as the sensitive subject matter of race, whiteness, and racial inequality yielded numerous answers that, as an African American, had the potential to be very upsetting. Teachers expressed their belief in racial stereotypes, and on multiple occasions, they made statements that were simply not true. Through it all, however, I remained calm, kept my composure, and monitored my reactions accordingly. At no time did I break from my cordial and respectful demeanor, not even when I was made to listen to the so-called scourge of “black pathology.”

Although initially it was somewhat difficult to keep from reacting when hearing hurtful racial stereotypes – and on more than a few occasions, outright racism – I did find that it became easier over time. Because data collection and data analysis in the responsive interview model occur simultaneously, I was constantly engaging with my data as it came in, a process that allowed me to become accustomed to, and better prepare for, the possibility of racially inflammatory discourse. Also, I constantly reminded myself that I chose this project. Nobody forced me to study race, nor did anyone demand that I investigate whiteness. These were choices that I made of my own volition, and if the sensitive nature of the subject matter was too much for
me to handle, then I had no business undertaking such a research endeavor. Lastly, I stressed to my conversational partners that I wanted them to open up and be honest with me, therefore, it would have been unethical, and quite frankly, unfair, for me to then turn around and chastise or otherwise judge them upon doing so. Thus, self-reflection, reflexivity, and my methodological training kept me grounded while navigating the tumultuous terrain of mixed-race fieldwork.

**Interviewing without Interrogating: Exploring Ideological and Experiential Contradictions**

In chapter six, I spent a considerable amount of time and space reviewing and analyzing the ideological, experiential, and discursive contradictions of my conversational partners. Although I went into great detail about the implications and theoretical utility of these contradictions, I did not spend much time describing how I successfully challenged teachers without making them feel uncomfortable or causing them any undue stress. As I also mentioned in chapter six, this was a delicate dance, one that required me to balance inquiry with ethics, and amounted to a big risk, particularly given the significant amount of time I had spent building rapport with my interviewees. If I probed too deeply or challenged interviewees too aggressively, months and months of effort could be lost in a moment’s notice. To both my delight and my surprise, this part of the data collection process went relatively smooth, as my interview respondents – rather than rejecting this line of questioning – embraced it, providing a multitude of answers that eventually led to the conceptualization and application of spatial negotiation.

In the responsive interview model, it is customary to start off with easy, lighthearted questions, ones designed to build rapport with, and show empathy to, your conversational partners (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). As Rubin and Rubin (2012) note, researchers should “begin by asking questions that provide the interviewees with a comfort level about their ability to respond” (pp. 108-109). This is exactly the approach I took while interviewing teachers. Not
only did I engage them in phone conversations before each interview, but I made sure to begin each interview with easy-going, laid-back, and stress-free questions. For example, my interviews typically started with informal questions, such as “tell me about your family” or “what do you do in your free time?” I also asked each conversational partner about what motivated them to go into education. This particular question consistently engendered positive emotions from my interviewees, as they often described the moment they knew they wanted to become a teacher. These types of questions made it much easier to broach contradictions later in the interview.

When it came time to explore contradictions, I tried to be as sensitive and empathetic as possible, but I also wanted my conversational partners to seriously engage with why their racial ideologies diverged so significantly from their racial experiences. While I was nervous about pursuing this line of question, I also felt confident that 1) I had successfully established a great rapport with my interviewees and 2) these questions would yield rich and sophisticated data. Also, given the quantitative consistency and qualitative degree to which interview respondents contradicted themselves, this is something that I simply had to explore. Luckily, the first time I probed a teacher about ideological and experiential contradictions, they responded in a fruitful and engaging manner, they did not recoil in horror or indicate that they were discomforted in any way. There were pauses, stumbles, and false starts, but they emerged in response to a serious effort to engage with question. To the extent that teachers got upset, it was not in response the question, per se, but at the implications embedded within the questions, namely that they were not as committed to colorblindness and post-racialism as they had previously believed.

Given the racial and gender mismatch mentioned above, I had already structured my interview protocol – and the interviews, themselves – in manner that was conducive to a cordial and constructive exchange of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. With this being the case, most
of my interviews had already covered emotional and/or sensitive material by the time it came to explore contradictions. Just as I had done from the initial moment of contact, I spoke clearly and openly, and I made it a point to remain respectful at all times. My questions, although at times challenging, were never issued in a confrontational manner, and I repeatedly reminded interviewees that, at any time, they could refuse to answer a question or end the interview altogether. Looking back on the interview process, navigating the ideological, discursive, and experiential contradictions of white teachers working in predominantly black schools took great care and finesse on my part, but in the end, it turned out to be a positive, illuminating, and worthwhile endeavor.

Conclusion

Although there currently exists an extensive research literature on how to conduct qualitative fieldwork across racial and gender lines, there still remains to be a consensus amongst social scientists about how best to do so effectively (Arendell, 1997; Best, 2003; Blee, 2000; Bulmer and Solomos, 2004; DeVault, 1999; Gallagher, 2000; Gurney, 1985; Oakley, 1991; Twine and Warren, 2000; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). As an African American male interviewing all white, mostly female teachers, demographic mismatch remained salient throughout the entirety of the research process. This included me struggling to find the best way to reveal my race to interview respondents. Ultimately, I found my footing and navigated the field successfully, up to and including me challenging teachers about their numerous ideological, discursive, and experiential contradictions. In the end – and despite our racial and gender mismatch – my conversational partners and I mutually constructed rich and sophisticated data, so much so that said data led to the development and application of multiple empirically relevant and theoretically significant concepts.
APPENDIX C

(Conversational Partners – Alphabetical Order)

*In order to protect confidentiality, all names, ages, certification areas, and school names have been changed.*

**Teacher – Age – Subject – School:**
Alexa Boyd, 43 – Math Teacher – *Harriet Tubman Middle School*.
Denise Bradley, 31 – Art Teacher – *Baker Middle School*.
Chelsea Clark, 34 – Technology Teacher – *Hurston Middle School*.
Amanda Costa, 34 – Social Studies Teacher – *East Genesee Middle School*.
Rebecca Darling, 47 – Science Teacher – *Brick City High School*.
Clay Davis, 36 – Math Teacher – *Westside High School*.
Mary DeYoung, 50 – Biology Teacher – *Frederick Douglass High School*.
Bethany Doyle, 47 – Language Arts Teacher – *Dr. King High School*.
Christina Gray, 45 – Music Teacher – *Baldwin High School*.
Allison Hall, 44 – History Teacher – *Jackson High School*.
Cynthia Jarvis, 24 – Health Teacher – *Gardener Middle School*.
Staci Livingston, 26 – Physical Education Teacher – *Otto Middle School*.
Jessi McCormick, 42 – English Teacher – *Emerson High School*.
Kate Meredith, 53 – English Teacher – *Seymour Middle School*.
Bryan Palmer, 45 – Social Studies Teacher – *Pattengill Middle School*.
Dan Reed, 48 – History Teacher – *Sexton High school*.
James Rhodes, 40 – Physical Education Teacher – *Brick City Middle School*. 
Candice Satter, 35 – Math Teacher – *Dwight Rich Middle School.*
Melanie Scott, 49 – Science Teacher – *Eastern High School.*
Olivia Strodel, 29 – Health Teacher – *Malcolm X Middle School.*
Sophia Taylor, 38 – Music Teacher – *Okemos Middle School.*
Leah Thompson, 33 – Art Teacher – *Walnut Middle School.*
Ian Townsend, 52 – AP Math Teacher – *Southside Middle School.*
Paige Vincent, 36 – Health Teacher – *Medgar Evers Middle School.*
Hanna Walker, 58, *Retired.*
Carrie Weaver, 50 – Language Arts Teacher – *Allendale Middle School.*
Jennifer Western, 48 – Chemistry Teacher – *Eastside High School.*
APPENDIX D
(Email Solicitation)

Dear (name of teacher),

My name is Marcus Bell and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Syracuse University. I am actively seeking research participants to interview for my doctoral dissertation: 


Interviews will be one on one and semi-structured; they will examine teaching experiences, perspectives on race, and perspectives on the intersection of race and education.

Unless otherwise specified by the research participant, all interviews will be conducted in a public place, such as a coffee shop, bookstore, library, etc., and will last anywhere from one to two hours. After the interview is over, your participation in this project will be complete.

Those meeting the following criteria are eligible to participate:

1) Racially identify as white or Caucasian.
2) Currently work, or in the past have worked, at an urban, predominantly black school.
3) 18 years of age or older.

Participation is 100% voluntary and all identifiable information will be kept confidential.

I’m asking that you please circulate the attached recruitment flyer to all members of your teaching staff that meets the stated research criteria.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Marcus Bell at mabell@syr.edu or (517)-303-9441; or Professor Amy Lutz at aclutz@maxwell.syr.edu.

Thanks,

*Marcus Bell*
*Ronald E. McNair Graduate Research Fellow*
*Junior Fellow of the Yale Urban Ethnography Project*
*Department of Sociology, Syracuse University*
Call for Participants!!!!!

Hello,

My name is Marcus Bell and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Syracuse University. I am actively seeking research participants to interview for my doctoral dissertation: *White Teachers, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness in Urban Education*.

Interviews will be one on one and semi-structured; they will cover various teaching experiences, perspectives on race, and perspectives on the intersection of race and education.

Unless otherwise specified by the research participant, all interviews will be conducted in a public place, such as a coffee shop, bookstore, library, etc., and will last anywhere from one to two hours. After the interview is over, your participation in this project will be complete.

THE IDENTITY OF ALL RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL.

Those meeting the following criteria are eligible to participate:

1) Racially identify as white or Caucasian.
2) Currently work, or in the past have worked, at an urban, predominantly black school.
3) 18 years of age or older.

Participation is 100% voluntary.

If you have any questions, concerns, or would like to volunteer to participate in this research project, please contact Marcus Bell at mabell@syr.edu or (517)-303-9441; or Professor Amy Lutz at aclutz@maxwell.syr.edu; or the Internal Review Board at Syracuse University at (315)-443-3013.

Thanks,

Marcus Bell
Ronald E. McNair Graduate Research Fellow
Junior Fellow of the Yale Urban Ethnography Project
Department of Sociology, Syracuse University
White Teachers, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness in Urban Education.

My name is Marcus Bell and I am a graduate student and part-time instructor in the Department of Sociology at Syracuse University.

I am interested in learning more about the day to day experiences of white teachers that work in urban, predominantly black schools. I would like to explore in greater detail how said teachers perceive race in general – and their whiteness in particular – to affect these experiences.

Respondents will be asked to participate in a semi-structured, qualitative interview, during which I will ask questions about perspective(s) on race, urban education, and daily experiences as white teachers working in predominantly black schools.

This project will consist of 35-50 research participants, all of whom are white teachers that currently work in urban, predominantly black schools. Each interview will last approximately 60-120 minutes, upon which the participation of the respective respondents will be complete.

I am inviting you to participate in this research study. Involvement in this study is 100% voluntary. This means that you may choose whether or not to participate and, if you decide to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty or protestation. Interviews will be conducted at a place of your choosing, including bookstores, coffee shops, libraries, etc.

All names, dates, places of employment, and any other identifiable information will be kept in strict confidence. No one other than me, Marcus Bell, will have access to this information.
Furthermore, anything discussed throughout the interview will also be kept confidential. Nothing said before, during, or after the interview will be connected to you in any way.

For purposes of analysis, I do plan on using an audio recording device to record each interview. After each interview is complete, it will then be transcribed, by me, and analyzed for my doctoral dissertation, as well as for possible use in presentations at research conferences. No one will have access to the audio recording or the interview transcription other than myself. Both the audio recording and the interview transcription will be deleted/destroyed after the study is completed or after five years' time, whichever comes first.

You reserve the option to decline being recorded if that is your preference (please indicate below).

I AGREE to be Audio Recorded ___   I DO NOT AGREE to be Audio Recorded ___

_Potential Risks:_

Because you might potentially detail and discuss painful or stressful memories about working in predominantly black schools, including, but not limited to, being singled out and treated unfairly because of your race, there is the possibility that you will be at risk of emotional distress. By invoking powerful memories, there is the possibility that at some point throughout the interview, you will get upset.

As such, by agreeing to partake in this research project, you are at risk of re-living painful memories and re-experiencing emotional distress. I will do my best to facilitate the interview in a manner that minimizes the risk of emotional distress, and should such a circumstance arise, I will alter, or even halt, the interview accordingly.

_Potential Benefits:_

Conversely, however, there are potential benefits for you through participation, as well. Specifically, you will be allowed to unburden yourself about your experiences as a white teacher working in predominantly black schools. In a sense, this research project has the potential to be therapeutic. As a qualitative researcher, one of the primary things I do is listen. To me, words are data. As such, inherent in this project is the opportunity for you to speak openly and honestly about something that plays a significant role in your day-to-day life; your race and how it affects your chosen profession.

Furthermore, in looking at the broader social and political context, particularly that of a growing anti-teacher sentiment, this research project will be beneficial to you by giving you a platform to voice your own, opinions, perspectives, and concerns about, both, the teaching profession and the current state of urban education.

Each Research Participant will be given a copy this consent form for their own records.
If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this research project, and/or your participation within it, please contact Marcus Bell at mabell@syr.edu or (517)-303-9441; Professor Amy Lutz at aclutz@maxwell.syr.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, or any other questions, concerns or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, please contact the IRB Office at Syracuse University [(315) 443.3013].

Thanks, Marcus Bell
Department of Sociology, Syracuse University
The Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Syracuse University    IRB
Approved

MAY 8- 2015   MAY 7- 2016

I am 18 years of age or older, and I wish to participate in this research study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Participant</th>
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<tr>
<td>Printed Name of Participant</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>Signature of Researcher</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>Printed Name of Participant</td>
<td>Date</td>
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APPENDIX G
(Initial Interview Protocol)

General, Non-Work Related Questions:
To start, I would just like you to state your name, your age, and how long you’ve been a teacher. Tell me a little about yourself, where you grew up, where you went to school, and how you came to live in Syracuse?

Was that a racially diverse area?

What are some of the things that you do outside of work?

Outside of work, would you say that you spend a significant amount of time around people of color?

Is there a particular reason for this?

General/Background education Questions:
What experiences, if any, throughout your life have shaped your decision to go into the field of education?

When you were in your teacher preparation program, did you see yourself working in an urban school, suburban school, rural, or did it matter?

When you think of urban vs suburban schools, is there a certain type of student or community that comes to mind?

Why do you think this is the case?

How did you come to work in an urban, predominantly nonwhite school/school district?

Do you regret the decision to work in an urban school?

Would you prefer to teach in a suburban school?

Why do you believe this to be the case?

Race/Whiteness Questions:
In your own words, thoughts, feelings, tell me what it means for you to be white.

Growing up, did you ever think about what it means to be white? Did anyone ever talk to you about it?

Growing up, were there any experiences where you felt uncomfortable, singled out, or out of place because you were white? Examples.

Throughout your life, have you ever felt that the actions or words of other white people, have, in any way, reflected poorly or favorably upon you?

Throughout your life, have you ever felt that being white worked to your disadvantage?

Conversely, throughout your life, have you ever felt that being white worked to your advantage?
Race/Whiteness/Education Questions:

What subject do you teach?

Tell me more about your everyday work experiences, what is your typical day at work like?

Earlier I asked you what it means for you to be white. Along those lines, can it tell me what it means for you to be white working in a predominantly black school?

In what ways, if any, do you think race affects your relationship with your students?

Parents?

Coworkers?

Have you ever been called a racist?

If so, could you please elaborate on a particular instance?

How did that make you feel?

How did you respond?

Are there ever any explicit conversations with you coworkers, white or black, or your students about the way race impacts the overall work environment?

White Racial Awareness Questions:

You spend a significant amount of time in predominantly black spaces, do you ever notice your racial status or feel out of place within these spaces?

What was your first experience within these spaces where you really felt or noticed the fact that you were white?

Are there any other similar experiences?

Within these non-white spaces, do you ever feel that being white is a disadvantage? If so, what are some experiences to that effect?

Do you feel that the actions, words, or deeds of other white teachers impact your relationships with students and their parents in any significant way?

If so, could you please provide examples?

Do you feel that black teachers have an advantage working with black students?

Do you feel as if your job, teaching predominantly black students, would be easier if you were not white?

How do you think race, as a whole, impacts urban education?

Gender and Class Questions:

In what ways does being a white female/male affect you teaching experiences within urban, predominantly nonwhite schools?

Do you think it’s different for white males/females?
How so?

How do you think being a white female/male affects your relationships with your students?
Their families?
Your coworkers?

How do you think gender, as a whole, impacts urban education?

In what ways does the poverty of your students impact urban education?
How does this poverty affect your teaching experiences?

How does the difference in socioeconomic standing—middle class, working class, poor—between teachers and students shape urban education?
Your teaching experiences?

In what ways do these gender and class dynamics interact/intersect with race to shape urban education?
Your teaching experiences?

Is there anything you would like to tell me, clarify, add, or otherwise discuss?
APPENDIX H
(Memorandum)

TO: Amy Lutz
DATE: April 28, 2016
SUBJECT: Amendment Approval - Use of Human Participants IRB#: 15-107
AMENDMENT#: 1 – Change in Protocol Title
TITLE: Whiteness Interrupted: Examining the Impact of Racialized Space on White Racial Identity

The amendment(s) submitted to the above referenced human participants protocol for review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) is approved.

This protocol must still be renewed yearly, based on the original expiration date of May 6, 2017. If applicable, attached is the protocol’s approved, amended informed consent document, date-stamped with the expiration date. This amended document replaces the original approved document and is to be used in your informed consent process. If you are using written consent, Federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate by signing the informed consent document and be provided with a copy of the signed consent form. Regulations also require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years.

CHANGES TO APPROVED PROTOCOL: Any additional proposed changes to this protocol during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, cannot be initiated without IRB review and approval, except when such changes are essential to eliminate apparent immediate harm to the participants. Changes in approved research initiated without IRB review and approval to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participant must be reported to the IRB within five days. Protocol changes are requested on an amendment application available on the IRB web site; please reference your IRB number and attach any documents that are being amended.

CONTINUATION BEYOND APPROVAL PERIOD: To continue this research project beyond May 6, 2017, you must submit a renewal application for review and approval. A renewal reminder will be sent to you approximately 60 days prior to the expiration date. (If the researcher will be traveling out of the country when the protocol is due to be renewed, please renew the protocol before leaving the country.)

UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS INVOLVING RISKS: You must report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others within 10 working days of occurrence to the IRB at 315.443.3013 or orip@syr.edu.
Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

Katherine McDonald IRB Chair

DEPT: Sociology, 426 Eggers Hall  STUDENT: Marcus Bell
References


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------. (1899). *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Published for the University.


Howard, G. R. (2006). *We Can't Teach what we don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools.* Teachers College Press.


------. *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. Sage.


--------. (2010). *Black on White: Black Writers on what it means to be White*. Random House LLC.


Curriculum Vitae

Marcus Bell
Department of Social Sciences, Onondaga Community College
4585 West Seneca Turnpike, Syracuse, NY 13215

(517)-303-9441
Email: m.bell3@sunyocc.edu

ACADEMIC POSITION

2017-2018 Onondaga Community College
Assistant Professor of Sociology

EDUCATION

2017 Ph.D. Sociology (With Distinction), Syracuse University.

2014 M.A. Sociology, Syracuse University.

2010 B.S. Sociology, Grand Valley State University.

RESEARCH & TEACHING INTERESTS

General: Race and Ethnicity; Urban Sociology; Stratification; Racial Theory; Sociology of Law.

Specific: Social Movements; Urban Education; Race, Crime, and Punishment; Poverty and Inequality; Critical Whiteness Theory.

Methods: In-Depth Interviews; Urban Ethnography; Historical-Comparative Methods; Grounded Theory.

PUBLICATIONS

Book Chapters


Papers in Progress

Bell, Marcus. Whiteness in Plain-View: White Teachers, Black Students, and Navigating the Color-Line in Predominantly Black Schools.

Bell, Marcus. The New Untouchables: Young, Black, and Looking for Work in Urban America.

Bell, Marcus. Black or Blue?: Navigating Intra-Racial Violence and Hyper-Policing in an Urban Ghetto.

Bell, Marcus. The Minds of Criminalized Black Men: Making Sense of Race, Place, and Citizenship in Post-Racial America.

Bell, Marcus. At the Mercy of the State: Race, Social Control, and the Myth of Limited Government in Urban America.


Book Reviews


TEACHING HISTORY

2014-2017  Graduate Instructor, Department of Sociology, Syracuse University.  
Classes: Ethnic Inequalities and Intergroup Relations; Sociology of Sports.

Fall, 2016  Adjunct Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Utica College.  
Classes: Introduction to Sociology; Race and Ethnicity; Criminology.

2013-2014  Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Sociology, Syracuse, University.  
Classes: Introduction to Sociology; Urban Sociology.

2011-2012  Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Sociology, Penn State University.  
Classes: Race and Ethnography; Race and Public Policy.

PRESENTATIONS/POSTERS

2014  “Working-Class Graduate Students and the Neoliberalization of Higher Education.”  

2010  “The Ahistorical Fallacy – How Americans Ignore History in Contemporary Analysis of Racial Inequality.” Grand Valley State University, Student Scholars Day, Allendale, MI.


2009  “Road to Resistance: Brown v. Board of Education and Other Legal Victories that Influenced the American Civil Rights Movement.” Grand Valley State University, Research Fair, Allendale, MI.

2009  “Reflections of Whiteness: The Origins, Progression, and Maintenance of White Supremacy as Cultural, Political, and Economic Force in American Institutions.” Penn State University, 14th Annual McNair Summer Research Conference, State College, PA.

AWARDS & FELLOWSHIPS

2016-2017  Dissertation Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Syracuse University (18,600).

2012-2013  Ronald E. McNair Graduate Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Syracuse University (22,460).

2011 – 2012  Bunton-Waller Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Penn State University
(2,500).

ACADEMIC HONORS

2014-2016 Junior Fellow of the Yale Urban Ethnography Project, Department of Sociology, Yale University.

2012-2013 Ronald E. McNair Graduate Research Fellow, Department of Sociology, Syracuse University.

2009-2010 Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, Department of Sociology, Grand Valley State University.

2009-2010 Competent Communicator Award, Toastmasters International Communication Program, Grand Valley State University.

2009-2010 Dean’s List, Department of Sociology, Grand Valley State University.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

2014-Present The Association for Humanist Sociology (AHS).

2013-Present Association of Black Sociologists (ABS).


2011-Present American Sociological Association (ASA).


2011-2013 Urban Affairs Association (UUA).

ACTIVITIES

2012-2017 Graduate Student Organization (GSO), Syracuse University.

2012-2017 Multicultural Graduate Student Organization Program (MGSOP), Syracuse University.

2012-2017 Sociological Graduate Student Association (SGSA), Department of Sociology, Syracuse University.

2012-2017 Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), Syracuse University.
2011-2012  Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), Penn State University.

2011-2012  Minority Opportunity through School Transformation (MOST) Committee, Penn State University.

2011-2012  Qualitative Interest Research Group (QUIG), Penn State University.