Narrative Constructions of Whiteness Among White Undergraduates

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

This critical narrative inquiry was guided by two overarching research questions. First, this study examined how white undergraduates interpreted and gave meaning to their white racial identities. This line of inquiry sought to understand how participants made sense of their white racial selves, the self in relation to people of color, and the self in relation to systems of racism and white supremacy. Thematic analysis of participant narratives resulted in three constructions of white racial identity: Ignorant, Emergent, and Critical.

Second, this study explored how white college students perpetuated racial ideologies of whiteness on campus. This line of inquiry examined how, through discourse, white undergraduates maintained the dominant/subordinate relationship between white students and students of color. In order to do so dialogic/performance analysis of narratives was utilized. Such an approach is concerned not only with the content of narratives, but the structure and telling of a given account. This analysis resulted in four distinct narratives that participants frequently employed within the context of the interview: Narratives of Campus Racial Harmony, Narratives of Imposition, Narratives of Enlightenment, and Narratives of White Racial Innocence. Each narrative represented a motivated telling with a unique plotline. Further each narrative operated to mask racial hostility, protect white innocence, and locate problems of racism elsewhere.
Dedication

To my parents, Cecilia and Brad. 
Thank you for your unyielding love and support.
Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful for so many individuals who supported me through this journey. Standing back from and reflecting on this process has reminded me how truly fortunate I am to have been blessed with such an amazing and supportive community. Although these individuals played very different roles in getting me to the finish line, I simply would not be here without them.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Arriving on a college or university campus often presents white\textsuperscript{1} college students with their first sustained exposure to racial difference (Gurin, Dey, Huratdo, & Gurin, 2002). Having come from homogenous, predominantly white pre-college environments, a majority of white students have rarely, if ever, considered what it means to be white (McKinney, 2005; Perry, 2001). This is particularly true within the context of a supposed post-racial society, where issues of racial discrimination are a concern of the past, and only overt acts of hatred are understood to be racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2013). Once on campus, white collegians still exhibit little recognition of their own racial identity (Bush, 2011; Cabrera, 2012b, 2014a, 2014b; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; McKinney, 2005) unless explicitly prompted to do so through engagement with diverse others (Fasching-Varner, 2012; McKinney, 2005).

Lacking an awareness of their own racial identity or the realities of white racism, white students fail to grasp the systemic, enduring, and powerful influence of race in the lives of students of color. In essence, white students operate from a place in which they fail to recognize their own race or the role of race in the lives of people of color. In not

\textsuperscript{1} The decision to capitalize “Black” and “Brown” but not “white” was a political one. It reflects the reality that for many, Blackness and Brownness are important marks of culture and identity.
recognizing their own racial identities, white college students collude in maintaining a system that privileges whiteness as the universal, unmarked norm (Perry, 2007). In turn, they continue to perpetuate campus climates that are unwelcoming and hostile for students of color, who are marked as the racial particular against the backdrop of whiteness (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). It should thus come as little surprise that white students have much more positive perceptions of campus climates (Griffin, 2017; Rankin & Reason, 2005) or that a colorblind perspective only intensifies a belief in a positive climate (Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008).

Mindful of these realities, the purpose of this dissertation was to understand white college students and their relationship to race in two ways. The first line of inquiry sought to understand how white college students interpret and give meaning to their white racial identities. An investigation of white identities, or the subjective experience of being white, offered insight into how white students made sense of their white racial selves, the self in relation to people of color, and larger systems of whiteness. Given that students’ experience in higher education is often characterized as a time of exploration and engagement with new ideas and perspectives (Arnett, 2001, 2010; Baxter Magolda, 2001; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005), this period in the lifespan is especially worthy of attention. Engagement with individuals from diverse backgrounds, course materials that push one outside of their comfort zone, and active learning experiences such as service-learning and intergroup dialogues are likely to induce some levels of dissonance that require students to make meaning of their racial identities (Reason, 2007).
Previous literature has described white students’ racial identities as largely invisible and characterized by victimization, a lack of cultural or ethnic connection, and a colorblind worldview (Bush, 2011; Cabrera, 2014a; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; McKinney, 2005). A select number of studies documented white identities committed to anti-racist work, wherein individuals’ identities are defined by a recognition of whiteness and accompanying privileges (Cabrera, 2012a; Eischstedt, 2001; Reason, 2007; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). Regardless of how white college students give meaning to their white identity, it is always constructed and negotiated within the larger ideological context of whiteness (Owen, 2007). Herein lies the second focus of this investigation.

The second aim of this study was to explore the ways in which white students reproduce whiteness through discourse. In this sense whiteness can be thought of as an ideology, or “a set of beliefs that seem to serve and shape the interests of a certain group in society” and has “the power to control or influence how people think about, or act, in their social circumstance” (Bailey & Gale, 2003, p. 23). Extended to race, ideologies serve as interpretive frameworks for which white individuals make sense of racial issues and normalize the status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). In many ways whiteness serves as the larger context, or narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), for which narratives of white identity are constructed. An ideology of whiteness is largely characterized by ahistorical understandings of racism and a commitment to a colorblind perspective (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Leonardo, 2002; Levine-Rasky, 2013). Understood as an ideology, whiteness “refers to a multitude of individual, collective, intentional,
unintentional, isolated, systemic actions that synergistically work to sustain and constantly regenerate relationships of unequal power between whites and nonwhites” (Yancy, 2004, p. 14). Whiteness offers white individuals a number of material and psychological privileges, often unearned and taken for granted (Yancy, 2004). Scholars have underscored the importance of moving beyond merely an understanding of what white individuals think it means to be white, insisting on an additional layer that examines the everyday production of whiteness (Leonardo, 2002; Lewis, 2004). This production is often communicated through discourse (Hill, 2008).

Previous research illustrated a number of discursive moves whites use to inscribe and reify whiteness, or the ideological perspective of white dominance over racial others (Leonardo, 2002). Sometimes referred to as “strategic rhetoric” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1994), “race talk” (Myers, 2005), or “white talk” (McIntyre, 1992), such semantic moves operate to either minimize the role of race in contemporary society or further perpetuate perceived cultural differences among racial groups. They also work to distance the white racial self from seriously engaging with the historical legacies of racism and the subsequent privileges of whiteness.

Leonardo (2002) offered a useful distinction in thinking about white identities, or the subjective experience of being white, and whiteness as a racial perspective or larger worldview. He explained:

“Whiteness” is a racial discourse, whereas the category of “white people” represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color. For
practical purposes, we are born with certain bodies that are inscribed with social meaning (Leonardo, 2000). Most people do not radically alter their physical identity through their lifetime. However, that white students act on the world does not suggest they accomplish this from the perspective of a white racial paradigm; in fact, they could be articulating their life choices through non-white discourses or strategies of anti-whiteness. To the extent that a man can be a feminist, whites can be anti-white. (p. 21)

Exploring how white students talk about race has the potential to expose the ways in which whiteness, or relationships of domination and subordination along the lines of race, are sustained on college campuses. As Lewis (2004) noted, “what is perhaps most interesting to examine is how the boundaries of racial categories are negotiated, challenged, and/or reinforced in daily life” (p. 625). An additional benefit of exposing whiteness as an ideology is that it situates racist behaviors and practices not as illogical or the result of a few ignorant individuals, but rather a carefully calculated result of conditioning. Critical Whiteness scholars have documented this as willful and determined ignorance (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997). As opposed to the commonly held belief that white people are ignorant of racial inequality due to a lack of knowledge, this approach assumes that white racial ignorance is an active and sanctioned process. Conceptualizing white ignorance as an active process challenges the preoccupation many white people have with notions of goodness and racial innocence.
(Applebaum, 2010; Sullivan, 2014) and moves towards an understanding of complicity regardless of intention (Applebaum, 2010; Yancy, 2015).

In order to examine white college students’ relationship to race, I explored the following questions:

1. How do white college students make sense of and give meaning to their racial identities?

2. How do white college students, through discourse, maintain the racial ideology of whiteness, or the dominant/subordinate relationship between whites and students of color?

I now turn to a description of the terms used throughout this study.

**Definition of Terms**

**Color Blindness:** I discuss this concept at length in the following chapter, as it is central to understanding the construction of whiteness as an ideological system and as an identity. If whiteness is a larger ideological system, one that affords a number of privileges and benefits, then colorblindness is a particular way in which the ideology is expressed. The style of an ideology:

refers to its peculiar linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies (or race talk), to the technical tools that allow users to articulate its frames and story lines. As such, the style of an ideology is the thread used to join pieces of fabric into garments. (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 101)
Central to colorblindness are notions of individualism, a minimization of the role of racism, and a naturalization of differences (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2013). Ascribing to a colorblind perspective insists that only overt acts of discrimination can be regarded as racist, with no attention to institutional, structural, and historical legacies of racism.

**Discourse:** Hill (2008), in her study of white elites use of language to perpetuate white racism, described discourse as “all the varieties of talk and text… the actual material presence, in structure and content, of language-in-use in history and at particular moments of human interaction” (p. 32). An attention to discourse thus requires an eye towards both the said and unsaid (Riessman, 2008). I follow Hill in recognizing that any form of written or spoken text constitutes discourse. She further explained that a discourse event is described as “the circulation of talk and text over a bounded period of time” (Hill, 2008, p. 45). This definition of discourse is especially important in the context of a narrative inquiry project, where often participants will talk about talk, or engage in retrospective meaning making about particular times and places. It is important here to note that a story is a particular form of discourse. Narrative inquiry is primarily concerned with eliciting stories of experience (Riessman, 2008). However, participants may recount other forms of discourse, such as conversations with friends, lectures from parents or professors about race, or perhaps social media postings.

**Narrative:** As I discuss in chapter three, the term narrative has been used in a variety of ways (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Narrative and story are often used
interchangeably, but providing clarity regarding the distinctions between the two is important for analytical purposes. Narratives are made up of stories, accounts, and past recollections. I rely on the definition provided by Gubrium and Holstein (1997) who noted that narratives are “accounts that offer some scheme, either implicitly or explicitly, for organizing and understanding the relation of objects and events described” (p. 147). They stress the importance of narrative linkage, or the juxtaposition of multiple stories against one another to make sense of experiences. Put otherwise, meaning making does not occur in isolation, but rather when a given account is considered in relation to past life experiences. Thus, a narrative “assembles individual objects, actions, and events into a comprehensible pattern; telling a story turns available parts into a meaningful whole” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 147).

**Race:** Renn (2012) posited that race can be used both as an identifier and an identity. Race as an identifier refers to “physical appearance (skin color, hair color and texture, facial features), ancestry, nationality, and culture” (Renn, 2012, p. 11). As an identity, race can be understood as “the meaning individuals and groups ascribe to membership in racial categories” (Renn, 2012, p. 11).

**Self-Criticality:** Yancy (2015) posited that white people must be able to engage in certain levels of self-criticality. Doing so requires white people to exhibit humility and uncertainty and be “committed to a life of danger and contestation, one which refuses to make peace with taken for granted “legitimating” white norms and practices that actually perpetuate racial injustice” (p. xii). To engage in self-criticality is to constantly
interrogate how one is complicit in white racism (Applebaum, 2010), as well as the symbolic meaning of whiteness to people of color (hooks, 1992). Self-criticality is inherently at odds with feelings of innocence, goodness, and moral virtuousness.

White Complicity: In a similar vein, white complicity refers to the fact that white people, regardless of their good intentions, are complicit in maintaining the racist systems that are a result of whiteness (Applebaum, 2010). Because whiteness is inherently relational, constructed and given meaning against racially marked people of color, it is impossible to escape maintaining whiteness. As Yancy (2015) explained:

> Indeed the question itself is a relational one as it implicates black bodies and bodies of color that suffer under the weight of the reality that whiteness is a problem, which means that to be white in white America is to be a problem. (p. xiii)

As such, it is impossible for white people to stand outside of systems of whiteness that are relationally constructed against people of color. White complicity asserts that white people must recognize their contribution to the normalization of whiteness, its practices, and habits. This concept is explored more fully in chapter two.

**Whiteness:** I conceptualize whiteness as an ideological system that confers benefits on the basis of group membership. It provides the context for which white identities are formed, interpreted, and performed. As an interpretive framework, it operates as a shared understanding of our lives and where one fits in the social order. This is to say that
ideologies can offer stories that help individuals make sense of their experience (Lewis, 2004). Bailey and Gayle (2003) defined an ideology as:

a set of beliefs that seems to serve and shape the interests of a certain group in society; has a legitimating/justifying function; and has the power to control or influence how people think about, or act in, their social circumstance. (p. 23)

Bailey and Gayle (2003) described an ideology as the accumulation of ideas over time. Through this accumulation individuals obtain a mental index into which they organize and make sense of society and their lived experiences. Ideologies are typically unconscious, and in turn one’s way of seeing the world becomes taken for granted and perceived as the norm. Bonilla-Silva (2013) described a racial ideology as one that provides interpretive frameworks for actors to rationalize the racial status quo. In a society predicated on racial inequality, ideologies serve to “naturalize a system that ensures subordination for millions” (Lewis, 2004, p. 632). Those marginalized by race can also operate through a racial ideology that challenges that status quo. Whiteness as an ideological commitment then refers to a range of institutional, cultural, social, and historical practices that confer privileges at both the individual and structural levels (Leonardo, 2002; Yancy, 2004).

**White Identity:** While whiteness is constructed as a larger ideological structure, white identity refers to the individual understandings and expressions of whiteness. It is an inherently psychosocial concept (Helms, 1995; Levine-Rasky, 2013), a place in which
individuals must consider what it means to be white in the context of a white-dominated society. In thinking about white identity I draw on the work of foundational Critical Whiteness scholar Ruth Frankenberg (1993). Frankenberg described whiteness as a standpoint from which whites understood both themselves and racial others. White identity then is not just about how white individuals understand and make sense of their own race, but given dominant racial ideologies, frame and make sense of people of color. Further, there is no fixed or inherent white identity, but instead it is performed by individuals “in and through fluctuating social and political conditions” and in turn “accrues meaning through the way it is expressed in the body, among other bodies in different times and spaces. The intelligibility of race – how it is known by an ontological quality – is apprehended through its performances” (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 6). In drawing on Frankenberg and Levine-Rasky’s understandings, I conceptualize white identity as a place from which both the self and racial other are understood, as well as a process of doing and performance that sustains the category of whiteness.

**Theoretical Framework: Critical Whiteness Studies**

Maxwell (2013) likened theory as similar to a spotlight in that it has the ability to shine a light and make visible certain aspects of a given phenomenon. In order to illuminate the workings of whiteness I drew on Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) as a theoretical framework. CWS is an extension of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Leonardo, 2002, 2009). The aim of this theoretical base is not to re-center whiteness as the unquestioned baseline marker of worth and humanity, but exactly
the opposite: to dislodge whiteness from its place of unquestioned, normative status (Feagin, 2013; Leonardo, 2002) and critically interrogate its inherently relational and parasitic nature. As it relates to higher education research, Critical Whiteness Studies can be particularly useful in revealing the ways in which whiteness serves as a baseline marker of normalcy, the standard by which faculty, students, and staff of color are judged, evaluated, and given worth.

Whiteness rationalizes away racial inequality through a devout commitment to ahistorical, decontextualized colorblind ways of knowing (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Historically, whiteness has been situated and understood in relation to people of color, and primarily Black Americans (Baldwin, 1998; Feagin, 2013; Morrison, 1998). That is, whiteness is parasitic in that it locates white virtue, rationality, and innocence against the dangerous, irrational, and contemptible racial other (Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 1999; Morrison, 1998). Whiteness is the universal norm, whereas people of color represent an often-undesirable deviation from such norm. This is what Perry (2007) has described as the universal/particular dynamic of whiteness. From this perspective, whiteness is always and everywhere oppressive. This does not mean all white college students are destined to be defined by whiteness, but rather whiteness acts upon them in a way that they must actively challenge. Just as patriarchy is always and everywhere oppressive, so is whiteness. But just as men can engage in pro-feminist work, so can whites move towards a more anti-racist stance (Leonardo, 2009).
Critical Whiteness Studies came to prominence with a shift in thinking about “racism as exclusively a matter of overt practices involving prejudice or antipathy to an understanding of racism as a system in which covert and subtle forms of institutional, cultural, and individual practices produce and reproduce racial injustice” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 8). As such, CWS scholars contend that racism is inherently a white problem (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). This is because CWS operates from the assumption that whiteness and its subsequent privileges tend to be invisible to whites. Matias (2016), recounting her experiences as a woman scholar of color, described the “eerily predictive” (p. 15) nature of white student responses to discussion of racism and white supremacy in her teacher education courses. These responses can best be characterized as highly resistant and illustrative of the sort of determined, willful ignorance that white students typically illustrate in the classroom (Applebaum, 2010). Operating from a CWS perspective makes clear that “understanding white supremacy and undercutting white racial knowledge form the problematic of anti-racist analysis and pedagogy” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 118). Because whiteness draws so much of its power from its invisibility and assumed normalcy, exposing the ways in which it operates and the subsequent consequences are of critical importance for cultivating inclusive, affirming, and welcoming campus climates.

Guided by Critical Whiteness Studies, this study relied on a number of existing theories, all of which are highlighted in chapter two. Although not all of the theorists explicitly identify was Critical Whiteness scholars, their contributions attempt to dislodge
whiteness from its normative, universal position in relation to people of color. I drew on both theories of racial identity construction (Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 1995), as well as larger systemic perspectives of race and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1996, 2013). Theories of whiteness as an ideological perspective, or an interpretive framework for making sense of the world, are also utilized (Leonardo, 2002; Feagin, 2013; Owen, 2007). I also drew heavily on white complicity (Applebaum, 2010) and white innocence (Leonardo, 2009; Yancy, 2015). Taken together these theories highlight the ways in which whiteness is more than a skin color or identity, but rather a place of interpreting and making sense of racial matters in everyday experience (Frankenberg, 1993). Further, they underscore that whiteness is primarily communicated and produced through discourse, or everyday talk.

I also drew on systemic theories of race and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1996; Feagin, 2013) and colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) to make sense of contemporary racial discourse. Colorblind perspectives insist that the only remaining remnants of America’s ugly racial past are irrational individuals, those who display overtly racist behavior. In a colorblind society there is no consideration of how structural and historical circumstances shape the life chances of individuals. Instead, “interactions are conducted and decisions made without consideration of participants’ social positions: doing so offends the principle of equality in which all persons are equally entitled to rights’’ (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 68). As a result, any consideration of structural inequality gives way to notions of rugged individualism. Individualism asserts that one can go as far as their talents, hard work, and abilities allow. From this perspective, “society is just a collection of people,
and everything that happens in it begins with what each person thinks, feels, and intends” (Johnson, 2005, p. 77). Such thinking has only increased since the election of Barack Obama, whose rise to the White House gave many a sense that the United States had reached a post-racial era (Feagin, 2013; Johnston-Guerrero, Pizzolato, & Kanny, 2015). A failure to recognize the institutional nature of racism, coupled with a corresponding colorblind ideology and preoccupation with innocence, makes it incredibly difficult for white college students to understand calls for racial justice. It locates problems squarely within the irrational racist individual and gives little regard to the historical legacies of racism in policing, housing, and education, among other social institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Johnson, 2005).

To explore this tension, I drew both on understandings of colorblindness as well as structural and historical theories of race and racism, most notably Feagin’s (2013) White Racial Frame. This frame contextualizes white identity by situating it within larger historical perceptions of Black Americans. Feagin’s work is unique in that it draws on emotional and cognitive processing. If white identity is understood as fundamentally relational, drawing on the White Racial Frame is a useful means of thinking about how white students see and make sense of people of color. By drawing on perspectives that both explore individual constructions of identity as well as systemic and historical understandings of racism, this work rests on a strong foundation for understanding how white students make sense of race and racism within evolving social and political contexts.
This study was guided by a critical narrative methodology. Narrative methodology is concerned with how individuals give meaning to experience through the act of storytelling. As such, attention is given to how lives and experiences are storied in particular ways (Chase, 2010; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Riessman, 2008). For the purposes of this dissertation, I was interested in both the stories told and the ways in which they were told. Drawing on two semi-structured interviews with each participant, I analyzed the same set of data using two different analytic procedures. The first, thematic analysis, is largely concerned with the told, or the so what of a narrative (Riessman, 2008). This line of analysis was used in exploring how white college students interpreted and gave meaning to white racial identities.

The second layer of analysis focused on the telling, or “the ways in which stories about experience are presented, structured, and made to cohere (the hows)” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 147). Whiteness, understood as a dominant racial ideology or interpretive framework for making sense of the world, is largely communicated and maintained through discourse (Hill, 2008). Discourse can be understood in this context as any form of written or verbal communication. In turn, this project theorized the words of participants at great length, understanding that words used are not neutral pursuits, but instead imbedded with historical, political, and social meanings. This perspective rejects claims of personalist ideology, which insists that the major evaluative tool of language is the original intent of the narrator (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), and instead unpacks the
multiple layers of meaning underneath the surface. To do this I drew on multiple theoretical frameworks discussed above, including the White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2013), critical theories of white complicity and innocence (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2002; Yancy, 2015), and discourses of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) and white racism (Hill, 2008; Nakayama & Krizek, 2004). Further, a focus on discourse is especially helpful in the study of whiteness and white identities because in a colorblind society there is an increasing preoccupation with racial innocence, that one is indeed not racist (Sullivan, 2014). In order be seen as virtuous and accepting, white Americans use certain discourses to appear colorblind or race-neutral. As such, this interrogation of language, consistent with narrative inquiry, offers a particularly useful analytical tool.

**Significance of Study**

The significance of this study lies in its ability to complicate and further expand the understanding of white college students, their racial identities, and the ways in which they perpetuate dominant ideologies of whiteness regardless of intention or awareness. It complicates current understandings in four ways.

The first way is largely methodologically through the use of narrative inquiry. Little scholarship exists on white undergraduates within the higher education literature (Cabrera, 2012a, 2014a, 2014b; Reason, 2005, Reason et al., 2007), and none appears to use a narrative approach. Cabrera’s work is by far the most informative in this area, but his research was based on a larger sample in which each participant was interviewed once for between 30-75 minutes (Cabrera, 2012a). Narrative inquiry is a distinctive
methodology in large part because of its ability to illustrate the temporal nature of experience as well as how individuals structure and narrate accounts (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Riessman, 2008). Multiple interviews produced thick and rich accounts of experience, both prior to as well as during college. Gubrium and Holstein (2008) referred to the process of intertextuality, or the process of linking multiple stories together in a way that provides insight into participants’ meaning-making process.

Second, in studying white racial identity I move beyond linear developmental models and towards typologies, or constructions, of identity. That is, the results of this dissertation do not insist a linear trajectory towards a non-racist or positive white identity (Helms, 1995), for such a claim is at odds with theories of white complicity and innocence (Applebaum, 2010; Yancy, 2008). As noted, Critical Whiteness scholars contend that it is impossible for white people to ever stand outside of whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). As such, the constructions of white racial identity presented in this dissertation reflect white students thinking about: (1) their racial selves, (2) the racial self in relation to people of color, and (3) the racial self in relation to larger systems of whiteness and white supremacy. Thus, a contribution of this study is that it considers not only the extent to which white students recognize their white racial identity, but also their capacity to situate the racial self as an object of critique and complicit in perpetuating whiteness. In this sense the results of the study illuminate white undergraduates’ preoccupation with innocence and being seen as racially progressive and informed on matters of race and racism.
Third, current scholarship on white students’ sense making of race, racism, and white racial identities are comprised primarily of samples that locate whiteness at the intersection of gender. Cabrera’s (2012a) work has focused on white men and Robbins and Jones (2016) examined white women in graduate preparation programs. The sample in this study is comprised of both men and women, as well as a diversity of other social identities within sexual orientation, social class, and spirituality. Additionally, students were involved in a variety of contexts on campus that provided unique narrative environments that informed sense making of whiteness and white racial identity.

Fourth, and as I discuss at length in chapter three, the goal of this dissertation was to explore both what white students think it means to be white and how they produce and reproduce whiteness as a dominant racial ideology on a daily basis. Critical scholars have noted that although it is important to consider what white students think it means to be white, equally if not more important, is to explore the consequences of this thinking for both white students and students of color (Lewis, 2004). Mindful of this, this dissertation contributes to the growing literature on white students in higher education by examining not just what white students say it means to be white, but how they maintain a racial ideology of whiteness on campus. An examination of discourse and the very construction of narratives illuminates the ways in which language choice communicates how white collegians make sense of racial matters and their own identities. Through the production of four distinct narratives that perpetuate the practices and habits of whiteness
on campus, the results of this study underscore how all white students are in some way complicit in maintaining racial hostility.

Finally, this dissertation was conducted during a time of increased student activism in light of accusations of racist and unwelcoming campus climates. At the institution in which data was collected, a number of protests occurred during the study, most of which were organized under the larger umbrella of Black Lives Matter. The results of this dissertation were very much informed by how white students interacted with a series of racial events that occurred during data collection, including the rise of Donald Trump, Black Lives Matter, and high levels of campus activism. The insights from this study should more clearly situate whiteness and white college students in larger discussions of campus climates. Chilly and hostile campus climates are rooted in uncritical acceptance of whiteness, colorblind ideologies, and historical racial framing of people of color (Rankin & Reason, 2005). When whiteness operates as an unquestioned norm, it serves as a filter through which others are evaluated and judged. Bush (2011) explained:

In a racialized and hierarchical society, where presumptions about values, standards, and how peoples should think and act are viewed from the dominant perspective, subordinated groups are perceived visitors (sometimes welcome, sometimes not). As such, interpretations of their experiences and actions are filtered through an environment where rules,
expectations, and interpretations presume the experiences of the racial norm. (p. 48)

By explicitly and critically centering whiteness, this dissertation offers insight that more clearly links whiteness as a racial ideology, and white students as individuals with racial subjectivities, to racially hostile and chilly campus climates.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a broad roadmap for the present study, including its purpose, methods, and significance. I contend that an exploration of white college students’ relationship to race is needed in two ways. The first is an examination of how white college students construct and give meaning to what it means to be white. The second is an interrogation of discourse in order to better understand how white college students perpetuate racial ideologies of whiteness on campus, regardless of good intentions. Such an investigation has a number of implications for white students and beyond. Most notably, as I have discussed in the chapter, white college students rarely consider themselves in racial terms. It follows that any meaningful work to challenge the racial status quo must begin with a consideration of one’s own racial identity. If white students cannot see themselves as having a racial identity, and hence a part of the larger problem of whiteness and white supremacy, then they cannot move forward in racial justice work. I now shift my attention to a review of the literature that informed the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I highlight a large body of scholarship that offers a conceptual framework for the study. First, I situate whiteness as an ideological construct. To say that whiteness is an ideology implicates it as an epistemological standpoint from which white college students make sense of the world in racialized ways. Doing so illustrates the ways in which white students determine what is and is not racially desirable (Feagin, 2013) and how they create and maintain racial boundaries through discourse. Having articulated whiteness as an ideological construct, I then shift my attention to the ways in which it operates on college campuses today. To do so I review literature on racially hostile and unwelcoming campus climates and previous literature on how white college students make sense of racial matters. I then explore scholarship on white racial identities among white college students and conclude with a discussion of increased racial consciousness and self-criticality (Yancy, 2015) among white students.

**Whiteness as Ideology**

The term whiteness has been deployed in a number of ambiguous ways (Owen, 2007). In the following section I explicitly situate whiteness as an ideology. Ideologies represent the accumulation of ideas over time that serve as a readily accessible mental index to interpret and make sense of the social world (Bailey & Gale, 2003). Racial
ideologies serve as interpretive frameworks (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), a lens through which white individuals understand both themselves and racial others (Frankenberg, 1993; Owen, 2007; Lewis 2004). As Lewis (2004) explained, “racial ideologies in particular provide ways of understanding the world that make sense of racial gaps in earnings, wealth, and health such that whites do not see any connection between their gain and others’ loss” (p. 633). This is to say that white racial ideologies, or whiteness, normalize a dominant/subordinate relationship, masking and perpetuating inequality and white supremacy. Further, normalized and unmarked, whiteness becomes the measuring stick against which all others, particularly those deemed racial or ethnic others, are evaluated (Bush, 2011; Lewis, 2004).

Understanding whiteness as an ideology allows for a consideration of how white college students create and recreate unequal race relations on a daily basis. This is especially critical in a supposed post-racial society, where only the most overt and extreme behaviors are considered racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Whiteness is thus characterized by ahistorical, colorblind perspectives on the world and rooted in notions of individualism and white innocence (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). However, as Leonardo (2004) explained, “despite the fact that white racial domination precedes us, whites daily recreate it on both the individual and institutional level” (p. 139). In this study particular attention was paid to the ways in which white college students recreated white racial domination on a daily basis. In this vein, whiteness continually perpetuates a hierarchical relationship of dominant and subordinate (Owen, 2007) through color-
blindness and ahistoricism (Leonardo, 2004). In situating whiteness as an ideology, I take up Lewis’ (2004) call to examine how whites live, perform, and “do” race in the everyday” (p. 637) and how such processes are connected to emerging forms of racism.

**Functions of Whiteness**

A number of scholars have attempted to define the properties of whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993; Owen, 2007). Owen (2007) described whiteness as a structure with a number of functional properties that reproduce racial dominance. First, whiteness serves as a particular and limited racialized perspective of the world. This perspective shapes understandings of the self and racial others. Second, whiteness is a place of structural advantage. These advantages are economic, social, political, and cultural. This property of whiteness is consistent with Ahmed’s (2007) discussion of whiteness as an orientation, or a place from which certain objects become reachable. She explained this orientation, noting that, “by objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with” (p. 154).

Third, whiteness is normalized and understood to be natural and unmarked. This corresponds with the fourth function, that whiteness is invisible to those who are white. Fifth, whiteness is distinguished from skin color, in that it is a distinct way of being. Owen (2007) explained, “whiteness shapes actions, social practices and dispositions and thus constitutes a part of that ‘know how’ or practical knowledge that competent actors
possess” (p. 206). Owen’s sixth property is that the boundaries of whiteness are consistently being redrawn. This echoes other scholars who underscore the varying and shifting nature of whiteness throughout American history (Baldwin, 1998; Feagin, 2013; Frankenberg, 1993). The final functional property of whiteness is its association with violence, both historically and in present day. As Owen explained, “whiteness cannot be understood apart from the violence that it begets or apart from the violence that produced – and continues to produce – it” (p. 206).

Frankenberg’s (1993) properties of whiteness largely align with those of Owen (2007). One property that is not discussed by Owen is the intersectional nature of whiteness. Although whiteness is a place of privilege, it is “not absolute but rather crosscut by a range of other axes of relative advantage or subordination” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 76). Such intersecting identities do not diminish the privilege granted by whiteness, but rather modify the experiences of whiteness. Giroux (1994) has made similar claims, noting the importance of recognizing white individuals as “people who are positioned across multiple locations of privilege and subordination” (p. 383). This is to say that how a woman who identifies as both white and a lesbian moves through the world is likely very different than that of a male who identifies as both heterosexual and white. It is not that the white lesbian does not experience white privilege, but that in some ways her privilege might be mitigated in certain contexts and spaces due to being both a lesbian and a woman.

**White Racial Framing**
The strength of understanding whiteness as an ideology is that it situates understandings of individual behaviors within a historical context. Feagin’s (2013) White Racial Frame provides a useful tool for understanding the ways in which racialized understandings accumulate over time. The frame “encompasses concepts about what is racially desirable and undesirable” (Evans & Feagin, 2015, p. 115). As an analytic tool, it provides a more complex and complete picture of how whites make sense of racial matters. It includes racial stereotypes (beliefs), racial narratives and interpretations (cognitive), language accents (audio), racialized emotions (feelings), and inclinations to discriminate. Feagin (2013) described the frame as a toolkit that whites draw on to interpret and make sense of every day situations.

The frame “does not exist apart from everyday experience, and racist practices flowing from it are essential parts of the larger system of racial oppression” (Feagin, 2013, p. 13). Many elements of the White Racial Frame can be traced back to the early 1600’s, when the construct of whiteness was first invented through interactions with African slaves. Numerous features of the modern frame, including notions that Black Americans are less civilized and able to regulate emotions, once served as a means of rationalizing slavery and conquest.

Evans and Feagin (2015) interviewed white and Black college students at three universities to explore the ways in which both populations thought about and understood race. Their work illustrated the ways in which the frame has evolved and its contemporary nature. Current framing of Black Americans largely revolves around both
colorblindness and the minimizing of racial inequality. Their work has illustrated how one can draw on the White Racial Frame as an analytic tool to make sense of whiteness. Central to this analysis is connecting participants’ discussion of race to systemic racism and historical assumptions about people of color in America. The frame can be applied to discussions of race by both whites and people of color.

For instance, Evans and Feagin (2015) drew on John, a Black 21 year old education major who recounted stories of whites grabbing their purses when he encounters them in public spaces, as well as refusing to let him prepare their food at the restaurant where he worked. Using the White Racial Frame, the authors connected historical assumptions about people of color such as the criminality of Black men and a perceived unhygienic, dirty character among Black Americans. Evans and Feagin explained that, “the frame is more than one significant ideological perspective among many; it has routinely defined a way of being, a road perspective of life, and language and interpretations that help structure, normalize, and make sense of society” (p. 12).

Understood as an ideology, it becomes possible to recognize how white college students perpetuate and normalize the dominant/subordinate relationships along race. As Owen (2007) insightfully instructed:

Whiteness, understood as a structuring property of the social world can, however, be exposed, challenged, resisted and disrupted. And this is precisely why a greater degree of clarity is necessary concerning what
whiteness is and how it functions in the reproduction of the system of racial oppression. (p. 205)

Owen’s work provides a useful guide for considering whiteness beyond a skin color or identity.

**Color Blindness**

Central to current manifestations of whiteness on college and university campuses around the country is a commitment to colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Cabrera, 2012; McKinney, 2005). In a colorblind society, “interactions are conducted and decisions made without consideration of participants’ social positions” (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 68). The result then is that individuals are stripped of their historical contexts and personal histories. Lost is any sense of structural inequalities attached to race, inequalities that are the result of centuries of oppression and marginalization (Bonilla-Silva, 1996). Racism and discrimination are understood solely as the behavior of uninformed, irrational individuals, and are in turn “always elsewhere” (van Dijk, 2002, p. 153). Rather than conceptualized in terms of systemic disadvantages, racism is presented as a series allegations (van Dijk, 2002). However, as Levine-Rasky (2013) noted, that “these actions are not hate crimes does not reflect the absence of racism in society but its normalization” (p. 69). Colorblind ideologies are central to the construction of white identities (Bush, 2011; Fasching-Varner, 2014; Frankenberg, 1993; McKinney, 2005; Perry, 2007).
Bonilla-Silva (2013) offered four distinct colorblind frames. Drawing on two primary data sources, the 1998 Detroit Area Study and the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students, his work has long served as foundational work in studies of colorblind racism. Bonilla-Silva’s first frame, abstract liberalism, involves the promotion of free choice, individualism, and the central role of meritocracy in the United States. Central to this frame are notions of equal opportunity and limited government intervention to achieve equality. Naturalization, the second frame of colorblindness, insists that racial segregation is the natural order of things. This often manifests when individuals explain away segregation by noting that people are more likely to flock towards their own kind, whether it be in residential segregation or interracial dating. A third frame is a reliance on culturally based arguments, or what Bonilla-Silva terms cultural racism. He explained that central to this frame “is blaming the victim, arguing that minorities’ standing is a product of their lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values” (p. 88). Finally, minimization serves as a means of denying the centrality of race and racism in contemporary American life. White Americans use this frame to confuse racial progress with racial equality. That is, while long strides have been made since the Civil Rights movement, both individual and structural racism is still a pertinent issue for individuals of color, which white Americans attempt to rationalize away. These frames operate in ways that both distances whites from accusations of individual racism and obscure any discussion of institutional discrimination.

**White Complicity and White Innocence**
An additional body of scholarship that served as a major framework for this study is white complicity and white innocence (Applebaum, 2010; Bailey, 2015; Leonardo, 2009; Sullivan, 2014; Yancy, 2008, 2015). The white complicity claim posits that all white people, regardless of their intentions, perpetuate and uphold whiteness as the legitimate, universal way of being in the world. As Applebaum (2010) explained, this approach “maintains that white people, through the practices of whiteness and by benefiting from white privilege, contribute to the maintenance of systemic racial injustice” (p. 3). She continued, highlighting that “white people can reproduce and maintain racist practices even when, and especially when, they believe themselves to be morally good” (p. 3).

According to Applebaum (2010), white complicity manifests in two ways. The first is through unconscious bias, assumptions, and beliefs about people of color. Consistent with Feagin’s (2013) White Racial Frame, this line of the complicity claim posits that no white person can avoid the powerful conditioning of whiteness. A hallmark of this conditioning is locating people of color as the racially marked particulars against the universal norm of whiteness (Perry, 2007). The second way in which white complicity operates is through the “practices and habits of whiteness and the consequences of those practices and habits” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 14). From this perspective, whiteness is not something one can renounce or transcend (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Yancy, 2008, 2015). Instead, regardless of intentions, white people are constantly implicated in the perpetuation of whiteness. Yancy (2008) further
elaborated on this point, one that is crucial for the work of this dissertation, when he explained:

One might say that being a white antiracist is never completely in one’s control because such an identity is deferred by the sheer complexity of the fact that one is never self-transparent, that one is ensconced within structural and material power racial hierarchies, that the white body is constituted by racist habits that create a form of racist inertia even as the white body attempts to undermine its somatic normativity… (p. 231)

The thinking of Applebaum (2010) and Yancy (2008) is instructive because it underscores that by benefiting from whiteness, white people inherently reproduce systems of white racial domination. Further, when whites attempt to situate themselves outside of the problem of white racism, as innocent and good (Sullivan, 2014), they further uphold whiteness.

In framing themselves as racially innocent, white people understand racism as located elsewhere, among the most overtly biased and prejudiced individuals. This often occurs in higher education through the uncritical use of white privilege pedagogy (Applebaum, 2010; Levine-Rasky, 2013; Leonardo, 2009). In acknowledging the privileges associated with their whiteness, white students can situate themselves as good whites that have come to recognize the privileges associated with their racial identities. Levine-Rasky (2013) described recounting privilege in this manner as a sort of redemptive outlet. That is, white students confess their racial privilege to an audience,
typically people of color, and believe themselves to be forgiven of any wrongdoing. In turn, they fail to see how they are still complicit in maintaining and upholding white supremacy, regardless of their intentions or admissions of privilege. Because white privilege is accrued at the expense of people of color, that is, it is inherently relational, simply acknowledging privilege does little to remedy the situation of racial injustice. As Applebaum (2015) explained:

> Privilege is not only about being able to walk through a store freely but also consists in the assumptions prevalent in the social imaginary of white moral integrity that is contingent upon the co-constructions of black as morally suspect. (p. 5)

When white students claim to acknowledge and/or renounce their privilege, this can in many ways serve as a barrier to self-criticality, or the constant interrogation of how the white racial self reproduces whiteness as the legitimate and universal way of being in the world (Yancy, 2015). Sullivan (2014) documented how white Americans frequently frame poor, Southern whites as racist and in turn understand themselves as racially innocent and progressive. By resisting any notion that one might somehow contribute to systems of racial inequality, white people collude in maintaining these very systems.

Having examined whiteness as an ideology (Owen, 2007), colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), white racial framing (Feagin, 2013), and notions of white complicity and innocence (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Yancy, 2008, 2015), I now turn to the consequences of whiteness on campus.
Whiteness on Campus

A large body of scholarship has illustrated the ways in which white college students view the world through a colorblind lens (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Bush, 2011; Cabrera, 2012). Bush (2011), drawing on survey responses from 500 college students and focus groups with 130 students and staff members, found that white college students did at times recognize the role of race and racism in the lives of people of color, but rarely implicated themselves in this process. That is, they did not see themselves as racialized beings and only understood racism as something that disadvantages certain groups. This was largely because, as Bush (2011) explained, the students in her sample drew on an individualistic framework for understanding social relations, and in turn relied on a deficit perspective in understanding inequality. Bush referred to this framework as the culture of poverty. By naturalizing the white condition, there was little, if any, sense of responsibility for the current state of inequality. She explained that rarely were issues of race “described as something that imparts a positive identity for whites, or as an idea that historically diminishes as well as bestows group and/or individual power, status, or wealth” (pp. 52-53).

Further, because the white students in her sample lived in Brooklyn, NY, they engaged in a great deal of cross-racial interaction. While such interactions with diverse peers have a positive impact on reducing racial bias, they also run the risk of offering a defense mechanism against interrogating one’s own beliefs and assumptions because racism is something for which only bad whites are responsible (Bush, 2011). And
although some students did recognize differential outcomes among whites and people of color, many still relied on ideological scripts to rationalize away inequality. Bush explained, “White students clearly have some awareness of the structural causes of racial inequality but draw upon ideological explanations to place blame on individuals and groups” (p. 201).

Bush’s (2011) findings are of central importance to this study, as her scholarship highlights how engaging with diverse peers may shield one from having to examine their own identities and privileges as well as distancing oneself from issues of racism and discrimination. Additionally, her findings are significant in that while white students may recognize the role of race in serving as a barrier to equality for people of color, it does not necessarily follow that they will see their own racial privilege nor give up ideological scripts that emphasize victim blaming.

Bonilla-Silva (2013) found that white college students were more likely to “give lip service to the existence of discrimination” (p. 91), but few spoke to the institutional nature of racism as a major contributor to inequality in America. He hypothesized that because many of the students in his study were taking social science courses at the time, they may have been more sensitized to issues of discrimination and racism. Despite this awareness that likely resulted from these courses, many of his participants drew on the minimization frame to assert that while yes, some discrimination does exist, it is not the reason for any sort of opportunity gap. In a similar vein, Watt (2007) has described the
ways in which those with privileged social identities such as whiteness intellectualize matters of power and inequality.

Cabrera’s (2014b) work on white college men offers an additional exemplar of whiteness operating on college campuses. He found that white men often engaged in racial joking within all white spaces, or what Picca and Feagin (2007) have referred to as the backstage. Jokes were rationalized by claiming that minorities were overly sensitive, and that this over sensitivity was the reason racism still existed. Cabrera’s (2012b; 2014a, 2014b) work also illustrated the ways in which white males operate from a colorblind perspective and claim a victimized identity, feeling that they have fallen prey to reverse racism. Although a majority of white men minimized the role of racism, they did so in very different ways dependent on context. At a predominantly white institution, the participants tended to be apathetic towards race, claiming millennials were increasingly tolerant and that issues of race did not impact their daily lives. On the other hand, at a more diverse institution in which only 35% of students identified as white, men had reactions that were characterized as angry. At these institutions white men felt threatened by race-consciousness policies. This is similar to the work of Perry (2001), who noted the difference in racial identities of white students in racially homogeneous and racially heterogeneous high schools. Taken together, this body of scholarship illustrates the ways in which whiteness manifests on campus. It operates from a place of structural advantage, obscuring the role of race and minimizing its importance (Owen,
Further, it provides a place from which whites view both themselves and people of color, and in turn perpetuates a dominant/subordinate relationship (Owen, 2007).

Any lack of racial reflexivity should not be taken to insist that white college students have not given thought to racial matters (Leonardo, 2009). Leonardo (2009) referred to this as the myth of white ignorance, explaining that “taken too far, it has unintended, but problematic consequences, one of which is that it promotes the “innocence” of whites when it comes to structures of race and racism” (p. 107). This myth of white ignorance obscures the ways in which whites speak in overtly racial ways within the company of whites (Cabrera, 2012b, 2014a, 2014b; Myers, 2005; Myers & Williamson, 2001; Picca & Feagin, 2007) and subtler, coded language in public spaces with mixed company (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Picca & Feagin, 2007). This is to say that white people know a great deal about racial matters and the significance of racial categories. This is evident, for example, when a white student speaks up defensively about the impact of affirmative action on his own chances at scholarships or when one explains what neighborhoods are unsafe and avoidable. This white racial knowledge (Leonardo, 2004) means “knowing how the world works in racially meaningful ways, but avoiding to name it in these terms” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 113). Leonardo (2004) contended that we must problematize such perceived ignorance of racial matters, “not in order to expose whites as simply racist but to increase knowledge about their full participation in race relations” (p. 107). I now turn my
attention to these specific rhetorical strategies that perpetuate whiteness on college campuses.

**Discursive Strategies of Whiteness**

Whiteness is largely communicated and produced through discourse. As Ross (1997) explained “our language and our basic assumptions are inescapably intertwined” (p. 256). Discourse is particularly powerful because of its ability to “conjure in us at some unconscious level the always implied contrast to white innocence – the black one who is both defiled and the potential defiler” (Ross, 1997, p. 264). Scholars have investigated the rhetorical ways in which white students construct and maintain the boundaries of racial difference, and in turn perpetuate a dominant/subordinate relationship. The work of Nakayama and Krizek (1995), Bush (2011), and Myers (2005) are useful means of understanding how white college students reproduce whiteness, and in turn, racial inequality through discourse.

Drawing on results from open-ended surveys and interviews, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) positioned whiteness specifically as a discursive space. In doing so they challenge any essential notions of whiteness, and instead focus attention on everyday communication and interactions that secure the political power and domination of whiteness. Understanding whiteness as discursive construction allows for a greater understanding of how white individuals construct their own social location. By mapping the rhetorical strategies of whiteness from a critical perspective, “we can begin the process of particularizing white experience” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 293), a move
which “displaces whites from a universal stance which tended to normalize and to
naturalize their positionality to a more specific social location in which they confront the
types of questions and challenges facing any particular social location” (pp. 293-294).
Nakayama and Krizek noted that such an approach does not seek a major figure who
imposes a definition of what it means to be white, but rather an interrogation of how
understandings are created and understood through everyday discourse and interaction.
Their work examined the strategic rhetoric of college students in reproducing whiteness.

The first means of strategic rhetoric identified was a conflation of whiteness with
power. Through this strategy, white individuals tied whiteness with a sort of naturalized
dominance. Such a strategy is used when whites associate their race as a majority or
status. The second strategy involved conceptualizing whiteness as a negative identity.
Through this strategy whiteness is understood as empty and lacking, a default that results
from no other viable options. The result is that whiteness is the universal, unmarked
space. It becomes, through rhetoric and interactions, the universal situated against the
particular. Herein lies a central contradiction that Nakayama and Krizek (1995)
underscored. Whiteness is both invisible, yet understood as a place of status and power.

Nakayama and Krizek’s (1995) third strategy defined whiteness through a
scientific lens. That is, students described race as a biological classification that referred
primarily to the color of one’s skin. By situating whiteness as a scientific classification,
“whiteness is drained of its history and its social status; once again it becomes invisible”
(Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 300). When white individuals understand race as a mere
biological concept, they fail to understand the social meanings prescribed to racial
categories over time. A fourth rhetorical strategy identified by Nakayama and Krizek
linked whiteness with nationality. To be white is to be American. Nakayama and Krizek
noted that this process is imbedded with power relations in that it pushes all other racial
and ethnic groups to the margins, recentering whiteness as inherently American. The
fifth strategy they identified involved individuals refusing to label themselves in racial
terms. In doing so they emphasized an “ideology of individualism over subjectivity”
(Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 301). Again, this rhetorical strategy re-centers whiteness
as universal, situated against the particular racial other. Central to this process is who
gets to choose their identities, a question that is connected to the sixth and final strategy.
Nakayama and Krizek described how many white students explained their race in terms
of their European ancestry. They frequently did so in a way that ignored history and the
implications of power, and further illustrated the privilege of picking and choosing which
identities they wanted to embrace and when they would embrace the specific identities.
The power of these strategies lies in their ability to re-center whiteness, while
simultaneously pushing racial others to the margins.

Fasching-Varner (2012), in his work with white pre-service teachers, illustrated
the ways in which white students used a particular linguistic move in their discussions of
race. His participants frequently used the phrase “you know” as a form of White racial
bonding with the White researcher. That is, they used the language in a way that
signified a shared racial experience as whites that prefaced discussions of racial others.
Fasching-Varner explained, “the deployment of a semantic move like “you know” demonstrates White people feel safe in revealing ideas that they believe non-White groups may see as problematic” (p. 34).

While the aforementioned studies examine the ways in which white individuals construct and maintain racial dominance through public discourse, the work of Myers and Williamson (2001) asked participants to record racial discourses they heard in private spaces. In this sense, students became both participants and collectors of data. Myers and Williamson drew on Toni Morrison’s (1993) concept of race talk, which she defined as “the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy” (p. 57). They further extended this idea to include any form of rhetoric that demeaned on the basis of ethnicity or race. They claimed that, “by engaging in everyday race talk, people help to nurture a racially hostile climate” (Myers & Williamson, 2001, p. 6). Their work further connects notions of racial discourse to chilly and unwelcoming campus climates across the country for students of color, a reality that has been documented by a number of scholars (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

Myers and Williamson (2001) found that individuals “actively engaged in racial coding of people, places, and things” (p. 8). Drawing on Feagin’s (2000) concepts of boundary maintenance and boundary construction, they illustrated a number of ways in which white college students, and those with whom they interacted in a number of social settings, perpetuated what this dissertation understands as whiteness. Boundary marking
is characterized by the ways in which dominant group members, in this case white students, construct the terms in which racial others are defined. This often occurred through racial slurs and characterizations that in turn had a dehumanizing affect. Such a process drew the boundaries between groups, drawing on historical frames that characterized people of color as “out of control, animalistic, ignorant, dangerous, dirty, lazy, and entertaining” (p. 11). Black men were frequently discussed as violent and criminal while Black women were understood within the historical, racist frames of mammies and matriarchs (Myers, 2005). Whites were troubled by large congregations of Blacks in public spaces and felt they displayed an exaggerated sense of pride and self-confidence (Myers, 2005). Brownness was somewhat more fluid in nature in that individuals could cross racial boundaries, albeit only temporarily. Individuals with brown skin color, including Latinos and those of Middle East descent, were often positioned as outsiders due to their language and accents. Similarly, they were frequently defined by caricatures in popular culture. This is consistent with Feagin’s (2013) White Racial Frame, as well as a number of theorists who have underscored the relational nature of whiteness (Giroux, 1994; Kincheloe, 1999, Morrison, 1993). Boundary policing referred to processes that claimed spaces as white and set the rules of engagement. In doing so, such territorial acts further perpetuated assumptions of superiority and domination.

Similar to the work of Myers and Williamson (2001), Picca and Feagin’s (2007) scholarship on white college students illustrated that overt racial discrimination has not
gone away; rather it has simply gone underground in all white spaces. Their scholarship echoes much of Myers and Williamson. In the post Civil Rights era, their research suggests that whites have become excellent performers, learning the scripts and expectations of what constitutes appropriate behavior in the front stage. Whereas the front stage is generally comprised of diverse audiences, the backstage provides a space of comfort and ease, and in turn an opportunity to speak more freely about race. The authors explain that “expressions of blatantly racist thought, emotions, interpretations, and inclinations have gone backstage – that is, into private settings where whites find themselves among other whites, especially friends and relatives” (p. x). In such spaces white individuals are free to speak about people of color, attributing behaviors and qualities to their race, mocking cultural attributes of racial minorities, and engaging in racist joking. Scholarship by Cabrera (2014b) highlighted this reality, explaining how white male collegians told racist jokes in spaces absent people of color. These jokes were rationalized by claims of oversensitivity on the part of racial minorities. The white men in Cabrera’s study reported hearing jokes on a consistent basis in all white spaces.

**Influence of Whiteness on Campus Climate**

This body of literature illustrates how whiteness operates on campus in a way that minimizes the role of race, marks only people of color as having a race, and rarely accounts for institutional systems of inequality. Whiteness thus works to distance white people from assertions of racism and invalidates the experiences and concerns of students of color. Additionally, it continually reasserts a dominant/subordinate relationship
between whites and students of color. A number of studies, while not explicitly about whiteness, illustrate its effects in creating hostile and chilly campus climates for students of color (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2007). Such climates run the risk of severely hindering the educational experiences of students of color at colleges and universities across the country (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2013).

Hurtado and colleagues (1999) offered four elements that influence campus climates. The first is a given campus’s historical legacy of exclusion for certain groups of people. Which students have been historically admitted to the institution? For students from racial and ethnic minorities who were admitted, how were they treated on campus? The second component of the framework is structural diversity, or the demographics of the institution. What is the percentage of self-identified white students as opposed to Black or Latino students, for instance? Previous scholarship has highlighted that structural diversity is necessary, but insufficient, in the attainment of meaningful engagement across differences (Gurin et al., 2002). The psychological dimension of the framework considers the ways in which campus environments influence the mental processes of underrepresented students. Smith, Allen, and Danley’s (2007) conceptualization of Racial Battle Fatigue, or the response to racial microaggressions in less than supportive environments, is one example of how students of colors experience barriers in the collegiate context. Johnston-Guerrero (2016) described the ways in which
students of color experienced intense feelings of vulnerability to both overt racist acts and everyday, more subtle microaggressions.

Finally, the behavioral dimension of the framework considers how people do, or do not, enact principles of diversity and justice on campus. Here one might contemplate how students engage with one another or how faculty treats students along the lines of race. Harper’s (2008) work has illustrated the low expectations that faculty have for Black males in the classroom. Similarly, Museus and Park (2015) found that Asian American students often encountered racial hostility through bullying, slurs, and profiling on both the part of their peers and police on campus. Such experiences led to heightened sense of fear on the part of Asian American students.

Harper and Hurtado’s (2007) multi-institution study on campus climates is also instructive in this area. Indeed, much of their findings map on to the framework proposed by Hurtado and colleagues (1999). For instance, participants across five institutions reported that race was largely an avoidable topic on campus, but that it was not difficult to name spaces that were racially segregated within the university. Similar to the original framework put forth by Hurtado and her colleagues, students of color reported a constant awareness of the reputational legacies of racism at their institutions. They explained that family members often struggled to understand why they would attend universities that had such racist legacies of exclusion. White students in their study reported much more welcoming and safe campus climates, but assumed that their peers of color had similar experiences. This is consistent with previous literature that
indicates a tension in perceptions of campus climates (Rankin & Reason, 2005).
Additionally, and perhaps most important to this dissertation, is that students of color perceived whiteness to be pervasive in every aspect of the university, including academic and social spaces.

If whiteness is understood to be a racial ideology, or a way of understanding the world in racial ways, then it quickly becomes clear how such a standpoint shapes the climate at colleges and universities around the country. Most notably, the function of whiteness as a baseline marker for which people of color have historically been evaluated and given worth becomes readily apparent. When Black males are seen as criminals or unwelcome in academic spaces, whiteness is at work. When Asian American students must constantly navigate racial stereotypes and harassment, whiteness is at work. Interestingly, the very notion of the “model minority,” or the thinking that Asian Americans are universally successful in academia, is a relational construction against the historical white framing of Black and Latinos as criminal, lazy, and unintelligent. Further, the colorblind and ahistorical nature of whiteness influences campus cultures that deny the legitimacy of claims of racial hostility and even situates white students as victims of reverse racism.

If whiteness is understood as a structuring property, as Owen (2007) suggested, it follows that white identities are developed, informed, and negotiated within this context. Further, to effectively engage within the context of a multicultural campus and challenge inequitable racial structures, one must first consider their own racial identity and
relationship to systems of racial inequality. I now turn my attention to white racial identity development.

**White Racial Identities**

Whereas whiteness is an ideology that acts upon white people, white individuals can craft a racial identity either in alignment with, or in opposition to, such an epistemological standing (Leonardo, 2002). The socially constructed nature of racial identities allows for a number of formulations. In essence, white identities are “fluid and flexible” and have the potential to fracture “into different racial projects” (Leonardo, 2002, p. 96).

A narrative approach to the study of white racial identity then offers an opportunity to interrogate how white students construct what it means to be white. What resources do they draw on in defining for themselves a sense of white identity? This is to say that a narrative approach, organized temporally around topically centered stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elliot, 2001; Riessman, 2008), has the potential to illustrate relative relationships to privilege, rather than a uniformly experienced sense of privileged whiteness (Giroux, 1997). It takes up Leonardo’s (2009) call to consider “what kind of whites they will become” (p. 97). Thus, while a focus on whiteness offers an orientation toward ideological understandings of race that are largely communicated through discourse, a focus on identity orients one to the various racial projects white individuals take up (Leonardo, 2002, 2009).
If identity is indeed, as Josselson (1996) once explained, “what we make of ourselves within a society that is making something of us” (p. 28), then how might this apply to white racial identity? Wegner (1998) defined identity along five lines. His thinking is particularly useful in order to critically interrogate white identities. First, identity is a negotiated experience. That is, we define ourselves in relation to others, through social interactions with individuals as well as institutions, such as churches, schools, families, and the media. Historically, whiteness has been understood only in relation to the racial other, most notably, Blackness. Identity is also about community membership, or through our understandings of those we are both familiar and unfamiliar. Here we might think of the ways in which white individuals live in segregated neighborhoods, attend segregated schools, and rarely encounter racial difference until college. Identity is also defined as learning trajectory, or “where we have been and where we are going” (p. 149). Given that individuals hold multiple social identities (Jones & Abes, 2013), identity is the nexus of multiple membership, where multiple identities and group memberships are reconciled to form a coherent sense of self. And finally, Wenger understands identity as a relation between the local and global, where individuals are influenced by both the particulars of their immediate context and broader styles and discourses.

**Historical Constructions of White Identities**

Although critical approaches to studying whiteness and white identities exploded in the 1990’s (Frankenberg, 1993; Giroux, 1997; Helms, 1995; Kincheole, 1999; Warren,
1999); and through the following decades (Feagin, 2013; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; Kimmel, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2002, 2013; McKinney, 2005; Perry, 2001, 2007), it should be noted that many theorists of color first named and conceptualized whiteness (Baldwin; 1998; Morrison, 1992). Yancy (2004) reminded critical whiteness scholars to remain open, “to those nonwhite voices that continue to reveal the extent to which they actually suffer and feel terrorized by whiteness” (p. 17). Perhaps most notable among these scholars was James Baldwin. In his essay On Being White, and Other Lies, Baldwin (1998) underscored the socially constructed nature of whiteness, which he described as an identity various ethnic groups took on for power and social standing over people of color. He explained, “no one was white before he/she came to America. It took generations, and a vast amount of coercion, before this became a white country” (p. 1). Becoming white meant forgoing an ethnic classification for the purposes of, “denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation” (p. 2). As opposed to Black Americans who have no choice in their identification, Baldwin claimed that whites make a moral choice to opt into a white sense of selfhood. This is what Bell (1991) deemed the “Caucasian Commitment,” explaining that whites “will accept large disparities in economic opportunity with other whites so long as they have a priority over blacks and other people of color for access to whatever opportunities are left” (p. 85). It was a sense of racial superiority that encouraged European immigrants to forego a sense of community with people of color in the fight for economic opportunity.
Toni Morrison (1992) made similar claims about the relational nature of Whiteness to Blackness:

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful, not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.

(p. 52)

Thus, while the majority of critical whiteness work has come from white individuals in the 1990’s and onward, it is of the utmost importance to recognize those individuals who, while not identifying as critical whiteness scholars, clearly articulated the underpinnings of whiteness early on.

The central tenet of both Morrison (1992) and Baldwin’s (1998) initial arguments surrounding whiteness are largely reflected in more recent theorizing on the matter. While the scope of this project does not allow for an exhaustive discussion of how we might conceptualize whiteness, there are clear themes that run through the majority of the literature. Most importantly, and to the points of both Baldwin and Morrison, white identity is fundamentally understood as relational and historically constructed in relation to people of color (Kincheloe, 1999; McKinney, 2004; Warren, 1999). Further, it is fluid and ever-changing, perhaps most notable by how different ethnic groups have opted into whiteness (Baldwin, 1998; Feagin, 2013), and always informed by other social constructs such as gender, sexual orientation, and social class (Kincheole, 1999).
In recent years a number of scholars have explored whiteness as a racialized identity among white people (Frankenberg, 1993; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; Helms, 1995; McKinney, 2004; Perry, 2001, 2007). Perry (2001) described whiteness as a form of ontological security, a security offered through a sense of group positioning that whiteness offers. Kincheloe (1999) discussed whiteness as reactionary, a process of drawing boundaries around the white self to encompass reason and rationality, while painting the racial other as irrational and without self-control. Frankenberg (1993) explained the concept as a social location from which whites understand both themselves and the racial other. And McKinney (2005) further complicated our understandings of white identities, explaining that, “Whiteness is no longer a fixed, stable essence on posses, but a flexible, transferable quality negotiated in everyday interactions” (p. 59). She explained that the benefits of and associations with whiteness can be minimized, for instance, if a white woman enters into an interracial relationship with a Black male. This sentiment has been echoed by other scholars, most notably Levine-Rasky (2013), who explained that similar to the ways in which individuals do gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987), whites similarly do race in a way that performs race to meet expectations.

Janet Helms (1995) offered what is widely considered the most influential and widely cited scholarship on white identity development. As a counseling psychologist, she situated white identity as a developmental process, wherein white individuals move from relative naiveté about race towards an increasing racial cognizance. Racial identity theorists do not assert a biological or essential nature of race, but rather that different
racial groups “have endured different conditions of domination or oppression” (Helms, 1995, p. 181). Helms (1995) contended that all individuals, regardless of race, go through a process of racial identity development. How individuals experience such development, however, is mediated by access to power and privilege. This is because how one makes sense of their racial identity is a response to environments, environments that have historically been structured around race. In many ways the foundation of Helms’ theory is similar to Bonilla-Silva’s (1996) discussion of racialized social systems, wherein societies are organized around socially constructed significance given to racial difference. The central developmental task for whites in America, according to Helms, is the abandonment of entitlement. She explained that, “healthy identity development for a White person involves the capacity to recognize and abandon the normative strategies of White people for coping with race” (Helms, 1995, p. 144). As individuals progress through racial identity statuses, they are able to handle increasingly complex race-related issues. Helms is quick to note that statuses are not mutually exclusive nor static, which is expressed in her movement from the language of stages to statuses (Helms, 1995).

For Helms (1995), white individuals begin at what she terms the Contact Status. Here individuals are largely naïve about issues of race and racism. There is little to no understanding of one’s own place in a structured system of racism. The next status Helms described is Disintegration. At this status individuals encounter some sort of disorienting experience that provokes a sense of anxiety and unease. This may occur from having a Black roommate or witnessing an act of individual racism, in turn forcing
an individual to “choose between own-group loyalty and humanism” (Helms, 1995, p. 185). At *Reintegration*, white individuals return to an idealization of their own racial group. Whereas at the contact status, race and racism played little to no role in one’s life, here race is a salient factor in making life decisions. At *Pseudoindependence*, Helms described a process in which whites display deceptive tolerance for racial others. At *Immersion/Emersion* whites begin to search for personal meanings related to race and work to redefine whiteness. Individuals beginning to engage in activism and anti-racism often represent this phase. Finally, Helms posited that some whites exist in the *Autonomy Status*, wherein they actively challenge and avoid racist systems, attempt to let go of their racial privileges however they can, and create a positive understanding of whiteness. I return to this developmental status at the conclusion of this chapter, examining the development of racially cognizant white collegians.

Although Helms’ work has been cited in countless publications on racial identity development, others have challenged the model as overly simplistic (Fasching-Varner, 2012; Reason, 2007). The linear progression of the model has the potential to cast certain white students as enlightened and virtuous White people who now understand the ways in which race and whiteness work, in turn distancing themselves from any implication in White supremacy. Sullivan (2014) discussed these phenomena, illustrating how White anti-racists frequently situate their virtuous, enlightened selves against poor and working class whites who are perceived as the real racists. Similarly, Bush (2011) noted that perceived enlightenment on matters of race runs the risk of letting whites off the hook for
racism and discourages any sense of self-reflection. As others have noted, what is perhaps the most important site of investigation is how white identities are constructed and maintained through daily interaction (Lewis, 2004), and the consequences of such constructions for both white students and students of color.

**White Racial Identity Scholarship**

Research on white college students’ racial identities reveals a number of consistent themes. A review of the literature illustrates identities that are largely characterized by invisibility, victimization, individualism, and colorblindness. Further, what it means to be white is often relational in that it is defined through people of color (Fasching-Varner, 2012; McKinney, 2005). In the following section I synthesize this literature and examine white college students’ racial identities as invisible, victimized, relational, and culturally empty (Bush, 2011; Cabrera, 2014; Fasching-Varner, 2012; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; McKinney, 2005). Although her work was on high school students, Perry’s (2007) scholarship is also included because it offers a useful contribution in highlighting the universal/particular dynamic of whiteness.

**Invisible identity.** Ideologically whiteness operates to normalize the white experience, in turn making white identities invisible and taken for granted (Owen, 2007). Scholarship has consistently illustrated the invisible nature of race for white college students (Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; McKinney, 2005). McKinney (2005) referred to white identities as prompted, because individuals did not reflect on them unless challenged to do so. Hardiman and Keehn (2012) similarly found that white students in
their work rarely had grappled with the question of what it meant to be white. While Perry’s (2001, 2007) work investigated high school students, her work is also informative in this area. Her ethnographic fieldwork in two high schools, one racially diverse and the other homogeneous, found that context informed the relative invisibility of a white identity.

In particular, Perry’s (2007) scholarship highlighted the ways in which a number of conditions, including the presence of racial others in high school, influence one’s sense of a white identity. Her results indicated that the presence, or lack thereof, of racially diverse peers had an influence on how white students understood whiteness and constructed their identities. Although white students across schools understood whiteness to be universal and natural, how they expressed and made sense of this was highly dependent on their racial contexts.

Students at the racially homogenous high school moved through a space dominated by racial isolation, which in turn “helps construct a white habitus that is everywhere confirmed without being named” (Perry, 2007, p. 384). Major events of racial significance were either discarded as racist or never discussed, and the lack of any racial minorities allowed such perspectives to go relatively unchallenged. At the more racially diverse high school, where whites comprised only eight percent of the student body, students were exposed to more multicultural programming efforts. These programs only further reproduced white supremacy however, as they reinforced the
universal/particular binary, wherein students from historically marginalized communities put their ethnicity on display for white students and staff.

**Victimized identity.** Within a colorblind context, race is no longer perceived among most white Americans to be a salient indicator of opportunity and success (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). It follows that white collegians generally see race-conscious policies as a form of reverse racism. Subsequently, they understand their own racial sense of self through the lens of victimization (Bush, 2011; Cabrera, 2012, 2014a; McKinney, 2005). Myers (2005) found that white college students in her study often “bemoaned the loss of whites’ privileges in a time in which whites must share with others” (p. 80). While whites espouse a belief in equal opportunity, they often struggle with the revelation that proactive measures to counter racial inequality will in some way cost them significantly (Bush, 2011).

McKinney’s (2005) work on white college students’ sense making of race illustrated how white identities take on the form of victimization and cultural stigmatization. She identified four ways in which this occurs. The first is that people of color are overly sensitive, which I described previously. The second is a feeling that people of color live in the past, and in turn implicate white people in practices for which they bear little responsibility. Her participants felt they were unfairly judged as a member of a group, rather than colorblind individuals. There is a great irony in this, as historically whites have been quick to universalize people of color as racialized groups, paying little attention to individual difference (Kincheloe, 1999). White college students
often counter claims of racism by embracing ethnic identifications (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Leonardo, 2009; McKinney, 2005). Ignoring that their ancestors historically discarded ethnic identification in order to become white (Baldwin, 1998), the rationale becomes that if the Irish or German immigrants could succeed, so can people of color, particularly African Americans and Latino.

Third, McKinney (2005) explained that whites assume a victimized position when they claim students of color separate themselves and receive special treatments. Whiteness is so invisible that they do not consider the racialized nature of their own social networks. This epistemological manifestation of whiteness is particularly troubling in that white students fail to understand the need for Black cultural centers, Latino student organizations, or multicultural programming. Finally, white students in McKinney’s study reported feeling invaded by people of color. This is largely the result of increased multicultural programming and social justice education, which attempts to foreground cultural traditions of ethnic groups and make explicit the oppressive history of whiteness. Bush (2011) similarly found that white college students often felt overwhelmed by an “outgrowth of Black radicalism – the notion that indeed Blacks want more than their share of resources and of power” (p. 92). This insight should be especially important in light of Black Lives Matter and the increasing amount of demands being made by students of color on college campuses. In a similar fashion, Cabrera’s (2012b) participants often made claims of reverse racism, but rarely could articulate the source of such discrimination.
Relational and culturally empty. Beyond feeling victimized it is also important to review white students lack of connection to an ethnic past, and in turn the relational construction of whiteness to racial others. White college students consistently report that they lack any sense of cultural or ethnic identity (Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; McKinney, 2005). Hardiman and Keehn (2012) explained that “students knew that they had an ethnic background or some ties to a cultural, group, but they were almost unanimous in describing that understanding on an intellectual level, not a personal or emotional one” (p. 126). This has led some to call white identities cultureless and empty (McKinney, 2005). Participants in McKinney’s (2005) study described being white as boring. They often engaged in border crossing (Leonardo, 2009) into other cultures, in turn appropriating cultural expressions and practices without having to experience the hardships and realities from which they stemmed (McKinney, 2005). An obvious example of such ethnic tourism is white students’ embracing of hip-hop and rap, but simultaneously describing people of color as criminal and dangerous (Feagin, 2013). When white students do engage with their own ethnic identities, it is typically in a convenient manner, such as during holidays or when associated with stereotypes like heavy drinking (McKinney, 2005).

If white college students do not identify with an ethnic tradition, how do they craft their identity? In large part it is constructed in relation to Black Americans, or what Baldwin (1998) called the disagreeable mirror. A large body of research highlights this point, noting that Black Americans serve as the referent group for white students (Bush,
In one study, white pre-service teachers described their racial identities by invoking racial others. An understanding of white identity was often “predicated on racial others who served as the socializing orientation” (Fasching-Varner, 2012, p. 87). Participants often invoked what they saw as Black spaces, such as malls, urban schools, and sports teams, in describing how they came to understand their racial identification. Similarly, Myers and Williamson (2001) documented the ways in which racial discourses drew stark distinctions between groups, as subjects “characterized ‘the other’ as out of control, animalistic, ignorant, dangerous, dirty, lazy, and entertaining” (p. 11). This sense of mirrored whiteness (McKinney, 2005) is a defining feature of the construction of race in America.

Here again Feagin’s (2013) White Racial Frame is useful. The White Racial Frame is fundamentally anti-Black and rooted in feelings of fear and entitlement. As such the frame reproduces and rationalizes white supremacy by depicting people of color as lazy, irresponsible, dependent on welfare, dangerous, unintelligent, and addicted to drugs. Just as early Englishmen saw Africans as a social mirror that reflected an inherent inferiority within the Black body (Campbell & Oakes, 1997), it appears white collegians today similarly draw on students of color as a type of reference group. One is quickly reminded of Ralph Ellison’s (1998) commentary in his essay What America Would be Like Without Blacks:
Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the ‘outsider.’ (p. 166)

When white students continually refer to racial others in describing what it means to be white, whether in referencing all Black spaces or cultural traditions, they leave whiteness as an ideology untouched and powerful. Additionally, it affords them the privilege to define people of color, a process that has damaging consequences for who is understood as belonging and welcome on campus.

**Whiteness at the Intersections**

It is important to note that white students are comprised of a number of social identities beyond race that inform the ways in which they experience and make sense of being white. For this reason, it is necessary to highlight the ways in which multiple social identities, and their interplay with a number of contexts, influence how white identities are constructed. In doing so it is critical to highlight the role of context, most notably through the work of Jones and Abes (2013) and the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). The Model provides a useful framework for two reasons. First, it underscores the fluid nature of identity and the role of self and context. Second, it illustrates the multiple social identities an individual holds. Originally informed by scholarship on women’s identity (Jones, 1997), the MMDI conveys how
social identities become more or less salient to an individual based on context. The Model is a not a linear model of development, but rather a snapshot in time of how individuals experience their sense of self among many social identities. For instance, whiteness may be more noticeable to a white student if she attended a Historically Black College and University than if they enrolled at a Predominantly White Institution. Further, the white student who attends a PWI may experience an increased salience around whiteness when attending a Black church on a Sunday morning, where the majority of parishioners are African American. Central to this process is the ways in which difference becomes visible and in turn, prompts some level of consideration or awareness of one’s own social identities. Additional research by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) highlighted the role of meaning making in this process. A major contribution of this work was a recognition that developmental complexity informed how individuals made sense of and interpreted social identities. This is to say that with increasing developmental complexity in how individuals think about self, relationships, and values allowed for a more internally defined understanding of social identities such as race, class, and gender. Further, such complexity allows for a more complex understanding of the relationships between identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007).

For the purpose of this study, the power of both the MMDI and RMMDI lie in their abilities to highlight how dominant identities such as whiteness go relatively unnoticed by whites, in large part because they move through collegiate environments in which whiteness is understood as universal. Certain environments or experiences
however, such as a class discussion on police brutality against African Americans, may increase the relative saliency of whiteness in a given space or moment. The MMDI also examines the multiple social identities that individuals hold, and how such identities often exist in flux. It is important that one does not conflate the MMDI with intersectionality, as the original MMDI was meant to capture multiple social identities but not the intersecting nature of such identities. That is, race and gender were portrayed as distinct from one another, whereas intersectionality would portray such identities as multiplicative and mutually informing (Nash, 2008).

Scholars of whiteness have warned against essentializing all white people as experiencing the world in the same way (Frankenberg, 1993; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 1999; Levine-Rasky, 2013). Whiteness does not exist in isolation, but rather is informed by other identities such as gender, class, and sexual orientation. Conflation of whiteness with essential power compromises the complexity of experiences that come with oppression, or additional privilege, along the lines of gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability. Any analysis of whiteness and white identities that neglects intersecting identities “produces as undesirable simplification” (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 112). This is to say that while all white people benefit from the privileges associated with whiteness, they may experience marginalization along other lines of identity. As Collins (1993) noted, “a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives” (p. 621).
How does one account for the multiple experiences within whiteness? Although historically intended to foreground the voices of multiply marginalized women of color (Crenshaw 1989, 1993), scholars more recently advocated for an application of intersectionality to dominant constructs such as whiteness and middle-classness (Levine-Rasky, 2011; Nash, 2008). Kwan (1996) highlighted this tension between initial intentions and applications to dominant constructs:

…straight white maleness arguably is a multiple identity, but intersectionality theorists would resist the claim by straight white males that theirs is an intersectional subjectivity. Central to intersectionality theory is the recovery of the claims and identities of those who, like African American women, are pushed to the margins of racial discourse because of assumptions of patriarchal normativity, and simultaneously pushed to the margins of the feminist discourse because of assumptions of racial normativity. (p. 1275)

However, as Nash (2008) underscored, theories of intersectionality should begin to broaden in scope in order to consider a variety of subjectivities across domination and subordination.

In order to account for the multiple experiences within whiteness I relied on the work of Levine-Rasky (2011). In extending intersectionality to whiteness and middle class subjectivities, she underscored the importance of recognizing the theory’s original utility to women of color, as a means of theorizing, consciousness-raising, and
mobilization for activism. Noting that domination and oppression co-exist, Levine-Rasky built on the work of Anthias (2005) who introduced the concept of social positioning, or how “different groups define, negotiate, and challenge their positions (Anthias, 2005). It is not so much a matter of social categories but of collective exclusion and belonging in relationship to other groups whose borders are permeable and fluid” (p. 242).

Applied to whiteness, Levine-Rasky (2011) documented how whiteness interacts with and is positioned in relation to other social constructs such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. She utilized the language of reinforcing and contradicting to illustrate these relationships. Whiteness and middle classness, for example, are reinforcing and offer little in the way of tension. However, working class whites and ethnic minorities experience contradictions between the dominance of whiteness and their marginalized locations that deviate from the norm. Working class whiteness “contradicts the social positioning of whiteness in terms of access to and deployment of resources” (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 113). Leonardo (2009) similarly remarked “the white working class does not benefit from whiteness in an absolute way, often clinging to it as a protective shield from the cruelties of labor exploration” (p. 70). This is perhaps most evident in the ways in which some whites are framed as “white trash,” an explicitly raced and classed social location (Sullivan, 2014).

This point was highlighted in the work of Michael Kimmel (2013), whose text Angry White Men underscored the ways in which fear, anxiety, and entitlement are at the center of White male identity. Interviewing White males around the country, from
college students to NRA members, Kimmel unearthed a growing tension between what white men feel is rightfully theirs and the new social and economic realities of an increasingly diverse and progressive society. Kimmel defined aggrieved entitlement, a sentiment he claims dominated white male discourse, as “the sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forced larger and more powerful” (p.18). Fueled by a sense of entitlement, anxiety has turned to anger. The anger, Kimmel posits, is largely directed at racial and gendered others.

To What End? The Developmental Potential of Higher Education

The scholarship outlined here underscores disturbing trends in regards to how white students think both about themselves as racialized individuals and students of color. Ideological commitments to colorblindness, coupled with a disregard for structural and historical legacies of racism, inhibit white students from seeing and implicating themselves as racial beings. Further, it becomes increasingly difficult, from this perspective, to understand calls for justice and equality among communities of color. Higher education is particularly situated to address such issues (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005).

Enrollment in higher education offers a chance for students to critically examine their own values, beliefs, and identities (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009). Theorists of emerging adulthood claim that it is at this point in the lifespan that individuals typically have the widest range of options available to them in terms of roles, identities, career
paths, and relationships (Arnett, 2000). Understood as a time of exploration before settling into more fixed adult roles, college serves an important function in moving students away from dependence on external authorities and towards a more internally generated system of values, beliefs, and identity (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009). This is to say that enrollment in higher education often moves students away from the comfort of home, where they can look to external authorities such as parents and teachers for answers to complex social problems. Such a reorientation can lead to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, which serve as critical spaces of learning and transformation (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Further, for white students who come from predominantly white precollege environments, college presents perhaps their first experiences in racially integrated spaces, such as classrooms, student unions, and campus clubs and organizations. In turn, in addition to engaging with issues of race and inequality in the curriculum, navigating and engaging with a diverse campus body provides an additional developmental task that students must interpret. Indeed, a central developmental goal for undergraduate students is the ability to recognize and appreciate difference without perceiving differences as threatening (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). In order to do so, however, students must exhibit developmental maturity in the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive domains of development. Put otherwise, students must have the developmental capacities to make decisions and judgment from an internal meaning-making system while considering the opinions and ideas of others. Such development requires a transition from a dependency
on external sources of authority to an internal sense-making system. When an internal system of meaning making is cultivated, students can consider the nature of their relationships, the value of competing knowledge claims, and their own sense of self on the learning process (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009). Applied to interactions across difference, intercultural maturity represents a “complex understanding of cultural differences (cognitive dimension), capacity to accept and not feel threatened by cultural differences (intrapersonal dimension), and capacity to function interdependent[ly] with diverse others (interpersonal dimension)” (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005, p. 274).

Kegan (1982) offered useful insight into the interrelated nature of these dimensions and their applicability to thinking about issues of race and racism:

A white teenager living in a liberal northern suburb may espouse values of racial egalitarianism if that is the prevailing peer ethic, only to become a holder of racist views among racist friends if her family relocates to a school and neighborhood in the South or closer to the action in the North. The prevailing wisdom here will be that the teenager has changed as a result of new friends and new influences; it would be as true to say, however, that the teenager’s way of making meaning has remained the same. (p. 57)

In this passage Kegan pointedly illustrated the underlying structure of meaning making and its relationship to racist thoughts. Without the cognitive complexity to recognize multiple, competing perspectives and the interpersonal maturity to have, rather than be
had by relationships (Kegan, 1994), the teenager’s identity is now consumed by racist thoughts. The prior egalitarian, anti-racist thoughts appear only to be the result of their immediate surroundings and need for interpersonal approval. Central to this process is how the student engages with the anxiety produced by dissonance, or the tension between current ways of knowing and new information. King, Baxter Magolda, and Massé (2011) reported two primary ways in which students responded to uncomfortable, anxiety producing engagement across racial difference. Students at early stages of intercultural maturity were often “stuck” in that they were unable to deal with challenges posed by racial difference to their current belief systems. Without sufficient support, these students were unable to work through and process the sources of tension. Students with intermediate levels of intercultural maturity were aware of other, potentially legitimate perspectives, but were not ready to reframe their beliefs in light of this new information. These students too, were unsure of how to proceeded. Most telling is that of their 49 participants, only three reached a place of advanced maturity in responding to engagement with racial others, and none of the three identified as white.

**Developing an Increased Racial Consciousness**

Numerous scholars posited that an appropriate outcome for white students is the development of an increased racial consciousness (Cabrera, 2012a; Eichstedt, 2001; Giroux, 1997; Reason et al., 2005). Central across this scholarship is the need for Whites to recognize their own racialized sense of self, understand the institutionalized nature of racism, and move from either guilt or avoidance to action. Giroux (1994) argued that
educators must engage white students to reshape what it means to be white. He explained that whiteness must “provide a diverse but critical space from which to wage a wider struggle against the myriad forces that undermine what it means to live in a society founded on the principles of freedom, racial justice and economic equality” (p. 385). In rewriting whiteness, white individuals can move beyond guilt and towards a complex understanding of racial inequality. Central to this process is listening to the voices of people of color in the struggle against whiteness and racial inequality. Rarely have white Americans considered themselves through the eyes of people of color. Much of the recent scholarship on whiteness and ally development reflects the discussion put forth by the likes of Giroux (1994) and Allen (2004).

Eischstedt (2001) claimed that whites must, “move beyond saying they are “merely individuals,” with no racial location” (p. 446), and instead recognize their whiteness and the social status and privileges associated with their positioning. In her study of sixteen white racial justice allies Eischstedt highlighted how individuals navigate what she calls the problematic identity of whiteness. Her participants exhibited the ability to recognize the role of race and racism, and their place in such structures, but were not immobilized or paralyzed by such understandings. All but one of her participants understood racism to be about systems, rather than people, and recognized their role as whites in perpetuating systems of inequality. Further, all identified whiteness as a significant marker of identity in their life while also recognizing intersecting social identities such as class, sexual orientation, and gender. These allies
walked a tight rope in articulating the role of their multiple identities without using them in a way that minimized or diminished the role of race and racism.

Reason and colleagues’ (2005) work on ally development in college reveals somewhat similar findings. Students in their study consistently reflected on the role of race within their lives and made sense of this within the context of white privilege, or what I have referred to more broadly as whiteness. Participants moved beyond guilt and felt a sense of agency in responding to issues of racism. Rather than always deferring to people of color, these allies felt a sense of confidence and in turn could act without always placing the burden on people of color. Similar to Eischstedt (2001), students interviewed by Reason and colleagues articulated a need to move beyond good and bad notions of white people, and instead recognized the complexity of multiple identities. Cabrera’s (2012a) work on how white men work through whiteness is also quite informative in this area. He found that, similar to other scholars (McKinney, 2005), critical examination of race and racism were most often the result of interactions with diverse peers. This aligns closely with Allen’s (2004) call to center the voices of people of color in any discussion of white identities and racial justice. Cabrera (2012a) described a process in which topics around difference took on a face and moved beyond the abstract. Specifically, he identified three experiences that led to an increased racial awareness: cross-racial interactions, multicultural education, and minority experiences. Reason and colleagues (2005) also found that coursework that centered issues of race and racism was instrumental for white students in developing as racial justice allies.
Self-Criticality and White Ambush

Although the development of increased racial consciousness is necessary, it is insufficient in truly combating systems of racial inequality and white supremacy. Institutions of higher education must also cultivate the capacity among white undergraduates to engage in self-criticality (Yancy, 2015). Yancy (2008) explained, “dismantling whiteness is a continuous project” (p. 233). Similarly, Reason (2007) advocated for the continual re-articulating of whiteness. Central to self-criticality is skepticism in a belief of having arrived at any kind of non-racist endpoint (Yancy, 2008, 2015). Rather than situating the development of racial consciousness as an endpoint, white students must remain open to what Yancy (2008) described as the experience of being ambushed by one’s whiteness. He explained:

Whites who are open to life-affirming and transformative transactions with people of color are not simply waiting defensively in fear of new information that may threaten to destabilize their sense of self. Rather, there is an openness to having one’s world transformed and cracked. Being ambushed within such transactional contexts can lead to profound experiences of liminality, throwing the white self into spaces of rich uncertainty and the actual phenomenological experience of the white self as permeable. (p. 240)

The type of openness to ambush Yancy describes is similar to other Critical Whiteness scholars who emphasize the role of uncertainty, humility, and vigilance in consistently
interrogating how one is implicated in whiteness (Applebaum, 2010; Bailey, 2015; Leonardo, 2009). It is a constant recognition that “to be white in America is to be always already implicated in structures of power, which complicates what it means to be a white ally” (Yancy, 2008, p. 235). As such, Yancy explained that white students must experience spaces that prompt a consideration of how the white self is formed and how that self is constructed in the historical context of whiteness. The approach echoes Reason’s (2007) participants who “revealed that understanding Whiteness is a continuous process of rearticulating meaning based on new experiences” (p. 132). Eischstedt’s (2001) participants also seem to reflect this thinking, for they were willing to “claim themselves as racist” (p. 465). Doing so requires a great deal of intrapersonal complexity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005), for it requires individuals to detach themselves from notions of racial innocence and goodness.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a conceptual framework for understanding white college students and their relationship to race in two primary ways. First, I defined whiteness as an ideology, or a way of seeing and making sense of the world and determining what is and is not racially desirable (Feagin, 2013; Owen, 2007). Such an understanding underscores whiteness as more than simply an identity or skin color, but as a place of structural advantage and essential, unmarked being. Whiteness is communicated through discourse and is in many ways the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstien, 2009) for which narratives of white identities are constructed.
Central to such discourse are a belief in colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) and white innocence (Applebaum, 2010). White identities represent the subjective experiences of being white. Because of the ways in which whiteness operates, white identities are largely invisible and taken for granted. Such invisibility offers a major stumbling block in moving white college students to a place of racial awareness. The consequences of such an ideological system, and subsequent white identities, is disastrous for students of color on college campuses, which I have documented in the preceding pages. I now turn my attention to a detailed examination of how I will explore whiteness and white identities among college students through narrative inquiry.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this research was to explore white college students’ relationship to race in two ways. The first was to understand how white college students make sense of their own racial identities. That is, how do white college students assign meaning to their white racial identities? This question examines the construction of white identity through storytelling. The second objective of this study is to understand the larger contexts in which these identities are produced: the ideology of whiteness. Through an attention to participants’ discourse, or what some have called “Race Talk” (Morrison, 1993; Myers, 2005), I explored the ways in which whiteness, as a dominant racial ideology, is produced and maintained, or possibly disrupted. In particular the following research questions guided this study:

1. How do white college students make sense of and give meaning to their racial identities?
2. How do white college students, through discourse, maintain racial ideologies of whiteness, or the dominant/subordinate relationship between whites and students of color?

In the following pages I describe my methodological roadmap. I begin by stating my epistemological approach to this study, which is best described as critical (Jones, Torres,
& Arminio, 2014). I then shift my attention to narrative methodology and the features that make it distinct from other qualitative approaches (Chase, 2010; Riessman, 2008). This is followed by a discussion of research methods, including sampling criteria and processes, data collection methods and analysis as well as matters of trustworthiness, positionality, and ethical considerations.

**Epistemological Perspective: A Critical Approach**

In order to examine white college students’ relationship to race, a critical perspective was necessary. A critical perspective recognizes the socially constructed nature of knowledge, but additionally underscores how knowledge is a product of history and power (Jones et al., 2014). That is, knowledge is the result of lived experiences, experiences that are fundamentally influenced by larger social constructs such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. In turn, the prospect of social change is central to critical research. Individuals are always within “historically situated structures that have a real impact on the life chances of individuals” (Hatch, 2002, p. 16). As Erikson (2005) noted, the critical researcher moves beyond a mere interest in how one makes sense of the world:

The interpretive qualitative researcher would say that the question “what is happening?” is always accompanied by another question: “and what do those happenings mean to those who are engaged in them?” And a critical qualitative researcher would add a third question, “and are these happenings just and in the best interests of people generally?” (p. 7)
To Erikson’s (2005) point, a critical epistemological standpoint underscores the role of power and politics and makes no attempt to hide behind the prospect of neutrality. To extend Erikson’s discussion, it is not simply how white students produce whiteness or make sense of what it means to be white, but one must also attend to the consequences of such happenings, most notably for students of color and larger campus racial climates. Although critical scholarship is traditionally used as a means of co-constructing narratives with individuals from historically marginalized communities in order to challenge oppressive structures, I used it to explore the ways in which whiteness operates as an unquestioned marker of normalcy and personhood. The goal was similarly to challenge oppressive structures of inequality, but attention shifted the focus from historically marginalized groups and towards whiteness.

Studying a dominant social construct such as whiteness presented a number of issues that were considered, most notably voice and representation. A hallmark of qualitative research is its ability to offer insight into the lived experiences of individuals, mostly through highlighting the ways in which they make meaning of a given phenomena (Hatch, 2002). Voice refers to “the degree to which research subjects are considered to be authorities or experts on their own lives” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 13). In carrying out this study I considered white individuals to have unique insight on race and whiteness, in large part due to their situatedness as whites. However, left uninterrupted, narratives of whiteness might reinforce the very racist systems and ideas this scholarship hopes to challenge. It is what Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2003) have called a type of
narrative affirmative action, wherein critical scholars allow historically marginalized voices to speak freely and for themselves through text, while those whom have historically been understood as the universal, legitimate source of knowledge are theorized and contextualized at great length. Highlighting this double standard, Fine and colleagues asked “how do theorists respect the integrity of informants’ consciousness and narratives, place them within social and historical context, and yet not collude in the social scientific gaze, fixation, moral spectacularizing (Roman, 1997) of the poor and working class?” (p. 190). A critical stance allows for the researcher to offer a level of interpretative authority that moves beyond mere description and instead projects narratives “against the wider screen of history and power” (Demerath, 2006, p. 108).

**Methodology: Narrative Inquiry**

This study was guided by a narrative methodological approach. Narrative inquiry emphasizes stories as a central means of understanding experience. Clandinin and Rosiek (2006) defined narrative as “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 42). It is through stories that experiences become personally meaningful (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006). Narrative scholars stress the importance of understanding individual’s stories as a whole, rather than as discreet parts and themes. Doing so allows for the researcher to examine the temporal nature of experience, a key feature of narrative inquiry. Josselson (2011) explained, “it is not the parts that are significant in human life, but how the parts are integrated to create a whole – which is
meaning” (p. 226). This is to say that time, context, and place matter in narrative inquiry (Chase, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elliot, 2012).

Through an attention to the particular, rather than the general, descriptive accounts of meaning making are developed. In turn, “any narrative is significant because it embodies – and gives us insight into – what is possible and intelligible within a specific social context” (Chase, 2010, p. 226). In the following section I outline three key features of narrative inquiry that were central to the present study: narratives as a three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), a focus on language and the presentation of self through storytelling (Riessman, 2008), and the co-construction of stories between participant and researcher (Chase, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Taken together, these features offer a space in which one can locate the unique features of narrative scholarship from other qualitative methodologies.

**Narratives as Three-Dimensional Spaces**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) presented narratives as three-dimensional spaces. That is, narratives are informed by interaction, continuity, and place. Interaction refers to the space between the personal and the social, the individual and the environment. Within the context of this study, white students’ inward environments, or their “feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) included individual sense-making about the self and racial others. This individual level of interaction is grounded in the theoretical perspectives of Nakayama and Krizek (1995), Myers (2005), and others who examine how white individuals construct whiteness.
through strategic rhetoric. It is also underscored in the work of Frankenberg (1993) and other scholars of white identity (McKinney, 2005; Perry, 2007) who describe whiteness as a location from which whites view themselves and people of color. The external environment, applied to this study, was useful in considering both broader societal and university-wide messages about race, whiteness, and racism.

Clanndinin and Connelly (2000) also underscored the importance of temporality in narrative inquiry by highlighting the notion of continuity. Experiences are not isolated events, but rather they grow and evolve out of previous events. They explained the importance of seeing an event not only as “a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time. Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future” (p. 29). This is what others have described as narrative linkage (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Narrative linkage insists that individual experiences have no meaning outside of the ways in which they are referenced against previous experience. It involves the process of “constructing linkages between bits and pieces of experience” (Gubrium & Holstein, p. 66), which are composed into a larger plotline of meaning. These understandings of reality were central in the construction of this study. I entered the project under the assumption that students’ current thinking about whiteness and white identity were fundamentally influenced by pre-college environments and contemporary movements for racial justice. This is to say that narrative work highlighted the importance of continuity, recognizing that narratives and sense making were not contained to one’s time on campus, but rather were influenced far
beyond this immediate context. This aligns with Reason’s (2015) contention that scholars must consider understandings of race and racial realities within the context of contemporary racial movements.

Finally, place refers to the specific contexts in which situations are experienced and interpreted. In the context of this study space referred to racially homogenous hometowns and high schools, more racially diverse communities nearby, and campus organizations and sites of involvement. In each case, these physical spaces were central to understanding experiences related to race and racism. Thinking about narratives as a three-dimensional space highlights that “studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific places or sequences of places” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). For instance, students’ interpretations of whiteness on campus could not be divorced from their memories and experiences prior to college.

**Presentation of Self and Considerations of Language**

Given that narratives are always understood to be a recapitulation of previous events, narrative scholars give particular attention to the ways in which individuals structure narratives. Although some variation in voice and representation exists within narrative research, narrative scholars are largely in agreement that language is never a neutral pursuit. As Riessman (2008) noted, the language individuals employ is “saturated with ideology and meanings from previous usage; the analyst never encounters a word from a pure position – it is not a neutral repository of an idea” (Riessman, 2008, p. 107).
This is particularly true in the study of race, as a number of scholars have documented the ways in which language is used to communicate and reify racial meanings and structures (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Hill, 2008; Myers, 2005; Nakaya & Krizek, 1995).

In this sense, narrative scholars pay great attention to how participants want to be known and understood within a given context, usually within the interview. This is consistent with Chase’s (2010) understanding that researchers pay attention not simply to the accounts participants offer, but “the versions of self, reality, and experience the storytelling produced through the telling” (p. 214). Similarly, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) urged narrative scholars to concern themselves less with individual memory or rationality and consider the purposes and consequences of storying experiences in a given manner. The narrative researcher is less interested in whether or not the account is one hundred percent factual, and more concerned with structure, language, and organization. Put otherwise, it is not the factual confession the researcher is after, rather it is a deeper understanding of how the participant organized and made sense of an experience, how they wish to be known and understood in relation to that experience, and how it is ordered and sequenced over time (Chase, 2010; Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2008). This was especially important in the present study. In a society dominated by colorblind ideologies of race, white individuals are often preoccupied with being seen as anti-racist or someone who does not see race at all (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Sullivan, 2014). Both of these signal a type of performance for a given audience.

**Relationship Between Researcher and Participant**
Finally, it is important to note that narratives are not produced in isolation, but rather are an interactive communicative event. In many ways one might be prompted to ask whose story is being told (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). To be a narrative researcher is to be cognizant of the many distinct, but also overlapping, narratives that exist within the inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher’s engagement with any narrative must be understood in relation to their own standpoint (Josselson, 2011). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) referred to this process as narrative beginnings. It becomes important for the researcher to be particularly reflexive in considering how their own narratives shape the research topic, questions asked, selection of participants, and most importantly, the engagement with participants within the interview setting.

Further, given that the interview is a particular form of communication (Misher, 1983), participants often attempt to pull the researcher into the narrative in a way that exacts a high level of engagement (Riessman, 2008). Participants tell stories as a means of entertainment, justification, or explanation. Regardless, narratives are told for particular reasons and within specific contexts (Chase, 2010). Individuals are not repositories for stories waiting to be told, but rather engage in the work of assembling stories for an audience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In turn, narratives cannot be understood outside of the researcher who prompts the telling. Put otherwise, the told cannot be divorced from the telling.

Taken together, narrative research was a useful means of exploring white college students’ sense-making of both their own racial identities and whiteness more broadly.
This was primarily for two reasons. First, because race is not typically a salient identity for white students (Abes, Jones & McEwen, 2007; McKinney, 2005), it was important to probe students for a variety of experiences and memories about race generally. Because the conditioning of whiteness is so strong and pervasive, it was critical to contextualize current understandings and discourses of race within the broader landscape of their biographical narratives. That is, a focus on stories and experience encouraged participants to recount memories in their hometowns and pre-college environments as a way of contextualizing current thinking. This is consistent with Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) conceptualization of narratives as three-dimensional space. Second, there is a great need for social desirability in the interview setting, particularly when the subject is as sensitive as race. Narrative research, with its attention to the structure and telling of stories, moves beyond the mere content of narrative and to how accounts are assembled and given meaning. This is a point elaborated on in the analysis portion of this chapter.

**Research Methods**

I now shift my attention to the particular research methods that were employed for this study. I begin with a discussion of the research site, and then move to sampling, highlighting both the criteria and strategies to obtain participants. In doing so I provide the rationales for my sampling procedures. I then shift to data collection and analysis and conclude with matters of trustworthiness.

**Research Site**
This study took place at a large research institution, State University (SU), in the Midwest. Located in an urban environment, State is home to over 45,000 undergraduates. According to the university’s records, racial and ethnic minorities comprise nearly 19% of the student body. As such, the city in which State is located is far more racially diverse than campus itself. According to the 2010 U.S. Census roughly 41% of area residents were ethnic and racial minorities.

The institution prides itself on a strong record of student engagement through clubs, organizations, and offices in student affairs. University marketing materials indicate that the university is home to over 1,300 registered student organizations. During the period of data collection the campus was marked by a heavy presence of campus activism. Campus protests and sit-ins were a common occurrence, particularly at the university library, the quad, and the student union.

**Sampling Criteria and Strategies**

Jones and her colleagues (2014) distinguished between sampling criteria and sampling strategies. Sampling criteria refer to the characteristics and qualities that one deems important to the construction of the study. For the purposes of this dissertation, it was necessary for participants to meet the following criteria:

1. Participants must self-identify as white.

2. Participants must be traditional aged, college undergraduate students (18-24 years of age).
3. Participants must represent a diversity of social identities along the lines of social class, sex, sexual orientation, and spirituality.

4. Participants must be considered to be reflective on matters of race and racism by expert nominators with whom they have worked.

A brief discussion of the rationales for these criteria is necessary. Participants were asked to self-identify their racial identity. Additionally, because this dissertation located college students within a particular developmental point in life, that of Emerging Adulthood (Arnett, 2001, 2010) and the undergraduate years, I sought out traditional aged college students. This is not to conflate age and development, but rather it is a recognition that certain phases of the life course are more likely to produce certain events (i.e. moving away from home, first meaningful interactions across difference) and be associated with particular developmental outcomes (Arnett, 2001, 2010). The third component of sampling criteria is important, for it offered a means of troubling overly simplistic understandings of whiteness that do not account for issues of class, sexuality or gender. The goal was to take up Giroux’s (1997) call to recognize the multiple locations that exist within whiteness. Two of the more recent studies on white identities in higher education have used samples entirely of men (Cabrera, 2012b) or women (Robbins & Jones, 2016). I attempted to obtain a sample that was diverse along the lines of gender, class, and sexual orientation.

Finally, I sought out students whom expert nominators believed were particularly reflective about matters of race and racism. Edwards (2009), in his dissertation research
on college men’s identity, used a similar strategy to identify participants. Using faculty and staff who have close contact with students, he sought out students whom exhibited some level of thought and reflection about what it means to be a man in college. He was concerned less with the product of their thinking, and more with the fact that they had shown some interest in considering gendered expectations. He explained, “the selection criteria focused on the process of thinking about what it means to be a man, but not on the product of that process” (p. 68). Similarly, I identified students whom faculty and staff have deemed particularly reflective about matters of race and racism. It should be noted that critical and reflective do not necessarily mean anti-racist, but rather individuals who, in their interactions with faculty and staff, have given some thought to contemporary matters of race and racism in America. Some level of reflective thinking is necessary because narrative inquiry relies on rich and descriptive accounts of experience.

The sampling strategy, or “the method that implies a plan for identifying those who may shed light on a phenomena of interest to the researcher” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 115), was best described as purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling recognizes the importance of identifying information rich cases. In order to obtain participants, I relied on student affairs staff members who had worked closely with students who met the aforementioned criteria. I first sent a letter to student affairs staff members detailing the purpose of the study and the sampling criteria, asking them to forward me any names of students whom they thought would make an excellent
participant (See Appendix A: Expert Nominator Letter). In this sense they served as an expert nominator.

After a staff member sent me the name of a given student, I notified the student that they had been nominated for the study (See Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter) and encouraged them to consider filling out a brief demographic form (See Appendix C: Participant Interest Form (Google Form)) if they were interested in participating. They were also informed that participation in the study would result in a $25 Amazon gift card for each interview they completed, for a total of two interviews and $50 in gift cards. In total 43 students filled out the form and expressed interest in participating in the study. The form was utilized to construct a diverse sample of students, including social identities, political orientation, and campus involvement. Once participants completed the form they were automatically entered into a database of prospective participants. From this pool I constructed the most diverse sample of participants possible, consistent with my goal of seeking a diversity of experiences within whiteness. Once selected, participants were emailed and informed of their inclusion in the study. The final sample consisted of 14 undergraduate students, all of whom were involved across campus in a variety of contexts including residence life, the campus programming board, service-learning, multicultural organizations, and Greek life. The sample was comprised of 7 men and 7 women, all of whom identified as cisgender. Ten of the participants identified as heterosexual, one as gay, one as lesbian, one as bisexual,
and one had very recently come out as pansexual. A detailed illustration of participants’ social identities, political orientations, and involvement is listed in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
<th>Spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Student Leadership, Wellness Organization</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Activities Board, Social Fraternity,</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Activities Board, Social Fraternity, Business Fraternity</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Soph.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Resident Advisor, Women’s Rugby Club</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Sorority, Leadership Organization, Alumni Council</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Residence Hall Council, Learning Community Council</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>Soph.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Resident Assistant</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Resident Assistant, Research Assistant, Class Honorary</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 – Participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Socioeconomic</th>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Position and Affiliations</th>
<th>Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Sr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Managing Resident, Resident Assistant</td>
<td>Student Assistant in Student Union, Multicultural organization</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Sr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan First</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Resident Assistant, Students for Socialism</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Sr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Sorority, Research Assistant, Second Year Experience, Service-Learning Cohort</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer Jr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle to Lower</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Resident Assistant, Student Ambassador</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler Sr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Resident Assistant, Gun Club, Campus Republicans</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews**

In order to examine how white students make meaning of whiteness and identity, I utilized semi-structured interviews. As Hatch (2002) noted, interviews allow for researchers to “uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their...”
experiences and make sense of their worlds” (p. 91). Similarly, Warren (2001) explained that interviews are meant to derive interpretation, not fact. Both of these conceptualizations align closely with Chase’s (2011) thinking about narrative research as a means of restorying and interpretation, rather than accessing direct facts. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are guided by, but not attached to, a specific set of questions (Hatch, 2002). Rather, participant and interviewer engage in a set of interactions that may influence the research questions.

Ellis and Berger (2001) highlighted the importance of an interactive interview guided by a sense of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Situating the researcher’s feelings, emotions, and responses in the interview, they asserted, can shift the interview from an interrogation to a dialogue. A number of scholars have underscored the ways in which interviews are an event in themselves (Devault & McCoy, 2001; Fetterman, 2010; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Miczo, 2003; Warren, 2001), particularly as it relates to constructing narratives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Jossleson, 2011). For instance, participants share the stories they do in large part because the researcher has asked the question. Miczo (2003) explained that participant stories are influenced by an “awareness and shared understanding of conventions and subject matter. One will not be able to escape cultural modes of relating and ideologies in consideration of narrative” (p. 474). Similarly, Fetterman (2010) underscored that in any interview there is some level of manipulation. Interviewing thus, “requires some conscious or subconscious shaping of the verbal exchange – through either explicit or implicit cues borrowed from cues in
natural conversations” (p. 48). In turn, how the interviewer shapes the interview is in large part dependent on biases, assumptions, and previous experiences. All of this is to say that while interviewing can be used as an interactive process to derive meaning (Hatch, 2002) or interpretations (Warren, 2001), it is by no means a way to completely capture unfiltered meaning of experience (Josselson, 2011; Mishler, 1986).

Given that this study is guided by a narrative methodology, it was important to conduct interviews in a way that elicited rich and descriptive narratives. A number of narrative researchers recommend engaging participants on specific times, situations, and experiences as opposed to broad questions about an extended period of time (Elliot, 2012; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Doing so yields data that is topically centered and temporally ordered.

Consistent with Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) notion of narratives as a three-dimensional space, interviews were used to engage students’ experiences with race prior to coming to college and while enrolled at the university. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, either by the researcher or an external transcriptionist. The first interview, which typically lasted an hour, focused primarily on participants’ background, life history, and precollege experiences with race. Participants were asked to consider first experiences hearing or thinking about race, the racial composition of their neighborhoods and schools, significant interracial contact experiences, and messages about race and racism from parents, teachers, and peers. This interview was constructed in light of Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) thinking, which recommended the composition
of biographically sensitive accounts that incorporate a lifetime’s worth of experience. Doing so provides narrative linkage and composition, or the notion that experiences take on no meaning until they are considered within and referenced against previous experiences. The first interview served as a means of contextualizing what was produced during the second interview regarding campus experiences (See Appendix D: Interview Protocol).

The second interview, which lasted on average 60-80 minutes, took place after first interviews had been transcribed and reviewed and typically occurred within two weeks of the first interview. The purpose of this interview was to focus on matters of race, racism, and whiteness on campus. Students were asked to consider experiences in the context of their social networks, campus involvement, and academic majors. Further, they were probed for their reflections on campus racial climates and accusations from campus activists that the institution was at times hostile and unwelcoming for students of color. This interview was also used to follow up on any themes or patterns that needed additional clarification from the first interview (See Appendix D: Interview Protocol).

**Data Analysis**

There is no uniform analytical technique within narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Jones, et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008). Narrative scholars largely agree that, “at the most basic level, it is the emphasis on stories and understanding lived experiences through the stories told by those narrating them” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 84). Drawing extensively on the work of Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008), I utilized two
separate forms of narrative analysis: thematic and dialogic/performance. Each offered unique insight into the study of white college students, their racial identities, and relationship to whiteness. I used the thematic approach to explore how white college students constructed and gave meaning to their white racial identities. This work focused primarily on “the told” aspect of the narrative (Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis allows for the creation of typologies or themes that emerge from the data. It also examines the resources and social scripts that participants see as available to them in constructing a given narrative.

I also sought a more nuanced understanding of how white college students either reproduce, or challenge, whiteness in their talk about race. This approach moves beyond an analysis of what participants say, and includes an exploration of structure and theoretical tensions and sensibilities. It offered the very context for which white identities are constructed and given meaning, or what one might describe as the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In what follows, I provide an extensive rationale for each approach, highlighting the unique contribution of both thematic and dialogic/performance analysis.

**Thematic analysis of white racial identity.** In an attempt to understand how white college students construct and give meaning to their racial identities, I employed a thematic analysis to narrative data. Considered the most widely used analytic technique within narrative research, thematic analysis is largely concerned with the content of participants’ stories (Riessman, 2008). Of all the approaches to narrative analysis, it is
the most similar to grounded theory research. A key distinction however, is that it keeps “a story ‘intact’ by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases” (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). That is, while grounded theory research takes data apart and creates categories out of the transcribed word, narrative scholars see this as a threat to the coherence, meaning, and the contextual nature of the data. As Mishler (1986) explained, “the practices exhibited in coding depend on implicit assumptions as to the relationship between meaning and language” (p. 5).

The thematic approach, perhaps more than any other analytic approach within narrative inquiry, honors the words of the participants. While prior theory is used to interpret and make meaning of participants’ accounts, thematic analysis is concerned with how participants experience and interpret a given phenomena (Riessman, 2008). The goal is to create a clean and coherent plot line that is structured temporally, offering a beginning, middle, and an end. Case centered in nature, narrative researchers examine stories and explore commonalities and differences in the construction of identity. Preserving the sequence of stories, narrative scholars theorize across a number of cases by “identifying common thematic elements across research participants, the events they report, and the actions they take” (Riessman, 2008, p. 74).

As it relates to this study, thematic analysis was utilized in the creation of constructions of white racial identity. This is consistent with thematic approaches to narrative inquiry that have been utilized to create typologies of a given phenomenon (Riessman, 2008). The overarching goal of this line of the research project was to
examine how white students interpreted and gave meaning to their racial identities, largely through the telling of multiple stories that together formed a coherent narrative. To engage in such thematic analysis, I drew on Josselson’s (2011) hermeneutic circle. The first step involved an overall reading that produces an initial sense of themes within each individual narrative. A key component here, which echoes the words of Mishler (1986), is remaining mindful of how “the meaning of each part contributes to an understanding of the whole” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 84). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) referred to this process as narrative linkage, or how participants make meaning of an experience in relation to prior experiences. In order to remain mindful of the overall meaning of each participant narrative, first reads of transcripts did not include any coding, just initial thoughts and reflections that were recorded in a researcher journal.

Second, I completed multiple readings to explore the different stories and their relationship, or even possible inconsistencies, to other stories told. Intertextuality (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) refers to the ways in which multiple stories often overlap. Stories, in this sense, refer not only to individual accounts but also grand narratives advanced through social institutions such as media, schooling, and family. Probing for inconsistencies was critical, given that participants frequently contradicted themselves throughout the interview. That is, while they would often make claims to racial innocence and goodness, they recalled a number of experiences that were incongruent with such a self-perception.
Consistent with narrative inquiry, data was coded in a way that kept major stories in tact. Using ATLAS.ti, codes were developed that reflected the meaning of a given story or account within the interview. This included both interpretive and descriptive codes. Interpretive codes, very much informed by Critical Whiteness scholarship (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009), included “situating the self as victim,” “emphasizing innocence,” and “drawing on marginalized identity to consider experiences with racism.” Descriptive codes more heavily relied on the words of participants, and included codes such as “first experiences thinking about whiteness” and “homogeneous precollege environments.” Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) conceptualization of narratives as a three-dimensional space, I also coded any physical spaces or larger social institutions that appeared throughout the interview. In doing so I paid particular attention to the contexts in which narratives were produced. Codes were then grouped into larger themes that reflected patterns across participants’ narratives. These codes reflected larger themes in how participants made meaning of their racial self and its location to people of color.

After reading and coding all interviews, coherent narratives were formed based on a number of stories told over multiple interviews. This required a great deal of interpretive work, for as the researcher I took many unrelated stories and composed a plotline with a beginning, middle, and end. As Riessman (2008) explained, rarely do participants offer accounts in chronological order. This was indeed the case with my participants, as they frequently told distant and unrelated stories with little sense of order.
or time. As such, it was important to impose a sense of order on the stories. Restorying the interviews required linking often unrelated stories, and as such, yielded a great deal of interpretive authority. This resulted in individual narratives for each participant, illuminating both pre-college and collegiate experiences with race and racism. These narratives are meant to highlight the temporal nature of experience, underscoring both early memories with race and sense-making of such matters on campus. The full narratives were shortened and offered at the start of chapter four as an introduction to participants.

**Dialogic/performance analysis of whiteness.** Whereas thematic approaches to narrative analysis considered the told, the dialogic/performance analysis incorporates the telling, or structure, and situates it within social and historical contexts (Riessman, 2008). This analytic method draws on structural analysis to examine how narratives are told, but also includes a critical perspective of language and context. Put otherwise, this approach asked, “who an utterance may be directed to, “when,” and “why,,” that is, for what purposes?” (Riessman, 2008, p. 105). It operates from an understanding not that stories are stored away, waiting to be told, but rather produced interactionally and strategically for specific reasons (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). In this sense, narratives are motivated works that have a directed aim. Such a perspective lends the researcher a great deal of interpretive authority. A large amount of interpretive work is necessary, and as such the participant is never considered the final authority on their story (Riessman, 2008). Although this may seem counterintuitive to qualitative scholarship and the central
hallmark of constructing stories with participants (Patton, 2015), the dialogic/performance approach rests on a very different set of assumptions about language.

Although qualitative researchers often view participant narratives as an unmediated truth, the dialogic/performance method troubles the relationship between language and meaning (Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Recall that a central feature of narrative inquiry is the understanding that stories are always a reconstruction or recapitulation of events (Chase, 2010; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2008). This analytic technique takes this assumption to great extremes, contending that word choice is not neutral but always a political act, and that words are always imbedded with previous meanings. The language individuals use is “saturated with ideology and meanings from previous usage; analysts never encounter a word from a pure position – it is not a neutral repository of an idea” (Riessman, 2008, p. 107). This approach inherently problematizes meaning and contends that words have great meaning beyond their surface. The job of the narrative scholar is to situate that language against the backdrop of history, politics, and social context. As Goffman (1963) explained, words are not merely a means of providing information but rather performing an elaborate drama. In turn, one might ask how does the participant want to be known in a given interaction (Riessman, 2008)?

This point cannot be understated, as it troubles the very relationship between language and meaning. No longer are the words of a participant a direct access to their
world, but rather a communication of a given ideology. Mishler (1986) explained the narrativized self shifts the question from “who am I” to questions of “when, where, and how I am?” Doing so does not so much focus on the direct reporting of facts or experiences (Elliot, 2012), but rather operates in a way that “language—the particular words and styles narrators select to recount experiences – is interrogated, not taken at face value” (Riessman, 2008, p. 137).

As applied to the study of white students, I drew on Critical Whiteness scholars described in chapter two in order to contextualize the words of participants. In particular, I utilized three major theoretical frameworks: Bonilla Silva’s (2013) colorblind racism, Feagin’s (2013) White Racial Frame, and work on white complicity and innocence (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Yancy, 2015). Theories of colorblind racism were useful in highlighting how participants might minimize the role of race and whiteness in a supposed “post-racial” America. Feagin’s (2013) White Racial Frame contextualized participants’ words, situating assumptions and frames about people of color in a larger historical landscape. Conceptualizations of white complicity and innocence were particularly useful in examining how white students understood their own racial selves in relation to larger systems of white supremacy. That is, did they consider themselves as complicit and a part of the problem or strive for a presentation of the self centered on innocence and goodness?

How does one engage in this type of analytic work that interrogates the meaning and ideological nature of language? Doing so required a critical approach (Jones et al.,
2014), because it is explicit in its attention to power dynamics and local, historical, and social contexts that may or may not be named by participants. Further, as the researcher I was granted a great deal of interpretive authority in looking beyond the words, or themes in the prior analysis, of participants. This is not to say that themes are not identified, but rather they are probed for deeper, ideological meaning.

To carry out this analytic endeavor I drew on Riessman’s (2008) structural approach to narrative analysis and utilized the multiple aforementioned theoretical frameworks (Applebaum, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Feagin, 2013; Leonardo, 2009) as a backdrop against which to interpret participant narratives. This is central to the dialogic/performance method of analysis, as it combines the what (thematic) with the how (structural) and situates it against existing theory to offer a rich level of interpretation.

According to Riessman (2008), a fully formed narrative includes six elements. The first is an abstract. This serves as the summary or “so what” of the story. One might think of it as the larger point. Second, a narrative has an orientation, which offers context in terms of time, place, characters and situations. Third is the complicating action. This serves as the turning point or main concern within the drama as told by the participant. Fourth, an evaluation of the events within the narrative occurs. In the evaluation the narrator steps back “from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotions – the “soul” of the narrative” (Riessman, 2008, p. 84). Narratives end with a resolution, or the outcome of the plot, and a coda that ends the story and brings the conversation
back to the present. Using this framework, I coded clauses within the larger narrative based on these elements. The strength of this approach lies in the ability to examine who and what the narrator identifies as significant, the organization and sequence of such significant experiences, and an attention to other characters in the plot, no matter how minor.

This is exceptionally important for the present study, as there appeared to be a strong desire among participants to be seen in a racially progressive, favorable light. Left uninterrupted, these narratives may have only further perpetuated myths of white innocence. Drawing on Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) conceptualizations of narrative work, I examined stories and accounts for inconsistences and tensions that further underscored desires for innocence and purity. For instance, participants frequently discussed their acute awareness of white racial privilege, only to offer accounts later in the interview that were defined by white privilege but with little awareness on the part of the participant.

The role of theoretical frameworks was particularly important here, for the dialogic/performance method of analysis attempts to situate data within local, historical, and social contexts (Riessman, 2008). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) have deemed these narrative environments that offer insight into how narratives are conditioned by a number of contexts including close relationships, local culture, and organizations. Applied to this study, narrative environments included the immediate context of the university, but also past relationships, pre-college environments, and larger contemporary discourses on race.
and racism. Riessman is particularly instructive here in thinking about how white students might perpetuate whiteness through their language:

What meanings are invoked? What history do the words carry on their backs? Who have they hurt or silenced in past uses? What may be accomplished when they are appropriated in the present? To address these difficult interpretive questions, dialogic investigation looks beyond superficial, literal, and consciously intended practices of language use. (p. 124)

Feagin’s (2013) framework, through an attention to the historical racial framing of people of color, was especially helpful in this analytic quest.

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers must establish confidence among readers in their findings (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014). The qualitative researcher’s aim is not to generalize to other settings, but instead to “offer readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). Although qualitative scholars are not concerned with presenting an objective, ultimate truth, they do need to give the reader “some grounds for distinguishing accounts that are credible from those that are not” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 280). That is, before the reader can consider the results within the context of their own experiences, the researcher must provide some confidence in the work. A range of techniques exists for ensuring a level of trustworthiness between researcher and reader. I employed a number of these measures, including reflexivity.
journaling, conducting multiple interviews, searching for negative cases and an using external auditor.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis I kept a reflexivity journal to monitor my own biases, assumptions, and emerging thoughts and considerations of the data. Journaling typically occurred immediately after an interview had finished. This process of journaling was important for multiple reasons. First, given the heavy use of theory in my analysis, it allowed me to connect participants’ words with current literature and theory. That is, through my journaling I began to make initial connections between the theoretical work that I was immersed in and the individual narratives participants offered during our time together in the interviews. Second, it was through the free write process that I began to give a language to my earliest interpretations of the data. Central to the interpretative process was identifying common themes and patterns across participants. Locating areas of divergence was also important. It was through the process of journaling that these themes became apparent, be it in the earliest stages of data collection or during analysis. Prior to analysis I frequently used the journal as a way of marking inconsistencies or similarities between participant narratives that were especially visible. These interpretations were refined as the process of coding occurred.

I also was sure to note any negative cases as my data analysis progressed. Searching for negative cases allowed for an exploration of disconfirming evidence (Maxwell, 2013). This was particularly important given how immersed in theory and literature I was at the time of data analysis. Qualitative researchers must guard against
the temptation of fitting participants’ into boxes that match our preconceived notions and assumptions. Maxwell (2013) stated, “instances that cannot be accounted for by a particular interpretation or explanation can point up important deficits in that account” (p. 284). While there is a tendency to want to confirm all of our preconceived notions and assumptions about the research topic, highlighting negative cases guards against this temptation.

I also utilized an external auditor to review initial conclusions and interpretations of data. Although direct data could not be shared with the auditor per the Institutional Review Board, this individual served as a sounding board and offered feedback on my analytic interpretations of participant narratives. I now turn to a more lengthy discussion on my own subjectivities, positionality, and the need for reflexive journaling.

Positionality

Qualitative research carries with it “a significant responsibility to tell the stories of those with whom researchers come into contact in the most respectful way possible” (Jones, 2002, p. 461). A critical component of this process is the need to reflect on one’s own subjectivities (Fine et al., 2003; Glesne, 1999; Josselson, 2011). In doing so the researcher must consider how previous lived experiences, relationships, and identities influence all stages of the research, from the formulation of questions to the interpretation and presentation of data. It is through individual subjectivities that one’s research questions and scholarly interests are rooted. As Glesne (1999) noted, “what you know about your research – reflected in your interpretations – is intertwined with what you
know about yourself” (p. 176). She equated subjectivities to lenses, a type of medium that influences how one sees their research. Before examining how my identities and subjectivities influenced the process of data collection and analysis, it is important to briefly note how they motivated the study itself.

This research process was indeed motivated from my own biography as a white person, my experiences giving meaning to whiteness, and my work teaching about race and racism in service-learning courses. Having come from a rural white town that is roughly 20 minutes from a much more racially diverse city, my own upbringing was marked by an absence of immediate racial diversity but not racist language and framing of people of color (Feagin, 2013). That is, despite growing up in an almost exclusively white town of roughly 6,000, messages of race were omnipresent. This was particularly the case in my high school. Schools in the city were “ghetto” and if a Black student ever enrolled in my school they were an extreme focus of attention. I vividly remember descriptors of the one Black student in our community. He did not speak like other Black people, my friends would proclaim.

I always had a sense that there was something problematic, even racist about this appraisal, but it was veiled as a compliment and I had no language or tools to interpret their assessments of his speech. No one had ever engaged me about whiteness or the historical legacies of white racism that produced the racist analysis of his dialect. I often went back in time to these experiences in my hometown during this present study, reflecting on how his humanity was constructed against the unmarked location of
whiteness. It also reminded me of my own inaction and the limited language and frames of reference I had to challenge such thinking. Instead, unsure of how to proceed, I remained silent or laughed in order to move on from the discussion. In this way I was complicit in perpetuating racial ideologies of whiteness that situated Blackness as inferior to whiteness. This research was in many ways motivated by experiences coming to navigate the terrain of whiteness, never explicitly learning about my own racial identity but frequently internalizing messages about racial others.

The study is also a reflection of my time teaching service-learning courses to predominately white undergraduate students. Time and again I have found white students to be incredibly resistant to material, frequently disengaging with the content and casting themselves as victims to a classroom discourse that was essentially anti-white. In doing so they opt out of valuable and rich opportunities for learning about the self, the experiences of people of color, and larger systems of white supremacy. Other students, I found, appeared to have the language to discuss white privilege but would consistently retreat when the discussions became deeper and more critical of individual white people. Taken together, these are the experiences that bring me to the present study.

**Considering the self and others in critical whiteness research.** Fine and her colleagues (2003) offered three questions to think about what they called the triple representation problem. They asked how we might present ourselves as researchers who influence the narratives we collect, participants themselves, and those individuals who
are central to the narratives, but not directly a part of the research. Given the nature of this research, a white man studying whiteness and race, a more nuanced discussion of positionality is required. I identify as a white, cisgender, heterosexual man of able body and mind from a middle class, Catholic family. The results that follow this chapter cannot be understood outside of the context of these identities. As Collins (1990) explained, “no standpoint is neutral because no individual or group exists unembedded in the world” (p. 33).

Throughout this study I frequently reflected on what amounted to a set of mixed feelings I had about the research process. On one hand, I was excited about the data I was collecting. The stories from participants offered a great deal of insight into their thinking about race, racism, and whiteness. Participants’ stories offered a window into the meaning they assigned to their own racial selves and people of color. Such reflective accounts among white undergraduates are rare, and so little of it exists in the field of higher education and student affairs scholarship. This was, I thought, very useful data for faculty and staff who engage in anti-racist education and student development work. I still stand by what I believe to be very valuable and important data, but I am also at times uncomfortable about the inherent privilege that produced the accounts.

I am certain that participants read me in a way that provided them a great deal of comfort in discussing matters of race and racism. Indeed, one participant, explaining that she thought campus was welcoming and affirming to all students, reluctantly said she likely would not share that opinion in the presence of students of color. It is difficult to
imagine participants sharing the stories and accounts they did if I was not white. Desires for racial purity and innocence would have likely been even stronger in such a space marked by a body of color. In turn, I am left sitting with the realization that much of what I have documented is largely the result of my own white racial privilege, that my colleagues of color may not have had access to the accounts these participants offered. Ruth Frankenberg (2004), one of the first white women to write on the subject of whiteness, noted the feelings that rushed over her when she realized she was encouraged to do something in graduate school that people of color had been jailed, lynched, and called mad for: challenging racism. As I wrote about or discussed my initial results, her words echoed in my head. The enormity of this reality, as Frankenberg explained, sank in as scholars and peers alike praised me for my work on whiteness.

In doing this research I came to the realization of my own complicity in whiteness and white supremacy in two ways. The first is that I, as a white person, had access to white students in a way that people of color did not. In preparation of data collection, I read the reflections of multiple scholars who have conducted qualitative research on white racial identity. Gallagher (2010), writing about his study of white students and race, entered the study assuming some level of pre-established rapport but was surprised to find this was not at all the case. He cautioned, however, that white researchers studying whiteness must avoid an essentializing of white students that assumes a commonality in experiences. Reflecting on his research he explained, “being an insider because of one’s race does not mute or erase other social locations which serve to deny
access, create misunderstanding, or bias interviews with those from the same racial background” (Gallagher, 2010, p. 375). Fasching-Varner (2013), on the other hand, noted the rhetorical device of “you know?” as a common refrain that participants utilized at the end of answers. He posited that “you know?” assumed a shared experienced based on racial identities. Cabrera (2012a) described that, as a man of color, his interviews with white undergraduate men were a constant microaggression. Reading each of these accounts reminded me of the centrality of the researcher in the interview, that we are not neutral subjects but active producers of the narratives with our participants. If narratives are understood as an active, co-constructed process of storytelling, how I identify is central to the data that resulted from this study. What does this say about participants’ perceptions of me? What does it say about the symbolic power of whiteness, comfort, and safety? These are questions I have wrestled with throughout my time in this study.

Second, the praise and attention I received as a white man doing research on whiteness was treated as almost a saintly pursuit. It highlighted, for me, just how low our expectations are for white people in pursuits of racial justice. That is, race work is something that people of color take up in their scholarship, not white people. And with this came the great irony of my entire dissertation: that as a white doctoral candidate studying and challenging white supremacy, I was upholding the very system. This is a reality that no white researcher can ever truly escape. How does one engage in Critical Whiteness work as a white person in ethical and conscious ways? No amount of reflection, internally or externally with others, could erase this reality.
Despite this fact, I did attempt to remain as conscious and aware of how my own racial biography may have influenced the production of participant narratives in the context of the interviews. I was particularly cognizant as participants recalled their pre-college environments. Having grown up in a predominately white, rural community in Central Illinois, certain participant narratives undoubtedly were more familiar to me than others. That is, the participants who recounted rural, modest upbringings were much more familiar to me, the son a single mother early in life, than the incredible wealth of suburban white upbringings. I did my best to remain aware of this fact and not be consumed by my own experiences in the flow of the interview exchange.

Finally, I worked hard to enter each of my 28 interviews with empathic neutrality (Patton, 2015). Patton described empathic neutrality as “understanding a person’s situation and perspective without judging the person – and communicating that understanding with authenticity to build rapport, trust, and openness” (p. 57). Moustakas (1995) similarly described the role of empathy in the qualitative interview, noting:

I enter with the intention of understanding and accepting perceptions and not presenting my own view or reaction…. I only want to encourage and support the other person’s expression, what and how it is, how it can be, and where it is going. (pp. 82-83)

Entering the interview from this perspective was critical given the nature of participants’ thinking on race and racism. That is, participants frequently offered accounts and
interpretations that were racist and a reflection of white racial framing of people of color (Feagin, 2013).

Indeed, at times it was difficult to not intervene as I would in an educational context such as the classroom. Drawing on the concept of empathic neutrality, however, reminded me that I was genuinely interested in how participants made meaning of their racial selves and whiteness. Meaningfully engaging participants in the interview process required that I listen with empathy and respect the emotions participants expressed (Ellis & Berger, 2003). That is, the very purpose of the interview was to elicit and uncover many of the problematic, incomplete, and at times inherently racist ways in which white undergraduates think about race, both their racial selves and people of color. I made sure to monitor my reactions, particularly nonverbal cues, so as to not signal what might constitute a desirable answer. In this sense I did not want to train participants to answer questions in a certain way. Multiple participants ended answers with comments such as “I’m not sure if that’s what you’re looking for” or asking if that was “the right answer.” One participant remarked in the interview that she was careful in how she described her definition of institutional racism because she did not want to look stupid. Empathic neutrality offered a helpful guide in answering these questions, explaining to students that there were no correct answers and I was genuinely interested in their perspectives and sense making.

**Ethical Considerations**
A number of ethical issues were considered prior to the start of this study. Because all qualitative research is autobiographical (Jones et al., 2014), perhaps the most pressing consideration was how much of myself I shared in interviews. This is particularly true in narrative research because narratives are always constructed through collaboration between the researcher and participant (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Riessman, 2008). As such, I considered how much of my own story I was willing to weave into the interview context. There is no consensus among qualitative scholars about how interviewers should respond to participants’ answers in the interview. Some advocate for relative silence in the face of answers from participants, so as not to give the impression that a given answer is more desirable than the other. Others have noted that silence will leave the participant feeling as if they have given the wrong answer or are somehow not answering as the researcher would like (Mishler, 1986).

Mishler’s (1986) guidance is useful, discussing that if the researcher remains silent after an answer:

Neither explicitly acknowledging or commenting on the answer nor proceeding immediately to a next question, respondents tend to hesitate, show signs of searching for something else to say, and usually continue with additional context. Sometimes they look for a sign that the interviewer understands or try to elicit a direct assessment with a query like “you know?” (p. 57)
Although I avoided offering guiding questions or responses (Hatch, 2002; Jones et al., 2014), I did offer affirming responses when the situation arose. I found this to be of particular importance given the sensitive nature of the discussion and white students relative unease with discussing matters of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; McKinney, 2005). It was my hope to convey to participants that they were not alone in rarely having thought about or considering race. Robbins (2012), in her dissertation research on white women and racial identity in graduate programs, shared selective information when her identities were similar to the participant and the exchange might help build rapport. For instance, she noted that if a participant similarly identified as Queer or Jewish, she might share her own experiences. Following this approach, I similarly shared selective information in a way of forging some level of rapport. For instance, during certain exchanges I affirmed participants by noting that I also grew up in incredibly homogenous racial communities or that I rarely heard any explicit messages about what it meant to be white. When participants asked me what I thought about a given issue that I broached in the interview, however, I was more hesitant to provide a direct answer explaining to them that I did not want to influence their subsequent engagement on the topic.

An additional ethical issue revolves around the use of member checks. Member checks are understood to be a pillar of trustworthiness within qualitative work (Jones et al., 2014), for they allow participants to respond to the researcher. Such a response can, to varying extents, confirm or deny how participants see themselves represented in the final presentation of data. I opted not to use this approach, largely because of the use of
theory and its role in contextualizing the words of participants. Qualitative data takes on no significance until the researcher interprets it through the lens of theory. As has been noted throughout this chapter, my interpretations of data were greatly informed by a number of theories, including colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013), the White Racial Frame (Feagin, 2013), and notions of white innocence and complicity (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). In light of these theories my interpretation of participants’ words may have seemed foreign or even completely at odds with what they discussed in the interviews.

Kvale (2003) described how member checks can serve as a means of rectifying a power imbalance within the interview, but that often time emotional barriers exist when participants encounter critical interpretations of their words. He explained, “there may be emotional barriers for the interviewees to accept critical interpretations of what they have told the interviewer, as well as limitations of the subjects’ competence to address specific theoretical interpretations” (Kvale, 2003, p. 485). This is especially true when one theorizes participants’ words about race, including sensitive topics such as their coming to understand race and the potential ways in which they perpetuate whiteness at the expense of students of color.

Some might argue then that such a member check could serve as an important source of data, or even more, an important educational intervention for these participants around matters of race and racism. However, after much reflection, I was uncomfortable with the prospect of member checks as an educational intervention in large part because
of the intensive time and investment necessary. Whiteness is powerfully ingrained in the white imagination, often after years of conditioning. Given the powerful nature of conditioning and socialization, it would be difficult to imagine a truly educational, one-off encounter about the data with each participant. Instead, I imagined many scenarios in which my interpretations might cause even more dissonance regarding matters of race, potentially prompting additional defensiveness and claims of not seeing race. Thus, while member checks are often heralded as central to the trustworthiness of a qualitative project, I did not offer them as a part of this dissertation. Had this study been designed as a constructivist project, wherein I offered less critical theoretical interpretation, I would be more inclined to provide participants with member checks. It should be noted that if the participants ask, I will be glad to share with them my interpretations.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to offer a methodological guide for the study of white college students’ relationship to race. First, I situated the study within the broader landscape of critical theory and named narrative inquiry as the guiding methodology. I highlighted a number of hallmarks of narrative inquiry that differentiate it from other qualitative methodologies and make it particularly useful for the study of white college students’ relationship to race. I then introduced sampling criteria and the strategies I utilized to obtain my 14 participants. A discussion of data analysis and matters of trustworthiness followed. I then engaged in an extensive reflection on researcher positionality and concluded with ethical considerations.
Chapter 4: Results

This dissertation was guided by two overarching research questions. The first asked how white college students construct and give meaning to their white racial identities. The second explored how white college students either perpetuated, or potentially disrupted, racial ideologies of whiteness on campus. The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, I offer individual narratives of each of the 14 participants in this study. These narratives are meant to illuminate the complexity and diversity within whiteness by considering the biographical particulars of each participant. Against the backdrop of these narratives I then answer the two central research questions guiding this dissertation. The first, how white college students construct and give meaning to their white racial identities, is addressed through the creation of three constructions: Ignorant Constructions, Emergent Constructions, and Critical Constructions. These constructions were created with the content of participant narratives, or common patterns and themes that arose from their interviews. That is, they were derived from thematic narrative analysis, or a central focus on the content of participant narratives (Riessman, 2008). Although the typologies I offer reflect increasing complexity and criticality of the racial self, they are not meant to portray a linear model of development.

Having examined construction of whiteness among individual white students, I then shift my attention to the ways in which whiteness is sustained and perpetuated on
campus. As opposed to an exclusive focus on the content, or the told, I also focused on the telling. Utilizing structural analysis (Riessman, 2008), I moved beyond the surface of a given story and considered motivations for why particular stories were told, how they were structured, and what their intended consequence was in the context of the interview. This level of analysis considers plotlines, characters, and what is accomplished in the telling of a given story. As a result of this analysis I highlight four larger narratives offered by participants: Narratives of Campus Racial Harmony, Imposition Narratives of Campus Activism, Narratives of Enlightenment, and Narratives of White Innocence. These four distinct narratives were developed through an attention to how participants structured and assembled accounts within the interview context. That is, through attempts to convince, persuade, and situate the self in a certain light.

**Participant Narratives**

Consistent with the aims of narrative inquiry, in the following pages I first present individual narratives of each of the 14 participants. In doing so I attempt to illuminate the complexity and diversity within the larger umbrella of white racial identity. That is, I provide these narratives to highlight the varying experiences students had with race prior to coming to college and the multitude of ways they interacted with these matters while at State University. Students backgrounds ranged from wealthy suburbs of Washington D.C. to rural Appalachian Ohio towns of no more than 1500. One participant spent almost the entirety of her precollege life in Paris, Switzerland, and Japan, while another did not even see a city until her final year of high school. A diversity of sexuality existed
among these students, including a self-identified masculine, butch lesbian, a pansexual man who recently came out to his family, and a gay man who rarely discussed his sexuality. Once at State University, all were heavily involved on different parts of campus. A majority of the participants, seven to be exact, were or had been employed as Resident Assistants. Others were involved in leadership organizations, the student programming board on campus, and a multicultural organization. Four participants were involved in Greek life.

Although these are the differences among participants, a number of similarities offered a predictable trajectory prior to college. Almost all of the participants grew up in exclusively white communities. They reported racially homogenous schools and social networks that prepared them for college. When students did experience racial diversity prior to coming to State, it often existed at a distance. Whether it was a segregated population of Latino students or a predominantly Black rival high school in the neighboring community, racial diversity was rarely experienced in intimate ways. The insulated nature of their precollege lives, often referred to as a “bubble” by many of the students in this study, did not preclude the existence of racially coded messages from families, teachers, and peers. Almost all of the students experienced, either firsthand or through word of mouth, the racialization of people of color as different, dangerous, inferior, or foreign. Perhaps most striking is the role in which Blackness played in the white imagination. The words “Black” or “African American” were uttered 930 times by
these participants, as opposed to 85 for Asian Americans, 74 for International, and 42 for Latino/Latina/Hispanic.

The purpose of these narratives is to offer a glimpse into the complexity of these students’ lives. Such narratives should in no way be used to excuse racist behavior and thinking, but rather offer a larger narrative context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
<th>Spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Activities Board, Social Fraternity,</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Activities Board, Social Fraternity, Business Fraternity</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Sorority, Leadership Organization, Alumni Council</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Residence Hall Council, Learning Community Council</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Resident Assistant, Research Assistant, Class Honorary</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Upper</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Resident Assistant, Gun Club, Campus Republicans</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Participants Characterized by Ignorant Constructions of White Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
<th>Spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Resident Advisor, Women’s Rugby Club</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas</td>
<td>Soph</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Resident Assistant</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>Sr.</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Resident Manager, Resident Assistant</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: Participants Characterized by Emergent Constructions of White Identity

118
Table 4.2 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Involvement on Campus</th>
<th>Spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Soph.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Sorority, Research Assistant, Second Year Experience, Service-Learning Cohort</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spencer</td>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Middle to Lower</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Resident Assistant, Student Ambassador</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3: Participants Characterized by Critical Constructions of White Identity

Amanda

Amanda, a fourth year student who was heavily involved at State, came to college from a predominantly white, affluent suburb outside of Cincinnati. She described her town as one that was “very safe and secure and kind of just typical suburbia.” Although her family was Jewish, which she admitted made them “semi out of the norm,” rarely did this identity come up during our time together. Amanda characterized her hometown as incredibly white but noted that they were in driving distance to more racially and
ethnically diverse communities. As such, much of her early exposure to racial difference, as was the case for other participants, came through extracurricular activities. For Amanda, this came in the form of show choir. As her choir traveled for competitions they were increasingly exposed to show choirs of color. It was in many ways the very first times she had been exposed to such racial difference. Similar to other participants, Amanda also explained that sporting events in high school was another early way in which she was exposed to racial difference.

Entering high school, Amanda still experienced relatively little interaction across difference. When asked to describe the racial climate of her high school she reflected that “I don’t think welcoming is the best word but I don’t think it was like aggressively against them either. I feel like they are pretty neutral.” She explained, “It’s like nothing was done to directly discriminate but also nothing was done to talk about the difference and celebrate the difference and give opportunity for more people, like there was nothing proactive done about integrating cultures or different viewpoints and that kind of stuff.”

Coming to State pushed Amanda to realize her levels of ignorance that resulted from never discussing matters of race and racism in high school. The limitations became visible through coursework in Public Health and Sociology, coupled with her extensive involvement in Student Life. Her involvement included wellness coaching, a leadership scholars group, and working as a project lead for Leadership Programs in the Office of Student Affairs. She recounted that “I cannot even imagine what my life would be like if I was still in that mindset and in that area of just like white ignorance. Not like the
people I grew up with are bad people, it’s just that they weren’t talking about important things, especially in regards to race. Like I said in the beginning I really enjoyed my experience growing up but I’m glad to be removed from it now and exposed to more things.” Amanda’s comments reveal the struggle, and at times shame, she experienced in relation to her hometown and pre-college upbringing.

**Connor**

Prior to coming to State Connor admitted that he had little to no interaction with people of color. Growing up he attended a private Catholic school outside of a midsize city, an education that he described “wasn’t cheap.” His early years were defined in many ways by his parents’ wealth, including his private schooling as well as playing competitive soccer and tennis. The formative years of his life appeared to be influenced largely through his Catholic school, a small, tightknit community where everyone knew each other. In this community there “were no secrets, no surprises.” Connor was not ignorant to the racial diversity that existed nearby. Although his school was exclusively white, the city itself had both public and Catholic schools that were home to a more racially diverse groups of students. During our time together he would frequently refer to his lack of cross-racial interaction as a type of disadvantage, a sense that his schooling may have limited him in this way. As was common among participants who grew up in homogenous precollege environments, Connor described a type of diversity beyond racial and ethnic difference, noting “diversity for me came on the level of personality and interest which I found really cool.” Despite his close proximity to Black and Asian
communities, he explained that his only times interacting with difference came through sports. He noted, “I mean, sports. I played a lot of sports in high school so that was one way I was exposed to those people, and I played club soccer so I would meet people across the state and across the city but I just meant in terms of the suburb of Dayton.”

Beyond cross-racial interactions, Connor struggled to name any moments or interactions prior to college that had prompted him to think about race or whiteness. At one point early in our first interview, appearing to be frustrated by the line of questioning, he pronounced he simply did not know what I wanted from him. Race was not a topic of discussion growing up, save for a few times his mother stopped his grandmother midsentence as she prepared to say something racially offensive. As Connor noted, rarely was there “any explicit commentary on race or varied backgrounds from my coaches or teachers because A, it didn't really exist where I went and so unless there was a major dispute or occurrence.”

The racial and ethnic diversity present at State was a stark contrast from what Connor had become accustomed to growing up. He explained “high school to college was a big jump for me in terms of size and scope.” Connor found this to be an appealing aspect of State, and claimed it was a part of his motivation to choose the university over smaller colleges that he felt were too similar to his hometown. Coming to State, he explained, would allow him to meet people of “varied backgrounds” and hear their stories. His networks on campus were predominantly white, however, including the Campus Activities Board and his fraternity. Connor was forced to deal with critiques of
the Activities Board, most notably that they were unresponsive to the diversity of campus. Connor claimed to entertain such assessments, but also struggled with larger critiques of State University because he found it to be home for so many people. In his words, the university was a truly special place. This allegiance to the university surfaced throughout our time together, as Connor constantly placed an emphasis on his connection to State, particularly when discussing matters of racial hostility on campus. Now in his senior year as a film major, Connor was looking to move to an area of the country that could aid in launching his career.

**Jason**

Jason, a finance major who was heavily involved in the campus programming board and his fraternity, hailed from an affluent family in a predominately white town. He estimated the community to be about seventy percent white, although there was a relatively large Hispanic population that he attributed to the General Motors plant. Jason’s early years saw little, if any, interaction across racial difference. He attended an almost exclusively white private school where each grade was comprised of no more than twenty students. His earliest encounters with race came when he moved out of his private school and into the much more racially diverse public school for sixth grade. The representation at this school was a stark contrast to his prior experiences, as the public school boasted a heavy population of Hispanic students from the nearby communities. Despite the increased presence of students of color, Jason still rarely engaged across difference. His new school was very much defined along racial lines. As he explained it, there were popular groups of white students and popular groups of Hispanic students, but
they rarely ever intermingled. His only true interaction across racial difference came from an early friendship with a young Black man his age, which had resulted through a summer basketball camp. These two stayed friends for a few years, but the friendship eventually faded as they grew older.

        Jason seldom received any explicit messages about race growing up, but he did pick up on some implicit cues from his parents. It became apparent to him early on that his mother was often fearful or uncomfortable around people of color. As he explained, “She won't say it. I can maybe feel it. If we're just driving somewhere, through [city] even, she'll want to stay in the car or park as close as we can to the place we're going.” Unlike many of the other participants, Jason did not have to go far to encounter racial diversity. Although his town was predominantly white, the relatively high population of Hispanic families offered spaces of cross-racial interaction that gave way to his mother’s reactions. The only explicit messages Jason recalled hearing about race was prompted by his cousin’s interracial marriage, which his grandmother vehemently objected. Describing his grandmother as “extremely racist,” a revelation he did not come to until high school, Jason explained that it was not uncommon to hear racial joking and commentary about his cousin’s relationship. Jason noted that, “I have cousins who have married African-Americans. They would be her nieces. She'll make jokes about the skin color of the baby.” Interestingly, Jason would not go so far as to call his grandmother’s beliefs “hatred, but honestly sheer disrespect for someone from a different race.”
At State Jason was heavily involved in both his fraternity and the university’s programming board, serving on the executive board of the latter. The programming board often came under critique for what some perceived to be a lack of diversity in the acts brought to campus. This critique posed a major challenge for Jason and was one of the first ways in which he was ever confronted with a substantial conflict around race and whiteness. Similar to Connor, he struggled to understand how students could have these interpretations of the Activities Board or the university in general. As President of the organization, Jason worked to convene meetings with students of color in an attempt to respond to their concerns. The events were sparsely attended, but Jason claimed to be committed to engaging these critiques moving forward.

Jordan

Jordan, a sophomore who identified as a lesbian and presented a more masculine expression, came from a wealthy suburb of Columbus that was commonly referred to in her community as “the bubble.” This description, which was offered by another participant from the same town, illustrates very early recognitions of racial segregation and meanings attached to race. As Jordan explained, “There was always the whole thing, “there are no Black people here.”” She described her high school as 95 percent white and that you were “either white or you were Asian.” This notion of the bubble was so commonplace that a program had been instituted at the local high school entitled “Beyond the Bubble.” At the time of our interview Jordan estimated that she had used the bubble to describe her hometown at least ten times in the last week. She envisioned it
as a sort of glass dome akin to what one might see in a sci-fi movie, sheltering an exclusive and utopian community. This language was not confined merely to members of the community, but was also evoked by those from surrounding towns.

Jordan explained that despite the lack of diversity in her hometown, it wasn’t really a problem for her because “I grew up in a pretty liberal household. My parents have always identified as Democrats.” This description of a seemingly open and progressive household were later contradicted when Jordan explained her mother sometimes made racist jokes and that her father “whenever we go to restaurants, let’s say a Mexican restaurant or an Indian restaurant… he almost mocks the tone and the accent of the waiter in a way that my mom and I both notice it.” After recounting these experiences, she flatly admitted, “He actually has made some racist jokes before.” Her mother’s racial joking included comments such as “You have to compete with all these little Asian boys and girls,” a sentiment she felt was a popular one in her high school.

Many of Jordan’s earliest memories of race came through her interactions with students of Asian descent. She did not specify if they were international or domestic students. This should come as little surprise given that the racial makeup of her school was predominantly white and Asian. Despite her incredibly white networks, she did recall having a Chinese friend whose house she remembered visiting in the second or third grade. Jordan explained that “I realized that her household was kind of different than mine, but I really didn’t go to her household until third grade… that that point I realized that there were differences between our cultures, differences behind our
backgrounds.” Additionally, her experiences in speech and debate club brought a similar awareness in high school, as almost everyone in the organization was of Indian or Pakistani descent.

Similar to other participants from extremely white communities, Jordan experienced interaction across racial difference through a traveling organization. In her case, this came through the Central Ohio Leadership Academy that took her to both Cincinnati and Washington D.C. In contrast to the bubble of her suburb Jordan explained “I was definitely exposed to more racial minorities through the organization.”

Upon arriving to college, Jordan found herself in a much more racially diverse community. Despite the relative increase in racial minorities from her hometown, her networks on campus were still extremely white and in many ways reflect the earlier bubble of her suburban community. At the end of her first year of college Jordan decided to apply for the Resident Assistant position in the hopes of interacting with a more diverse group of individuals. She explained her motivations, noting “I wanted to get to know people from different backgrounds, and get to know my residents, and my coworkers, and form those connections with people.”

Interestingly, despite framing college as a space for diverse interactions throughout our time together, Jordan’s networks were incredibly white. This was particularly true in regards to her R.A. position. Although she had initially applied for the position because of its potential to expose her to difference, she recalled that of the 40 RA’s on her staff, only five were of color. This was in stark contrast from the staff the
previous year, where racial diversity was much more visible. Reflecting on her expectations, Jordan explained “there’s some diversity, but it’s not as much as I was expecting.” Beyond just her staff, the floor in which she presided over as an R.A. was also almost exclusively white. Describing her floor, Jordan said, “We don't have a very racially diverse floor. I'm pretty sure there's only two African American people and I think everyone else is white unless it's like their racial identity might not be able to be expressed visually, but that I know of, the only people who identify as a racial minority there's two of them on my half (of the hall).”

**Laura**

Laura is in many ways the epitome of the involved student. Her resume lists an impressive accumulation of activities, including organizations focused on leadership, service, and alumni relations. In addition to these three student groups she was also a member of a prominent sorority on campus. Now in her senior year it had been four years since Laura came to State from a suburb of Cleveland. When asked to describe the racial makeup of her hometown, she said pointedly “probably 98% white.” Little racial diversity existed in her community, and by extension, her high school. She rifled off the demographics as if you could check students of color off by name: “We had a couple Asian students in my grade, one Black student, and one Indian student, if I remember correctly. It's been a few years, but that was it.”

Although the town was void of any racial or ethnic diversity, there was a striking split along class lines. The community was largely divided between rural, poor families
who lived on county roads and the more suburban and affluent households in town. Laura spent her formative years prior to State in the affluent, suburban part of town. This class divide was in many ways the only true exposure to difference Laura experienced prior to college. It should come as little surprise then that Laura explained she hadn’t really given much serious consideration to matters of race and racism until coming to State. In fact, when asked to consider any meaningful memories with race prior to college, Laura apologized and stated that she just did not have "many personal memories with race because (I) didn’t have much exposure in high school.”

Similar to so many other participants, a lack of racial diversity did not equate to a lack of racialized messages from family members. Although Laura could not recount many early memories with race, she did recall her grandmother consistently telling her, "don't bring a black boy home to your family.” These messages were frequently laughed off and chalked up to her southern roots. It was just expected that she might “be a little bit more racist than the rest of the family.” Her father also engaged in racially tinged messaging. Hailing from what Laura described as “inner city Cleveland,” he was the only one of his siblings to “make it out.” Despite having left the city, Laura claimed her father maintained relationships with many African Americans and would frequently proclaim “Oh, I'm one of the brothers. I love them.” Overall, Laura’s time prior to State was marked by a lack of any substantial interaction across difference.

Arriving at State did offer a space for increased attention to race and racism, particularly given her extensive involvement on campus. Through her involvement in
student organizations and subsequent required courses for a leadership minor, Laura was thrust into conversations on identity and white privilege. She found the courses useful in that they exposed her to an array of perspectives and differences that were not possible in her nearly all white hometown. These perspectives appeared to be welcome until they directly challenged her assumptions and beliefs. Laura described a time in which she was incredibly frustrated over the definition of racism offered in a class on power and inequality. When told that only white people can be racist because of institutional structures that reinforce power relations, she scoffed at the idea. Her dad, growing up in Cleveland, was often beaten up by Black men and dropped out of school. She explained, “Because that is the community that my dad grew up in. He was the minority. And um he was treated a lot worse than I have ever seen anyone treated because of their race.” To her, this was racism. That this definition was rebuked by an instructor and fellow classmates, and instead labeled as a form of bias, was difficult for Laura to accept.

Similar to her time at home, many of her networks on campus were predominantly white. Although her leadership student organization offered some level of racial diversity, her sorority, which was a major catalyst for her social life, was characterized as “probably 97% white.” This was nothing out of the ordinary to Laura, because students of color have just not felt the historical connection to Greek life that white students have. Further, when Laura interacted or experienced student activism on campus, her reaction was typically met with frustration or apathy. She frequently
explained that she and her friends just weren’t passionate about matters of social justice to the extent of activists.

**Liz**

Liz spent a considerable amount of her youth overseas prior to coming to college. Her father’s job in the financial industry, which resulted in considerable wealth and a plethora of opportunities for her and her siblings, took her family all over the world. Before eighth grade Liz had found herself living in Chicago, Paris, Japan, Michigan, and Switzerland. While her parents and siblings returned to the states during her last year of high school, this time to Cleveland, Liz resided in a small boarding house and finished out her education in Switzerland.

Rarely having lived in the United States prior to college, Liz’s sense-making around race, racism, and her own white identity was often assembled on the go. That is, as she returned to the United States for college, she found herself attempting to make sense of race in the context of America. She confessed to knowing very little about racial stereotypes, such as Black Americans being lazy or good at sports. Additionally, her historical orientation was largely European. She knew more about the French Revolution than the American Revolution and the Civil Rights Movement was more of a blip on the radar than a matter of extended discussion in school. Liz explained that when she did learn about racism, it was situated merely as a historical concept: “they teach it to you like it's a thing of the past and so I just kind of accepted that as fact. Yes they were second-class citizens, but they're not anymore. Then I took this and I just kind of went
with that. I honestly had never really given race much thought, but I didn't grow up here and I think Americans really put more of an emphasis on it than other countries do.”

Liz’s schooling rarely introduced her to those who were not white, particularly overseas. The only time she recounted seeing any students of color was during a brief stint before high school in Michigan, where she “realized there are black people, or people of different races.” Both her private school in Switzerland and the International School of Japan lacked any racial diversity beyond a few students of color. As such, her exposure to race largely came through infrequent interactions with students of color and her fathers lamenting about “the damn black kids” who had bullied him as a kid. Her father’s experiences being bullied seemed to excuse, or at least justify, this type of language.

Interestingly, it was while in Japan that Liz first noticed racial difference due to having one Black friend. It was then that she first began attaching meaning to race, as she asked her friend’s mom to style her hair too. As the mother pointed out the difference in the girls’ hair, explaining that white hair could not be styled the same, Liz’s whiteness had for the first time become apparent. Despite this interaction, her engagement with matters of race, racism, and racial difference were limited in both Japan and Switzerland. It was not until Liz returned to the States that her recognition and awareness of race accelerated. She described the move back to Ohio as a culture shock, feeling far removed from American understandings about race. Liz explained, “moving
around a lot, you jump from place to place, you’re never fully in one spot long enough…”

Now on campus and a senior involved in Residence Hall Council, Liz constructed a narrative defined by apathy and white victimhood. When asked to recall something that she had recently overheard on campus that she might characterize as racist, Liz responded this would be tough because she walked around with headphones on. Matters of race and racial injustice were largely distractions, issues with which Liz could not be bothered. As she bluntly offered, “I don't know, I am ignorant on the issue and I'll admit that just because I really don't pay attention to it, I guess selfishly, because I can't really be bothered. I've got a lot of other stuff going on in my life.”

Lucas

When I met Lucas he was in his second year at State University, and completing his first semester as a Resident Assistant in one of the university’s first year living communities. He came to State by way of an affluent suburb just outside of Washington D.C. The son of a government contractor, his early years were undeniably shaped by his time there. Lucas described the county in which he grew up as one of the richest in the country. As such, he often sensed that it shielded and bubbled him from issues of racial inequality, or as he explained, “we just didn’t have to deal with it.” His high school class of 1,000, for instance, was roughly 80 percent white. The transient nature of his community, so heavily populated by politicians, government officials, and military families, meant that students seldom made it from kindergarten to high school without
transferring. Lucas, however, did. His families’ longevity in the community gave Lucas a close proximity to the grief, heartache, and resulting racial and ethnic tensions that ensued after 9/11.

Lucas was in first grade on that September morning, unable to remember many of the details but aware enough to know something was up when his mother came to retrieve him from school. Initially delighted at a day off school, he would quickly learn that two of his classmates lost parents in the attack on the Pentagon. When asked what he recalled about that day, Lucas pointedly recalled, “I remember the tears. And the funerals… Just like that experience of like…why is that kid crying? Or, you know, what is, what is this thing we are going to? Why am I wearing black, kind of thing?”

The centrality of 9/11 to Lucas’ narrative stretches far beyond the day of the attacks. The implications of that day for his community were immense. First, two years after the attack many of his classmates were shuffled around the country as their parents reported to a variety of bases in light of a declaration of war. The fleeting nature of his community was accelerated as military families were moving from base to base. Lucas’ high school years were littered with homecoming celebrations. He recounted high school rallies welcoming parents back from Afghanistan and fathers returning from combat in Iraq at their son’s football game.

September 11th had another implication for Lucas and his upbringing: a heightened sense of Islamaphobia and nationalist rhetoric. It was clear that the attack on the Pentagon, and the subsequent consequences for so many military families in the area, had
taken an emotional toll on the community. What Lucas would describe, and name in his own words, amounted to an intense fear of Muslims. As the years passed and he grew older and more able to comprehend the dynamics of the so called war on terror, Lucas heard a familiar message in his community: “that conversation of like we’re declaring war against Islam. Was basically what was being told.” Lucas’ early years, and his first and most meaningful encounters across difference, were often dualistic messages that painted Islam as an enemy of America.

Before deciding to enroll at State, Lucas had initially intended to join the Navy. During high school Lucas was invited for dinner with his girlfriend’s family, all of whom were either currently enlisted or were veterans of the military. In what he could only characterize as extremely uncomfortable and eye opening, his girlfriend’s family prepared him for what he was about to encounter when he would serve his country: “So they were having a conversation with me and they were, a lot of what they were saying was like, we are going to kill the Muslims. And like, we're going to take over the Middle East and you need to be prepared for that.” As Lucas would explain, these messages were not uncommon in his relatively liberal suburb of D.C.

When Lucas came to State he became increasingly aware of racial tensions and inequality. Although families of color lived in his wealthy suburb of D.C., they were typically affluent which to Lucas, did not appear to expose the depth and severity of racial injustice. Both on campus and off he quickly began to recognize the realities of racial segregation. While he perceived his hometown to be well integrated (but
overwhelmingly white), at State “you have the Black kids, you have the white kids, you have the international students. And it’s much more prominent that those are groupings and they stick to their own groups. And that there is not much interaction between them. Whereas at home, in [city], it was more of a mumble jumble, it didn’t matter what you were or where you were.” During our time together it became apparent that Lucas’ two years at State had exposed him to tensions and conflicts around race and racial privilege, which busted the bubble that had initially shielded him from such issues in Virginia.

As an education major Lucas was required to complete a student teaching requirement early in his career at State. This experience offered his first prolonged engagement in a community of color and provided a powerful juxtaposition around matters of race and opportunity. Comparing his student teaching at a predominantly Black school located in the city and a predominantly white school in the suburbs, the disparities were striking. He recounted, “And the difference between the two is insane. Like how underprivileged the inner city kids are. And how a majority of them are minorities.” Lucas made sense of these schools in light of his own educational experiences, explaining that back home parents could literally pick and choose where they sent their children based on opportunities such as theatre programs or a renowned football team. Student teaching began to expose Lucas to the limited agency so many families of color living in poverty have, particularly as he reflected on his own time in high school.

Matt
Matt grew up in an extremely white, wealthy suburb of Ohio. Although he identified as gay, he was the only participant from the LGB community to not once speak of his sexual orientation as an important part of his college experience. He, like other participants in the study who hailed from this area, described the community as a “bubble.” It was one defined by white picket fences and brick houses, where all of the homes had mulch and the same color door. Consistent with the conceptualization of his town as a bubble, he explained that no one really showed much interest in branching out to “see what’s out there.” Although his parents divorced when he was in the eighth grade, he still found himself immersed in a predominantly white, now more rural, community. Matt recalled that after the divorce he and his mother moved to a farm where he could “run along our driveway and horses would run with me.”

Retracing his earliest experiences with race, Matt explained that while there were Black families in his community there was never a sense of racial tension. He clarified that because these families made good money that “everyone was kind of on the same level” and that although he couldn’t speak for everyone, he didn’t think that anyone “really experienced that much prejudice at [suburb] just because, it just wasn’t… it wasn’t that type of neighborhood.” His community, he explained, was different. Race just wasn’t an issue. Matt pointedly clarified: “just like when everyone is doing well you know, they are all going to the country club, the problems and injustices don’t really show up there. Because they haven’t really experienced them either.” From Matt’s vantage point, the wealth of his community mitigated any possibility of racism. This is
an unsurprising interpretation given that he frequently defined racism merely as a matter of individual prejudice and bias. Such a belief was likely supported by the fact that his parents were best friends with the family of a Black judge. The relationship seemed to instill a sense of colorblindness and racial harmony with families of color hailing from upper-middle class backgrounds. Despite the fact that many of his high school teachers frequently urged students to remove themselves from their protected bubble, it appears their encouragement rarely led to sustained interaction across difference beyond the one family of color.

At State University Matt was heavily involved a Resident Assistant, a peer mentor, and a the junior class honorary. His primary orientation to campus came through his involvement in residence life. Despite his involvement in various areas of campus, he moved through State in primarily all white networks. Even his R.A. staff, which he attributed to his increasing understanding of diversity, boasted only three staff members of color out of forty. Further, he could not recall meeting a single individual of color in his major coursework. Matt perceived this to be normal however, as food and science technology was predestined to be overwhelmingly white.

Rachel

Rachel hailed from an Appalachian town of just under 1500 where her entire family lived on one street, her grandfather owned the hardware store, and her parents had once owned the local diner in town before she and her siblings were born. Her working class roots reflected a close connection to family, an extreme sense of loyalty, and a
belief that you should give more than take. Rachel described a town that seemed almost disconnected from the world. It had one stoplight and was a 15-minute drive to the nearest Wal-Mart or any grocery store. Despite being about an hour from a major city, she was never truly exposed to an urban environment until late in high school. Her hometown, as she described it was, guns, trucks and America. The thousand or so residents of her town often felt forgotten, Rachel explained. Speaking passionately about her town she noted “At least people pretend to care about the inner city. People don’t ever even mention white trash or hillbilly. Whatever you want to call rednecks or lower poverty.”

This sense of being forgotten did not diminish the sense of community and family ties. In many ways it seemed to strengthen them. Her connections to her peers and her family were as tight as could be. In fact, when Rachel accidently became pregnant early in her college career, even she was shocked at her father’s excitement for his daughter to start a family. She eventually had a miscarriage that she still struggled with during our interviews.

The close bonds of the town could not be separated by its almost exclusively white racial composition. In high school Rachel and her brother both dated Black residents from the neighboring town, and it was not uncommon to hear white racial evaluations of their relationships. After her brother’s girlfriend had left a gathering of friends at the county fair, another friend in the group finally got something off his chest: “Can you believe he’s dating that [n-word]?” This was something she had heard from
her own cousins, who also explained they could never date or marry a Black man.
Preparing to leave for State U, Rachel lashed out at her friends at the county fair, saying, “That’s my brother and his girlfriend! Excuse me. I was just so mad.” Such racial framing of Black Americans in particular was not uncommon. It occurred both subtly and not so subtly. Given the overwhelming white nature of her town, those in her community would often mark people of color racially, such as “oh I saw a Black girl today.” Although their whiteness remained invisible, Blackness served as a major visible marker of difference. When Rachel and her uncle traveled to see a friend in urgent care in a nearby major city, they encountered much more racially diverse neighborhoods than they were accustomed to in their small town. As they drove through the city her uncle remarked, “Oh these [n-word], they’re so disgusting. They always smell.”

Rachel’s commitment to her immediate family remained. She strongly believed that whatever she worked for shouldn’t be spent on herself, but her parents. Because her dad couldn’t work and her mother had bounced around jobs, they often just made it by. It was critical for Rachel to give back in any way she could. Not because her parents told her to, but because she wanted to. She and her older siblings worked hard to save up money in order to buy their parents a new car after their father worked tirelessly to install a propane heater in his wife’s car. Rachel spoke glowingly of their purchase:

We all bought them this because they didn't have a car. My dad was putting a propane heater in my mom's van in the winter in the morning to heat it up so she could go to work. We're like this is ridiculous. We've
always talked about it, but we're like we have to do this. We cannot let them continue to drive this van that doesn't even have heat. My dad's truck had broke down, so they only had the van, so we finally bought them a car. So they have a brand new Hyundai Elantra.

At State University this story was often met with surprise and a sense of befuddlement. Why on earth would you buy your parents a car? And why would your parents possibly need you to buy them a car in the first place? Rachel reacted with a similar confusion to her peer’s orientation to money and spending, “Because it means a lot to them and they need it. That's how we are. We give away more than we indulge in ourselves. I don't know the last time I went out and spent my money on me.”

Rachel’s transition to State U, where only one other student from her high school had matriculated, was not easy. She felt completely lost, uncomfortable with all of the concrete, lack of green space, and flabbergasted that her new peers didn’t know what mudding or truck pulls were. She was indeed in an entirely different world at State. Joining a multicultural organization focused on immersion in new cultures provided her access to opportunities she had never envisioned in Appalachian Ohio. A trip to New York City her freshman year with the group opened her eyes to a world she had never even considered knowing. The trip was a catalyst for Rachel, propelling her to becoming heavily involved with the organization and an intense reflection on her own racial identity.
At State Rachel surrounded herself almost exclusively with students of color, largely through her involvement in the multicultural student organization. Her friends were Black, Mexican, Bengali, Indian, and if they could be read as white, they were from South America. Her boyfriend of two years was Mexican and hailed from southern California, where she had recently visited him and his family. These friendships, and her romantic relationship, sustained her throughout her time on campus and offered a powerful window into the experiences of students of color. During our time together Rachel never spoke of these friends as token minorities or used them to prop up her own presentation as an enlightened white. Instead, she recalled, often times in painstaking details, their experiences with racism and white supremacy that she was never aware of before coming to State. Whether it was the ways in which a police officer interacted in such a hostile manner with her Mexican boyfriend, as opposed to his gentle tone with her, or a Black friend sharing openly racist experiences with white students on campus, Rachel exhibited an ability to listen and recognize the limitations of her own knowledge.

Patrick

Unlike most participants, Patrick was not attending his in-state college, but rather had come to State University from San Diego. His pre-college narrative was defined heavily by the presence of racial and ethnic diversity. In fact, he was one of two participants to engage in sustained contact across difference prior to coming to State University. Growing up his best friend was Pilipino and Patrick frequently found himself in a house with cultures and customs far different from his own. He vividly recalled the
distinctions that quickly became apparent to him as early as fifth grade, from language to the respect and care given to elders in the family. He explained, “going over there and his grandma is like living with him and it’s more of like, they want to make sure she is okay and that she is having a good happy life towards the end of her life was something that was new.”

Patrick described his high school as comprised primarily by white and Asian Americans, with a diversity of Latino and Mexican students as well. Black students, however, were almost nonexistent. Interestingly, Patrick found himself making sense of the experiences of the few Black students in his high school during our interview. While in San Diego, he had observed a split between Black students who interacted with Asian and white students, those who were typically involved in extracurricular activities, and those who largely stayed with other Black students. He recalled a sense of confusion as to why this split existed in high school, wondering what was so bad about wanting to be involved, putting an emphasis on your academics, and spending time with Asian and white students. Reconsidering his initial perspective, he now began to wonder how his high school might have attempted to white wash Black students. He explained, “And I think that, some, maybe where those Black students were coming from is like “I don’t want to be white washed.” “I don’t want to be like, for my culture to have to go away for me to fit in and for me to be accepted here.” I think that was something that I think about now and I think that’s tough.”
This increasingly complex way of thinking about race was likely the result of his time at State, for which he attributed a great deal of his own personal growth. The adjustment from San Diego to a larger research institution in the Midwest, however, offered a different change in scenery than most other students experienced. Patrick recalled arriving at State and thinking “wow there’s a lot of white people here.” Contrasted against the backdrop of his racially and ethnically diverse community in San Diego, he described State as a white dominated campus where he could walk around in a sea of people who looked just like him. He readily admitted that this was not a comfort students of color had the luxury of enjoying. Further, he was vividly aware that most of those students who looked like him, his white peers, had an astonishing lack of interactions with nonwhites prior to coming to State. During his first year on campus Patrick lived on a scholars floor for International Affairs. The way other students talked about diversity sounded superficial, like a grab bag of difference that they could pick and choose from. He explained that “oh I have a Black friend” or like “oh there is a foreign exchange student on my floor” and that is the extent of diversity. And for me that’s not what it was. It’s not about having a Black friend or having a foreign exchange student because I’ve interacted with a bunch of different kind of people like my whole life. So that wasn’t really it for me.”

Relative to other participants, Patrick’s time at State provided a good deal of interaction with racial and ethnic diversity. He majored in Chinese and Political Science and served as a Resident Assistant for three years. By the time we met, he was running
his residence hall’s front desk. A supporter of Black Lives Matter, he exhibited a great deal of reflection in regards to how he could best support the movement as a white person without feeling like he was “taking over or being condescending.” His support for the movement, and matters of racial justice in general, often led to tensions back home with his conservative parents. Visits back home, which did not happen often due to the costly nature of flying to San Diego, were greeted with claims of a liberal university indoctrinating him. Patrick himself identified as conservative prior to coming to State, but found his time in college as one that freed him of the influence of his parents’ thinking and a new awareness of just how controlled he was by their beliefs in high school.

**Ryan**

Ryan grew up about two hours east of State University in a town of roughly 12,000. He described the community as one in which it was not uncommon to see confederate flags on the back of pickup trucks. In fact, although he had never seen them, it was widely known that the town had an active Ku Klux Klan presence. Ryan rarely spoke of his rural community in a positive light, explaining, “hometown isn’t really a word to describe where I come from.” He described it as “extremely culturally homogeneous,” dominated by German and Italian culture and overwhelmingly white. His high school, where he would graduate with a class of 120 students, was predominantly white but did have a small Guatemalan population. His interactions, however, were almost always with other white students. Ryan recounted that the school
seemed to keep the Guatemalan students separate from white students, placing them in the cafeteria whenever people were not using the space for lunch. He figured this had contributed to a lawsuit the school faced for allegations of “negligent education for the Hispanic population.”

Ryan had long displayed an interest in cultural diversity, a topic that was rarely interrogated during his education growing up. During high school he was the President of the Foreign Cultures club. He critiqued his school system for failing the few students of color enrolled, explaining that “they (students of color) didn't really have a sense of Black culture or Asian culture because they were the only ones. They couldn't really express it because they didn't really have anyone to necessarily deal with.” Throughout our time together Ryan attempted to bridge the gap between students of color and himself as a white man, drawing on his marginalized experiences as pansexual. He had recently come out to his parents only months before our interview, and attributed his small, conservative town for having kept him quiet for so long. He connected his experiences of being different to students of color, explaining, “Since I knew I was different with being gay and stuff I think I knew, "Oh, I don't want to treat people like that."”

At State Ryan continued his passion for matters of racial and ethnic diversity, majoring in International Affairs and learning Chinese and Arabic. He was in his first year at State after transferring from a branch campus. His involvement included both his work as a Resident Assistant and in Students for Socialism. Now at the main campus, Ryan found there to be less diversity than he had experienced at the branch campus about
thirty minutes away. He described State as elitist and overly white, something he was not necessarily expecting before transferring. During his first year he found himself surrounded by a heavily Somali population. The university had five Muslim student organizations and it was not uncommon to see posters and fliers in Arabic. State, however, was dominated by a Greek life culture that was exclusively white and offered little to no religious diversity. Although Ryan hoped to use his position as a Resident Assistant to further engage in matters of social justice and inclusion, he was surprised at how little he felt his staff discussed issues of race, class, and religion. Of his 18 person R.A. staff, only one person did not identify as white. His participation in the study seemed to be motivated by a yearning to learn more about race and racism beyond his involvement on campus. When asked what led him to participate in the study he responded, “I definitely am looking more for like, how do I feel about this? I've been thinking more about race relations on campus and the different aspects of race.”

Sarah

Located about a half hour outside of Cleveland, Sarah was one of the few participants to attend a racially diverse high school. In fact, she estimated that white students made up only about 30 percent of the school’s student body. African Americans, she claimed, comprised roughly 60 percent. Despite the relatively diverse nature of her school, her pre-college experiences were nonetheless plagued by segregation and racial tensions. And although the school had an incredibly diverse student body, this composition did not lead to a great deal of cross-racial interaction. Both the school and the community in which it was located were divided along racial
lines. Sarah, who was enrolled in mostly upper-division courses, rarely encountered non-white students in her classes. At home she lived in a predominantly white neighborhood. The students of color in her school, Black and Latino alike, lived “on the other side of the tracks.” This was phrase Sarah admitted made her uncomfortable. Growing up her father would often drive her through these communities in order to send a message about what her future could be if she did not work hard in high school and college. The racially coded messages were meant to “scare me and say like, you know, “if you want to do well, or if you wanna, if you don’t wanna end up living here go through college, be successful, like do these things.”

Sarah frequently experienced a tension between her parents more conservative leanings, which she described as “a little bit racist,” and her high school network comprised largely of her peers in a student group focused on race relations. The organization was the oldest of all the student groups in her high school, having surfaced in the 1980’s due to severe racial tensions in the racially integrated school. Sarah joined early in her high school career, rising to a leadership position her senior year at the same time as Trayvon Martin was murdered. She recalled the divide between her parents and her peers in the organization, often feeling like a moderator between the two competing sides. Sarah recounted feeling angry and saddened all at once, while simultaneously experiencing an increased awareness of racism in America. Although she had been presenting to elementary school classrooms for two years on matters of race and racism through her organization, this struck a different tone. She explained it was the first time
she had really considered the deadly impact of race on a national level. Trayvon Martin could have been any number of the young Black men in her high school. In many ways, Trayvon Martin appeared to put a face to what had before been an abstract and largely academic issue.

Her parents did not offer the support and guidance in thinking through racial injustice that Sarah was looking for. Instead, she found a mentor in her organization’s advisor. Her advisor, with whom she soon found herself eating lunch with and talking through issues outside of class, “definitely helped me through some of these issues that I had with like interacting with my parents because my opinions like, because I grew up in this school system, socially I lean pretty liberal.” As their relationship blossomed Sarah took up *The New Jim Crow* at the suggestion of her advisor. Increasingly in support of the larger Black Lives Matter movement, Sarah was now considering mass incarceration and racism within the criminal justice system. In her final year in the race relations group she moved the organization to consider such issues.

At State University, Sarah was a sophomore biomedical sciences major who was heavily involved in both her sorority and a community service cohort. In many ways her narrative is the inverse of other participants. While she had a great deal of exposure to racial dialogues prior to college, her engagement on these matters was limited relative to high school. Caught up in the work of her demanding major, coupled with the responsibilities of her sorority and cohort, left little time for her to engage in race-based work. In fact, during our time together she explained she was nervous attempting to
describe the *New Jim Crow* because she was afraid she could not appropriately convey its message. She attributed this trepidation to the fact that it had been roughly two years since she had taken part in sustained discussions on race.

**Spencer**

Spencer, a third year white woman majoring in Political Science and Psychology, grew up in a very small town on the outskirts of Cincinnati. Her hometown was almost exclusively white. In fact, diversity in her life prior to college referred primarily to matters of social class. Although not often talked about, as people tended to be “uncomfortable” engaging social class, a visible distinction existed between those who lived in poverty and those who did not. Located on a hill, those who lived in poverty tended to be at the bottom of the incline, whereas those with more affluent life styles could be found at the top. Raised in a traditionally conservative and lower class family, Spencer recalled her earliest recollections of race with her father. These conversations largely resulted from having a Black best friend in the second grade, Alicia. Spencer described her father as “very racist,” explaining that he “doesn’t have any sense of diversity or understanding of it.” Spencer found this ironic because her father was 100% Native American. She herself was half Native American, half white. The anger she felt towards her father resulted in her shedding her identification with Native American culture and identifying solely as white.

When asked to describe her earliest memories with race Spencer vividly recalled her father openly using the n-word in her household as he would explain, “you shouldn’t
be hanging out with that [n-word] and stuff like that.” These behaviors towards Alicia and her family were not limited to her father. Spencer recalled the seeming unease in which members of her Catholic school community exhibited when Alicia’s family moved into the school. Admittedly Spencer’s memories of these early moments are sparse, and much of them have come from more recent conversations with her mother who has helped her make sense of these early memories. Spencer is much closer to her mother than she is with her father, with whom she no longer has a relationship. She attributed his blatant racism to the fact that “he also didn’t graduate high school so I feel like the lack of education honestly is what stopped the development of diversity issues within his realm.” Although her mother similarly had not attended college, she explained the ways in which she embraced her friendship with Alicia and often told Spencer that “I just love that both my children went after interracial friendships.” Due to her lack of education, Spencer felt her mother was as about as evolved, a word she used frequently to describe racial attitudes, as she could be. Spencer described her grandfather as very “intermediate” in his understanding of racial matters, largely because he “was uncomfortable talking about race.” Although this did not bother her early in life, it now caused some source of tension: “That kind of tainted my view because when I was growing up I didn’t understand the concept of white privilege. Now that I see how he takes on the idea its like something that I would rather talk about. Seeing how he just dismisses it is very unappealing to me.” While her grandmother did not outright dismiss
conversations about race growing up, she did not and does not to this day actively seek them out unless otherwise prompted.

Similar to her family, Spencer’s experiences in schooling can be described as incredibly white and largely void of discussions about race growing up. Growing up she remembered only “two or three” African Americans in her hometown. She explained, “If you ever saw someone that was diverse in color or race it was pretty obvious in my school just because there was like two or three people that would choose to identify that way.” Indeed, sports were the primary outlet through which she had contact with any students of color. This came both through her teammates and through interaction with opposing teams from nearby communities.

Despite the lack of racial diversity in Spencer’s pre-college community, she described multiple moments in which race became a matter of discussion in her social networks. One such instance came in regards to college admission processes and the critical web of relationships in which she found herself entangled. At the source of this conflict was her best friend who was born in India, and her high school boyfriend, a white male who was incredibly bright and at the top of his class. Her friend had gained admittance to many prestigious schools, one of which her boyfriend has been denied. Spencer explained that reverse discrimination was discussed frequently in her predominantly white high school. Her boyfriend often complained about being the victim of such policies, going so far as to experience a spiritual crisis and questions his belief in God during a difficult college admission process. Spencer recalled thinking
“yeah, you are really smart and talented but you’ve never had a job, you’ve never had to do anything actually for yourself.” In contrast her friend had worked long hours to contribute to his family’s financial stability. Seeing his experience “Changed my view because I had to see what he went through. He has gone through so much to just be in this country.”

At State University Spencer described experiencing a type of “culture shock,” a term she used frequently to describe her transition. Coming from a conservative town with a single mother, the university provided a very different environment than what she was accustomed to growing up. The diversity she was now encountering was quite unfamiliar. She was dating a man heavily involved in campus activism and was herself a Resident Assistant. She attributed her growing awareness of racial inequality to her work in residence life, stating that prior to coming to college she simply repeated much of what her parents and grandparents would tell her about politics and current events. Spencer’s emerging sense of criticality would serve as a source of tension between her and her family, most notably her mother and grandparents. A supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement, Spencer initially feared letting her family down or creating a rift in their relationship due to her newfound awareness.

Tyler

When I met Tyler he was about to begin his final semester at State, having amassed an impressive record of involvement as a Resident Assistant and a member in the National Residence Hall Honorary, the Pistol Club, a marketing club, and the College
Republicans. His involvement in the latter was no surprise as Tyler expressed some of the more conservative political orientations among participants in the study. Tyler was raised in a small suburb of Cleveland, one that he described “predominantly you know, upper middle class suburban neighborhood. Mostly white um very little minorities in there.” The utter lack of racial diversity during Tyler’s upbringing became most evident when explained that he was the President of his high school’s international club. When asked to describe the club in more detail, he noted, “the international club was a lot of being able to learn again about the different cultures of the world and engage, we wouldn’t necessarily have that, those races or ethnicities present in the club.” In essence, the club was an opportunity for his white peers to consume a variety of ethnically diverse restaurants in town, where conversations about diversity would supposedly ensue. Tyler appeared to take great pride in his involvement in the club, an indicator of his openness to diverse perspectives.

His narrative revealed very limited openness to different perspectives, however. His exposure to people of color was often limited to a handful of trips to Cleveland with his father. It was not uncommon for Tyler to hear racial slurs among his extended family and his parents’ friends. When asked to elaborate, he recalled hearing a number of racialized messages, “Saying that all Black people are criminals and drug addicts and stuff like that. Things that I’m like, well, that can’t necessarily be right all the, to generalize that to all people.” Although his parents would quickly attempt to counter the messages, it was clear that people were not hesitant to express these attitudes and beliefs
in his hometown. Tyler recounted multiple instances in which conversations on holidays quickly turned to police brutality. A number of his extended family members were police officers, and as such, it tended to be a frequent topic of conversation. The n-word was again a predictable refrain in these conversations, although Tyler was quick to point out that his family members in law enforcement never used the actual word. These conversations centered on how unfairly law enforcement was treated in light of the larger Black Lives Matter movement sweeping across the country.

Tyler described the racial and ethnic diversity of State University to be an “additional bonus” once he arrived on campus. He claimed that this diversity gave him greater exposure to difference and an ability to “engage with more so, the real world.” Despite his claims to appreciate and value the difference at State, he often positioned himself as a victim to reverse racism and an overemphasis on multiculturalism. As a Resident Assistant he struggled with what he saw as a liberal agenda of the Multicultural Center, responsible for many of his diversity trainings. He would also explain at length a sense that he could not share his opinions, fearing how he might be alienated. If he could speak freely he would question his peers on the notion of institutional racism, the merits of affirmative action, and the plausibility of white privilege. In many ways he positioned his more liberal, white peers as hypocritical in their demands for inclusivity. As a white male who was conservative in his political leanings, Tyler felt it was impossible to find any type of community within his residence life staff. Instead, he frequently located this
support within his other organizations, including his Pistol Club and the College Republicans.

**Constructions of Identity**

I now shift my focus to one of the central research questions that guided this dissertation: an examination of how participants constructed and gave meaning to their own white racial identities. In carrying out this study I was interested in how white students interpreted and attached meaning to their identities as racial beings. Although one question in the interview protocol directly asked students what it meant to be white, so much of what follows was gleaned from the ways in which they talked about race and racism beyond direct inquiries about identity. That is, the meanings that became apparent when participants were asked to consider their first memories across racial difference or the diversity represented in their high schools. The following pages portray three constructions of white identity as reflected by participants’ narratives: Ignorant Constructions, Emergent Constructions, and Critical Constructions. Each depicts increasing levels of self-criticality of whiteness and white racial identity. This is to say that each of these constructions is meant to represent one’s understanding of a racial self, its relationship to people of color, and to larger systems of white supremacy. These constructions are not meant to portray a linear process of development, but consistent with narrative inquiry offer unique constructions of identity through storytelling.

Six participants assembled a white identity through what I describe as Ignorant Constructions of white identity. These participants rarely, if ever, recognized the ways in
which whiteness infused and determined their perspectives, despite making claims to the contrary. In many ways these student leaders crafted identities rife with contradictions, claiming they were aware of whiteness and white privilege, but frequently making appeals to their own innocence and situating whites as victims of reverse racism. Concerned with their own racial innocence, they became hostile or defensive when students of color made their white identities visible. These participants exclusively understood racism as overt, hateful bias and more of a character flaw than a form of institutional and historical dominance.

Participants with Emergent Constructions of white racial identity exhibited a developing understanding of their whiteness. That is, these five participants spoke to the role of racism in the lives of people of color and recognized their own racial location of advantage as white people. This was coupled with an emerging understanding of racism as not merely individual, but systemic, although this was at times difficult to articulate. The limitations of this group of students were their inability to situate themselves as a part of the problem of white supremacy. Although they recognized a racial location and the presence of racism, they struggled to directly implicate themselves as a part of the problem. Racism and white supremacy existed to these students, but it was either located in institutions or in bad white people elsewhere. These students struggled to link their own racial privilege to the perpetuation of white supremacy on a consistent basis. As such, much of their understandings of whiteness and white privilege appeared to be abstract and conceptual. A major developmental task for these participants was resolving
the growing rift between the world they knew before college and the one they inhabited now. An emerging recognition of racism and whiteness resulted in a number of tensions between these students and their family and friends back home.

Finally, Critical Constructions of white racial identity represented the most complex interpretations of the racialized self in the study. Representative of the fewest students, these three individuals exhibited both a recognition of whiteness and an ability and openness to implicating the self in issues of white supremacy. Additionally, they understood racism at both individual and institutional levels. Attributing these complex and critical interpretations of whiteness to their time at State University, these students also struggled with tensions between their new awareness and precollege environments. In each category I highlight how participants attached meaning to their racial selves, the role of people of color in this construction, and to larger systems of white supremacy.

**Ignorant Constructions of White Identity**

Laura, Connor, Liz, Jason, Matt, and Tyler were characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white identity in ways that were largely void of any critical interpretation of whiteness. That is, these students rarely, if ever, recognized the ways in which whiteness was imbedded in their sense making of the world. To be white was to be neutral. To the extent they did think about race, they habitually situated themselves as victims to a campus preoccupied with multiculturalism and diversity, while frequently making appeals to their own innocence. Given their preoccupation with their own innocence, perhaps it should come as little surprise that these students exhibited a great
sense of discomfort when people of color made their racial selves visible. That is, these students reacted with anger and frustration when people of color shifted the gaze and made whiteness the particular, rather than universal, way of being. The five participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white racial identity frequently rationalized away claims of racism by people of color.

**Determined not to see: “I just really haven’t seen it.”** These students had little to no problem questioning, or even denying, claims of racism by people of color. As such, they frequently struggled to comprehend the centrality of racism in the lives of students of color. Further, their own whiteness and culpability in such racism was left untouched. Tyler explained that while students of color have grievances about racism, “I’m not sure that all those grievances are necessarily accurate.” Matt questioned students of color who participate in campus protests, stating he would love to talk to one who senses racial hostility at State, “I would love to talk to one of them and see why because I just really have not talked to someone who participates in those protests.” In regards to Black Lives Matter, Liz expressed a wish that “Black people would kind of just, just move on with your lives.”

Throughout our interviews, Liz exhibited little restraint in denying claims by people of color regarding their experiences with racism. The morning after Donald Trump’s election, she had class with a friend whose father was born in Syria. The woman recounted hearing men on her residence hall floor engage in racist, hostile
discussions about her in light of the election results. The woman explained what she
overheard to Liz:

That's when she said, "The people who live next door to me are Trump
supporters and I overheard them." I don't know if it was through the wall
or she was walking back opening the door and heard it, but when the
people said, "Oh, there's an Arabic girl that lives next door. We're going to
show her where she belongs."

Liz’s friend, already terrified of potential immigration laws she feared would deport her
father, was clearly troubled by the men’s comments. Their very language seemed to
insinuate a threat, real or perceived, to her physical safety. The words themselves clearly
had an impact on her psychological sense of safety. Liz however, astonishingly
described this reaction as melodramatic:

Liz: I don't know, she seemed, and I guess I would be too, she seemed
upset by it, and I would be as well if someone lived next to me but I don't
know if I would buy into it as much as other people would. I think they
just talk a lot, to be honest. I don't know, I think it will blow over, but yeah
that's pretty much the whole story on that.

Zak: Yeah. What do you mean buy into it? What do you mean by that?
Liz: They say we're going to show her where she belongs, but then
what does that mean exactly? What do you think they're going to do to
you exactly? They can't do much if they're living in a dorm, because
frankly if you go report it to the hall director any sort of violence or discrimination they'll get written up immediately and kicked out. Depending on how severe or how ... What's the word? I guess on how horribly they treat her or pretty much anything they do, any kind of misconduct in general you can get written up by your hall director.... She was really worried, which if I were Muslim I would be too, but I think it was a bit melodramatic...

The passage reveals Liz’s inability to sense how her own whiteness affords her the privilege to brush off such racist discourse so close to one’s home, literally down the hall. She briefly mentions that she would also be worried if she were Muslim, but then directly follows such a claim by characterizing her friend as melodramatic. Further, rather than inquire into her friend’s concerns, she listened quietly and kept her reactions to herself.

Tyler was perhaps the most direct in denying claims of racism and racial inequality, going so far as to draw on historical white frames of Black Americans to rationalize unemployment and perceived institutionalized racism. Although he frequently heard about institutionalized racism at State, he was not convinced. He explained, “when the way I see it is there’s more people of color in the system because there are more people of color committing crimes. So why are people committing crimes?” Tyler, completely unaware of the role whiteness plays in framing his assumptions about the racial other, continued “I think it might come to like, at home. We need to look at like the families of people of color and those neighborhoods, those families.” While Liz
minimized the concerns of a student of color, Tyler went so far as to question the legitimacy of institutionalized racism and instead offered individualistic causes for inequality.

Other participants who assembled Ignorant Constructions of identity relied less on overt denials and more on a refusal to see in the first place. Their inability to recognize how whiteness and racism operates in the lives of people of color was striking, particularly given their professed knowledge through extensive involvement on campus. Jason, Tyler, and Matt all indicated that education offered a common playing field that mitigated racial disparities. According to Jason, white students and students of color found themselves on a “common level, a common playing field” and as such all students faced some level of vulnerability in making new friends, acclimating to a new environment, and engaging harder coursework. Tyler also conflated experiences of transitioning with concerns of race and belonging. He recounted a time in which a Black female resident in her first year at State and from a predominantly Black community did not feel she was fitting in. Tyler felt he could relate to this experience because:

I mean, I can understand that when she would tell me about her story about how she came from people like that and I know people – because I know people that are white and came from a white neighborhood… I don’t think they would have as much of a problem finding people the same ethnic background as people of color, but I just kind of sympathized with her… I mean, people a lot of times will come with different issues of like,
“Oh, I played soccer at home. I don’t feel the same” – I don’t think of it as a different level of homesickness or something like that.

Tyler, like so many other participants who constructed such a white identity failed to recognize the centrality of racism in this woman’s life on campus. Further, he is completely unaware of how whiteness, and the overwhelmingly white nature of campus, influences this woman’s discomfort, instead conflating it to his own experiences.

Matt, reflecting on his affluent pre-college environment described in his narrative at the outset of this chapter, sensed that there were no issues of racism in his high school because of an “equal playing field.” As such, everyone had “the resources to do well on standardized tests and get tutoring if they need it… We had AP everything. Everyone had the opportunities.” Matt rationalized away any potential claims of racial hostility in his hometown because of class advantage and well-funded schools. Perhaps no quote better spoke to his ignorance when he explained “when everyone is doing well you know, they are all going to the country club, the problems and injustices don’t really show up there.”

Jason, Connor, and Laura also represented this inability to recognize the role of whiteness in shaping their patterns of behaviors and the experiences of students of color. In each of their cases, this complete lack of visibility came to the forefront in regards to their student organizations. Jason and Connor both lamented their frustration regarding administrators’ constant push for the programming board to offer a diverse lineup of events. Each of their frustrations reveals the invisibility of their white racial perspectives.
and an interpretation of whiteness as seemingly neutral. Jason recalled countless student affairs staff challenging the organization to bring in additional acts of color. This was a predictable sequence, however, because despite their urges he felt that students simply knew best. Describing the tension between State University staff members and the programming board, Jason explained “so uncomfortable just in terms of like, I think the students… it’s a student ran programming board and so I would argue that the students have the best interpretation of what other students want.”

Interestingly, at the time of our interview Jason had recently encountered a Black male who was a new general member of the programming board and volunteered to consider ways for the group to appeal to students of color. It still seems, however, that when Jason referred to students he was implying white students. This is increasingly evident when he posed a question to me:

Jason: ..Someone told us we haven’t had like a Hispanic speaker in three years. Or something. And I would have never figured that out. But I mean I could ask you or I could as you know, who do you think, who do you think told us that? A student or staff?

Zak: Staff?

Jason: Yes, because the students, the students are less aware of that.

Unable to locate the ways in which whiteness influences his perspective, here Jason fails to consider that the Hispanic student population could very well be aware of this concern. This is particularly relevant given that a man of color had recently come to Jason asking
to help broaden the scope of the organization’s reach to Black students at State. Connor, involved in the same student group, expressed similar sentiments. He was also irritated by requests for such an emphasis on diversity, saying “it’s impossible to have every group represented to the n\textsuperscript{th} percent.” Such a focus on diversity led to competing demands and you simply could not please everyone:

If we do this for maybe just people of color, which is what he wanted to do, how are we representing the Asian-American students and all these other demographics that also want events tailored to their group, essentially. You can’t make everyone happy but you can try to make the most people happy as you can.

In both Jason and Connor’s remarks, whiteness is never marked as a specific and particular racial interest. Black, Hispanic, and Asian-American students, however, are all clearly racialized.

Laura also failed to mark whiteness as a unique racial identity, instead racializing people of color. When asked about the diversity of her sorority she admitted it was overwhelmingly white. As she would explain, this was the case across Greek life. The lack of students of color was not a problem though because they simply were not interested in rushing. She defended the Greek system against any claims of racism or exclusion:

And I don’t think that it’s that people are being discriminated against during recruitment. I think it’s that people of color, different nationalities
don’t feel the connection to Greek life or go through recruitment that… I mean it’s a traditionally white thing in history. I think it makes sense that more white people rush. But I’ve never heard of someone not getting into a house because of like skin color or anything like that.

According to Laura, overt bias and prejudice had no role in the underrepresentation of women of color in Greek life. Further, when women did rush “the focus is always on like would you be friends with them? Do you want to hang out with them? Would they be a good representation for your chapter? Would they be able to meet the commitments of membership?” As is consistent throughout these participants, Laura exhibits little ability to recognize how whiteness might influence whom the women in her sorority recognize as desirable and worthy of friendship and membership.

**White victimhood: “We’re tired of being labeled racists.”** Failing to see or denying outright the role of racism as central to the lives of students of color, these white student leaders also situated themselves as victims. What they found themselves victims to varied in nature, but each participant constructed accounts that implied they were casualties of a campus seemingly too preoccupied with diversity and social justice. Highly engaged with State University, these participants portrayed a picture in which their voices were not included but rather maligned and ridiculed. Jason explained that the Student Affairs staff members would “rather see an African American male, white female, a gay Latino, literally, (is) my interpretation of our advisors in Student Affairs.” Liz described sociology courses that blamed white people for all of society’s ills and
Tyler was uncomfortable with the narrative he felt State’s Multicultural Center was pushing. As a “white male Republican” in residence life Tyler felt that “it kind of sucks that like I feel like I have to be inclusive of all these other people but then like I am not included in that.”

There was a strong sense among these participants that white students simply could not speak up when it came to larger dialogues on campus about race and racism. As Matt explained, “well it often feels like my opinions aren’t valid on anything that has to do with diversity because I am white.” Participants reported experiencing this feeling in classrooms, student organizations, and R.A. staffs. In doing so they firmly attached victimhood to meanings of white racial identity. Matt recalled an experience in R.A. training, a familiar scene in many of the participants’ narratives, that illustrated this perceived victimized identity. He discussed the debate that occurred over white people’s ability to understand students of color:

It's just like an identity seminar. Someone was talking about she was saying like, it was along the lines of well ... It was like ... like you don't necessarily, she was an African American girl and she was saying that white people don't necessarily see the injustices and kind of like that institutional racism because of white privilege and then so that's what that was. Then another white guy had said like well (let’s) not say white privilege is a bad thing. Like it kind of gets a negative connotation like it's bad to be white and so that's kind of where that conversation went and she
was like ... It kind of went back and forth. She's not saying it's bad to be white, just like you don't understand, you can't understand our situation and then he kind of went back and it's like well yes I don't have the same experiences but like let's not put a bad, let's not make being white bad now. It's not like two wrongs don't make a right. If you're arguing that being black puts you at a disadvantage and it's like society says it's bad to be black. Like don't say it's bad to be white. That's not a productive conversation.

Matt’s commentary is illustrative for a couple of reasons. He seems to endorse another white male R.A. who proclaims that white privilege is not inherently negative or problematic. It also appears that any critique of whiteness, the absence of which is a defining feature of this identity construction, is unproductive. The primary concern in the exchange is assuring that white people are not perceived as “bad.” Matt continued, insinuating that people of color were somehow hurting their cause and any attempts to gain white “help:”

…don't count us out. You know what I mean? Don't dismiss us because that doesn't help you… Like if you're trying to, if your goal is to be considered equal than it doesn't really help to make more barriers between us and say like well white people can't understand us.

Further situating whiteness as a victimized identity, Matt would say he was glad that the White R.A. “stood up for himself” in the situation.
Similar to Matt, Laura explained she often sat in silence during such discussions on race and racism. Through her leadership course it appeared that white people simply could not know, or speak up, because of their racial identity. Tyler also remarked that a fellow R.A. on staff, a Black woman, would often tell him “You’re not Black so you don’t understand,” and then she shut down the conversation.” Again, the account is constructed in a way that positions the student of color as the aggressor. Shutting down conveys a sense of forcefulness, failing to allow Tyler any additional opportunity to discuss his perceived suppressed opinion.

Not only did participants paint themselves as victims through a perception they were not allowed to engage in discussions of race and diversity, but that if they did, they would surely be characterized as racists. With racism so firmly understood as a matter of individual bias and prejudice, these students consistently discussed the implications of being called a racist. Liz explained the label is not one that a white student could quickly shed, “No one wants to be labeled racist, almost because there's just no coming back from it. If you're labeled racist then they'll all tell their friends and then… you're ostracized I guess a little bit.” Laura described her approach towards conversations of race and racism as hesitant because “I don’t want to offend anyone. And I didn’t want to seem like ignorant or rude or be labeled as racist myself because I was being adamant about this so I don’t know.” Liz detailed a great frustration and anger she felt existed among white students at State University who were tired of shouldering the blame for racial inequality in light of increased activism on campus. In her typical uninhibited style she
admitted, “I think a lot of white students, or just white community in general, is just tired of being labeled as racists when we’re not.” Her reluctance to speak honestly about her feelings on racism even surfaced in the interview, out of fear of being seen as a racist. When asked to discuss how she perceived the campus climate she responded that it was welcoming to students of color, but soon followed up, “I hesitated to say that though because if you were to say that as a white person, you're almost afraid to because then you're labeled as racist.”

Reactions to the gaze of students of color: “I don’t want to be the focus.” To be white, for these participants, meant to be neutral and raceless. Because individuals in this category struggled to see the ways in which whiteness shaped their own perspectives, they typically reacted with frustration, anger, and hostility when gazed upon as racial subjects by students of color. That is, when made to be the particular, rather than the racial universal norm, they were often thrown off balance. Accounts of being gazed upon by students of color were often brought up unprompted. Consistent with the centrality of Blackness in white students’ sense making of race, the gaze they experienced typically came from Black students on campus. In what follows, I highlight the ways in which these participants experienced the gaze of students of color, both cognitively and affectively. Central to this process was an anger and frustration at what they sensed were gross generalizations of white people. In reality, these were not generalizations but a particularization of whiteness based on years of experience interacting with white people.
Laura, who constructed a narrative largely centered on a sense of enlightenment and simultaneous apathy, offered an account that powerfully illuminates white reactions to the gaze of students of color. As a part of her leadership organization she was responsible for assisting with an event in the Student Union celebrating Black History Month. As one of only three white students in the room, all of whom were also assisting with the logistics of the event, Laura initially was comfortable with the message of the Black female keynote speaker. Messages about Black pride and beauty were familiar to her. She recounted, “I remember a lot of Black pride statements and sticking together and loving your history and Black is beautiful and all of that kind of stuff. Like kind of generic. I don’t know, I guess I’ve heard stuff like that before.” Discussions of Blackness that were void of any critique of whiteness were understood as acceptable.

When the woman spoke to the role of whiteness and white people in the historical oppression of Black Americans, however, Laura’s reaction shifted quickly. Critiquing and implicating whiteness elicited a different response from Laura than discussions of Blackness alone. She explained:

But then she went into like the history of her family and like the oppression that they have faced. She had some section, and I wish I could remember exactly what was said, but it was like she was like directly saying like, white people hate black people. And she was saying it like very generalized. It wasn’t like oh there are some people who are going to
hold you back. It was like, white people hate Black people was kind of the message I was getting from it.

Laura struggled mightily in interpreting the words of the speaker. This was her first time in which she found herself as the only white person in a room, and now messages directly challenging and making visible the role of whiteness in historical and modern forms of oppression were on display. She felt the speaker’s messages were shocking and “almost like rude.” She reflected on the experience further, noting “She talked about like, rebelling against the white oppression and all this stuff and I was kind of just like, I don’t think that like white people in general, I think you’re generalizing.” Laura was unsure of how to react because she had never heard anything of the sort, but her reaction was one defined largely by frustration and anger. She did not like being generalized.

Further, she juxtaposed the speaker’s commentary about whiteness with her own behavior as a white person at that very event:

….I feel kind of offended by that. Like, I’m here volunteering at your event. I put all your food out. I took your tickets. I like made this happen for you. Like, I don’t think it’s very fair that every single white person like hates Black people.

Laura’s reaction is consistent with her larger narrative of victimhood. She seems to insinuate that the woman was speaking about her as a white person, and not whiteness as a larger system. Further, her reaction that “I made this happen for you” insists some sort of indebtedness on the part of the Black students and their speaker for setting up the
event. It echoes Matt’s earlier commentary about people of color needing white people’s help, or as he put it that they shouldn’t count white people out. Taken together, Laura’s reaction highlights the discomfort and unease white students tended to feel when confronted with a direct critique and implication of whiteness.

While Laura’s experiences came from a larger critique of whiteness and its violent history, others experienced a gaze directly upon themselves. This was the case for both Tyler and Jason, particularly as it related to the relationship between race and social class. Tyler recounted a recent discussion with a Black male student regarding student loan debt. The student told Tyler, “oh you white people don’t have to worry about it. You’ve probably got all of your school paid for.” Tyler, who came from a wealthy family, was angered by this perception. He explained his emotional response to the claim, noting, “I was kind of like pissed. Because it was like, who are you to judge me?” He sensed a double standard existed, because if he had generalized all Black people he would be labeled a racist. The following passage highlights his sense making about being racialized symbolically by the Black male student:

If I came out and said like “oh all you Black people are criminals” then I would have been a huge racist but it’s okay for someone of color to say that about me because I’m a white male who is not necessarily a minority, but it, that doesn’t seem fair that they can, there is that perception that someone of color can generalize someone that is not of color.
Similar to Laura, Tyler expresses a frustration at what he sees as a double standard. Ironically, he would go on to express feelings of irritation about being generalized, noting “it’s unfair to generalize people into certain groups because of their color.” And while Tyler said he did work every summer to help pay for his college, it remains that he failed to recognize the symbolic ways in which his whiteness appeared to this Black male, in this case as having a severe financial advantage.

Jason expressed comparable sentiments. Recall that his high school had a relatively large Hispanic student population. As such, he described multiple interactions in which students would make his whiteness apparent. These students would typically make visible the financial advantages he had, including his wealthy neighborhood and his nice car. Jason would respond somewhat defensively, noting that he worked at a golf course in the summer. Cognitively, Jason began to consider the role between race and social class, but affectively he still projected a feeling of defensiveness. The students’ claims made him “feel uncomfortable. There’s nothing I can do, or to me there’s really nothing I can do to combat it.” At the heart of this feeling was a strong discomfort with being singled out, or being shifted from the universal to the particular. Jason explained his desire to simply fit in, noting that:

I don’t want to be the focus. I don’t want attention for something like that…. It made me feel like it was not a commonality between everyone. It made me feel different than everyone else. It was important to me to try to relate to everyone.
This tension surfaced again while at State. In fact, during our time together Jason was again experiencing interactions that made his whiteness the subject of critique by a student of color.

At the time of our interviews Jason and his friends were planning a spring break trip. One of his female friends, who identified as Hispanic, explained that of the many options available for their weeklong get away, she preferred the least expensive of the bunch. The woman told Jason “she is sorry that she has to work three jobs to do it and I get everything handed to me.” The comment, Jason reflected, “fired me up because I work in the summer. I’ve worked since high school to be able to afford trips and stuff like that.” Jason said he did not know if race played a factor, but that he was really set off by the event. He continued:

It just sent me off kind of. I definitely felt anger. And like, I didn’t feel bad for her. Really. So like, I didn’t feel remorse or like, I wasn’t like. I don’t know…. So I didn’t feel like for her, I wasn’t sympathizing for her like “oh I’m sorry everything is handed to me,” because it’s not. And “I’m sorry you work three jobs. How can I help?” That’s not how I felt. I felt like I don’t even want to talk to you or be a part of this conversation. Just know that I am paying for this trip myself too.

Similar to Tyler, in both instances Jason responded to the critique of his whiteness by offering his summer work to counteract claims of entitlement and privilege.

Interestingly, none of the three responses indicated any sort of financial stress or a
requirement to work during the school year. It appeared both men worked, but only
during the summer without the additional stress of schoolwork. It would be hard to
conceive of how Jason could have worked given his heavy involvement and demanding
schedule with Student Activities. Further, the work he did appeared to be largely for the
trip itself, rather than any day-to-day living requirements. He further added that his
parents would give him money for the trip. Similar to Laura and Tyler, Jason illustrates a
complete disregard for his peer’s perspective and an inability to recognize what his
whiteness might represent to this student of color.

Matt discussed two different instances in which he experienced people of color
making his whiteness visible and an object of critique. As he readied himself to apply for
medical school, Matt enrolled in a prep course that would assist him in constructing a
strong application. During one of the sessions the instructor, who was an Indian man,
asked the students in the room how they might convey their cultural competency to an
admissions committee in an interview. When a student whom Matt identified as Indian
raised his hand, the instructor told him to hold off and explained it would be useful to
hear from a white person on the matter.

Consistent with a narrative constructed through victimhood and enlightenment,
Matt painted himself as subject to unfair assumptions:

And I’m sitting there like here I am, I obviously would never say that I am
fully culturally competent. There is always more to learn. But to say that
a white person has to struggle more with understanding diversity, like just

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because you’re Indian you know that, or it felt really bad. Because here I am. This is the second year I’ve gone through a lot of training and um. And uh made a real effort to understand different cultures and go to the [multicultural] programs and had talks with my residents and you know, had programs about diversity and things like disabilities and, I felt very aware that there are so many types of privilege and it isn’t just race. And here he was, who, I mean, these are the types of um, people who might be interviewing me. And they already have these perceptions about me and white kids that they don’t understand diversity. So that kind of hurt. Just, because now I feel like I have to really prove myself, that the thing is now it feels like there is already kind of prejudices against, not prejudices that’s not the right word. But an expectation that white people don’t understand diversity.

Matt’s response illuminates a great deal about his reaction to feeling white in the eyes of his Indian instructor. First, he situates himself as relatively enlightened on matters of race and racism through his work as a Resident Assistant. His efforts are offered as proof of his competence. This is a larger phenomenon that is detailed at length later in this chapter. Second, he interprets the instructor’s challenge, one actually meant to aid him in the medical school application process, as a burden. He is constantly burdened to have to prove himself because “they” have perceptions about “white kids” who do not understand diversity.
Matt expressed this thinking again when he recounted an experience, one that was actually detailed by three different R.A.’s involved in the study, during his Resident Assistant training. A Black female R.A. lamented her issues with white women who braid their hair, as it represented a form of cultural appropriation. Matt narrated an account that made him appear to be paralyzed in the moment, unable to speak up and challenge the woman’s perspective. This critique, he explained, was limiting expression and making a big issue out of nothing.

**Emergent Constructions: “White is Ignorance”**

The second typology of white identity is best described as Emergent Constructions of white identity. Sarah, Lucas, Jordan, Patrick, and Spencer frequently constructed a sense of self that indicated an emergent understanding of whiteness. That is, unlike the students in the prior construction, these students offered accounts in which they claimed to recognize their racial identity and the subsequent privileges associated with whiteness. This awareness fell short in that they rarely, if ever, actually implicated themselves in whiteness and white supremacy. Beyond vague and abstract discussions of white privilege, these students typically framed themselves in a positive and desirable light. Nonetheless, it is clear that these students were beginning to see the role of race and whiteness in matters of opportunity and desired to continue thinking through such matters. With increasing awareness came a feeling that one must utilize white privilege to act against racism. These students spoke of an obligation of sorts that helped define their sense of a white identity.
In addition to an emerging awareness of whiteness, they also exhibited a developing understanding of the institutional dynamics of racism. Although they frequently relied on an understanding of racism that centered bigotry and prejudice, they did begin to discuss systemic and historical legacies of racial inequality. As such, they often struggled making sense of these emerging perspectives in the context of their pre-college environments. In this sense, they existed in a very liminal state, straddling prior messages from friends, teachers, and parents back home with the new knowledge acquired at State U about their racial selves. Because this was also a phenomenon of those in Critical Constructions of white identity, a discussion of liminality is presented after Critical Constructions.

**Beginning to see: Recognizing a racial identity.** Unlike participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions, these students exhibited a developing awareness of their own racial location and their relationship to people of color. This most frequently occurred in larger discourses of white privilege, wherein participants would discuss how whiteness conferred a number of advantages. Lucas described being white as, “hell of lucky. I would say that white is privileged. White is ignorance.” A major privilege these students discussed was being untouched by the daily impact of racism. That is, being white afforded them the privilege of not having to think about their whiteness or how it privileged them on a daily basis.

Jordan explained that she was increasingly trying to consider how whiteness afforded her the ability to be ignorant and unaware of racial injustice. Her whiteness
served as a barrier of sorts in trying to understand the experiences of students of color.

She explained:

I guess when I think about it, it's that whole check your privilege type thing. I don't necessarily do it consciously all of the time, but when I go to make a comment about race, I kind of try to think about how I might not understand someone else's experience. It doesn't necessarily have to be race, it could be another issue like socio-economic differences. I don't know, location differences, just various different life experiences. I think race plays a big part into people's life stories. There's a word for that, I feel like they used it in R.A. training. It's the experiences that people have had, they shape who they are.

Her account illuminates an emerging awareness of whiteness, as she considers how to “check her privilege,” that might obstruct her ability to hear how students of color experience the world. Her voice on the matter is still developing, as she tries to recall a concept she had recently learned in class. In addition, Jordan frequently attempted to draw on her own experiences as a lesbian to empathize with students of color on campus. Just as she did not want to be generalized as a “butch” lesbian, she grew frustrated when her white peers would similarly frame all students of color the same.

Patrick similarly spoke of his inability to understand the experiences of students of color. To be white was to be privileged. Although a white person could experience difficulties in their lives, the difficulties were not a result of race. He drew on his own
experiences as a white, bisexual man in clarifying, “my life isn't hard because I'm white. It's hard maybe because I'm in the LGBT community, or because I'm an out-of-state student, or because a bunch of different facets of who I am as a person, but it's not because I'm white, and I don't have to ever worry about being oppressed or not being able to do things because I'm white.”

Through his extensive involvement in residence life it became clear to him that there were gaps in his ability to connect with students of color and that it was critical to recognize such limitations. Situating his discussions within the context of being a Resident Assistant, to be white meant a limited ability to understand the role of racism as experienced by people of color. In this sense, to be white was to have a sort of deficit. He explained, “It’s hard… I can’t have the knowledge of what it’s like to be underprivileged because of my race. I can talk about it to a certain extent, but there’s always going to be something that I’m lacking because I’m white.” Patrick explained that because he could “never have that experience” that it would be useful to have more people of color on his overwhelmingly white R.A. staff to help “contribute to the conversation.” He found it ironic that so much of higher education appeared to be white people talking about race in all white spaces. During his time at State he recognized a familiar pattern in which “a lot of white people sitting around talking about how it’s unfair for people of color…. It’s just kind of ironic that it’s only white academic mostly middle-class people talking about it.” Although Patrick exhibited this awareness, he did not consistently implicate himself as an object of critique. Rather, he still seemed willing
to set himself apart from other whites. As opposed to others, this was something “I notice because we’re aware of those things.” He continued that “Why is it important, diversity as a concept? I think that's not something that most college students would understand, just because, like I say, not because they're incapable of it, but because that's not what the focus is.”

Lucas also discussed his racial self as being defined through an inability to know. He recounted an experience in which a supporter of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign was shouting and promoting violence against Muslim Americans in a public space with a great deal of student traffic. It took an instance such as this, he noted, to highlight for him that he would never encounter such hatred due to his race. He recalled thinking “that’s when you start thinking about being white. Like when you see that you’re like, I’m not scared for my life because I’m white…. Like, I’ll be fine. They won’t shoot me, kind of thing.” This was a point Lucas highlighted frequently during our time together. Considering the limitations of his racial identity occurred both in the context of his work as a Resident Assistant and as an education major. In both spaces he was pushed to consider the limitations of his whiteness and what he might represent to people of color. When his own Muslim residents felt threatened by a Trump/Pence campaign sign located on a door down the hall, Lucas sensed that “because the nature of who I am and the fact that I know that I am white and I know I am male. I know that I am straight… I therefore can’t really empathize or understand what you’re going through.” Lucas explained that his approach to his residents was one in which he
attempted to learn from them and gain further insight into their experiences. For students with this Emergent Construction of white identity, a major concern appeared to be how they could not fully connect or understand the diverse students with whom they worked. Attempting to recognize this limitation and find ways to bridge any gaps in knowledge or understanding was critical.

Lucas also encountered this feeling of a limitation in the context of his field experiences as an education major. Placements in both urban and suburban schools, coupled with coursework on race and ethnicity, provided Lucas a great deal of exposure to dialogues on race and racism. In fact, his major provided him perhaps the most exposure outside of his co-curricular involvement among participants. Lucas explained that his student teaching experiences instilled in him a need to be humble in schools serving students of color, “because you have to understand that like, you’re the alien to them and like, yes you’re trying to understand but you don’t want to be insensitive, you just need to be there to understand…” His faculty encouraged him, as a white person, to stay open to conversations regarding his whiteness in urban educational environments, particularly in terms of how he might be received by parents and children.

Both Sarah and Spencer also highlighted an emerging awareness of their racial identities. In Sarah’s case, the racial dynamics of her community service site were telling. Volunteering at a food pantry she had quickly noticed a pattern of who was serving and who was being served. She explained, “And it just, it really, it like didn’t settle well with me that the fact that we had a bunch of white adults serving food to um,
mainly African Americans suffering from homelessness and poverty.” Sarah was still attempting to name what was unsettling to her, but she found the racial dynamic of her volunteer work problematic. Spencer explained it was difficult to attach any meaning to being white because she had never experienced race-based discrimination. She noted:

If you asked someone what does it mean to be Black, I assume, and I don’t know if it is correct to assume that but I assume that is something that is strong part of their identity. And I think the reason that I don’t feel a sentimental connection towards being white is because I haven’t really experienced um the type of discrimination or anything that negative upon it that makes me reflect on it a lot.

Similar to Lucas, Patrick, and Jordan, Spencer begins to make sense of her own racial location in relation to people of color. Just as Patrick had explained that his life was not difficult because of his race, she underscores that an absence of discrimination leaves this identity relatively meaningless. Further, she drew on her own experiences as a woman to highlight how discrimination and marginalization increases her awareness of a particular identity, “like when it comes to be a woman, I identify with that a lot more and so when it comes to my identity I just really don’t think of race that often and that’s sad.”

Although participants frequently situated themselves as racial beings and highlighted the role of white privilege, this typically occurred on an abstract and general level. Perhaps this should not be a surprise given that their voices were very much in the early stages of developing, attempting to recognize their own racial identities and the role
of whiteness in their lives. To the extent students did offer concrete ways in which they benefitted from whiteness, it was typically couched as an inability to understand students of color and their experiences with racism and white supremacy.

**An obligation to act: “A social responsibility.”** As students began considering what it meant to be white they placed an emphasis on utilizing their newfound privilege to combat racial injustice. Many of these students were quick to point out the importance of using one’s white privilege in ways that were productive and helpful to historically marginalized communities. This is to say that although their understandings of whiteness and racism were still very much developing, to be white meant an obligation to act.

Jordan described a social responsibility that she carried as a white person. To be silent, or unaware of one’s privilege, only threatened the potential for socially just communities. She explained the need to be conscious as a white person, “it’s almost like a social responsibility, to take into account that there is some kind of privilege that is pre-existing just based on the color of my skin.” Jordan spoke vaguely about “preconceived notions” she held about “people of other groups.” In her mind, it was important to combat these biases by engaging others. She again spoke of white people’s obligation, this time discussing it as a duty:

> I don't want to say it's a duty to try to understand people of other groups, but it'd be very helpful if you did just because it seems like in general, I know that I have preconceived notions and I actively try to fight against
preconceived notions about other people in groups that they may
physically identify to belong with or may actually identify to belong with.

Sarah spoke of a similar obligation. Given that her primary involvement on campus
came through service and volunteer work, she frequently found herself considering the
role of “giving back.” Similar to Jordan, she framed this as a necessary consequence of
her white privilege, noting “But that like, giving back to society is almost like a necessary
thing for whites because we are so privileged. In society. Because we have these
unearned advantages. We need to like, humble ourselves and serve the underprivileged
of society.”

Spencer and Patrick also appeared to recognize the ways in which white people
are more likely to be heard on matters of racial justice among their white peers. Spencer
recounted her friends of color telling her that she was in a better position to “invest” in
movements such as Black Lives Matter. The intersections of her race and social class,
coupled with her relationships with other whites on campus, appeared to give her a
certain type of platform. She reflected on this reality:

I have a lot of radical friends that are um. Promoting that movement.

Who are Black and that’s kind of their take on it. When they look at me
and say, you have this education, you have this better socioeconomic
status. You could invest more in it then I currently can because I’m not in
a position to really do that other than the fact that I have my voice.
As Spencer continued to reflect on her own racial location, she increasingly understood that her voice was more likely to be heard as a white person in discussions of race and racism.

**Evolving understandings of racism.** Whereas participants in Ignorant Constructions of whiteness defined racism solely as individual bigotry and hatred, positioning themselves as the victims of reverse racism, these participants offered a somewhat more nuanced definition. This is to say that they were beginning to understand themselves in relation to racism, not only as a means of individual behaviors. What was most notable was that when asked to define racism they frequently referred to individual character flaws and overt prejudice, but throughout their interviews they hinted at a growing awareness of how historical legacies of white supremacy have shaped opportunity for people of color today. These participants were beginning to articulate the contours of institutionalized and systemic racism, while still defining racism largely through individual prejudice.

For instance, Patrick’s thinking on racism, and his relationship to it, is perhaps most illustrative of the complex and messy interpretation of the concept. This should come as little surprise given that these students were characterized as emerging, their voices and opinions still developing. Patrick spoke of institutionalized racism on multiple occasions, most frequently in regards to criminal justice. He recounted conversations he had with his father upon returning home from college as he railed against disparities in sentencing and the war on drugs. Drawing on information he had
learned in class about prison reform, he explained, “like one thing for instance I talk about is like cocaine and crack. And I talk about the difference between that and why does crack have ten times the penalty that cocaine does.” Describing these conversations with his father as discouraging, he further hit on the construction of communities:

…talking about the unjust nature of the criminal system and why we police Black areas more. And like even the idea of Black areas, like why are there ghettos? Like why did those even get created in the first place?

Patrick’s discussions with his father certainly underscored an emerging awareness of institutional racism, largely the result of his coursework. He explained the cyclical effect of these historical legacies, linking crime to matters of opportunity, racial profiling, and policing of predominantly Black areas.

Clearly, Patrick exhibits a level of complexity in his thinking about racial inequality that participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions did not. However, he still relied on highly individualistic notions of racism. When asked to define racism Patrick’s first thought was about individual actions, responding that “Hm. I guess racism would be an explicit action or words said to someone because they are a different race than you are.” He also described the implicit bias he felt was ingrained in people from an early age. This was different from racism however, “…I think that bias is something that, something we all have. I know I am biased but I don’t think I am racist. Like I know that sometimes these thoughts come up and I combat them when they come up.”

Patrick’s distinction is interesting, in that it appears to be more socially acceptable than
racism, although he did not clarify the difference between the two. In fact, Patrick explained that anyone could be racist and that “racism can happen to white people too.” Racism was not merely perpetuated by whites, but rather, “if anything is being done to target or to, like disadvantage a specific, a race. It doesn’t matter what it is.”

Lucas typically spoke about racism as individual prejudice, or “when you marginalize against someone else because they look different than you.” Centering his definition on specific actions, he offered examples such as racist jokes, commentary, and violence. He also described a more overt racism, “of you can get the racism of like, the Aryan ideal that like whites are just better.” The implication of Lucas’ understanding was that education could cure racist thoughts and beliefs. He continually referenced “personal connections” and “dialogues” as keys to eradicating such racist beliefs. According to Lucas, engaging with someone of a different race led to “a personal connection with someone, and you develop those personal relationships. It starts to disprove those stereotypes.” Engaging in this type of dialogue would then lead to a consideration of “are these basically racist ideas true or not?” From Lucas’ vantage point racism could be challenged and rationalized away through dialogue and facts.

Similar to Patrick, these primarily individual definitions of racism were met with an increasing awareness of institutionalized inequality. For Lucas, this awareness was the result of his education courses that explored matters of educational equity. Although he did not discuss these matters when directly asked to define racism, at other points during our time together he spoke of the widening gap in educational attainment, largely as a
result of racial segregation in schools. He described how schools were more segregated now than they were during the Civil Rights era and underscored disparities in opportunity among white students and students of color.

Sarah too, offered a compelling example of primarily relying on individual definitions as an understanding of institutional racism emerges. She responded to the request to define racism as “maybe just like discriminating against someone because of their racial identity.” Sarah made sure to make distinctions between intent versus impact, a concept that seemed to be discussed regularly among involved students at State University. Having read The New Jim Crow, a landmark book on racism in the criminal justice system, Sarah was beginning to define for herself the dynamics of institutional racism. She admitted to being nervous in her attempts to define institutional racism out of a fear of sounding ignorant. Citing mass incarceration and racial profiling she explained:

I just don’t completely agree with the way our justice system works at the moment and that is something I am very like, passionate about. That is probably the one sector of race relations that I am very interested in. Like racial profiling and stuff like that. Like why racial profiling leads to mass incarceration and why mass incarceration leads to the new Jim Crow or whatever.

Sarah’s comment that it was the “one area of race relations” she was particularly interested in was true. She would frequently discuss that she had a lack of knowledge on
other matters of racial justice, but that her experiences with the *New Jim Crow*, coupled with her race relations student organization in high school, fueled an interest in criminal justice.

**Failing to implicate the self.** Taken together, participants in the Emergent Constructions of whiteness underscored a developing understanding of their racial selves on multiple fronts: the limitations of knowing difference, an obligation to use one’s privilege for racial justice, and an increasing awareness of institutional racism. What distinguishes them from the final three participants in this study, or where one might consider the edge of their identity development, was in their ability to center themselves as an object of critique. A hallmark of narrative inquiry is an attention to what is left unsaid. Unlike the participants that follow, these students rarely, if ever, considered how they themselves contributed to the problem of racism and white supremacy on campus. That is, although they articulated the ways in which people of color suffered from the realities of white supremacy, they were unable to link in meaningful ways how they might be implicated in this process. It was typically other whites, as Jordan illustrated when she decried racial profiling, “Mentally, my mind is like, "Stop that white people."”

**Critical Constructions of White Identity: “I Realized I’m White and a Part of this System”**

Ryan, Amanda, and Rachel all represented Critical Constructions of white racial identity. These students were actively exploring what it meant to be white and implicated themselves as a part of the problem of racism and white supremacy. They did not speak
of white privilege or racism as abstract, theoretical concepts; rather they consistently offered examples of how they, regardless of their intentions, contributed in some ways to a racially hostile campus. In this sense, they were less concerned with appearing as good, well-informed white people, instead exhibiting an openness to self-critique and continual development. Whereas participants in Emergent Constructions were beginning to consider whiteness and white racial identity, these three participants frequently applied this knowledge in the context of their own lives, be it in their behaviors, relationships, or campus involvement. And although these students also were concerned with taking action against racism and white supremacy, they appeared to do so in reflective and deliberate ways. That is, they considered their role in racial justice work, how people of color might perceive them, and how to appropriately engage other white people.

**Complex understandings of racism: Institutionalized and colorblind.**

Amanda, Ryan, and Rachel all spoke of racism in much more complex and nuanced ways than the other eleven participants in the study. Their primary definition of racism was never about individual bias or hatred, nor did they confine the concept to a character flaw. Rather, they consistently spoke of racism as a matter of institutionalized and systemic disadvantage. Further, when they did speak about racism at the individual level, it was discussed as a matter of colorblindness and race neutrality. This focus on colorblindness, or what Ryan called “soft racism,” led to a critique of overly optimistic views of race relations.
When Amanda was asked to offer a definition of racism, she described a process of “action or inaction in times of need directed towards racial and ethnic minorities.” She was one of the few participants to explicitly name racial minorities as the exclusive victims of racism, making clear that whites could not be the target due to their status as a majority group. When asked to clarify what this definition of racism might look like, she clarified:

I think of some of the more tangible things like job discrimination, like physical violence, and I’m trying to think of other things… and the educational differences like borrowing resources and that kind of stuff.

Then also more things like unfair treatment in the justice system compared to comparable white cases.

Amanda’s thinking on the matter had been informed through her coursework in sociology and public health. She described these discussions as quite different than those she had in history courses because they dove deeper into matters of racial inequality. Her Sociology of Urban Problems introduced her to police/community tensions and stop-and-frisk laws, causing her to understand that “this is a systemic problem.” She connected these issues to historical legacies of white supremacy and racism, noting, “it’s just like the systemic problems that have been perpetuated throughout our country. The white supremacy that has always been, from the conception of our country.”

Rachel and Ryan also spoke of institutionalized racism. Both discussed their frustration at false notions of progress, which often stemmed from colorblind
perspectives of the world. Rachel described the guilt she encountered as a white woman because so many of the whites in her hometown portrayed racism as an issue of the past. These comments angered her:

…and I think it’s bullshit that people are like, “oh, we’re past that, we’re done.” I’m like, “no there’s so much racism, there’s so much work.”

There’s systematic racism. Look at the percentages of Blacks and Hispanics and colored men in prison as opposed to white men, and the difference of their sentencing for the same crime. I just think that racism has evolved.

Although Rachel’s use of the term “colored men” was troubling, it was clear she understood racism beyond blatant acts of racial hatred and supremacy. She expressed frustration at “how ridiculous drug charges are” and how people “get sent to prison, and their voting rights are legally taken away because they’re an ex-criminal for low level drug charges.” In her mind, institutionalized racism was sustained through what she discussed as “covert racism.”

Rachel explained this type of covert racism, noting that “a lot of people subconscious, and already stereotypically think that Black or Hispanic men are a danger, and that’s why, for the same crimes, Black men are given worse sentences.” Reflecting on how people of color are discussed in her all white town of 1500, she underscored the process of subtle othering “the way they talk about Black people. It’s not even like terrible what they’re saying, but they label them like “them.” Ryan offered a similar
perspective, explaining that if you asked many white people if they are racist they would say no. But the problem, he sensed, was in subtle, passing comments that situated people of color as inferior. Just as Rachel described racism as having “evolved,” Ryan saw a new form of racism, “I think there’s the new racism….I think racism now is with people we know, with the soft racism and saying things that are just super in passing but super important because it’s racist.” This form of racism represented a shift in overt hatred and bias to comments that gave whites some form of wiggle room. Ryan witnessed this type of soft racism frequently back home with his family. He explained:

> Not necessarily, “oh, we know all Black people should be enslaved” or whatever. Hardcore racism and things like that. It was more soft racism like passive comments from family members and parents. The thing with my dad like, “they’re trying to be gangsters.” That comment when we were watching the Ferguson riots.

This type of analysis shifted away from how participants in prior constructions saw racism as a character flaw, and instead situated it as a part of white conditioning and an ability to offer racist beliefs in socially desirable fashion. Taken together, these participants consistently offered accounts of racism as institutional and pervasive among white people, not an anomaly that could be found only among the most intolerant.

**Implicating the white self: “You’re a part of the community that instills that.”** Similar to participants in Emergent Constructions, Ryan, Amanda, and Rachel all spoke to the existence of a white identity and subsequent racial privileges. The
distinguishing feature of these three participants was how they opened themselves up to critique as white people. They not only discussed concepts of whiteness, white supremacy, and white privilege, but applied them directly to their own lives.

Amanda spoke passionately about the safety afforded by whiteness, explaining “being white in this country is a safety bubble around you, essentially.” She would continue, providing one of the more emotional accounts of how whiteness operates in the lives of white people:

All you have to do is be white. You don’t have to be a good person. You don’t have to be safe. You don’t have to be young or old. All you have to be is white and you’re good. On the other hand, all you have to do is be Black to get shot. Or to be distrusted. Or to be seen as inferior. Or less worthy of kindness…. 

This account moved beyond textbook definitions of unearned advantages or simply not having to think about one’s race.

These three students went beyond simply discussing white privilege as an abstract, distant topic and consistently implicated themselves as white people. Rather than pointing fingers elsewhere, they looked inward. Beyond offering detailed explanations of how they understood white privilege, they centered themselves in the discussion. Amanda, for instance, described being in a state of limbo:

I think I am in that stage where I’m in limbo. I’m starting to recognize I have this privilege, and I know that, but then what do I do with it? It’s all
these questions? There’s just so many questions. Why me? Why not them? What do I do? That kind of stuff. I’m very limbo-ey.

Having given little consideration to race before college, the past four years had been a wakeup call of sorts as she considered the role of her own racial identity in her access to opportunities and possibilities. Amanda processed these feelings at length with Student Affairs educators, one of whom relied on a well-known identity development theory to tell her she was experiencing white guilt. Although this may have captured a portion of Amanda’s development, she appeared to be defined less by guilt and more by a sense of urgency and criticality.

Take for instance an event she facilitated over the summer with her student leadership organization. Amanda and three colleagues were presenting their routine talk on leadership, but to a very different crowd than they were accustomed. The group was comprised of young emerging Black engineers, and as such they were the only four white people in the room. Amanda recalled thinking, “I’m really white in this group of people.” She went beyond a mere recognition of her whiteness though, and began asking questions about her and her peers’ discomfort that day:

It was interesting, we had a debrief discussion about that experience afterwards and the… comments were that, that we are still trying to process. The fact that we felt slightly uncomfortable being white in a group of Black high school students was a sign of us not acknowledging our privilege. I really noticed that and I don’t think that it affected the
facilitation and I didn’t feel like things were negative after that but it was something that I was like really aware of at the moment and in our discussion afterwards all the other facilitators also felt that same awareness. Then we were like why did we all feel that and like let’s talk about it and it was kind of like, we were like this is something that we don’t have to normally acknowledge so the fact that we did we were like what does that mean?

Amanda went on to explain that the debrief amounted to nothing more than “dancing around the issue,” opting instead to consider how the group could better be aware of which groups they were presenting to before hand. This did not, in her opinion, directly address the role of whiteness in producing the discomfort.

Amanda critiqued herself, and other “educated white people,” who claim to know what is going on but do not do nearly enough to combat racist systems. In her opinion it was easy for white people to make up excuses for inaction, but in her mind the only true reason was that their lives did not depend on combating racism. Again, the central hallmark of this identity construction was a willingness to critique the white self. Amanda did so, articulating that, “right now, sometimes I’m a part of the problem because I am a part of the inaction… I don’t want to like exclude myself. I don’t want to be like this high and mighty person because I’m definitely not but I’m working on it.”

She would explain there was much more she should be doing, but that she was at times unsure of how to best proceed, be it in activism or confronting a family member.
This sense of criticality also extended to her career. Each of these three students offered reflective accounts of how they could best use their whiteness to fight for racial justice. Amanda was seeking a career in public health, recognizing it as a possible avenue in which she could leverage her privilege as a white person to work in resource-deprived communities. The following passage further highlights her sense of criticality:

I want to go into public health. I for a while was thinking, "Who am I to go into public health? I haven't had adverse experiences to pull from. I'm not a member of those communities, what can I do?" Then I was like, "I can use my position of privilege, and my position where I've had all this education, to spread the resources and the education and the wealth, and try to break down those inequities."

Two points stand out about Amanda’s thinking here. First, she illustrates an awareness of her own racial identity and how it might serve as a barrier in such work, that she is essentially an outsider in the communities in which she hopes to work. Second, there is a desire to work for social and racial justice, but it appears to be more thought out than those who broadly claim they must use their privilege to combat racism.

Rachel also offered a number of instances in which she was opening to self-critique as a white woman. Most of these experiences occurred not through her involvement on campus, but rather in her social networks that were primarily comprised of students of color. Rachel consistently offered accounts in which her friends made visible the limitations of her knowledge as a white person. Similar to Amanda, she not
only recognized the ways in which whiteness and racism operated, but implicated herself in the equation.

In one such instance Rachel recounted a conversation she had with her Black male friend as they walked across campus at night. It was late and traffic was relatively light. Rachel insisted that she and her friend simply cross the street and jaywalk. Her friend, James, was less inclined to due so out of fear of the police:

Even the other night, one of my good friends, we were walking home, and we live on Main (Street). And since they’ve gotten the new dorms, a lot of people jaywalk. I always jaywalk on Main. I went to go jaywalk, and James, my black friend was like “Rach, we ain’t jaywalking.” I was like, “why?” he was like, “because I will get in trouble for this. You don’t have to worry about it.” I was like, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about it.”

Rachel’s receptiveness to James’ experiences represented her ability to be critiqued as a white woman without becoming defensive, angry, or hostile. Often pausing before answering questions, our time together revealed a level of comfort with this critique that few other participants exhibited.

Perhaps the most revealing example of this comfort with critique came when Rachel attended a Black Student Association (BSA) meeting to promote an event her student organization was hosting. She explained that she felt judged when she attended BSA meetings, receiving dirty looks that appeared to be because she was white. After
attending the BSA meeting she discussed it with some of her Black friends who explained to her what her whiteness might represent to students of color. The discussion occurred at Leadershape, a weekend retreat that aims to craft students’ philosophy of leadership. She recalled the conversation in which she stated, "You know, I try and go and be an ally, and then I get these looks and I just don't feel welcome.” Her peers cautioned her against becoming too defensive, noting the importance of BSA to Black students on a white campus. Rachel recalled the conversation, noting:

They explained to me that, you know, that is their one safe space on campus, to where they don't have to worry about race. They're like, "Please still go, try to just ignore those people that give you those looks, but just keep that in mind that that is their safe space, and they don't know you so they don't know what perspective you're bringing in when you come."

Rachel’s discussions with her peers at Leadershape underscore again her willingness to recognize the limitations of her own white racial knowledge in very concrete ways. She moves beyond an abstract point that being white might serve as a barrier in understanding racial oppression, and instead applies it directly to her experiences. That is, rather than discuss these matters conceptually or academically, she implicates herself as a subject of critique. She found the opportunity to learn from her peers as exciting, because she had not “had many chances to really, like at LeaderShape, to get great feedback and advice on
what I can do better and what I shouldn't do, so I just really appreciated that conversation."

Rachel appeared to have been reflecting a great deal on how she approached her work as an ally. In addition to dialoguing with her friends of color, she was constantly seeking out resources to learn how to work for racial justice in ethical ways. When asked how she defined an ally she described it as tricky. Her concern was that even those white people who have good intentions could cause harm, explaining:

It is hard to separate what white people actually understand in the struggle, because even people that have good intentions, if they don't have the right experiences or haven't tried to broaden their view the right way, can sometimes be more harmful. I think as an ally, it's just always asking what they need from you as well, rather than assuming like, "Oh, this is what I think you need," and trying to just educate myself and always be open.

Rachel’s commentary underscores her skepticism of white people attempting to do racial justice work. She admitted to having few white friends on campus and offered a number of instances in which she listened to the testimonies of her friends of color. Rachel recounted a number of instances in which her friends of color, particularly Black students, shared feelings of isolation, be it in matters of dating on campus or the lack of racial diversity and representation in the media. These experiences appeared to be central to how Rachel made sense of her own white identity and how she was located in relation to people of color.
Rachel even went so far as to critique the overwhelming whiteness of the Leadershape Retreat that she had been excited to attend. Over the weekend the students participated in a simulation that was meant to portray the underlying values of equity and justice, illuminating the haves and have not’s. As students bargained for different coins in order to accumulate as much wealth as possible, Rachel found the simulation to be all too familiar to her working class roots. She described the simulation as “very real to her.” She found a sense of commonality with one of the few Black men at the retreat, who also experienced the simulation to be a means of reliving marginalization. Rachel explained:

There was a lot of people that were very privileged from affluent families who were like, "It's a game. It's funny." After multiple times of us telling them, "No, this is real. This is hurt. I've went through this in my life for twenty years. It's not a game. This happens every day."

Rachel continued, describing how she discussed these matters with the Black male student in her cluster group. She explained that he had:

gotten so worked up that he had to step out of the game. He didn't take part in the conversation or anything. I went up to him that night after everything was done, and I was like, “if you wouldn't mind, I had heard you had had trouble with the simulation, like I did as well. I almost stepped out. I was on the verge of tears. Could we talk about it?” So we talked about it. In my small cluster, I was able to discuss my feelings, and
he stated how "I'm representing all blacks. I am the only black male that was there. If I were to go to my family cluster and talk and be mad and say how this affected me, then all of you white people will continue to view blacks as that. I didn't even feel comfortable sharing my thoughts." I was like, "Holy shit."

This conversation appears to have further opened Rachel up to how her whiteness blinded her from knowing. While many of the other students in the study would have grown defensive or angry at the phrase “all of you white people,” Rachel did not. Instead she framed it as a meaningful learning opportunity. Not having thought about how he might be seen as representing all Black students at Leadershape, she reflected on the very different experiences they had, “Because LeaderShape creates such a safe space, or at least it did for me. I think that is largely because I was white, and my actions, I'm not worried about people viewing all white people based off my actions.” She described this as a defining moment in her thinking about her own whiteness and in turn, offered a much more skeptical appraisal of the Leadershape experience:

Yeah, and it makes me ... LeaderShape especially. You create these visions for a world, and it's really empowering. You go around and you read everyone's vision and you think, "Oh, man, the world's going to be a great place if everyone keeps doing this," but then I step back and I'm like, "This is only ... it's fifty white people. What about all the other Indian students and Black students, that don't ever think to apply or don't apply
because they don't think they can make it in, or don't even apply because they don't want to be outnumbered?"

Looking back on her experience, Rachel noted that it is difficult to get excited about such a transformative experience when it is almost exclusively white students.

In addition to surrounding herself with a racially diverse circle of friends, Rachel also drew on her own experiences with marginalization as an entry point for some level of empathy. Clearly her time at Leadershape left her frustrated and angry about how class advantage was trivialized, in turn prompting a conversation with her group member Trevion about race. Rachel consistently drew on her marginalized identities, as a young woman who grew up in poverty with a disability, to try and make connections across difference. What stood out, however, was that she always qualified her comments by stating that she was not trying to conflate the experiences. She explained that her disability, which frequently caused chronic, debilitating pain, coupled with growing up in poverty helped her gain a sense of struggle. Rachel continued, noting “I think people would be a hell of a lot nicer if they had to go through the same things I had to go through. It makes it more real. I've always been able to empathize, but you never understand until you're in their shoes.” She was quick to not conflate her experiences of marginalization with those of racism, however, highlighting a nuanced understanding of her intersecting identities:
To be white, that's the thing. I don't think about it a lot because I'm not forced to. That's something we talk about in class. I get up and I look in the mirror and I'm not like, "Oh, I'm a black woman, you can make it through the day." I get up and I look in the mirror and I'm like, "You look pretty rough, let's go." I don't have to think about race very often, and I think that that makes me super-privileged. The few times I've had to think about it, it's nothing compared to the interactions that I've seen my friends go through or I hear that my friends have had to go through.

Rachel’s recognition of the different experiences among women was one of the more complex ways of thinking about the racial self that surfaced during the study.

Ryan’s narrative also underscored the two consistent themes of Critical Constructions of identity: a consistent awareness of his white self and a willingness to implicate himself as a part of the problem of white supremacy. To be white was more than mere skin pigmentation, but rather a cultural standpoint. Ryan explained that many white people thought about whiteness as, “The pigmentation of your skin. Which I think is the way often times a lot of people say it, like that but in reality what it means to be white in America is cultural.” He situated whiteness in a paradoxical way, explaining the pervasive nature of white culture in America while also underscoring that as an identity, whiteness meant little relative to what Blackness represented to Black Americans. Ryan often referred to the overwhelmingly dominant presence of white
culture as white washing, a concept he had recently learned in a Political Science course. When asked to clarify further, he responded:

I think maybe more of a societal connotation is that white culture is the only accepted culture and I think that word connotes that there is an effort to not have Black culture or Asian culture or other cultures. I think that's what that word connotes. I think physically it just means there's a lack of people of color but I think there's also a societal meaning to it. There's an effort to preserve white culture.

He frequently applied this concept to State University, explaining that campus was “totally white washed.” While the campus was able to meet his needs and interests, which were often not marked as explicitly racial, students of color faced a lack of representation. His Resident Assistant staff of 18 featured one student of color, a woman whom identified as Vietnamese-American.

Although Ryan had initially thought of college as a time in which racial and ethnic diversity would be stressed, he found it to be incredibly lacking at State. As an example, he explained to me that he could “tell you the person I think of when I think of Greek life.” Greek life, to Ryan, was one of the most white washed areas of campus, both hyper visible at State yet lacking any presence of racial diversity. When asked whom it is he thinks of when thinking about Greek Life, Ryan replied “I think of a white guy with short brown hair and you know, a very preppy style. I think of a white guy.” This whitewashed experience was quite different than his first year of college at the
nearby branch campus, where he frequently interacted with the large Somali and African American populations. For Ryan, the whiteness of State was alarming. Such thinking was consistent with Ryan’s underlying recognition of whiteness as a particular racialized perspective, not a taken for granted standpoint.

Having recently come out as pansexual, Ryan often drew on his own experiences of marginalization to bridge his gaps in understandings. Rarely seeing people like him represented on campus provided some level of insight into how students of color might feel:

Like I would say, again this is coming from my experiences clearly, I would say nine times out of ten a queer person thinks more about their identity, their sexual orientation, than someone who is straight would. I feel the same thing applies to someone of color. They have to think about their identity more because they’re faced with more challenges and less representation, thinking "Oh why am I not on this television show? Why am I the character that always gets killed off first? Or my race."

His experiences with marginalization, which appeared to be magnified coming from an incredibly conservative hometown, allowed for him to understand that “it’s personal… it helps me empathize with people who also need that help, whatever it is, identifying themselves or just being able to not be disenfranchised.”

Beyond this recognition of his racial identity as a white man, Ryan also showed a willingness to apply this knowledge and implicate himself in white supremacy. This first
became noticeable when Ryan discussed a newfound awareness that being white meant “you're a part of that community that instills that (oppression).” He recounted a particular instance that occurred during his first year as a Resident Assistant at the nearby branch campus. Per the responsibilities of his position, he was required to call the police after stumbling upon a loud party that clearly hosted a number of underage residents. When the police arrived, Ryan noticed that the first person they approached was one of his Black residents. Against his growing interest in the Black Lives Matter movement against police brutality Ryan remembered thinking:

"Oh my god I just did that, because I was the one who like, you know ... "
and this is…but I was the one who like, found the party and busted up and called the cops and everything. That's when I was like, Oh I did that. I am the person who I keep reading about in the news and I'm the person who triggers this police brutality. All of that happened in my mind at that time and it was just, "Oh." It was very surreal in a way but also very terrifying because I was like, "Oh my god! I'm this person I'm reading about."

Again, unlike participants in the first two constructions of white identity, Ryan is less concerned with his own goodness or moral virtuousness. Rather, he locates himself within a broader system of whiteness that polices Black bodies with hyper surveillance. By calling the police Ryan saw himself as contributing to this problem. As he noted, “I always associated the bad guy with police brutality as police who are racist, but in that moment I realized the bad guy was not necessarily the police, it was people who don't
understand.” Ryan would elaborate that white people who refused to understand hostile race relations, particularly in regards to the policing of the Black community, were as much the problem as the police themselves.

Similar to Amanda and Rachel, he exhibited a willingness to make himself the object of critique, rather than speaking about whiteness and white privilege in more abstract, distant terms. Describing the experience as “surreal,” Ryan explained, “I just realized that I’m white and I’m part of this system.” He continued, discussing that:

There's an element that white people need to consider…for me that moment… kind of identified me. I don't want to say identified but it felt very, almost too easy of a word. I felt like I was the enemy in a way.

Ryan’s discussion of being identified in the moment speaks to his willingness to locate his whiteness not as universal and neutral but rather a particular racial perspective.

**Liminal States of Being: “Home is Not Exactly Home”**

Students characterized by both Emergent and Critical Constructions of whiteness shared a similar experience of liminality. Although the extent to which they centered themselves as an object of critique varied, all of these students exhibited an increasing awareness of whiteness, both in their own lives and the lives of people of color. As such, they began to reconsider their prior relationships and communities in a new light. As noted previously, the messages they received about race growing up were rooted in colorblind perspectives and ahistorical in nature, typically occurring overwhelmingly in homogenous environments. Now on campus, a tension was beginning to emerge. To
varying extents they were coming to recognize the role of race and racism in the lives of people of color, and subsequently their own racial location as white people. In opening themselves up to this tension they found themselves cognitively detaching from early messages about race and dealing with the affective consequences of reconsidering so much about what was once considered home.

As these participants gained increasing awareness of whiteness and racism, they sensed a growing distance, both physical and emotional, between their lives at State and their hometowns. Rachel and Ryan were both accused of a sense of liberal superiority that could only have resulted from a college education. Amanda recalled an instance in which she referred to herself as a “chink” because of a common misperception among many that she was Asian. Her friends on campus explained to her the meaning of the term and its racist history. Amanda, who was even embarrassed to tell the story in the interview, could not believe it. This language was frequently used in her hometown. It was a common nickname utilized by her friends in high school. She remembered being overcome with emotion at State thinking, “Like I had no idea. No idea. And I was like what kind of area did I grow up in and I had no idea that was not fine…. I just can’t even imagine why I thought that was okay but I did. It was a thing I did.” Being confronted by her peers led her to a realization familiar for many of the students with Emergent and Critical Constructions of whiteness: how did I ever think this was okay? As she explained, “I cannot even imagine what my life would be like if I was still in that mindset and in that area of just like, white ignorance.”
Ryan similarly remarked that upon meeting students from far more diverse communities in his first year at State, “That’s when I realized that it wasn’t normal.” Once on campus he quickly realized the homogenous nature of his hometown and that “there’s this bubble of ultra conservatism that is not healthy and it’s a very controlling aspect of the town.” Rachel, hailing from her small town of no more than 1,500, felt that she had outgrown the place she’d been so fiercely loyal to growing up. She had come to the realization that:

so [city] isn’t quite home yet, but [town] I’ve just outgrown, is what I feel like. I love going home and being able to say hi to people, but I don’t think I really could have a deep conversation with anyone from [town], just because they haven’t ever left and they’ve never tried to expand their horizons, and it’s something I’m so passionate about.

Such realizations were difficult for students. It required not only that they reconsider what they thought to be true about the world, particularly in regards to race and opportunity, but there was also an affective component to this process. Students most frequently experienced these tensions when they returned home, be it for the weekend or over an extended break. It was during this reentry into pre-college environments that the contrast became most evident.

Spencer emotionally described how she felt like a fraud when she returned home from State. This was particularly the case early on in her career as she became exposed to issues of racial injustice. Incredibly close to her single mother and grandparents, she
feared disappointing them with what she called increasingly liberal views of race. In recalling a visit shortly after enrolling at State, Spencer noted:

> At first it was difficult, like my freshman year I would say just because I was still pretty attached to my hometown. In a way that, when I came home for breaks, I just kind of felt like a fraud in a way when I was at home.

She continued, explaining that when she returned to campus she “just kind of felt free in a way. No one knew who I was.” This sense of freedom and an ability to explore alternative ways of thinking about race was a stark contrast to back home. Spencer now found herself advocating on behalf of Black Lives Matter, dismissed All Lives Matter as missing the point, and was supporting Hillary Clinton for President. The latter served as a point of tension. When she told her grandma and grandpa, whom she affectionately described as mamma and papa, that she was voting for Clinton they told her she had disappointed them, even raised her wrong. Spencer quickly learned she needed to approach conversations about race more sensitively than she would with someone on campus. She recalled a particular interaction she had with her papa on the subject of Black Lives Matter, a topic that surfaced for many of these students back home:

> (he) just tries to dismiss it no matter what. When it’s on the news I bring it up I’m like, “man, that sucks. I can’t believe something like that is happening.” He’s just kind of like, “what did they expect if they’re being
violent towards police officers?” And not questioning the fact that the law enforcement is not always in the right. Sometimes it is corrupt.

Spencer, like many participants in Emergent and Critical Constructions, struggled to confront the racial assumptions and beliefs of those closest to her despite her increasing awareness. As she would explain, “I feel like when I’m at home it’s not necessarily a safe place with those ideas and that mentality.”

Rachel similarly illuminates these processes, both the growing detachment from home and the simultaneous difficulty in confronting her peers and family members. As described in her narrative, Rachel prided herself on the tightknit bonds that defined her family. Although family remained as strong to her throughout her college career as ever, tensions did begin to emerge. Returning to her small, Appalachian town she heard a common refrain:

“oh you’re a know it all. Think you’re better than us now that you go to college now, and you want talk about this stuff?” My parents are very much like, “Yes, Rachel wants to talk about everything, and she thinks she knows the right way.”

It was becoming evident to Rachel that she simply could not engage in the types of dialogues around race at home that she enjoyed at State. Despite the tensions Rachel routinely went home to see her family. She detailed numerous experiences that only further amplified the growing distance between her hometown and her new ways of
thinking about race and whiteness. As she would so pointedly note, “Home is not exactly home. Home is really just going home to my immediate family.”

One of these instances especially struck Rachel because it was from a close friend. She recalled, “I went home this summer and somebody was speaking in Spanish and she said something along the line of, “You shouldn’t be in this country if you’re not speaking English,” to me.” I was like, you’ve met Jose.” Jose, Rachel’s boyfriend, was a Latino male who was born and raised in southern California. Beyond the overt racist nature of the comment, the remarks hurt Rachel on a personal level because her friend knew of her relationship. She was hesitant to confront the racist framing of Spanish-speaking individuals however, in large part because she valued the relationship with her friend. Frustrated that she was silent, she explained “I just dropped it because I knew I would have severed ties if we went any more into that conversation. I didn’t want to lose a five year friendship over those words.” Rachel’s sense-making on the interaction underscores a caution in taking the conversation any further, perhaps fearful of what else she might discover from her friend.

Rachel had a similar experience with her cousin, with whom she had been incredibly close growing up:

Something that's been bothering me lately, I'm super-close to my cousin, and the last time I went home, she's, "The N-word." First she said, "I'm not racist," but then the N-word with a strong "e-r" at the end, and I still can't
get over it. It's hard for me to, again, be so close with somebody that is so
blatantly racist and then denies it.

Again, Rachel experienced a great deal of dissonance in how those closest to her, in this
case her cousin, speak about people of color. This overt racist framing of Black
Americans was incredibly troubling for Rachel. Still, she found herself struggling to find
the right words in how she could best confront her cousin.

Ryan found himself unsure of how to confront his father on explicit racist framing
of Black protesters during the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri. As they were watching the
events unfold on the news his father proclaimed “oh they just want to be gangsters.” His
father’s comments represented to Ryan what he frequently described throughout our time
as “soft racism.” He sensed it was better not to confront him because he “knew where it
would go.” Amanda also erred on the side of avoiding a confrontation when her aunt
began a long tirade against Black Lives Matter. Espousing the viewpoint that all lives
matter, her aunt described at length her anger and frustration on the Black Lives Matter
movement. Amanda remembered thinking “you don’t get it. Like you don’t understand
what that really means, you don’t understand the implications. But I wasn’t in a position
to have a calm conversation about it.” Still bothered after lunch had ended, she expressed
this sentiment to her father:

I like asked my dad afterwards like that’s not okay and I need to talk about
that and he is like don’t even bother. Don’t talk to her like, don’t do it, it’s
not worth it. And so like I know that it would be worth it to have that
conversation; I’m just trying to find a way to like approach it and have myself be like a calm, knowledgeable person and not like get angry.

Taken together, these accounts illuminate the increasing distance, both physical and emotional, these participants experienced in relation to their home communities. A major developmental task was becoming more comfortable in this distance, a process that both Spencer and Rachel begin to illustrate. It required not only a recognition of how they knew the racial world prior to State, but also an unlearning and the subsequent tensions with friends and family members back home. None of the participants seemed to be comfortable consistently challenging and pushing back against those with whom they were closest in their hometowns. They did, however, experience their hometowns quite differently than they had prior to State. As Rachel so pointedly noted, “I just struggle really hard trying to go back home and being like no this stuff matters, and this is what I believe in, and they entirely disagree. Very, very narrow minded.”

**Perpetuation of Whiteness on Campus**

Having illustrated the unique histories of participants, in addition to the three typologies of white identity in college, I now shift to the ways in which white students perpetuated a racial ideology of whiteness on campus. Central to understanding this process is that whiteness acts upon white peoples regardless of the complexity of their understanding of race and racism. Indeed, the ensuing pages should complicate linear and clean understandings of white identity. The purpose of the following section is to illuminate how white student leaders in the present study, often unknowingly,
perpetuated a culture of whiteness on campus. These larger narratives were derived using structural narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), a process that involved an attention to motivated tellings and what particular stories and accounts accomplished in the interview setting in particular and on campus more broadly.

Participants perpetuated whiteness in four ways. First, they uncritically absorbed institutional messages about diversity and inclusion, in turn offering overwhelmingly positive perceptions of race relations on campus. I have termed this Narratives of Racial Harmony. Second, given the positive and harmonious views of campus, a number of participants reacted in hostile and paternalistic ways towards those students who did speak out about racial injustice on campus. I describe this process, drawing on Delgado and Stefancic (1999) work on imposition language, as Narratives of Imposition.

Third, because of their heavy involvement in campus and their proximity to administrators and diversity programming, many participants tended to craft narratives that created a false sense of arrival. In many ways this narrative, entitled the Enlightenment Narrative, situated participants as transformed and knowledgeable, having arrived and now responsible for educating other students. Typically when such a narrative was enacted it implied that these students were done learning and had arrived in their understandings of whiteness and racism. Finally, through Narratives of Racial Innocence, a number of participants perpetuated whiteness in their constant efforts to maintain the perceived goodness and innocence of the family members and white peers. In the following pages I explore each of these narratives and how, despite some
participants’ increasingly complex ways of thinking about whiteness and their relationship to students of color, all of these students were in some ways complicit in perpetuating a larger system of white supremacy.

**Narratives of Campus Racial Harmony**

Participants perpetuated a culture of whiteness through the ways in which they perceived and made sense of campus race relations. This is to say that a majority of participants viewed campus as welcoming and inclusive to students of color. These perceptions of the campus illustrate a distorted view of race relations and an inherently racialized, white form of racial knowledge. Their sense-making cannot be divorced from their strong ties to the university, particularly student affairs. Participants exhibited a fundamental belief in the work of State’s diversity and inclusion efforts, in turn making it difficult to comprehend that students of color might consider campus to be unwelcoming. This involvement with the institution is an important backdrop for understanding their perceptions of race relations on campus. If the university was so committed to diversity, then how could matters of racial unrest really be an issue? In a sense, an uncritical absorption of institutional narratives about diversity and inclusion led students to a positive image of the campus. Only two participants, Rachel and Ryan, consistently critiqued the climate of State U.

In the following pages I illustrate how participants interacted with State’s Office of Student Affairs and the ways in which they absorbed messages of diversity and inclusion. Having done so, I then shift to their overall perceptions of campus climate as
positive and welcoming and explore two means of justifying this interpretation.

Interpretations of campus as welcoming and racially harmonious were justified through two mechanisms: an absence of overt bias and situating State U, and higher education in general, as inherently more open and progressive than society at large.

**Fundamental belief in campus diversity efforts.** Given their heavy involvement at State and their close proximity to administrators on a personal level, a number of participants uncritically absorbed institutional narratives about diversity and inclusion. This is to say that these student leaders fundamentally believed that State was doing the best it could to promote a welcoming campus atmosphere. Amanda, who had direct access to multiple student affairs professionals, would go so far as to place State University ahead of other institutions, stating:

> Overall we have a relatively good staff and administration and professors that want to make positive change. I think that sets us apart from some institutions who are kind of just maybe stuck in their ways a little bit, or who aren’t as open to that change component.

She went on to situate State U against an institution a few hours away that her friend attended, noting it lacked the desire for social change and inclusiveness she experienced. She described the nearby university as stuck in their ways and that according to a friend, “nobody there is open to these social justice conversations. Not nobody, but very few people are open to that, and they just want to stick to their ways and stick to the way they grew up.” Although Amanda exhibited a great deal of complexity in making sense of
whiteness, it was clear that she greatly admired the work she perceived of State in promoting a socially just campus. Understanding this proximity, and the ways in which participants accepted institutional messages about diversity and inclusion offer an important backdrop for their perceptions of campus climate.

Students consistently reported that the institution went to great lengths to promote inclusion. They frequently employed the phrase “diversity and inclusion” as a catchall, leaving the concept ambiguous and without a clear sense of meaning. Liz, for instance, portrayed a university that discussed these matters non-stop:

….I don’t think that’s true that the campus environment is hostile because all anybody ever talks about is diversity and inclusion, especially within housing. I’ve been in student dorms for three years now. That’s everywhere, just diversity and inclusion. I applied to be an O.A. I applied to be an R.A. Both of them had multiple questions that were directed towards the diversity and inclusion. I don’t necessarily think that that’s true that it’s openly hostile towards people of color.

Liz’s assertion that diversity and inclusion are everywhere was a noticeable refrain from many participants in this study. Interestingly, it is unclear what exactly she means by “diversity and inclusion.” She was far from the only student to use the phrase in broad and ambiguous ways. Through his work on the activities board Jason sensed a similar emphasis on matters of inclusion from student affairs staff. He explained, “the office of
student life is so passionate about diversity and inclusion.” He would go on to admit this emphasis almost made him uncomfortable at times.

Lucas, an education major and an R.A., described his time at State U as greatly impacted by a focus on diversity and inclusion. He reflected on his experiences thus far, noting “our education does have an emphasis on inclusion and diversity and understanding other people… State, I think, creates good human beings. And part of being a good human being is not being a racist. And like, they’ve done that.” Similar to both Liz and Jason, Lucas employs “diversity and inclusion” in an ambiguous way. It is unclear exactly what the phrase refers to, but it carried a great deal of currency among the student leaders. Additionally, Lucas’ commentary that State’s commitment to diversity means they don’t produce racists is troubling at best, as it places racism solely as an individual behavior that an institution can seemingly root out. Lucas characterized a white student body that was generally aware of white privilege, noting “especially here at State. People are aware of it, they know it exists. And they don’t deny it exists. It’s just usually the severity, I think.” Lucas’ optimistic evaluation of white students and their perceptions of privilege seem to stem from his heavy involvement and belief in institutional messages of diversity. Laura described her first year at State in which she was a member of a scholars group focused on leadership. Her account also utilized this language, as she recounted, “my freshman year I was in [scholars group] and that is all about like, inclusion and they want diversity in that.” Interestingly, both Laura and
Spencer referred to their time at State as being in a bubble in which diversity, inclusion, and social justice were the norm.

Participants most frequently cited institutional diversity and inclusion efforts through their involvement in residence life. Seven participants in the study were currently or had been employed as Resident Assistants, while others referenced their time living in the halls. Time and again these students referenced the department’s commitment to diversity and inclusion, which was one of its four pillars. Many sensed that their experiences in residence life reflected a larger commitment to diversity, and thus a racially progressive campus. Patrick had been a Resident Assistant for three years and was now supervising his hall’s front desk. He recalled the strong emphasis placed on diversity and inclusion throughout the department, from the initial job interview to the annual R.A. training before the start of each academic term. He explained, “like in training we talk about it. We talk about like diversity and inclusion are one of our core four pillars. So, we are talking about that all the time. It was something that got brought up in your interview to get the job.” Lucas echoed the emphasis housing placed on diversity, particularly through programming. He noted:

And I think res life, also, because diversity and inclusion are two of our pillars out of the four… We put on events that are multi-religious or multi-cultural or things where you can go and explore other cultures and religions and interact with those students and force them to interact with those students. And people take those options. Because they’re fun. And
like, they’re willing to learn about it. So I think it’s because State U gives those opportunities as well…. When we put on those events, we make sure that we talk about it, we don’t ignore that it’s an issue.

Sarah, who was not an R.A. but had lived in the residence halls, similarly endorsed the work of housing staff. She attributed a progressive student body in part to the fact that students were required to live on campus for their first two years at State. For Sarah, the connection was clear: “And that could be because of the different programs that State puts on, like how residence halls promote diversity, inclusion, community.” Living in the residence halls at State, “lends itself to students then promoting diversity and inclusion like outside of the residence halls. Like once they move out.”

Taken together, the accounts offered by participants illuminate an overly optimistic view of the campus racial climate, in large part through their involvement and association with student affairs. Amanda explained that conversations about diversity and inclusion were the norm at State U, which just was not the case at many other institutions. Or as Laura, who frequently exhibited colorblind and distorted views of race relations on campus explained, “it’s the environment and the way that here at State U, you’re encouraged to talk about things like that…” This belief in the institution’s diversity work made it difficult for participants to recognize the racially hostile environment that existed at State U. In essence, their heavy involvement with and fondness for State served as the larger narrative environment for which they made sense of race relations on campus.
Perceptions of campus harmony. All but three participants spoke of campus as a welcoming and open environment. Lucas provided a typical assessment of race relations, “On campus I would say that most people are very supportive of it, are very supportive of diversity, very supportive of inclusion.” These assessments of race relations are troubling given that a number of participants in the study recounted seeing or hearing something at State that they would label as racist behavior. Their depiction of State U is highly indicative of white racial knowledge and expresses a distorted view of race relations. Such a welcoming climate was justified largely based on the absence of overt bigotry and hatred, again confining matters of racism and white supremacy to individual relations. Given their heavy investment in institutional messages of diversity and inclusion, for many participants it seemed as if State U was a racial utopia. Connor processed through his own feelings about the university and reflected on claims that the campus might not be welcoming for everyone, “It’s troubling just because I think this place is so great, to see some people reacting so negatively to it…” This optimistic portrait most participants painted of campus was despite the heavy presence of campus activism and racial unrest, detailed later in this chapter. As described earlier, the inability of most students to grasp the systemic and institutional narrative has implications for this distorted perception. Participants also justified these perceptions by contrasting campus, and in turn college students, to society at large. In doing so they spoke vaguely about “society” and “the real world” as a way to demarcate the unique nature of State. Both of these justifications are detailed in the following pages.
An absence of bias: “Walking around with headphones on.” Participants most frequently justified their claim of positive race relations through the absence of overt bias and discrimination on campus. That is, they either rationalized their view of a positive climate by claiming racially harmonious relations on campus or, if such overt discrimination occurred, they just did not see it. Further, if they had witnessed an instance of interpersonal racism the incident was typically written off as an anomaly. Spencer, who was at times conflicted about how welcoming campus might be for students of color, still relied on an individual frame of reference when considering matters of race and racism, explaining that students at State U “are becoming more aware of that fact that being prejudiced and using discrimination towards people is not right. I think that mentality is growing that it’s wrong to do those things.” Sarah described State U as a very “tolerable community” but later changed her evaluation to “respectful.” She arrived at this perspective in large part because she had not witnessed any instances of overt racial hostility, although she claimed that maybe she just had not been in a position to witness such events, as if they occurred at some special time and place: “I haven’t really witnessed any major like attacks based on racial identity here. But maybe I just haven’t been, you know, been in the right place to see it?” Sarah articulated that because State U offered so many identity-based organizations that students likely felt much more at home. Recall from Sarah’s narrative that she had an emerging understanding of structural racism, particularly in the justice system, and had participated in a student
group focused on racial justice in high school. Against the backdrop of these experiences her analysis of the campus climate was somewhat puzzling.

Liz offered a similar analysis of race relations, centering her focus on individual definitions of racism and claiming that she just had not encountered instances of racial resentment, “I never see any white supremacists around campus. It’s a bit of a cliché, but I like to think everybody just gets along. I’ve never noticed any instances of racism.” Liz would go on to offer, unknowingly, a powerful metaphor when asked if she could recall hearing or seeing something she found racist on campus:

Zak: Could you recall a time since you've been on campus in which you overheard someone say something that you found to be racist, something that you would think of as racist?

Liz: That's going to be tough because I walk around with my headphones on.

Zak: Okay.

Liz: No, nothing comes to mind. To be honest, I don't pay attention to it much.

The imagery of a white student walking around campus with headphones on, unable to hear anything outside of what she has selected to listen to, is a powerful reflection of how so many participants made sense of race relations. For Liz, she was tuned in to her own world, moving through the same campus as students of color who frequently report an unwelcoming climate, but unable to hear any of these claims despite their close proximity to her.
Matt, more than any participant, consistently made claims of positive race relations due to the absence of overt bias and discrimination. His optimistic assessment of campus completely ignored his own racialized perspective. Matt largely drew on his experiences as a Resident Assistant in making sense of race relations:

I think that with the Multicultural Center requirements and having diversity programs, but I can’t, other than that incident on my floor last year, like I don’t see like bad things happening and I don’t see people not being welcoming. You know when I look at my floor I see, well I don’t have any African American residents this year, but I have students from like, I have Indian students and Chinese students and everyone kind of hangs out in the study rooms, the same couple guys play guitar really well and like they’re all hanging out and having fun and it just doesn’t seem like an unwelcoming atmosphere.

A number of points stick out from Matt’s reflection on race relations. The first is that he has an incredibly optimistic and positive perception of his residence hall, and campus in general. This is despite the fact that Matt had a Black female resident come to him after she overheard multiple men on the floor using the n-word in their room. Matt explained that the young woman was “very upset” about hearing the men, who made statements such as “you know [n-word]s are stupid and things like that.” While the woman opted to leave the residence hall for the night, Matt struggled to describe their actions as racist because it just didn’t seem like they understood the impact of their words.
He continued, “I mean obviously they, I think they weren’t educated. They were just stupid and saying stupid things. I think racist is just a really bad word. Like, I think Hitler is a racist… I think the word gets thrown around a lot.” Matt’s interpretation of his white resident’s use of the n-word illuminates the ways in which he failed to recognize explicit racist behavior and was seemingly more attuned to maintaining the innocence of his white residents than the student harmed by the language. He would later explain that “It doesn’t seem like there is a lot of anger in the residence halls” and he just didn’t “really experience it. I don’t hear about it.” His analysis of the campus climate is also troubling because he fails to recognize how problematic it is that he had not one African American resident. Very few participants spoke about the role of access and representation as it related to climate.

**Inherently more progressive: “The uniqueness of college.”** Participants also presented a racially welcoming institution by situating State U, often ambiguously, against society. The term “society” was employed frequently by participants as a means of offering an entity against which to juxtapose State U. In doing so, State was understood to be better than alternatives, and as such, as good enough. This presentation of State drew on traditional narratives of college as a time of diverse interactions, progressive views, and inherently more forward thinking than the “real world.” It was striking just how many participants, unprompted, attempted to situate the university against the outside world when discussing race relations on campus.
The reasoning appeared to be that because white students had exposure to diverse groups of students, as well as a number of programming and course options, that the institution facilitated interactions that were unique to college. Lucas described this thinking, “I would say on campus especially people are very open to the conversation. Whether that, that could be an awkward conversation and I think people feel uncomfortable with it but they still will have it. Sometimes it takes someone to sit them down and do it. They’ll converse about it. Societally? Nah. Not open to it.” Laura also situated State, and college in general, as an important space of diversity, inclusion, and openness to perspectives, noting, “I think on college campuses in general they’re better than the overall world, like on average, I personally haven’t experienced any race relation issues in my time at State.” In both instances, Laura and Lucas offer progressive interpretations of higher education, using “society” and “the overall world” as vague and generic referent groups.

Although he at times exhibited some levels of critically about race relations on campus, Patrick offered a similar account that situated State U, and college in general, as inherently more racially progressive. Patrick would go so far as to argue that State U was home to so many open-minded people that those who did exhibit racist beliefs or behaviors would be ostracized, leading to a closeting effect of sorts. Here Patrick underscores the difference between State and “society:”

Better than race relations in society, I would say, just because I think…

Clearly, the population on this campus is more educated than the average
society in America, the community in America, so I think strictly because that, you are more open, you’re more liberal with your thinking in terms of being open to new ideas and being able to hear different points of view and accepting that. We’re on a place of pretty open acceptance of a lot of different things…. You’re not going to be around this many educated people, this many open-minded people, this many accepting people as you will be in general. I think because that environment is here… Clearly there’s still bias, and I don’t want to negate all of those incidents that we have.

Patrick’s account is not surprising if one considers his larger narrative plotline. Originally from San Diego, he arrived at State rather conservative in his political beliefs but found his time in college to prompt a powerful shift in ideology. Now identifying far more liberal than when he arrived, he makes clear connections between his own development in college and what he assumes other students must experience. Interestingly, he concludes his commentary by noting the presence of “bias” on campus, but it still appears this bias exists on the margins of campus, rather than being central to the experiences of students of color.

Jason, who also sensed that college had made him more liberal on social issues, despite what appeared to be very conservative approaches to racial justice, provided a similar interpretation of State. Ambiguously situating State against “society” he claimed that the overt racial bias one might see outside of college would never happen on campus.
Consistent with so many other narratives, his analysis relies exclusively on an understanding of racism as individual prejudice:

Well, I think the uniqueness about college is that you like, as I said earlier, you’re on a common level, common playing field. And so you don’t really… you don’t really think that much about like, I would never say that I’m not going to be friends with someone because of their race. Larger society? I think that you, it’s not as, everyone is not in the same spot so in larger society you’re gonna meet people who are financially challenged, who are very stable, who are um Black, white right? Like different ages. And it’s not gonna be as easy to connect with them, I think. But like everyone when they go to college is pretty vulnerable in terms of like, friends and opening up to a total new experience, usually.

Similar to Patrick, Jason positioned State U as simply more welcoming and accepting than society at large, although he offered no specifics about regional or demographical particulars within the umbrella term of society. Further, his explanation assumed that all students on campus are on an even playing field, experiencing the campus in rather similar ways. Perhaps most striking is the assumption that all students are on a similar financial level and that one would only experience varying levels of social class beyond college. Interestingly, despite Jason’s claims that college provided a common ground in which everyone generally gets along, he admitted to the prevalence of racial segregation throughout campus.
Spencer offered a similar analysis about the commonality that students experience at State. At times incoherent and contradictory in her discussions of race and racism, explaining that race relations might be comparable to the real world but that “I think on campus there is just like this natural courtesy towards one another to be kind to each other no matter what.” This courtesy, as Spencer explained it, was the result of feeling a shared sense of community at State University: “Just because we all have like that umbrella of the fact that we are all Panthers and we all go to State…. So I would say that it is pretty similar, I just don’t think it’s as hostile in a way. And I think that it is because the umbrella of like everyone is a Panther.” For Spencer, Jason, and Patrick it was not just that State was more racially progressive than the real world, but that a sense of community transcended racial categories. Undoubtedly influenced by their intense connections to campus through multiple organizations and affiliations, the pride in being a Panther was seemingly enough to bring people together.

**Refusing to see: Accounts of racist incidents on campus.** It is important to note that the very students who offered glowing reviews of the racial climate often simultaneously reported seeing or hearing racially hostile occurrences. In essence, these contradictions illustrate a determined ignorance (Leonardo, 2009) of the campus climate. During the time of our interviews, a number of racist incidents occurred on campus. Participants recounted a number of situations they had experienced either personally, or heard about second hand, that would seem to be at odds with perceptions of an inclusive campus environment. Typically anti-Black in nature, but also targeting Muslim and
international students, some of these matters are described here so as to illuminate a refusal to see what was happening on campus.

Tyler, quick to dismiss claims of racism and typically shoulder the blame of racial hostility on student activists, recalled two instances that would seem to challenge his very perceptions of harmony. After an incredibly publicized incident that involved a man of Somali descent attacking students on campus, a member of his gun club on campus angrily asserted that “Oh we should get rid of all the foreigners!” On yet another day in which he was walking through the campus quad, the site of a large Black Lives Matter protest, he overheard a student call protesters the n-word. Neither of these incidents, however, indicated any level of racial hostility to Tyler. Rather, he depicted them as outliers that did not represent the racial inclusiveness of State University.

Lucas recounted a program in his residence hall that brought the Muslim Student Association (MSA) in to answer any questions residents had about Islam. The event was meant to serve as a Q&A for students who either had concerns about Islam or simply did not have much knowledge of the religion. Although Lucas saw the program as incredibly educational, his description of how white residents interacted with the MSA students was incredibly troubling. He recounted a scene in which these residents felt comfortable and empowered to ask questions they might not otherwise offer, as if the MSA were objective, neutral parties who would not in anyway feel harmed by the ongoing interrogation. Lucas recalled one exchange in particular, in which a resident explained to the Muslim students, “my natural reaction is to be scared of you. When I see you I
question am I looking at a terrorist. Am I looking at someone who I can trust?”

Reflecting on the program, Lucas noted that the students conveyed a deep sense of fear and suspicion about Muslim students, “And those students, I mean they told them like, I appreciate all of you being here. I don’t think any of you are terrorists. I don’t think that. But I am telling you that when I see you, especially in an airport, was a big one they brought up, I’m scared.” Lucas seemed unable to recognize the psychological violence inflicted on Muslim students in this situation, approvingly stating that the MSA representatives handled the questions very professionally. Most striking about this encounter is the ways in which it offered a “diversity program” for white students’ consumption, although whiteness was left unmarked against the Muslim other.

As discussed earlier, after the election of Donald Trump Liz spoke with a lab mate of Syrian descent who overheard residents next door to her proudly proclaiming they were going to show the woman her place. The incident was representative of larger reactions on campus to the election of Donald Trump, with numerous marches throughout the quad chanting, “build the wall.” Liz recounted her lab mate’s experience:

The Syrian girl was telling me after the election there were Trump supporters that lived next door in her dorm and she overheard them talking. One of them said, “Oh, the girl next door is Arab. We’re going to show her where she belongs.” So there’s a little bit of fear in that.

As noted earlier in her narrative, Liz arrogantly dismissed the fears of the woman as being melodramatic and overly sensitive. At the same time as Liz was making sense of
her lab mates fear of Islamaphobia, she also saw fliers on campus promoting white pride. She was unsure how to interpret their meaning, never explicitly calling them racist:

Someone had posted pictures of flyers in Jacobs Hall and I was, I don’t know, conflicted on it at first because I wasn’t sure what the intention was. The picture was a map of Europe and a silhouetted man and it said something like… It said something like it’s okay to be proud of where you came from, it’s okay to be white. Then there was another flyer that said “are you tired of being made to feel guilty for your race?”

Consistent with her larger narrative, Liz failed to recognize the racist nature of these messages, instead playing into the sense of victimhood that the fliers promoted. She found the posters to prompt a larger internal dialogue, considering whether or not they were racist or simply promoting a sense of racial and ethnic pride that other groups so routinely celebrated.

Participants also seemed aware of issues of representation and access to clubs and organizations on campus. They did not, however, consider these matters as reflective of racial tensions. Discussing the difficulty in recruiting a diverse body of students to the campus Activities Board, Jason expressed recognition that the university’s student government had been accused of failing to recruit students of color noting that, “Student government, for example, kind of faced, there was something on Twitter about people saying they are primarily white and fraternity/sororities.” Similarly, Laura recognized the almost exclusively white nature of Greek life, but rationalized this reality by stating
that “people of color, different nationalities don’t feel the connection to Greek life or go through recruitment that… I mean it’s a traditionally white thing in history. I think it makes sense that more white people rush.”

Together, the accounts offered by participants paint a portrait of an institution that is far from post-racial or near achieving a welcoming and harmonious climate. Rather, they provide a glimpse of the larger institutional climate regarding race and racism that participants themselves recounted, while still managing to deny any sense of racial hostility. Perhaps what is most fascinating is that despite a majority of participants’ reliance on individual understandings of racism, even accounts of individual bigotry were not enough to claim an unwelcoming climate. Instances described by Tyler, Lucas, Liz and Matt earlier, all offered troubling examples of racially framing students of color.

**Narratives of Imposition**

As participants sat down for interviews their accounts could not be divorced from the larger reality of ongoing campus activism. State University had an active group of student activists who frequently attempted to disrupt business as usual on campus. Their disruptions were typically quite visible, and if students did not see it directly they certainly heard about it through social media soon after. That is, if they didn’t happen to be in the Union, campus library, or on the quad, they witnessed the events unfold after the fact on SnapChat, Twitter, and Facebook. Further, many of the protests garnered so much attention that some participants openly admitted it was a frequent topic of conversation among their friends. Protests on campus typically occurred under the Black
Lives Matter banner, but also included activity against then-Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump and various investments of the university. Overwhelmingly, however, the protests were associated with racial justice.

Far before Black Lives Matter, Critical Race Theorists Delgado and Stefancic (1999) conceptualized the Imposition Narrative. The narrative, simply put, captures white reactions to movements of racial justice throughout history. While initially supporting a group’s desired goals, white Americans begin to situate those in a movement as hostile bullies asking for far too much. And since white Americans at first appeared to support their initial demands, they can situate themselves as the victims of an overly aggressive group of activists. In essence, they maintain their innocence by proclaiming that they once supported such movements but can no longer stomach being bullied into progress.

Eight participants in the present study offered a revised Imposition Narrative, this one in reaction to campus activism. Because of the prevalence of this narrative and campus activism, analysis is offered separate from, but against the backdrop of the perceptions of campus climate. As noted previously, these participants tended to view campus as welcoming and largely void of any individual bigotry. Connor found himself confused at claims the university was hostile and unwelcoming, explaining, “hostility is just not the atmosphere of this campus. It’s home for so many people.”

Student activism was often framed as acceptable insofar as it did not disrupt the everyday flow of campus. Indeed, multiple individuals in the study initially praised
students’ willingness to engage in such work. Laura claimed that she could understand where protesters were coming from and Connor was proud of students for their strength in numbers. In this sense, participants attempted to offer initial support for activism work at State before expressing frustration, anger, or annoyance. Recounting a sit-in in the main administration building, which resulted in an order to leave before the police were called, Laura captured the overwhelming sentiment of the Imposition Narrative. She explained, “I think that they took it a little bit too far. It’s a university. You’re dealing with university officials. You go here. You’re a student. You are obligated to follow university rules.” Not surprisingly, six of the eight participants were those characterized by Ignorant Constructions, with the other two from Emergent Constructions. Three variations of the Imposition Narrative of Campus Activism manifested during my time with participants: (a) Inconvenient, (2) Ineffective, and (3) Misguided.

**Inconvenient: “I don’t go there to be preached to about social issues.”**
Participants overwhelmingly felt as though student activism was an inconvenience to their daily routines on campus. These students questioned participants’ motives, often paternalistically, and situated themselves as the victims of overly aggressive behavior. Participants frequently mentioned the student union as a space on campus that was the subject of disruptive actions on the part of protesters. A gathering spot for many students, particularly student leaders, protests in the Union were met with a high degree of frustration and hostility. Individuals continually questioned why activists felt the need to carry out sit-ins, marches, and rallies here. Laura captured many participants’ feelings
about the obstruction in the Union, explaining “I think that’s not really the time or place for it, in my opinion.”

Consistent with a larger view of campus as a welcoming and inclusive space, Spencer described the Union, quite ironically, as a safe space for her. Indeed, a level of irony exists in a white student describing a campus building as “safe,” only to be disrupted by students of color and their white allies. Spencer, who otherwise exhibited a great deal of emerging complexity in her thinking around race and racism, recalled a protest in the Union:

So like [Student Group] when they went into the Union and like and tried to do this protest I think I talked about this too last time, um, I just found that to be extremely off-putting…. Because I was thinking this is supposed to a safe place where I should feel welcome to study, where I should feel like the community. And I just feel like uncomfortable and disrupted because I’m studying for finals and you want to do a protest in here.

Spencer’s account is telling in that she situates the student union as a place on campus that should be safe and offer her a sense of community, matters that students of color frequently struggle with at Predominantly White Institutions. Further, she had no hesitation in situating her own feelings ahead of the concerns and demands of her fellow student protesters. This is to say that her focus is much less on experiences of isolation and marginalization, but rather that she was inconvenienced by their disruptions.
Spencer was far from the only student to share these frustrations, particularly about the Union. Tyler, Connor, Laura, and Matt all specifically mentioned it as a space that should be free of disruption. Tyler, who saw little utility in protests, signaled the irritation symbolic of this reaction. He explained, “Well I was angry at that protest… that was in the Union. It was like a Black Lives matter protest and anti-gun protest too. And then it was like, people are trying to study here and again I was looking at what are you trying to accomplish with this?” Matt similarly described protests at both the Union and library as “a waste of everybody’s time.” Both of these men disregarded the concerns of protesters and instead prioritized their seemingly race-neutral needs.

No participant was more outspoken than Laura, a heavily involved student who spent a good deal of her day in the Union. Consistent with the Imposition Narrative Laura would initially explain that she understood activist’s goal to bring awareness to issues of racism and inequality. Prefacing her comments acted as a means of providing cover for what would come:

I personally, when protests happen in the Union, I get that that’s like the biggest forum to make your point but every time I see something happen I’m kind of like, this is like where people come to study, I work here, like I am upstairs working. I don’t want there to be chanting and stuff. It, it seems like almost rude to disrupt people’s like, day with that. But, I get that’s why they do it because people are there going about their daily lives and they are trying to get their message to them. And make a point. But,
like if I’m sitting in a chair like, typing a paper, eating my lunch, I don’t want there to be a protest going on three feet away. Because I go to the Union to do homework. To go to work. To go to meetings. To like meet up with my friends. I don’t go there to be preached to about social issues. Laura’s account works to situate her, and other white students, as victims of the aggressive, bully-like actions of campus activists. It is clear the importance the Union has to her as she describes the variety of ways in which it is, in Spencer’s words, a safe space. She simultaneously sees the Union as a place of work, involvement, study, and taking a quick break between classes for lunch. Protesters who disrupt these activities are, in Laura’s words, rude and disruptive.

Recounting a conversation she had about a protest in which she was not present for days earlier, Laura explained “I would be so annoyed if I was at the Union and that was happening… All of us kind of shared the opinion that like, it would be so annoying to have people yelling and like microphones things, while you’re trying to do your homework or I wonder if the people having like meetings upstairs like could hear what’s going on?” Laura’s account here highlights that her interpretation of campus activism was not isolated, but rather held by many in her social networks across campus. In many ways it becomes clear that the Union is a symbolic representation of whiteness on campus, as it is home to many of the student leaders, a majority of whom are white. Students of color and their white allies drastically change student’s orientation to the space, as their presence often facilitated a sense of chaos and disruption.
Lucas felt a similar sense of frustration at the obstruction of protesters. Consistent with the narrative’s utility of providing safe cover for eventual opposition, he explained that while protesting was not for him, “if I need to move out of the way for them to do something that they’re saying, making a statement for I’ll move out of the way. Like, I’m all for it.” He continued however, and offered an incredibly similar narrative to that of Spencer, “but you know, there’s sometimes where I am just like “Okay you blocked off High Street or something. And I’m like, “let’s think about other people.” These two lines of thinking seem to be quite incongruent, even contradictory. At one point Lucas provides a half-hearted endorsement, claiming he will get out of protesters way, but then goes on to frame them as selfish for not thinking of how they are interfering with the daily routines of other students.

Ineffective: “It made them feel uncomfortable.” Because protests so frequently interrupted the daily routine of students, multiple participants asserted that activists’ efforts simply would not work. In what can again best be characterized as paternalistic, participants explained that white students would not react well to the tensions created by protests. Further, many offered alternative means of bringing awareness to racial injustice. Consistent with a larger theme of the study, the alternatives offered rarely implicated white people directly.

Spencer and Jason both felt that the activism that was so prevalent on campus did little to bring them into the movement. Spencer saw protests and sit-ins as counterproductive. These were, in her mind, not the way to begin a conversation on
racial injustice. Proclaiming that student activists frustrated people on campus, she reflected on a recent protest explaining that “I think it made them feel uncomfortable because it’s not a responsible way to have a conversation or anything like that.” The “them” in which Spencer referred to in this account was other white students. Spencer’s remarks convey a sense that if only protesters would be more open and welcoming to white students, a larger dialogue would occur. Again it appears a participant places an emphasis on the emotional responses of white students witnessing activism rather than the lived experiences that first prompted a need for protesting. Rather than rallying and obstructing the flow of campus, she offered that activists might consider options more inviting, such as a rally. Laura similarly posited that activists should be more open to having conversations where an agreement that could work for everyone might be reached. When Spencer found herself in the midst of a recent protest, she readily admitted that “it did not make me want to join their movement. It did not make me want to look up their movement. It did not make me want to educate myself at all.” She continued:

I don’t think it (protesting) produces the results that the protesters necessarily are looking for. I think it causes more disruption that positive, um rather than positive or empowerment from the protests which I think is what they are actually going for. So when it comes to like Black Lives Matter, I know the purpose. I would say is to empower the idea that black lives matter. And like, that is completely true. I agree with that in all
circumstances. But I also think that the way that they are held, if there is any type of hostility or aggression that can be detected from a protest like that from another person, I think immediately kind of, is off putting for that person.

Spencer’s account is telling for a number of reasons. First, she exhibits the unease and discomfort that seems to be typical for many of the participants in the study when they are implicated in matters of racism and white supremacy. Although many protests spoke to matters of institutional racism and inequality Spencer clearly felt targeted by activists. She frames protesters as “hostile” and “aggressive,” language that is consistent with the historical framing of people of color, particularly Black Americans (Feagin, 2011). Further, she expresses a support for the larger Black Lives Matter movement, but struggles when it manifests on her own campus. This is likely because Spencer, like many other participants, sensed that campus was simply more welcoming and inclusive than society at large.

Like Spencer, Jason explained that he didn’t really understand protests and that “I don’t let people, like movements I guess, sway me a certain way. I have truly never felt like I wanted to be a part of it. The protests. And they don’t ever convince me to think a certain way either.” Jason made sense of activism at State U in light of seeing Black Lives Matter protests the prior summer in Minneapolis, for which he could not understand why individuals would be willing to get arrested over a civic disobedience. Speaking of the broader movement Jason explained that “I don’t like the Black Lives
Matter movement. I don’t really understand that.” This evaluation of the movement seemed to be rooted in a lack of what Jason perceived to be positive solutions as he noted, “It bothers me because to me these people who are protesting are not doing anything to fix it. They’re not doing anything to make the relationships more positive.”

Similarly, Connor did not see any practical gains that were coming from the strong presence of activism. His strong affinity for and pride in State U often made it difficult for him to grasp why students of color felt the need to protest. Although he supported their right to engage in activism, he questioned both their motives and what he perceived as any lack of practical solutions:

I just fail to understand where their emotions are coming from or how they think that we could do a better job. I’m a big fan of concrete plans and creative approaches to problems. I think that if you have a problem or concern, there’s always got to be a solution or idea to combat that. It’s okay to see a problem somewhere, but it’s also very, very important to see a way around it or at least start a discussion on how things can be better.

That’s why I’m just confused.

Connor’s account is illustrative in that it highlights his strong connection to the institution, asking how “we” could do anything to fix it. Further, he responds to activists call for racial justice in a very business like approach, claiming they should consider creative solutions.
Tyler not only saw the protests and activism as ineffective, but as directly responsible for worsening race relations on campus. Hesitant to admit much of a race problem existed on campus in the first place, he perceived the attention to racial justice as problematic for students of color. His accounts illustrate his inability to recognize both his own white racial perspective and the claims of students of color. Without protests, Tyler claimed, “people are going about their day. You don’t have those – just like angry, hateful conversations like screaming matches at each other.” With the protests, however, “it just kind of like further magnifies the perception of the racism on campus and also like it’s making things more difficult for people of color because it’s creating a more hostile environment.”

The perception that activism is what was making life harder on students of color is indeed illustrative of a distorted, racialized perspective of campus. Tyler sensed that the continued attention to racial injustice “would magnify and amplify it. I think it would show more issues than are actually occurring on campus.” His claim that activists made race more of an issue that it needed to be is characteristic of the third way in which students utilized the Imposition Narrative.

**Misguided: “We are not the police.”** For three participants, all of whom were characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white identity, protesters efforts were misguided. This use of the narrative had one primary function: issues of racial injustice were elsewhere. Matt, perhaps more than any participant, characterized the arrogant assumptions of this type of white racial knowledge. Recalling a protest at the Union,
Matt questioned why the student protesters felt the need to organize on campus. As he reflected on the protest his irritation became visible, noting “...like why are you doing this here? You know, we have exams. We are not the police. What’s going on?” Matt’s commentary further reflects the initial theme of protests being inconvenient for white students. It also, however, illuminates a discomfort at being the subject of protests. The police, not State University, should be your intended targets if you must protest. Although racism may exist elsewhere, largely in the form of police brutality, claims against the university were insincere and completely misguided.

Even more troubling, Matt questioned if any of the protesters had even been the subject of police harassment. Drawing on the arrogance that characterized his larger narrative of disputing claims of racism, Matt remarked, “it kind of seemed like an unorganized people, just complaining to complain. I was like, did you, are all of you really, do you feel like you are that targeted by the police? I don’t think so.” Matt’s statement is telling in a number of ways. Most notably is the complete lack of recognition of his racialized perspective, which is a central characteristic of Ignorant Constructions. Equally as troubling, however, is a feeling that the students active in protesting could not have possibly experienced harassment at the hands of the police. Matt feels no restraint in denying these claims. Further, it diminishes manifestations of white supremacy merely to police brutality and avoids any larger discussion of systemic injustice and racism inside of the university. Perhaps this is because Matt often struggled in considering claims of systemic racism on campus. He noted:
It's like institutionalized racism and it's not actions, it's the whole system is against African Americans and to me I just wish that they could point to more specific things rather than being well “no, you're white you don't see it but we do and we're not going to point to specific incidents but it's everything.” That's I think…that kind of comes to mind but then obviously the police shootings, it's like those are pretty clear. It's like yes, those are clearly incidents that you can point to but then they kind of, they'll go to those and they picket sort of institutionalized racism or something I've not experienced.

Here Matt claims that because activists will not provide a synthesis of systemic white supremacy, that he is inclined to disregard their accusations. Further, he expresses the anger and frustration when he is racialized as white. Matt’s sense making of protests might best be summed up when he described his reaction to a recent protest: “Oh, c’mon.” Tyler similarly brushed off such claims, describing protesters as “a bunch of crazies and…radicals.”

Liz, whose narrative was no doubt influenced by her lack of time spent in the states and growing up abroad, also questioned the claims of student activists. For her, this just was not an issue that needed attention on campus. Although she saw the merit in select Black Lives Matter rallies around the country, she typically understood the movement to be unnecessary. She remarked, in a similarly arrogant fashion, that while issues of racism existed, the Black Lives Matter movement “almost feels like they’re just
trying to make themselves feel special, based on the color of their skin and I think that’s kind of counterintuitive when you want equality no matter what color skin. That’s kind of my far removed view.” Consistent with the use of the Imposition Narrative, Liz both claims to recognize racism can be an issue and ends her remarks by situating them as “far removed.” Similar to others who employed the narrative, she paternalistically evaluated their motives and actions, claiming they had gone too far and simply “trying to make yourself feel special based on the color of your skin.”

**Narratives of Enlightenment: “Once You Understand, You Understand”**

A third way in which participants perpetuated a racial ideology of whiteness on campus was through a presentation of the self as enlightened and transformed. Participants frequently assembled accounts that situated themselves as more educated about matters of racism, white privilege, and racial inequality than other students. That is, this narrative was frequently constructed against other white students who, without the same involvement on campus, just did not have the sense of level of competency and awareness. The narrative followed a predictable pattern. Participants would establish that through their involvement they gained increasing exposure to matters of diversity and inclusion. Second, they surrounded themselves with likeminded people, as their involvement at State put them in contact with other racially progressive and aware white students. In doing so, they projected a sense of racial transformation against the backdrop of less racially cognizant white peers. Finally, participants would imply that their job was to educate these other white students.
For many of the participants, this narrative worked in a way that appeared to shut themselves off to critique and reflection of their own whiteness. They had arrived. They were aware. Rachel and Ryan were the only participants who did not once evoke this narrative. Even Amanda, who exhibited a considerable amount of self-criticality, at times situated her awareness against other, less-educated whites. This is to say that while this narrative was most frequently employed by Ignorant and Emergent Constructions, it was also surfaced in Critical Constructions. The utilization of this narrative highlights a major tension between where these students actually were in their varying understandings of race, whiteness, and white supremacy, and how they projected themselves. Recall that participants in the first two identity categories failed to ever implicate themselves in matters of racism and white supremacy. Further, those with the least complex ways of sense making, Ignorant Constructions, habitually failed to see or rationalized away the role of racism in the lives of students of color.

Lucas, in his first year as an R.A. and experiencing an emerging awareness of his white identity, offers a prime example of the ways in which this narrative was utilized. First, Lucas establishes the fact that his position as an R.A. gives him an outlet to discuss matters of race and racism that other students did not:

I think if you didn’t have a place to talk about it you wouldn’t talk about it. Whereas having [Assistant Hall Director], having other RA’s, having the whole like res life staff as well, just talking about diversity and inclusion constantly it just opens the conversation and makes it a prevalent
thing to me more so than, if because I’m white, so technically I could
ignore if it I really wanted to. But just having that, that outlet creates a
reason to care, I think.
Here Lucas highlights how he constantly engages in dialogue on matters of race as a
result of his involvement at State. It should be noted that his comment that he could
avoid such conversations if he wanted to, due to his whiteness, is consistent with his
larger narrative of emerging awareness. Having established his exposure, he furthers the
narrative by highlighting that his position provides him access to likeminded people who
are similarly transformed, “they’re often people who are open to (the) conversation as
well. So just because of the people I am interacting with, being at State… generally we
can have the conversation.”

Because Lucas and his peers exist in such a space of enlightenment, it is their
work to educate others. He explained that after learning about various issues and
concepts from professional staff, it was time to move on and work to educate peers. No
other quote better summed up this notion of the enlightenment narrative than Lucas’
thinking that, “and then once you understand, you understand.” He would go on to
explain what this looked like in practice:

And um, it’s usually very like, let’s get this done, let’s talk about it, let’s
understand it and we have that conversation further, it’s like we will have
a one on one. And I had a one on one with [Assistant Hall Director]. And
we will talk with him and just sort of be like, let’s understand this. Give
me more examples. Help me understand what is going on.
Lucas continued, noting, “I don’t want to say it is business like, but it is a part of our
job.” The goal was, “how do we get students to understand that, just so that we don’t
understand it, they also understand it kind of thing.” Lucas utilized this narrative,
consistent with other participants, in that he established his own sense of awareness
through involvement, situated such knowing against other white students, and made it
clear his work was now to educate others. He goes so far as to frame his work as
business-like, removing himself as a student and learner in the process completely.

Patrick similarly deployed this narrative, situating himself against other, less
involved students. As a Resident Assistant “all your friends become people who are also
in res-life, because you come to value the same things, so conversations about diversity
become much more commonplace for me.” Because of the interactions with his fellow
staff members and professional staff, “we’re all in the same mindset and we all had
similar background of education, we can start having those conversations.” This was a
common refrain from Patrick, who often positioned those in residence life as inherently
more interested in conversations about diversity and social justice. For instance, he
explained that, “when you get into that community everyone wants to learn as well. Like,
you don’t have the people in there who don’t think it’s worth anything to know about
diversity.” Such realizations made him question how other students at State might
possibly have access to these types of dialogues, “And I wonder, other students on
campus, how they’re getting to know all of these things.” This made it even more important that Patrick and his peers had the ability to facilitate conversations about race and racism, because uneducated peers simply had no other outlet on campus to engage with these topics.

Matt also claimed that those he surrounded himself with were simply more aware and enlightened on racial justice. Central to his narrative was a confidence in his own cultural competency, which often came across as a type of commodity for personal gain. Matt explained that as Resident Assistants everyone was “fairly culturally competent” and, perhaps most strikingly, that “we obviously are R.A.’s because we are not bigots.” His claim here distances himself, and other Resident Assistants, from any implication in matters of racism and white supremacy. In fact, from Matt’s vantage point they were hired because of their sense of racial awareness. The result was that Matt saw his duty as one of an educator. Beyond R.A. training, it was his job to shift into educator mode, utilizing his cultural competency to help other students arrive to a similar place:

..you have the opportunity to kind of break some barriers as a white person, kind of purging the gap for maybe other white people who don’t think the same. Like for me I think it’s neat to be able to kind of like bridge as an RA, as a white RA, for maybe white people who don’t think the same as me to be more culturally competent.

Again, the implication here is that Matt’s role is less of a student and more of an educator. As Lucas explained that once you understand you understand, Matt insists his
job is now to help other whites “who don’t think the same as me” to become “more culturally competent.” When asked about claims that campus is racially hostile and unwelcoming, Matt was less interested in reflecting on his own inability to see this perspective and instead asked what he should be doing as a Resident Assistant to address other students’ bias:

…And then just kind of ask them how like as an R.A. is there anything I could do more in the residence halls to prevent that because obviously that’s something I don’t want to continue and so if I have the ability to prevent that I would want to know..

Rather than looking inward to reflect on his own racial perspective, Matt conceptualizes his role as one of educating other whites on behalf of students of color. This is quite consistent with the inability to attach any meaning to his own racial identity and location in relation to people of color, as was detailed earlier in this chapter.

This narrative was not confined to residence life and resident assistants. Laura, heavily involved in leadership and Greek Life, offered a strong illustration of how these student leaders positioned themselves against other, less engaged white students on campus. Although she frequently struggled to answer questions in the interview coherently, appearing to be thrown off or befuddled by a number of questions about race, she explained at the end of our first interview that some of the questions were easy. Her opinion was skewed because of how normalized and routine these conversations were to her as a heavily involved student within student affairs at State University:
Some of the questions are hard to answer because it’s something I haven’t thought about before…but also, some of the questions were easy because I have been involved in some student groups that really care about diversity and inclusion and like social identity and have tried really hard to educate me on those things. And I think that is not an experience everyone on this campus gets. I think a lot of my opinions are skewed because I have had those experiences and those are the groups of people that I usually spend my time with.

Multiple components of the narrative surface here. Similar to many of the other participants documented here, Laura claims to surround herself with people who engage in these conversations, noting that those are simply the people she usually spends her time with. Additionally, because of her involvement and these relationships, many of these conversations are commonplace. Of course, a major tension exists, in that Laura rarely recognized the ways in which her whiteness infused her perspective and sense making of the world, a reality that has been documented at length in this chapter.

Laura continued to position herself as racially transformed and enlightened, explicitly situating her experience at State, one dominated by heavy involvement, with others:

…I don’t really know what the general campus feel is, I only know what my area that I have been exposed to is. And I think that I am generally, like, a group of people that cares more and tries more and like, has more
exposure to issues like this than a lot of people who just like go to class and go home and like, like in their house on whatever street with their friends. You know? Because I think there are a lot of students that go to class and go home at State. I just don’t know any of those students. So, so I would be really interested to see what their opinions would be?

Laura’s questions of what the rest of campus is like insists a sort of separation or distance from other white students, an unfamiliarity with how they might possibly move through State. She goes so far as to wonder how they might respond in the interview and condescendingly described their experience as a matter of going to class and back to their house on “whatever street with their friends.” Her interpretation fails to account for any other ways in which students might be involved or exposed to such dialogues on campus while simultaneously being blinded to the privileges that allow her to be so heavily involved (i.e. not having to hold a job).

Although Amanda offered a far more complex way of thinking about whiteness, both her own and how it worked institutionally at State, she at times also drew on the narrative to distance herself from other, less involved, white students. In speaking about her support for Black Lives Matter and disgust for recent police shootings of Black men, she credited this awareness to her involvement at State. And while Amanda did seem genuinely angry about the treatment of young Black men in America, she also posited her awareness against those who were less involved. Recalling a recent conversation in which she and a friend discussed Black Lives Matter she explained, “we tend to forget
that people who don’t have our experience don’t talk about these things. It’s just so ingrained to talk about social justice and human rights and the inequalities that are happening.” Through her experiences with university leadership initiatives, both courses and organizations, she had opportunities that other students did not.

As has been noted throughout this chapter, Amanda was one of the most reflective and thoughtful participants in the study, often pausing to answer questions and balancing multiple perspectives against her white racial self. In many ways she had underwent drastic transformation and an increased sense of enlightenment. Amanda’s ties to State, however, prompted a narrative that she was better off for her involvement and that such engagement with the university was the only way to arrive at such a place. She described the relationship between her involvement and understanding of racial justice, “I do acknowledge that I think I have a different experience than some other students just like working in student affairs, with my job, I get exposure to people who are very passionate about social justice and about diversity and making campus a safe space for that.” Unlike other participants, the utilization of this narrative did not work in a way that closed her off to self-critique. She still spoke to her own bias and complicity in racism and white supremacy and was willing to sit with larger critiques of whiteness. That she did employ this narrative, however, continues to highlight the ways in which engagement in student affairs seemed to instill a sense of righteousness and arrival that was exclusive to involved white students.
Taken together, these narratives illustrate the ways in which participants understood their involvement at State as a path to enlightenment and transformation. The problematic nature of this claim rests not in the involvement itself, but in the fact that participants seemed to utilize it as a way of presenting themselves as one of the “good whites.” Central to the narrative was a juxtaposition against other, less involved white students. As such they conceptualized involvement at State as the only way to a more racially aware self. Further, for many, particularly those in residence life, they saw their role primarily as educators and failed to see themselves as still in a constant state of unlearning their white racial conditioning. This presentation of self was rife with contradictions and represented a false sense of arrival and an emphasis on moral goodness. It offered students a way of standing outside of self-critique and continued reflection, and instead situated them as enlightened, transformed, and racially progressive whites.

**Narratives of White Innocence: “Racist is Just a Really Bad Word”**

The fourth and final way in which participants perpetuated whiteness was through a concern with the white moral innocence of those closest to them. As with each of the other three narratives, a key feature of assembling stories in such a way is to convince the self and reader of a particular point or idea. Given that participants primarily understood racism as a matter of individual prejudice, a premium was placed on projecting other whites as good people. Unlike paternalistic perceptions of activism, constructions of white moral innocence of other whites were not exclusive to one category of identity
construction. Rather, virtually all of the participants employed narrative devices that attempted to provide cover, so to say, for the important white people in their lives.

This is to say that while participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions were most likely to make appeals to their own innocence, and those characterized by Critical Constructions were willing to implicate themselves in matters of whiteness and white supremacy, the need to narratively protect those closest to them transcended identity categories. Such narrative cover was most frequently offered for family members, but also included close friends, sorority sisters, and teachers. Further, the narrative was employed in two ways. Some participants would attempt to rationalize what frequently amounted to racist, white racial framing of people of color by those they cared about. They typically offered this qualification, whether it be generational or a product of one’s upbringing, after the initial account was given. Second, participants would regularly provide unprompted endorsements of moral goodness when introducing a new character to their larger narrative, such as their parents, teachers, or friends on campus. Indeed it became striking just how often participants would reassure me, as the interviewer, of this goodness without any prompting. In both instances the devices served to reinforce the moral goodness of white people in participants’ lives, failing to implicate them in systems of whiteness and white supremacy.

**Rationalizations after the fact.** Participants were willing to offer a host of racial messages they encountered prior to coming to State University, regularly sharing experiences and conversations were raised. These typically surfaced when they were
asked to think about important people in their lives and any messages they received about race growing up. Quite telling, participants hardly ever spoke of times in which their parents or teachers sat them down to discuss the realities of racism and white supremacy. Rather, participants almost always took the question as times in which they heard racist messages.

Not surprisingly, multiple students rationalized away racist, white racial framing as the product of generational differences. Commentary by parents and grandparents had to be understood within the context of their times growing up. Tyler, whose family had multiple members of law enforcement on his mother’s side, said it was not uncommon to hear the n-word thrown around on holidays. Although he made sure to note that it was not those who were police officers using the language, it was typically employed regarding police shootings. He explained:

It would be like mainly, like my mom’s side. Like of the family. On holidays and stuff like that. So like, if they would talk about those police shootings because they also are the ones in law enforcement. Not necessarily the ones in law enforcement making the racial slurs, but someone else would bring it up and then saying like, hey, what do you guys think about that n-word or something like that.

After providing the initial account, Tyler would circle back around to it and claim that his family members were using slurs “loosely:”
They wouldn’t necessarily have a hatred for a race but they would use slurs loosely. But it, but it didn’t mean that they were committing a hate crime or anything like that. It was just using those kind of slurs that they were accustomed to.

Tyler began to provide cover for his family members by situating their language within the larger context of “what they were accustomed to.” Further, he situates the use of the n-word against an actual hate crime in what appears to be a means of minimizing their language. Having found the concept of “using slurs loosely” to be an interesting interpretation of the n-word, I asked Tyler for clarification of exactly what he meant by “loosely” and how he made sense of it in relation to committing hate crimes. He clarified:

I mean, people, everyone has prejudices. And, if you know someone, like their intent behind stuff, so like, I know my family. And I know that they are really good hearted. But just that there’s, just the way that they grew up, wouldn’t…. The way that they were, the people that they were surrounded by were telling them like, it’s okay to use these slurs and stuff like that. And not that today would be considered like not appropriate slurs. So it’s more so like the language that people are using, not necessarily like the white supremacist view or things like that. They’re not saying that white people are better they’re just saying like… the slurs.
The narrative Tyler constructs here accomplishes two primary objectives. First, he is able to vouch for the moral goodness of his family members, noting that they are not white supremacists. Being a white supremacist appears to carry a much heavier and more dangerous connotation than simply using slurs. In drawing these distinctions he paints the two as mutually exclusive. Second, he justifies these behaviors as ingrained after years of conditioning. His parents would frequently tell him that you could not “change someone that’s older and has those racial biases.”

Laura similarly rationalized her grandmothers’ explicit messages about the unacceptable nature of ever dating a Black man, chalking it up to her age and even finding a bit of humor. Her grandmother was just old and “on a lot of medication. She says some pretty crazy things.” She explained:

My grandma is definitely.... I mean, she grew up on a farm in West Virginia, so it's understandable that she's a little bit more racist than the rest of the family. She's told me before, "Don't bring a black boy home to your family" and things like that, which we always just think is funny.

Laura readily admits that her grandmother is a “little bit more racist” than her other family members, although it is unclear what a “little bit” means. Further, her grandmother’s racial framing is merely a product of her old age, southern upbringing, and medication. Laura even attempted to make appeals to her own innocence, explaining that “we tried to have conversations with her to be like, ‘you know, It’s not really funny to say things like that.’”
Jason and Liz both rationalized racist framing of Black Americans as the result of previous negative experiences with people of color. Jason’s cousin was in an interracial relationship and had recently had their baby. His grandmother was not comfortable with the marriage or the pregnancy but this was probably because of bad experiences that “just reaffirmed her uncomfortableness (sic) with different races.” Jason would not go so far as to call his grandmother’s feelings as hateful, but rather disrespectful. He again employed this narrative about his mother. When considering the messages he received from his mother about race he remarked, “From her the message I’ve always got, or I felt with her, is she is scared or uncomfortable when she's with other people that may not be the same skin color. She won't say it. I can maybe feel it. If we're just driving somewhere, through [city] even, she'll want to stay in the car or park as close as we can to the place we're going.” Explaining that his mother exhibited some levels of discomfort when in urban areas populated with people of color, he questioned if she had simply “a bad experience I don’t know about.” Liz also used this line of thinking. She justified what she had initially perceived to be racist language on the part of her father due to the fact that growing up in Cleveland he had been attacked by Black men in a predominately Black neighborhood:

Well, he’s not racist but he has prejudices towards Black people. He was bullied a lot in school, by Black kids. Sometimes he’ll say things or make comments that my sister and are kind of like, “Dad come on.” When you think about it, it’ll be just because that’s who bullied him…
Interestingly, Liz was not the only participant to distinguish between being overly racist and holding a bias. In fact a number of participants would rationalize peer behaviors as a product of attending all white high schools, claiming it led to subtle bias.

A prime example of this rationalizing can be found in the earlier account offered by Matt regarding the men who openly used the n-word on the floor, which led to a woman of color reporting the issue to him. He was hesitant to call the men racist, instead situating it merely as a matter of education. These weren’t necessarily bad, overtly racist men, but people who lacked any interaction with people of color prior to coming to college. They did not “understand the problem.” He explained this justification:

Yeah, I mean obviously they, I think they weren’t educated. They were just stupid and saying stupid things. Um, I think racist is just a really bad word. Like, I think Hitler is a racist. Um. I’m trying to think of examples. But like I don’t think that.. I think it is just a word that is thrown around a lot.. I don’t think people are necessarily racist but they are bias and they don’t necessarily understand other cultures as much. I think it’s got to be something that are bad actions or something that are racist.

What was most striking about this account was Matt’s preoccupation with maintaining the innocence of the two white men on his floor, explaining away their behavior as the result of a lack of education. Beyond the fact that it is unclear how Matt knew they
lacked any formal education about race, or the notion that education would somehow extinguish such racist framing, it is indeed remarkable that he uses Hitler as a marker of moral character to avoid implicating the men themselves. Tyler also rationalized away racism, providing cover for a friend in his gun club by explaining he may have had some biased opinions of Muslims but was in no ways racist, “It’s more of – the bias and then there’s the racism. The racism, I feel like it’s more of the hatred towards the different group like almost wanting to commit violence or something like that.”

One final example illuminates how participants attempted to vouch for the character of those they cared about after sharing their racist thoughts or behaviors. Sarah, who in high school had been heavily involved in a group promoting racial equality, had a close friend who openly used a variety of racial slurs. When asked how he used the n-word Sarah explained:

When he is talking about an African American. He will say like, this blank, this n-word did this today. He’ll say like, really bad words (sigh). This is so bad. Ah I hate even saying it because it like makes me feel so uncomfortable. But he says, like he is the only person that I have met like this, and he is like my project almost. But I know it is not going to work. Because he is just so like ingrained in his mindset. He says like, he even makes up racial slurs for minorities basically. Like he uses those like the n-word, and that’s so gay, but he will like make up words for other minorities as well. So like “ching-chong.” That’s awful. It’s awful. He
does it as a joke but it’s not, I don’t think he realizes other people don’t
find it funny. He’s like the only person who finds it funny.

Sarah’s friend engaged in racial framing that was not coded or discrete, but rather openly
hostile, racist, and rooted in white supremacy. She still, however, seemed willing to
vouch for him and his character. When asked how her or her friends confronted this
language, she replied that they typically “all say he’s being really rude, really
disrespectful.” Interestingly, Sarah and Jason both used disrespectful, rather than more
pointed and political terms, to describe such racist behavior. Further, she did not hesitate
to remain his friend, explaining, “he’s actually still one of my really good friends
because, I mean I like other parts of his personality.” In vouching for his character she
also attempted to rationalize his thought process as the product of limited interactions
with racial diversity, “he went to a school, it was like a Jesuit high school. Not many
African American people. Not very many minorities.” Although she knew many people
from the school, he was probably “the worst out of all of them when it comes to filtering
what he says and being respectful of other people.” Taken together, these instances
illustrate how participants provided cover for other whites, vouching for their moral
character and offering reasons seemingly beyond the individual’s control to justify white
racial framing and white supremacist thinking.

Unprompted endorsements of white goodness. Unlike the participants
described above, this narrative device securing white goodness was utilized preemptively
and seemingly out of nowhere. Given the contentious nature of race relations in
America, perhaps it is no surprise that many participants were quick to speak to the innocence and goodness of those whites in their lives. Indeed, it became striking how many participants appeared ready to defend those closest to them against any claims of racism or racial bias.

Amanda employed this narrative device on multiple occasions when speaking about her mother. When she was asked to think about some of the most important individuals in her life and the messages they shared about race, she quickly moved to a glowing portrait of her mother. Both of her parents, Amanda explained, “have always been very liberal and accepting.” Her mother, in particular though, “is a big proponent of me not being judgmental.” It was easy to talk about current issues in the news regarding racial inequality because her mother “is very much aware and educated and I can have good conversations with her.”

Rachel, who was the most open to a critique of her whiteness as any participant, also made sure to provide some clarity around her parents’ moral goodness. She did so by prefacing a larger conversation about Black Lives Matter with her mother. The argument lasted five hours as Rachel attempted to convince her mother the importance of naming Black lives because, “they’re not treating everyone to all lives as if they matter.” Before she offered this account however, Rachel made sure to situate her parents in an appropriate light by claiming, “As I mentioned, my family and my parents aren’t racist and I’m very thankful that they taught me and raised me to be so open minded.” It appeared that Rachel’s willingness to center herself as an object of racial critique did not
extend to her family members as well. When Ryan explained that his mother made them run to the car after a swim meet in high school due to the presence of a Black homeless man, he qualified the statement with “this story is so ridiculous. My mom’s a great person but she’s a little nutty sometimes.” The fact that Amanda, Ryan, and Rachel, all three of whom exhibited relatively complex ways of thinking about race, racism, and whiteness, utilized this narrative indicates both its utility and ability to transcend the three typologies of white identity. In each instance they sensed a need to endorse the goodness of their parents in light of certain behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs.

Liz and Matt also highlight unprompted endorsements that appeared to shield loved ones from any possible allegations of racism or implications in white supremacy. Discussing her grandmother, Liz pointedly noted “She’s kind of got an interesting perspective. She’s worked with black people, she’s never had a problem with Black people.” Matt also engaged in this practice in attempting to think of any messages he received about race. Similar to most participants, he took the question to assume any explicitly racist commentary. He responded, “I mean my mom was pretty liberal. I mean she is just very accepting and she never said anything bad about anyone. Um. Doesn’t.. you know. Um. Our good friends growing up were, was a Black judge.” For Matt, who identified as politically conservative, situating his mother as liberal seemed to maintain her innocence and imply that she could not be in any way implicated in matters of racism and white supremacy. In this sense, liberal appears to equate with moral goodness.
Jordan also invoked this apparent relationship between liberal parents and white innocence, as she explained that although she did not attend a diverse high school it did not really matter because the lack of racial diversity was mitigated by the fact that her parents were liberal. She noted, “I didn't really get a lot of exposure to other races or other cultures in general, which wasn't that much of a problem because I grew up in a pretty liberal household. My parents have always identified as Democrats.”

In summary, narratives of white moral goodness had a distinct function: participants utilized them as a means of providing cover from accusations of racism for those whites with whom they were closest to in life. The narratives, both through a rationalization of white racial framing and unprompted endorsements of goodness, are telling in that they maintain a sense of moral virtuousness. In fact, they illustrate a preoccupation with assuring the audience that indeed the whites they are closest to are good people. Inherently connected to individual definitions of racism, they attempt to project other whites as outside a larger system of whiteness and white supremacy.

**Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was threefold. First, I introduced the 14 participants and offered individual narratives for each. In doing so, I attempted to highlight both the diversity within whiteness as well as certain shared experiences. These shared experiences included early white racial framing of people of color and incredibly homogenous pre-college environments. These narratives also underscored transitions to State and their experiences with race on campus. Second, I offered three typologies of
white racial identity that were constructed to reflect the ways in which these students interpreted their racial selves, people of color, and their relationship to larger systems of racism and white supremacy. Finally, I provided four narratives that were frequently used during my time with participants that served to reinforce and perpetuate ideologies of whiteness on campus.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, I examined how white undergraduate students interpreted and gave meaning to their white racial identities. This resulted in three constructions of identity: Ignorant, Emergent, and Critical. Second, I explored how white college students perpetuated a racial ideology of whiteness on campus. From this analysis I developed four narratives that participants frequently utilized in order to maintain the racial status quo: Narratives of Campus Racial Harmony, Narratives of Imposition, Narratives of Enlightenment, and Narratives of Racial Innocence. In this chapter I first offer a discussion of results in relation to these two research questions. In doing so I offer a discussion of each of the three constructions of identity. I also review experiences of liminality and the role of intersecting social identities. I then shift my attention to the four narratives of whiteness that maintain the racial status quo on campus. I conclude the discussion by situating results in the context of Helms’ (1995) theory of white racial identity development. Having offered a discussion of results I then shift to the implications for practice and future directions for research and scholarship. I conclude with a discussion of the limitations of the study and some final thoughts.
Constructing White Identities: How White Undergraduates Interpreted their Racial Identities

Consistent with critical approaches to qualitative research, I utilized a number of theoretical perspectives to contextualize participant narratives. Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2003) described such contextualizing as a type of narrative affirmative action, where scholars yield a great deal of interpretive authority in their analysis of traditionally dominant, privileged voices. Whereas Critical Race Theory operates from the assumption that people of color have historically been silenced and rarely valued as a source of knowledge (Ladson Billings, 1995, 1998; Harper, 2009; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), Critical Whiteness work underscores the dominant, taken for granted nature of whiteness and white people (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). In doing so, CWS attempts to contextualize the words of participants within a broader theoretical landscape that exposes whiteness as the dominant, universal way of being.

The three typologies of white racial identity developed through analysis of data are based on the extent to which white students both recognized their white racial identity and centered themselves as a racial object of critique. Although traditional theories of white racial identity development posited an awareness of one’s identity as the central developmental task (Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; Helms, 1995), I extended this analysis to include participants’ willingness to implicate themselves in matters of white supremacy. In many ways this analytic effort considered the extent to which participants took up Yancy’s (2014) question of what it means to be a white problem and Applebaum’s (2010)
assertion that regardless of intentions, white people are always in some way complicit in maintaining white supremacy. As such, constructions of white racial identity were defined by the extent to which participants (a) recognized whiteness as a racial identity and (b) implicated themselves as a subject of racial critique, or complicit in white supremacy regardless of their intentions.

**Ignorant Constructions of White Identity**

As noted in the findings, participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white racial identity failed to recognize their racial identity or consider their complicity in racism and white supremacy. That is, they were marked by an absence of both developmental tasks. In fact, these participants frequently constructed a racial self that was the victim of multiculturalism and diversity efforts on campus. This is consistent with a large body of literature that underscores how white college students situate themselves as the victims of supposed reverse-racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Bush, 2011; Cabrera, 2014a; McKinney, 2005; Myers, 2005). As McKinney (2005) described, “for young whites, the new “white man’s burden” is whiteness itself” (p. 116). These participants’ narratives were rife with contradictions, frequently making claims to an awareness of a racial self but failing to recognize how whiteness actually influenced their perspectives. For instance, Laura spoke at length about her involvement and coursework on white privilege and identity. Yet when discussing the racial dynamics of Greek life at State, she rationalized away the role of whiteness by explaining that students of color just were not interested because participation in Greek life was a historically white activity.
Further, she denied any potential claims that women of color were actively discriminated against, noting that women simply made decisions based on whom they could see themselves hanging out with in the chapter.

Similarly, Jason railed against student affairs staff members who frequently encouraged the programming board to offer more racially diverse acts for students. He explained that students did not care that the activities board had not hosted a Hispanic artist or speaker in years. In both instances, participants failed to account for the role of whiteness in their meaning making. Laura did not consider how the overwhelming white nature of Greek life might deter women of color from rushing historically white sororities, or how whiteness might influence who is deemed desirable for inclusion in a peer group. Nor did she connect her assertion that Greek life is a “historically white” activity to any consideration of historical legacies of exclusion and white racism. When Jason explained that students did not care that the activities board had not hosted a Hispanic act in years, he appeared to be talking about white students. In fact, both Jason and Connor had discussed how the activities board frequently came under fire from students of color for not hosting a more diverse lineup of speakers and artists. In each instance participants’ understanding of racism as an individual character trait, rather than a system of power and domination, impaired their abilities to hear such critiques about their respective student organizations. This finding is consistent with prior scholarship that illuminated the highly individualistic understanding of racism among white students (Bush, 2011; Cabrera, 2014a; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; McKinney, 2005; Robbins &
Jones, 2016). Watt described the process of minimization in which the focus shifts “away from wrestling with the magnitude of social injustice and toward sharing a recipe for cross-cultural interaction” (Watt, 2007, p. 122). Laura, Jason, and Connor all failed to recognize the historical legacies of racism on campus, instead minimizing claims to matters of individual intent.

Participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white identity mirror Ahmed’s discussion of whiteness as an orientation to the world, one that places certain styles, behaviors, and spaces within reach. Their thinking also reflects Frye’s (1992) concept of whiteness, which she described as a “deeply ingrained way of being in the world” (p. 151). This location is so taken for granted that despite participants’ claims to the contrary, whiteness operates as the universal standard of being against which all others are evaluated and given worth. Despite claiming to recognize their racial identities, what might best be described as giving lip service to the idea, their narratives were characterized by the type of racial ignorance that a number of theorists have described as central to whiteness (Baldwin, 1998; Bell, 1993; Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997; Sullivan, 2014). Although conceptualizations of ignorance are frequently associated with a lack of knowledge, these scholars have highlighted that racial ignorance is a willful process. Sullivan (2014) explained white racial ignorance not as a lack of knowledge but as a production of a particular racialized type of knowing. It requires actively avoiding information that confirms the accusations and testimonials from people of color. As Applebaum (2010) described:
…it is a type of ignorance that arrogantly parades as knowledge. Rather than an absence of knowledge, white ignorance is a particular way of everyday knowing or thinking that one knows how the social world works that is intimately related to what it means to be white. (p. 39)

Participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions displayed this type of willful ignorance. They were quite comfortable questioning or denying the experiences of students of color. Liz said that Black Lives Matters protesters should get on with their lives and Tyler questioned if grievances of campus activism truly held merit. Similarly, Matt grew frustrated when a Black female Resident Assistant expressed her anger at white people culturally appropriating Black culture. These findings are consistent with previous literature that underscores white students’ preference to minimize, or outright deny, claims of racism by students of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Cabrera, 2014a, 2014b; McKinney, 2005; Watt, 2007). These participants exhibited a similar pattern that Cabrera (2014b) documented among white undergraduate men. He explained that these men enacted white privilege to “determine what constitutes reality (i.e., that racism does not exist), thereby framing those who see racism as viewing a skewed version of reality” (p. 10).

When white students arrogantly deny claims of racism on the part of students of color, they only further contribute to a racially hostile and unwelcoming campus climates. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) described a process of racial battle fatigue, or “the physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the
amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism” (p. 555). After a racially traumatic event, students of color often experience feelings of “detachment or emotional numbness or a feeling of distorted or altered reality (e.g., wondering, “Did I really hear what I thought I just heard?”) (Smith et al., 2007, p. 555). When white students engaged in the type of minimization and outright denial that Jason, Laura, and Connor did, they only further contribute to racial battle fatigue by concealing the role of whiteness and racism in the institutional environment.

In each case, participants exhibited the arrogance Frye (1992) describes as central to whiteness. This arrogance is rooted in a complete and utter certainty in one’s own experiences as truth and an unwillingness to consider the perspectives of people of color. Put otherwise, despite evidence of racism and white supremacy on campus, these students went to a great length not to see. As Spelman (2007) explained, such ignorance takes a great amount of energy. It requires one to rationalize away behaviors and attitudes, such as when Tyler described how his family “loosely” used slurs or Matt’s defense of his resident’s use of the n-word against accusations of racism. Moreover, Matt would explain that the term racist was thrown around far too much and should be reserved for the likes of Adolf Hitler. The white men in Cabrera’s (2012b) study similarly located racism in the most extreme, fringe groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Doing so aided them in maintaining a positive view of themselves because they did not possess the intent of such overt bigotry and feelings of white superiority. Fasching-Varner (2012) also found that white pre-service teachers exhibited a propensity to “distance oneself from
supposedly racially problematic people” (p. 108). By locating racism in only the most prejudiced and hateful figures and organizations, white students are able to situate themselves as relatively enlightened and innocent. In turn, dialogues on race and racism are again reduced to matters of the individual. Such discourses are dualistic in nature and reductionist in that they situate good whites against bad whites.

Baldwin (1985) illustrated the role of this type of willful, determined ignorance in maintaining a white sense of self, noting “White America remains unable to believe that Black America’s grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country” (p. 536). In essence, this group’s preoccupation with goodness and innocence, coupled with their understanding of racism as exclusively a character flaw, prevented any serious engagement with claims of racism and white supremacy on campus. Further, the results of this study indicate that when participants were centered as the object of critique, that is when their whiteness became the subject of discussion, they exhibited discomfort, frustration, and anger. As hooks (1997) explained, people of color react to whiteness not so much on the basis of stereotypes, but rather in reaction to “the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination, a psychic state that informs and shapes the way black folks “see” whiteness” (p. 169).

A critical finding of this research is how participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions of whiteness reacted when gazed upon as racialized subjects. Given that they had not meaningfully grappled with their white racial identities, coupled with an
individualistic understanding of racism, these individuals could not sit with critiques by people of color. Previous scholarship documented how white students’ thinking about race is almost always about the racial other, not whiteness itself (Cabrera, 2014a, 2014b; Fasching-Varner, 2012; McKinney, 2005). Additionally, the racial isolation of exclusively white pre-college contexts leaves whiteness unmarked and the universal norm that is rarely, if ever, reflected upon (Perry, 2007). As such, discussions of cross-racial interaction and tolerance are acceptable insofar as they do not directly implicate whiteness and individual white people.

Whereas participants in the following two typologies encountered dissonance because of the privileges and power associated with whiteness, these students were thrown off balance because they experienced a strong discomfort with being framed as racial subjects. During the Black History Month event, Laura initially found the speaker’s commentary uplifting for students of color. As the speaker discussed Black beauty and empowerment, Laura nodded in agreement as she listened to a familiar refrain she had heard in her coursework. However, when the speaker directly implicated whiteness, and white people, Laura no longer took kindly to the speaker’s words. She grew uncomfortable, even characterizing the group as ungrateful because she had assisted in setting up the event. To Laura it was unfair for the woman to cast all white people as oppressors. In a similar vein, Jason described his displeasure with being judged on the basis of his race, explaining he just wanted to blend in. Laura and Jason’s reactions to being racialized are similar to Perry’s (2007) findings of white racial identity in a
predominately white high school. She explained that in this all-white context, whiteness was universalized, noting ““they”—people with ethnicity—had identity, community, traditions, rituals, ancestry, and culture, whereas white kids were “just white”” (p. 382).

Both Perry (2007) and McKinney (2005) highlighted how white students conflate whiteness with simply being American. For those characterized by Ignorant Constructions, whiteness was so empty (McKinney, 2005), that when it was made to be the racial particular a great deal of anger and frustration surfaced.

This is to say that participants could not fathom the “special knowledge” (hooks, 1997) that people of color held about whiteness. Crafting identities rooted in determined ignorance (Leonardo, 2009), they failed to recognize the pain that whiteness represented. Allen (2004) explained how whiteness operates to diminish the knowledge of people of color:

> The oppressor turns others into inanimate objects, rendering their symbolic death as human subjects and producers of emancipatory knowledge. Given that whites do not value people of color as considers of the world, it is no wonder that whites have little or no awareness that people of color, those inanimate objects of the white supremacist mind, actually do think about and scrutinize white people. (p. 126).

Participants rarely considered the special knowledge (hooks, 1992) students of color possessed, and when confronted by their interpretations of whiteness, became hostile and defensive. This process illuminates the intense discomfort that participants experienced.
when they were shifted from the racial universal to the racial particular (Perry, 2007). The results of this study underscore that a central developmental task for white students must be not only a recognition of one’s own whiteness, but a sense of self-criticality (Yancy, 2015). That is, white students must possess the humility and vulnerability to center themselves as racial subject of critique. Ortiz and Patton (2012), writing about the importance of self-awareness in difficult dialogues, explained that “tensions arise quickly when individuals realize that how they perceive themselves is vastly different from how others perceive them” (pp. 20-21). Discourses within higher education on white undergraduates and social justice education have long centered on a recognition of whiteness (Helms, 1995). The findings from this present study, however, illustrate that this is a necessary, but insufficient starting point. Students must not only name their racial identity, but apply their emerging awareness of racism and whiteness to the self. Otherwise, they fail to recognize how they are complicit in racism and white supremacy (Applebaum, 2010; Yancy, 2015). Reactions to the gaze of people of color underscore the importance of being able to engage in self-critique. Participants in the Emergent Constructions of white racial identity best illustrate students who are beginning to recognize a racial identity, but do so in a mostly abstract, academic way.

**Emergent Constructions of White Identity**

Participants characterized by Emergent Constructions of white identity were defined by a growing awareness of one’s white racial identity and the subsequent privileges that resulted from whiteness. They also exhibited a growing sense of the
institutional and systemic nature of racism in America. As such, these five participants offered a greater level of complexity (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005) in their thinking about race, racism, and whiteness than those characterized by Ignorant Constructions. Despite their emerging awareness of whiteness and the racial self, these participants failed to implicate themselves as an object of critique. That is, their thinking about the matter appeared to be largely academic and abstract, frequently discussing white privilege but rarely applying it to their own lives. In many ways, they offered the most perplexing narratives. As Thompson (2003) explained, “although we can acknowledge white racism as a generic fact, it is hard to acknowledge as a fact about ourselves” (p. 8). These participants offered promise in their ability to name the contours of racism and whiteness, but never considered themselves seriously a part of the problem. Lucas recalled learning about how white teachers are perceived with skepticism in communities of color and Sarah was considering the racial dynamic of a community service organization through her service-learning experience. These reflections were largely left to surface level understandings, however, and never extended in complex ways to the racial self.

Although beginning to name whiteness as a racial location is an important first step, it does little good if students do not also consider how they themselves are a part of the problem of white supremacy. In this regard participants resembled Watt’s (2007) discussion of how those with privileged social identities tend to intellectualize matters of power and inequality. Merely listing off privileges associated with whiteness may
actually do more harm than good (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2004, 2009; Levine-Rasky, 2013). As Levine-Rasky (2013) explained, discourses of white privilege can serve as a type of redemptive outlet, allowing white students to confess and be forgiven for their racial sins. Further, Leonardo (2009) and Applebaum (2010) both underscored the limitations of white privilege pedagogy, most notably its highly individualistic nature. A major limitation they identify is that white privilege is often conceptualized as a matter of individual advantage and benefit, with little consideration of the power base of white supremacy. Taken together, these scholars have documented how acknowledging one’s privilege can at times be a means of letting white people off the hook. As Leonardo (2004) explained, white students ought to be less concerned with “the issue of unearned advantages, of the state of being dominant, and more around the direct processes that secures domination and the privileges associated with it” (p. 137). Indeed, many of the participants in this construction spoke of the privileges associated with being white, but rarely in ways that directly implicated themselves. Matias (2016), in her work on white urban teacher candidates, illuminated how white people can place too much of an emphasis on caring for the other, as if such emotions could ever truly alleviate the pain and suffering that results from white supremacy.

Throughout our time together these participants talked in casual ways about racism and white supremacy. Although they had the language, it appeared to be understood in a distant and academic fashion. Engaged in a number of activities and courses that discussed topics of race and racism, these five students clearly had the
vocabulary to engage the topic at hand. They did so, however, in very casual ways, seemingly rearticulating concepts they had learned through Resident Assistant training, coursework, or service-learning programs. McIntyre (1997), in her work on white pre-service teachers, offered a similar observation in “the ease with which whites “talk about” people of color” (p. 135). Like those in McIntyre’s study, discussion on people of color and white racism largely appeared routine and academic, as if these students could not truly grasp the horrors of white supremacy and racism, both historically and today. McIntyre (1997) offered her own hypothesis for this type of white talk, noting, “participants have had very little – if any – opportunity to “talk with” the Other. Rather, they have learned about people of color from the media, their parents, teachers, texts, peers, and the evening news” (p. 135). She described white talk as a way of talking about whiteness and racism that does not implicate the white self in the matters at hand. That is, white talk is largely surface level, abstract, and does not force white individuals to confront how they benefit from white privilege and institutional white racism. It is dangerous then in that it gives an appearance of understanding and enlightenment, but in effect shields the white subject from any critique.

Similar to McIntyre’s (1997) participants, the students in this construction had limited interaction with students of color, either prior to college or once enrolled at State. Bailey (2015), drawing on the work of McIntyre, described a similar process of fluttering that allows white people to stay on the surface of discussion, looking for “detours and distractions” (p. 48). She goes on to underscore not only the limitations of white talk, but
the dangers inherent in staying on a surface, abstract level:

White talk distracts us from, rather than engages us, with the heart of the white problem: fear. The long answer is more complicated: white talk has a deep moral, ontological, and epistemological payoff for white folks. It permits us to feel as if we are thoughtfully engaging race and racism but allows us to do so from a place of imagined invulnerability, comfort, and safety. (p. 43)

Participants characterized by Emergent Constructions echoed much of Bailey (2015) and McIntyre’s (1997) commentary about white talk. That is, they appeared genuine in their efforts to learn more about race, racism, and white privilege through their involvement at State. Unlike those defined by Ignorant Constructions of white identity, they did not situate themselves as victims or become defensive and angry when made to be the racial subject. As such, although they often overestimated the extent to which they truly grasped the impact of white supremacy and racism, highlighting the Enlightenment Narrative, they nonetheless were willing to speak openly about these matters. Yet in doing so, they always kept the discussion at an arm’s length and never too close to home. They offered adequate definitions and spoke extensively about what they had learned in class or in trainings, even acknowledging that they certainly benefited from white privilege, but all of this was done in very conceptual and theoretical ways. Never did these participants truly implicate themselves in concrete terms, nor consider how they perpetuate white supremacy despite their good intentions.
Derrick Bell (1991), in his seminal thesis *Racism is Here to Stay: Now What?*, contended that “few whites are ready to move beyond the abstractions of equality and actively promote civil rights for blacks where they work, or where they live” (p. 573). Indeed, it is a privilege of whiteness itself that the horrors of white supremacy might be discussed in such abstract and academic discourses. This was a major point of distinction between Emergent and Critical Constructions. Although both recognized a racial self, only those three participants in Critical Constructions truly implicated themselves in critical ways, moving from abstract to applied knowledge of racism and whiteness.

Given their emerging awareness of white privilege, participants characterized by Emergent Constructions placed a strong emphasis on utilizing their whiteness to act against racism. A number of scholars documented the importance of moving white students to a place of action against racial injustice (Cabrera, 2012a; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). Although this is a critical goal, others have warned against commitments to action without a complex understanding of racism and white supremacy (Ahmed, 2012; Applebaum, 2010). Ahmed (2007) explained, “if we want to know how things can be different too quickly, then we might not hear anything at all” (p. 65). Her critique is not intended to immobilize whites who yearn to engage in racial justice work, but rather underscores how one’s desire to be against racism can obscure what racism is and how it operates. In the case of these participants, there was a clear rush to act despite not having considered how they themselves were complicit in maintaining and reproducing whiteness regardless of good intentions to act. A major distinction between these
participants and those in Critical Construction was the level of reflection in their desires to act.

Finally, a major point of development for these participants was an emerging awareness of racism as an institutionalized and systemic force in America. Sarah spoke of the *New Jim Crow* and Lucas recounted the educational disparities he had learned about in his education courses. This was one major point of departure between Ignorant and Emergent Constructions. Whereas those characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white identity referred to racism as exclusively a matter of bias and prejudice, the five participants in the Emergent Constructions began to move beyond individual attitudes and behaviors. As Bush (2011) noted, white college students do “not appear to view racism as a relationship of power but something that bad people do overtly: structural or systemic patterns are not relevant” (p. 64). Minimizing racism as merely a character flaw, as was consistently the case among participants in Ignorant Constructions, allows whiteness to remain invisible and unnamed as its systematic manifestations are concealed in favor of individual analysis. The five participants characterized by Emergent Constructions began to move beyond what Leonardo (2009) described as the bigot-causes-discrimination view. This is a pivotal moment of development, as it has the potential of opening up new understandings of the racial self within a larger landscape of institutional white supremacy. This capacity to recognize the institutional dynamics of racism is critical, for it broadens white students understanding of how the racial self exists in relationship to systems of inequality. Watt (2007) has encouraged students with
dominant identities to consider both the personal and political implications of privilege.

**Critical Constructions of White Identity**

The three participants defined by Critical Constructions of white identity exhibited the most complexity in their thinking about their racial selves and how they exist in relation to people of color and larger systems of racism and white supremacy. They engaged what I consider to be the two main tasks for white students: an awareness of one’s white racial identity and the capacity to recognize one’s complicity is racism and white supremacy. This is to say that they not only recognized their white racial identity, but they consistently modeled openness to critique about the symbolic and material consequences of whiteness. In doing so they moved beyond naming a racial identity in an abstract sense and considered how whiteness manifested in their own lives and the lives of people of color. In this regard, Ryan, Amanda, and Rachel all engaged with Yancy’s (2014) question of what it feels like to be a white problem. Similar to Cabrera’s (2012a) participants, whom he described as working through whiteness, participants exhibiting this construction “made the issue of racism a tangible reality rather than an abstraction” (p. 394).

The distinguishing feature of this construction was participants’ ability and willingness to be the racial subject of critique. The capacity to do so is critical for engaging in difficult dialogues across difference, primarily because white students may experience great discomfort and pain when hearing the testimonials of students of color (Reason, 2007; Reason & Davis, 2005; Watt, 2007). Reason (2007) noted how his white
undergraduate participants “attempted to integrate a personal understanding of Whiteness that was dynamic and fluid, situational and relational” (p. 129). That is, it is critical that white students recognize the symbolic and material consequences associated with their whiteness in a variety of shifting contexts.

Rachel exhibited this quality more than any participant in the study, frequently reflecting on the limitations of her white racial subjectivities. Although participants in Emergent Constructions spoke at great length about how whiteness made it difficult to know the experiences of people of color, Rachel offered multiple examples of how this occurred in her own life. It should be noted that Rachel was the only participant in the study to have social networks comprised primarily of people of color. This is in itself concerning as it highlights the segregated nature of the institution, even amongst the most heavily involved students on campus. For Rachel, her friends of color appeared to serve a major catalyst of development in thinking more critically about her racial self. Prior studies have documented the role of people of color in the development of increased racial consciousness among white people (Cabrera, 2012a; Eischstedt, 2001, Reason, 2007; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005; Watt, 2007). This body of literature documented the importance of cross-racial contact both prior to coming to college and once on campus. Eischstedt (2001), in her study of white racial justice activists, found that “in almost every case, these white respondents were brought to awareness of their whiteness and its social significance through interaction with people of color” (p. 455). Rachel’s relationships with students of color appeared to cultivate a level of empathy and care that
is frequently absent among white students in their thinking about race (Leonardo, 2009; McKinney, 2005). As Cabrera (2012a) cautioned, however, there is a danger in consistently relying on students of color to educate their white peers.

Ryan and Amanda also displayed the capacity to implicate oneself as a part of the problem of white supremacy. Amanda considered what it meant that she and her three white co-facilitators were so uncomfortable presenting to a room full of Black students and Ryan wondered aloud about the implications of being a part of the social group that has historically and today oppressed people of color. He expressed a great deal of dissonance, perhaps even guilt, when, as a Resident Assistant, he called the police to break up a party and the first person the officers approached was his Black resident. Each of these narratives illuminates a willingness to situate oneself in the broader landscape of white supremacy and racial domination. As Bailey (2015) commented, “naming our ignorance requires releasing our attachments to goodness and comfort and recognizing fear and discomfort as sources of knowledge and connection rather than as sources of closure and flight” (p. 50). These three participants stood out in their ability to move away from preoccupations with innocence and moral goodness. Whereas the prior two constructions of white identity were quite concerned with being seen as good white people, Rachel, Ryan, and Amanda reflected a level of uncertainty and discomfort about the consequences of their whiteness. Applebaum (2010) encouraged this type of vigilance in continually reflecting on one’s own complicity, in turn moving away from white narcissism and towards feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability.
Given their willingness to situate themselves as an object of racial critique, these participants were committed to action but in more deliberate and reflective ways. In this regard they did not move to action in ways that blocked their ability to hear and understand (Ahmed, 2007), but rather considered how to leverage their whiteness in the most ethical and meaningful ways against racial injustice. Amanda questioned her desires to do Public Health work if she could not relate to the communities in which she wanted to work and Rachel was frustrated by white people who arrogantly assumed they had the answers to complex matters of racial injustice. Rather than merely stressing that white people must utilize their privilege to combat racism, these participants considered how they, as white people, could best combat racial injustice. In this regard these three participants mirrored Reason’s (2007) discussion that whites must continuously rearticulate whiteness. His participants engaged in a constant process of considering how whiteness informed a sense of self, relationships with others, and fundamental worldviews. As such, participants were less concerned with having arrived at a particularly enlightened understanding of the white racial self, but instead continually monitored how whiteness informed their perspective and contributed to racial inequality.

**Liminal Experiences: Feeling Caught In Between**

The results of this study also highlight that for students who are actively exploring the meanings of whiteness and white racial identity, the potential exists for an emerging tension with their pre-college communities. That is, they exist in a liminal space that requires them to straddle both their home communities and college environments. In this
sense liminal experiences between precollege and collegiate communities are a direct result of actively engaging matters of race and whiteness. Participants in Emergent and Critical Constructions often found themselves reconsidering relationships they held so close prior to college. As Rachel explained, home was no longer really home, and for her it was difficult to envision having the type of conversations with friends and family members that reflected her thinking about race and racism. Not only did participants report seeing their prior communities differently, but their communities saw them differently. Given that identities are a “balance between how we see ourselves and how others see us” (Arminio & Torres, 2012, p. 33), this tension is an important context for students sense-making around their white racial identities. Multiple students recalled how family members were skeptical of their new ways of thinking about race and racism. Spencer explained how her grandparents said they had raised her wrong and Patrick’s parents often derided the indoctrination of his liberal education.

Whereas participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white identity offered little in the way of objections to such behavior (i.e. Tyler’s discussion of using slurs “loosely”) those in Emergent and Critical Constructions experienced a sense of dissonance when returning home. This is to say that experiencing such a liminal state was the direct result of reflecting on and considering whiteness and white racial identity. These participants, however, frequently struggled to challenge what they perceived to be racist remarks or behaviors by their parents, family members, and peers. To do so requires a great deal of interpersonal complexity in how one engages in relationships
These participants consistently struggled to challenge others back home out of fear of how it might impact their relationships moving forward. In this sense, their emerging understandings of racism and whiteness were overridden by the values they placed on these relationships. Conflict was avoided in order to maintain a positive relationship. This finding echoes prior scholarship, as Robbins and Jones (2016) similarly found that white women in graduate preparation programs struggled to determine when and how to call out actions and behaviors that were racist.

The experience of feeling torn between two communities is consistent with scholarship that has underscored the painful emotions that result when challenged to consider one’s racial perspective for the first time (Frye, 1992; Goodman, 2011; Reason & Davis, 2005; Thompson, 2003; Watt, 2007, 2012). Thompson (2003), writing about social justice education, noted, “when old values prove false, the loss we feel in giving up the sense of selfhood tied to those values is painful” (p. 21). Frye, reflecting on her own experiences in coming to unlearn whiteness, explained a process in which everything one knew to be true is now uncertain, “all of my ways of knowing seemed to have failed me – my perception, my common sense, my good will, my anger, honor, and affection, my intelligence and insight” (p. 148).

This feeling of loss that both Thompson (2003) and Frye (1992) described is central to the development of increasingly complex ways of thinking about the self and the self in relation to others (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Parks, 2000). Participants in this
study experienced a sense of loss in the relationships and communities they felt most at home prior to coming to college. Parks (2000) described the experience of loss akin to a shipwreck, the point at which what was once a dependable and trustworthy source of shelter and cover comes apart. At the heart of this process are new ways of making meaning, or increased complexity in how one thinks about the self, their relationships, and the very nature of knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 2001). As one begins to see the world differently, they experience a shift not only in cognition but also relationships (Parks, 2000). As Parks (2000) described, “to undergo the loss of assumed certainty, to have to reorder what was once presumed to be dependably real, involves emotion as well as cognition” (p. 71).

Amanda described being in a place of limbo, for which her supervisor responded she was likely experiencing white guilt. Although guilt may have been an emotion she was indeed experiencing, she was also engaged in actively considering how to exist in relationships in light of new meanings attached to whiteness and the racial self. The results of this dissertation underscore that a major developmental task for white students is a reconsideration of prior relationships and communities that shielded one from every considering the role of race and racism in America, let alone one’s own identity. This can be painful; as many participants noted the difficulty they had incorporating this new knowledge into existing relationships.

**Intersecting Identities: Potential Entry Points for Empathy?**
I intentionally crafted a sample that would take up Giroux’s (1997) call to explore the diversity within whiteness. A limitation of more recent research on whiteness in higher education is that samples have typically existed at the intersection of whiteness and one other identity, most notably gender (Cabrera, 2012b; Robbins & Jones, 2016). Even within these studies, however, results suggested that the intersections of whiteness with other marginalized identities offered some levels of empathy and insight into the experiences of students of color. Cabrera (2012a) found that for white men, holding a marginalized identity provided some level of understanding of systemic oppression. In turn, they were able to draw parallels to racism. Further, Reason (2007) described how women were able to draw on their non-dominant subjectivities to craft more complex ways of interpreting racism and oppression.

Consistent with prior studies (Cabrera, 2012a; Reason, 2007; Robbins & Jones, 2016) whiteness intersected with non-dominant identities to offer contradictory experiences of power and marginalization (Levine-Rasky, 2011). At times participants’ marginalized identities appeared to offer an entry point into understanding the experiences of students of color. For instance Jordan discussed her experiences being generalized as a “butch” lesbian and how students of color might experience similar broad stereotypes about ability and worth. Ryan and Patrick also drew on feelings of marginalization and exclusion that stemmed from their sexual orientations to make sense of feeling excluded and alienated.
Similarly, Rachel drew on multiple marginalized identities, including her social class and disability, in order to make connections with her friends of color. She was quick to note that these could never truly stand in for experiencing racism, but that they at least provided a starting point in understanding. Rachel recalled a particular instance in which a professor doubted the validity of her disability as she sought out reasonable accommodations at the start of a new semester. She drew on this experience as a way of connecting to how students of color may not trust faculty who are not willing to entertain their experiences with racism and marginalization as valid. The results of this study indicate that experiences with marginalization and exclusion based on other target identities might offer a useful starting point for students in their attempts to understand the realities of white racism on campus and in society at large. Although these participants drew on the contradictory experiences that resulted from the intersection of non-dominant identities with whiteness to further their understanding of racial oppression, such identities have the potential to distance students from serious engagement with race. Unlike the present student, McKinney (2005) found that white students utilized non-dominant identities to undermine discussions of race. As such, one should not assume that by virtue of holding historically marginalized identities white students would make connections to systemic racial oppression.

**Racial Ideologies of Whiteness on Campus**

The second aim of this dissertation was to explore how white students perpetuated racial ideologies of whiteness on campus. Bonilla-Silva (2013) described racial
ideologies as interpretive frameworks that assist white people in making sense of racial issues and normalizing the status quo. Similarly, Lewis (2004) explained that racial ideologies naturalize and rationalize away racial subordination. As an ideology, whiteness operates as a “multitude of individual, collective, intentional, unintentional, isolated, systemic actions that synergistically work to sustain and constantly regenerate relationships of unequal power between whites and nonwhites” (Yancy, 2004, p. 14). In essence, an ideological commitment to whiteness rationalizes away claims to racial inequality, maintains white racial innocence, and preserves a dominant/subordinate relationship between white students and students of color.

Mindful of this conceptualization of whiteness, I sought to understand how white students maintain the racial status quo on campus, regardless of their intentions. In doing so my thinking was guided by Leonardo (2009), who explained that no white person can stand outside the influence and conditioning of whiteness. That is, regardless of intentions and levels of consciousness, all white people are susceptible to perpetuating a racial ideology of whiteness. As Leonardo (2009) articulated:

The *collective racial unconscious* includes even the most “enlightened” person who presumes to think “outside” of race. For *racial ideology has no outside* and the person or society immersed in race cannot think outside of it, which represents the racialization of reality and the realization of race. Either a society is completely racialized or it is not; there is no such
thing as “a little bit racialized” or “this or that nation is more racialized than another.” (p. 38)

In this regard, one cannot transcend racial ideologies of whiteness, regardless of intent or goodness. Consistent with Leonardo’s thinking, I attempted to move beyond discussion of whiteness exclusively as a racial identity, and towards the habits, practices, and consequences of its ideological underpinnings. In many ways this discussion goes beyond notions of good and bad whites and towards recognition of how all white people, regardless of intention or racial consciousness, are a product and a producer of whiteness on campus.

In what follows I review the four narratives participants frequently invoked during our time together. Drawing on Riessman’s (2008) discussion of narrative analysis, I moved beyond an attention to the told and concerned myself with the telling. That is, drawing extensively on Critical Whiteness Studies, I considered how participants wanted to be known in the interview setting (Chase, 2010; Riessman, 2008). Given that matters of race and racism are such sensitive topics, I assumed participants would construct accounts that would present themselves as socially desirable and racially progressive. Each of the four narratives that emerged from data collection had a distinct plotline and a motivated telling (Riessman, 2008). That is, they appeared to be offered with a goal in mind in the specific context of the interview. The four narratives that emerged, Narratives of Campus Harmony, Narratives of Imposition, Narratives of Enlightenment, and Narratives of White Racial Innocence, all worked to normalize racial
hostility on campus and minimize the role of whiteness in the production of this hostility. These four narratives contribute to an existing body of scholarship that highlights how white people perpetuate whiteness through discourse and talk (McIntyre, 1997; Myers & Williamson, 2001; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). The results of the present study support Myers and Williamson’s (2005) claim that the process of race talk nurtured racial hostility on campus.

**Narratives of Racial Harmony**

Narratives of Racial Harmony were offered as evidence of State University’s welcoming and inclusive campus climate. Participants, all of whom were heavily engaged at the institution, consistently underscored an environment that was welcoming to all students, regardless of race and ethnicity. This finding is consistent with previous research on white collegians’ perceptions of campus racial climates, which tend to be overwhelmingly positive (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Such results indicate that white students and students of color inhabit the same campus, but appear to hold drastically different interpretations of the space (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). When asked to recall something she saw or heard that was racist on campus, Liz responded that she did not have anything to offer because she walks around with her headphones on. Her response offered a powerful metaphor for how white students move through campus, largely unaware of how their peers of color experience feelings of marginalization, alienation, and everyday white racial framing (Feagin, 2013). The account was even more powerful
given that Liz had earlier recounted the fear her Muslim neighbor felt in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s election, particularly once she heard white men on the floor saying they planned on “putting her in her place.”

Her account, and the accounts of so many participants in this dissertation, illustrates the determined, willful ignorance that is characteristic of white racial knowledge (Leonardo, 2009). That is, participants justified campus as welcoming and inclusive in the absence of any racial hostility or overt bigotry. This was despite the fact that virtually every participant named an instance of bigotry or bias on campus. These instances were written off as anomalies, not the manifestation of ideological commitments to colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) or white racial frames of students of color (Feagin, 2013). Further, matters of representation and historical legacies of racism and exclusion on campus were rarely named as indicative of a hostile campus climate. In fact, only Rachel consistently named these realities as evidence that State still had plenty of work to do.

The results of this study begin to illuminate how participants’ involvement at State may have clouded their ability to critically evaluate the institution’s racial climate. Participants frequently highlighted what they perceived to be a genuine commitment on the part of State to matters of diversity and inclusion. Some participants even situated State as unique in its efforts to promote inclusivity among institutions of higher education. As one participant remarked, messages of diversity and inclusion was seemingly everywhere. Interestingly, the phrase “diversity and inclusion” was offered
time and again by the student leaders in this study, which signaled an apparent passive absorbing of institutional messages. It was often deployed in vague and uncertain terms, with little specificity as to what it actually meant. These findings again echo McIntyre’s (1997) discussion of white talk and Bailey’s (2015) description of fluttering. That is, consistently referring to the university’s commitment to diversity and inclusion was often superficial and surface level, evading more nuanced discussions of racial hostility on campus. Ahmed (2012) described this as the lip-service model of diversity, noting, “diversity becomes a convention, or a conventional way of speaking about the university. Diversity becomes a ritualized or polite speech” (p. 58). Johnston-Guerrero (2016) described the ways in which institution’s preoccupation with compositional diversity diminish any critical interrogation of racial climates. Indeed, many of the participants in this study described the institution as overwhelmingly inclusive despite offering evidence of individual acts of racism and bigotry. Describing diversity as a type of “feel good” politics, Ahmed contends that “the fact that diversity is not a scary word is a part of the problem: if it is detached from scary issues, such as power and inequality, it is harder for diversity to do anything in its travels” (p. 66). The results of this dissertation underscore a major disconnect between claims of “diversity and inclusion” and any connections to privilege, power, and equity.

Participants’ belief in an inclusive and welcoming State University highlight how attitudes, beliefs, and understandings of race and racism are in some ways reflective of larger institutional messages. Returning to the foundations of narrative inquiry, Gubrium
and Holstein (2009) urged scholars to consider the narrative environments, or institutional contexts, in which individual narratives are constructed. Doing so orients one to the institutional cues that inform actors’ sense making of a given issue. Connor, who like others was heavily involved at State, could not fathom how students of color might feel the university environment was hostile towards students of color. He explained that the university was home for so many students and as such claims of hostility were difficult to understand. Connor’s discussion of experiencing the university as home reminds one of Turner’s (1994) analogy that students of color often feel like a visitor in someone else’s house at Predominantly White Institutions. There is no reason to doubt Connor in his assertion that, to him, State does indeed feel like home. Yet the analysis is indicative of his white racial knowledge (Leonardo, 2009), and an inability to recognize how whiteness informs his perspective. It is also a reflection of larger institutional messages. For a number of participants in this study, State’s apparent preoccupation with diversity and inclusion made claims of racial hostility unreasonable.

Recall that Jason felt his activities board advisors were obsessed with diversity and numerous Resident Assistants lauded Residential Life’s commitment to diversity and inclusion, which were two of the department’s pillars. In fact, one office had the language of “diversity and inclusion” in their title. Again, Ahmed’s (2012) analysis is useful, as she described diversity as a type of institutional knowledge and in turn “knowing which words are most popular is about how one can be affectively aligned with others” (pp. 60-61). For participants in the present study, their extensive engagement at
State provided them with a great deal of access to faculty and staff who reproduced these institutional commitments. Believing the university was fully committed to diversity and inclusion, however broadly described, made it difficult to comprehend claims of hostility, alienation, and discrimination on campus. In turn, eight participants in particular displayed a great deal of frustration and anger at the heavy presence of campus activism.

**Narratives of Imposition**

Reactions to campus activism were consistent with Delgado and Stefancic’s (1997) discussion of imposition language. Throughout history struggles for equity and opportunity have been framed as an imposition on the dominant group. Such language results when, in this case, white people “find their demands excessive, tiresome, or frightening. The imposition narrative delegitimizes the reform movement, portraying it as unprincipled” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, p. 98). The imposition narrative has a great deal of utility in that it allows those in majority groups to hide behind surface level acceptance, only to frame those challenging systems of oppression as overly aggressive. Delgado and Stefancic (1997) highlighted how those fighting for their freedom are framed as overbearing bullies who will stop at nothing to get their way, which dominant group members predictably interpret as a type of special treatment.

Participants in the present study situated campus activists, who were quite active during the period of data collection, as an imposition. Consistent with Delgado and Stefancic’s (1997) initial discussion of imposition language, participants utilized the narrative as a way of offering their initial support for student activism. In this sense, they
protected their own presentation of the self as good and innocent, placing the blame of the activists for going too far. I offered three ways participants utilized Narratives of Impositions: (a) Inconveniencing, (b) Ineffective, and (c) Misguided.

Those students who employed the inconveniencing variation of the narrative underscored the unspoken white nature of campus spaces. Consistent with Critical Race Theory’s tenet of whiteness as property (Ladson Billings, 1995, 1998), the Student Union was a particular space in which participants expressed anger and frustration over protests. Protesters were situated as burdensome and hostile, disrupting what was meant to be, as one participant noted ironically, a safe space for students. This is particularly when one considers that the Union is the hub of student life, particularly for engaged student leaders. Given that participants in the present study remarked how white their involved student networks were, it appears the Student Union is a racialized space that has a particular meaning for white students. The anger and frustration that these student leaders expressed underscores how whiteness serves as a particular orientation to the world, and when bodies of color disrupt white spaces, the resulting tension is noticeable as white people attempt to reorient themselves (Ahmed, 2012).

Participants also framed campus activism as misguided and ineffective. These two variations of the narrative further emphasized white students’ innocence. For instance, participants remarked that they were not the police, so they were unsure why they were the targets of these types of protests in the Union or library. This reaction is unsurprising given these students, all but two of whom were characterized by Ignorant
Constructions, understood racism solely as an act of individual bigotry. As such, these students could not grasp the purpose of protests, let alone the rage and anger that fueled them. This was only amplified by the fact that these participants understood the campus climate as welcoming, inclusive, and affirming.

In proclaiming that they were not to blame for racial sins of the past, these participants echoed a familiar narrative told throughout history. It is one James Baldwin (1998) recalled in his writing. Writing about his encounters with White people, he described their reluctance in recognizing their own complicity in racism and white supremacy:

The nature of this stammering can be reduced to a plea. Do not blame me. I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade. Anyway it was your chiefs who sold you to me. I was not present in the middle passage. I am not responsible for the textile mills of Manchester, or the cotton fields of Mississippi… I have nothing against you, nothing! What have you got against me? What do you want?

(Baldwin, 1998, p. 322)

The narratives offered by these participants were strikingly similar to Baldwin’s encounters with white people. Why do students of color and their allies block roads, scream in the library, or conduct sit-ins in the Union? As participants explained, they were not the ones who killed Tamir Rice or Michael Brown. As one student said, “we
are not the police.” Other participants completely disregarded the protests, questioning any motives they might have.

In each instance these participants echo Delgado and Stefancic (1997) larger discussion of nonreflexivity among white people. They explained that “underlying many uses of the imposition metaphor is nonreflexivity, the quite natural tendency to believe that one’s own way of seeing and doing things is natural and universal” (p. 103). Participants’ inability to recognize how whiteness inherently shaped their interpretations of campus activism is reminiscent of Frye’s (1992) concept of whiteliness, understood as a taken for granted way of moving through the world. Unable to recognize larger legacies of racism and white supremacy, or how such legacies are upheld institutionally, participants framed protesters as misguided bullies with an overbearing agenda against innocent white students.

Narratives of Racial Enlightenment

A major finding of this dissertation is how, through extensive engagement with the university, participants overestimated their awareness and understanding of whiteness and white supremacy. Participants frequently constructed narratives that situated their understanding, and by extension innocence, against the backdrop of less involved peers. Time and again these students spoke of their extensive involvement as surrounding themselves with racially progressive, inclusive, and aware white people on campus. This was particularly true for those involved in Residence Life, despite the fact that most were on staffs that were almost exclusively white and rarely offered meaningful interaction.
across difference. One participant expressed her surprise at just how white her staff was, as she had expected a racially diverse group when she initially applied for the position.

The use of other, less involved white students is reminiscent of Sullivan’s (2014) discussion of how middle-class, educated white people use poor, working-class whites as a reference group to assert their racial goodness. As has been made clear throughout this dissertation, this was despite considerable gaps in their thinking about matters of race, racism, and white supremacy. Of course, this is not to say that participants were not exposed to a great deal of learning about matters of social justice broadly and race and racism in particular. It is clear that they were. However, this involvement was often used as a way of situating themselves as inherently more enlightened and transformed than their white peers. In doing so they saw themselves as one of the good whites, not a part of the problem. Sullivan (2014) detailed how the politics of self-transformation are problematic in that they lead to the false belief that individual awareness and development are sufficient in eradicating white privilege. Further, a concern with one’s self-presentation as morally virtuous obscures complicity and recenters white feelings of innocence and goodness (Applebaum, 2010; Butler, 1995; Matias, 2016).

Butler (1995) cautioned against the “production of the saintly white person, the responsible white person, the politically accountable white subject” (p. 443). To see oneself as complicit in white supremacy and a racially hostile campus, regardless of one’s intentions, threatens one’s desire to be seen as one of the responsible, aware white people Butler described. It is to be at odds with the institutional messages of diversity and
inclusion, the very ideas that one’s beloved university promotes. In many respects it challenges the illusion of happiness (Ahmed, 2012) that larger discourses of diversity and inclusion sustain. As Matt explained, he and his peers were hired as Resident Assistants because they “obviously were not bigots.”

Narratives of Enlightenment also contained a level of certainty that are at odds with seriously grappling with the meaning of whiteness and one’s white racial identity. Critical Whiteness Scholars have long warned against any notions of arrival on the part of white people in their personal racial journeys (Applebaum, 2010; Fasching-Varner, 2012; Leonardo, 2009). Lucas explained that he used his weekly one-on-one’s with his Assistant Hall Director to obtain the necessary knowledge about issues of racial injustice and then help his residents consider the issue. His commentary that “once you understand, you understand” exemplifies the business-like mentality with which he approached his work for racial justice. It was as if he had unlearned years of conditioning and rid himself of his white subjectivities over the course of a semester. Aaneurd (2014) contends that white students must stay in a place of uncertainty, noting “this attention to the limitations of knowing and a willingness to stay within the space of uncertainty is one of the key aspects of humility” (p. 106).

If racial ideologies are successful to the extent that they “help people to understand their lives by providing stories of the world that make sense” (Lewis, 2004, p. 632), Narratives of Enlightenment appear to furnish white undergraduate student leaders with these stories. That is, participants drew on their involvement at State to locate
themselves as inherently more aware of racism and white racial privilege than less involved white peers. Thompson (2003), described the need for white students to maintain this sense of innocence and goodness amidst the intense dissonance that comes with learning about white racism:

It is because whites are uncomfortable with the implications of acknowledging white racism that (whether or not we use the term) we are tempted to position ourselves as “good whites.”…We want to feel like, and to be, good people. And we want to be seen as good people. This need is often more apparent among white college students who are first beginning to struggle with the implications of racism than among advanced white graduate students and white professors who have spent years studying racism and antiracism. (p. 8)

Consistent with Thompson’s thinking, these narratives often worked to distance oneself from any complicity in whiteness and white supremacy, instead framing the self as an enlightened anomaly who needed to educate peers. Resident Assistant trainings, diversity workshops, and leadership organizations were offered as evidence of goodness and innocence, distancing the self as much as possible from less enlightened white students. But as Ahmed (2012) explained:

The reduction of racism to the figure of “the racist” allows structural or institutional forms of racism to recede from view, by projecting racism onto a figure that is easily discarded (not only as someone who is “not me”
but also someone who is “not us” who does not represent a cultural or institutional norm). (p. 150)

Ahmed (2012) highlighted two major issues that are relevant with the Enlightenment Narrative offered by participants. First, it conceals any notions of systemic, institutional racism in the institution, which given students’ investment in State were already difficult to detect and name. Second, it creates a reference group of less involved students who as Laura described, just go to school and then back to whatever house they live in off campus. As Ahmed (2012) noted, these less-involved students are not only different than individual participants who “get it,” but are an entirely different type of students than the collective, involved student body.

**Narratives of White Innocence**

A key theme throughout this dissertation has been the role of, and desire for, white racial innocence. A final way in which white students maintained the racial status quo was through a defense of their white family members and peers. That is, this narrative operated to defend others against any accusations of racism. In doing so participants rationalized away behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that were racist, dehumanizing, and often based on historical racial framing of people of color (Feagin, 2013). This narrative served to divorce such behaviors from their assessments of otherwise positive and outstanding character. These accounts obscured the relationship between individual behaviors and historical legacies of white supremacy. In turn,
participants maintained the racial status quo by accounting for other white people’s comments and actions that upheld white supremacy.

Participants employed this narrative in two ways. They either offered unprompted endorsements of goodness for key figures in their lives or rationalized actions after elaborating on a story of racist language or behavior. Their use of this narrative device was a reminder of the centrality of innocence and goodness in the white imagination. That is, virtually every participant at one point or another felt the need to defend a friend or loved one from any potential accusation of racism. The centrality of innocence to white identities has been well documented throughout this dissertation (Applebaum, 2010; Baldwin, 1998; Leonardo, 2009; Levine-Rasky, 2013; Sullivan, 2014; Yancy, 2015). The recurring use of this narrative, however, should underscore the strong ties that these students held to their pre-college environments. As has been noted previously, participants characterized by both Emergent and Critical Constructions experienced a strong liminal state as they attempted to resolve conflicts between their home communities and new ways of thinking at State. Narratives of Racial Innocence only further underscore the deep emotional investment white students have in their pre-college communities, the places and people responsible for so much of their racial conditioning. Their constant concern for maintaining a positive image of those closest to them is an important illustration of just how powerful whiteness is in acting upon individual white people (Leonardo, 2009).

In Context of Helms’ White Racial Identity Development

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It is important to consider the present study in relation to widely used models of white racial identity development, most notably the work of Janet Helms (1984, 1995). The findings from this study both support and complicate Helms’ work. Consistent with Helms’ theory, white racial identity is a complex and messy process. Although the original model of white racial identity development utilized the language of stages (Helms, 1984), Helms later changed this language to statuses, which she believed conveyed a more permeable, fluid, and complex process. The model is useful in that it offers insight into increasingly complex ways of how individuals make sense of racial information. Helms stressed that her model is meant to be explanatory, noting that her initial use of stages was intended “to mean mutually interactive dynamic processes by which a person’s behavior could be explained rather than static categories to which a person could be assigned” (Helms, 1995, p. 183). In this regard, Helms embraced the complicated and at times, contradictory, experiences of white people’s racial identity development. Indeed, in her revised use of language, shifting from stages to statuses, she reinforced the need for more “conceptually complex analyses” (Helms, 1995, p. 183) of individual sense making and interpretation of white identity and racism. Although critiqued for being overly linear (Fasching-Varner, 2012; Reason, 2007), Helms stated in her revised work that neither theoretical nor empirical work can locate a pure or exclusive status (Helms, 1995). It is this level of complexity that is often lost in interpretations of her work.
The results of this study do, however, complicate some of the language used in the more complex statuses of white racial identity development (Helms, 1995). A major theme among participants in this study was a preoccupation with goodness and racial innocence. Participants frequently made claims to their own innocence, situating racist whites as elsewhere. The language offered by Helms (1984, 1995) and others (e.g., Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006) runs the risk of reinforcing the desire for goodness. For instance, Helms (1995) described the Autonomy Status as defined by the “capacity to relinquish the privileges of racism” and stated that individuals “may avoid life options that require participation in racial oppression” (p. 185). Helms offered as an example white people who choose to live in an integrated Black-white neighborhood. Critical scholars of whiteness (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Sullivan, 2006, 2014; Yancy, 2015) contend that it is impossible for white people to give up their white privilege, because regardless of intent, white people still benefit from systems of white supremacy. Interestingly, Sullivan (2006) used the same point that Helms draws on, that of living in a racially integrated neighborhood, to illustrate this point. She explained that:

When a white person makes a well-intentioned decision not to live in an all-white neighborhood, for example, doing so can simultaneously disrupt her habit of always interacting with white neighbors and augment her racial privilege by increasing her ontological expansiveness. The sheer fact that she is able to make a choice about which neighborhood in which
she lives is, after all, an effect of the privilege she has because of her race and economic class. (p. 10)

To Sullivan’s point, regardless of intention, white people still benefit from systems of white supremacy. This is not to discourage white people from living in an integrated neighborhood, but to highlight the privilege and luxury of choice. In this regard, white people cannot simply relinquish their privilege by pure intention. Indeed, as the four narratives of whiteness underscore, all of the participants in this study perpetuated a racial ideology of whiteness regardless of their individual intentions.

This is consistent with both Reason (2007) and Fasching-Varner’s (2012) critique that the linear trajectory of Helms’ model posits a false notion of developmental arrival at a non-racist identity. Similar to Fasching-Varner (2012), I found it difficult to locate participants in any one of Helms’ statuses. This was most evident when participants exhibited an academic understanding of racism but failed to truly implicate themselves in matters of white supremacy. That is, participants characterized by Emergent Constructions of white racial identity were especially difficult to pinpoint on the model. Further, even the three participants characterized by Critical Constructions of identity sustained whiteness through the ways in which they talked about race, as highlighted in the four narratives of whiteness. This reality troubles any notion of arrival or the abandonment of racism, or Helms’ (1995) contention that individuals “may avoid life options that require participation in racial oppression” (p. 185). Critical Whiteness scholars have documented their concern with any notions of arrival (Applebaum, 2010;
Bailey, 2015; Leonardo, 2009; Yancy, 2015). Given participants’ desire to be understood as racially innocent and progressive, this type of language may further reinforce such thinking. Practical applications that move students away from desires for racial innocence, and towards what Eischstedt (2001) has described as an awareness of problematic white identities, are thus useful. This is also similar to Reason’s (2007) discussion of continuously working to rearticulate whiteness.

**Implications for Practice**

This study offers a number of implications for student affairs administrators and faculty alike as they confront campus climates marked by racial hostility and defined by historical legacies of white supremacy. One of the major findings of this study was that white undergraduate students prized feelings of goodness and racial innocence over critically implicating the racial self as a part of white supremacy. As has been documented, only three of the fourteen participants exhibited both an awareness of their white racial identity and a willingness to be situated as the racial subject of critique. Participants characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white identity illustrated an absence of both and frequently became defensive and hostile when gazed upon as racial subjects. Those characterized by Emergent Constructions appeared to have the language, from what appeared to be the result of their extensive involvement at State, but rarely applied the concepts to their own lives in any tangible ways. Only Amanda, Rachel, and Ryan consistently illustrated an acute awareness of how whiteness influenced their perspectives and confronted how they were themselves a part of the problem of white
supremacy. These students recognized how whiteness informed their worldview and what it represented to people of color.

Educators are encouraged to intentionally construct educational contexts that challenge white undergraduates to consider both what it means to be white and how, regardless of one’s intentions, the racial self is implicated as a matter of racial critique. That is, discussions of white identity cannot be divorced from the larger landscape of whiteness and white supremacy, for these are the very contexts in which white racial identities are constructed, rendered invisible, and positioned as the universal norm of existence. Whiteness is the very structure that conditions the formation of white racial identities (Owen, 2007).

As such, educators are encouraged to situate discussions of white privilege within a larger framework of institutional racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). The results of this dissertation underscore how participants frequently named racism as a matter of individual bias and prejudice. This is consistent with prior scholarship that has documented white undergraduate’s fixation on individual, rather than systemic, understandings of racism (Bush, 2011; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; Levine-Rasky, 2002, 2013). Providing resources that explore the contours of systemic, institutionalized racism shifts the focus from individual intention to how historical legacies of racism have created unequal opportunity structures. This approach may reduce defensiveness and resistance by locating white students in a system much larger than themselves (Johnson, 2005). Further, exposing white students to the realities of institutionalized racism will
provide a shared conceptual language in how to engage in cross-racial dialogues about race.

One of Critical Race Theory’s most foundational theorists, Derrick Bell (1991), offered a useful reminder that although the fight for racial justice must confront individual bias and hatred, even more important is the constant reminder that “we live in a society in which racism has been internalized and institutionalized to the point of being an essential and inherently functioning component of that society” (p. 88). Educators must be vigilant in exposing white undergraduates to the systemic and institutionalized nature of white racism in America. If not, it is likely that students will continue to conceptualize racism as an individual character flaw that can be rooted out by enough education. How educators engage white students on matters of institutionalized racism will vary based on context and the amount of time one has with students. An instructor of an entry-level sociology or service-learning course will undoubtedly have more time than an activities board advisor or residence hall director. Regardless, the first point of entry for discussion should be focused on institutional, systemic racism. Readings, videos, and activities that articulate how ingrained racism and white supremacy are in America can shift the conversation from abhorrent, racist individuals to a larger system that we are all responsible for challenging.

Given the preoccupation with individualism and innocence, educators should directly connect white privilege to matters of institutional racism. Leonardo (2009) offered a useful way in which faculty and staff might think about applying this to their
own practice. He recommended that educators extend discussions of white privilege to consider not only the status of being dominant but the process of dominance that secures privilege. He revised privilege lists initially created by McIntosh (1992) to highlight how white privilege is a product of white supremacy. For example, white people can generally live in neighborhoods that are exclusively white because of historical policies of housing discrimination, red-lining, and residential segregation. This approach moves beyond a mere description of advantage and situates it within a context of domination. As Leonardo (2009) explained, “whites enjoy privileges largely because they created a system of domination under which they can thrive as a group” (p. 88). Locating white privilege within larger systems of white domination has the potential to shift the discourse from individualistic to systemic and open up dialogues that move beyond character flaws and prejudice. Leonardo’s (2009) work offers a useful means of doing so with white undergraduates.

Educators might also consider utilizing pedagogies of complicity (Applebaum, 2010). Applebaum offered this approach as an alternative to white privilege pedagogies that center feelings of white innocence and goodness. This moves beyond the redemptive function (Levine-Rasky, 2013) of white privilege and challenges white students to consider how benefiting from white privilege perpetuates white supremacy regardless of intention. Given that only three participants in the present study illustrated an awareness of their own complicity in white supremacy, it appears complicity pedagogy could offer a useful intervention to promote more complex ways of thinking about the racial self.
Educators who wish to operate from this perspective should begin dialogues on race and racism by reminding white students that racism and racial privilege are not about good white people and bad white people. As Applebaum (2010) explained, complicity pedagogy is not about blaming white students but instead “about helping white students to understand how even their best moral intentions must be scrutinized for their potential to reproduce racist systems…” (p. 183). Eischstedt (2001) utilized the language of problematic white identities. Her work on white racial justice allies underscores how this language can be used, rather than that of positive white identities, in order to recognize the “belief that all whites are racist given the context of white supremacy…” (Eischstedt, 2001, p. 465). Her work could serve as a useful example of how anti-racist whites work through these complexities.

Educators should offer concrete examples of how white people reproduce systems of inequality despite their anti-racist motives. White instructors and facilitators might discuss how they are more likely to be heard and accepted by other white people when teaching about racism and racial privilege. Utilizing implicit bias tests should also assist in this project, as results will underscore the subconscious assumptions and beliefs white people hold about people of color regardless of intention or levels of education. Offering significant amounts of reflection is key, as white students should be challenged to think about how they might contribute to racism despite their best intentions. Reason (2007) noted the importance of reflection for white people so that they can truly begin to grasp their own racism.
A certain level of developmental readiness is likely necessary for this approach to be effective (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). In many ways complicity pedagogy requires the interpersonal complexity to be critiqued as a white person in cross-racial dialogues without becoming threatened or defensive. Further, intrapersonal students would need to at least begin relinquishing investments in the white self as racially innocent, pure, and good. As such, this approach is likely best suited for students who might resemble the participants in Emergent and Critical Constructions of white identity.

To cultivate both an awareness of the white racial self and a sense of criticality, as well as institutional understandings of racism, educators must be prepared to invest significant time with white students. Participants frequently mentioned that their opportunities to engage matters of race and whiteness in the co-curricular were disjointed and inconsistent. For instance, students in Residence Life may have been immersed in conversations during summer R.A. training, but did not return to the material until a single staff meeting in October. Even then, the discussion was limited and lost amidst other duties associated with the position. As has been made clear throughout this study, the conditioning of whiteness is strong, and cannot be undone over the matter of a course, workshop, or even a semester. If faculty and staff wish to take seriously the task of cultivating both an awareness and sense of criticality, the two features I consider central to reconstructed white identities, they must be prepared for significant engagement on the matter. Otherwise, students may end up with abstract, academic understandings of
racism and white supremacy, as they would similarly master content in engineering or biology courses.

Those in Residence Life might consider incorporating weekly dialogues about race and racism into their staff meetings. Assigning a weekly reading that explicitly centers whiteness and race for discussion is one way in which housing professionals might continue the momentum from R.A. Training, when student staff is immersed in discussions of social justice. Resident Assistants in this study reported an absence of racial diversity on their staffs, making this intentionality even more imperative. In light of this finding, housing professionals should double down on their efforts to recruit more racially diverse student staffs. This is important not just for the learning and development that occurs within the staff, but for larger matters of representation among students of color in the residence halls.

Student Affairs professionals in student activities and programming should consider explicit training on issues of representation and belonging. Given that these are the students responsible for identifying and hosting entertainment acts on campus, it is important that they understand the potential alienation that may result from never seeing musicians or speakers who look or identify like you. Recall Jason’s frustration at his advisors’ insistence on identifying more racially and ethnically diverse groups to bring to campus. Jason’s frustrations stemmed from the fact that, in his mind, students just did not care about the identities of musicians or speakers. His thinking indicated a conflation of “students” with “white students” and failed to consider that indeed Hispanic students
may very well be frustrated and angered at this reality. Trainings and workshops for those students in student activities should thus explicitly discuss the importance of representation and belonging.

Additionally, educational interventions that attend only to intellectual understandings of racism are incomplete, as was illustrated by Emergent Constructions of white identity. One strategy for moving beyond these abstract, academic understandings is through direct engagement with voices of color (Allen, 2004). White educators must proceed with caution, as relying on people of color to continually educate white students only reproduces systems of white supremacy (Cabrera, 2012a; Matias, 2016). That is, students of color should not be offered as diversity for which white students can consume. This appeared to be the case for many participants in the study, as they frequently referenced college as a time for diverse interactions and learning from people different from themselves. Allen (2004) recommended that any strategy to engage white students on racism must begin with the voices of people of color. Such engagement can come from cross-racial dialogues or through secondary sources such as texts and videos. This is consistent with Critical Race Theory’s central tenet of elevating the voices that have historically been framed as illegitimate (Ladson Billings, 1995, 1998). Allen explained, “We can only be awakened and released from our neurosis to the extent that some person of color somewhere will take the time to help us do so, whether directly or indirectly” (p. 125). In this light, educators are encouraged to draw heavily on texts that explicitly center voices of color.
A central hallmark of whiteness is the arrogant assumption that one’s perspective of the racial world is truth (Leonardo, 2009). Providing sustained engagement with voices of color is an important first step in challenging such arrogant assumptions. Further, it moves beyond merely a discussion of advantages accrued from whiteness and to a larger dialogue that interrogates the consequences of white privilege in the life of people of color. Given that participants appeared to be fixated on Blackness as the racial Other, educators are encouraged to expose white undergraduates to a diversity of perspectives beyond a Black/white binary. Drawing on LatCrit and AsianCrit offers a useful starting point in this endeavor (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Indeed, authors of color have long reflected on whiteness in their writing. As Owen (2007) noted, although whiteness tends to be invisible to white people, “it tends to be less transparent to non-whites, as is suggested by the long history of African American analyses of whiteness that includes W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison” (p. 206). Exposing white students to authors of color who explicitly write on the meanings and consequences of whiteness has the potential to dramatically shift whiteness from the universal, raceless norm to the raced particular.

Educators should be prepared for a range of reactions when white students are explicitly racialized and made the subject of racial critique. A major finding of this study is how those characterized by Ignorant Constructions of white identity reacted when gazed upon as racial subjects. While scholars have traditionally considered how white people gaze on bodies of color (Feagin, 2013; Yancy, 2004), this research underscores
the immense discomfort and dissonance that occurs when students and faculty of color
gaze upon white people. As such, educational contexts that highlight how people of color
have historically gazed upon white bodies should offer critical dissonance for white
undergraduates.

Faculty and staff must be prepared to assist white students in considering the
symbolic representation of whiteness to people of color. Thompson (2003) explained the
difficulty so many white students have in accepting representations of whiteness among
people of color, noting:

For the white student who is new to colored epistemologies, whiteness
theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial critiques of white racism, it
can be devastating to realize that people of color – people who, not by
coincidence, do not really even know you – can make judgments about
you and just assume that you are racist without giving you the chance to
prove otherwise. (p. 8)

Similarly, Kincheloe (1999) noted that “As whites, white students in particular, come to
see themselves through the eyes of Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and indigenous peoples, they
begin to move way from the conservative constructions of the dominant culture” (p. 163).
These encounters can make painfully obvious just how visible one’s whiteness is to
people of color. That is, white students must come to understand, as bell hooks (1997)
explained, that people of color react to whiteness not on the basis of individual
stereotypes but through a collective response to a historic legacy of terror. Again,
situating these discussions within the larger context of systemic, institutionalized racism should work to reduce some levels of defensiveness and resistance. Educators should connect the writings of scholars of color to historical legacies of racism. That is, their writing needs to be framed as a direct response to the long history of systemic racism in America. These types of narratives, those that center the voices of people of color, should be used extensively after basic concepts of structural racism and white privilege are explored. In this regard personal narratives work to foster the type of emotional response to racism that those characterized by Critical Constructions frequently displayed.

In addition to drawing on the voices of color, highlighting the work of anti-racist whites can offer a guidepost for white students in their own journeys. Educators should proceed with caution, for if these writings are uncritically absorbed they can promote false notions of white heroism and narcissism that Critical Whiteness work challenges (Applebaum, 2010; Leonardo, 2009; Yancy, 2015). Exposure to white people engaged in anti-racist work is important however, as not one participant in this study received explicit messages about whiteness or racial justice work growing up. Sarah was involved in an organization that promoted cross-racial dialogue, but she never received any direction on her white identity or the role of whiteness in racial inequality. In turn, providing white students with resources that model the way for responsible racial justice work is of critical importance. A large body of scholarship highlights how white people wrestle with the meanings of whiteness and consider how to best act against racial
inequality (Cabrera, 2012a; Eischstedt, 2001; Reason, 2007). White educators themselves should also model the way. Again, this is especially important given the lack of white people students have had in their lives committed to anti-racist work. White faculty and staff should also consider ways in which they can model the humility, uncertainty, and reflexivity necessary to challenge whiteness. Being open about one’s own process in coming to see and critique whiteness is a useful starting point.

**Implications for Research**

The present study also offers a number of implications for future research. First, scholars of race and racism should be explicit about the naming of whiteness and white supremacy in their scholarship. Researchers conducting scholarship on racism in higher education are encouraged to be intentional in naming whiteness as an active agent of oppression on campus. As Leonardo (2009) explained, such an approach is “unequivocal in its political capacity to name whites as the group enforcing racial power” (p. 121). Scholars should not dance around these matters, but rather confront them head on in order to locate the agent of oppression and domination.

Additionally, scholars who are committed to researching whiteness and white racial identities among white people are encouraged to be intentional about the methods they use. Interviewing white people about race is no easy task. Multiple participants in this study apologized for having, in so many words, little material with which to work. That is, because participants had rarely thought about whiteness, at times they were at a loss during our exchanges. The most rich and fruitful responses came about when I asked
for recollections of particular memories and experiences. Consistent with narrative inquiry (Chase, 2010; Riessman, 2008), I asked about significant times and experiences that participants could reflect on, allowing for them to share detailed stories and accounts. It was during these moments, when participants shared extended accounts of experience, that their sense making came forward. This is to say that researchers are encouraged to consider the interview as an interactive speech event (Mishler, 1986), rather than a question and answer process. Researchers should also be cognizant of how participants seek to be known in the interview setting. Scholars of narrative inquiry have long highlighted matters of self-presentation in the context of the interview (Chase, 2010). This is only amplified in the context of discussing such a sensitive matter as race.

Finally, researchers should consider the larger narrative contexts in which white students interpret and give meaning to their racial identities (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Gubrium and Holstein highlighted the centrality of intertextuality, explaining that “any episode of storytelling should be viewed as a sharing the empirical stage with other stories” and as such, “the researcher is encouraged to examine a story in relation both to its immediate environment and to other domains of storytelling” (p. 187). Applied to the study of race and racism, researchers should remain cognizant of larger societal narratives that influence the construction of individual narratives. Participants frequently incorporated current events, including the rise of Donald Trump, Black Lives Matter, and tensions between police and communities of color. Researchers are encouraged to remain cognizant of how contemporary events might influence sense making of race and
racism. Had this study occurred at a different time, prior to the rise of Donald Trump, or at a different place, at an institution without high levels of campus activism, the individual narratives offered by participants could have been drastically different. As such, researchers studying college students’ sense making of race and racism must consider how individual accounts are influenced by larger, macro discourses of race. This is a strength of narrative inquiry, as Riessman (2008) explained researchers should illuminate “how larger social structures insinuate their way into individual consciousness and identity, and how these socially constructed “selves” are then performed for (and with) an audience, in this case the listener/interpreter” (p. 116).

The results of this study provide a starting point for future inquiries into white undergraduates’ experiences and sense making. First, for those participants who were actively engaged in reflecting on the meaning of whiteness, a clear tension emerged between their current thinking and pre-college environments. This study barely began to scratch the surface of this phenomenon. Future research should further explore how white undergraduates manage pre-college communities and relationships in light of new information and increasingly complex ways of thinking about race and whiteness. Participants in this study spoke at length about the difficulties of returning home, and once home, confronting friends and family members who engaged in racist, white racial framing (Feagin, 2013) of people of color. Educational practices that ask white undergraduates to reconsider what they knew to be true about the racial world inherently call into question messages from friends, teachers, and family members. How do white
undergraduates negotiate these relationships in light of new, increasingly complex, understandings of the white racial self?

Another line of inquiry should consider pedagogical practices that foster more institutional analysis of racism and white supremacy. The results of this dissertation are consistent with prior research that highlights how white students conceptualize racism as a matter of individual bigotry (Bush, 2011; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; Levine-Rasky, 2013). When racism is relegated to the behaviors of only the most overtly prejudiced individuals, institutional racism is concealed from view. Faculty and staff alike must consider best practices for moving students beyond this limited understanding of racism. In order to do so, research that explores the contexts that produce more structural understandings of racism is warranted.

Given that this study focused on those students most engaged in the university, future research should also explore constructions of whiteness among those who are less involved on campus. A central finding of this research was that students’ thinking about whiteness and racism were reflections of institutional messages of diversity and inclusion. That is, they appeared to parrot the institutional knowledge (Ahmed, 2012) that they knew was valuable. Future scholarship should examine how white undergraduate students who are not so connected to student affairs interpret and give meaning to their white racial identities.

Finally, scholars should examine whiteness at the intersection of other social constructs. The results of this study suggest that other marginalized identities, such as
having a disability or identifying as a lesbian, may offer entry points into empathy in considering the perspectives of people of color. A growing body of scholarship has begun to explore these intersections, including white male undergraduates (Cabrera, 2012a, 2012b, 2014a, 2014b) and white women in graduate preparation programs (Robbins & Jones, 2016). Researchers should continue to construct investigations that examine the diversity within whiteness, including the intersections of social class and sexual orientation. Levine-Rasky’s (2011) conceptualization of contradictory and confirming intersecting social identities offers a useful framework for future investigations.

**Limitations**

Finally, this study is not without its limitations. Each of the following limitations offers additional opportunities for potential lines of research on white college students. First, participants overwhelmingly grew up in exclusively white, homogenous communities. As such, they had little contact with people of color prior to coming to college. A limitation of the present study is the lack of cross-racial interaction participants had prior to college. Might the results have been different if participants engaged in sustained contact with people of color prior to coming to college? Future studies should attempt to draw on students from more racially and ethnically diverse communities, as such pre-college environments were rare in the present sample.

An additional limitation related to sampling is the small number of working class students who participated in the study. Only two students identified as working class.
The intersections of whiteness and working class identities offer a number of tensions and conflicts (Sullivan, 2014). White working class students experience contradictions in that they benefit from white racial privilege, but lack much of the social capital their other white peers enjoy (Martin, 2015). Scholars have long documented how working class white Americans have opted into whiteness in order to obtain some level of social capital over people of color, despite their best interests (Baldwin, 1998). Additionally, class oppression can often serve as an obstacle for white undergraduates to recognize how they are privileged by their racial location. More students from working class backgrounds would have helped illuminate the complex intersections of whiteness and social class.

Another limitation is the relatively few number of participants who were characterized by the most complex way of thinking about race and whiteness, Critical Constructions of white racial identity. Although this was not surprising given the level of sophistication required to locate oneself as complicit in white supremacy, the study would have benefited from more participants within this construction. More participants in this typology would offer additional complexity and nuance in the construction.

Finally, data was collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews. It was clear throughout the interviews that a majority of participants were preoccupied with a presentation of self that was innocent and good. Observing white undergraduates in natural settings, such as courses on race or their student organizations, might offer an alternative means of interpretation. That is, extended participant observation where the
researcher can, to a certain extent, fade to the background, has the potential to reduce the need for social desirability and goodness.

**Summary**

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine white college students’ sense making around race, racism, and their own white racial identities. The results of participant narratives illuminates the complex, messy, and at times, contradictory nature of students’ identities and their subsequent complicity in perpetuating racial ideologies of whiteness on campus. In many ways, these results suggest that understandings and interpretations of whiteness are both a product of pre-college conditioning and institutional messages of diversity and inclusion. As Okun (2010) so brilliantly reminds us, most white students “have never had any opportunity to see their own conditioning; I should be angry at their conditioning rather than at them” (p. 63). Indeed, the conditioning of whiteness is incredibly powerful in acting upon white undergraduate students, even the most involved and engaged on campus. Leonardo (2009) asked educators to envision what kind of whites that white students will become. Will they be defined by the conditioning of racial ideologies of whiteness, or remain vigilant in recognizing the role of whiteness and white supremacy in their own lives and the lives of people of color?

The results of this dissertation underscore that institutions of higher education have a long way to go in combating this conditioning that influences even the most engaged students. As I have made clear throughout, central to this process is both the
recognition of one’s white racial identity and the ability to situate the self as a racial object of critique. Institutions of higher education must construct educational contexts that cultivate such levels of criticality among their white undergraduate students. Doing so is imperative not only for their learning and development, but central to fostering more inclusive and affirming campus climates for students of color.
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Appendix A: Expert Nominator Letter

Hello:

My name is Zak Foste and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program here at The Ohio State University. I am writing to you in hopes that you might be able to assist me in nominating potential participants for my dissertation research. My dissertation will examine White college students and the ways in which they construct and give meaning to their own racial identities. Additionally, I intend to explore the ways in which White college students either perpetuate or disrupt Whiteness as a racial ideology. All that is required of students is participation in two one-on-one interviews, each lasting approximately an hour. Students will be compensated for their participation with a $50 Amazon gift card.

I am hoping that you might nominate students with whom you have worked that identify as White and have illustrated some level of reflective thinking about matters of race and racism. It is important to note that I am less interested in the outcome of such reflective thinking, and more that students have exhibited some level of reflection on these matters. I am seeking a wide range of perspectives. Students should be traditional aged undergraduate students. Because I am attempting to seek a diversity of experiences within whiteness, I am hopeful to obtain a diverse sample along the lines of gender, social class, sexual orientation, and political affiliation.

It is my hope that this research extends understandings of White college students and their racial identities. Further, this research should illuminate the ways in which White students either sustain or disrupt unequal power relations on campus. Both are of critical importance in our contemporary campus climates that are often hostile and unwelcoming to students of color.

Please send me names and email addresses of students you believe would make excellent participants for this study. Students will be informed that you nominated them unless you wish to not be identified, in which case your name will not be attached to their nomination. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I have also listed the contact information of my advisor, Dr. Susan R. Jones. Thank you in advance for your assistance with my dissertation research. I truly appreciate your help.

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Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear ______________________________:

My name is Zak Foste. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program conducting research on how White college students make sense of matters of race and racism both in contemporary society and on campus. The field of higher education has very little in the way of research on White college students’ thinking about race, and as such you would be making an important contribution to the field. Your stories, experiences, and memories will be the subject of this research. You have been nominated by __________________________ as a potential participant for this study because they felt you have given some thought to matters of race.

All that is required of you for this study is two interviews, each lasting approximately an hour. The interviews will occur during the fall of 2016 and likely be conducted within two weeks of each other. During the interviews we will talk about your earliest memories with race, experiences with race in high school and college, and how you have come to understand what it means to be White, among other things. In essence, you will be asked to share meaningful experiences with race as well as your thoughts and opinions on the state of race and racism today.

Your participation will be confidential. Further, participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If selected, upon completion of both interviews you will be given a $50 Amazon gift card as a token of my appreciation.

If you are interested in participating, please complete the following form:

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Susan R. Jones with any questions or concerns.

Best,
Zak

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Appendix C: Participant Interest Form (Google Form)

Participant Interest Form- White College Students on Race

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research. Please take a moment to fill out this form. As much information that you can provide about yourself will be helpful. Questions relating to identities (Ability, Social Class, Gender, Sex, Sexual Orientation) are left open ended so that you may self-identify. If you do not feel comfortable answering any of these questions, you may abstain, but they will be helpful in obtaining as diverse a sample as possible.

Name:

Email:

Year in School:

First Year
Sophomore
Junior
Senior
Other :

Major:

Minor:

Campus Involvement (i.e. Student Organizations, Greek Life, Campus Employment, Resident Assistant, Student Government):

Sex:

Gender:

Social Class:

Ability:
Sexual Orientation:

Ethnicity:

Which of the following best describes your political orientation:

Very Conservative
Conservative
Moderate
Liberal
Very Liberal
Appendix D: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol #1
Pre-College Experiences with Race and Whiteness

Explain that we will be discussing matters of race prior to coming to college. Try to orient participant in thinking to experiences/memories prior to college.

1. **Introduction:** To start off, could you talk to me about where you grew up? Perhaps you could paint a picture of where it is you come from?
   a. *Probing question:* How would you describe the makeup of your hometown (Race, ethnicity, social class)?
   b. How would you describe the racial make up of your social networks prior to coming to college (school, neighborhood, friends, spiritual institutions, athletic teams)

2. As you know, the purpose of this study is to explore white college students’ understanding of race and being white. Could you take me back in time to your earliest memory with race? (Clarification: Could include the first time you noticed race, first time someone explicitly discussed race.)
   a. *Probing question:* Why does this moment stand out for you?
   b. *If does not mention interaction with someone who isn’t white:* Could you describe to me your first encounter with someone who wasn’t white?

3. Who would you describe as the most significant people in your life (prior to coming to college)? What messages did you receive from them about race?

4. When was the first time you thought about yourself as a White person?
   a. *Probing question:* what prompted you to consider yourself as a White person?
   b. What was this process like for you? How did you make sense of this process?

5. What would you describe as the three major moments related to race and racism in society in your lifetime?
   a. *Probing question:* Why did you identify those as the most meaningful?

6. Let’s shift the conversation to particular experiences in high school. How would you describe the racial makeup of your high school?

7. Could you talk to me about a time in high school that prompted you to give a good deal of thought to matters of race and racism?
8. How do you define racism and who/what was instrumental in arriving at this definition?
9. Before we conclude, do you have any questions for me?

Interview Protocol #2
Collegiate Experiences with Race and Whiteness

Explain to participant that the purpose of today’s interview is to discuss experiences with race since coming to college.

1. To start us off, can you describe for me the racial makeup of your social networks on campus (friendship groups, classes, faculty, work settings)?
2. Could you talk to me about a significant experience you have had since coming to campus that made you think about what it means to be White?
3. Could you talk to me about a time in which matters of race and racism were discussed in one of your courses?
   a. Probing Questions: What was the racial makeup of the class?
   b. Tell me why this moment in particular stands out?
   c. How did you make sense of that conversation? What kind of feelings did the conversation elicit for you?
4. How would you describe the general state of race relations on campus today?
5. Over the last year there have been a number of protests on this campus related to matters of race and racism. Last fall students staged a sit in in the Ohio Union to protest what they perceive to be an unwelcoming and racially hostile environment for students of color. How did you make sense of this?
   a. Probing questions: Did you hear about this around campus or within your social circles? If so, what was the nature of those reactions?
   b. When you hear students of color proclaim that they feel unsafe or unwelcome on campus, how do you make sense of this claim?
6. What do you think it means to be White?
   a. Probing question: How did you come to this definition?
7. How do you think a student of color would explain what it means to be White?
8. Could you describe a time in which a race-related incident elicited a strong emotional response for you? (Examples of emotions could be anxious, nervous, guilty, angry, annoyed.)
9. Before we conclude, are there any questions you have for me?
Appendix E: Informed Consent

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

**Study Title:** A Critical Examination of Whiteness among White College Students

**Researcher:** Dr. Susan R. Jones

**Sponsor:**

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

**Purpose:** This research study seeks to better understand how white college students make sense of and interpret race, racism, and their own racial identities. Dr. Susan R. Jones, along with a graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) Program, will facilitate this project and work to achieve the following four goals:

- To better understand how white college students construct and assemble their white racial identities.
- To better understand what experiences and larger societal narratives participants draw on to construct a sense of white racial identity.
- To examine how white college students either produce, or potentially challenge, whiteness as a dominant racial ideology through story telling and discourse.
Procedures/Tasks:
Participation involves:

- Participation in two one-on-one interviews. The interviews will be conversational in nature and will last between 60-90 minutes. Researchers will audio record and transcribe each interview. A paid transcriptionist may also transcribe interviews.

Safeguards for ensuring the privacy, confidentiality, and proper use of data are summarized below.

Duration: The research project will begin in August of 2016 and will be ongoing. The time commitment for your participation will be approximately three to four hours. This estimation includes both interviews and any contact via email.

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

As a token of appreciation you will be rewarded for your participation in this study. At the outset of each of your two interviews you will be provided a $25 Amazon gift card.

Risks and Benefits: Rarely are white individuals given the opportunity to reflect on issues of race, racism, and what it means to be white in America. By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which you have come to understand matters of race and racism as well as what it means to be white. Additionally, these interviews will be a reflective process that offers an opportunity to consider and make sense of race relations both on campus and in society. The ability to reflect on notions of race, racism and what it means to be white should allow for an increased sense of self-awareness and a better understanding of how this construct influences one’s behaviors. There is minimal risk involved in this study. Discussions of race can often present sensitive and difficult topics. The goal of this research is for participants to be as honest, open, and candid as possible. During the study participants may reflect on difficult experiences they have had in relation to race, racism, and being white. In the event this occurs, the investigators will have resources from the university’s counseling center on hand.
Confidentiality: Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

All information used in publications and other public forums will be kept anonymous to protect your privacy; each participant will select a pseudonym that researchers will use for material prepared for all publications and other public forums. The only individuals that will have access to the interview data are Dr. Susan R. Jones, Zak Foste, a paid transcriptionist, and one doctoral student at Ohio State University who will serve as a peer debriefer to provide a different perspective on the interview. The researchers will be the only individuals with access to data containing personally identifiable information and will keep such information in locked file cabinets or on password-protected computers.

To ensure accuracy of the researchers’ interpretation of the information you provide, the researchers may ask you to review summaries of interview transcripts.

Participant Rights:
You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.
Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, or if you feel you have been harmed as a result of study participation, you may contact Dr. Susan R. Jones (jones.1302@osu.edu or 614-688-8369)

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
**Signing the consent form**
I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

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**Investigator/Research Staff**
I have explained the research to the participant before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant.

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