White Men’s Racial Others

by Timothy J. Lensmire — 2014

Background/Context: Increasingly, researchers and educators have argued that alternative conceptions of Whiteness and White racial identity are needed because current conceptions have undermined, rather than strengthened, our critical pedagogies with White people. Grounded in critical Whiteness studies, and drawing especially on the writings of Ralph Ellison and Leslie Fiedler on what it means to be a White American, this article describes and theorizes White racial identity in ways that avoid oversimplification, but that at the same time never lose sight of White privilege and a larger White supremacist context.

Focus of Study: The research focused on the social production of racial identity for four White men and explored how their racial identities were dependent on relations with real and imagined racial others.

Research Design: The four men were part of a larger study that investigated race and Whiteness in a rural community in Wisconsin. The study, employing an interpretive methodology, included open-ended, in-depth interviews. Initial interviews lasted one to three hours; follow-up interviews were one to two hours long. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using inductive methods. Analysis for this article focused on their discussions of racial others and their experiences with them.

Conclusions/Recommendations: The theoretical and empirical work in this article makes three primary contributions. First, this work demonstrates the significance of people of color to the ongoing social production of White racial identities. These men used people of color, imagined and real, to understand themselves and their powers. Second, this research illuminates the persistence, functions, and effects of racial stereotyping and scapegoating, including the emotional costs associated with what Ellison saw as White people’s continual need for reassurance of their own superiority. A final contribution of this work is that it complicates and deepens our understanding of why White people take up a colorblind discourse when talking about race. In addition to hiding an underlying racism, colorblind discourse may serve to minimize or manage conflict among White people who disagree about race.

White Americans have, from the first, hopelessly confused the real Negroes and Indians . . . with certain projections of their own deepest minds, aspects of their own psychic life with which precisely they find it impossible to live.

~Leslie Fiedler

INTRODUCTION

For the four White men who are the focus of this article, the production of their own racial identities was tied up with their relations to real and imagined racial others. In this, these men—Frank, Robert, William, and Stan1—were not at all special. Nor was their relative physical and social isolation from people of color, in a small, mostly White, rural community in Wisconsin, remarkable. Most White people in the United States live segregated lives, spending their time at home, at school, at work, and at worship with other White people. And yet, people of color loom large in the social production of White racial identities.

In what follows, I first discuss the larger interview study in which these four men participated. Then, I sketch a beginning theoretical account of the social production of White racial identity with the help of two scholars who explored just how important racial others have been for the meaning- and self-making of White people throughout U.S. history. Finally, I turn to the words and stories of Frank, Robert, William, and Stan in order to deepen and complicate this account and to learn what these men might teach us about Whiteness and White racial identity.

Caveats and fine-tuning are needed, certainly, but literary and social critic Leslie Fiedler (1964), in my opening epigraph, is correct. For these White men, real and imagined people of color were hopelessly confused, as well as amazingly significant for their psychic and everyday lives. In the lives of these men, people of color divided factions of families and churches against one another, for example, when a son stood against his mother on behalf of a sister who was dating a Mexican immigrant. People of color were integral to moral lessons they learned as boys, including positive lessons about fairness and respect in athletics and negative lessons about hypocrisy, as they listened to their White elders project their own failures and demons onto Native peoples. People of color, imagined and real, helped these men understand themselves and their powers—how smart they were, how good, how tough. People of color helped them position themselves in relation to the racist and democratic meanings and values of their workplaces, community, society, and world.

Indeed, these White men bore witness to novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison’s (1953/1995) claim—especially if we expand Ellison’s focus to include stereotypes of a multiplicity of racial others—that

it is almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historic change, social justice—even the “criminality” implicit in the broadening of freedom itself—without summoning malignant images of Black men into consciousness. (p. 48)

The purpose of this article, then, is to describe and theorize White identity and Whiteness in ways that avoid essentializing them, but that at the same time never lose sight of White privilege and a larger White supremacist context. If, as a growing number of antiracist researchers and educators argue, our previous conceptions of White identity have too often hurt rather than helped in our critical pedagogies with White people, then this work contributes to a more nuanced and helpful portrait of Whiteness and White racial identity that we might draw on in our social justice efforts.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

THE STUDY

Frank, Robert, William, and Stan were part of a larger interview study of race and Whiteness. The study, grounded in interpretive research methods and assumptions (see especially Erickson, 1986), involved open-ended, in-depth interviews with 22 participants. These participants represented three generations of White people living in a single rural community—generations that grew up before, during, and after the civil rights movement. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 83 years of age, included equal numbers of women and men, and included people pursuing (and retired from) a range of occupations, including farmer, factory and office worker, nurse, student, and educator. Initial interviews lasted one to three hours; follow-up interviews were one to two hours long. Interview questions explored the meaning of Whiteness for participants and how the meaning of Whiteness changed over time, within lifetimes, and from generation to generation. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using inductive methods (Erickson, 1986; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hammersly & Atkinson, 1983).

Drawing on a series of his own interview studies, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000) has challenged the findings of large-scale surveys that indicate that White people’s attitudes toward people of color have changed in the United States, for the better, since the civil rights era. He argued that, instead, a rather racist and recalcitrant ideology still characterizes White people’s thinking and feeling. What has changed, according to Bonilla-Silva (2003), is White discourse about race. White people have taken on a new style of talk, a “language of color blindness” that “avoids racist terminology and preserves its mythological nonracialism through semantic moves such as ‘I am not racist, but,’ ‘Some of my best friends are . . ,’ ‘I am not Black, but,’ ‘Yes and no,’ or ‘Anything but race’” (p. 70).

As I conceptualized my study, I was curious if differences in White talk would surface among older and younger White people. Early analyses of the interviews, however, did not expose significant differences across generations in the talk used by participants. Old as well as young avoided racist terminology. There also was little of the “incoherent talk,” the “slippery, apparently contradictory, and often subtle” language that Bonilla-Silva (2003) documented (p. 53). I suspect that at least part of the contrast in White talk across our studies has to do with contrasting interview questions and schedules.

Bonilla-Silva’s research teams asked direct questions about affirmative action, interracial dating and marriage, and societal inequality. My interviews were less structured and began with questions about participants’ experiences with (or stories that they had heard about) conflicts between the German and later Polish immigrants who settled this community. (German immigrants began settling in the area in the late 1850s, with Polish immigrants starting to arrive about two decades later.) This part of the interview was informed by Matthew Jacobson’s (1998) historical account of the hierarchies and struggles among different White ethnic groups in the United States, well into the 20th century, as to who were superior White people and who were not.

Then, inspired by Thandeka’s (2001) work, I asked participants to try to remember the first time that they noticed they were White and to narrate experiences in which being White somehow mattered or was important. From there, we moved on to explorations of how they and their community had interacted with or responded to people of color in various situations and across different historical events, including (a) the relatively recent practice of hiring Hmong and Mexican immigrants to work on local farms and (b) the controversy surrounding Ojibwe efforts in the 1970s to claim their fishing rights, guaranteed by 19th century federal treaties with the U.S. government, on nearby lakes and rivers (Loew, 2001).

As data analysis progressed, I became less interested in questions of how the meaning of Whiteness changed for individuals or differences in White talk across generations, and more interested in how participants’ sense of themselves as White people was connected to experiences with people of color. I realized that one of the unexamined assumptions I had brought to this research was that, since participants led largely segregated lives, then people of color would have little to do with their social and psychic lives. In other words, I had assumed that my data analysis would expose isolation from people of color, rather than relation or connection, as undergirding the production of White racial identities.

For this article, analysis focused on interviews with four men who, at the time of the study, were between 40 and 50 years of age. Two men—Stan and William—were farmers; Frank and Robert were educators in the local public schools. I concentrated on places in the interviews where these men discussed racial others and their experiences with them.

After I had identified these parts of the transcripts, I began the basic tasks of analysis: generating and testing assertions in relation to the data (Erickson, 1986). I read and reread these parts of the transcripts, created various assertions about what these men had said, and returned again and again to the transcripts to look for confirming and disconfirming evidence. I revised and abandoned assertions as necessary. At times, I consulted the audiotapes of the interviews, when I suspected that what a participant had said might have been obscured by the transcript. Later, in order to make sure that my findings were not dependent on exclusions I had made (that is, in my focus on parts of the interviews where these men discussed their experiences with racial others), I returned to the complete transcripts and tested the evidentiary warrant of my assertions there.

My broadest assertion—that real and imagined people of color were central to the ongoing production of these White men’s racial identities—obviously cuts across the interviews. However, in what follows, I do not emphasize other commonalities across the words and lives of these men. Instead, their stories are presented as variations on this basic theme.

This variation is important because, within antiracist research and pedagogies, White people have too often been positioned, have been addressed—in Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (1997) sense of “Who does this pedagogy think you are?”—as nothing but the smooth embodiment of racism and White privilege.2 Increasingly, researchers and educators have argued that alternative, critical renderings of Whiteness and White racial identity are needed because past conceptions have undermined, rather than strengthened, antiracist efforts (Conklin, 2008; Gorski, 2012; Lowenstein, 2009; McCarthy, 2003; Thandeka, 2001; Trainor, 2002; Winans, 2005). Toward this end, James Jupp and Patrick Slattery (2010) have called for a “second wave” of White identity studies—a second wave meant to supersede a first one that was too often reductive, that too often insisted that “Whites de facto represent a static, monolithic, and ontological White supremacist homeland. What a tragic error, we think, to emphasize essentializing stasis, if that is what, in fact, we seek to change” (p. 471).

With Bonilla-Silva (2003), I believe that a colorblind racism is the current racial ideology that sustains racial inequality in the United States. I also believe that Bonilla-Silva’s interview studies are among the most important empirical research we have for making sense of Whiteness and race.3

However, I should note a difference in perspective, a difference in assumptions, between my work and Bonilla-Silva’s work. Bonilla-Silva (2003) interpreted “incoherent talk,” long pauses, contradictions, and digressions as evidence of an underlying racism. Such an interpretation seems, at times, quite reasonable. At other times, it seems that his interview questions may have tapped into a deeper ambivalence that needs to be theorized and understood. In other words, surface contradictions and ambiguity might be less the result of an underlying, straightforward racism in need of hiding, and more the expression of a deeply conflicted, ambivalent White racial self (see also Lensmire, 2008; Lensmire, 2010). A theoretical account of this White racial self is developed in the next section.

CREATING AN OTHER AND A WHITE SELF

My broader theoretical framework is grounded in critical Whiteness studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Du Bois, 1935/1992; Dyer, 1997; Jacobson, 1998; Lipsitz, 1995; Lott, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Roediger, 1991; Rogin, 1992; Thandeka, 2001; Wiegman, 1999). For this article, of particular importance are writers who illuminate how White men have used people of color not only for their labor and economic gain, but also as a cultural and symbolic resource. The following develops two related accounts of this use of people of color in the production of White racial identities, drawn from Ellison (1953/1995, 1986, 2003) and Fiedler (1955, 1964).

Ellison (1986), like Fiedler (1964) in the opening epigraph, thought that stereotypes of racial others were projections. However, Ellison theorized these stereotypes in terms of a larger scapegoating rite or ritual in which White people participated in order to be White. That is, Ellison thought of stereotypes as a particular instance of White people sacrificing Black people, killing them symbolically, in order to assure themselves of their own Whiteness and superiority. Another instance of this scapegoating ritual was lynching, when Black people were literally killed, literally sacrificed, so that White people could go on being White.

For Ellison, scapegoating worked by progressing through three moments: first, the group doing the scapegoating identified with the scapegoat (that is, the scapegoat was a substitute for the group); second, the group separated itself from the scapegoat, declared that the scapegoat was an other, was not them; and finally, the group experienced a renewed sense of unification, reassured of its identity. (See Eddy, 2003, for a helpful discussion of this aspect of Ellison’s work.)

Thus, when Ellison (1986) examined the situation of poor White farmers in the Jim Crow South, he noted that they were “uncomfortably close to Negroes in economic status” and he thought that they found the possible rewards available to them in America as a land of opportunity “far less inviting than clinging to the conviction that they, by the mere fact of race, color, and tradition alone, were superior to the Black masses below them” (pp. 175, 176). This conviction, this belief in their superiority, however, was challenged at every moment of every day by the actual material conditions of their lives and by their position at the bottom of the South’s White social hierarchy that defined them as “poor White trash” (p. 174). For Ellison, then, these poor Whites needed ways to reassure themselves of their Whiteness and their superiority.

In rationalizing their condition, they required victims, real or symbolic, and in the daily rituals which gave support to their cherished myth of white supremacy, anti-Negro stereotypes and epithets served as symbolic substitutions for the primitive blood rite of human sacrifice to which they resorted in times of racial tension. (p. 177)

For Ellison, stereotypes were “symbolic substitutions” for a more “primitive blood rite of human sacrifice”—lynching. He even thought that it was fortunate—for Blacks and the nation as a whole—that, most of the time, stereotypes were enough, that the “Southern rituals of race were usually confined to the realm of the symbolic” (p. 177). When they were not enough, the lynch mob did its work.

Ellison certainly recognized that lynching, by instilling terror into the Black community, functioned along with Jim Crow laws, social custom, and anti-Black stereotypes to reinforce White control and racial hierarchies. But he was also intent on understanding the meaning and function of lynching for White people. For Ellison, White people, especially poor White people, had difficulty denying the basic humanity of Black people. But if White people were to recognize this humanity, then White supremacy would need to be dismantled and the social order would need to change. Thus, Ellison (1986) argued, for the lynch mob, Blackness was associated with “satanic evil” not only or even primarily because of a Christian tradition that associated darkness with evil, but because Blackness “symbolizes all that its opponents reject in social change and in democracy” (p. 178). If stereotypes, for Fiedler (1964), pointed to aspects of White people’s “own psychic life with which precisely they find it impossible to live” (p. 117), then what poor White farmers in the South could not live with—when all they really had going for them was their Whiteness—was the all-too-easy recognition of their similarity to, their continuity with, Black people.

Ellison had no interest in supporting, even implicitly, the common-sense notion in the United States that it is poor and working-class White people who are the “real” racists, allowing middle- and upper-class Whites to congratulate themselves on their racial enlightenment and sophistication. Thus, even as Ellison (1986) analyzed the existential situation of poor Whites in the South and their rituals of stereotypes and lynch mobs, he also understood these White people as actors who were taking up a script that was written long before they were born.

For Ellison, the Founding Fathers wrote the original script and were its first and crucial players. Ellison considered the Constitution a sacred document and a “script by which we seek to act out the drama of democracy, and the stage upon which we enact our roles” (p. 330).

Unfortunately, from the first, the actions of the Founding Fathers clashed with their noble spoken lines. They abandoned the sacred principle of equality. The Founding Fathers balked in the face of the economic consequences for them of dismantling slavery, balked in the face of the arduousness and uncertainty of actually attempting to live out democracy. As Ellison (1986) put it:

At Philadelphia, the Founding Fathers were presented the fleeting opportunity of mounting to the very peak of social possibility afforded by democracy. But after ascending to within a few yards of the summit they paused, finding the view to be one combining splendor with terror. From this height of human aspiration the ethical implications of democratic equality were revealed as tragic, for if there was radiance and glory in the future that stretched so grandly before them, there was also mystery and turbulence and darkness astir in its depths. . . . So having climbed so heroically, they descended and laid a foundation for democracy at a less breathtaking altitude, and in justification of their failure of nerve before the challenge of the summit, the Founding Fathers committed the sin of American racial pride. (pp. 334, 335)

The Founding Fathers chickened out. They abandoned the principle of equality and blamed their failure of nerve and greed on Black people. For Ellison, then, the Founding Fathers were the original scapegoaters, and this act of scapegoating was a gift to the American people that kept on giving.

This was a gift, obviously, with profound, horrific consequences for Black people. The Founding Fathers also gave a sickening gift to their fellow White Americans and those of us who followed. Ambivalence, hypocrisy, difficulty in seeing who we really are as White people: These are among our inheritances, what we gained along with thin rationalizations for White privilege. Furthermore, Ellison thought that by scapegoating Black people, the Founding Fathers ended up putting race at the very center of the American drama. And because race influenced the

ethical sphere no less than the material world—the principle of equality being a command that all men be treated as equals, while some were obviously being designated unequal on the basis of color and race—it made for a split in America’s moral identity that would infuse all of its acts and institutions with a quality of hypocrisy. Worse, it would fog the American’s perception of himself, distort his national image and blind him to the true nature of his cultural complexity. (p. 333)

For Ellison, then, what White people cannot live with is their social role as White people in the American drama, given that playing this role demands the betrayal of the sacred principle of equality. Wanting to believe in America, freedom, and equality, but confronted with the hard work and uncertainty of democracy, as well as massive inequality all around us, we scapegoat and stereotype people of color. As Ellison (1953/1995) wrote:

Whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising . . . between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not. . . . Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man. (pp. 28, 41)

My second theorist of White confusion and projection is Fiedler (1955, 1964), who argued that the American Dream, for White men, might have as much to do with racial reconciliation as it does with economic opportunity. When Fiedler (1964) read 19th and 20th century literature and popular culture, he found a consistent theme: a dream or myth of a “Garden of Eden with two Adams” (p. 129). Over and over, our American novels and films featured pairings of a White male and another male of color, expressing what Fiedler (1955) called our “national myth of masculine love” (p. 143) and the “white man’s dream of reconciliation” (Fiedler, 1964, p. 109). Fiedler pointed to Chingachgook and Natty Bumppo in James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales, Queequeg and Ishmael in Moby Dick, and Twain’s Jim and Huck; and later, Sam Feathers and Ike in Faulkner’s “The Bear,” Chief Bromden and Randle Patrick McMurphy in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, and the characters played by Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier in the film, The Defiant Ones.

For Fiedler (1955), this was a sentimental and outrageous dream, a dream with roots in White atrocities against people of color—colonialism and genocide and cultural eradication, slavery and lynching and Jim Crow. It was a dream born of the fear that, as White men, we had cut ourselves off, forever, from the love of our brothers. With reference to the White narrator of Melville’s Moby Dick, Fiedler wrote that

Ishmael is in all of us, our unconfessed universal fear . . . that compelling anxiety, which every foreigner notes, that we may not be loved, that we are loved for our possessions and not our selves, that we are really—alone. . . . Behind the white American’s nightmare that someday, no longer tourist, inheritor, or liberator, he will be rejected, refused, he dreams of his acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended. . . . Our dark-skinned beloved will take us in, we assure ourselves. . . . He will fold us in his arms saying, “Honey” or “Aikane”; he will comfort us, as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly real. (pp. 150, 151)

Fiedler thought that, inside us, as White men (and close to this desperate wish for forgiveness), was the fear that what we had done could never be forgiven. In other words, we feared that Black and Native men must also be dreaming, not of reconciliation, but of revenge. Their dream of revenge is our nightmare, the “Black rebellion and red massacre we have portrayed for decades in popular fiction and films” (Fiedler, 1964, p. 116). Fiedler thought that even as this nightmare filled White men with fear, we also wished for this revenge to happen. We longed for an accounting that would finally settle the score.

In sum, Ellison theorized stereotypes as scapegoating rituals meant to secure racial hierarchy and obscure our failure of nerve before the demands of democracy. Fiedler’s account of how White men end up confusing real and imaginary people of color is at once as sweeping as Ellison’s—extravagant offenses like genocide and slavery put all of this in motion—and is, at the same time, intimate. White men fear that our sins and the sins of our fathers might alienate us, forever, from potential brothers, friends, comrades, and lovers. And so we dream of reconciliation and quake at the terrors we have unleashed and for which we may/must pay.

USING PEOPLE OF COLOR: FRANK, ROBERT, WILLIAM, AND STAN

FRANK

Frank is a high school teacher. However, the focus here is Frank’s discussion of his uncle Norman.4 Frank’s first description of his uncle Norman was not very positive, and later ones would do little to alter this first impression. Frank said that his uncle was “very alcoholic, hates Black people, not sure he likes Catholics too much either.” Throughout the interviews, Frank tried to distinguish his father from Norman: “I would see my uncle Norman . . . that would really be hard on some people, and yet my father never modeled that behavior.”

In the following, Frank characterized Norman’s response to local Ojibwe efforts to claim their fishing rights on nearby lakes and rivers. These rights included taking fish in traditional ways, including spearfishing. Here, and in other parts of the interviews, Frank described his uncle’s (and his father’s) illegal deer-hunting and fishing practices, and engaged in what seemed to be an imagined dialogue between Norman and himself. Frank was obviously producing this dialogue now, as an adult, but my sense was that he might have wanted to say this to the adults in his life when he was young, as he heard their talk and witnessed their actions:

FRANK: They were just really, “Awww, the Indians are stealing. They’re drunks. All they’re doing is going drunken spearfishing, not doing anything sporting. And it’s a bunch of shit—their culture, they’re not the same ones that were here 200 years ago. They should do what we have to do.” “OK, well, what do you have to do?” “Well, I have to get up at four in the morning to go out and poach all my deer before the game warden catches me.” If you ask them, “What do you have to do?” “Well, I have to buy a license and follow all the rules.” “Well, no you don’t. I’ve been with you when you’ve broken all those rules.” “But they’re not forced to live the life I am.” But if he described his life, it wasn’t the one he was living. But it’s that same attitude. “Everyone should have to be in my hell. They shouldn’t get anything better.”

TIMOTHY: But you saw this as a kid already.

FRANK: Well, yeah, they were just so obvious. . . . And I don’t think my dad’s way of wrong was quite the level of Norman’s level, but then again, I’m trying to justify my father better than my crazy, alcoholic uncle. I know I’m doing that because I wonder at times, when those two guys are out, who knows what evil—you know, I don’t know what he was doing or shooting and maybe he just left it at Norman’s.

According to Frank, even as a boy he had seen through the lies and hypocrisy of Norman. He wanted to think of his father differently, but Frank recognized that he was “trying to justify” his father and that, in the end, he had little actual knowledge of the extent to which his father differed from Norman in what he was “doing or shooting.” Frank saw his uncle breaking rules; he heard him attempt to explain away his behavior; and he heard Norman, in the same breath, accuse others (in this case, Ojibwe fishermen and their communities) of being morally bankrupt for not following the rules.

Norman scapegoated people of color. However, even if, as Ellison argued, this scapegoating enabled Norman to think of himself as superior to them, it also seemed to cost Norman, seemed to cause him psychic pain. Frank said that Norman struggled with alcoholism and depression, and he thought that Norman’s time in Vietnam and the death of Norman’s brother there contributed to his difficulties:

FRANK: I think he spent seven years in Vietnam. He decided to come back and then another brother went over. His name was Eric and he got killed, and then Norman went into the psychiatric hospital, spent a year there, and now, to this day, he drinks heavily. But when he’s drinking—I’ve experienced this—he’s broken down and cried, “I think I might have been the guy that assassinated Martin Luther King. I’m not sure.” He’ll have moments, but then he’ll be this giant, generous guy. He’ll pick up a guitar and just play very—kind of renaissance in those areas.

Obviously, much could (and should) be made of Norman’s worry, when he was drunk, that he may have assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many interpretations, from many disciplines and perspectives, could be generated. The one developed, below, proposes that Norman, at such moments, intuited something important about the construction of his own White racial identity.

In Rabelais and his World, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) was interested in exploring the laughter and festivals of the folk because he saw in them lessons for how to oppose the official social order and ideology. Bakhtin thought that official truth was held in place by fear. Consequently, he was interested in how that fear might be lifted or countered. He theorized that feasting—sitting with friends, eating, drinking, and laughing—might provide occasions for fearlessness, and with this fearlessness, counter-truths might be perceived and expressed.

There is an inverted feasting here with Norman, one with drinking and tears. However, these tears and drinking appear to have enabled moments of truth telling.

As explored in the previous section, Ellison (1986) thought that the sorts of stereotypes Norman espoused about Black and Native peoples were “symbolic substitutions” for a more “primitive blood rite of human sacrifice” (p. 177). Furthermore, Ellison argued that such scapegoating rituals were crucial to the creation and maintenance of White people’s sense of themselves as White and American. Norman’s fear that he had killed Dr. King, then, seems an uncanny recognition of the connections Ellison drew between stereotyping, blood rites, and identity. In other words, the truth Norman expressed at these moments was that his identity, in some profound way, was dependent on killing people of color.

ROBERT

Robert is an elementary school educator and basketball coach. Two interrelated themes are developed with Robert’s interviews. The first is that people of color often became the focus of conflict within this White community. Stated differently, there was not an agreed-upon, monologic word or perspective about race in this community. The second theme is that Robert’s physical and moral development as a boy was wrapped up with people of color, even though he had little contact with them when he was young.

Experiences with people of color increased for all of these men as they grew older, both because of the expansion of activity and interaction that comes with becoming an adult and because of demographic shifts that included Hmong and Mexican immigrants joining their community. These experiences were often characterized by conflict, which pointed not only to enduring racism within their local community, but also to conflict within the White community itself. Thus, Robert resigned as the coach of a nearby high school basketball team after the ongoing criticism of him by White parents—criticism that started when he suspended a White player for calling the only Black player on the team a racial epithet (the racial epithet). In addition, both Robert and William described contentious debates within their different Lutheran churches over whether these churches should sponsor and support Hmong immigrants coming to the area.

Robert told me about arguments made by church members in support of sponsoring Hmong immigrants, including ones based in Christian commands to love and care for those in need and arguments based on the idea of a debt that they had to pay as U.S. citizens for the Hmong’s help during the Vietnam War. (In the end, these churches did sponsor and support Hmong families who settled in the area.) Robert also recounted how church members opposed to sponsoring Hmong immigrants talked about their opposition. I asked Robert if he thought that church members who opposed sponsoring Hmong immigrants said what they actually thought or if there were things left unsaid.

ROBERT: I think people were very guarded about saying that in front of people in the church and if they would say anything at all, it would be to the extent of “Well, our job as Christians, first of all, take care of our own. There are many people in our community that need our help first.”

TIMOTHY: And “our own” would literally be like the parish?

ROBERT: Parish inside of a circle of a community inside of a circle of the county area and therefore, “You’re excluded.” So, people consoled themselves in the fact that the only way of justifying, saying that I’m not prejudiced—I think there was tremendous prejudice within the Lutheran church, who was really responsible for bringing them here. . . . It wasn’t openly expressed that way. People had very hidden agendas for the reasons that they shouldn’t come, that we should not be sponsoring. I just think it was all race-based.

TIMOTHY: But you didn’t hear that. It was just sort of like, or that wasn’t said, that “These people are inferior” or undeserving or anything like that and that it was more that “It was going to put a drain on us” but it also sounds like “They’re not us,” right?

ROBERT: “They’re not us. Take care of our own first.” Which is kind of a nice way of saying “I’m prejudiced.”

We should not be surprised about the unspoken racism that Robert reported, nor that other White people argued for supporting Hmong families on moral and political grounds. Both groups attempted to use a Christian command about caring for others as part of their arguments. The difference, of course, rested on who was to be included within the circle of the church’s responsibility: Who is “our own”?

A crucial point here, and one that is often ignored when we conceptualize antiracist pedagogies in teacher education and professional development, is that the White community is often divided about race. Furthermore, this division works itself into individual White people, who are often conflicted or ambivalent about people of color (Cheng, 2001; Thandeka, 2001). This will become more evident in the discussion below with William.

In relation to Robert, a perhaps surprising aspect of his discussions about race was just how important people of color—specifically, professional athletes—were to his physical and moral development and identity. From an early age, Robert was a serious athlete, and he told about the considerable labor he put into making his body not only be able to perform successfully in competition, but also be able to imitate the arm motion and leg kick of a favorite professional baseball pitcher or the jump shot of a favorite basketball player.

ROBERT: The San Francisco Giants had this Black-Hispanic player, Juan Marichal, he had this big leg kick and my brother and I would always pitch to each other. One of us would be Juan and the other one would be the catcher—that big leg kick. And Roberto Clemente, oh my gosh, I just loved watching him play. In basketball, I was a huge Knicks fan because I really loved watching Walt Frazier play. Willis Reed—there was another player called Earl Monroe, Earl the Pearl—when those guys, in ’69 I think they won, I idolized those guys. The only guy I would want to be other than those guys was Jerry West, he is the insignia on the NBA thing. So, really influential and trying to model how they would play. Trying to shoot like Walt Frazier. He always had his ball way up above his head, and kind of back. Those things, those traits, certainly young kids are very impressionable, myself being one of them, would constantly try to emulate those characteristics.

TIMOTHY: Were there other things you remember yourself trying to do or be like? Let’s try to figure out like how this—one of the ways that this influenced us was we tried to make our bodies move like these guys. You mentioned the pitcher, the high kick, shooting the ball a certain way.

ROBERT: Football, the Rams used to have Deacon Jones and Merlin Olsen and Rosey Grier, the guy that jumped on Sirhan Sirhan, and my brother and I used to always emulate the front four. I think they were called the “Fearsome Foursome” and I can remember being in the living room and we’d stuff our shirts with pillows and you’d do that stuff. Baseball? Willie Mays was one of the greatest. I can remember him making that over the shoulder catch. Not live, I think he made it in the late ‘50s, but I remember seeing it played over and over again and oh, man, I would idolize just the way he would play. So, they just had a huge impact on who you tried to be and what you tried to make of yourself.

Robert was attempting to embody particular ways of moving and being as an athlete, and his models for this embodiment came largely from people of color. (Of the 10 athletes Robert mentioned by name, only 2—Jerry West and Merlin Olsen—were White.) Furthermore, this embodiment extended beyond sports and physical coordination. Robert also talked about how important it was for his emerging understanding of concepts such as respect and fairness to see people of color and White people competing honorably together in athletics. His education about race took place largely in relation to athletics.

ROBERT: I think as we grew up, very seldom did we talk about acceptance of other races [in school]. Curriculum was so different. You didn’t have classes in guidance. If it was addressed, it may be addressed in Sunday School. So, personally I think I learned a lot about racism and other races being accepting through sports, through watching it on TV, through watching people shake hands after a good game, through seeing other races work together in all sports. Seeing Black announcers for the first time. And especially seeing that Black athletes could rise above and really soar and stand out and “Hey, I want to be like that.” So that taught you that it’s okay to be like that person, that person can be someone you can accept.

There are certainly limits to what young boys could learn about race and racism through athletics, but we should not ignore what Robert said here and in other parts of his interviews. Robert read biographies and autobiographies of his favorite athletes, and, consequently, he learned about and had to try to make sense of the racism and death threats that Hank Aaron faced as he chased Babe Ruth’s home run record in baseball. Athletics, for Robert, were not only scenes for the display of physical skill, but also moral dramas that taught him about intolerance and that it was “okay” to accept and emulate people of color. And as Robert noted, it was not as if such topics were being taken up in school.

In the following, Robert expressed his admiration for the combination of athletic prowess and social grace that he thought baseball player Lou Brock embodied. It does not seem a stretch to draw a line, even if a long and tangled one, between what Robert learned with and from people like Lou Brock and his later decision, as a coach, to suspend a White basketball player for mistreating a Black teammate (whatever the trouble this caused for him in his White community). Robert also recalled his surprise, as a young man, when he walked alongside Brock before an All Star game and discovered that he was now, somehow, as “big” as one of the Black athletes he had looked up to for so long.

ROBERT: I remember, I would have been about 16, the last time the Brewers had that All Star game, 1975. My friend and I and my dad and brother went down to the All Star game and it was really hard to get tickets so we were sitting up in the nosebleed seats in the upper deck. But we got down there really early, purposely, because we wanted to see the players walk in. All the star athletes, especially Lou Brock and Bobby Murcer from the Yankees, they were let off and then they walked from their limo or cab in. It was so cool walking next to Lou Brock—here’s this little guy that you were just as big as—and he was just phenomenal. What a thrill that was just to listen to him talk. You didn’t have to say anything, just listen to how he would interact with people around him.

Robert told a story here of overcoming social and physical separation. Lou Brock had been distant from Robert, someone glimpsed on television or imagined while reading the sports section of the newspaper. Even during the All Star game, he would be far away (though closer), as Robert, his friend, his father, and his brother watched from the “nosebleed seats in the upper deck.”

But Robert was waiting outside the stadium, early, before the game. And then, for a brief moment, he got to walk with Lou Brock, got to be close to him. Being this close, Robert realized that this man he had looked up to was the same size as him. Robert was quiet. He was thrilled, content just to listen to Lou Brock and be close to him.

What is Robert’s story—a story about baseball, race, and being, finally, close—if not what Fiedler (1955) called our “national myth of masculine love” (p. 143)?

WILLIAM

William and his family owned a small farm, and like many small farmers, their economic situation was precarious. They had inherited the farm from his parents and had been running it for over 15 years, but William was not sure that they were going to make it. Finances were tight.

William belonged to a different Lutheran church than Robert, but his church had also decided to sponsor Hmong families and he agreed with this decision. And, like Robert, he was very aware of racism in his own community.

In fact, this knowledge of just how racist the small community of Purgatory and nearby Wisconsin cities were seemed to lead William toward a further stereotyping of Black people. He reasoned that the racism of White people, along with a depressed local economy and the absence of an established Black community, would make the area a difficult one for Black people to live in. And therefore, he thought that the few Black people who did live in the area must be selling drugs: Why else would they be here? He reported not thinking about Black people this way when he visited large cities, such as Milwaukee, or when he and his family had taken a vacation to Florida. William’s perceptions of Black people shifted according to place.

Of the four men, William seemed the most intensely conflicted, the most ambivalent, in relation to race. This was all very personal and close to him. William recounted how his sister started living with a Black man and how, after initially being on friendly terms and having his sister and her boyfriend over to his house, William gradually became worried that the two of them were addicted to drugs. When his sister, out of the blue, asked his mother for thousands of dollars from his mother’s savings, William persuaded his mother to not give his sister any money:

WILLIAM: Boy, then the roof blew off when she told my sister that no money was coming, and we’ve been called bigots ever since.

TIMOTHY: By her?

WILLIAM: By her. She’s told other people that and it hurts and it’s not true. I really resent my sister for—“Why are you saying that? You know better. We were brought up all the same out here.” I don’t understand what happened. If she was a user herself for a while and her brain was toasted or what, but—

TIMOTHY: It seems like very little of this has to do with her boyfriend at all.

WILLIAM: It doesn’t have to do with him at all. The only thing it has to do with him or the race thing is that she’s using it against us, saying we’re racist.

This accusation seemed to hurt William profoundly, and I think this was exactly because he was ambivalent, conflicted, inside. William not only knew about the racism of others, he felt it inside himself. However, he did not want to feel that way. He struggled openly in his interview to figure out why he felt the way he did about Black people.

WILLIAM: I think what scares me about Black people in general is that I think they’re very street smart as a race, because a lot of them have been from inner cities or a generation back was from inner cities, had to scrape and scrimp to make, just to eat, and they ended up being very street smart. I mean a lot of Blacks are poor. That’s not an opinion. That’s a fact and I guess I always figure if you’re street smart then you’ve probably got a knife on you some place. You probably know all kinds of moves to put somebody on the ground if need be, and that’s something that strikes fear in me. Isn’t that logical? To me, it is. I always think of them as street smart.

TIMOTHY: Well, we can both mull that over—

WILLIAM: I mean me, being out on this farm, I think of myself as dumb as far as knowing the ins and outs of living in the city. Why wouldn’t I be? It’s the same as why wouldn’t they be smart about it, why wouldn’t I be naïve about it. I think it’s legitimate and I think it’s a reason we distrust them. It’s really not about race, per se. It is, but it isn’t. It is because I think Blacks in general have those street smarts. Then again, it’s not just that they’re Black, I’m afraid of what they all know how to do or how to hurt me or whatever they needed to—not necessarily want to but—I know I wouldn’t want to fight many or any of them one on one because I think I’d lose.

TIMOTHY: I think that you’re getting to something there. This all gets so mixed up together, it’s so hard to sort through what—

WILLIAM: When you think of having a fight in Purgatory, it doesn’t involve having a knife, right? It involves somebody usually giving someone a fist in the chops or you’re rolling around on the floor or whatever. When I think of fighting with a Black person, I almost always see a knife.

In William’s imagination, he pictured himself as a poor White man in a fight with a poor Black man. This scene is almost a perfect, condensed rendering of what historians and theorists of race relations in the United States would say has been a key strategy used by White elites to achieve and hold onto power. Through policy, law, and custom, White elites have successfully pitted poor White folk against poor Black folk so that they do not join forces against the White elite.

For example, Thandeka (2001) discussed how, in colonial Virginia in the late 1600s, White elites became fearful that poor Whites might align themselves with people of color rather than with their White superiors. Consequently, these elites engaged in a series of maneuvers in order to divide and conquer common people by granting limited standing and privilege to White folk while denying it to their Black sisters and brothers. One instance of such tactics was a law that granted White masters the right to whip, at their own discretion, their White servants, but not to strip them of their clothes before whipping them (as these White masters could with enslaved Africans). For Thandeka, such actions by White elites produced, by the time of the Civil War, an embracing of the idea of White supremacy by poor and working-class White people (even as such actions also reinforced the idea that some White people were better than other White people).

In the above, William seemed, at times, to want to avoid stereotyping Black people. His use of “Black people in general” and “Blacks in general” could be interpreted as the attempt to recognize that not all Black people are the same. But, the overall impression is one in which “we,” meaning White people, are different from and fearful of “them,” meaning Black people.

If William stereotyped Black people, here, around the notion of “street smarts,” it was not done with explicit reference to biological or genetic causes. The causes here are sociological and economic.5 The violence and competence that William fears in Black men were born in these men out of necessity. For William, they have been and are poor, and they have had to struggle to survive. When he talked of these men hurting him, William suggested that they “needed” to do this and might not want to do it.

If William’s stereotyping of Black people as street smart makes us conclude that his mind and heart are animated, in part, by individual racism (there is no reason to avoid this conclusion), then we should also acknowledge that William did not make this image up out of nothing. Indeed, it is a pervasive, durable, stereotypical image of Black men, one already well established in American literature by the early 1900s, when Sterling Brown (1933) named it the “Brute Negro” stereotype.6 It is a stereotypical image celebrated by one of the leading, left-leaning, White writers and intellectuals of the 20th century, two-time Pulitzer Prize winning author Norman Mailer.

The difference between William and Mailer is that Mailer, in his 1957 essay “The White Negro,” idolized Black men for their street smarts. Indeed, he and other hipsters wanted to be this sort of Black man, wanted to be White Negroes.7 The same violence and ability to survive, that William feared, was what the hipsters and Mailer wished to embody themselves. Mailer’s reading of Black men’s existential situation and their responses to it led him to the same stereotypical image as William, except that Mailer added some jazz and sex. Here is Mailer (1959):

Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive . . . relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. For jazz is orgasm . . . (p. 341)

Here is the same reduction of Black men to dangerous bodies (and a reduction of the most sophisticated music of our continent to a spurt of emotion). William feared the Black men he imagined this way, feared that they would win if he had to fight them. Mailer understood this fear, wanted to inspire this fear, himself, in others:

Since the Negro knows more about the ugliness and danger of life than the white, it is probable that if the Negro can win his equality, he will possess a potential superiority, a superiority so feared that the fear itself has become the underground drama of unforeseeable consequences. Like all conservative political fear it is the fear of unforeseeable consequences, for the Negro’s equality would tear a profound shift into the psychology, the sexuality, and the moral imagination of every white alive. (p. 356)

On this last point about White fear of “unforeseeable consequences,” Mailer was right and continues to be right. In this, his analysis was quite close to Ellison’s (1953/1995), who thought that it was “almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historic change, social justice . . . without summoning malignant images of black men into consciousness” (p. 48). However, Ellison refused to stereotype Black people, even when that stereotype might, in some twisted way, suggest their superiority.

William and Mailer, for all their talk about “street smart” and fearsome Black men, were not, in the end, actually talking about these men. They were talking about themselves. They were using stereotypical renderings of Black men to express their own fears and desires as White men in our racist and stratified U.S. society.

STAN

Stan, with his wife and children, ran a larger dairy farm than William’s. Their financial situation was better, though Stan felt that, as farmers, they were caught between, on the one hand, economic pressures to create bigger and bigger farms and, on the other hand, increased environmental concerns and regulations that came with bigger farms. Stan despaired that there would not be enough money in farming for his daughter or son to take it up, and that Stan and his wife would eventually have to sell a farm that had been in his family for over 100 years.

If one of the problems being explored in this article is how imagined and real people of color function in the creation of White racial selves, then Stan did not exactly get off to a good start as a young boy. When asked if he could remember the first time that he realized he was White or that being White somehow mattered to the situation he was in, Stan told about how his mother scared his siblings and him into behaving when they went to the annual county fair.

STAN: I guess that’s a tough one because I can remember my first time actually seeing a Black person was at the Purgatory County Fair . . . Because my mom would scare the living shit out of us. Give us $5 and told us if we didn’t behave—she’d point and say, “See that big Black man over there? He’ll take you.” That’s what she would say. We’d never seen a Black person before in our life. We didn’t know if they were good, bad. We didn’t know anything about them. . . . What’s funny about that, when my dad and his brothers would talk, their parents, I guess—back in those times and Gypsies used to travel through here on a regular basis. Well, their moms and dads used the Gypsy scare. If you didn’t behave, the Gypsies were going to take you. They had the scare factor they had to throw into you. Basically, that happened the first time.

Stan thought that this particular othering of a Black man at the county fair was a reworking of an older stereotype in this area’s Polish and German communities: the thieving Gypsy (where the thieving included children). Stan’s mother had pointed at a Black man at the fair and rendered him a terrifying character who would take misbehaving children away from their parents. (Stan’s mother had also told him that if this happened, she would not try to get Stan back.)

Stan told this story as a humorous one and it was similar to other stories he told about his mom, who often came off in Stan’s stories as intolerant and prejudiced. Thus, Stan also told about his sister who, at the time of the interviews, was dating a Mexican immigrant who also worked on Stan’s farm. Stan’s mother had asked Stan to intervene in the situation and demand that his sister stop dating this man. Stan refused, saying that his sister should be able to date who she wanted.

Stan seemed less conflicted than William. Stan said that he tried to be open to people who were different from him. This commitment seemed to have some purchase on his action. Stan said that he had fired a White man who worked for him when this man started harassing a coworker because he was Mexican. Stan believed that TV and other media had a big role in spreading stereotypes about people of color, and that eventually, with constant repetition, White people believed these stereotypes. When I asked him why he did not believe these stereotypes, he theorized that it had to do with his own experiences being overweight. In what follows, Stan even referred to the prejudice he faced for being overweight as “racism.”

STAN: See, I feel I have more open-mindedness than the average guy because there was racism towards me being overweight all my life. I had to be funnier in school. I had to be more outgoing to have friends. Otherwise, people ignored me. So, I can see where all this shit starts. People didn’t judge me by my intelligence. I was just a fat kid. That’s how it always was and that’s just a cruel part of this world.

Stan traced his desire to be racially tolerant to his experiences being “just a fat kid.” These experiences, he said, helped him “see where all this shit starts.”

Stan’s comment that others did not judge him by his intelligence suggests that the link he was making between racism and prejudice against him for his weight had to do with how racist thought connects the surface and depth of a person. One of the key ways that racism works (“where all this shit starts”) is by persuading people that something essential, something deep, can be intuited about others from the color of their skin, from their surface.8 Stan’s own experiences with being judged by how he looked, then, helped him understand (and reject) this aspect of racist thought.

Stan wanted to be judged by his intelligence, rather than by how he looked. There is an echo here of Dr. King’s “I have a dream” speech, in which he called forth a nation in which his children would “not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” Later in the interview, Stan made explicit reference to King and spoke of the deep respect he had for him and other Black leaders of the struggle for civil rights. Just as Stan wanted to be recognized for his intelligence, he recognized and emphasized the intelligence of these Black leaders.

What follows is taken from a longer discussion about the causes of inequality. Stan believed that White discrimination was a major factor, but he also believed that Black people shared some of the blame. He cited comedian and actor Bill Cosby for the claim that the current generation of Black people was not doing enough to address their situation.9 In the middle of this discussion, Stan went on a sort of reverie about civil rights leaders of the past.

The scene Stan narrated was a night-time one, one of dreams and nightmares. He was unable to sleep. He was watching TV.

STAN: I watch a lot of documentaries because, I don’t sleep, so I watch a lot of that stuff on the Discovery channel and the History channel and all that. When we went through the time with Martin Luther King, the Blacks, I think—there was true racism then. People just didn’t want them in this country. But look how well they were dressed and look how well those guys were educated, the ones that were fighting. . . . My God, when you watch those old tapes, Martin had very well educated—and the same with the Black Panthers. They had a very well-educated group of people. . . . It seems to me that you see less and less of the well-dressed Black man out there. That’s the way I see it, I don’t know.

TIMOTHY: Well, I think if you tried to do a survey of what the media image is, I think that you’re right.

STAN: I told you this in the first—the media is actually the one that causes the racism. How many times do you see a story about a well-dressed Black or Indian or whatever on the TV? It’s all about drive-by shootings, selling dope, and they’re just branding and branding and branding these people. And what you see on the TV is what’s going to sink into your head.

Stan said that the media were “branding” men of color. It seems safest to assume that Stan meant “brand” as describing someone or something as bad. However, given Stan’s concerns to distinguish surface from depth, as well as his ideas about how media such as TV influence thought, it is possible that he was invoking other meanings of “brand.” Perhaps Stan’s repetition of “branding” three times was not only for emphasis, but because the word also suggested marking/burning the skin or all the ways that companies work to create a recognizable and desirable “brand” for their consumers.

Stan, like William, did not need to do much work to imagine dangerous Black men. They were everywhere on Stan’s TV. But he could find other Black men there, too, late at night, when he could not sleep.

Stan did not have a lean and powerful body like Robert. When Robert willed and shaped himself toward athletic prowess and social grace, he dreamed of the bodies and movements of his favorite Black and Brown athletes. Robert had the sort of body, himself, to make this dreaming and moving plausible. Stan dreamed, instead, of being judged by his intelligence. If Dr. King was at the center of a nightmare for Frank’s uncle, Norman, then, for Stan, King was a companion in a dream of mutual recognition. Stan dreamed the “White man’s dream of reconciliation” (Fiedler, 1964, p. 109).

These interviews were conducted in the spring of 2006. Maybe I should not have been surprised, then, in the fall of 2008—as I drove through the Wisconsin countryside, through Purgatory County, on my way to Purgatory, where Stan and William and Robert and Frank lived—that it seemed like there were more Obama than McCain signs on the lawns and in the fields.

Obviously, the 2008 election was about more than race.

Obama took 54% of the vote in Purgatory County to McCain’s 45%. The vote was divided, like these men and their community. But there must have been enough White men, like Stan, who dreamed of being accepted by, dreamed of reconciliation with, a well-dressed, educated Black man.

CONCLUSION

This work is motivated by the demands of pedagogy and politics, by the press of the question of what is to be done to work more effectively with White people in antiracist and social justice efforts. U.S. society remains White-supremacist in its structures and practices, notwithstanding the election (and re-election) of our first Black president. Individual White racism flourishes, whatever the new, colorblind race talk that grew up in response to the civil rights movement (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). My emphasis on complexity at the core of White racial selves is not meant to distract from these realities, nor to suggest that conflict and ambivalence cannot co-exist perfectly well with White supremacy.10

The theoretical and empirical work in this article makes three primary contributions, as well as raises important questions for us to consider as part of our future antiracist research and action. First, and most obviously, this work demonstrates the significance of people of color to the ongoing social production of White racial identities. Stan dreamed of intelligent communion with Black men; William feared them and mourned that his sister thought him a racist; Robert trained his body to move like the Brown and Black athletes he idolized, and watched as his religious community fought over whether or not Hmong immigrants were within its circle of responsibility, were “us” or “them”; and Frank’s uncle, Norman, assured himself of his own superiority by scapegoating Native peoples as his young nephew looked on and lost his innocence. People of color are central to the drama of White lives.

We tend to ignore this fact in our antiracist teaching and research. We mistakenly assume that, since White people lead segregated lives, people of color are not central to, not present in, those lives. I do not mean this as a criticism of courses and programs that aim to put White people in meaningful contact with people of color.11 However, an important finding of my research is that White people are always already in relationships with people of color (even if imagined) and always already “know” them. How would our pedagogies shift if we assumed relationship and knowledge?

These relationships and knowledge are often rooted in projection and scapegoating, and the second primary contribution of this work has to do with the persistence, functions, and effects of stereotypes. That stereotypes persist is not (or at least should not be) a particularly startling assertion. However, within education we have proffered and assumed inadequate explanations for this persistence. Stereotypes are typically conceptualized as beliefs about and representations of the Other that prop up oppressive racial systems, by justifying racism and violence against people of color (see, for example, Davis, 1983; Frankenberg, 1993). This is certainly a crucial function of stereotypes. However, theorizing stereotypes as projections—as tangled up in our guts and hearts (not just our heads), as something we need to go on living in a violent and unjust U.S. society—helps us better understand why they are so tenacious.

It also creates a space for us to consider the emotional costs of scapegoating and stereotypes for White people. Again, this is not meant to ignore the oppression, misery, and death that scapegoating and stereotypes have produced and continue to produce for people of color. But what would happen if we began imagining our antiracist pedagogies as offering to White people some understanding of the sort of emotional distress and confusion that Norman, Frank, and William experienced? I often hear from fellow antiracist educators and researchers the (despairing, exasperated) question: Why would White people ever want to give up their privilege? My research suggests that there are costs associated with what Ellison (1953/1995) saw as White people’s rather desperate and continual need for reassurance of their own superiority (exactly because White people simultaneously know that they are not actually superior). Perhaps the exhaustion and emotional costs of playing the role of White American are openings to critical work on race with White people.12

A final contribution of this work is complicating and deepening our understanding of why White people take up a colorblind discourse when talking about race (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; McIntyre, 1997). The traditional way of interpreting this discourse is as enabling White people to hide or disguise an underlying racism, so they can avoid being implicated in it. No doubt this is an important and fruitful reading of colorblind race talk. However, this discourse might also function to minimize or manage conflict among White people. In other words, do White people talk in obscure, subtle, and abstract ways about race not only to hide their racism, but also to avoid serious ruptures with White friends, family, colleagues, and other members of their communities?

Perhaps this should be obvious, but White people do not agree about race. Furthermore, they know that they do not agree about race. Each of the men told stories that featured White people in conflict (sometimes significant conflict) with other White people around issues of race. Unfortunately, the only conflict among White people that is represented in antiracist literatures tends to be conflict between, on the one hand, the enlightened, antiracist, researcher/authority figure/teacher and, on the other hand, the ignorant, racist, subject/subordinate/student (Jupp & Slattery, 2010). We need more research and writing that acknowledges divides within White communities, that studies the effects of these divides on the talk, thinking, and feeling of White people, and that explores the challenges (as well as possibilities) that these conflicts among White people create for antiracist pedagogies.

Amy Winans (2005) provided a wonderful example of how attending to the fears and conflicts that churn beneath her White undergraduate students’ use of colorblind discourse opens up pedagogical possibilities. In her analysis of student talk and writing in her classroom, Winans discovered that colorblindness often functioned as a sort of cover for, as one of her students put it, “hesitant and confused feelings concerning race” (p. 262).

Winans argued that there were at least two desires at work in her students’ assertion of their own colorblindness. One was the rightly criticized desire to protect the White self from any chance of being implicated in racism. Another, however, was the desire to protect others and to act ethically. Winans told of one student’s reflections on why she did not want to participate in discussions about race. At first, the student thought that her only reason for remaining silent was that she might inadvertently hurt the feelings of the one African American student in the class. Eventually, however, with Winans’s support, she questioned this motivation, and wondered if she was less worried about her African American classmate and more worried about being perceived as a racist.

In other words, Winans did not imagine her students as a single thing, a single essence. She did not assume that a single desire (such as innocence or privilege) informed their words or actions. Winans took the ethical beliefs and goals of her students seriously, but then bent them to the purpose of helping students explore the limits of their own colorblind stance.

Researchers and educators need to begin to read the words and actions of White people differently. Perhaps Toni Morrison (1992) provided the best demonstration of this different sort of reading in her William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization, later published as Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination. If we are to understand and influence White people, understand and influence their dreams and future actions, then we should consider orienting ourselves toward them as Morrison oriented herself toward the White authors of the American literary canon.

As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. (p. 17)

Longing, terror, perplexity, shame, and magnanimity—we could do worse, as researchers and antiracist educators and activists, than to attempt to interpret and participate in the ongoing production of White racial identities with Morrison’s list in mind.

Notes

1. These are pseudonyms, as is the name I use here for the Wisconsin county and town in which these men live: Purgatory. Also, the style adhered to in Teachers College Record requires that “Black” and “White” be capitalized. This is not my usual practice as an author.

2. My research positioned me, and continues to position me, at the center of a series of tensions—and not only because I am a White man who grew up in a rural community much like the one in which my participants lived. Chief among these tensions is one animated by methodological commitments to both (a) describing and theorizing the complexities and conflicts at the heart of White racial identities and (b) witnessing and theorizing White racism, as part of a larger antiracist project.

In the abstract, these two commitments need not be in opposition. Indeed, my hope is that by pursuing the first—by creating better conceptions of Whiteness and White racial identities—we might better be able to understand, intervene in, and combat White racism. However, on the ground, living out the first commitment seems to make me soft on White racism, perhaps even an apologist for it. The old racism is so deep (and not past—see Frankenberg, 1993) and the new racism so slippery and facile (so ably documented by Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003), that attention paid to anything other than White racism’s sickening and profligate workings seems a betrayal to antiracism.

3. Other crucial works are Ruth Frankenberg’s (1993) and Katerina Deliovksy’s (2010) interview studies with White women.

4. For an expanded treatment of Frank’s interviews, especially Frank’s characterization of two, “high” and “low” White spaces in which he thought he lived and learned, see Lensmire (2011).

5. Of course, this does not mean that such notions were not lurking close by. As Stuart Hall put it in his famous lecture entitled “Race: The floating signifier” (Media Education Foundation, 1997):

The biological, physiological, and genetic definition, having been shown out the front door, tends to slide around the veranda and back in through the window.

6. Whatever earlier and other sources William might have encountered, he would have certainly experienced this stereotypical image in the national media as a young man, given that an important part of the Reagan Administration’s War on Drugs was propagating the image of the Black male as a criminal—see Michelle Alexander’s (2010) The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness.

7 Fiedler (1964) thought that Mailer’s essay should be interpreted in terms of the older White American dream of chaste love between White man and Black, only here, that union gave birth to a male child, a White Negro.

8. Dyer (1997) argued that race and racism are always about bodies. White people obviously have bodies, but Western thought posits that these bodies, unlike the bodies of racial others, are animated from the inside by an ennobling spirit. “The White spirit organizes White flesh and in turn non-White flesh and other material matters: it has enterprise. Imperialism is the key historical form in which that process has been realized” (p. 15).

9. Cosby had, at a 2004 meeting commemorating the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education in Washington, D.C., made a series of comments that were quite critical of the African-American poor and that sparked an ongoing controversy. Cosby eventually published a book with Alvin Poussaint in 2007 that reiterated this message of Black responsibility.

10. In fact, complexity and ambivalence are what we would expect within a system that attempts to rationalize violent conditions (Deliovsky, 2010).

11. I am thinking, for example, of the partnership between Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, an African American church in Columbus, Ohio, and a masters of elementary education program at Ohio State University, and the wonderful theorizing of racial identity coming out of that work (see Seidl, 2007; Seidl & Hancock, 2011).

12. See Jennifer Logue’s (2005) important reflections on the possibilities and dangers of re-evaluating privilege and reconceptualizing “dominant subjects as insecure, alienated, anxious, anguished, violently repressed, and/or pathological” (p. 375).

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