Woke: Performing Progressive Whiteness in a Racially Liminal Time

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Up until recently, the prevailing racial perspective in the U.S. tended to view racism either as a thing of the past or a rare occurrence, or people explained away racial disparities with other rationalizations that were based on class or culture (Bobo 2011; Bobo, Kluegel, and Ryan 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2003; Feagin 2014, 1999; Lewis 2004; Massey 2010; Omi and Winant 2014; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Pettigrew 2009; Vickerman 2013). Paradoxically, the overriding ethos of "color-blind racism"[1] or "post-racism" meant that whites did not consider themselves racist, nor could they recognize how they benefited from the systematic oppression of people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2004; Feagin 1999). This pervasive color-blind viewpoint allowed people to claim a non-racist identity even while spouting racist stereotypes and dismissing the concerns of large numbers of people of color. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) famously described, we became a nation with racism but without racists. Ironically, part of the color-blind ethos meant that diversity held a precarious position in the cultural lexicon. Diversity had to be accepted, because only *real racists* had problem with anyone's race, but actively working towards diversity through affirmative action and the like was racist.[2]

This ethos prevailed even as whites in America still lived highly segregated lives, where contact with racial minorities was often rare, cursory, or optional (Anderson 2015;

[1] Various scholars use the hyphenated "color-blind" convention, and others use the term "colorblind" (for example, Nilsen and Turner's 2014 edited volume *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America*. I follow Bonilla-Silva's lead and use the hyphenated term unless it is in a direct quote from a source which does not hyphenate.

[2] The flip side of this was, of course, that if you actively worked towards racial diversity you became the "real racist" because you continued to acknowledge and give credence to the importance of racial difference.

Feagin 2014, 1999; Katznelson 2005; Perry 2002).[3] The combined factors of white racial segregation and color-blind racial logics would seem to reinforce the conclusion that whites outside of coastal population centers lived in blissful ignorance of their own whiteness. But while these non-diverse places may be racially homogenous, whites are more and more aware of their own whiteness. As *The New York Times Magazine* claimed in June 2018 "White people are noticing something new: their own whiteness" (Bazelon 2018).

We are emerging from a moment in history in which the color-blind ethos was dominant into one where race cannot be ignored. From Black Lives Matter protests to Twitter hashtags like #OscarsSoWhite (Ashagre 2016), to white anti-racist protestors being run down in Charlottesville, to politicians like Rep. Steve King of Iowa asking "white nationalist, white supremacist, Western civilization – how did that language become offensive?" (Gabriel 2019) race has returned to prominence in our national discourse. We are in a time of turmoil, a liminal period between color-blind ideology and whatever may come next. Whites, even segregated whites, are noticing, thinking, and talking about what their own whiteness means and thinking about their whiteness in relation to minority others. And in racially isolated areas this newly emergent racial awareness is not just about the politically charged fear of racial others, although you'd be excused for thinking so if you turned on a news program after the 2016 election cycle. Racial progressives – *white* racial progressives – live in these overwhelmingly homogenous places as well.

[3] See, for example, William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), Massey and Denton's (1998) *American Apartheid*, and Camille Zubrinsky Charles' 2003 *ARS* article "The Dynamics of Racial Residential Segregation."

Places like the Northern Plains, the Midwest, and rural Appalachia are usually characterized by their "red state" leanings, where Confederate flags fly in front yards and the "Don't Tread on Me" Gadsden flag image is a custom license plate option. In fact, as I traveled around to these places, conducting interviews with educators, homemakers, baristas, students, and homeless vets, I found that many of my interviewees exhibited some attitudes of racial progressiveness, often mixed in with color-blindness, but distinct in many ways. To use a colloquialism, I found that white folks had "got woke," meaning they performed an identity, that while fractured and fragmented, explicitly acknowledged racial difference and racial privilege, employed a structural analysis of racial inequality, and valued diversity.

I grew up in "flyover country," so returning to do research was a homecoming. My home, called Middletown County in this work, is often portrayed in larger cultural dialogues as alternately an idyllically wholesome, lost-in-time land of Oz or a backwards place full of ignorant people and politicians nationally known for their ineptitude. But having lived there, I knew this deep-red (and to use another colloquialism, "mighty white") state had a more complicated racial story to tell, especially in this moment of racial resurgence. It's said that the reason for the recent electoral victories of racially regressive politicians is that they appealed to "forgotten people," the rural white working class, who reportedly came out for Donald Trump in droves (Jardina 2019).[4] I argue that some of the

[4] This is a common narrative, but the picture is more complex. Race did play an important factor in the 2016 election among working class and middle-class voters, including previous Obama voters. While Trump outperformed Romney's showing in 2012 among the white working class, he was supported mostly by affluent people in the primaries and his voters during the general election, about 69%, were without college degrees, so this was seen as evidence of his working-class support. However, this is the average among all Republican identified voters, so his isn't higher than average. See Morgan and Lee 2018, and Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018, and especially Jardina 2019.

real “forgotten people” in scholarship and public discourse are white racial progressives outside of coastal urban centers.

This dissertation explores the questions: “How do white racial progressives from isolated areas understand their own whiteness? How do they make sense of racial inequality in the absence of racial others?” Along the way, I explore the limitations of such a progressive racial identity in areas of low diversity for relationships, the role gender plays in these performances, and finally, the prospects of racial progressive identity for combating racial inequality.

COLOR-BLIND SCHOLARSHIP AND THEORIZING WHITENESS

Racial scholarship since the early 2000s has been dominated by attempts to understand the “new racism.” The pervading theory of contemporary race relations comes from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who treats the concept of color-blind racism as an ideology, articulated in his book *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, currently in its fifth edition (2017). Bonilla-Silva contends that color-blindness is a pervasive ideology of race and racial inequality. According to Bonilla-Silva, color-blindness is the dominant type of “‘new racism’, or the set of mostly subtle, institutional, and seemingly nonracial mechanisms and practices that comprise the racial regime of ‘post-racial’ America” (2015a:1358). The component parts of color-blindness include frames, styles, and racial stories utilized mostly by whites to justify the racial status quo and deny that racism is still an extant problem (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2015a, 2014, 2003).

Firstly, the color-blind ideology is founded on a belief that wide-scale racism is a thing of the past. The overt, Jim Crow style of discrimination is seen as an anachronism of the rural south (Bobo et al. 1997). The consensus of color-blindness is that society has moved passed such things, especially in regard to Blacks, but by extension all people of color. Token successes such as Muslim members of Congress or Latino candidates for President are held up as evidence that racial minorities no longer face such systematic oppression. Secondly, color-blindness explains current racial disparities largely through non-racial accounts. As McDermott (2006) and Bonilla-Silva (2017, 2003) point out, whites (and others) quickly turn race-based arguments about inequality into class, personal, or cultural deprivation discussions. Finally, color-blindness posits that we live in a "post-racial" society, frequently pointing to contested "evidence" such as the election of President Obama (Bobo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2003; Feagin 1999, 2014; Lewis 2004; Massey 2010; Omi and Winant 2014; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Pettigrew 2009), although most race scholars see the election of Obama as part and parcel with color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2014; Pettigrew 2009).

While the theory of color-blindness was a powerful intervention, I contend that as it is currently formulated it is inadequate for examining the paradoxical relationship of white segregation and how whites conceive of racial others. As it is currently conceived, color-blind racism theory suffers from two central problems. First, it offers a homogeneous view of white racial construction. By treating color-blindness as an ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2014, 2003), and arguing it creates a white habitus (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007), the theory does not allow for the complexity of racial frameworks that whites may employ in understanding race. By

Bonilla-Silva and Embrick's own admission, the "white habitus" idea is an "attempt to explain the group psychology of whites by relying on a rather simple proposition" (Bonilla-Silva et al 2006:230). This uniform and theoretically inflexible approach to understanding whiteness highlights the further need to have intersectional approaches to studying it.

Secondly, and relatedly, the theory of color-blindness does not take gender into consideration either theoretically or in most empirical applications,[5] a theoretical shortcoming that Bonilla-Silva has explicitly acknowledged and issued a call for correction (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Intersectionality scholars have demonstrated time and time again that race and gender function together, and that understandings of race are shaped by gender frames (Hughey 2014; McDermott 2006; Perry 2002; Peck 2014; Wingfield 2009). Because we also know that race and gender are two foundational frames for our understanding of difference (Omi and Winant 2014; Ridgeway 2011), and that men and women experience race and racialized schemas differently (Collins 2009[2000]; Hughey 2011; Kimmel 2017), it is vital to understand how male and female whites differ in their understanding of race.

Color-blind theory sees color-blindness as an ideology within which people navigate using frames, styles, and stories. Conceiving of color-blindness as an ideology allows for it to be seen as available to anyone, although the largest majority of people who prescribe to this ideology are apparently white (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2015a, 2003). However, conceiving of color-blindness as an ideology that is largely the domain of whites contributes to its homogenizing effect. This approach paints whites with such a broad

[5] A notable exception is Pamela Perry's 2002 *Shades of White.*

brush that whiteness becomes a theoretical straw-man, contributes to the perpetuation of the white/non-white divide that lacks theoretical complexity, and maintains whiteness at the center of racial inquiry. I argue that looking at racial orientations as identity performances overcomes some of these shortcomings and allows for a greater understanding of cultural incoherence and the presence of competing racial narratives.

RESEARCHING WHITENESS AND WHITE IDENTITY PERFORMANCE

What we know about whiteness suggests that there is much greater diversity than the dominant theory suggests. In order to avoid essentializing differences among whites, or "homogenizing an admittedly diverse group," whites should not be studied with the assumption of an explicitly shared *groupness* (Lewis 2004:624). There are "vividly illuminating…ambivalences and contradictions in white identity" (Perry 2002:3). There is scholarly evidence, when we look for it, of a more complex racial orientation by whites, where color-blind arguments against acknowledging race are followed up immediately by anti-Black prejudice, and even claims about the importance of diversity (McDermott 2006; Warikoo and de Novais 2014). The theoretical foundation of color-blind racism is materiality, both of resources and power, but that materiality would seem to suggest that a white habitus would be fundamentally inflected by other social locations. This incoherence is in line with knowledge about how culture is used in interaction.

As contemporary culture scholars know (Swidler 1986, 2001; Fine and Fields 2008; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Reed 2011), culture is partial, contradictory, and heterogeneous. Racial and gendered stereotypes are an important aspect of this fragmented and often contradictory nature of culture, acting in reductionist ways and contributing to racial and gender inequality (Collins 2009[2000]; Nilsen and Turner 2014).

Because culture is employed in ways that are fractured, in ways that vary according to context, and in ways that depend on the intersecting identities of the individual, it is important to explore the ways white men and women perform their white racial identity. Color-blindness is a dominant cultural ideology, but we need to understand how, when, and if it is drawn upon in white progressive performances.

Research on whiteness has also focused on racial reactionaries (Blee 2003; Kimmel 2016; McRae 2018), those whites who believe they are the victims of changing racial demographics and called upon to protect what they see as their heritage. Racial resentment by whites against immigrants and racial others translates into support for "backlash government" policies that literally damage the health and livelihood of the people who support them (Kimmel 2016; McRae 2018; Metzl 2019). Some of this research (Metzl 2019), while compelling and undoubtedly accurate, continues the larger scale erasure of whites in these areas who are invested, at least in their perspectives and performances, in combatting racial resentment. The racial progressives, or "woke whites," that I interviewed admitted to being disturbed by the rise of racial resentment and its effects on politics and culture. They were familiar with the "angry white men" (Kimmel 2017), they recognized the deadly power of a shared "white rage" (Anderson 2016), Racial progressives, however, get comparatively little coverage in research on race.[6] Whites growing up in the U.S. system of white supremacy like are all subject to the need to "unlearn" and become aware of the nature of white privilege and the many subtle and insidious ways it effects the ways whites see the world (Anderson 2015; DiAngelo 2018).

[6] Matthew Hughey's 2012 monograph *White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists, and the Shared Meanings of Race* is a notable exception.

The contact hypothesis first articulated by Gordon Allport in the early 1950s (also known as Intergroup Contact Theory) posits that under appropriate conditions one of the best ways to reduce prejudice is for people of different groups to communicate face-to-face (Pettigrew 1998). This theory still gets a lot of intellectual traction, especially amongst whites who purport to value diversity, but cross-racial contact even in the presence of proper power dynamics is no guaranteed path to lessening prejudice (DaCosta 2009; Matias 2016; Ullucci 2011).

Recent research into what I'll categorize as "well-meaning whites" has demonstrated that whites who are concerned with racial inequality often fall short of their stated goals, reinforcing racial hierarchies, especially gendered ones (DiAngelo 2018; Hagerman 2018, 2017; Sullivan 2014; Trepagnier 2010). Whites who congratulated themselves for being progressive enough to vote for Obama acted upon their racial anxieties in 2016 and either did not vote or cast votes for Trump (Jardina 2019). Parents who want their children to embrace racial diversity end up participating in opportunity hoarding in ways that overwhelmingly disadvantage children of color (Haberman 2018; Hanselman and Feil 2016). Women who see themselves as racial allies to people of color move their pain to the center of conversations when they are called out by racial minorities for being insensitive (Accapadi 2007; DiAngelo 2018). These folks are invested in the central ideas of the color-blind era that overt racism is bad, and since racism is bad only bad people have any racially insensitive attitudes or behaviors. Being a good white person hinges on believing that you do not contribute to racism personally (Sullivan 2014; DiAngelo 2018).

Like the work on racial regressives and white racial anxieties, research into well-meaning whites who eschew racism or openly embrace anti-racism shows how powerfully interconnected racial identity is with emotions. Bonilla-Silva himself issued a call to incorporate emotions into racial analysis.[7] One way of doing this is by focusing on white racial identity as a performance, rather than as shared ideology. By exploring racial identity through the theoretical lens of performance we gain access to the way competing cultural logics are utilized in different situations. We can also see how a performance of racial identity interacts in systematic ways with gender and class identities, allowing a more nuanced understanding of the fullness of white identity variation. We know that research into well-meaning whites tends to focus on relatively affluent people in areas with some racial diversity, and research into white-dominated areas tend to focus on racial regressives and their racial anxieties and political conservativism. What we do not know is how white men and women perform an honorable white progressive identity in areas of low racial diversity, where they must imagine the racial other. We don't know how woke whites perform wokeness in areas that are full of other white people, especially areas that are characterized as politically and racially conservative.

POST-POST RACIAL? THEORIZING WHITENESS IN A RACIALLY LIMINAL TIME

With the rise of hate crimes, hate groups, racially motivated attacks, and the mainstreaming of white supremacist and nationalist rhetoric (SPCL 2018) we are moving away from the color-blindness of the recent past and into something else. I argue we are

[7] This was during his 2018 ASA Presidential Address, reprinted in American Sociological Review

in a transitional period, a *racially liminal* time, transitioning away from the color-blind era and its dominant logics. Victor Turner argued that liminality represented a state of great intensity, with retreat from social action norms and heightened reflection and scrutiny of central cultural values. Liminal times are characterized by danger and a sense of rootlessness (Turner 1970). I define *a racially liminal time* to mean *a period of time in which race is particularly visible, contested, and salient in cultural and political discourse.* In contrast to racially consolidated times, racially liminal times are particularly tumultuous and unsettled (Swidler 1986), in which narratives compete for cultural dominance and both newer and older ways of relating to racial identity are visible. In this liminal time the language and logics of color-blindness are still very much in use, but the foundational claim that race is no longer salient in American society has crumbled. What this new era will be, we do not know, but my research indicates that there are new ways of seeing the salience and prominence of race among white people in this racially liminal moment, and this variety has implications for how whites understand their own racial identity and the racial identity of people of color.

Ann Swidler famously highlighted the way cultural elements function in unsettled times. In her work *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (2003), Swidler explains that we utilize cultural repertoires, especially during times of tumult and transition. I argue that the current moment of political and social upheaval amounts to an unsettled or racially liminal time. Individual whites are feeling unsettled about the role race should play in their lives, some are noticing for the first time that their whiteness is a racial identity, and some are coming to the disorienting realization that they have racial privilege, which can spawn various emotional responses (DiAngelo 2018, Matias 2016).

How do racially progressive whites manage evolving understandings of race in this racially liminal time? How are they constructing the notion of what it means to be an honorable white person, particularly in areas of low diversity? How do they interpret racialized conflict with family and friends, and how are these conflicts shaped by gender?

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

To answer these questions, I conducted intensive, open-ended interviews with white women and men, age 18 and above, living in demographically white-dominated areas of the U.S. To capture a broad range of white perspectives, several regions were selected; this was a multi-site and intersectional study. Participants for in-depth interviews were recruited based on 1) their being involved in one of three racially salient situations and 2) their location in a highly-segregated white area.

I conducted 64 interviews in three locations, a mountainous region in rural Appalachian Virginia that I call Mountainville, a college town in a sparsely populated state in the northern Rockies that I call Northwest Town, and an affluent suburb of a central midwestern city that I call Middletown County.[8] This research depended upon finding whites who lived in areas where whiteness is significantly above national averages who had limited contact with people of color. I sought to speak with whites more likely to be thinking about race, which presented certain sampling challenges. Most whites have the privilege of not having their race be something they think about on a regular basis; because of the ubiquity of whiteness, especially in the areas I was targeting, I predicted that many whites would not have given much thought to their own racial identity (Bonilla-

[8] For full details of research sites, recruitment, and analysis, see Appendix A.

Silva 2017; DiAngelo 2018, Matias 2016). To counteract this, I recruited whites in situations and contexts that research has demonstrated were most likely to activate thinking about race: people pursuing online dating, parents thinking about school district selection for their children, and people facing food insecurity. These situations afforded me some built-in class variation; I also specifically sought to include both men and women.

Racial experiences in the United States cannot be separated from gender. Difference is organized along various lines, but gender and race are two primary cultural frames which organize our social relations and orient our behaviors (Ridgeway 2011). Such powerful frames affect the most micro behaviors to the most macro of social structures. In short, cultural beliefs about gender and race shape our perceptions of others and help us categorize both individuals and their coordinating categorical behavior. Hegemonic beliefs about gender and race are institutionalized in our media, laws, government policies, and organizational practices (Ridgeway 2011). As intersectionality theory points out, social categories such as race, gender and class are axes of power and disadvantage, but they are not additive, operating instead in conjunction with each other in complex ways. Their intersection does not resemble a stack of disadvantaged identity pancakes, but a spider's web of intersecting identities and their infinite complexities (Collins 2009 [2000]:21), reminding us that oppressions work together to produce inequality and that oppression cannot be reduced to one isolated type.

Empirical explorations of race and gender[9] demonstrate that men and women experience their racial identity differently. Stereotypes vary by gender, shaping the kind of reception that men and women of different racial-ethnic backgrounds meet; for example, Latina women frequently face stereotypes of a "spicy" sexuality while Latino men are often assumed to link their sexuality with machismo (Vasquez 2014). Furthermore, we know that class position interacts with gender and race to shape an individual's experience of their racial and gender identities (hooks 2000). Working-class white men and women differ in their selection of sexual partners and ideas of attractiveness, with white females more likely to entertain a black partner, and white men most likely to dismiss the idea of dating a black woman (McDermott 2006). The behavior of young women is shaped by their understandings of femininity and its connections to racial identity as well as parental class location and racial and ethnic identity (Bettie 2000). Clearly, to understand how whites experience their racial identity, I needed to have variance of gender and class positions.

My sample also varied by class. Of the people I spoke with over the course of my research, one-third were food insecure or facing food insecurity. Some were homeless, living in tents or just received shelter spots, some were couch-surfing, and some were paying the rent (just barely). I spoke to relatively affluent divorcees, a community college professor, some students, and a lot of people working low-level white collar or service jobs. Poorer white people across the board are less insulated from racial others, largely

[9] See, for example, Kimmel 2016, Pollock 2004, and McDermott 2006.

due to the relationship with race and poverty, as well as the dynamics of home ownership versus renting (Gibbons 2018).

Race is culturally informed but emotionally felt. When confronted with their racial privileges, many whites react with anger, sadness, and disgust at the suggestion that they may have benefited from a system of discrimination, thus undermining their deeply-held belief in their own merit (DiAngelo 2018; Matias 2016). Being confronted with the reality of white as a racial identity is disorienting, as whites often benefit from moving through the world without having to consider the impact of their race (Ioanide 2015). But since whites are invested in the idea of being a "good white person," the information interviewers can glean from discussions of race with whites is particularly ripe for analysis. In this racially liminal time, with the contemporaneous rise of overt racism and progressive racial resistance, this knowledge of "woke" whites' emotional experience of race is vitally important.

Because I sought to understand how whites in nondiverse places imagined race, I conducted this research through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews allowed me to connect closely with people, building a rapport and level of comfort that is necessary when taking on a potentially uncomfortable topic like race, and their semi-structured nature meant that I had a set of questions to discuss with each participant but that I could pursue other topics as they became salient. Most important, interviews give us excellent insights into how people utilize the culture available to them. Pugh (2013) articulates what interviews provide the researcher with relation to culture. She explains that interviews provide information of varying types, including what participants see as honorable, schematic data that gives us clues to multiple cultural frames at work, visceral responses,

and meta-feelings that situate the relationship between the visceral and the constraints or freedoms surrounding actions. For the interpretive researcher, interviews allow access to an "emotional landscape" that helps us make sense of individual motivations and their relationship to broader social trends. Interpretive interviewing means the researcher doesn't dismiss elements of cultural incoherence as problematic data, but rather sees these instances as valuable moments helping us understand not only how people think and feel, but also "how it feels to feel that way" (Pugh 2013:49). We can see the role of emotions in the activation of cultural elements, especially at those points when they are seemingly contradictory. Emotions are central to racial identity understandings and performances. Pugh writes "most of all, we can feel culture in the emotional reckoning of the distance between our visceral and honorable selves" (2013:52).

I did not initially set out to study racial progressive whites. Rather, I aimed to examine how racially isolated whites understood their own racial identities and that of racial others, with an eye to how they used culture in these understandings. Thus, this dissertation is based on 46 interviews with people who performed some vestiges of a woke identity, a subset of the larger group of 64 with whom I conducted interviews that included people who did not. Appendix A details more of the process by which I conducted interviews, analyzed data, and came to view my informants' understanding and conduct of wokeness as the most important contribution I could make to existing knowledge. What follows is an exploration of that wokeness, its parameters, barriers, gendered elements, and limitations.

OUTLINE OF THIS WORK

I argue that in the current racially liminal time, "wokeness" is an emergent way of performing an honorable white identity. Wokeness co-exists with the dominant ideology of color-blindness, but has its own identity practices, with its own race talk, racial stories, and underlying logics. Central to performing a woke whiteness are the ways of acknowledging, or "seeing," race and its impacts, claiming an emotional connection with people of color, and rooting the performance in a current understanding of what constitutes an honorable white identity.

Chapter two details the central elements that make up a woke white performance, including an openness to discuss and acknowledge race, various rationales for their support of diversity, the fractured nature of woke performances, and outlines various paths that racially isolated whites can take to identify as a woke racial progressive. It also introduces the concept of *racial verstehen*, the foundational empathetic emotional connection of woke identities. Chapter two examines with what makes a woke performance different from a color-blind approach and how these conflicting cultural logics can coexist in white identity performances during this racially liminal time.

Chapter three outlines the particular challenges to woke performances faced by whites in racially homogeneous "diversity deserts." Woke-identified whites develop numerous strategies to demonstrate their valuation of diversity, including redefining the parameters of diversity, employing market solutions, and employing parenting strategies based on exposure to racial and ethnic others. Chapter three also shows the way woke

whites finesse the definition of diversity, expanding and contracting what counts as diverse in different scenarios – particularly in relation to Blackness.

Chapter four explores the tribulations of woke whites in their interaction with racially regressive, rather than progressive, family members. In this chapter I take on the role of familial teasing and boundary-making, as well as the ways woke-identified whites shut down racial interactions before they move beyond hard boundaries that might put family relationships at risk. This chapter details the concept of "punctuated censure" to cut short racially insensitive talk from loved ones and how woke whites confront racially regressive family members in ways that differ from how they confront people with whom they are less intimate.

Chapter five charts the different ways that men and women enact woke whiteness, particularly as enacted in emotional dimensions. I explore the role of female rage, which is very much tied to the current zeitgeist of progressive resistance, and how women experience the emotions of wokeness in different ways than men. I also outline and define the concept of emotional reparations, which involves performing emotional pain on behalf of racial others, and the way this performance differs from the "hazard play" more often enacted by men.

Finally, the conclusion explores the limits and potential of woke whiteness in relation to anti-racist goals. I argue that wokeness is not a substitute for direct action when it comes to making racial inequality a thing of the past, but that it does have a potential to impact social change in a more diffuse way through interactions and creating new norms of white behavior. Color-blindness, which functioned as the hegemonic racial discourse and the default version of an honorable white performance for so long, is being fractured.

We are in a moment of racial transition. The implication of this work, I contend, is that wokeness can represent a path towards whites' participation in profound social change, but that this potential is limited by the level of investments whites feel they can afford.

We are living through a time of great upheaval, witnessing the disintegration of a color-blind system that had convinced most white Americans that racism was something of the distant past, and that race no longer mattered. The evidence of this disintegration comes from the increased and undeniable prominence of race in our politics, media, and relationships. Popular accounts suggest overt racism, white supremacy and white nationalism are on the rise, as are hate crimes and hate groups (Cohen 2019). At the same time, however, news media suggest diversity is being taken more seriously in boardrooms and on TV screens. Hate crimes are being met with messages of welcome, love, and inclusiveness (The Guardian 2019). Platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, that were so instrumental in the spread of racial hatred and the rise of radicalization, are finally starting to ban (some, not all) egregious racists and crack down on hate groups.

White racial progressives are likely to be important components of anti-racist movements, and I envision this work as a necessary compliment to research that focuses on color-blindness, its logics, and its effects (Bonilla-Silva 2017), as well as works focused on more politically-minded, racially conservative whiteness (Hochschild 2016; Metzl 2019), and intersectional works examining whiteness and gender (Blee 2003; Kimmel 2017; McRae 2018). From the work of these scholars we know about the powerful emotional connections between race and gender identity when racial threats are perceived, and we know about the parameters and effects of following color-blindness

and how it has perpetuated racism. We need to know more about progressive white racial identity, how this interacts with gender, and what this could mean for racial progress beyond color-blindness. To improve both our scholarship about race relations and our strategies for fighting racial inequality we need to flesh out the narrative of whites in “real America” and develop more nuanced understandings of whiteness in this racially liminal time.

CHAPTER 2: PERFORMING WOKE WHITENESS

Northwest Town is not, on the surface, the type of place that you would associate with wokeness; most people here are not from a big city, it's in a state notorious for high gun ownership, red politics and politicians, and an ethos of independence and rugged individualism. And, notably, it is very, very white.[10] Sitting in "Healthy Fare," a local natural food store (hugely popular, akin to an indie Whole Foods with an expanded cafeteria), I was struck by a particular aesthetic whiteness of many of the residents. There was a rangy, lean, and weathered look to the inhabitants of Northwest Town, a certain Western affluence that called to mind Robert Redford and Daryl Hannah, or ranchers that work hard, but retreat in the evenings to million-dollar log homes with massive stone fireplaces.

It's here that I met Shannon. This store was where Shannon worked a couple of shifts a week, when she was not focusing on her TA duties or doing schoolwork. Shannon was working on her MA in Communication Studies at the local university. She presented as a spritely, zaftig blonde in her late 20s, with hair cut short and angled, minimal makeup, and a penchant for tattoos and bold prints. She described herself as a queer woman and was using dating apps to date both men and women in Northwest Town. She actively thought about issues related to race, gender, and sexuality - in her classrooms, when she interacted with her family, and when it came to whom and how she dates. As we talked,

[10] According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Northwest Town was 92.1% white, 0.5% Black, 2.8% Native American, 1.2% Asian, 0.1% Pacific Islander, 0.5% who identify as some other race, and 2.8% identify as bi-racial or multi-racial. People of any race who identified as Hispanic or Latino made up 2.9% of the population.

I asked her about how often she discusses issues like racial and gender inequality in the current political climate. She answered:

> *I definitely talked about it before. But I'd say I've actually had more positive conversations after the election. Like, diving deeper into things about race and gender, and sexuality. Like with my mom and my dad and my brother. Because I think they're seeing so much more of that on their [Facebook] feed for the first time…I feel like they just get it so much more now and asking questions and expressing how much different things are, even though it doesn't affect my cis-white-straight brother…Privilege is the absences of oppression in a lot of ways. It's about not having to think about something, and in this case, it would be about race. So, you wouldn't have to consider changing the way that you look when you go out, or how that might negatively impact you getting a job or getting a date or even just being safe.*

Shannon was plugged into issues of race and gender before they came to dominate social media feeds, and she enjoyed talking about them in depth, particularly in ways that highlight inequality and white privilege.

Shannon was someone we might easily identify as "woke." The concept of "wokeness" recently began popping up as a byword for social awareness. The concept of being woke and its related attitudes and practices began to gain traction in the mid-2010s[11] and subsequently woke became an available identity option for whites interested

[11] Woke as a slang term has its origins in Black vernacular, but its current understanding is credited to Erykah Badu's 2008 song "Master Teacher." The use of social media hashtags like #staywoke have helped shape its

in racial progressiveness. Shannon's wokeness was evidenced in how she actively thought about how systems of inequality work and did not shy away from discussing topics like racial privilege and trans rights. But wokeness is not a quality people have, or a threshold of progressivism that they achieve. Rather, wokeness is one potential way of performing an identity, especially a white racial identity. As I discussed in the last chapter, wokeness is the next iteration of what it means be an honorable white person and follows on the heels of the previous color-blind standard. In this chapter I lay out the elements of a woke white identity performance and its foundational components.

First, woke white performances include a willingness to acknowledge race and talk about it, contra to color-blind ideology. As Shannon's quote from above illustrates, woke whites indicate through their face-to-face conversations and online interactions that they acknowledge and are willing to discuss racial issues and deny the central claim of color-blindness – that to see race is itself racist. This willingness includes an emotional component; woke whites actively confront negative emotions like shame and guilt that would be avoided under color-blind logics. Second, woke performances include declarations about the value of diversity even in areas where it is strikingly absent. While overtly racist performances of whiteness deride multiculturalism or diversity as a threat to white identity, color-blindness positions diversity as a positive goal that is a fait accompli in our supposedly post-racial world (Bobo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2018; DaCosta 2019; Ramasubramanian and Miles 2018). In contrast, woke whites acknowledge that diversity has not yet been attained; this is the catch-22 of woke whites, the valuation of difference

current definition, and woke was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in September of 2017 https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/woke-meaning-origin

while surrounded by sameness. Third, woke performances interact with emotions in specific ways that acknowledge inequality and the suffering it causes. This comes through what we might call *racial verstehen,* an ability to empathize with racial others and, from there, to recognize personal privilege from whiteness. Shannon pointed out that her cis-white-heterosexual brother benefits from a matrix of privilege that is very different from hers as a cis-white-queer-female, but that both of them experience the privilege of whiteness through the absence of oppression in numerous ways. Finally, wokeness is fractured and fragmented, often mixed with elements from other cultural approaches to race. As a relatively new cultural idea, we can think of it as a recently acquired tool in most whites' cultural toolkits (Swidler 1986). It was exhibited by many of my interviewees, but deployed alongside color-blind explanations and logics.

Research on how whites come to an awareness of their own whiteness and begin to understand racial discrimination tends to highlight variations of the contact hypothesis (see Bonilla-Silva 2017, Trepagnier 2010), but I found that direct contact was not a pre-requisite to developing a woke perspective. In this age of online connection whites can come to this awareness through direct or indirect contact with racial others. The "empathy switch" can be flipped, for example, by hearing tales of police violence, or from direct interactions with people of color in ways that specifically mobilize empathetic feelings.

First, let's examine what it means to openly acknowledge race, and how this is done in accordance with a woke white identity.

PERFORMING WOKENESS: SEEING, TALKING, AND FEELING RACE

A central tenet of color-blind racism is that to talk about race at all is racist, because it reifies something that, we, as a culture and as people, should have evolved away from; racism is a relic of a bygone America (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 2017). But as Shannon's quote from the beginning of this chapter indicates, a woke white performance involves actively talking about race, incorporating it into discussions despite discomfort and difficulty. Whites are notoriously reluctant to talk about race and racial issues, especially inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2017, DiAngelo 2018). The intense discomfort whites feel about discussing or acknowledging the existence of race discomfort is central to white fragility (DiAngelo 2018). The dominance of color-blind ideology has only intensified discomfiture regarding "race talk" to such an extent that we now have a system of codes for talking about race without actually mentioning race (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 2017; Collins 1998, 2006).[12]

Whites who adhere to a color-blind perspective avoid discussing race (Trepagnier 2010), respond to race talk with emotional distress and distancing (DiAngelo 2018), or try to reframe the discussion from racial issues to be "anything but race" (Bonilla-Silva 2017). Guides for white people to talk about race are common, from the *New York Times* best-selling book *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2018) by Ijeoma Oluo, to video guides for white students which aim to answer the questions "How should white college students talk about race? What do they need to understand as they enter the conversation, and what challenges should they expect?"[13] The existence and popularity of such resources

[12] See, especially, Bonilla-Silva (2002) and Collins (1998). While Bonilla-Silva points out that within a color-blind system whites, in particular, will go through convoluted conversational steps to avoid mentioning race, Collins focuses more on the use of coded words, for example the use of "urban" as code for Black.

[13] Harvard's Graduate School of Education has a video series called "Walking the Talk" centered on how to have conversations about diversity. Rastageri, Shafer, and Walsh 2017.

indicate the difficulty most whites habituated to color-blindness have when talking about race, and the fact that confronting racial issues results in a great deal of discomfort, guilt, and even emotional pain.[14] But a woke performance includes a stated willingness to discuss race, and often includes testimony of such discussions, even though they come with difficulty or discomfort.

What differentiates wokeness as a new, acceptable, and widespread way of performing white racial identity is the explicit acknowledgment of other people's racial identities, one's own whiteness, and that this whiteness comes with benefits. Shannon's performance of whiteness was actively *not* color-blind. In the exchange above, Shannon showed a knowledge of the whiteness of her family, and how this whiteness works with other classifications around gender and sexuality. She not only understood her whiteness as impactful, but she recognized how her identity as a white, queer woman might shape her understandings of justice issues differently than her "cis-white-straight brother." Shannon notably and actively *acknowledged seeing race*, both her own and others. This acknowledgement of race sets people apart from the overriding ethos of color-blindness and is a central element to a woke identity performance. The ability to avoid race talk, and its attendant discomforts, is a function of white privilege. The ubiquitous nature of color-blindness allows whites to avoid race talk in most cases. So, whites who are willing to participate in such conversations and process the negative emotions that come with such an undertaking are influenced by a qualitatively different logic than the color-blind ideology.

[14] It has been pointed out that the discomfort white's feel from confronting their own racial privilege pales in comparison to the emotional and physical toll that actual racism takes on people of color.

But white racial awareness can also coincide not with contemporary woke performances but with a more traditional, overt racial distrust. After all, white supremacists also "see color," even when their white supremacy has been re-branded and distanced from the Ku Klux Klan (Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018).[15] Some of my interviewees who did not exhibit woke racial behaviors also "saw" race and were willing to talk at length about racial differences. For example, Gary was born in the early 1970s, in an even less diverse city than Northwest Town, where we met, but in the same state. He did not grow up around many minorities, saying that "you could probably count on one hand how many Mexicans I've seen [growing up]. Blacks, there's probably ten in the whole town." Gary described his household as "a little racist, but not bad" and used the friendship he and his twin brother had with a Black boy in the neighborhood as evidence that race was not really an issue for him when it came to friendship. But Gary spent time in jail due to drug- and alcohol-related charges. As a consequence of his incarceration, he had brief periods of increased contact with people of color. He definitely "sees" race and believes it is significant for behavior. He and I sat and talked in the temporary homeless shelter he just moved to, after losing his apartment due to unemployment.

> *Gabriella: And having that experience [in jail], did it change how you thought about Latinos or Mexicans?*

[15]White supremacists such as David Duke and Richard Spencer have also adopted some use of color-blind language, saying that their perspectives are not about hating racial others, but advocating for their own groups. Their use of color-blind rhetoric allows them to present a palatable front, one largely in line with the prevailing idea that good white people do not see race or give credence to its importance. For an excellent analysis of the use of color-blind rhetoric by Richard Spencer in his campus speeches, see Ramasubramanian and Miles, 2018.

Gary: Mmm hmm. Yeah…Just the way the different people act. They have people who act different. Different races and stuff.

Gabriella: I know that being inside can ramp up tensions. Are you somebody who feels comfortable – now that you're out - do you feel comfortable hanging out with other races?

*Gary: I talked to a Black guy here [at the shelter]. I mean I'm comfortable with them. But I mean he acts right, you know, doesn't act like a... (mouths word n*gger).*

Gabriella: But not while in jail?

*Gary: Oh, the jail? The same thing. We had a Black guy in jail here. He was crazy. You didn't go near him. He had screws loose, and (lowers voice) he acted like a n*gger and the other one acted like a n*gger, and they acted that way, so they get treated that way. The way I feel…I don't think I'm racist because if somebody talks to me and they act normal, I'll treat 'em normal. If they come up like (affects Black urban accent) 'Yo! What up, homie?' I'm like 'fucking idiot.'*

Shannon and Gary both acknowledged racial differences. They both grew up in largely white areas, and later on had some limited exposure to people of color, Shannon through travel abroad and Gary through incarceration. Through the course of their interviews, both occasionally juxtaposed their racial awareness with color-blind talking points. So, what made their ways of "seeing" race different? The answer is in their

understanding of what racial difference meant, and how their seeing related to their own racial identity.

Gary's view was that if you act like "a n*gger" then you confirmed something essential about Black identity, that being Black carries with it an inherent negative way of being, while "proper-acting" Blacks (meaning those that eschew urban Black codes of speech and behavior), whom he can hang with and who will get his respect, reign in this individual characteristic. Shannon, on the other hand, viewed race as something external. She focused on the socially constructed categories of gender, race, sexuality. These categories are external to individuals, hierarchical organizational systems of classification that are heavy with cultural meaning. Shannon was acutely aware of the way her social location within such system of classification shaped her perspective, and also shaped the perspectives of others with different social locations, like her brother.

Gary and Shannon both acknowledged seeing race, and they both had these racially aware moments in their performances mixed with color-blind elements. What made Shannon's woke performance different from a color-blind identity was not simply racial acknowledgment – Gary demonstrated that awareness. The key element differentiating Shannon's woke performance from a color-blind one was the acknowledgment of racial identities as socially constructed, and non-essential to individuals. Shannon indicated that she sees external systems as the causes of inequality, and that she sees her own whiteness as different from other racial identities because of its attendant privilege.

I met with Andrew, a father of two young girls in his mid-30s who lived in Middletown County. He and his wife both had creative careers and he had earned an MA

in theater. Andrew, like Gary, grew up in a white area but memorably interacted with a few Black people as a kid. Andrew specifically recalled three Black male schoolmates and remembered several negative interactions that he did not attribute to racial characteristics. I asked Andrew about interactions with people of color growing up.

> *Gabriella: Did you have a close relationship with any of people of color at school?*
>
> *Andrew: Not really. Actually, interestingly enough, the one African American dude in my [elementary] school kind of kicked my butt…And it was like, I think a lot of it would have been very stereotypical. I mean I didn't know how to take care of myself. I don't think there was any racial component, but the other kid was kind of a jerk and I didn't know what to do, and there was a fight. And that was probably the first interaction I had was that. Yeah. Yikes! (Laughs).*

Andrew moved from private religious primary schools to public high schools, where he had a few more interactions with Black classmates.

> *I get to high school and the other [Black] guy in my class got really upset about me encroaching on a girl he was interested in…And I do remember there was an African American guy in my gym class who I'm sure was a massive drug dealer, based on our conversations. And we talked three days a week in gym, and he might have been the only person who really talked to me that first year. He just made his money in an alternative way. "Sales*

> *and distribution," yes. So that, countering the other two, I was like "oh, you're going to be nice to me. Okay."*

Notice how Andrew characterized negative interactions with people of color. He specifically recognized the racial differences when he experienced some hostility and even physical violence growing up. But he did not couch his experience as the target of hostility in racial terms, he did not explain the situation through a belief something inherent about Black males and aggression. While these interactions, especially regarding a young, Black male as a drug dealer, could be easily seen through a stereotypical lens equating Black men with drugs, violence, and crime, Andrew was at pains to acknowledge that he did not view these interactions as rooted in racial differences, but in interpersonal conflict about girls or ephemeral issues. Like Gary, Andrew pointed out both conflicts and conviviality in his interactions with racial others, but he did not attribute criminality or violence to racial sources.

I asked Andrew for his definition of white privilege, and he responded with an illustration acknowledging how his nighttime jogging experience differs significantly in the risks from that of a similar man of color.

> *I think there's definitely moments where it's, you know, there are days that I've probably tried to not be on the road. Cinco de Mayo, Halloween, the nights that the odds are much higher that dumb things are going to happen to you. But I am well aware that I am far less likely to run into issues just being white and driving around out here.*

Andrew exhibited an understanding of racial differences and structural inequality. Throughout our conversations he specifically addressed the ways racial privilege is tipped towards powerful, older white men, and that this imbalance can have a detrimental effect on people over whom they have power. Andrew pointed out that his everyday experiences, like driving around his neighborhood, are potentially fraught only on nights when traffic is notoriously dangerous, but on the whole his daily experiences are not made more dangerous because of his racial identity. He said that his lack of worry when doing something as mundane as driving is something that those with white privilege need to own.

Woke performances, even though they often overlap with color-blind elements, involve directly acknowledging issues of race and racial identity, and often racial inequality. Andrew and Shannon's responses typified a woke white identity performance in that they acknowledged racial differences and were eager to concede that these have differential impacts in people's lives. While Gary also saw racial differences, he viewed racial stereotypes about behavior as being something that was based on internal truths. In Gary's understanding, Mexicans and Blacks are likely to act in certain ways, but if they control their impulses and act in accordance with white norms, he would have no problem with them. He did not see himself as racist because he was fine with select racial others, and could even be friends, as long as they acted a certain (white) way. For Andrew and Shannon, they recognized racial differences and were willing to discuss them, but as woke whites they centered their understandings in the privilege that comes with their racial position. The ways woke whites discuss race involves both recognizing racial difference and giving credence to the external social systems behind racial inequality.

Another central element to a woke performance is related to the visibility of difference, the desire for diversity and the acknowledgement of diverse populations as a social good. However, for woke whites in racially segregated areas this presented challenges.

PERFORMING WOKENESS: THE VALUING OF DIVERSITY

My woke respondents noted that diversity mattered to them, but that the goals of a diverse life were something that took effort on their part to achieve (strategies for this will be discussed in the next chapter). But the inherent value of diversity was a consistent characteristic of woke performances, with respondents hinting at why diversity was a goal.

This avowed desire for diversity is important for several reasons. First, it helps distinguish woke white identity performances from color-blind ones; color-blindness is dependent on the idea that racism is a thing of the past and that we have entered a post-racial society where diversity is already accepted and appreciated (Bobo 2011, Bonilla-Silva 2017, Vickerman 2013), In racially homogenous places, colorblind logics dictate that it would be racist to attempt to alter the racial composition because doing so would make race more visible. Wokeness eschews color-blind logic and supports boosting and appreciating diversity. Second, by yearning for diversity whites invested in a woke identity endorse the importance of racial difference. Third, this appetite for diversity demonstrates a woke perspective to an audience; it establishes those who yearn for difference as people who think about race even when their own racial identity is made salient through the presence of racial others. Valuing diversity can show who they are and how they feel

about race to other whites. In these ways, we see that diversity has substantive meaning for woke whites, as well as serving as a signal to themselves and others.

Whiteness is treated as a default identity, and much research into white identity demonstrates that whites often feel that they have no racial identity, which is the sole purview of racial minorities (Feagin 2013; Picca and Feagin 2007). In contrast, woke-identified whites see the absence of diversity, recognize when they inhabit veritable "diversity deserts," and are able to actuate racial thinking even when deeply immersed in low-diversity environs. My interviewees provided me with several justifications for why they thought diversity was important to have in their lives.

Diversity is Good for Kids

One central valuation of why diversity matters to woke whites is the perceived positive effects for children. When we met, Jennifer was in her very early thirties and a mother of two very young kids. She grew up in a decidedly white area just south of Middletown County, and ended up in Nebraska teaching chemistry at a state university after receiving her PhD. Jennifer and her husband were unsatisfied with the lack of diversity in Nebraska. When a job came up at a community college in Middletown County, Jennifer jumped at the chance, but it wasn't without risk. In her job interview, Jennifer explicitly brought up racial diversity as a social good – not something normally associated with the discipline of chemistry.

> *And when they were doing the phone interview and they asked me to sum up why I wanted the job in one word or phrase I said "diversity."… I was*

> *terrified because they didn't get back to me super quickly [after the interview]. And that's kinda a risky thing to say for chemistry. I mean you get the wrong person and they go "diversity?", that's not the answer for chemistry. Why was I honest!?! (laughs). I mean [Middletown County] it is still a pretty white area, but it isn't as bad as [Nebraska] was.*

While Jennifer was racially aware enough to see that the demographics of Middletown County were still largely white, she saw this job as an opportunity for relative improvement in this regard. As we chatted I asked her about school district demographics and the importance of diverse school populations. Her children were still a couple of years away from school age, but she had concerns about the highly ranked district where they lived at the time.

> *I don't know exactly what the diversity [in this school district] is comparable to, but I'm also worried about the pressure it would put on my children. I'm much more interested in a district that.... I don't know for sure but I'm pretty sure [where we live now], it's the whitest district. Just based on the way that, I don't know, the way that money and diversity go. The more money the less diversity. I felt like in the back of my head that's an issue, and I would say "hey, like if we can't send them to the best school district...But they're gonna have exposure to kids who don't look like them and different languages..." And that's not something I just say to make myself feel better, but that genuinely makes me feel good.*

Jennifer and her husband value diversity so highly that she would trade some of the affluence, reputation, and potentially quality of the school district for some greater

measure of exposure to diverse student populations. She recalled a trip back to the Middletown County area at Thanksgiving the year before the job opportunity came up, when her son Jonah was still an infant, and before her daughter was born. While Middletown County is mostly white, diversity is relative, and the presence of a modicum of racial heterogeneity gave Jennifer something to work with.

> *We went to an IHOP late at night to see a friend and there were people speaking different languages and that didn't look like Jonah. And I was like "I want this for my child." Because I don't want him...[Nebraska] was great, my students were phenomenal, but it was completely white. And we went to the child development center on campus, and of course campuses tend to be more diverse than the areas around them, and it was still super, super, white. Like we had I think one kid who had one parent who was English speaking but had one Spanish speaking parent and we're like "you're our diverse person. You're our diversity and you're not even that diverse! (laughs)…And, like I said, the opportunity to expose Jonah to at least a sampling of the world was very attractive to me.*

Jennifer explicitly noticed race, and the lack of racial diversity, as it pertained to the environment her children will inhabit. She knew that Middletown County was still a highly white area, but she also recognized that the global reality of diversity was much, much different from her narrow experience in Nebraska. Jennifer and her husband were willing to make sacrifices to give their children a more rounded view of the world and its peoples. She left a tenure track professorship and students that she loved in order to take a community college position in a more diverse area. Jennifer is emblematic of many woke

parents. As her kids mature, and their social world widens, parents like Jennifer hope that exposure to diverse groups of people will pay dividends in the form of children who are more accepting of difference and wise to the reality of the global population.

Diversity is Good Because of Shared Humanity and Interpersonal Connection

Another aspect of the value of diversity that my interviews revealed is that of personal growth and enrichment; woke whites saw diversity as a pathway to becoming better people by connecting with shared humanity. While my interviewees were recruited because they had come from areas with low racial diversity, some had had the opportunity to travel. This opportunity brought an appreciation for diversity and difference that broadened their global perspectives. For example, I interviewed Renee, a divorced mother of three in her late 40s, and a native of Middletown County. After leaving college Renee took a job working in Chicago for several months. This gave her a first taste of racial diversity, including daily interactions with non-whites, which Renee credits for broadening her understanding of the world and people in it.

> *In my hometown there was very much, there was only "Caucasian" (air quotes) descent, and not even too many ethnic European descent…very few… diverse races in my school. And it wasn't until I started working as a young adult in Chicago that I was exposed to that kind of diversity… So, I was like 'oh wow" and so I met diverse people. And so, I think that's what really exposed me to be more open minded about that. It was kinda cool.*

Renee fondly remembers this time in Chicago and her first exposure to other people from different backgrounds, people who were not “generic” white or ethnically-identified whites. These cross-racial connections made her more accepting and open minded, and she credits her experiences in Chicago with inspiring her to teach her children to value people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Diversity had a positive value for her personal development, but it is also an admittedly scarce resource in Middletown County, a situation she recognized as problematic.

Katie’s travels abroad brought her into contact with people who were racial and religious others. Tall, slim, and attractive, with a bohemian aesthetic and long, blond dreadlocks, Katie was born in rural Iowa and moved to Northwest Town. When we met she was in her early 20s, had just finished a degree in English Literature, and was a devout Christian. As a successful high school and college basketball player, Katie had the opportunity to travel and play in England for a few months. She described her upbringing as “super, super, white, like white farmers.” But Katie’s travel basketball experience brought her into contact with racial others in a profound way.

Katie said she was very grateful for her travel experiences because it allowed her to truly see the humanity of other people, particularly Muslims, in a way that was not available to people who did not get out of the small town “Podunk” area she called home. During her travels in England she befriended Rena, a fellow athlete who was a Muslim refugee from Syria.

> *And so, when I came home [from England] I was like "that's a thing that I want to go do, is go help people in the refugee crisis.” And it completely changed my viewpoint of Muslims, of, like, just all of that. Just because I*

> *hadn't been around it. And it was so wonderful. They're such wonderful people. And there was a lot of bad stuff going on in the [refugee] camp, like drugs and prostitution, but there's that in most states, you know? And it really helped me see them as people."*

The connections Katie forged allowed her to connect with a politically, racially, and religiously maligned group – Muslim refugees – in ways that "completely changed [her] viewpoint" on an entire group of people. Her friendship connection with Rena allowed Katie to not only develop a sense of racial verstehen, but fostered a desire to experience the danger and plight of the refugees, and to help if she could. Katie went on to volunteer for a month in a refugee camp in Greece set up for Syrian refugees, a move her parents forcefully opposed. This decision put Katie at risk personally, even though she dismissed some of the dangers, but it also brought her into conflict with more conservative family members who could not allow empathy to override their prejudices. But for Katie, these physical and emotional risks were worth the risk to deepen her transformative empathetic connection.

Diversity is the Future

Younger people I interviewed tended to express positive feeling for a diverse future, especially when it came to interracial relationship and families. When we met, Rebecca was 19 and taking a few college classes. She grew up in an affluent blended family, of which she was the youngest. For her, the diversity already present in the U.S. was on an inevitable upward trajectory, so she was mystified by people's negative

reaction to demographic shifts and changing norms of interracial intimacy. She had a new roommate who was mixed race named Tara, and whom she described as her best friend. Tara and Rebecca talked about racial issues frequently, and their talks, especially about the Movement for Black Lives, added to the quality of Rebecca's life and her understanding of the future. I asked Rebecca about this ease in talking about race, and she said she's usually comfortable with the subject, but with some parameters. "Yep, depending on the person...Younger people are much easier to talk to about it, more open." Similarly, Alexis (24) did not understand people's opposition to interracial relationships, and saw these types of pairings as more and more common, and antagonism towards them as outdated.

> *"I feel like Black and white kids [together], those relationships are not as unusual as they once were. You see biracial relationships everywhere you turn, so I feel like there's more of an understanding of it, but then again I also feel like going to [rural towns like Greenburg], there are a lot of old-timey, like stay with your race attitudes, that kind of thing."*

Alexis saw the increased normalization of interracial relationships as something positive and future-oriented. She disparaged places that were less cosmopolitan, more "old-timey," as going against the tide of positive social change. While many whites, especially older people, view demographic shifts away from whiteness as a threat on a scale from discomfort to racial genocide (Cramer 2016; DiAngelo 2018; Hochschild 2016; Metzl 2019), woke-identifying whites view these as indicative of a positive future with fewer racial divisions, and hopefully, less inequality.

Diversity as Rebellious

Other whites viewed diversity through a different lens: as a symbol of rebellion. Like many woke-identifying whites, Aaron worked to distance himself from his family and people from his hometown, where attitudes towards race were "backwards." When I asked him how he developed more progressive ideas about diversity, he credits his playing of early online multi-player video games and his interest in punk rock.

> *I mean I played them all the time when I was a kid…And I was in contact with, usually at that age, older people than me. A lot of them were college age or older. And so, I guess they were introducing me to ideas that I probably wasn't ready for. Or at least it would have been seen that way by the "in" group at that time that was around me. So punk rock, the internet, and I was just always around...It's part of the redhead spirit is being a rebel. I don't know. I still don't really understand it. But I'm not like the other people I grew up with. And I'm glad that I'm not.*

Aaron's assertion that he was glad to be different from the people he grew up, implying they are not progressive on race, highlights the importance of woke performances as a distinct white identity, different from the status quo. Woke-identified whites are in opposition to both overt racial hostility and color-blind indifference. Being different, rebelling against the norm, brings with it the benefits of self-respect, for people like Aaron. But embracing rebellion also poses the challenge of enacting an identity that is seen more at the vanguard. In majority white places, this means that woke performances include

some ambiguous practices involving diversity, which will be explored in more depth in the next chapter. Now, I will turn to one of the foundational elements of feeling wokeness, that of empathy with racial others.

WOKENESS AND EMOTIONS: RACIAL VERSTEHEN

Another way woke performances differ from color-blind is through the expression of a desire to understand the perspective of people of color and the burden that race places on their lived experiences. I refer to this impetus to understand the perspective of a racial other as *racial verstehen*. Weber's foundational methodological approach to sociological inquiry, Verstehen (literally "understanding" in German), meant understanding motivations and meanings from another's point of view, taking a subjective role and investigating, with the help of available knowledge, another's perspective. This is an informed empathy, an educated foray into another subjectivity. Woke performances are characterized by a specifically racial verstehen, a willingness of woke whites to use their available racial knowledge to attempt to feel the often-painful reality of a racial minority subjectivity. Thus, woke white performances often mean emotional discomfort for whites as they recognize their own racial privilege.

Aaron, the red-headed rebel, had very young children when I spoke to him. He expressed a knowledge of racial pain, an empathetic understanding of the deep harm and emotional damage racism brings. He worked as a student teacher in a school that had mostly Black children with whom he wanted to connect, but this connection led him

to the realization of the hurt and damage racism brings. Aaron witnessed the horror of racial hurt and how it was at odds with his desire to protect his children.

> *And I would probably, and I do now, try to keep my kids - or I will try to keep my kids - away from feeling racism and feeling that kind of discomfort. And those kids [at the school] were not… no one was able to keep them from that. No one will be able to keep them from that.*

While Aaron's infant son is white, Aaron's own foray into racial damage and hurt was so affecting that he wanted to do all he could to prevent his son from having to "feel that kind of discomfort," not from experiencing racism, but from witnessing and comprehending it. This is not to say that Aaron planned to shield his children from being aware of race; like most woke parents he wanted to raise woke kids. Rather the strength of Aaron's racial verstehen, his deep empathy with those Black students, made him dismay that any child could feel such pain. He acknowledged that pain was something no child deserves.

Fear of the racial other, especially of Black racial others, is an emotion that features prominently in much research on racism and its persistence (DiAngelo 2018; Ioanide 2015). In woke performances, the desire for racial verstehen engenders a willingness to understand the negative effects of racial discrimination. Recall Katie, the bohemian girl in her 20s living in Northwest Town, who traveled to England for basketball and made friends with a Syrian refugee from Aleppo.

> *She clung onto me… And she went back to Aleppo. Back to her family. And we were all like "Rema, you can't do that. You are going to die if you go*

> *there." And just to hear her story, hear what she had gone through, and what her whole family was going through was like, really intense...*

Katie's friendship with Rema, and her fear for others in the same situation, made Katie willing to defy her family's wishes and spend time working in a camp for other Syrian refugees. While Katie's contact with Rema was sporadic after Rema's return to Syria, the empathetic connection between these two friends was something that ended up expanding to an entire group of vulnerable people. Katie's lack of exposure to racial others, coupled with her father's racist polemics against Muslims, had primed her for a fear reaction, but empathy won out.

A frequent touchstone of inequality for woke whites was police violence against people of color. Racial verstehen was employed to help woke whites connect with this terrifying aspect of the Black experience in America. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1994[1903]), W.E.B. DuBois famously asked, "How does it feel to be a problem?" The visibility of police violence against Black people horrified many woke whites that I spoke with, who used racial verstehen to attempt to understand what being a problem meant, its risk of violence, and its risk of loss.

Woke white men, like Andrew earlier in this chapter, tended to recognize the privileged white skin gave them from being perceived as a greater threat by police. In contrast, women, especially mothers, demonstrated racial verstehen by imagining the pain of loss. Christine expressed shock and deep horror when we were talking about police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement, which she supports. For her the pain of losing loved ones, especially children, to police violence that rarely goes punished in the courts was overwhelming. She teared up as she said "Can you imagine? I mean

can you even imagine?! The pain those mothers feel, seeing their babies shot. Children! It kills my soul." Christine, and many other woke whites, knew they could never experience the truth or racism and its attendant mental and physical pain. But they attempted to understand it through using available knowledge and deep empathy.

WOKENESS IS FRACTURED

Scholars of culture have various terms for the ideas and images that make up any culture, and how these ideas are utilized by social actors, such as characterizing elements of culture as tools and our personal cultural knowledge as a toolkit from which we can draw (Swidler 1986). Culture is imperfectly available, deployed in fractured ways, and deeply entwined with emotions. Cultural change happens in the interstitial moments when multiple meanings combine from different sources; cultural schemes are expressed through different human actors, each with their own particular interests and perspectives, so they are never purely or perfectly reproduced (Ortner 1989; Sahlins 1987).

As discussed in the introduction, in the current racially liminal time, what defines an honorable white performance is in flux. The result of this realignment of what counts as honorable is some level of logical and conversational incoherence, with color-blind and woke elements coexisting in the same communities, the same households, the same conversations. While a performance of an honorable white identity is the larger, overarching goal for woke whites, the details of this performance are shifting and incongruous with competing woke and color-blind logics. In discussions of race, whites are able to "code switch" between different versions of an honorable white performance, often doing this seamlessly and without recognizing the contradictions.

Andrew signaled a shift towards a color-blind performance when we discussed workplaces, white dominance, and historical shifts. He signaled wokeness via an awareness of "old white men" being potentially problematic when they head institutions and workspaces, but shifted to a color-blind (and gender blind) stance:

> *I feel like some of these companies are starting to get these things right. And the same old white guys who don't want any [tattoo] ink showing at the office place [will be gone soon], [My wife] went to work for a recruiting firm for tech. And the company was literally run by three old white men. And it was one of the worst jobs she's ever had. Super stressful…and this is, I think, some of the problem of the government. The government is run by old white men that can no longer relate… I think the privilege is there. I think some companies are making some progress in getting these things right.*

Other white men, with whom Andrew shared a gender and racial identity, were identified by him as a problem and a barrier to progress. He mentioned that some companies that are moving towards diversity represent progress, and implied that such progress will continue with the aging out of the older generation of white male bosses. But then he shifted into color-blind logics:

> *You tell me that five people are going out for a job, my first question is not how many of them are women, my first question is not what their ethnicity is, my first questions is not their sexual orientation, my first question is how qualified are they? I don't care!*

He disjointedly switched from a woke performance rooted in recognizing racist and sexist leadership as problematic, into making a meritocratic and color-blind argument. Andrew asserted that he would not desire a position if he knew that it was earned not on merit, but he also says he does not want to think that he was refused a job or a position due to someone else ticking an imagined diversity box.

> *I also think that there's probably a little bit of legitimacy to people who, are gonna make the argument that there are probably out there white people who have been overlooked so somebody who can meet a quota somewhere. I think that happens, but again, that shouldn't be your concern if it's about being qualified. I try not to think about that when I'm applying to grad school, or when I'm applying to a job. I don't want to think that your either gave or refused me the job because I'm white, or because I'm male. I'm qualified, and we should have that conversation and not...So, I think it's there and I'm willing to acknowledge it, but I also think that there are plenty of people, especially the younger you get, that I don't think it's going to be as bad down the road.*

While Andrew expressed a hopefulness that younger generations would see past traditional markers of minority status, be it race, gender, or sexuality, he specifically said that “getting these things right” meant being blind to these divisions. He emphatically stated that he does not care about sexuality, race, or gender as a qualifying factor. But his focus on qualification echoed calls for a meritocracy, one central to color-blind ideology, undercut diversity arguments, and implied a level of agreement with color-blind

arguments against affirmative action programs that he explicitly mentioned supporting in other points in our discussion.

Fractured woke performances are not just about people struggling with deciding if a woke or a color-blind performance is the most honorable and true reflection of their position. Another way that woke white performance can fracture is when racial identity is subsumed to another, more salient identity. Leah normally took a woke position over the course of our discussion, until she talked about the racial diversity in her son Noah's school.

> *We [Leah and her husband] don't have a problem with any other people, any races... It wasn't an issue, because we don't see race, you know. We just, we don't see that being an issue or anything like that. So, no. We were more concerned that he was in a school where he felt respect and his needs were going to be met.*

When asked if diversity mattered in school choice, Leah switched to a color-blind stance. She claimed not to see race take the race of others into account, and her paramount concerns was child's comfort. Noah, her son, was diagnosed with autism and so finding a school that could serve him well was Leah's greater concern than diversity.

Interestingly, Leah's performance indicated that her identity as a good mother was at odds with her performance as a woke white woman. With competing identities, good mother vs. good woke white woman, Leah's performance demonstrated that wokeness can and will be subsumed, and color-blind logics re-emerge as more prominent.

PATHWAYS TO WOKENESS

How do white people from areas that are almost exclusively populated by only other white people come to develop racial verstehen? Why would someone from a majority white area become racially aware, especially when this is not the norm and might earn them scorn? Much research since the 1950s offer variations on the theme of Allport's contact hypothesis, that under certain conditions and with an eye to power differentials, prejudice can be reduced between groups by their members spending time together (Pettigrew 1998). Some research supports the basic premise of contact theory (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Trepagnier 2010), while some problematize it by showing cross-racial contact can make prejudice stronger (DaCosta 2009; Matias 2016; Ullucci 2011).

My research suggests that coming to the racially progressive position of wokeness can actually take two routes: in addition to direct contact with racial others, an indirect route to wokeness – a cultural imaginary – can be opened up via media. A cultural imaginary can be precursor to more direct interactions with racial others, laying the groundwork of empathy and curiosity about others that can then lead to direct contact. Sometimes the cultural imaginary is sufficient to start someone onto the path of racial progressivism, and sometimes it acts as empathetic priming for more direct commitment when the opportunities arise.

Direct Paths to Wokeness

Direct paths to wokeness from my interviews included face-to-face contact, conversations at work, childhood friendships, and college classes. Let's return to Renee, who worked briefly in Chicago in her early 20s before coming back home to Middletown

County. This time in her life represented her first close and frequent interactions with people of color.

> *And then when I was exposed to working in Chicago, a diverse city, I realized these people are educated! These people are intelligent, and productive adults! And I had had a very different view growing up. So, but, I was exposed to something very… narrow when I was growing up. And obviously I saw the other side later….*

Renee had limited direct exposure to racial others, combined with her experience being raised in a household where stereotypes about Black people as lazy and unintelligent were normalized. It was a dizzying and eye-opening experience to have her prejudices undermined by direct evidence. Her path to wokeness was through direct interaction with her colleagues of color, in keeping with the parameters of contact theory.

When Aaron entered college to become an elementary school teacher he had indirect exposure to racial others and to difference in general via music and internet gaming. When he was close to the end of his studies he spent time as a trainee teacher in a predominantly Black school. While Aaron was experiencing being a racial minority for the first time, he was also experiencing frustration as well as responsibility for the well-being of children, so he started asking questions of employees of color in the school.

> *I do remember asking the [Black] janitor… "what is racism like?" Like, what does it feel like? Because at this point, I was starting to be more aware of what these kids go through. I was starting to think about these kids' lives and how much different I grew up than them…And, um, I realized that I*

> *haven't experienced racism. I haven't even really seen it firsthand. And I guess I kinda wanted to understand what the other side was like. And I remember asking him and all he could really tell me was that it was, like, really uncomfortable. Uncomfortable was all he kept repeating. And, uh, I, I... Jealous isn't the right word but I really, really wanted to know what that was like. I think maybe so that I could be more sensitive to it, so I could be better at my job at that time.*

Aaron's strong desire to understand *what racism felt like* shows he was interested in establishing a sense of racial verstehen. He made several seriously insensitive attempts at getting knowledge, including wanting individual Black people to speak on behalf of the experiences of people of color as a whole. The janitor may well have been describing the interaction with Aaron as uncomfortable and racist. Aaron cringed when he thought back on his questioning, putting the janitor and other colleagues on the spot. He was embarrassed about his behavior in hindsight.

But direct connections are no guarantee that the necessary empathetic relationship that leads to racial progressive positions will be established. Class and power dynamics have an important role in whether direct contact effectively lessens prejudice. Take Raymond, for example. When we spoke, he had just lost his girlfriend to a terminal illness and was planning on staying with friends until he could find his own place, since he had been living with her. Raymond was in his mid-60s and grew up about eighty miles from Northwest Town, but travelled a bit when he was in the Navy. I asked him about his upbringing, and how it affected whom he associated with as an adult.

> *I truly was raised that all of us were equal. That even the girls were equal... I say I know lots of different people who are Native [American], and we're good friends... You know, that I'm not against them. And I've seen... I've hung with people of my race, white, who are...But prejudism [sic] exists on both sides and it's really sad. And you know I said, I learned that lesson when I tried to date a girl at Pascagoula Shipyards, and she was colored. And she came to work beat up by her brothers for trying to date me.*

Raymond took a more color-blind view about prejudice being rooted in personal dislike rather than in systems of inequality, and he relied upon the familiar "both side" framing of prejudice, effectively erasing the existence of white privilege and the advantages white systematically receive. In his case the empathetic foundation for racial verstehen was not laid, and Raymond did not move towards a racial progressivism despite his admitting that he has pursued cross-racial intimacy in romantic and friendship relationships.

Direct contact between whites and racial minorities is classed. More affluent whites are able to limit their interactions with people of color, and can avoid entering into non-white spaces, while poorer people of color must frequently enter and adapt to white environments (Anderson 2015). Poorer whites come into more frequent contact with racial others, even in areas of low racial diversity, because racial minorities are overrepresented among the poor. The direct contact that occurs in the spaces has the potential to activate empathy and limit prejudice for outgroups, and there is evidence that belonging to another marginalized identity group like being white and LGBTQ can aid this process (Trepagnier 2010). But there are no guarantees, and there are too many variables to predict with much certainty when direct contact will activate empathy enough to move a white individual to

a racially progressive position. What previous research and my own data suggest, however, is that something must trigger that spark of empathy, a necessary but not sufficient condition of the path towards progressivism, especially its contemporary iteration of wokeness. Sometimes, that trigger is through the cultural imaginary.

The Cultural Imaginary: Alternative Paths to Wokeness

While research emphasizes direct contact with racial others as the path to racial progressivism (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2003; Picca and Feagin 2007; Trepagnier 2010), for many whites the path to a woke identity began with exposure to cultural elements that offered a broader vision of more diverse places. Aaron's path to wokeness included rebellious punk music, and links to others via gaming on the internet, which coincided with a shrinking of his actual social connections because he began to question the tenets of his church.

> *So, there was punk music, then there was getting kicked out of church, and then the internet...And suddenly you're in contact with people seemingly around the world. Certainly, around the United States, that were all different. And you're no longer trapped in this small town. And that just grew and grew along with the internet.*

Similarly, Bruce grew up about five miles outside of a small town near Middletown County, and only remembered encountering a few people of color during his entire childhood. Bruce's exposure to music via radio and MTV (which also got him kicked out of a conservative Christian church), is credited with opening his eyes to other ways of being, and other types of people. Similarly, Kathy, a single mom in her early 50s, shared an

intergalactic way she distanced herself from her "small-minded" parents in the diversity desert of far southern Middletown County in the 1960s and 1970s.

> *This sounds corny, but Star Trek was really important (laughs). I watched all of the reruns after school. Here were all these people from different backgrounds, different races, and they were all working together. And kissing! Lt. Uhura and Kirk![16] That was so different, and so hopeful to me. It wasn't like anything I saw around me, but I was like "why couldn't it be like that?"*

The exposure to difference that these woke whites experienced early in their lives framed a cultural imaginary in which difference seemed positive - rebellious, exotic, and hopeful - and the narrow sameness of their homes seem stultifying. These stories suggest pathways to wokeness do not need to be through direct activation of empathy for racial others, but rather can come from a cultural imaginary, generated by a combined negative association with people in one's immediate circle and indirect positive associations with diversity through media.

Even in the cultural imaginary, the horrors of racial violence can have profound impact. Tanya grew up in Mountainville, and had just turned thirty when we spoke. Her elementary school was small and the middle and high schools were combined, with a few Latinx students who came and went and a few Black students whom she knew by

[16] The kiss between Nichelle Nichols as Lt. Uhura and William Shatner as Captain Kirk in the episode "Plato's Stepchildren" broadcast on 11/22/1968 is often cited as the first scripted interracial kiss between a Black and a White actor on US broadcast television.

acquaintance. Tanya's path to wokeness began with realizing the danger of the mundane for people who lacked white skin.

> *I remember reading about Trayvon Martin, with his hoodie and his skittles, was it? He was just walking, and gets tackled and shot and the guy is not guilty? Are you kidding me? That's bullshit. It pissed me off, and I remember thinking that's how everyone dressed in my high school. Like he wasn't doing anything any of us didn't do, but he was Black, and he got shot.*

Tanya's outrage was linked to the similarities between Trayvon Martin and her own friends and family. Hoodies and sweets, walking through the neighborhood, these activities should not be dangerous, she thought. The intensity of media content can flip the empathy switch, setting someone on the path to racial progressiveness in the absence of direct contact with others.

CONCLUSIONS

Central to most performances of whiteness is a concern with appearing respectable, with maintaining the idea of the good white person. Various scholars have noted how even well-meaning white allies perpetuate racism and inequality (DiAngelo 2018; Hagerman 2018; Hughey 2010; Sullivan 2014). What makes a performance of whiteness successful is achieving the standard set for a good white person. In the years since the Civil Rights Era, this standard for an honorable white performance was color-blindness. Now, the concept of wokeness is percolating through culture, particularly via social media. It is becoming an available cultural touchstone for racially progressive whites, concerned with racial injustice.

Wokeness has developed in reaction to color-blindness and is defined by specifically acknowledging racial difference and critiquing racial inequalities. Woke whites do not accept that diversity is already achieved, and claims about the importance of racial and other forms of diversity are foundational to a woke white identity. And even in the absence of people of color, woke whites emotionally connect with imagined racial others through empathetic projections I term racial verstehen, and sometimes find their way to wokeness via the cultural imaginary, as promulgated by media or other cultural elements. But, like all cultural elements, wokeness is fractured. Woke performances frequently also include markers of hegemonic color-blindness, and the acknowledgement of this complexity in honorable white performances allows for a more nuanced understanding of whiteness, especially as it is understood in this racially liminal period.

A significant part of wokeness shared by my interviewees was an expressed desire to embrace diversity, even as all of them also live in areas of marked racial homogeneity. The next chapter explores this irony by asking “How do woke whites perform their racial identity in the absence of racial others? And how do those who support diversity access or even promote it in their racially homogenous surroundings?”

CHAPTER 3: PERFORMING WOKENESS IN NON-DIVERSE PLACES

One of the strongest legacies of the system of racial hierarchy in the US is residential segregation. Whites - especially middle-class and higher - still live markedly racially isolated lives (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2003). The woke-identified whites that I spoke with struggle with the irony of showing an appreciation of racial difference in places characterized by their homogeneity. These woke folks place a high value on diversity, and this value is central to their identity as honorable white people. Yet they lived in places that are "diversity deserts," where access to opportunities to interact with racial others in their community are limited.

This chapter deals with what I term the "diversity paradox." Woke whites are dedicated to showing the ways they appreciate racial diversity, but this is a challenging prospect in areas where such diversity is a scarce resource. The diversity paradox is important because of the ways woke whites attempted to adapt to its challenges. One of the most significant adaptations is the way they negotiate the meaning of diversity.

Woke whiteness is predicated upon the idea that diversity has inherent value. This notion requires that woke whites acknowledge race and endorse the importance of racial difference, an important distinction between woke identity performances and color-blind ones. In the previous chapter I detailed the ways that diversity represents a moral and social good to woke whites. My respondents said it was good for children to experience diversity, to make them aware of the range of human perspectives and identities as citizens of the world. Diversity was valued because it allowed for interpersonal

connections in ways that highlighted our shared humanity, thus transcending racial divides. Demographic changes were also important to woke whites, who saw the decreasing numerical (and social) power of whites as part of a positive future where white supremacy was weakened. Embracing racial diversity and difference in low-diversity environments was seen as a rebellious stand against the ubiquity of white norms and the racial complacency of color-blindness.

Woke performances, even though they often overlap with color-blind elements, involve directly grappling with issues of racial identity and racial inequality. Acknowledging race for the woke whites I spoke with also meant seeing its glaring absence. Many of my respondents noted that diversity mattered to them, but that the goals of a diverse life were something requiring effort on their part to achieve and were not without perceived risks. In what follows, I detail the ways woke whites try to deal with the diversity paradox, the desire for a diverse experience in areas of low racial variation. Managing the diversity paradox meant having flexible qualifications for what counts as diverse and when. It also included various strategies for engaging with diversity, including parenting for exposure to difference, and using the consumer market to gain access to cultural and racial variation. Finally, I discuss the implications for performing wokeness to largely white audiences, and how whites qualify the cost/benefits of living in diverse places.

CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS OF THE MEANING OF DIVERSITY

Living in areas with low levels of racial variation, while wanting to demonstrate a commitment to the value of diverse communities, presented a distinct challenge for woke whites, one that required flexibility and creativity. First, woke whites expanded and contracted the concept of diversity. Woke white performances depended on seeing and

valuing racial diversity, but they adapted to doing so in diversity deserts by making diversity a relative matter.

Expanding Diversity: Race is to Culture

With practical limits on the chances of interacting with members of racial minorities, one conceptual approach was to expand the definition of "diverse" to include ethnic and cultural elements. This allowed woke whites to stay true to their assertion that they valued the role of diversity in their lives while mitigating some of the difficulty in finding ways to connect with racial others.

Cultural diversity, even when it was white culture, was often used as a proxy for racial diversity. Aaron held out the possibility of sending his children to a local French immersion school. Jennifer mentioned taking advantage of cultural programs close to her home.

> *Yeah, so we want to expose our kids to diversity. Like we live close to this church where there's gonna be a Serbian festival, so we'll take them to that next week. And we're introducing them to foods. I gave him a piece of a savory kimchi pancake the I was eating last week, so he can get a taste of different cultures.*

From an anti-racist perspective, the bar here is set low by focusing on white European cultures. What this approach to finding access to diversity does is equate exposure to culture with exposure to racial and ethnic difference, which has the effect of flattening the hierarchies that underlie inequality. Woke whites in diversity deserts employed a broadened view of diversity to make up for the lack of true racial heterogeneity in their

environments. Diversity, and diversity talk, starts to encompass ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, religion, and class backgrounds. In fact, as Jennifer's quote indicated, it can even mean literal taste of cultures without any cross-racial or cross-cultural interaction with other people.

An expanded definition of what counts as diverse also had the effect of overestimating the true levels of racial diversity in majority white areas. Because diversity represented something valuable to whites invested in wokeness, they began to focus on racial diversity everywhere, actively identifying racial others and prioritizing their presence rather than their relative rarity. For example, Colleen said this about her neighborhood school in Middletown County:

> *I think [my son's school] is actually pretty diverse. The area we live in, with my son's school, there are several kids whose parents work for [major telecom and GPS software corporations headquartered in the area], so there are kids in his class who have parents from India.*

Colleen's neighborhood in Middletown County had very low levels of racial diversity, particularly lacking in Black and non-white Latinx residents. However, it did have a small population of families from India and several Asian countries. These families, and their children, were hyper-visible. Colleen was actively attuned to looking for evidence of diversity, both because she valued it for her child and because it was part of her woke white identity. As token theory would predict (Kantor 1977), this magnification of diversity occurred in situations where there were small pockets of racial minorities that ended up being more visible than their numerical presence would indicate.

While Colleen was magnifying diversity in her local school and neighborhood, this overestimation was repeated at town and city levels as well. Much like whites consistently overestimate the closeness of their relationships to people of color as a way of proving their lack of racial hostility (Bonilla-Silva 2017), the desire to demonstrate wokeness, with an explicit commitment to diversity, fostered a broadening of what counts as diverse that simultaneously watered it down.

Andrew's wife Laurie described having a young Black girl as her best friend. She explained that she grew up in Portland, Oregon, which she characterized as "a really diverse place." Yet Portland was 76.1% white in the 2010 census, and while that number is down from 84.6% in 1990 and 92.2% in 1970, it remained markedly white (US Census Bureau 2018). For the woke whites I spoke to, however, places like Portland, or even Middletown County and Mountainville, do count as diverse, because they are relatively more diverse than even whiter areas. Woke whites frequently reported perceiving an area as racially much more diverse than it was.

Contracted Diversity: Blackness as a Measure of Authentic Diversity

Yet it is not just that woke whites always *expanded* what counted as diversity. Instead, in my interviews, I found that depending on how they wanted to characterize a certain location, sometimes they expanded the definition of diversity to include racial/ethnic/cultural people, practices and flavors, and other times they narrowed it to mean only the presence of Black bodies. Vanessa was born in a college town adjacent to Mountainville, and lived there until she moved in with her grandparents in high school and began attending a very rural school 45 minutes away in Greenburg. Vanessa's

expansion of diversity included both the inclusion of cultural standards as well as hypervisibility of minorities, and overestimation of the diversity of a locale.

> *For me, being raised in [the Mountainville area] there were a lot of different, what am I trying to say, a lot of difference. Lots of different skin colors, different cultures, different religions.*

The presence of the university in Mountainville did mean that this area had a bit more racial diversity than the surrounding county, but it remained largely rural and whites were still considerably overrepresented compared to national averages. In fact, the college town that Vanessa grew up in was just under 85% white, while the national average is 73.3% white, according to the 2010 Census (US Census Bureau 2018). Asians made up the largest minority population at 7.8% of the town, largely due to the influence of the local university and its international student body. Yet she placed racial (skin color) diversity on par with religious and cultural, indicating that she found each type of diversity equally valid and valuable. She was upset about moving from this college town to Greenburg because of its perceived racial homogeneity.

> *When I moved to Greenburg (sighs)…I was upset about moving to Greenburg because it had a reputation as a redneck [high] school, and it is. And there were only like two Black kids in the whole school! And this sounds bad, but they acted white. They didn't act like they were from a different culture or type or anything like that, so it was much different to switch schools and be in that role, and guiltily even as an adult, when I'm driving through Greenburg now. It's kind of blossoming into this community now which is way different, people started being like "Oh, I like to live out there*

> *where it's peaceful." And so even now when I'm driving down the street and I see people of different origins I'm like "OMG, good for Greenburg! I didn't know that people like that were coming here. Cool."*

Vanessa's account of the differences between the Mountainville area and the nearby Greenburg are significant, in that she envisioned the diversity of Mountainville and its immediate environs as being decidedly varied. Her appreciation of heterogeneity was demonstrated in the fact that she applauds the fact that the once redneck mountain town of Greenburg is now attracting people from "different origins," which reflects positively on the town itself.

Two things were notable in this passage. First, Vanessa's account conflated race with culture by pointing out that her Black classmates "acted white…[t]hey didn't act like they were from a different culture," displaying a problematic underlying assumption that racial others would be expected to have their own, different, Black culture. The celebration of a diversifying Greenburg, noting "people of different origins" seemed to imply that the Blacks who grew up in the area and acted like the white residents did not sufficiently contribute to diversity because they were not "culturally" Black as she expected. Second, Vanessa's specific mention of only a few Black students is used as proof that Greenburg was not diverse. But Vanessa's own experience in the Mountainville area had very few Black people as well. The diversity she claimed to see was racial (largely Asian) and cultural and religious. The presence or absence of Black bodies is used as a yardstick for the lack of diversity in one instance, but "people of other origins" or differing cultures or religions, still with the absence of people of Black African descent, is sufficient diversity in another.

Was Colleen having a few kids in her son's class who are the children of Indian immigrants much different, say, than Alexis's rural Connecticut upbringing with only "one Black guy and one Black girl" in her classes? Jennifer's move to Middletown County was dependent upon having options for exposure to hearing other languages, or a literal taste of other cultures. But again, Jennifer recognized the overall whiteness of Middletown County, held in contrast with the "super, super white" demographics of her previous home in Nebraska. When woke whites worked to excuse, justify, or just tell a positive story about their own contexts, my respondents had very different measures for what counted as sufficient diversity, equating racial diversity with religious and cultural difference. Additionally, woke whites in diversity deserts used Blackness as the most visible marker of the lack of diversity.

In the course of my interviews I asked all my respondents about their first memories of people of color. For many of them, this person was a schoolmate in elementary or high school, even college. While my woke-performing respondents expressed the importance of diversity in their lives, they also spoke of how non-diverse their experiences were growing up. When they spoke about bringing diversity into their lives now, they often used things like Indian food, or travel to Europe or the Middle East, or the presence of people from India in their children's classes as their touchstones. However, when they thought about the lack of diversity in their own past, they zeroed in on the absence or presence of Black bodies as the measure for whether a place or organization was diverse or not.

I asked Bruce and Christine about their experiences with diversity as children, and both responded by claiming they could count the number of Black students in their schools on one hand. Alexis described her upbringing as "not diverse at all" and remembered only

a couple of Black kids in her elementary school growing up. When I asked Kurt about the demographics of his neighborhood growing up, he replied:

> *Growing up in a farm community, no, there were hardly any...any, anybody. No. Anybody who wasn't white. [My neighborhood] was basically… Like in the 1980s I think there was maybe five black students in the entire school.*

Andrew went to a private high school with around one hundred kids in his class. He said:

> *"I think that in my, through the course of going to school, I think I had two African American guys [as classmates], and that's about it as far as any kind of ethnic anything."*

The use of Blackness as a yardstick for diversity was extremely common. Sean and I spoke about his earliest interactions with anyone of color.

> *Gabriella: And what about the first time you interacted with people of color in person?*
>
> *Sean: Um, elementary school.*
>
> *Gabriella: Lots of racial diversity?*
>
> *Sean: No. No. It's, uh, 50 to 1. 100 to 1. But there were a few. There were a few African Americans in my public school. It was a very small school. Very rural, very small school. There are 3 or 4 elementary schools for the county, one high school/middle school consolidated. And it's probably 50 or 60 to one. There are very few.*

Gabriella: Did you have people you considered your friends that were African Americans?

Sean: Not really until High School, and even then, not one who was really a friend. There was a kid who was Puerto Rican who was kind of a friend, and there was a kid who was an African American who I used to play basketball with. But again, not really friends. I spent time with them. I didn't really have friends for the most part.

Sean, like the other respondents, defined his childhood experience as lacking in diversity because only a few Black students were present. He did point out someone from a Latino background in High School, but he does not fall into the common trap of racial progressives of overestimating the closeness of these relationships.

My respondents who performed any measure of woke white identity zeroed in on the absence of Blacks in their childhoods as part of their personal narratives of "seeing" race, and learned early on that diversity meant the presence of Black bodies. These notions of the meanings of diversity competed with the expanded definitions they deployed at other times (including white European cultures under the umbrella of "diverse"), and re-inscribed the dominant Black/white divide in racial relations in the United States.

In the United States, our racial divisions highlight the Black/White divide (Alba 2009), to the point that Black African immigrants find it challenging to navigate their own identities in an American context (Vickerman 2016). I found that for woke whites in areas of low racial diversity, the role of Blackness and the presence or absence of Blacks and

Black culture represented an additional paradox. The presence of Black people and Black culture was used as a marker for "real" diversity. Black people were used as examples, as measuring sticks for how diverse a place was. Woke whites who acknowledged race also recognized the presence or absence of Black individuals in particular.

On the other hand, their expanded definitions of diversity had the paradoxical effect of erasing the importance of Black people to diversity in the United States. In their own woke performances, whites went to great lengths to declaim the ways they bring diversity into their lives, via the strategies detailed throughout the beginning of this chapter. Hagerman (2018) points out in her study of affluent white children that many of her respondents believed "the presence of any person of color makes [their] school diverse" (2018:85). In their discussions of how they embrace diversity, my respondents seemed to follow a similar logic, making any present individuals of color hyper-visible. However, its absence was frequently focused on Blackness.

This framing, where the absence of diversity hinged on Blackness, but the presence of diversity focused on everything but, speaks to the enduring legacy of a particularly American understanding of race. DuBois declared the color line the "challenge of the 20th century;" others have shown it still plagues us into the 21st century (Alba 2009, Bobo 2011, Bonilla-Silva 2017). The US racial hierarchy still very much depends on an understanding of the importance of Blackness. Various scholars have theorized that our racial hierarchy, with whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom, and "others" in-between, is not as ossified as we may think. Various "ethnic" groups from Southern and Eastern Europe have made the leap into broader categories of whiteness (Alba 2009), Jews have straddled a liminal space between whiteness and otherness (Azoulay 1997), and there

are indications that the category of white may be open to so-called “model” minorities (Vickerman 2013).

While the fluidity of racial categories in this country may be underestimated, those moments when my respondents emphasize the absence or presence of Black people as a marker of diversity reveals two important points. First, they indicate how Blackness as a marker of difference looms very large in the consciousness of whites, especially those concerned about acknowledging racial inequality. Second, it reveals that Blackness is not only central for regressive whites, but that even whites who are racial progressives view Blacks as the apex of racial otherness, due to the fact that Blacks represent a large racial minority category in the US (13% of the population in the 2010 census), or to the unique cultural meanings they occupy today because of their history as enslaved peoples.[17] Whatever the reason, this focus on Blackness as the bar for authentic diversity is important for understanding the way woke whites relate to racial difference.

Woke whites did not only re-define diversity as a concept, they coupled this with strategies for bringing greater diversity into their lives. They had various strategies, including parenting for exposure, and using market options.

STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING WITH DIVERSITY: EXPOSURE PARENTING

Exposure to diversity, be it through music or movies or church festivals, was central to the experiences woke parents want to give their children. Pugh (2009) coined the term “exposed childhoods” to capture the phenomenon wherein affluent African American families would take pains to make sure their children attended enrichment activities with

[17] https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb11-cn125.html

less affluent Black children, helping them learn to navigate their own Black identity and learning about Blackness away from their majority white schools. This type of exposed childhood "rests on consumption, both pathways and commodities" (Pugh 2009:200, see also Dow 2019). In contrast, the woke white parents I spoke with sought out exposed childhoods for diversity. They deploy commodities like Disney DVDs and attendance at "ethnic" festivals as vital pathways for exposing their children to the diversity of the world beyond their majority white enclaves, potentially opening doors to family race talk (Hagerman 2018).

Jennifer, who described giving her son a kimchi pancake, referenced that symbol again as an example of how she hoped to keep her son engaged and desirous of less ordinary things.

> *So, we're doing this hippy-dippy thing called baby-led-weaning. It sounds hippy-dippy but basically, it's just lazy (laughs). It's just you feed the kid what you eat...I remember we had Korean, and like I said he had a kimchi pancake when he was less than a year old, and he gummed it. He likes spicy things. Now, he's almost two, we're getting into he likes gummy bears and goldfish and chicken nuggets and that kind of stuff. So, we're like we need to do more of these things to get him exposed, more international events and again, we like food so any exposure that we can get him to food flavors is amazing.*

While her child, like many two-year-olds, was fond of chicken nuggets and goldfish crackers, Jennifer was concerned that his palate would not develop to appreciate the wide variety of flavors available to him. For Jennifer, an exposed childhood would help her son

combat his love of “white bread” type foods, the kind of foods typical in white households. Jennifer was emphatic of the need to cultivate in her son a desire for the diverse tastes of the world as one avenue to appreciating diversity. Like Sean and other woke parents I spoke with, Jennifer also viewed exposure to languages and cultural output as vital for her son’s development.

> *[My son] has Kindermusic and so that CD goes in the car, and I do love that. So, they do things in other languages and other cultures and I love that. Exposing him to jazz and opera and I love that. And that’s something that was important to us, because taking him out of daycare [to save money], that puts a lot of pressure on my husband [who stays at home]. And daycare is great for diversity. And for exposure to different things.*

Jennifer and her husband are financially constrained, so to save money on childcare costs they opted to have him stay home with their son. The move meant that their son lost exposure to actual interactions with a more diverse group of kids such as he experienced at daycare, so Jennifer and her husband Andy turned to the consumer market to offset this loss. However, this turn to market-based approaches came with its own set of problems. It was difficult to make choices, for example, which did not reinforce the “otherness” of different cultures or races or that reinforce harmful racial stereotypes (Childs 2014). The performative aspect of consuming diversity through the market was, on its surface, aligned with the woke value of appreciating diversity, but it quickly became more complex depending on what is consumed and how.

While my sample did not include elite affluent parents, I saw parallels to the wealthy white families described by Hagerman (2018) in her book *White Kids: Growing Up with*

Privilege in a Racially Divided America. Hagerman reported that her families felt "the purpose of [global] travel is either to gain an appreciation for global human difference or to learn more about forms of social inequality across the world…introducing [their children] to the cultural diversity that spans the international community" (2018:133). Because the woke whites I spoke to were not in a financial position to plan international travel, they turned to other forms of commercial exposure parenting techniques. The use of foreign language music, the international food, the tickets for ethnic festivals, all of these were motivated by the desire among woke white parents to give their children exposure to racial, ethnic, and cultural Others. For woke whites, exposed childhoods look different up and down the class ladder, but they shared similar motivations.

This exposure parenting strategy has four major implications. First, it serves as part of a woke white performance where diversity is a central value, and an implicit good for children. Second, it potentially contributes to a "cultural imaginary" for children akin to that which served as an alternate pathway to wokeness for some of their parents. Third, however, it relies upon problematic elements of consumer culture that make "Others" available for purchase, in turn re-inscribing the racial status quo. The long history of white "culture vultures" appropriating from people of color (Collins 1998, 2006), and the current debates over the nuances between cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation (Collins 2006) is relevant here. Finally, as previously mentioned, this practice has the effect of equating racial difference with cultural or religious difference, which flattens out the effects of different systems of inequality. Exposure to foreign languages is commendable, but exposure to racial others should (according to woke goals) arouse discussions about inequalities. Treating such exposures as all part of the same pro-

diversity pot risks the erasure of social injustices that are antithetical to the expressed goals of wokeness. Woke white parents do not always seem to take great care to contextualize differences into their historical and political backgrounds.

Buying Diversity and Eating the Other: Consumer Practices

For white folks invested in performing a woke identity but living in diversity deserts, the realm of consumer culture is a source – and sometimes the only source - for bringing diversity into their lives. The consumer marketplace is dominated by a white racial frame (Henderson, Hakstian, and Williams 2016) that allows ideas of racial and ethnic others to be offered up as "ethnic spice" (hooks 1996; Veresiu and Giesler 2018). In her essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance" hooks wrote "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 1992:21). Consumer culture, and especially media culture, is often rife with stereotypical images and over-simplified caricatures that are made palatable for white audiences (Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi 2017). Nonetheless, the woke whites I spoke with tried to curate a diverse life through thoughtful consumption of media choices, food, and travel while being mindful of the problematic representation of racial minorities in media and consumer goods.

Bruce is a divorced dad in his late 40s, who works in higher education. The first time Bruce travelled overseas was for a three month-stint in Jordan, Israel, and Palestine, a period of disorienting culture shock for him. He learned to barter and haggle, he developed a taste for falafel (which he subsequently lost after a terrible case of food poisoning), and he woke up to his own white privilege. While Bruce grew up very low-income, he had managed to move into the middle class, but the poverty of his youth did

not prepare him for what he saw, in particular, among the Palestinians in Israeli-occupied territory. While shocking, this immersion in a different world made him much more interested in seeking out diversity where he could find it in Middletown County. Mostly, due to the expense of travel, he expressed this desire through food – he said he would "try anything once" - and foreign shows and movies on Netflix.

Similarly, Dave told me about how he and his wife try to bring diversity into their lives, which often includes trying different "ethnic" foods and even making them at home, adjusted for their family's tastes. Dave's wife seems to focus more specifically on making sure their kids see people who look different, while Dave himself focuses more on thinking about cultural diversity.

> *My wife's probably a bigger fan of making sure my son sees people who are of different ethnicity and of different skin tones, but I figure he's going to see that regardless because we don't really shelter him. I mean, we don't expose him to stuff that's completely age-inappropriate (laughs), but if he sees someone dressed differently then we're going to talk about it. It's not something to stare at any more than you stare at anything else. That's a cultural thing, or whatever. Or "guess what we're having for dinner? I guess our watered-down version of what they'd be eating too!" So, like, they're not weird like you think they are, I mean, if he even thinks they are at that point.*

Dave's concern for his son was that he learned that just because someone may be dressed differently, or has clothing that indicates cultural differences, that his son does not see them as "weird." While he accepted that kids might initially view difference as bad or unwelcome, Dave nonetheless wanted his very young son to accept and not stigmatize

people who are different based on skin color or culture. His wife was more intentional about exposing their son to racial diversity; Dave supported this exposure effort, including bringing “watered-down” versions of other cultures into their food choices.

Dave’s joking about the watered-down spice of ethnic foods was a self-mocking signal, one that other woke whites also employed in interviews. This type of self-deprecation told me that he was aware of his own whiteness, and that he viewed that whiteness as ordinary, less than exciting, and not something he took pride in. This signal reinforced his woke performance; it showed he was very aware of his own racial position, and was not so invested in defending it, being mindful of how defenses of white culture are linked to white supremacy and nationalism. It also helped him establish a bond with me as a fellow white person. Self-deprecating humor is a type of self-disclosure, and is used to minimize possible value judgement that is also used to build rapport with an audience (Matwick and Matwick 2017). In a racial context, such joking helps to establish boundaries of racial in-groups (Weaver 2016), so Dave’s joke implying whites were unable to handle highly spiced ethnic cuisines signaled his wokeness and his whiteness to me as his audience. Dave parodied his own family’s attempts to broaden their cultural experiences, indicating that he knew such attempts were done in earnest but that the benefits of finding diversity through such practices may not be fully realized.

In addition to food, media choice was a popular way for woke whites to demonstrate their desire to consume widely and diversely. Woke white parents were very intentional about the media consumption happening in their households. Christine typified the struggle many parents faced to balance what is popular with what they think will be good for their children to consume. Her children were in the midst of a Frozen

fandom that ran deep, and they were not alone. The 2013 Disney film was one of the highest grossing animated movies of all time and remains a marketing juggernaut (Kounang 2017) that even led to a bump in popularity for the name Elsa (Konnikova 2014). But Christine worried about the racial politics behind the media in her house. She "also got Mulan for them, and Pocahontas," she said. "Because I don't want them to only see white princesses."

Sean's path to wokeness included early exposure to hip-hop artists such as 2 Live Crew when he entered middle school. As he told me, it was the age of MTV, hip-hop, and basketball. In his school, he and any other white kids who consumed "Black" music were likely to be targeted with the slur "wigger," a portmanteau of "white" and "n*gger." Sean described loving the beats and the flow in hip-hop, and the storytelling about lives very different from his own. Sean viewed himself as a musical omnivore, and hoped to pass this on to his son.

> *He's going to have exposure to a wide range of music, first of all. Everything from African Pop Funk to classical to Klezmer, if he wants. Heck we could listen to some Mexican Polka if that's what he's into…And that's the wonderful thing about living in this age. I had to take what I could get, so some extent. What could I find? Who has a copy of this that I can hit record, you know? And today's children... Anything is available now. And I love that he has access to anything and everything.*

In this comment, Sean specifically highlights music associated with different ethnicities and non-whites. Klezmer is traditionally associated with Eastern European Ashkenazi

Jews, and while Jewishness has a complicated relationship to whiteness,[18] Klezmer and its various revivals are very much outside of the white mainstream (Baade 1998). Mexican Polka and African Pop Funk are musical types that originate and dominate in non-white places and with largely non-white audiences.

> *And I'm going to try to not only give him access but give him exposure to anything and everything. And see what he picks and chooses, and what he likes over time. And chances are what he likes will be terrible. It will be Justin Bieber with auto-tune, and like the worst Casio keyboard backbeat you can imagine, and the phrase be like, you know "who let the cat's[19] in?" and they'll repeat that 500 times and that will be the song. And I will want to beat myself in the head with a 2 by 4, but he would have heard the Beatles and Tchaikovsky and Miles Davis and everything else. He'll have exposure to those things.*

Sean's passage indicated he subscribed to exposure parenting as well, and that world music was an important and accessible option for showing his son Liam the rich and wide variety that various cultures had to offer, a potential source of a cultural imaginary that represents diversity.

Sean's consumption of world music especially included a certain element of self-congratulation, a not-uncommon characteristic on the part of whites who see themselves as culturally open, tolerant, and cosmopolitan (Hess 2013). Sean participated in a

[18] See, in particular Azoulay's (1997) *Black, Jewish, and Interracial: It's Not the Color of your Skin, but the Race of your Kin, and other Myths of Identity* and Goldstein (2006) *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*.

[19] Or, more likely, the Baby Shark https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqZsoesa55w

modified version of Bryson's "Anything but Heavy Metal" (1996) by distancing his own tastes from auto-tuned pop and Justin Bieber fandom, while positioning his own appreciation for The Beatles, Tchaikovsky, and Miles Davis as representative of quality. He said he wanted, above all, for his son to experience cultural omnivorousness (Peterson 1992). And where Sean's own parents threw out his entire cassette collection because they worried about his exposure to 1990s "gangsta" rap and the sexual explicitness of 2 Live Crew, Sean was positioning music of racial and ethnic others as a positive exposure. Be it Miles Davis or African Pop, Sean positioned this as on par in cultural importance with white paragons such as The Beatles and Tchaikovsky while humorously disparaging pop musicians like Justin Bieber, and their young and female audience. Like Dave's joking about watered-down taste, Sean's joking acted as a signal for his wokeness, but it was also used to disparage pop music and its fans, and by extension, mainstream culture.

Qualifying the Practice of Diversity: Risks and Reinvention

Whites in diversity deserts also managed the paradox of diversity by invoking the risks and benefits of diversity as they framed the alternative: living in a more racially diverse place. They reported many perceived risks of greater diversity, such as the stereotypical association of racial diversity with higher crime rates and the expense of living in more diverse, more urban, and more populated places. In doing so, they justified the status quo of their diversity paradox.

Aaron was born and raised just outside of Middletown County, as was his wife Layla, but she went to school in southern California. Living in San Diego represented a massive change from her Midwestern childhood, and she and Aaron frequently discussed

her experiences. Aaron told me he and Layla were actually considering a move to southern California in order to raise their children in a more diverse environment. The diversity

> *I think because we live in [Middletown County] and we have a lack of diversity here for the most part, it's something that we would have to try very actively to expose my kids to diversity. I have talked with my wife about that and we have actually talked about moving to California, which is where she went to school. Um, to…and, and, um, with a conscious… um, ah… With the diversity question in mind. About would it be a good idea to move to San Diego where she went to school? You know he would be experiencing more diversity there and that would be really great.*

Aaron was enthusiastic about the potential of raising his kids surrounded by racial diversity, declaring that the experience would be really great. But within this woke performance there was evidence of Aaron's discomfort with how to handle the diversity paradox, indicated by his rhetorical incoherence (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2003); his "ums" and "ah" function not just as speech fillers, but as indicators of struggle and internal conflict during race talk. Aaron's use of rhetorical incoherence is perhaps evidence of his discomfort here, an unease resting on perceived financial and physical risks. He was weighing his ideals of wanting to expose his kids to diversity with something he was struggling with: cost and crime.

> *Um, and, but I mean financially it's not a good move. Cost of living here is way too cheap. Super nice for that. And I don't know if they'd be more safe there than here.*

Aaron began to reveal the struggle. He mentioned that the move would disadvantage them financially. But then he hit upon a disturbing event that had happened near his home, with disturbing implications.

> *But, you know, then it was right around the time that we were having that conversation there was a shooter just outside of our neighborhood at this bar called Frank's.*[20] *And I mean we go by that restaurant or bar or whatever, we pass by it just about every day. And the guy's house where they apparently caught that dude at is directly across the street from a park I take my kid to literally every day. And that kinda scared the crap out of me. And before that happened I was like, well of course they would definitely be safer here than anywhere in California, right? And after that I was like, it doesn't matter. There's nothing that I can do.*
>
> *That pisses me off and it scares the hell out of me, but I don't know. Maybe they would be safer here.*

The shooting Aaron referenced was a racially motivated hate crime, where two victims were killed, and one bystander was shot. (It received national news coverage, but I have changed details here to preserve anonymity). Aaron's discussion of the safety factor was complicated. He sees exposure to greater diversity as a positive thing for kids, even if it

[20] The two men, people of color, were killed after a white gunman told them to "get out of my country!"

would create financial hardship. But then two people who represented the limited amount of diversity of Middletown County were killed precisely because they were not white. Aaron was struggling. Was it safer in Middletown County? Was it just as dangerous now as multicultural San Diego? Did it matter, because this type of danger is everywhere? It was a complicated issue that Aaron and Layla had to negotiate.

On the one hand, there is a stereotype of more racially diverse places having higher rates of violent crime, but then a horrific crime occurred very close to his notoriously safe neighborhood. A very public hate crime in his suburban enclave shook Aaron's sense of safety and made him reevaluate his ideas about relocating. Aaron had considered a more racially diverse environment might necessarily be a more dangerous environment, but racial violence was already close to home.

Yet this linkage of racial diversity with the threat of violent crime is a deeply stereotypical association, which increased Aaron's discomfort. In our interview, he went to great lengths to talk about the physical nearness of this hate-crime that made national headlines, in a way that distanced himself from the stereotypical association of racial minorities with violent crime. In this case, they were the victims specifically because they were minorities. Aaron knew that making the move towards diversity would be putting his woke ideals into action, but also that the effort required would be significant. While his performance as a woke parent required the valuing of racial diversity, his interview revealed his struggle with the emotional weight of the possible costs and dangers, as well as his discomfort in putting into words his own belief in racial stereotypes.

Aaron said he cares about diversity, but considered the possibility that it could come at too high a price: financial risk, physical safety, and great effort.

> *I would like it if [my kids] were exposed to more diversity, and actually there's a person that my wife is colleagues with who is from France, and his kids go to a French school where they speak French and stuff. And I honestly doubt that that is something that we would do, but it's like, I mean that's there, and we could do something to expose our kid to more diversity. It would be more effort, both financially and physically more effort to actually go and do that. But, I mean I would like it if Middletown County was more diverse, but what can I do? I can't force people to move here."*

In this revealing passage, Aaron accomplished several things. He justified not pursuing a more diverse environment on financial grounds, he thought through the perceived risks of violent crime that might endanger his family, he was relieving himself of the burden of making Middletown County more diverse in a fatalistic way ("*I can't force people to move here*"), and, as explored earlier in this chapter, he was expanding the definition of diversity from a racialized concept to a "cultural" one via reference to the French school.

Aaron was not alone in his qualifying of diversity, its risks, and benefits; many woke whites struggled with how and why they could or could not pursue greater diversity. Woke parents like Aaron and Layla did not doubt that their children would benefit from being around diverse groups of people, but the challenges that they associated with diverse environments such as a higher cost of living and even crime were brought up as major barriers to creating a life in perfect harmony with their ideals. This inability to create a life where ideals and realities were aligned, and the inability to talk about it without violating their codes of honorable woke whiteness, was a source of unease and some measure of guilt for my interviewees.

WHITE ON WHITE: WOKE PERFORMANCES FOR WHITE AUDIENCES

Current research highlights the complex relationship between white guilt and white identity (DiAngelo 2018; Jardina 2019). White guilt is a frequent target for criticism from the right[21] and the left[22], but it also has a role in understanding white privilege. Research shows that "whites who possess higher levels of racial guilt also tend to believe whites have more advantages" (Jardina 2019:134), and the more racially aware whites are of their own racial identity, the more likely they are to recognize their privileged position. I found that woke whites were aware of their racial privilege and were unnerved by this knowledge. Part of performing woke whiteness to other whites, in areas of low racial diversity, was admitting past racial insensitivity.

I asked Katie about white privilege, how she would define it or if she had an example. Part of her explanation involved admitting to something she felt was very problematic. While her admission would seem on its face to be anti-woke, I interpreted it as more complex.

> *Gabriella: So, if I asked you about white privilege, how would you define it?*
>
> *Katie: For me personally, which I don't enjoy feeling this way and I wish I didn't feel this way, but the fact that I feel safer in a bunch of white people than a bunch of people from different races. Um, just because of different*

[21] See, for example, conservative commentator Shelby Steele's 2007 book *White Guilt: How Whites and Blacks Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era.*

[22] See, for example, discussions that claim guilt reduces the likelihood of action and focuses on emotional pain of whites. DiAngelo (2018) deals with this in *White Fragility*

prejudices I've grown up with and different ideas that have been put in my head. And that takes time to get over those sorts of things.

Katie's response showed two important things. First, she was comfortable enough with me as a white person to admit that she is more comfortable around groups of whites, and second, that she was still working through deeply-held stereotypical associations of people with color and danger. Katie's body language indicated her discomfort with this admission. She squirmed in her seat and moved her long dreadlocks over her shoulder repeatedly. But this uncomfortable admission was part of her performance of wokeness. Katie acknowledged that white privilege impacted how she interacted with other people. She expressed that she didn't like, and didn't want, to have this greater comfort with whites over racial others. Her confession also demonstrated her awareness that she must unlearn racist ideas. She described growing up with prejudices and "things in my head" that she was actively working to banish from her consciousness.

Through her uncomfortable admission, Katie was demonstrating that she knew she had un-earned racial privilege. Her admission showed that she knew she should, and most certainly does, feel bad about having this privilege. And finally, the admission reinforced the narrative that she is on a journey to improve herself. Katie's confession demonstrated her wokeness through her willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about race, acknowledge them and own them. By allowing herself to be seen in a negative light by another white person, Katie took a calculated risk that she might not have taken with a person of color. It was a woke white performance tailored for a white audience, indicating shame but also an honorable impulse for improvement. Katie was engaging

directly with her racial identity and showing a desire to move beyond (Matias 2016), rather than demonstrating white fragility (DiAngelo 2018) and retreating from such an admission.

Performing wokeness for all-white audiences means that allyship must be narrated, rather than demonstrated. Leah's discussion of white privilege had her pointing out the positive benefits her son might receive from his school because he was a white child with special needs. She then transitioned into discussing a personal passion of hers – breastfeeding support for new mothers – and how she uses her position to advocate for women of color.

> *Like, I do breastfeeding support and counseling. And you know, we're always trying to help within the African-American community… and the Hispanic community, because [breastfeeding faces] a stigma [in those communities], it's not accepted there. Especially Hispanic men, they don't like their wives doing that. And that's not necessary, and they want to go back to breasts used for sex and not what they're really used for.*

In Leah's narrative of supporting women of color with breastfeeding, she demonstrated that her concern for people of color goes beyond words. She knew that her position as a white woman granted her privileges, so she used her time and knowledge to help other women. Arguably, Leah's testimony could be interpreted as an exemplar of a white savior personal narrative; the selfless white woman swooping in and helping poor women of color. She also spoke in very broad strokes about the attitudes of men of color towards women's bodies, reinforcing stereotypes about the sexual appetites of minority men. But she was giving this testimony as part of a performance for me, as another white woman. Undoubtedly, her presentation might have included more nuance, or qualifications, if she

were detailing this ally position to a woman of color. But from one "woke" white woman to another presumed "woke" white woman, the emphasis was on the honorable nature of her actions.

Lorna and Sarah took an intersectional view of their own privilege, examining the way their class, sexuality, and race worked together. Their performances stressed for me stressed their racial privilege, while downplaying the very real class disadvantage they experienced. Lorna and Sarah were a lesbian couple, with Lorna in her late 30s and Sarah in her late 20s. They had been together for a couple of years and when I spoke with them they had just become homeless; it was summertime and they were living in a tent near the river that flows through Northwest Town. Since the weather was bearable they felt that they "were doing alright" but were worried what the changing seasons would bring. While they had never been in such dire financial straits before, both grew up poor in the area. I asked them both about white privilege, and if they felt it was something they thought about or had experienced.

> *Lorna: I mean, we see how the cops hassle Black people and some of the Native Americans who are also in the [homeless tent] camp. We don't have to worry as much. Guess we're not as scary! (Laughs). And I think that people might be nicer to us when we roll in to get food at a pantry or something.*
>
> *Sarah: Unless it's in a church, because they've looked at us funny at some.*
>
> *Lorna: Yeah, that's true. But I think that us being white women means that we don't catch as much shit as other people do who are "camping."*

Sarah's interjection about getting funny looks at church food pantries highlighted that they knew they were marginalized because of their status as a lesbian couple, but they recognize that their race and gender afforded them some level of protection from harassment by the police and others who would target the homeless population.

Lorna and Sarah's approach to a woke white performance was multifaceted. While Lorna and Sarah certainly had their share of worries, their performance of whiteness carried a sense of lightness. Lorna laughed about not being seen as "scary", but her joking is also an explicit reference to the racial and gender privilege she and Sarah have, even in such a difficult and vulnerable situation. They were solidifying their woke identities to me and to each other, and while homeless women face significantly increased risks including violent crime and sexual assault (Wong, Shumway, Flentje, and Riley 2016) they were downplaying their own class disadvantages in relation to their racial privileges.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I've detailed the attempts of woke whites to live a life that demonstrates their dedication to diversity. They report how they strive for diversity, and they show that they are aware of the lack of diversity in their lives and environments, but this striving runs up against a myriad of barriers that they invoke: barriers of practicality, of perceived risks, barriers of costs, financial and temporal, barriers that sometime traffic in the stereotypes that underlie the systems of racial inequality they criticize. Woke whites

struggle to manage the diversity paradox, valuing diversity while living in a low-diversity area.

They adopt many strategies in managing this paradox, including conceptually expanding and contracting the boundaries of what qualifies as diverse, depending on the near complete lack or small availability of people of color. The meaning of diversity is expanded to include things like cultural and religious difference when there is no chance of interaction with racial others, or when only a few minority people are present and given outsized significance. However, when woke whites are evaluating what makes a place diverse they use the presence or absence of Black bodies as the yardstick, reifying the dominant understanding of racial division in the U.S., the Black/white divide.

Renegotiating the meaning of diversity allows woke whites to maintain their identity as racial progressives, it gives them a path to achieving a successful white performance even in areas where such a performance is not easy. Along with this redefining of what counts as diverse under different circumstances, woke whites turn to places like the consumer marketplace to supplement the lack of diversity resources where they live. They approach diversity for their children via exposure parenting, using local resources, consumer options, and their expanded concept of diversity to bolster their performance as woke parents raising globally prepared children. These types of strategies help support woke white performances by making the pursuit of diversity successful, reinforcing their identity as honorable racial progressives, and possibly serving to generate a cultural imaginary such as that which led some respondents to woke whiteness themselves. Finally, they modify their performance of wokeness to fit white audiences. In some

situations, there is a transposing of cultural diversity for racial diversity, pointing to Blackness to describe a lack.

The conceptual approach to broadening diversity has the ironic effect of erasing Blacks while recognizing the importance of Blackness. The presence of Black people is implicit in the understanding of what a truly diverse place looks like. While the phenomenon of tokenism is well established, ticking the boxes of "racial diversity" in groups and institutions, what I am dealing with here is the conceptual importance of the absence or presence of Blackness. What I have found is that woke whites give much greater weight to the presence of any cultural, ethnic, or racial group when evaluating current diversity in a positive way, but when criticizing the lack of diversity, they focus on the marked lack of Black bodies. So, by broadening diversity to something that doesn't need to include Blackness this strategy actually highlights the centrality of the Black/white binary in understanding race in the U.S (Alba 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2003). Racial inequality and imagined racial problems are still rooted in the black/white frame (Feagin 2013).

Furthermore, strategies for expanding diversity are often done on through the consumer marketplace and in an a la carte fashion. The implications of this strategy are several. First, by seeing diversity as something that can be consumed when and where whites choose, even those woke whites who value diversity are commodifying racial others. Theorist bell hooks (1996) refers to this as the "ethnic spice" offered by consumer culture, and Warikoo and de Laurentis (2014) refer to this as "imbibing diversity." Whites are able to purchase Blackness, or otherness, via consuming media, food, travel, fashion, and other projects in an attempt to vicariously experience otherness but in a way that is without risk to the racial status quo. This dependence on selecting diversity elements from

a menu further contributes to the conflation of racial and cultural diversity, and reflects the white privilege of being able to selectively enact ethnic identities (Waters 1990).

In the absence of actual racial diversity, such as my respondents lived with on a daily basis, the strategies they engaged in to show their dedication to diversity brought their own risks. The diversity paradox, that desire for diversity while living in its absence, meant that woke whites attempted to resolve this conflict in ways that had unintended consequences. Expanding what counted as diverse risked watering down the impact and meaning of cross-racial association. Conflating religious and cultural diversity with racial and ethnic diversity risked removing it from the context of differing inequalities. The way diversity was conceived as both requiring and erasing the significance of Blackness in America speaks to the enduring legacy of the Black/white divide. Performing wokeness to only white audiences reinforced the identity of the social actor as an honorable white person, but may have had little to no impact on racism as a social ill. Turning to marketplace solutions for exposure to diversity ran the risk of reinforcing racial stereotypes and breeding reductionist views of other peoples, especially with regard to children. As we see in the next chapter, however, woke whites must also manage other risks: the challenge of reconciling their racially progressive views with racially regressive relatives.

CHAPTER 4: WOKENESS AND FAMILY MATTERS

Woke whites must find strategies for dealing with interpersonal, often intergenerational, conflict over race. They must do this in ways that preserve their sense of self as racial progressives and as family members, and also preserve relational ties with their loved ones. Family plays a vital role in educating people about the meanings of race, not only in the reproduction of racist behaviors and assumptions but also in the meaning of whiteness and what constitutes an honorable white performance. And when family members end up with divergent racial orientations, it can be troubling, forcing people to compromise their own principles or their relationships with loved ones.

Starbucks cafes are never really ideal places for interviews, but this was where Alexis had asked me to meet. She had a window between dropping her kids off at school and an appointment in a nearby town, and this café represented a convenient halfway point for the busy young mom. As we tried to talk over the background music, the sounds of beans grinding and milk steaming, small lines appeared on her brow. She was clearly thoughtful and somewhat troubled by the family memories my questions were bringing up:

> *Gabriella: Do you remember if issues related to race were discussed in your house, growing up?*
>
> *Alexis: Um, well my dad, he was very, like, "stay with your color. You do not cross the color line, you stay within your race." (Sighs heavily). So, in seventh grade - I grew up in the same school, with all the same kids [every year], so we had maybe one Black girl and one Black guy in our grade every*

> *year, and in seventh grade I actually dated the Black guy for two days… My dad found out after the fact, after we had broken it off. It was two days! It was just two days, because it was 7th grade, you know. I'll never forget, he came to my room and he was like "say it ain't so!" And I was like "what?" So, it was like that. But then after, when I moved to Mountainville, he was like "please, whatever you do, stay within your race. Don't go anywhere else, just please stay within your race." And I was like, "Wow, that's awful. That's cold."*

Her father's regressive ideas about race and interracial dating were difficult for Alexis to process, since she loved her father and craved closeness with him, while being offended by his racist attitudes.

Alexis grew up in a deeply rural part of Connecticut and moved to another rural area around Mountainville in her late teens. As she explained, her small country school didn't have multiple classes for the same grade, so her classmates were the same, year after year. Her seventh-grade flirtation with the "one Black guy" was with someone she had known her whole school career. He was a known entity, trusted by her and familiar to her as a friend as well as a classmate. But in a nearly all-white environment, the little diversity that was available was noticed and seen as a risk, othering Black classmates who had been part of a small and intimate group for years. Their brief foray into acknowledging a mutual attraction for a couple of days as adolescents was something her father could not fathom.

Boundaries between woke and racist, the progressive vs. regressive sides of racial awareness, are fraught when the regressive is represented by your close family

members. So how do whites preserve family closeness while also distancing themselves from retrograde racial attitudes? This chapter will deal with the challenges that people invested in a woke identity often face when progressive racial ideals come up against racially regressive attitudes of relatives. Performances of a woke white identity tend to be easier in the abstract, when people talk about ideals or "what if" situations. The lack of diversity and interracial interactions that characterized my interviewees' daily lives meant that a lot of their racialized interactions occurred in this terrain of the imaginary. Their white privilege and relative racial isolation translated to being able to deal with race when they felt it was meaningfully salient. They could join in (or chose not to) online, or in workplaces, at parties, etc., on their own terms. Interactions with family members, however, were qualitatively different; they were less voluntary, and more immediate.

The central role family plays in identity meant for my informants, interactions with family members were often an emotional morass with high stakes. Existing family dynamics were often already complex, and when the topic of race arose stresses and strains were amplified. I wanted to explore how woke whites understood their identity as racial progressives while grappling with their family identities as loving daughters, cousins, or grandchildren. I wondered about the types of strategies they developed for confronting offensive racial attitudes demonstrated by loved ones. What were the barriers to woke white performances that family interactions frequently reveal? When did woke whites opt for family conflict and when family cohesion?

In this chapter, I'll explore this tension between *valuing family* – how woke whites feel about their role as family members, and *evaluating family* – how woke whites recognize family members as racially problematic. I will examine the paradox presented

by family interactions between racial progressives and racial regressives; such interactions often reinforce the racial status quo, even when family discussions could be a potent site for changing attitudes (Hagerman 2017). Intergenerational exchanges, especially disruption of ritualized uses of racist slurs and speech patterns, can open up the potential to make the family a site for anti-racist practices, since they are embedded in loving relationships (Nelson 2015). Yet woke whites strive to find strategies for dealing with interpersonal, often intergenerational, conflict over race in ways that preserve their sense of themselves and also preserve relational ties.

Negotiating racial principles within relationships is not easy. Even dedicated white anti-racist parents have found difficulty in applying their principles to parenting practices (Hagerman 2017, 2018; Matlock and DiAngelo 2015). Differing racial attitudes, particularly across generations, are often a source of pain, shame, and frustration. Reconciling the images of one's relatives as being worthy of love while simultaneously holding and expressing distasteful racial attitudes, challenges those who enact performances of woke whiteness. In other words, how do you handle being a racial progressive while at Thanksgiving dinner, when Grandpa wants to talk about Mexican rapists crossing the border?

Woke whites I spoke with reported frequently being at odds with family members over issues of race, as they faced of a continuum of racially insensitive to outright racist sentiments from loved ones. Managing this conflict involved a great deal of boundary work and emotional negotiation. Woke whites operate under the paradigm that an honorable white person actively calls out and discusses racism, while a morally inferior person ignores or promotes racism, making the fact that loved ones are frequently guilty

of the latter a source of shame, frustration, occasional bemusement, and anger. This negative cluster of emotions butts up against love, joy, playfulness, fun, and other positive aspects of family participation, creating tensions evident in my interviewees. Alexis, for example, when relating the story told in the opening vignette, exhibited tense body language, she sighed and grimaced, she expressed bewilderment and dismay at her father's stated position.

My respondents followed several strategies when familial loyalty and racial awareness clashed, including *punctuated censur*e, *teasing, tuning it out*, strategically *distancing* themselves from loved ones, *minimizing racism*, and *resignation*, or fatalistically claiming "people can't change." Managing the tension between valuing family and evaluating the racial attitudes of family sometimes required compromise of woke ideals. The constraints woke whites expressed in interacting with their families meant tolerating some racially regressive behavior from loved ones, avoiding the topic, or disengaging. Because of their reactions to these constraints, woke whites' strategies for managing racialized interludes with loved ones limited the chance for deeper dialogues within family settings. Thus, the status quo is often preserved within families, even when families could be potentially great sites for racial growth and changing attitudes.

I develop my argument by first examining the strategies woke whites use to defuse racial conversations with racially regressive relatives. I then examine the various constraints that familial relations place on the free expression of woke white behaviors. Finally, I discuss the implications of these limitations for racially progressive possibilities.

"GRANDMA, YOU CAN'T SAY THAT!": NEGOTIATING RACIALIZED INTERLUDES

The tension between demonstrating love and caring and the high value placed on family, and the enactment of racially progressive ideals becomes apparent in *racialized interludes*. Racialized interludes are moments when race comes into the conversation, when it is acknowledged or discussed or confronted in some way. Because one of the privileges of whiteness is the ability to ignore race in most interactions, race is not explicitly mentioned in most interactions that whites have with other whites (DiAngelo 2018; Matias 2016; McDermott 2006). Their whiteness may be salient, but it is often not recognized or consciously considered. For my respondents, sometimes woke whites brought race up, more often it was their loved ones, but racialized interludes often involved collisions of family members' opposing views on race, collisions that woke whites approached strategically. During racialized interludes some strategies were more pointed, like punctuated censure, some could be playful, like teasing, and some were non-confrontational, like minimizing. I discuss them here in order from most to least confrontational.

Punctuated Censure

A near-universal strategy among my respondents was the use of short, declarative expressions of shock that served to solidify boundaries against offensive speech and prevent the occurrence of racial conflicts that might put family unity at risk. The overwhelming majority of my interviewees who participated in any kind of woke performance had a story involving a variation of "grandma/grandpa/dad you can't say that!" I refer to these small declarative statements, often formulaic "don't say that" or "you can't say that" without any further discussion, as *punctuated censure*.

The use of punctuated censure can accomplish several things. First, it allows for a direct rebuke of racial insensitivity. These quick, short, targeted declarations are meant to shock the listener. They are emotional, direct, and despite being short, are powerful disruptors to normative racist behavior. Second, the tone and brevity of a punctuated censure statements mean they are not likely to devolve into an argument. They are delivered with shock but not anger, carrying just enough negative tone to be powerful but not derailing whatever activity is being undertaken by "starting a fight." Third, they effectively communicate to others that the speaker has definite boundaries of acceptable speech and behavior in relation to race, in hopes of discouraging someone who may be tempted to say something racially insensitive in the future. And finally, punctuated censure serves to insulate the person who uses it from the stress and disappointment of hearing loved ones participate in distasteful racial dialogues. Punctuated censure acts like car bumper; it takes some of the emotional blow, can stave off permanent relationship damage, and works to keep your relationship safely on the road. But the protection offered only works if the racial interlude is relatively low impact. If there is too strong of a collision between woke whites and racially regressive relatives, family ties may not emerge unscathed.

Family interactions are often built around phrases that are short and fragmentary. As Briggs (1998) points out in her exploration of Inuit play and intergenerational communication, many interactions don't develop into a "full-fledged drama" with grand enactments. While the matter may be serious, the interaction can have a character that belies its importance. These short, verbal exchanges help family members build a "multifaceted web of important meanings" (69) around competing visions of race and

relationship. So, when a woke-identified white says “Grandma, you can’t say that!” and Grandma subsequently tuts, disconnects, or even responds with a variation of “you know what I mean” or “I didn’t mean it like that,” they are both participating in important relationship contest and repair.

Punctuated censure signals the absolute boundary of acceptable behavior; through these statements, a person warns the family member that anything expressing deeper or more overt racial animus crosses the line. The boundary for a woke white might be the “n-word,” or it might be some stereotype, or even a joke. Whatever the woke white decides approaches a danger zone, punctuated censure throws up a “proceed at your own risk” sign.

For example, Hayley said she could never be friends with someone that used the n-word. That would be a hard line for a friendship, a point of no return. But her mother has been known to use the word on occasion.

Gabriella: So, what do you do if your mom or someone you love uses the n-word?

Hayley: I told my mom “Mom! You can’t say that. You know you can’t say that around me!”

Hayley’s punctuated censure of her mom marked a dangerous boundary. The use of the n-word in Hayley’s presence would be a friendship deal breaker, but family relationships are more precious. In order to avoid having her mother cross that line, Hayley used punctuated censure, so her mother would learn racial slurs were unacceptable. To go further would pose a risk of having to limit contact, so punctuated censure is a conversational “danger: enter at your own risk” warning sign. People who do

not heed the warnings run the risk of escalating conflict that can endanger relationships. When punctuated censure is effective, it allows for an understanding of the boundaries of acceptable race talk on both sides. What these ritualized phrases also indicate is that the drama will not develop further, that the subject must be dropped at this point. Such chiding interactions, simultaneously serious and good-natured, make such encounters "sometimes delightful and sometimes uncomfortable," (Briggs 1998: 70), but always useful for preserving relations. For my respondents the exchange of these ritualized punctuated censure phrases were most often frustrating, but their relatives would sometimes laugh them off while also taking the hint. However they were received, these phrases did serve to put a stop to escalating tensions in racialized interludes.

Additionally, punctuated censure allows both sides to co-exist with dignity and a sense of being honorable. Heather recalled discussions during holiday outings with extended family, when visiting her grandparents in Kansas City. She described navigating who would be the relative to confront the her racially and religiously conservative grandmother, and when such confrontations were used.

> *Heather: They [her grandparents] were very important, and every holiday we would go spend it with them and they were just so important [to me]. But we avoided the topic [of race]. So, Christmases (sighs). After Christmas we would go down to the Plaza[23] and Grandma would make, kind of snarky*

[23] The Country Club Plaza in midtown Kansas City is an open-air shopping district famous for its fountains, high-end retailers, and holiday light display. It has a history of racial tension because it is a popular destination for both white families from more affluent areas and Black teenagers who live in the city center to hang out, which often results in conflicts over claims of loitering as well as dress code ordinances. The Plaza is affluent and coded as a white space, so the presence of young, Black people results in higher levels of policing and harassment.

comments [about Black people], and I would like, shut it out. My mom and I would exchange glances.

Gabriella: But it wasn't something that you felt you could confront or address directly?

Heather: Certainly not with them. Now if Grandma said something I would say "Grandma!" and she would know from that reaction that she had said something. That she couldn't say something like that around my cousin or I [sic].

Heather's testimony established her reluctance to actively chastise her grandmother, especially during holiday festivities that were supposed to be fun. But her passage also demonstrated the use of small, targeted interventions that were understood by both parties, her grandmother and herself, as related to race talk. Heather never participated in race talk herself. She didn't respond in an expected woke way by starting a dialogue with her grandmother about insensitivity. She just stopped the conversation cold, before an argument could arise or her grandmother could say something even more damaging. Punctuated censures like this effectively say "Please stop. Don't go any further and make me have to avoid your company."

While family dynamics can constrain anti-racist interventions, they can also serve to reinforce alliances between other family members who share frustrations. Heather's cousin and her mother shared knowing glances and other silent communications which kept the peace during holiday celebrations and reinforced the notion that her Grandmother's behavior was unacceptable. The boundaries were communicated and

understood, but the family continued their holiday celebration. Grandma was secure in the fact that she wasn't going to be yelled at or humiliatingly chastised in public. The topic was dropped. The grandmother was stopped short of sacrificing her dignity through a public family row, and had the option of laughing it off as "not being serious" or qualifying it with "you know I'm joking" to save face. Heather, her cousin, and her mom understood that they were on the "right side" of the race issue and were able to feel morally superior through their honorable white performances, while maintaining the peace with the family matriarch and preserving honorable family member status.

Nonetheless, what punctuated censure does not do is foster discussion. In fact, the use of punctuated censure seems to function as a barrier to more profound conversations with family members who, as Heather said, are not "ever gonna change their mind." Punctuated censure statements are part of a woke performance because they are a direct rebuke of racist behavior, but they can also go hand in hand with a sense of fatalism about the possibility of change. They seem to act as a form of pressure relief valve, helping woke whites manage when family members are racially problematic, but function as a barrier to deeper connection and represent a significant ideological compromise on the part of woke whites.

Confronting the topic of race is a foundational element of a woke white identity, as detailed in chapter two. This means bringing race up in conversations where it might not otherwise have been addressed, it means recognizing the lack of racial diversity and taking steps to rectify this deficiency. It means declaring and enacting a specifically color-aware performance. But with the use of punctuated censure, woke whites are choosing to value family over an alleged commitment to racial progress. They are willing to

compromise the ideal of actively participating in racial discussions. These compromises themselves are a sign of white privilege. The option of not directly confronting race is only an option for people for whom persistent racism is not a threat to their existence, merely a threat to their comfort.

Teasing

Intergenerational teasing was a common dynamic in many families among my respondents. Like punctuated censure, teasing tests boundaries, confronting serious issues couched in lighthearted tones. Teasing can reinforce family cohesion, let family members know how and why they belong, and help them feel secure in knowing the boundaries for behavior (Briggs 1998).

But boundaries are not static. This type of teasing is frequently used to examine the current boundaries for important issues in families, where playfulness and discomfort intermingle, especially across generations (Kerr et al. 2018). Teasing exchanges are emotional interactions that allow drama and play to help with the negotiation of cultural issues and meanings, and they are able to do this in ways that can be difficult but also enjoyable. And teasing exchanges are another parry in these racialized interludes, where family members take each other's measure without confronting the issue directly.

Aaron described mischievous banter with his mother, as part of the experience of whiteness for both of them.

> *So, one of the jokes that I do with my mom is, I'll just kind of fuck with her, and just say like...She'll just say anything, something totally innocuous, and I'll say "Mom! That's super racist, mom!" And she'll like go pale, and like "Oh*

> *my god, was it? Oh my god I'm so sorry!" And I'll laugh "I'm just messing with you." And it gets her every time and it's so much fun and I'm evil for doing this but it's a blast.*

Both Andrew and his mother were invested in honorable performances of their white identity, but the teasing exchanges served two very important goals. First, these interactions reinforced their relationship through gentle ribbing, joking that minimizes the risk of relational rupture by virtue of the fact that family members can joke about serious issues that might fracture less intimate relationships. So, the teasing solidified family ties. Second, such teasing preserved both Aaron and his mother's identity as whites. Central to these interactions was the acknowledgement of both of them as whites that were the products of their family, and their times. Aaron's teasing showed his mother that the boundaries of what constitutes a "good white person" (Sullivan 2014) are mutable, but that he would help her learn the acceptable boundaries and subtly reshape her behavior if she so chose. Aaron's playful, even joyful teasing with his mother did double duty here, showing he was invested in clarifying the boundaries of racial discussions with her, but also indicating that he approved of her concern with not appearing overtly racist.

Sometimes, however, woke whites are themselves subject to "joking" behavior that confronts-without-confronting their racial views; woke whites interpret these moments as "teasing" to preserve family bonds. When I spoke with Sarah she was in her mid-20s and worked part-time at a print shop while she took classes at the local university in Northwest Town. She came from a blue-collar family and hoped to be the first of her family to finish a college degree. Sarah said her grandfather "subsists on a steady diet of Fox News" and

believed her association with higher education was likely to make her misguidedly liberal in her politics, including racial attitudes.

> *Sarah: [Grandpa] will ask me if I'm taking classes on "Obama-loving" and if I'm majoring in "Snowflake Studies," like those Fox buzzwords, you know. I try to laugh it off if I can or talk about my actual classes. Sometimes my mom tells him to lay off, or gives him a look or something, because she can see I get upset. So, she makes him stop. He just sees it as teasing the grandkids and, I guess, he just thinks everyone is just too sensitive these days. I know he's looking for a reaction, so sometimes I leave the room. Like if he ever uses a slur I tell him he can't say that, so we don't go there.*
>
> *Gabriella: Has he ever used a slur around you?*
>
> *Sarah: Not to my face, but I heard him mumble it. And my brother has heard him. I think he knows he can't go that far around me, but he pushes, you know? He pushes.*

Sarah's grandfather took specific aim at the idea of political correctness, which includes racial awareness. His comment on "Obama-loving" echoed an overtly racist phrase often used against racial progressives in the Civil Rights Era, "n*gger-lover." Sarah's grandfather's specific use of Obama in this phrase focused on the former president's racial identity and is a racial attack without any specific racial slurs, which would have driven Sarah away because it violated unspoken boundaries. Sarah's discomfort with her grandfather's actions was obvious, but she interpreted his behavior in the context of "normal family teasing." Her younger brother Jacob was also subjected to jokes, although

these were more about reinforcing proper masculine behavior. Sarah's mother, however, would sometimes run interference for Sarah when the teasing got to be too much. In this instance, Sarah's mother would hit the brakes before punctuated censure was necessary; Sarah said that punctuated censure would be her next step. She knew her grandfather would be capable of such offensive behavior, and she had a plan in place for that eventuality. But, at the time, Sarah did not challenge the frame for his behavior as "normal family teasing," and thus excused herself from confronting him.

Teasing skirts the edges of rebuke, combining humor with hostility, but sometimes also benevolence. Teasing incidents are often playful and mischievous, but also uncomfortable and annoying. By adopting the framework of "just teasing," family members are able to play with race and racial beliefs without edging over into confrontation or conflict.

Tuning Out

Another strategy woke whites used to manage their relations with difficult family members was to *tune out* family racism. Many of my respondents, even those who were the most likely to relish getting into fights with strangers or acquaintances on social media, were likely to tune out when it came to family members and racial issues. While family interactions stifled their ability to perform a woke whiteness; they did not revert to performing a color-blind white identity, but rather chose to tune out.

Hunter was a young college student in his early twenties, and he grew up in a small town about a mile from Northwest Town. His family were largely ranchers who "talk a lot of smack" about the Latino and Native American men who sometimes came to work on

the ranch. Hunter saw himself as an educated guy and felt stifled by his small-town upbringing. He longed to travel. He told me the world and all of its people are exciting, so he would actively seek out people from different races, nationalities, and backgrounds. While with me, Hunter spoke effusively about diversity and his desire to travel and interact with different people, but he admitted that he regularly censors himself whenever any race talk comes up with his family. He described these interactions as "taking my energy," and "dragging me down." His decision to "tune out" was a self-protective measure in his eyes. He saw discussions with his family on issues of race and other types of diversity as a fool's errand, unlikely to produce change and instead, likely to cause him stress and trouble.

For my woke respondents, issues around race, especially those involving politics or inequality, were very emotionally charged. Our current political divisions are mapped onto concepts like racial and gender equality in ways that are particularly fraught (Hochschild 2016; Hughey 2012; Jardina 2019; Kimmel 2017). People like Hunter, who invested a great deal of energy and time into developing an understanding of the world and bolstering their "woke" credentials, do not see arguing with family members as a productive use of their finite reserves of time and energy. These woke whites view confronting family members' entrenched political attitudes and concomitant racial biases as a Sisyphean task, daunting and futile.

I met Vanessa, a project manager, married to Billy, a cop, in Mountainville. She considered herself much better informed on political issues than her husband. For Billy, politics was only relevant if it was about take-home pay and support for the police. He

was unconcerned about other issues, especially those relating to race, gender, and LGBTQ people.

> *So, Billy, being politically uninformed, is just like "Trumps love cops! Cops! Cops! Cops!" And I'm like "but you...let's talk." But he's like NO! Cops! Cops! Cops! [Trump] loves cops, and he's going to do things for our economy. And I'm like "do you read things!?!" So, he just, he is opposite of the political spectrum of me, but luckily, he doesn't spend as much time with our children (laughs)... [Billy] was like, Trump changed something with the taxes where we get more money on our checks and he's like "he's doing all good things for us, I don't know why you're mad." Whatever. So, I try not to get…I don't get way wrapped up in it, in his ignorance, but I do make informed decisions when it comes time to make informed decisions.*

Vanessa described herself as very happily married, but she was mystified and slightly miffed by her husband's political and social blind spots. Her strategy was to do all she could to teach her children to pay attention to inequality and social good. Vanessa conducted herself, personally and politically, in line with her ideals. But with her beloved husband she selectively tuned out his "foolishness" when she couldn't get conversational traction on racial or other social justice issues.

For my respondents, racialized interludes with family members continued if positive emotional synergy was present in any form. Whether it was the fun that Aaron got from joking with his mom, or the solidarity that Heather felt with her mom and cousin during a fun family outing, the presence of positive elements in the interaction seemed vital for continued association, even in the face of disagreement or distasteful behavior.

But family members tuned out when the prospect of conflict was high, and the likelihood of change was low. Both Hunter and Vanessa refrained from fully interacting with some family members, because they believed such communication was unlikely to have any positive affect. Hunter felt drained, dispirited, and disgusted when he tried to talk with his rancher family. Vanessa "picked her battles" and was strategic about when she chose to push for conversations. As a protective measure, tuning out seems to preserve the peace while allowing woke whites to safeguard their energy for those times when they believe it does pay to join the racial fray.

Minimizing Racism

Another strategy described by my respondents was *minimizing racism*. Bonilla-Silva (2003) identified the minimization of racism as a rhetorical strategy central to the function of color-blind racism. This strategy involves rhetorical moves that serve to diminish the role of race and racism in American society and reinforcing the narrative that racism is a thing of the past. Related to this, woke whites often apply the same logic to the racially problematic actions of their loved ones, claiming they are a "little bit racist" or "not really like that, not a bad person" despite holding regressive or even abhorrent views. Aaron, who enjoyed teasing his mother about saying racist things, had a different approach for his dad. Where he would connect with his mother in playful ways, Aaron identified his father as intractably racist. He gave up on trying to bond with his dad by discussing racial issues.

> *My dad is definitely racist, unfortunately. So, and there's like degrees to it, you know? There's like KKK, and then there's like "I don't like Black people." And then there's just like "I'm not going to openly say anything, but maybe*

> *I'm unconsciously doing things to favor my race over a different one." And I definitely think that we all probably have racial biases that are inevitable. And are working subconsciously.*

Aaron cut his dad some slack by saying he wasn't racially violent, rather he just didn't like Black people, and then pointing out that all people inevitably hold racial biases. Aaron placed his father on a continuum of racism, where the violence and hatred associated with the Ku Klux Klan are at one pole, but puts all other people along this continuum, so Aaron and his father were potentially closer than his father was to the worst offenses of violent racists. This strategy allowed Aaron to acknowledge, as woke whites do, that racism is systemic, and at the same time to diminish the perceived impact of his father's racial bias because sometimes people unconsciously act in ways that discriminate. Whites share this tendency as part of "back-stage" performances, wanting to justify their relationships with racially problematic white friends (Picca and Feagin 2007). But for woke whites who similarly are invested in maintaining connections to regressive family, deploying this minimization represents a compromise of their racially progressive principles.

This minimization strategy requires whites enacting wokeness to transgress the stated norms of that paradigm, in which good people are at minimum aware of racial inequality and at most actively anti-racist. Within this belief system, people who express overt racism or problematic racial views are hard to consider "good people" (Matlock and DiAngelo 2015; Nelson 2015; Sullivan 2014). It's no wonder woke whites are distressed when loved ones demonstrate problematic racial views, as it undermines the notion they are good people deserving of love.

Gabriella: So, were race or gender issues ever talked about in the home?

*Katie: No, we didn't really talk about it that much. But I definitely think that my dad from my grandmother got a little bit of racist tendencies. Just being in the Midwest, you know, she would say racial things...that were not racially acceptable. Like even today she says some things where I'm like (cringes).... And she goes "well I know that's not politically correct anymore, but back in my day it was normal." You know, so...It's not that I think she actually thinks - Maybe she does! But I think that, um, that it comes from that, like earlier generation where they'd say things like "n*gger" and I'm like "grandmother, you can't say that!"*

Gabriella; So, when that happens, do you call her out or...

Katie: Well, I'm like "why would you say that?!?"

In this passage, we learn that Katie used punctuated censure and racial minimization. Her (paternal) grandmother's obviously racist use of the n-word definitely distressed Katie, meriting punctuated censure, but Katie had trouble acknowledging that her grandmother could actually "think that way." Katie recognized her grandmother as the potential source of her father's problematic racial perspectives, but she minimized the extent by saying her dad inherited "a little bit of racist tendencies" from his mother. The use of minimization and punctuated censure was also present in Katie's interactions with her father.

Gabriella: So what sort of things did you notice in your dad? Sounds like there were subtle things...

> *Katie: (Pause) You know, just, he didn't, he didn't really associate with people of color or, um. I don't ever remember him saying anything super negative about them, but just like the stereotype in general of people being on welfare and that sort of thing, is mainly what they would talk about would be like "oh, all those...you know, people on welfare." But normally they were referring to people of color, something else… Okay so here's the thing where my dad, who I know is very kind and stuff, but the little bit of racist side came out, where when I went over to England to go to school he said, 'don't make friends with any Muslims.' And I said "Dad! You can't say that."*

Katie's father's avoidance of interaction with people of color was excused because he did not, in her memory, say "anything super negative about them," but this is followed immediately by his use of racist tropes about welfare and racial minorities. Her father, Katie assured us, "is very kind and stuff" but has a "little bit of [a] racist side" which revealed itself when she was heading to Europe during the Syrian refugee crisis.

This passage revealed the pain Katie felt in acknowledging that her loved ones, whom she knows to be kind and loving, failed a basic standard for goodness with regards to race. The use of minimization of racism provides a rationale for continued contact and interaction with problematic family. If the racial bias of loved ones is "not that bad" then they, as people, are not bad enough to warrant cutting ties. Just like color-blind ideology places racism at a distance - in the past, the minimization of racism by woke whites keeps racists at a distance.

Calculated Distancing

Several distinct types of distancing were mentioned by woke whites in my interviews as ways of understanding how they themselves could be so different from racially regressive relatives, despite being related to or raised by these same people. First, generational distancing played an important role in how my respondents discussed the most intransigently racist of their relatives. Second, they employed geographical distancing by indicating that some areas of the country are more racially problematic than others.

The previous excerpt showed Katie wrestling with reasons as to why her grandmother and father might be forgiven for their racist proclivities. Katie appealed to the fact that her family was in the Midwest, and that her grandmother grew up in less politically correct times, hinting that their racial attitudes, while wrong, should be considered in the context of time and place, even while Katie herself is the product of a white, rural, Midwestern upbringing. Bruce also employed this dual distancing of generation and geography. Bruce is a divorced father of one in his mid-forties, and both he and his ex-wife grew up in small towns in the Ozarks before moving to Middletown County. When Bruce's daughter was three, he and his wife began to talk about where they wanted to build a home and what kind of school district they wanted their daughter to experience. They were looking for quality schools coupled with racial diversity. I asked him why that was:

> *I grew up outside of a town of 1,200 people and there was very little racial diversity. My family were very prejudiced, especially my uncle Chuck. And even my dad would talk about how Blacks weren't smart enough to be professional quarterbacks. This was back in the 1980s. I wanted my*

> *daughter to have a bigger worldview, not so limited, so narrow. And that's another reason why we are careful when we visit my family. I don't want her to hear their backwards attitudes, especially from my older aunts and uncles. My uncle Chuck, he's a problem.*

Bruce recognized his family as problematic, and put this down to racist older family members, as well as their small-town location. This made him very aware of the ways that he chooses to interact with them and very vigilant about the kinds of conversations his daughter is privy to when the family gets together. He managed his time and his travel to limit racialized interludes with his family and to protect his daughter from older generations he viewed as dangerous in their bias and ignorance.

In this example, we saw Bruce using distancing techniques about generation and geography on two levels. First, he used these generation and geographic distancing rhetorically, to position himself as experientially and ideologically different from his problematic relatives and home town. Second, he used the actual geographic distance between his immediate family and his family "back home" to be strategic about his daughter's exposure to older relatives he finds racially problematic.

My data show that wokeness is most often performed by younger people, and conflict from racialized interludes is often with their parents and grandparents' generation. Families, especially intergenerational interactions between adult children and senior parents, mean that "deeply rooted and historical tensions between family members can be brought to the fore" during this phase in the family cycle (Cotte and Huff, 2016). So, tensions between generations of family members is not uncommon, but additional conflict over racial issues is an added risk to peace and stability. In addition, however, identities

are also closely tied to family; people want to feel comfortable with being related to and loving others.

As discussed in chapter two, paths to woke whiteness can be from direct interactions with individuals of color, or it can develop via the cultural imaginary, generated by indirect contact through media and online contact. The fulcrum here is the activation of empathy. With racially regressive family members, a sense of connection exists that is in tension with the empathetic foundation of woke ideals. This tension underlies the calculated distancing that woke whites undertake in regard to generations and geography, quite literally the people and places that formed them, but that diverge from who and where they are now.

Resignation: "They Can't Change"

My interviewees who performed woke whiteness did a great deal of explication about how they became "woke" and acknowledged the racist nature of American society. In doing so, they explicitly recognized the possibility for growth and change, moving away from stereotypes and racist views, and towards more nuanced understandings of how race functions and the effects of racism and white supremacy. Respondents professed to be actively dedicated to making racial change; they themselves are testament to people's ability to become more racially aware. However, while being living proof of the ability of people to evolve in their racial attitudes, a surprising number of my respondents dismissed this same possibility for their loved ones.

I was surprised by the fatalistic tone many respondents took towards relatives and other loved ones with problematic racial attitudes. Interviewee after interviewee

expressed a resolve that the minds of their relatives, (particularly older relatives who were generationally distant), were never going to change with regards to racial issues. Christine summed it up with a touch of the morbid. “They’re old, they’re gonna die soon, they won’t change,” she said, with the implication that there was no point in trying.

Aaron adopted different strategies with his mother and father, for example. With his mother, he used teasing for his own amusement, because he recognized that she did not want to be perceived as racist and she saw that there were racially problematic elements to her own childhood. Aaron recognized that his mom still held problematic racial views, but he didn’t see or treat her as an unrepentant racist, so he still discussed racial issues with her and even treated it as a way to joke around. Aaron pointed out that the fact that he can joke with his mom means that she is not irredeemable, that it is worth his time and effort to talk with her about racial issues as part of their interactions. Aaron’s father, on the other hand, “makes Bill O’Reilly look like Che Guevara,” he said.

> *Gabriella: Yeah, the joke you play on your mom. If she blanches at it - at the thought of having said something racist - she seems to recognize she doesn't want to be racist.*
>
> *Aaron: Yeah! So, it's like [my dad has] learned that you're not supposed to be [seen as] racist, but he hasn't learned to not be racist. So, if I do that joke around my mom and my dad is there also, he gets offended and will fly off the handle. And that's one of the things that makes the joke so much fun, is because I can only really do it when just my mom is around. So, he'll be like upstairs or in the bathroom or something and I'll kind of do it quietly.*

But it's like he just can't have fun with anything. But with race stuff, like he...Oh, I remember him recently railing against Black Lives Matter. I don't know somehow, it's insulting. Like, for him, if someone says Black Lives Matter, in his mind they're inherently saying, 'only Black lives matter.' And, uh, I don't understand how that mindset comes about, but it's definitely something that race issues are still in my dad's mind. And racism. He's an angry person.

Aaron's father's emotional reaction to racial discussions centered on anger and frustration. Like Aaron's interactions with his mom, the interactions with his dad also reinforced their white identities through dueling performances of white identities: Aaron demonstrated his racial progressivism, while his father is demonstrating his commitment to a level of white supremacy (arguably his understanding of a different notion of honorable whiteness). Aaron also pointed out that his father's racial animus had not dissipated over the years, only become less obvious in public. The increasing intensity of his father's anger and his long history of racism has driven Aaron to disconnect because change is not possible.

Gabriella: With your dad now, has the political discourse - you said it made it even harder to talk to him about this kind of thing. What role does race play in the conversations that you can have? Has race come up in his most recent political thinking?

Aaron: I mean especially when Obama was the president. He hated Obama. You know, "Obama's not American. Wasn't born here. He's a Muslim" blah blah blah... And it's worse now [in the current political climate]. And I mean

he's still just as racist. I think maybe now he hides it a little bit better [in public] because people have come to learn that being racist is a bad thing, so you definitely don't want to look obviously racist.

Aaron stated that his dad had finally learned not to act overtly racist in public, that you are supposed to hide your racism, but he does not see his father as someone who wants to change or ever will. The current moment of racial liminality, with its heightened racial rhetoric, has only deepened his father's racist positions. While Aaron still joked with his mom, both for entertainment and to help prod her towards greater racial sensitivity, he viewed his father as a lost cause.

Resignation may look like the strategy of "tuning out," but it is distinct. First, tuning out is often done as a protective measure for woke whites. It is a conscious ignoring of racial content in discussions, and it is turned on and off selectively when needed. Second, resignation is more concrete, it comes after an epiphany that there is no hope for this person. Resignation represents a failure of the idea of change; because changing this loved one is not going to be possible, then woke whites will compromise their ideal of tangling with racial issues.

CONSTRAINTS TO CHALLENGING PROBLEMATIC RELATIVES

Why don't woke whites confront their relatives? Confronting racism is difficult. It comes with risks and requires bravery, and the closer people identify with group membership the harder it becomes to disrupt racism in that group (Trepagnier 2010). When it comes to confronting racism within their own (usually all-white) family, woke

whites must marshal their emotional resources and navigate complex family politics in order to preserve ties to loved ones. For the most part, among my respondents, casual racism wasn't sufficient reason to sever precious family ties. Racialized interludes were managed, via punctuated censure, teasing, tuning out, minimizing racism, distancing, and resignation, in order to preserve family relations. Because of the value placed on family, woke whites often feel constraints on confronting racially regressive performances within their families.

Most interviewees had stories about family members whom they contrasted to themselves regarding racial attitudes. But frequently censuring family members carries a risk, and sometimes you do not have the luxury of tuning out. Many whites who are invested in a woke identity did not feel empowered to challenge family members even though they feel entirely comfortable calling out those further from their inner circle. Three rationales for this constraint emerged from my discussions with respondents: the desire to belong, the need for family help, and a lack of authority.

Ties that Bind

Belonging to a family, even one that was messy or problematic, remained hugely important to my respondents. The sense of connection people felt from their loved ones, and the sense of identity they gained from belonging were obviously precious. Even among family members who embarrassed and horrified woke whites, there was love.

Belonging to a family can be important for one's sense of identity. Who we are is made up of the various categories to which we belong, including our identity characteristics like race, gender, sexuality, as well as the relational positions like son,

father, or brother, and the voluntary and ideological categories we claim like conservative or vegetarian or agnostic. When we are placed in a situation where these categories are at odds, it can be difficult.

Christine has two kids by her ex-husband. She grew up with relatively open-minded Christian parents, but very conservative religious “Bible Belt” grandparents. As a child, Christine was particularly close with her maternal grandparents, and as a mother she really wanted her kids to be close to their great-grandparents, since they were both still alive. As she described her relationship with these people the love Christine felt for them was palpable, but so was an underlying tension. I asked her about this, and she said that her children would never be able to be as close to her “Nana and Pop-Pop” as she was, because they were being pushed away by criticisms and fearful attitudes. I asked for an example.

> *Christine: This sounds weird, I know, but I remember being twelve years old, starting to read Eastern religious books and about Eastern cultures and [my parents] were okay with it. They were very open minded, luckily. But my grandma, she gave me an article, because I was doing yoga, saying "this is sinful." So, I was like “is it sinful?" I kinda felt guilty because I was so close to my grandma.*
>
> *Gabriella: So, is that the sort of thing hampering her relationship with your kids?*
>
> *Christine: (Sighs) Yes. She’s so closed off to anything different, everything is sinful. Everything that comes from another culture – movies with Black*

> *people. Black Panther, are you kidding? Even them having friends who aren't white…Like, my son has a best friend who is from Malaysia and his family is Muslim, and she went off about how Islam is evil. He's eight! This is his best friend! Her fear, it's poisonous. Poisonous to her, poisonous to us. And that makes me so sad, because how many people are lucky enough to have great-grandparents around? It's…It's just so tragic.*

Christine obviously suffered great heartache from the way her grandmother approaches any kind of racial, religious, or cultural difference. As a young child, Christine's relationship with her grandmother was close, and she took her Nana's critiques about things like yoga to heart. The greater pain, however, came from the dashed hopes that her children would be able to maintain a close and loving relationship with their great-grandmother.

Christine's desire for a sense of belonging with her family, for intergenerational bonds that most people don't have the opportunity to forge, was frustrated by a "poisonous" fear of anything different. Her kids had grown to be resistant to spending time with their great-grandparents. Christine said she understood and even agreed with her children, thinking that time spent in her grandmother's company was likely to be painful or even damaging to them, and antithetical to the way she wants her children to view the world and the variety of people in it. She wanted family togetherness, but she instead got fear of "otherness." Christine still maintained a "pretty good relationship" with her grandmother, visiting frequently and trying to minimize or tune out the more offensive and outlandish claims. Being a good granddaughter ended up being at odds with being a good mother, however, so the hoped-for intergenerational intimacy didn't materialize.

Family Help

Another factor impeding active confrontation on the part of woke whites was the understanding that family members were an important source of instrumental and social support. Renee recalled feeling uncomfortable about her paternal grandfather's racism, but being unable to express her discomfort.

> *I can say very candidly my dad's dad was very much racist. And, um, it drew my attention. I didn't like that. And I never really voiced that to him. But my grandmother would correct him. And I grew up thinking that [his behavior] was just wrong.*

But as a grandchild Renee did not feel in a position to challenge her elder relative's overt racism, leaving that to her grandmother.

> *My grandparents were very influential. They were stable people that remained married up until they passed, and they were the backbone of what my mother couldn't cover, what my dad didn't cover, the grandparents were there.*

Renee's grandparents were undeniably important to her because she loved them, but she also recognized that her family was dependent on their help to cover what her mother couldn't, and her father wouldn't. She did not feel in a position to challenge her grandfather, but she sensed as a child that she should not rock the boat due to her parents' dependence on the grandparents' goodwill.

Similarly, Kaylee, a young mother in her late teens who grew up just outside of Mountainville, is dependent on family help. At the time of our conversation Kaylee had

three young children under five. Kaylee was living in a woman's shelter and trying to sign up for food assistance. Like many of my youngest respondents, Kaylee's views on race differed markedly from those of her family members.

> *Ugh, my mom. We don't have the best relationship and I really don't like a lot of the things she says. She's real country, real old-fashioned, and I hate that my kids hear words like that [n-word] around her. But I got to have somebody to watch my kids! I don't have a choice but to have her do it. I just tell 'em that their Granny loves them but she's wrong about a lot of things.*

Kaylee relied heavily on family members for support, particularly child care. Her precarious position in life meant that she did not have the luxury to avoid interactions with her racially problematic mother. Her children's basic care was her first priority, and so she compromised her racial ideals in order to meet more pressing needs, even while trying to mitigate her mother's influence.

Alexis faced a similar problem. When her children return on Monday evenings from spending a weekend with their paternal grandparents, she told me she expects the "Terrible Tuesdays," where she has to counter negative messages (and eating habits, and behavior patterns, etc.) that her children picked up from their extended family. Nonetheless, custody arrangements, financial constraints, and a belief in the importance of family prevented her from limiting their time with her children. Alexis recognized that it required more from her parenting to "deprogram" her kids on a regular basis, but didn't feel she could risk causing a rift in the family over problematic racial attitudes and comments.

The realities of childcare expenses and challenging life situations mean that parents invested in a woke white identity often do not have the luxury of confronting family members and creating possible rifts because they are dependent on the good will and cooperation of the same people they find problematic. Other, more immediate considerations win out over principled stances.

Lack of Authority

A third factor getting in the way of woke whites standing up to family racism was their perceived lack of authority with members of the older generation. Kurt grew up in a household with a fairly authoritarian father. His father did not like to be questioned about decisions he felt were in the best interests of his family, such as moving to a farm to provide his children with opportunities to build character through hard work, and not having a television in the house for many years. It was a household where children were expected to speak when spoken to, and to be obedient. Kurt entered the military when he was in his late teens, and found the dynamic familiar. The hierarchical family dynamic Kurt grew up with carried into his adult interactions with family members who were elders. Kurt described his dad as someone who has a great deal of white privilege but wasn't aware of it, but contrasted this with his own personal experience with being food insecure.

> *[My dad] is an example of white privilege. He's always had it pretty good. He worked hard but his upbringing and education and social status was a major help to him, whereas I lived in less privileged areas and took down all kinds of different work and interacted with all kinds of different people compared to him. And so that's what makes me less, you know, not afraid*

> *to talk about it [with other people]. Because I've lived in it and been around it for so long.*

Kurt felt constrained in his ability to discuss racial issues with his father, however, in contrast to the relative comfort and frequency with which he participates in these types of conversations with friends, neighbors, and acquaintances.

Respondents who grew up in particularly religious households, with clear hierarchies, tended to express this reticence to stand up to elders. Aidan grew up Mormon, with no ambiguity about his father being the head of the household. The Mormon church has a long and problematic history with race (Mueller 2017), and this was a point of contention for Aidan and his siblings growing up.

> *But nobody, and I mean nobody, would ever say anything to my dad about it. Not then, not now. First, you'd be criticizing The Church. Unthinkable. And then you'd be criticizing dad's authority. Kids had no place, no right, to do that.*

Core values in Aidan's family silenced possible criticisms from the younger generation.

The woke whites I spoke with felt hampered in their capacity to confront racially regressive attitudes or race talk among their family and loved ones. When family members are racist, the sense of family connection and belonging is often at odds with a racially progressive identity. The difficulty of confronting racism is magnified within families because these connections are so valuable. But confronting racism in family settings is also made more difficult because of the way racism is understood in our culture. Calling someone racist is tantamount to calling them a deviant (Trepagnier 2010). Being

called a racist in the color-blind era is one of the worst things that whites believe can happen to them (Bonilla-Silva 2017; DiAngelo 2018; Ioanide 2015; Sue 2010; Trepagnier 2010). Many woke whites did not feel they were in a position to challenge family members in racialized interludes because they did not want to risk upsetting loved ones or causing fights, or they did not feel they were in a position to challenge or question family members who they depended on, deferred to, and cared deeply about.

GIVING FAMILY MEMBERS A PASS

Woke whiteness is a performance that positions the self in opposition to the status quo. As my respondents demonstrate, they actively reject the hegemony of color-blind understandings of race as part of their performance of their own racial identity. They also position themselves in opposition to the rise of racial animus and antagonism that they witness in the current reality of our racially liminal time. As it turns out, however, one of the most challenging contexts for participating in a performance of woke whiteness was the home; respondents told stories of holding coworkers or other "outsiders" to much higher standards than family members.

Many whites I interviewed felt profoundly guilty and conflicted about not confronting or actively trying to reeducate or change their family member's minds, especially as they recognized that they have reacted stridently to casual racism from workmates, acquaintances, or even strangers. When Grandfather makes snide comments about "urban youth" or racist Uncle Glenn decides to bless a family gathering with his opinions on Black Lives Matter, these behaviors are interpreted within the context of family. The

same problematic racial behaviors are interpreted differently, depending on the intimacy involved between the actor and the witness, and frequently based on whether the actor is in a position where they may not "know better." Behaviors are interpreted as positive, neutral, or negative, based on the cultural context of the actor (Briggs 1998), so behaviors that relate to race can be interpreted different ways.

The same rant against urban youth might be interpreted as foolish, unintentional, but ultimately not worth calling out when coming from Grandpa, but a co-worker or online interaction with an acquaintance would be interpreted as racially harmful or obviously racist. Take, for example, these quotes from Jennifer. In the first, she was talking about discussing people of mixed race with her father as a child.

> *My dad, I would say, was probably more conservative. I remember him talking about the concept of an "Oreo" and how he couldn't support the concept of a Black person and a white person getting married because it wasn't fair to the kids. And I remember thinking "that's weird, Dad." And my mom's family…they're all very conservative, but conservative doesn't mean racist, but more close-minded we can say.*

Jennifer minimized her father's position against mixed-race marriage, and she declared her understanding that conservatism is not tied to racism when it comes to her mother's family. However, if we look at how she responded to ties between conservatism and racism among work colleagues, she had this to say.

> *Why I think Black Lives Matter, and why I think that the [border] wall is racist and why I think we should help our immigrant brothers and sisters is*

> *because of things I learned in kindergarten and Sunday school. When somebody falls down you help them up. I fail to understand conservatives [not understanding this]. I asked the person who sponsored the College Republicans at [my former institution]. I said I just don't understand why we don't expect of our adults…why we don't expect the same basic respect for human dignity that we teach our children…We're so freaking far removed from that. Why do [Republicans] only care about a certain subset of people? I am a bleeding-heart liberal in that way. Call me a snowflake, I don't freaking care.*

Jennifer diminished the impact of conservative politics and its perceived ties to racism in her own family, but she was not shy about drawing these explicit connections when it came to people in the workplace. The level of intimacy and closeness she had with her family meant she granted them more leeway in racial issues than other people in her social circle, and she was willing to be more antagonistic with those outside her family.

These different reactions to family member versus coworker are telling. Woke whites like Jennifer did not give up their deeply held value of diversity and racial progress, but the expression of these values was constrained in their interactions with loved ones. Home and family are the sites where change is allegedly possible, sites often characterized by coming together in love, togetherness, intimacy, community, and also the frontlines of how we learn about race (Matlock and DiAngelo 2015; Nelson 2015). Interestingly, woke whites did not retreat into color-blind tropes that would be familiar and comforting to most of their family members. They were not abandoning their wokeness to color-blindness.

At the same time, however, family interactions were important contexts where the status quo was reinforced, despite their potential for social change through discussions of difficult issues. Families are supposed to be characterized by unconditional love, to provide security and support. Why can't we have those difficult conversations there? If woke whites can have difficult conversations on Twitter with relative strangers, why is it so hard to have the same conversations with people whom you love and trust? My respondents suggested that, ultimately, the risk of distancing family members was too high, so the opportunities to have deep and meaningful dialogues about race were allowed to pass by. Punctuated censure, teasing, tuning out, minimizing, distancing, resignation, all of these strategies were ways of dealing with the moral compromise of avoiding frank and open race talk during racialized interludes.

CONCLUSION

Change could happen within the family setting; it is where some people find deep trust, love, empathy, and togetherness. Valuing the importance of family is one of our highest cultural norms, and people tend to stick together with family despite many stressors. It is precisely because families are so valuable and important to our identities that the risk of difficult racial conversations is not undertaken, and so opportunities for racial progress are missed. The self-censuring and rationalizations around the racially problematic actions and attitudes of loved ones end up preserving woke-identity at the expense of woke goals.

Woke performances come up against frequent roadblocks, particularly in those contexts that, quite literally, hit closest to home. Family interactions are problematic for those who wish to perform woke whiteness, but my respondents developed strategies for

dealing with the tension between family belonging and their stated principles. While family harmony concerns often inhibited the execution of a woke identity, many respondents chose self-protective disconnecting. Maintaining the idea of a family member as a good person, worthy of love, even as they held regressive racial views resulted in several rationalization strategies, including, punctuated censure, teasing, tuning out, minimization, calculated distancing, and resignation. Woke-identified whites who were dependent upon family members for help with things like childcare, and those who felt a lack of authority in relation to elders had additional constraints for woke performances, as did those who felt their sense of family belonging was at risk. Because of the significant value placed on family, many woke whites wrestled with difficult emotional negotiations to square their wokeness with their family attachment. Because of the recognition of the risk to family cohesion involved with direct and vigorous discussions during racialized interludes, opportunities for racial progress and change within families were often missed.

An element of white privilege is the luxury of using racial wokeness as a litmus test for association. But for family members, racially progressive attitudes were not used this way; racially regressive relatives were tolerated to a certain extent, or were managed by the strategies discussed above. Tellingly, the strategies employed demonstrate that shutting down and backing off, with occasional interaction via teasing, that woke whites navigate race even when they are avoiding interaction. Largely, these strategies seem rooted in the protection of an honorable self-image and the avoidance of negative emotions that stem from conflict with loved ones. But while the emotional energy of the woke-identified white is protected through the strategies laid out in this chapter, these protection strategies also have the net effect of protecting the racial status quo.

The next chapter deals with gender difference in handling the often-uncomfortable realities of a woke white identity. Woke whites are willing, family issues notwithstanding, to feel racial discomfort, to feel their own privilege and try, through racial verstehen, to understand that of others. But women and men who enact a woke identity present and process the emotions of wokeness in unexpected ways. The next chapter asks: how do women and men differ in their performance of woke whiteness? It explores how the emotional aspects of wokeness processed and performed by men and women, and investigates what impact, if any, this has on the potential impact woke identity has for social change.

CHAPTER 5: GENDER AND EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT AMONG WOKE WHITES

It was a warm summer afternoon in Middleton county. I had the windows down and NPR on the radio, as I drove through a labyrinthine subdivision looking for the address of my next interview. Pin oaks were ubiquitous in the front yards, and kids' bikes were lying on their sides in a few driveways without children anywhere near. Theft must not be a great concern around here, I figured, in this comfortable suburban enclave. There was little variation in house colors and styles, and the address numbers on the homes were so tasteful and unobtrusive as to be practically useless for someone like myself trying to find a specific address. I suspected the HOA must be strong here, and they must not be interested in making navigation any easier for non-residents. But then, why would they? This is a community that does not need to put out the welcome mat for outsiders. Homes sell quickly in this solidly middle-class area, in no small part due to the award-winning school district, the plentiful parks, convenient highway access, and a county sports complex just two miles away.

I finally found Andrew's home, its house numbers obscured by the decorative spring-themed flag that still hung by the front door. The out-of-season flag actually coordinated nicely with the pastel plastic IKEA kids table and chair set, and small fun house that sat on the porch. It was a scene that gave the impression of a lively home where fun and play are more important than a bit of messiness. My interview was with Andrew, but he was fixing dinner for his two daughters, and his wife Laurie came into the room, home from work. There was a gleeful chaos to this young family. Andrew and I had been talking about how he thought the current political climate related to issues of race

and inequality. He acknowledged a rise in overt racism recently, both online and in politics.

> *So, I do think that the numbers [are up] of people who are willing to be really overt about some things that, to me it made a little more sense when they were a little more behind closed doors. And it's kind of remarkable. Clearly in a country of however many million people, yeah, we're probably gonna have some neo-Nazi sympathizers. I don't necessarily think they should have a convention in downtown DC about it. I think some of that...She [his wife] has actually had, like, legit anxiety during the political cycle. And I was like "you need to put that down. Stop looking at it, it's doing things to you that reading the news shouldn't." Not to say I don't care, but I also, I'm bad at stress anyways so I put politics in a box and I'm like, I am going to read because I want to know, but I have so many things that do damage to me on a stress level, politics can't be one of them.*

Andrew's wife Laurie couldn't help but overhear our conversation. She chimed in:

> *I just...especially now, there's so much. And I'm a highly empathetic person, and so I've been affected really potently this past year. But I'm not an activist. I don't have that in me. But what I can do is try to do this (raise kids) correctly. So, you know there's been some tears. There's been some tears. I definitely felt some political anxiety. I still do to a certain degree.*

The interaction between Andrew and his wife Laurie encapsulates one of the main differences that I have found between how woke-identified white men and women deal

with the emotions surrounding race and racial inequality that are so prominent in our racially liminal time. Andrew was well-informed. He even recognized that, contrary to what color-blind ideology would have us believe (and in accordance with what people of color have consistently recognized), the recent past of the United States has not been devoid of racial conflict, that racism never went away, it just changed form or went "backstage" (Bobo 2011; Bonilla-Silva 2018; Picca and Feagin 2007; Vickerman 2013). While this current racially liminal moment is an unsettled one, with potentially upsetting moments of conflict and turmoil, Andrew had the ability to remove himself from the racism of the present climate. He acknowledged that Neo-Nazis were probably a fact of life in the United States and that their ideas were socially and politically ascendant, but could compartmentalize this disturbing reality when it got too much for him (a privilege of his own whiteness). Laurie, on the other hand, had a harder time doing this. She didn't see herself as an activist, but her concern over the state of politics as they relate to race and gender was such that she has repeatedly shed tears. Laurie described herself as an empathetic person and specifically referenced her friendship with a Black girl growing up; her upset was rooted in her worry for herself and for racial others, her employment of *racial verstehen*.

In this chapter I take an intersectional approach to understanding woke whiteness and gender. In particular, I explore how the white women and men I spoke with differed in their approach to processing emotions. I found that woke white women tapped into their anger and rage on behalf of others, drawing upon their caregiving perspectives, in a form of what I term *emotional reparations.* In contrast, woke white men were more apt to process racial inequality and conflict at a greater distance. I found that woke women and

men both understand their position as whites in relation to the threat Blacks in the United States face from police, but women connect more with a fear and anger on behalf of others, whereas men identify with gendered police threats and the enjoyment they get from racial debates. Their somewhat distant perspective represents a gendered privilege of masculinity, the relative distance from caregiving responsibilities. The ability to compartmentalize and disconnect indicates that woke white men interacting with others, both online and in person, tend to perform *hazard play*, playfully poking around dangerous topics. While "white women's tears" and their reactive emotions are often an impediment to racial progress (Accapadi 2007; DiAngelo 2018), I argue that the closeness women, especially mothers, feel to the plight of racial others opens opportunities for movement towards racial progress.

EMOTIONAL REPARATIONS AND WOMEN'S ANGER

Gender and race shape our experiences of emotions, so it is important to understand emotions in the context of interlocking identities (Smith, LaFrance, and Dovidio 2017). In my research, women and men who identified with a woke white identity exhibited emotional investment in the importance of racial justice, but for white women there was a notable expression of strong emotions like anger. Female rage has become more visible in the popular press of late. Recent books such as Soraya Chemaly's (2018) *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* and Rebecca Traister's (2018) NYT bestselling *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, highlight the power of women's anger to shift politics and culture. The 2018 mid-term elections ushered

in a record number of women serving in the U.S. Congress,[24] riding a (mostly blue) wave of anti-Trump sentiment and its perceived misogyny. The first Women's March in D.C. on January 21, 2017 was held the day after the inauguration of Pres. Trump. It shattered all attendance expectations and had three times as many attendees as the inauguration itself.[25] As late-night host Samantha Bee proclaimed on the January 25th, 2017 broadcast of her show *Full Frontal*, it was not just in DC and other metropolises where women's anger was bringing them to the streets. "There were marches in Kanab, Loup City, and Zebulon, which sound like *Star Trek* planets but which I assure you are real American towns where real American people are getting real woke, real fast."[26]

For white women invested in a woke identity, expressions of outrage and anger were common among my interviewees, especially on behalf of others. I term these performances *emotional reparations*, performances of emotions such as anger, outrage, and sadness that accomplish several things for the woke whites who undertake them. First, such reparations serve as an emotional release for their empathic experiences of the other. Empathy is both a necessary prerequisite for racial verstehen – the willingness to put yourself in the shoes of racial others - and a byproduct of it. Evidence of empathy in woke performances goes deep, and is shown in the level of emotional work and strain that some whites cultivate. Awareness of unfairness and injustice takes a mental and emotional toll.[27] While whites are not subject to the powerfully damaging effects of experiencing prolonged racism, recognition of white privilege comes with guilt and other

[24] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/18/record-number-women-in-congress/ Emphasis added
[25] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/22/us/politics/womens-march-trump-crowd-estimates.html
[26] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pEcvteQo9g
[27] Of course, the impact of awareness of such racial inequalities on whites is not comparable to the continued and demonstrable damage it inflicts on people of color. Still, the willingness to dip a white toe in the pool of racialized pain is not a requirement of whiteness. So, such a move is a voluntary engagement with painful emotions.

negative emotions. This recognition of white privilege also comes with political implications, as woke whites must wrestle with what it means to be free from the fear of state-sponsored violence, for example.

Second, emotional reparations signal to the self and to others that you are an honorable white person, because you willingly share the pain of your fellow humans, tapping into shared humanity and moving beyond socially constructed racial categories. Emotional reparations show fellow whites what exactly constitutes an honorable white performance in the performer's eyes, as well as signaling to people of color who witness the performance that the performer is an ally.[28]

These emotional performances are active demonstrations of dedication to the plight of racial others. Some whites may not be in a position or know quite how to directly address racial injustice or may not be oriented towards activism, so emotional reparations allow them to express their frustrations and solidify their identity as a good white person. Indeed, this can be a danger of emotional reparations: it can potentially siphon energy for activism into emotional displays. Among my respondents, women were much more likely than men to perform emotional reparations.

I asked new mom Jennifer if she would give any advice to people moving to Middleton County, and if that advice would differ based on the racial identity of the person to whom she was speaking. In response, Jennifer brought up a recent conversation she

[28] When I use the term signaling, I want to be clear that I attach no pejorative meaning to it. I recognize the phrase "virtue signaling" has a negative connotation as a conspicuous signaling of moral worth and value. While my use of the term is used to communicate a moral ideal on the part of woke whites, I use the term more in line with ideas of successful performances of identity, following West and Fenstermaker (1995)

had with someone at work who is a white Catholic woman married to a Muslim man from Iran.

> *She's expecting [a baby] and she's telling me that they're going to raise their kids... I think they like to talk about their lives and they like to think - to know - to know that somebody cares. I genuinely care…But [they have] curiosity about that, about how a Black kid was with four of his buddies and the cop initially backed [his car] up against them and this kid, they were driving away, and he got shot in the back of the head.*[29] *An 18-year-old boy! And she said that she told her husband "well he shouldn't have died" but her husband with the TSA stuff, she just tells him "you just shouldn't resist." I'm just sad that that's a world we have to live in.*

Jennifer's identification with her expectant colleague and that woman's husband allowed her to demonstrate her position as a caring ally. She related the story of the Black boy shot by police, demonstrating her outrage and pain at the senseless killing, but also subtly demonstrated to me that her white colleague is not sufficiently affected on behalf of her husband's treatment at the hands of the TSA. Jennifer was clearly saddened at the state of the world. She also related a story about her cousin and this cousin's adopted sons.

> *My cousin [and her partner], they adopted two little boys, one from Vietnam and one from Korea, and they're brown [skinned]. And [my cousin] says she's had to have conversations with her 8-year-old about not resisting police officers. And that just breaks my heart. Those are conversations*

[29] I am not sure which incident she is referring to, but I believe it might be the case of 15-year-old Jordan Edwards. https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/5/1/15499996/jordan-edwards-police-shooting-texas-balch-springs

> *we're never going to have to have with [my son]! So, in that context, if… if… if there was a concern I would go out of my way to connect them with someone. But I wouldn't know what to do, in my white middle class privilege, I wouldn't know how to help them. I would put them in touch with somebody who could help them. I don't know how I define privilege other than I know that I have it. I mean, um, I can think of scenarios, like I'll never have to tell my son that he'll have to be especially careful about how he approaches police officers compared to my cousin and her brown sons. Our children are raised very similarly, we're from the same family tree...And so somebody said that it is our job as people of privilege to shut up and listen, and I think that that is so powerful and so important.*

Jennifer's concern with the adopted sons of her cousin and the potential danger the police pose to young, brown-skinned boys broke her heart because she knew that her own son would not experience that undue burden. Jennifer's sorrow at the inhumanity of those who exhibit bias was palpable. She exhibited a willingness to make herself uncomfortable daily, and didn't understand why others cannot use their position of racial privilege to do the same. In her mind, a good white person would acknowledge white racial privilege. She was distressed, unsure of how to help them, but could demonstrate her own desire to do so. She attested to the importance of white people shutting up and listening to the experiences and perspectives of people of color, but she was also speaking out, performing emotional reparations on their behalf because she was heartbroken that another mother, and other sons within her own family, have to entertain the possibility of violence or even death.

Women who were invested in woke whiteness demonstrated their strongest emotional reactions when they perceived threats to loved ones, especially children. Leah and I were talking about her recent move and the struggles she had finding a school with suitable resources for her autistic son. She saw parallels between protecting her children and their best interests to what she imagined minority parents often experience. I asked her if this makes her more likely to discuss racial inequality with other parents.

> *Yeah. Definitely more likely. I mean, more likely and more aware and, like, on the warpath. I feel like I just immediately have my defenses up, and I'm like protecting my kids, and um making sure that they know how we feel. And you know, I don't want to push [my and my husband's] views on them, because I don't necessarily think that we think the right way, but we certainly think with love and peace, and not judging based on gender, race, and religion. Or financial status. Those things work together.*

Leah was "on the warpath" in ways that turned her ire towards larger systems of inequality, tied to issues of class and financial precariousness, coupled with the knowledge that people of color are overrepresented among the poor and financially vulnerable.

Leah's anger on behalf of others was sparked by her own family's experiences with the subprime mortgage crisis and not being able to afford another home. Leah's racial verstehen was rooted in her own perceived victimization by large corporations and their unfair ways of doing business, and the knowledge that subprime mortgages were

oversold to people of color. Leah "gets" the structural ways people are exploited by large institutions, and the subsequent compounding challenges these exploitations spawn.

> *It's so f-ed up, the way the banks went after people. And I know that they just got away with it, and it hit African American and Latino families even harder. And no one is going to jail, and people suffered so much. It makes me so angry!*

Leah's guiding principles of love and peace did not prohibit the expression of righteous indignation at inequalities, and her own victimhood allowed her to empathize with others who have faced added burdens due to religion, race, and gender discrimination.

Shannon, the queer, young graduate student in Northwest Town, told me that her personal motto is "do no harm, but take no shit."

> *And I really, really, mean that. I will put it out there in a very open hearted [way], I'm not afraid to stand up for myself. And for men especially that comes off as abrasive. And, so, if we start to tiptoe into that territory [about race] where I am like, "Hmmm, in order to look myself in the mirror I'm gonna have to speak up here." Then I know the date's over. I'm not trying to argue with some fucking guy about politics and I'm not there to teach them about feminism either.*

Shannon's interactions require a level of awareness, "wokeness," among people she dates. But her emotional performance of woke whiteness extended to outrage on behalf of others. She related to me a recurring situation where she was more outraged on behalf of a Brazilian colleague of color from than the woman herself.

Shannon: Yeah, and so sometimes we'll be, like all these white people in the classroom and we're all pissed off about some race issue, and she's like "I don't really get it. I'm not feeling that way, just so you know." And so, I think she sees herself more like an ex-pat, than a black person. And she's fairly light skinned but has nappy hair and whatnot.

Gabriella: So, she has some features that would be racial markers of Blackness here?

Shannon: Yes. Absolutely. So, her name is Rafaella, but it's spelled with an R (pronounced H), so like we have a few professors that are like "Rafa" and I'm like "doesn't that piss you off?" And she doesn't say anything, but I'll be like "it's Hafa! It's Hafa!" I'll just get in there because I can't stand it. Anyway, but that kind of stuff doesn't seem to irk her as much, because it doesn't have the same...I think we just see it very differently.

Shannon's understanding of racial issues was rooted in her understanding of what would be racially offensive in an American context. She felt outrage – to the point of correcting professors – on behalf of someone who does not share the same racial touchstones, or at least did not react to them with the same overt visceral disgust. It was possible that Rafa may not have wanted Shannon to correct the professors about the pronunciation of her name; students of color and international students are particularly vulnerable members of university communities in the U.S., but they also commonly have very different views of racialized interactions than do African Americans and other native-born racial minorities (Vickerman 2016). Yet Shannon interpreted the name situation through her own lens, not that of her colleague of color.

Shannon's position as a member of the LGBTQ community gave her a ready understanding of just how difficult systems of oppression can be to navigate, her experiences approximated other forms of discrimination and thus opened a door to empathizing with racial pain (Picca and Feagin 2007). Like Leah, Shannon had some understanding of what it is to be disadvantaged; while Leah's understanding came from an institution and Shannon's from an identity, both women could parlay these experiences into a willingness (and confidence) to put themselves in the shoes of racial minorities and feel outrage on their account. Examples like Leah's "warpath" mode and Shannon's anger on Rafa's behalf encapsulate emotional reparations. They are rooted in understanding another's perspective and are the performance of a kind of protective outrage.

We know that the standards of white femininity discourage the expression of negative emotions, especially anything related to anger. A popular proverb reads "anger is one letter short of danger[30]," and for women, expressing anger often comes with risk. Racial and class disparities exist, such as the well-known "angry Black woman" trope and the jokes at "poor white trash" women exhibiting unseemly, non-deferential behavior (Chemaly 2018; Taylor and Risman 2006). But a mother's anger is the most socially palatable form of female anger (Chemaly 2018). We expect women to be angry on behalf of their loved ones, because we assume caring roles are the most central to female identity. Women are supposed to be givers and carers, so anger on behalf of themselves is not seen as justified. However, we accept the protective anger of "Mama Bears" and jokingly compare Hockey Moms to pit bulls in lipstick, as Sarah Palin famously did at the

[30] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/both-sides-the-couch/201206/anger-is-one-letter-short-danger. This saying is often misattributed to Eleanor Roosevelt.

2008 Republican National Convention. Research confirms that women with greater levels of education, more children, and who are married feel more anger; women tend to feel more anger in terms of family matters, whereas men's anger is more related to subjective identity (Taylor and Risman 2006). As emotions are raced (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Matias 2016; Young Kim 2016), the gendered emotions of whites are also constructed through whiteness.

The emotional reparations demonstrated by my female interviewees served as an emotional release and also signaled their honorable character to themselves and to myself as the audience during the discussions. Drawing on the material in the previous chapter, when it comes to family conflict and anger over racial insensitivity, there is more self-censoring than in interactions with people who are not loved ones. For the most part, this anger on behalf of others is mitigated by family relations.

Sometimes, however, the conflict reached a breaking point, as it did with Alexis. Alexis' relationship with her father reached its nadir when she met and started to date a Black man who was a hospital administrator where she worked, and she cut ties over her father's comments. At times, racialized conflict propelled women to action in their face-to-face interactions with others.

Woke white women also found themselves expressing and performing their anger in social media discussions, a primary outlet for passionate emotions in modern times (Ferenczi, Marshall, and Bejanyan 2017). Online, when women chose to join racialized conversations they became irate, most commonly with strangers or acquaintances. Recall in the last chapter that family members were often not directly confronted about racially problematic comments and were instead ignored online or muted, as woke whites employ

the language of self-care to justify disconnecting or giving up on an argumentative thread that seems never-ending. With acquaintances or strangers online, however, women were much more likely to participate in ways that risked angering the other party. Jennifer discussed her experience with others on Facebook:

> *Not this "but but but but [what about]" NO! Just listen. It's like related to the concept that there can't be reverse sexism or reverse racism because it's about POWER. And unless the power switches, which it isn't going to, then we can't have the other ism.*

Jennifer's Facebook engagement is emblematic of one way women participate in race discussions at a distance. Jennifer refused to accept the excuses or the "both sides" nature of the argument, she did not entertain the validity of people who refuse to understand power and its consequences, and she was incensed on behalf of unknown people of color. She also recognized the unfair and inaccurate stereotypes that target women of color.

> *I got into a Facebook argument about that, "the welfare queen does exist because I used to live in the poorest district in Mississippi and we had 14 y/o girl getting pregnant because that was the way to get money!" And I was like "no 14-year-old girl wants to get pregnant unless that's the only reality she knows." So, realizing that people have different realities, and that, that, as an educator I want there to be some education.*

Jennifer dug in and insisted upon the reality of inequality, dismissing anecdotal evidence. She did not entertain the possibility that anecdotes have any validity in

the face of the truth. But she also was perplexed and concerned about her own anger.

> *This is a really hard problem but being defensive and angry when you're called out isn't going to solve anything. And there is oppression. And as somebody who has been on the other side of the power it's my job to shut up and listen. Like I don't know what to do with my power, I don't know what to do with my privilege.*

Jennifer's rage was her reparation, because she didn't "know what to do with [her] privilege."

Women face a cultural expectation of caregiving, and so are often penalized for not basing their identity and actions on their relationship to others and how it might affect people presumed to need their care. The expectation of caregiving represents a gendered burden for women, and the lack of caregiving pressures is a gendered privilege for men. One of the byproducts of this caregiving norm is the relational or other-focused way of thinking that women often exhibit, compared to the self-focused orientation that is reinforced in men. For the woke white women performing emotional reparations, they frame their concern by connecting with the risk to kids, the pain to families, the way the vulnerable are victimized.

But woke women also are aware of the burden of care and representation in how they approach expressing their negative emotions. They avoided alienation when they had responsibility for a group and tempered their emotional presentations with this goal in mind.

Alienation, Incorporation, and the Fallout from Emotional Reparations

Woke whites of both genders risk alienating their listeners if they are too strident in their stance on race, but the women I spoke with handled this risk differently than men. Women concerned themselves more with making sure no one felt alienated, while men were less attuned to these sorts of implications. Take Shannon, the graduate student in communications studies, who was taking classes but also teaching. I asked her about race and gender issues and the way she approaches discussing them in those settings.

> *Yeah. It definitely comes up a lot in my graduate classes, and those feel like very safe spaces to talk about it. I think people that don't know how to talk about it yet generally just stay quiet, or ask questions in private later, or make jokes or whatever they can to bring it up.*

Her own graduate class environments were places where Shannon felt comfortable discussing these issues. She expected these topics to be on the table in the grad class environment and seemed to expect those classmates who were less adroit in discussing such sensitive issues to find ways to adapt. In fact, Shannon's anger on behalf of her colleague Rafa having her name mispronounced indicated that Shannon was comfortable enough in this classroom environment to challenge powerful professors as a first-year graduate student. Yet this kind of public takedown was in contrast to how she behaved in classrooms where she taught.

> *As far as my own classroom goes, in public speaking, I choose to remain neutral in a lot of ways. I... (pause) I know what I know about. So, if some kid gives a speech on mental health, and somebody asks a question and*

they don't know the answer, I'll be like "actually it's this percentage and if you want the article I can show you it." So, I direct them in that way, instead of focusing on certain beliefs or values, out in the public sphere. You talk about what good sources of information are, and what peer-review means and how to find journal articles, and what that even is…

I don't really want to alienate anyone. But as long as their topics are sound and not going to be hurting anyone. I only got one review from my class last semester of a kid that was like "I think we just really believe different things and that made it hard to understand stuff in this class." So maybe examples I used were too out there, but it's my life, those are the only ones I've got.

Shannon, she of the “do no harm, but take no shit” mantra, felt the need to use a soft approach in her classrooms for fear of alienating students who might be made uncomfortable by discussions of race, gender, and sexuality. While she was confident in her subject matter and in applying academic knowledge to real-world experiences, her woke performance was tempered by a hesitancy to make people uncomfortable. Her concern was about creating a safe environment without alienating anyone who might not share her progressive views, which for Shannon meant avoiding directly addressing those topics.

Women like Shannon spoke of a hesitancy about initiating difficult discussions in a face-to-face situation, for fear of sacrificing cohesion. Among my female respondents there was a striking difference in when and where they performed emotional reparations. They distinguished between different kinds of interactions based on closeness and their level of responsibility to the group. With family members during racialized interludes, woke

white women tended to self-censor by deploying one of the strategies like punctuated censure or tuning out. Keeping the peace and maintain intact family relationships was a top priority in this most intimate circle. But with regard to interactions involving friends, social media online, and in dating situations, however, women tended to speak up. These relationships were less intimate and there was less risk to speaking up about contentious issues, and showing strong emotions like anger. In Shannon's dating she prioritized being able to look herself in the mirror over offending "some fucking guy." She stood up for her beliefs, and was confident enough to stand up for her colleague Rafa, within her graduate classes. But when Shannon was responsible for captaining the ship of her own class, she didn't rock the boat. When woke white women had the responsibility for shepherding a group they downplayed the emotional performances of their wokeness and focused on the relational responsibilities of the group.

"AND I ENJOY IT": MEN'S "HAZARD PLAY"

Emotional reparations were much more common among my female respondents, who found themselves stressed by the barrage of negative and depressing news in our racially liminal time. But in general, men adopted a different approach. This quote from Leah demonstrates that divide.

> *I hate [watching the] news. I hate it. Especially with what's going on now, I think you and I both know, it's too depressing to even watch. And our son has picked up on my husband and I talking about "not my president" and just how evil he is. And just disgust, and I just tell my husband "I can't even." Because my husband will listen to NPR, and he loves Colbert, Stephen*

> *Colbert, and I just can't because I know that they are trying to make it funny, but it's not. It's scary that it's even like that.*

Where Leah's husband consumed the news and then coped with its negativity by embracing the black humor of late-night hosts, Leah felt it too deeply and could not put the implications at a humorous distance. This example typifies a broader pattern: women were troubled, angry, and sometimes overwhelmed by racial inequality and conflict, while men seemed to adopt a more playful stance towards race and racism with a focus on debate. While women prioritized connection through avoiding "poking the bear," men seemed to be sharpening their sticks.

While women's anger is having a cultural moment, men's tendency to be argumentative about political issues online and in person is well documented. The popularity of the "poking the bear" meme acknowledges that some people often act in ways that they know have a good chance of causing conflict or raising emotional reactions. Researchers have demonstrated that men are much more likely to enact this type of behavior online than women (Ferenczi, Marshal, and Bejanyan 2017). Advice columns give women perspective on how to deal with this online argumentativeness from the men in their lives. For example, the February 14, 2019 edition of "Ask Carolyn" in *The Washington Post* included this letter from a woman who identified herself as "Wishing Facebook was Anonymous":

> *These are charged times, we all know. My husband spends hours arguing with strangers on the comments section on articles and friends' posts on Facebook…I hate it. I've asked him to stop and he says he feels like he needs to call out bigotry and racism wherever he sees it. He was raised in*

a pretty racist family but has become 'woke' and wants to wake everyone else up. But it doesn't work. People dig in and he looks like a crazy person!

While the woke white men whom I spoke to were not, to my knowledge, engaging in harmful internet trolling,[31] they were likely to get involved in racial arguments with the hope of triggering a reaction, often without specifically believing that any real anti-racist goals were being served by their actions. The ubiquity of online arguments, and the politicization of topics regarding racial or gender inequality, meant that broaching these subjects was akin to poking that sleeping bear. We might call the act of participating in these arguments *hazard play*. These moments are hazardous because they are known topical triggers for strong emotional reactions, and they are play because the men involved get some level of enjoyment out of the interactions.

Hazard play does two things for woke white men, it provides them with entertainment and it is an opportunity for identity signaling. Whereas emotional reparations provided women a much-needed outlet for negative emotions as well as a way to signal their position as woke whites, hazard play provides signaling through an opportunity for mischievous fun. The arguments the men participated in were about signaling a racially woke position and not about achieving tangible anti-racist goals, so they were important for their performative aspect. These instances of hazard play allowed

[31] Trolling on the internet is the (largely male) pastime of making unsolicited comments with the intention of provoking emotional reactions and bringing people who "took the bait" into arguments. While the political right has been implicated in a lot of troll activities, for example Amanda Marcotte's book *Troll Nation: How the Right Became Trump-Worshiping Monsters set on Ratf*cking Liberals, America, and the Truth Itself* (2018), the left is not immune (see Bernie Bros: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernie_Bro). The trolling phenomenon, though difficult to track, is perceived as largely white and male. For more information see Eckstrand, 2018, and Clinnin and Manthey 2019.

men to perform woke whiteness with an underlying emotional distance that kept things lighter and more diverting for them, although possibly more negative for others.

Aaron described his own hazard play when he and I were talking about discussions of race on social media.

> *Because it's like always on my mind. And I enjoy it. And I also am kind of a button pusher (laughs), so I'll inevitably bring it up in conversations where I know I'm not supposed to, but I can't help myself.*

Aaron derived mischievous pleasure from this racialized type of hazard play. He loved the charge he gets from political discussions, most especially when race is even tangentially involved. He recognized that he's "not supposed to" if he wants to preserve the conversational peace, but for him the pleasure he could get out this type of interaction outweighed the concern over others' comfort.

Men's woke white performances involved inciting racial conflict casually in interactions where the alienation of non-woke whites was a possibility, particularly in arenas that were not exclusively white like workplaces, classrooms, and virtual spaces like Facebook threads. In addition to entertainment, hazard play also has a signaling component: woke white men used hazard play as a way of solidifying a woke identity. I met Sean, a landscaper who was in his early 40s, and had a young son. I asked him about how he deals with these issues on Facebook, his social media site of choice. He indicated an awareness that online conversations about racial issues are most likely not going to change any minds, and was able to keep both the outcomes of such discussions as well as the impacts of racism at an emotional distance.

Sean: I've been using Facebook, really just to vent about my anger at the world, and have recently decided that it's 99% a total waste of time and 1% a partial waste of time (chuckles). So, I'm just weaning myself from it. All I end up doing is saying radical leftist things and having people respond with either "oh yes, I agree completely" or calling me a "libtard" and "moron" and telling me that I need to watch out when the white people take over the world.

Gabriella: So, are these Facebook friends of yours? Do you have a broad range of Facebook friends?

Sean: Yeah, absolutely. If anybody asks me for a friend request, I just hit yes. I don't care. So, I have Facebook friends who I've never interacted with in any kind of meaningful way, except occasionally "thumbs up, I like your salad," or "you know, NO there IS such a thing as white privilege and here is a slight small explanation," and "no, I'm not trying to make you feel guilty for your success. I just want you to acknowledge the fact that the game is not level." You know. So, it's a waste of time. Either you're inside your bubble, or you're outside of it, and no one cares what you say either way.

Sean said he doesn't disengage from people online, or even unfriend or mute them, if they call him a "libtard" for advocating his woke position. He said he doesn't go all in, but he will offer "a slight, small explanation" for his position. But he saw participation as essentially a debate of internet bubble denizens, not pressing real-world issues. He was not worried about alienating those he might be conversing with. He treated such interactions with a humorous detachment, viewing them with a somewhat nihilistic

fatalism. Through such interactions he was able to signal his woke identity – by giving examples of white privilege, for instance – but the entanglements were treated like a lark.

The types of discussions and heated arguments, the trading of barbs, insults, and jokes downplayed the seriousness of what was at stake. In Leah's quote from the beginning of this section she explained her view that the state of politics and race relations was deadly serious; according to her, men like her husband and late-night talk show hosts "*they are trying to make it funny, but it's not. It's scary that it's even like that.*"

Why is hazard play fun for men? First, hazard play is fun for men because men are taught that teasing and trading barbs is fun. Fathers frequently engage in this kind of exchange with their children, and while it can be harmful if taken to the extreme, it represents a "fun" way of enacting a form of masculinity (Kerr, Gini, Owen, and Capaldi 2018).

Second, men are more likely to participate in trading online insults, harassment, coordinated attacks, and other aggressive online behavior no matter the subject (Clinnen and Manthey 2018; Pew Research 2014), which enhances affinities with different groups. I found that the emotional charge that people got from taking a side and a stand online, solidifying divisions between an "us and them" on given topic, was a pleasurable one. The achievement of this emotional charge was through a very gendered online dynamic, where men are much more likely to join or start online debates. The parry and thrust of an argument, the point scoring through logic and facts, the one-upmanship of trading witticisms, all of this is a potential source of fun for women and men. But there is an element of masculine privilege at work here. Women's responses to racialized interludes tended to be more connective, thinking about who was hurt, thinking about family pain.

Men's responses to racialized interludes were more focused on individual satisfaction and consequences. The men could focus on the debate without being overwhelmed by the potential negative ramifications of racism for the lives of real people. I found that men and women positioned themselves differently with regards to whom they empathized with in debates.

Empathy opens the door to racial verstehen, being willing to look at the world through the experience of racial minorities. Yet in their hazard play, woke white men sometimes expressed empathy for people whom they felt were wrongheaded on race. Aaron's encounters with race and gender issues on social media, for example, indicated distance from the impact of these political footballs on the lived experiences of people affected. Aaron viewed these exchanges more as entertaining debates rather than arguments where he should act as an advocate on behalf of people of color against "these racists."

> *Gabriella: The latest political cycle, has it changed how you think about race or gender, or has it made you think about these issues more?*
>
> *Aaron: Um I think it does make me think about it more. It probably does because, I feel like people, these racists, have come out of the woodwork. It's almost like they are trying to make it normal, after they've been...One of the things that I've been thinking about, is that everything that Trump does, or this administration does, I'm like "this is horrible! The world's on fire!" So, it makes me think about people like my dad who were very against Obama, they must have felt just like this, the way I feel now, for eight years. And I'm like "wow, that sucks." That must have sucked for them. I still don't think*

> *that their feelings were legitimate in any way… But, they still felt that nonetheless. But those feelings informed their behavior, their decisions, in their political world and elsewhere.*

Aaron acknowledged that racists are "coming out of the woodwork" in the current social climate, aided by the president and many powerful interests. Yet his discussion of the divisions between those who are racist and those who aren't focused on political tribes, and he demonstrated empathy for people like his father (whom he calls a racist) because they perceived Obama as problematic to the same extent as he perceived Trump. Aaron understood quite clearly the role of emotions and feelings in political discourse but at that moment, did not demonstrate the outrage on behalf of others who are the ones most affected by racial inequality.

This extension of empathy to those of the "other side" of racial debates shows just how low the stakes were for the woke white men involved. Debates and discussions were more about principles than people-focused. And when disagreements were raging sometimes woke white men identified more with their debate partners than with the victims of racial inequality.

Men connected with the playful banter, embracing the scrappy ideal of loving debate, expressing humor or even awe about the ignorance of their debate partners, on and offline. In contrast to the woke white women I interviewed, this comfort with conflict extended even into situations in which the risk of alienating one's audience was great. Andrew taught classes on theater craft for various local schools, usually at the junior college level. I asked him if issues about race or gender ever come up in his classrooms, since he focuses on technical elements like lighting and sound. He said he encouraged

these types of discussions because he liked the exchanges, especially before class. His perspective is that discussing these issues would build camaraderie and foster connection in real life, whereas people might be more likely to express their unvarnished (and less civil) perspectives online.

> *So, I can remember there were a couple of nights where people got there early, and we might be having a conversation, but there were definitely some kids, [one] who came in with a knife [in his] boot and some students with Trump gear. I was like "I don't want you guys to have this weird [sense of being] anathema to each other in the middle of class where we're gonna be talking about things" and whatever.*

Andrew's belief in the importance of people talking face-to-face was rooted in his distrust of online discourse and his knowledge of online troll culture. He wanted in-person interactions to become more comfortable for people on opposite sides.

> *I think, um, I think one of the things with current-aged college kids is that they are so used to the anonymity of the internet that actually saying some of those things in person is harder than they think it is. For me to come out and use a racial epithet to your face is not the same thing as posting it on the internet. And I think that kids that have grown up in the digital ether, some of that is hard. I think that they struggle more to just have a conversation, be it confrontational or not. I think that they have a harder time with it, because I do these discussion forums online and a lot of times, they're really productive, and I'll try to do the same thing in class and I find that I don't get the interaction.*

Andrew was not concerned about alienation via discussion or controversial topics like race and gender, unlike Shannon. Following the 2016 Presidential election he had trouble getting students to actively participate in class, describing the mood of the class after the election in terms of walking on eggshells. However, his strategy was to directly confront the issue, not shy away.

> *I actually had a night class in the fall [of 2016], and it was like YIKES! It was really hard to teach for a couple of weeks there, because everybody was just out of it, including me... I have one student who is a - she just got her concealed carry - she comes from a staunch conservative family. She's the most liberal member of her family and her best friend is my nanny, and it's interesting for perspective to have these kids over and talk about some of this stuff. But in a classroom, it's a little bit of an eggshell thing. I think students don't want to set anybody off. They're really interested in the whole gun control thing. I was very surprised that more students that I've talked to are not as concerned about being shot but they don't want to have to watch somebody being shot. It's interesting from the perspective of I think the whole issue of there's so much entitlement and nobody wants to step on any toes or be the impetus for this.*

For Andrew, the problem was the sense of entitlement and the fear of causing offense. Andrew approached his woke performance as a steward for difficult conversations, seeing it as his responsibility to get debates started and difficult dialogues out in the open. He felt his role was to push beyond timidity and discomfort to a place of more openness and frank discussion. The personal distance he felt from the subject matter of racial

intolerance allowed him to move forward unimpeded by fear of alienating his students. In contrast to Shannon the TA, who sought to create a safe space, Andrew's role, as he saw it, was to open up these conversations even in the presence of weapons.

White men seem to have an ability to keep the implications of racism more at a distance, so I found that they didn't get overwhelmed by their feelings of anger or sadness, and could still find joy in teasing and debate. The women I spoke with felt rage because they empathized with racial minorities through trying to understand the pain of discrimination on individuals and families. I found that they felt emotionally connected to racial others to such a degree that they need the release of emotional reparations.

This argument is not simply that the women were more emotional, but instead that they had trouble feeling anything but negative emotions when they thought about racial inequality and its effects. Men are certainly taught to suppress most emotions, so it wasn't surprising that I found they were less likely to engage in emotional reparations, particularly the profound sadness that many women felt. However, women are also taught to suppress anger, which made their anger on behalf of the victims of racism all the more interesting. Yet the women who expressed the greatest anger were woke white mothers, reinforcing the idea that a mother's anger is the most palatable type of female rage (Chemaly 2018).

While all woke whites exhibit levels of racial verstehen, how men and women handle the emotional components of differed. Men's ability to think of themselves more as individuals compared to women's position as individuals in relational webs of connection allowed men access to the positive emotions of playfulness and enjoyment.

UNDERSTANDING GENDERED WHITE PRIVILEGE

This social context, where women are taught to think of themselves relationally and men are encouraged, or at least allowed, to think about themselves more as individuals, also impacted how men and women thought about racialized risks of violence. In this racially liminal moment with its heightened adversarial politics, woke white women embraced the zeitgeist of resistance and expressing anger at injustice based on their subjective identities as women, but also by enacting emotional reparations and feeling outrage on behalf of racial others.

On the other hand, men's subjective identity as white men was not perceived as under threat among woke men that I interviewed, in contrast to the racial threat experienced by the men detailed in works such as Kimmel's *Angry White Men* (2017) and Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016). The anger explored in Kimmel and Hochschild's works was reactionary, hinging on aggression and anger being acceptable and even desirable when white men displayed it in a retaliatory context; Kimmel (2017) referred to this as "aggrieved entitlement," a thwarted prerogative that redirects its antipathy towards "others" like women, immigrants, and minorities of all types. My interviewees who exhibited wokeness did not adhere to the idea of a white racial entitlement, so central to understanding the roiling emotions and aggrieved postures detailed in these authors' works. In fact, they exhibited an aspirational desire to be distanced from their entitlement, and instead performed a gratitude for what they had, due to their recognized white privilege.

I asked all of my interviewees to define white privilege, whether they were familiar with the concept or not, and I followed this up by asking about examples of what they thought white privilege might look like. Overwhelmingly the idea of police threat was the most common example supplied. But men and women differed, as men recognized the privilege of being white but the persistent risk of being male. Women thought about the threat of police violence in terms of loss as well as risk. The women I spoke with also talked about the privilege of not personally facing much risk of personal violence. But they also spoke of the privilege of not having to worry about their white children getting shot by the cops, compared to the ways they knew Black parents in particular had to constantly warn their children of the dangers associated with police interactions.

White women focused on personal risks and risks to loved ones. Consider Leah's response to my question about what white privilege meant to her.

> *White privilege is just, um, knowing that that's a dominant race and I would never have to worry...wouldn't be worrying about having to watch my back for people that would hate me and could hurt me. Or could just, um, a police officer that could pull me over and just not like me because of the color of my skin and then kill me. Because I think you and I can agree that that's running rampant now too, and that's scary as hell. So that, white privilege would...I would, that, maybe my son is treated differently in school because he's white. That maybe, you know, maybe he's treated better, and this is nothing against his speech therapist or anything, but maybe they think I'm more likely to work with him and get him to work at home versus somebody of color, you know.*

At first, Leah touched on familiar talking points like personal "freedom from worry" without concrete examples. Though she recognized that racial discrimination is not just being disliked by people, or potentially inconvenient, Leah highlighted the hurt and hatred it can bring. She mentioned the possibility of harm and death from the police based on skin color, but then pivoted and talked about how white privilege most likely has *positive effects* on her son's care at school. Leah's examples of white privilege, like many of the woke white women I spoke to, focused on describing the abstract absence of risk for herself and her loved ones and then spoke about the positive benefits in concrete terms for someone she loved.

Woke white women, especially mothers, empathized with the fear and the pain of mothers and families who have lost loved ones to police violence, and recognized that this will not be a risk for their own children. In this way emotional reparations brought woke performances in line with the concerns and goals of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Hayley was living in the women's shelter in Mountainville. She faced food insecurity while trying to get out of an abusive relationship, so her mother was taking care of her three small children. As we sat and talked in a local library, I asked her about having conversations with others on the topic of race and/or gender. She didn't hold back.

> *(Heavy sigh). It's not fair. It's just not fair. I see these things on the news and I imagine being a mother who lost your kid, lost your baby because a cop shot 'em. Can you even…I mean, that is fucked. FUCKED. I had some run ins with police, just for like drinking and stuff…*

> *It pisses me off. Like they ain't done nothing and they're dead. You know that kid [Tamir Rice] that had a toy [gun] and got killed, like a couple of years back? Some white cops shot him? Imagine being his mama. I got boys, and boys play at guns! They just do! But I feel for his mama because her baby is gone, and he was just playing. It pisses me off so much, like shit. That ain't right! That ain't fair! I don't care if you're blue or purple or whatever, that is fucked up. So yeah, I get Black Lives Matter, because that could have been my kid except it won't be because he's white.*

In Hayley's response to my question she employed a mix of woke and vestiges of color-blind language. Not caring if someone was "blue or purple" echoed a common color-blind trope about the unimportance of skin color, but she also mentioned specific cases of police violence and the way it is Black families are disproportionately burdened by this pain and loss. Leah and Hailey both expressed righteous anger at gross injustices, empathizing with family pain, but always tying their responses to loved ones, not just themselves. Contrast this with the very specific, personal reactions of male respondents. Men face a greater threat from police than women do, being more likely to be pulled over and more likely to be arrested (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). Andrew, a jogger, talked about his own physical safety and the perceived threat he might present to his neighbors.

> *I run at night, and I haven't had a problem with it yet, but I usually wear a bandana and I probably look a little, I don't know what you're supposed to look like when you run. But it's not yoga pants and matchy-matchy, so I'm*

just kind of waiting for cops to...I don't usually carry anything but a phone but I haven't had it happen yet, but I'm waiting for the time when [I have to say] "I would be happy to have you put me in the car and take me to my house."

Andrew knew that a man who didn't dress the part as a jogger, who was running through a suburban neighborhood at night, would likely be perceived as a threat at some point. But he was more worried about driving on the roads during a popular holiday for drinking than he was about the inevitable time the cops would come to escort him home, because the prospect of a ride in a police cruiser as a white man does not carry with it the threat of assassination. He recognized both his gendered threat to others, and his gendered risk from the police, but also the lack of the racial threat due to his whiteness.

I asked Aaron about what role he thought his whiteness played in his daily life, and he also brought up the privilege of not being at risk from the police in a way that racial minorities might be.

Gabriella: What role do you think your race plays in your daily life? Is it something you think about, or is it something that is mostly off your radar?

Aaron: I don't think I think about it on the day to day, and I think that that is part of white privilege. That I don't have to think about it every day. And...um, so...But I would say that I'm still scared if I get pulled over by the cops. Probably not in the same way as someone, as a person of color, but

> *I still am. Part of that's the punk side of me. Even if I'm not doing anything wrong.*

Despite an adversarial view of the police stemming from his punk identity, Aaron recognized that the police did not pose an outsized risk to him because of his race. He wanted to keep the cops at a distance, but he knew that the risk he faced from the police was not rooted in his racial identity. Similarly, Dave, another father of young children living in Middletown County, had privilege pointed out to him in college. He would often be asked to drive people home from night classes by classmates of color. Through their requests he began to understand how his position as a white man accomplished two things: it gave him a greater access to movement on the road and in public places, and it protected people of color from police risk if they were with him and he was driving.

> *Because I'm white that I get away with stuff that other people wouldn't. I get to drive - this was introduced to me whenever we were [running] around for projects for classes in college, that because I'm white I have an... like, access somewhat to tools, I think, is a way of putting it, that other people don't, just by virtue of being white. Like I can walk into a place and I don't get a sideways glance or there aren't any whisperings about what we do with him.*

Dave recognized his whiteness not only did not put him at extra risk for violence from the police, it actually afforded protections to people of color who accompanied him. His white privilege, especially when behind the wheel, resulted in a virtual protective bubble for others in his orbit. Dave, Andrew, and Aaron all connected their racial privilege to the issue of police violence against people of color, especially Black men. This was common

across most of my interviews, and is a testament to how large the issue of police threat to Blacks looms over racial relations in America.

For white men and women understanding racial threat, gender mattered in their responses. Women's understanding of their white privilege meant freedom from police violence based on race, but also pivoted to very concrete understandings of the privileges afforded to their loved ones, like Leah's son and Jennifer's adopted nephews from earlier in this chapter. Leah spoke of how her white son might be treated better at school. Jennifer talked about how she would not have to explain to her white son that he needs to fear the police, where his adopted brown-skinned cousins would have to be aware of their racial identity in all police interactions. Hayley identified with the mother of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, and connected Tamir's playing with guns to that of her own sons'. Aaron, Andrew, and Dave's understanding of white privilege again touched on the relative lack of threat of racialized violence, balanced with their knowledge that their gender did put them at greater risk than women. Men were more focused on negotiating their racialized and gendered relationship with the police through a personal, individual lens. Women's empathy, especially that of mothers', was more outward-facing, more rooted in the gendered norm of women's relational connections. Women expressed emotional reparations, while men were more likely to express gratitude that they were not subject to as great a risk as men of color.

CONCLUSION: WOKENESS AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Research has revealed time and time again that gender and race matter in how we process and express emotions. My research provides empirical support for exactly how racialized emotions differ among racial progressive men and women. I found that woke white women were much more likely to participate in performances of emotional reparations, demonstrating through their outrage, anger, and pain that they are willing to try and understand in a deep and real way the racial pain of others. Woke women performed emotional reparations. Negative emotions like anger and sadness were expressed in ways that provided important emotional relief to these women, who identified strongly with the suffering of others. The emotional reparations also provided a way for women to signal a woke white identity. When and how emotional reparations were enacted depended on the context. In close relationships like within families, woke women often self-censored to safeguard important relational ties. In interactions with acquaintances, dates, friends, colleagues, and other less intimate situations woke women felt the most freedom to perform their deeply felt anger, outrage, and sadness. In situations where they felt a sense of stewardship for a group, performances of emotional reparations were tempered by the desire to avoid alienating anyone.

Woke white men, on the other hand, had more freedom to experience both anger and enjoyment when thinking about and discussing racial issues, and were more likely to seek out possibly negative emotional reactions from others via hazard play. While the woke white women I interviewed expressed sympathy with the children and mothers whose racial identity put them at greater risk, the men evinced their empathic understanding in a less relational, more individual way. Women's social burden of care work was evidenced in the way woke white women oriented their racial verstehen,

performances of emotional reparations, and understanding of racial privilege along relational lines. Men's social privilege relative to the burden of care work emerged in several ways. I found that woke white men had internalized the lowered expectations of centering thoughts and actions around the impact on others. This was demonstrated through the men's ability to show relative distance from the painful impacts of discrimination, their relative lack of concern over alienating others, and the way they understood racialized threats.

Our identities are raced and gendered. We learn about the content and parameters for successfully performing these socially constructed categories through our interactions, but we also learn to feel these identities. Emotions are one of the most powerful elements to feeling our race (Bonilla-Silva 2018) and our gender. By understanding the different ways that woke white men and women relate to the emotional realities of their experiences we can begin to speculate about the potential impact of woke identities. In my concluding chapter I explore the relationship between wokeness, empathy, and activism. I ask how wokeness relates to social change, and analyze the potential of woke whites to impact the racial inequality that has defined social relations in America.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.

- James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*

We live in a racially liminal time, a time of border wall fights, and Black Girl Magic, of escalating hate crimes and historically diverse election victories. This moment has called into question what might have been the cultural bedrock of whiteness before: the color-blind ideology. Instead, whites are attempting a new stance: to be woke.

Wokeness means an openness to confronting race. It positions itself in opposition to color-blindness, even as those logics sometimes emerge side-by-side in performances. Being invested in a woke white identity means an honorable performance of whiteness includes talking about race, acknowledging its importance in organizing our social world. It means demonstrating a dedication to diversity even when living in a diversity desert. There are various pathways to woke perspectives, but to be invested in such a perspective means having the ability to experience a specific type of empathetic imagining of racial others, racial verstehen. Racial verstehen is the empathetic bedrock of woke orientations, because it means whites are willing to imaginatively experience the pain of racial others. It is the desire for human connection that is specifically aware of racial inequality and the privilege of a white identity.

Performing a woke white identity presents challenges for people living in areas where racial diversity is low. This paradox of wanting to perform an appreciation of diversity without easy access to racial others is central to understanding how wokeness is carried out by segregated whites. This leads to creative approaches to connecting with

what counts as diverse in areas of relative racial and cultural homogeneity. Strategies include having flexible approaches to when something counts as diverse. The lasting legacy of America's anti-Black racial history can be seen in the way that the absence or presence of Black bodies or cultural markers of Blackness are used as the litmus test for authentic diversity. The elasticity granted to definitions of diversity, particularly in the conflation of cultural and racial diversity has the effect of flattening out historical injustices.

Contact theory suggests that racial harmony stems from increased contact across race. If this were the case, however, we would see the bulk of racial progressives among the poorest whites. I found that elements of woke performances were spread out, common to suburban white liberals and homeless vets. The more influential factors in whether people displayed racially progressive attitudes was gender and age. Older interviewees were less likely to espouse progressive views, and male interviewees were slightly less likely than women.

Wokeness means, in many cases, conflict and tension with family members who not only are not woke, but who actively deride and push back against racially progressive behaviors and attitudes. Boundary work within families is fraught for many woke whites, who have to balance the intense desire for belonging to a family, as well as the support and help such closeness provides, with trying to stay true to their own ideas of honorable whiteness. This means employing punctuated censure when race talk inches too close to inviolate boundaries. Whites feel constrained in their ability to confront racist family members because of the strength of connection. This often results in self-censorship, as opposed to conflict or reversion to color-blind performances.

The way that gender interacts with a woke white identity is often via emotions. Women, particularly mothers, perform emotional reparations as a way to connect with the pain and other negative emotions of people of color. In particular, women are connecting with their anger and outrage at racial injustice. The empathetic connection women feel with racial others is something many of them come to through their caregiving responsibilities. Men instead tend to enjoy hazard play, pushing buttons and teasing other whites around them in an attempt to egg on conflict that they find entertaining. A touchstone for both woke men and women was the threat of police violence and knowing their own white privilege largely shields them from its impacts. The gendered nature of much of the violence means male woke respondents very keenly felt the lessened risk, while women tended to view this risk through the lens of the suffering experienced by family members who experience the loss.

WOKENESS, SOCIAL ACTION, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Wokeness is a performance of a racially progressive white identity. It has central features, including the valuing of diversity, the willingness to acknowledge and discuss race and racial issues, and the empathetic activation of racial verstehen. But social performances as social scientists understand them are all “social actions,” whether the audience is the self or a large group. Wokeness as a performance reinforces to the social actor that they are an honorable white person, that they care, and that they are not a bad (read: racist) person. But wokeness can be limited: it does not require actual activism. Often racially progressive social action that is not traditional activism, in the form of vigorous social campaigning, protest, letters and other communications, and various

highly visible behaviors, is dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant to the progress of social causes. But does this ability to perform wokeness without activism undermine its potential for social change? I argue that wokeness can still have an impact on social change, but it is likely to be achieved slowly and its effects more diffuse.

Direct action and activism are still the most effective way to change a system of inequality, especially when it comes to institutional norms, particularly in the age of social media (Earl and Kimport, 2011). And wokeness can encourage white people to become involved in activist organizations or pursue activist agendas and goals. But for the woke whites I spoke to, living in racially homogenous places, opportunities like volunteering for anti-racist organizations or developing cross-racial partnerships were thin on the ground, which remains a distinct barrier to white anti-racist activism in many places. However, I argue that through other practices, woke whites are helping to bring about social change by performing this current mode of racial progressiveness, to potentially even more effect now in a racially liminal time.

Swidler (1986, 2003) tells us that an unsettled time is characterized by transitions from workable habits to new ideas. In this unsettled, racially liminal time, wokeness represents a new set of ideas and standards for behavior, emotions, and ways of relating. But, while social actors like woke whites can create “new strategies for action” based on these woke ideals, “long-term influence depends on structural opportunities for survival of competing ideologies” (Swidler 1986:282). Social actors in these times are testing, trying out various social action possibilities, to see which “stick” and may emerge as workable actions (Katznelson 2003). So how are woke whites helping to reinforce racially progressive options through their interactions, even in the absence of direct activism?

They are doing this by becoming active bystanders to racial discrimination, through modeling a new honorable whiteness that directly interacts with race, and through race-conscious parenting choices.

Active Bystanders

My interviewees detailed woke white performances where their race consciousness came into direct conflict with dominant color-blind logics. In this way wokeness is disruptive to the dominant racial social order. As I have detailed throughout this work, woke performances are founded in empathy. Racial verstehen is an investment in empathy across racial lines and is the central characteristic of a woke white identity. Empathy is important to activism, but we must differentiate between different expressions and types. Passive empathy "produces no action towards justice but situates the powerful Western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to cast her gaze at her own reflection" (Boler 1999:160). Passive empathy is not a reflexive empathy, it is not one that motivates change. We need to press forward from passive empathy to active empathy, beyond "this makes me feel" to "this makes me take action." The distinction in the way empathy is realized matters for its effectiveness and potential for changing behaviors.

White women can, in fact, display greater levels of empathy compared to white men when it comes to instances of racial discrimination (Picca and Feagin 2007). The problem is, women are more likely to empathize with someone accused of being racist, rather than the potential victim of the racial animus. Various studies show that white women are more likely to empathize *and* sympathize with people accused of racial insensitivity, excusing them as "a good person" or saying the person "didn't really mean it." Women's powerful investment in whiteness and maintaining existing relationships

results in significant rationalization to make racial insensitivity the result of any motivation but racism (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Picca and Feagin 2007). Passive bystanders can fail to intervene due to identification with the person doing the discriminating, fearing causing embarrassment if a sense of connection is felt (Trepagnier 2010). But when a woke white is the bystander, and they fail to feel more empathy for the perpetrator of discrimination than they do for its victim, then the potential for norm-busting racist behavior opens up. The likelihood of an *active,* rather than passive, bystander is increased. Woke performances include pushing back, be it online or face-to-face. This pushback can be gently done or with vigor. Time and again, my interviewees detailed discussions they had about race, often including pushing back online or trying to educate less racially aware friends or coworkers. While the most problematic close family members are stopped before unacceptable boundaries are crossed via punctuated censure, in other instances, when the relationships are not so close as to incur great risk with conflict, woke whites pursue the social risks of calling out others in racialized interludes.

Engaging with Race Directly

Whites are often passive in the face of overt racial discrimination or language under a color-blind framework because racism is so often dismissed as being about something, anything, other than race (Bonilla-Silva 2017). But woke performances are characterized by not avoiding race talk, and not ignoring racism when they see it. Woke whiteness is overtly race aware and is rooted in an active empathy, so a woke performance has the potential for disrupting passivity in the face of racial insensitivity or other racist speech and acts. Woke performances are more than an expression of white guilt, they are a performance of whiteness that is concerned with honorable racial “best

practices," such as being sensitive about politically correct language choices. Being politically correct is rooted in respect and empathetic connection. Racial best practices also can be as simple as consciously choosing respectful language during a conversation, or it can be intervening in a heated conversation or act of direct racial discrimination. This direct engagement with race can include being an active bystander to racial hostility, or it can include starting discussions about diversity in all-white spaces. It can be sharing books on race with friends, or supporting minority-owned businesses. However it manifests, this direct engagement with race means that woke whites are thinking about race, and racial justice, when they have the privilege of ignoring it due to their whiteness.

Race-Conscious Parenting

Woke white parents were also committed to raising racially aware white children. They purchased "diverse" toys, tried to seek out exposure to different cultures and types of people, and many had given deep thought to how they would approach talking about racial difference and racial inequality with their children. While parents, particularly those who identify as "good white liberals," can be guilty of reinforcing problematic racial ideas (Hagerman 2018, 2017; Sullivan 2014), woke parents are very concerned about specifically passing on their racial empathy to their children. Jennifer's concern that her son would prioritize kindness and understanding, Leah's concern with raising a son who recognized racial difference but didn't attach meaning to it, Bruce's sharing of socially conscious documentaries with his daughter, all of these represent concrete actions on the part of woke parents to raise woke kids.

If we look at the concept of racial education writ large in the United States, we can see social justice movements making similar requests for active empathy with the victims

of racial oppression (DiAngelo 2018; Ianiode 2015). Through their active intervention, direct engagements with race, and parenting strategies, woke whites are modeling a new honorable whiteness for those around them. While color-blindness does slip into some performances, the fact remains that by virtue of its racial consciousness wokeness is antithetical to color-blindness. Wokeness is a progressive racial identity *in action*. While it is not necessarily activism, it is an active and disruptive way of performing whiteness.

"I'M NOT AN ACTIVIST, BUT…": THE PROMISE AND LIMITATIONS OF EMOTIONAL REPARATIONS

Only a handful of the woke whites I spoke with identified themselves as activists for any cause. Some women, like Leah and Jennifer, began explanations with the phrase "I'm not an activist, but…" and then went on to detail their emotional reparations and deeply felt investment in racial equality. Why do people who obviously care so deeply about racial justice distance themselves from identifying as an activist? One reason is, I suspect, the negative connotations of the word *activism*. The progressive publication *In These Times,* a flagship magazine of social activism in Chicago, even went so far as to publish a piece about dropping the term "activist" because of its unsavory and unpopular associations (Smucker 2017).[32] Another reason is the aforementioned structural challenge of finding organizations and activities that promote racial justice in areas of low racial diversity. Additionally, it may also relate to limitations of time and energy. People, especially young parents, live busy lives, so time and energy resources are often low. Add to this an orientation towards any type of political or social justice, and our

[32] Author Johnathan Matthew Smucker also argued that activism sounds like a hobby, when dismantling power structures should affect every facet of a person's life.

contemporary environment promotes emotional exhaustion. The reality of time constraints and emotional fatigue gets to the promise and limits of a certain enaction of empathy: emotional reparations.

WHITHER WHITE GUILT? WOKENESS AND EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Racial identities are felt. They are experienced through the entire range of emotions, be they woke, color-blind, or white supremacist identities. While the emotional performance of whiteness includes a range of behaviors, woke emotional performances are distinct because of their outward orientation. "White guilt" and "white women's tears" may be focused on the emotional pain and shame felt by whites for things they have done. In contrast, woke emotional performances in general, and emotional reparations in particular, are outward-focused through the function of empathy.

Wokeness invites individuals to do the necessary reflection that includes acknowledging racism in a system that also produces white privilege. DiAngelo (2018) points out that the still dominant view of racism is that it consists of individual acts of prejudice, not systems of inequality. In the logic of this conventional view, it follows that you are only racist if you consciously harbor hatred for people of color. But, seeing racism only in outward racial hostility is a misguided and insidious way of understanding racism. As DiAngelo writes, this view "functions beautifully to make it nearly impossible to engage in the necessary dialogue and self-reflection that can lead to change" (2018:123). The fragility of whiteness is represented by the emotional pain and resistance whites feel when their own prejudicial thinking or privilege is pointed out. But, as my research shows, woke

whites are emotionally invested and are, to varying degrees, willing to reflect and connect with the discomfort of feeling their whiteness. They do not feel hatred towards racial others, rather they feel anger on their behalf, sadness for their suffering, and most importantly, they feel empathy.

DiAngelo (2018) offers suggestions for whites who are moving away from the pitfalls of white fragility and its defensiveness. This includes acknowledging that authentic antiracism is frequently uncomfortable, and that white comfort helps maintain the status quo, so white discomfort is necessary and important. Those whites that are "going for woke," to coin a phrase, must not shy away from feeling the negative emotions that come with recognizing unearned privilege but are so necessary for growth.

The woke whites I spoke with do connect with this discomfort; they are willing to try and feel the racial pain of others through racial verstehen. This is an enaction of empathy that is an imaginative exercise in pain and harm; woke whites may never know the personal pain of racism, but they attempt to understand it through imagination. Their action is cultural, emotional, symbolic – hard to measure, intangible, but still potentially powerful, especially as woke whiteness dissipates across the nation.

Racial Progress in Diversity Deserts:

My interviewees were whites from areas of low racial diversity, so there were structural, demographic challenges to them demonstrating their commitment to anti-racism. While this perceived lack of opportunity can have a stultifying effect on active participation, I would also argue that the fact that wokeness is performed for other whites

has its own potential for normalizing a new form of honorable white identity that is concerned with racial justice.

Most research on how racial progressives come to their thinking with regards to race focuses on the good that comes from cross-racial contact. This is the "contact hypothesis – the view that interaction between members of two social groups promotes positive attitudes" (Trepagnier 2010:100). The contact hypothesis was first introduced in 1954, the pre-civil rights era. And while there is solid research showing that the promise of the contact hypothesis is sometimes the case, with race it is more complicated. Well-meaning whites behave in several ways in the presence of people of color in order to preserve the mask of non-racism (Picca and Feagin 2007). This co-racial frontstage behavior includes being overly nice, avoiding contact (such as not going into a particular club or crossing the street), good-naturedly mimicking Black mannerisms and speech patterns, being mindful of avoiding racial terms and labels, using coded language to express negative sentiments about people of color, and occasional violence directed at people of color.

This research suggests that interracial contact is not enough. The positive effects of cross-racial interaction depend upon the lack of a power imbalance between the individuals involved, and in the symbolic interactionist concept of role taking. When whites are able to take on the role of others, to enact racial verstehen and empathize with a racial other, then affirmative effects are seen (Trepagnier 2010). But in the absence of these elements, cross-racial interaction can have the opposite effect, including increasing racial microaggressions on up to outright racial hostility (Picca and Feagin 2007; Sidanus et al

2008; Sue 2010). Cross-racial friendships can fetishize racial others and perpetuate racial stereotypes, as can interracial romantic relationships (Bonilla-Silva 2017, 2003).

There are two important effects of whites being able to take the role of a racial other; it encourages reflexivity and empathy. However, Trepagnier and others who focus on this modified contact hypothesis empathize the absolute necessity of face-to-face contact. My research shows that the condition of face-to-face contact is not necessarily required. While cross-racial contact under the right conditions can and does undermine racist thinking (see, for example, Katie's experience with her Syrian Muslim refugee friend), in this age of social media it does not appear to be mandatory. My research shows that whites who have very limited access to people of color can utilize media sources to develop the skills to take the role of racial others through their experience of a cultural imaginary. Racially conscious woke whites have already activated an orientation that could make cross-racial interactions, when they do occur under proper conditions, more likely to be productive and to bring about positive social change.

WOKENESS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Is wokeness leading the way to an anti-racist future? What are the possibilities for social change? Color-blindness was the dominant way of performing as a "good white person" for the past several decades, but it represented the latest iteration of a white supremacist ideology. While color-blindness is still the dominant logic, even in this racially liminal time, wokeness is emerging as a way to perform an honorable white identity, a progressive option centered on the direct acknowledgement of race and racial inequality. But does the ability to see race past color-blindness mean that woke identity

performances will succeed where color-blind ones failed? Can wokeness bring about social change?

Racial progressives have existed all along, through each iteration of racism throughout U.S. history. White abolitionists such as John Brown during slavery, white Civil Rights Era activists such as Viola Gregg Luizzo, and, recently, Charlottesville anti-racist activist Heather Heyer all lost their lives fighting for racial justice. But when evaluating the possibilities of wokeness for social change we must differentiate between the performance of a racially progressive woke white identity and racially progressive activism. The emotional elements of woke performances, particularly through emotional reparations, runs the risk of siphoning energy away from activism and redirecting it into emotional displays. Wokeness is a performance, and any identity performance is social action. But it is not the type of action which necessarily manifests change in a direct way like social activism. Rather, wokeness is pregnant with possibilities for change, through the application of empathy for racial others, through childrearing practices, as well as through modeling openness and encouraging discussions about difficult topics among white people. Woke performances in the absence of direct activism are likely a necessary but not sufficient component for widespread social change.

Wokeness represents a new possibility for performing a racially progressive white identity, but wokeness exists on a continuum. It is fractured and often co-exists within a white identity performance with vestigial color-blindness. Wokeness is a social action that can, at its most articulated, pave the way for social activism. Racially progressive identities need to be examined in a nuanced and critical way for several reasons. First, white investment in anti-racism is essential to dismantling systematic racial oppression.

Because whites are the designated beneficiaries of white supremacy, if they are not invested in dismantling these systems they will, actively or passively, be helping preserve them. Second, white racial progressives are not perfect white people. They make mistakes, can reinforce harmful stereotypes, and can need course corrections as they learn and develop deeper racial sensitivity. As with many good things, intentions matter, but effects matter more. Because of their necessary participation in dismantling racist systems, their needed buy-in, it is vital to find those whites who are invested in racial equality.

Racial progressives are often problematic, so performing a woke identity is not a panacea for white racial insensitivity. As Hughey (2012) pointed out in his comparative ethnography of a white anti-racist organization and a white racist organization, the way whites perform their particular racial identity can reify the "realness" of race, the Black/white racial divide, and even racial stereotypes, regardless of which side of the racial justice debate they stand. Yet wokeness has potential to engender both motivation for deeper racial learning and for social change via indirect routes. This cautious optimism comes from the important role emotions, especially empathy, play in woke white performances.

For several decades the logic of color-blindness has dominated how we think about race in America and beyond, supporting racism by denying its continued existence. But through each iteration of white supremacist logics, we have seen racial progressives emerge to challenge the status quo. The logic that allies itself with the perspectives of the powerful is the logic that tends to win out. Can wokeness emerge as a dominant logic during this tumultuous racially liminal time? In the past the successes seen in particularly

transformative crusades, such as when the Civil Rights movement undercut Jim Crow white supremacy, were triumphant, only to see color-blindness emerge. Nonetheless, progress was made.

There is the possibility that racially progressive wokeness can emerge as a viable alternative to whatever the new hegemonic standard of enacting whiteness ends up being. Much like alternatives co-exist alongside hegemonic masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), wokeness could surface from this racially liminal time as a viable option for a white identity. The possibilities of wokeness and its potential impacts, however, depend upon those whites who perform this identity. Their willingness to be reflexive, to confront their own privilege, and to normalize active participation in anti-racism will determine how much wokeness' potential for social change is realized.

I began this concluding chapter with a popular quote from James Baldwin's essay "My Dungeon Shook" in his work *The Fire Next Time.* "To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger." This quote is often used as a call to action for activists of any stripe, devoid of connection to racial justice. But the full quote, in context, reads like this. "To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity" (1995:5). Baldwin's quote is not just a generic call to activism and investment in social change. It is patently about the dangers of whites clinging to their own whiteness and its attendant privileges, comforts, and certainty. Wokeness in whites is not necessarily concurrent with anti-racist activism, but it does hold the potential for social change. It is a way of embodying an orientation towards racial progressivism. By fully connecting via empathy, that is the foundation of a woke white identity, there is a path towards activism and

change. Yet the move from wokeness-as-a-performance to wokeness-as-a-movement depends on the collective willingness of whites to confront the danger of their own white identity.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW:

To address my research questions on how racially isolated whites understood their own racial identity and how that related to racial others, I designed a project based on intensive, open-ended interviews of white women and men, age 18 and above, living in demographically white-dominated areas of the U.S. To capture a broad range of white perspectives several regions were selected; this was a multi-site and intersectional study. Participants for in-depth interviews were recruited based on 1) their being involved in one of three racially salient situations and 2) their location in a highly-segregated white area.

I conducted 64 interviews in three locations, which I have dubbed Northwest Town. Middletown County in the Midwest, and Mountainville in the southeast. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes at the shortest to 3 hours and 10 minutes at the longest, but averaged 1 hour and 20 minutes. These interviews were conducted at the location of the participant's choice, which included libraries, offices, private homes, coffee shops, homeless shelters, and public parks. Four interviews were conducted via video, using Skype or Google Hangouts. Interviewees received $20. Interviews were recorded with permission and personally transcribed. I applied for and received two fellowships to help fund the travel expenses associated with living for several months in Montana and Kansas. In 2017 I received a Raven Society Fellowship as well as an internal grant from the Department of Sociology to finance summer qualitative research. IRB approval for this research was received, and research took place between November 2016 and May 2018.

SITUATIONAL PARAMETERS FOR RECRUITMENT:

Whites facing theoretically derived, racially salient moments were chosen with the hope of "evoking a variety of interactional settings, social contexts and institutional situations" (Lamont and Swidler 2014). As Hochschild (2003) reminds us, probing the meanings of everyday events gives insight into the "magnified moments" that reveal how we make sense of our world, the emotional weight of this meaning, and the role culture plays in our personal understandings of ourselves and others. Interviewees were recruited according to whether they were facing decisions or actions when thinking about race might be more likely to happen. The underlying assumption was that while relatively segregated whites enact and perform whiteness continually, they might not think about race or confronting racial others as they go about their daily lives. Nonetheless, at certain key moments race and racial ideas do become particularly salient to them (Bonilla-Silva, Goar and Embrick 2006). In order to maximize my potential for talking to whites who were more aware of race, or felt it more salient at the time, I recruited whites in three racially-informed key moments: online dating, choosing a school district, and signing up for government benefits like WIC, TANF, and SNAP, or other sources of food assistance.

Internet Dating:

Internet dating, both in setting up an account and in the management of interests, require whites to think about intimacy with other racial and ethnic groups, which involves confronting their own racial frames. Additionally, an element of the presentation of self is at play (Goffman 1959) that necessitates consideration of the potential reaction of others to the individual's racialized interests. Internet dating presented an opportune outlet for examining how white men and women negotiate potential interactions with racial others

through their own racial identities because the enterprise requires racial salience and what it means for whites to consider (or not consider) intimacy with racial and ethnic others.

Signing up for an online dating service or app requires the user to confront their own racial identity and conceptions of others, as they are potentially choosing the racial and ethnic identities of people with whom they would like to be matched. Dating profiles sometimes require users to select from default "any" race/ethnicity, to specifically choosing interest in whites, blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Middle Easterners, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, East Indians, Inter-racial, and "other" (Robnett and Feliciano 2011). While more modern dating apps like Tinder and Grindr do not allow ethnic filters, others like OkCupid do (generating much controversy on either side). Research into internet dating reveals that the intersection of various race and gender identities has significant impact on both the willingness to consider certain mates as well as the likelihood that overtures will be acknowledged. For example, Lin and Lunquist (2013) found that among heterosexual internet daters, "mate homophily" dominates for both men and women. Women tend to respond to men of similar or more dominant racial status (according to the racial hierarchy of the U.S. that places whites on the top and Blacks on the bottom), while non-Black men respond to all but Black women. Education does not mediate the racial preferences of white men or women; whites with a college degree are more likely to respond to whites without a college degree than blacks who have earned one (Lin and Lunquist 2013). For male internet daters the racial divide seems to fall into the tri-racial partition suggested by Bonilla-Silva (2017, 2003), while for women it seems to be more in line with Feagin's (2014) proposed Black vs. non-Black model. Asian males

and Black females are much more likely to be excluded over other opposite-sex counterparts; stereotypical ideas of Asian males lacking sexual prowess and the desirability of Asian women seem to be at play (Robnett and Feliciano, 2011). Racial preferences are thus conditioned by gendered conceptions of race.

Parents and School Districts:

Similarly, white households with young children or children on the way are frequently confronted with a moment when their whiteness becomes salient. White households with children are the least likely of all household variations to live in racially integrated neighborhoods (Goyette et al. 2014). Scholars suggest that parents think they need to manage risk for their children, such as school quality or amenities, and that this is particularly important for those households with young children. Households where the oldest child is 6 or younger are more likely to move when the percentage of Black residents and the diversity in the neighborhood is higher. Interestingly, even though white households with children are less likely to live in integrated neighborhoods than white households without children, homes with older children and those headed by more educated people tend to move to significantly more diverse areas where other individual characteristics are controlled for (Goyette et al. 2014). Children thus make racial identity more salient for whites and bring to the fore the racial frames that might be utilized by parents/caregivers.

A major motivator for residential decisions for households with children is schooling. Choosing a school is a moment when parents consider their own attitudes towards racial and ethnic diversity and multiculturalism, and also throws into high relief how parents want their children to experience diversity (Byrne and De Tona 2013).

Emerson, Chai, and Yancey (2001) designed a creative way for getting to the relationship between race, residential choice, and children. They asked respondents to imagine having two school-aged children and they were looking for a house. In this scenario a house was found which hypothetically ticked all boxes of needs and desirability. Before asking participants if they would like to purchase the home, researchers presented the participants with a set of randomly generated neighborhood characteristics, indicating public school quality, crime level, direction of property value change, and racial composition ranging from 5 to 100% Black, Asian, or Hispanic. The authors state that "whites are neutral about buying a home in a neighborhood between 10-15% Black, but are unlikely to buy a home in a neighborhood over 15% Black" (Emerson et al. 2001:932) when controlling for proxy variables. This pattern is especially pronounced for families with children and has potential impacts for school segregation as well. The cited research affirms that families involved in making school choice decisions, particularly if it might necessitate a residential move, are embedded in a racially informed negotiation where their own race and that of potential neighbors and classmates are particularly salient.

Food Insecurity and Public Assistance:

Race and gender are also particularly salient in the image of people on public assistance. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program that was the result of the 1996 push for welfare reform was specifically designed to target an illusory and racialized population of welfare queens[33] and their offspring (Anderson, Halter, and

[33] Interestingly, the image of the welfare queen was taken by Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich and other conservative politicians from the work of Charles Murray, author of *Losing Ground* and co-author of *The Bell Curve.* While the racism inherent in Murray's work has been roundly criticized and his conclusions successfully refuted (see Patterson 1997, Alland 2002, Zuberi 2003), his work and the stereotypes it contains continue to exert undue influence on public policy and in the public imagination.

Gryzlak 2004; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Foster 2008). Despite the fact that whites make up approximately one third of TANF recipients, the image of the welfare recipient as female and Black dominate the popular imagination (Monnat 2010; Foster 2008; Hancock 2004).[34] The image of welfare recipients exists at a crossroads of gender, race, and class (Foster 2008) that is potentially at odds with the gender of whites signing up for benefits and certainly at odds racially. I recruited people in this situation based on the assumption that when whites sign up for TANF or other forms of food assistance for the first time their racial identity is particularly salient, and their ideas of the racial others more prominent in their minds.

How has public assistance been coded as female and Black, and why would whites see this as problematic? As Fraser and Gordon (1994) discuss, the discourse of dependency is built upon a scaffold of gender and racial subtexts. Because being welfare *dependent* necessarily means one is not *independent*, that most lauded of American virtues. The idea of being dependent on benefits such as TANF or food stamps or visiting a food pantry, is tied to a genealogy of dependency which made dependency more appropriate for racial minorities, women, and children; dependency has made the shift from a state of being to an individual character trait that reflected the supposed moral weaknesses of those who were not independent. Under the New Deal, programs like unemployment insurance served as an appropriate aid to white working men, excluding

[34] The principle architect of welfare reform, Ron Haskins, was quoted on NPR on the 10th anniversary of the new TANF "welfare to work" reforms saying that the changes meant "goodbye welfare queens, hello working moms" (Foster 2008:163). While the more palatable working image of the single, working mother may have seemed like an improvement over the tainted welfare queen, in reality the welfare queen remained in the popular imagination as the representative vision of all welfare recipients (Foster 2008). This gendered and raced image of what a TANF recipient looks like belies the reality of the recipient population. Blacks and Latinos are overrepresented among TANF recipients based on their percentage of the population (Monnat 2010; Fox 2004), however according to the Office of Family Assistance – under the umbrella of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services – for fiscal year 2010 whites, blacks, and Hispanics made up roughly equal numbers of TANF recipients.[34]

most minorities and white women who were forced to accept stigmatized welfare (Fraser and Gordon 1994). Fraser and Gordon (1994) remind us the personal character of the welfare dependent versus the independent individual "maps onto a whole series of hierarchical oppositions and dichotomies that are central in modern culture" (332) including masculine/feminine, public/private, and white/non-white.

RACIAL SALIENCE AND RACIALLY LIMINAL TIMES:

In each of these instances – online dating, choosing schools, and signing up for food benefits – white men and women would theoretically be experiencing the salience of their racial position and often their gender identity as well. But each of these cases also allowed for a particularly sociological examination of the respondents' understanding of racial identity, whiteness, and racial others. Ideologies, racial, gendered, and otherwise, are rooted in material domination and the privileges it confers (Bonilla-Silva 2015a; Lewis 2004). Therefore, these cases – online dating, applying for public benefits, and choosing schools – were chosen not just for the opportunities they present for examining white racial salience, but also because each represents very concrete material interests in the lives of the interviewees. They presented a mix of class position and a range of ages in my participants, from 19 to 72.

This research design did allow for a qualitative approach that covered a wide range of situations and racially activated thinking, but it presented challenges as well. Truth be told, I did a great deal of work to connect with whites who fit within these distinct parameters in order to increase my chances of interacting with "everyday" whites who normally don't have to be racially aware, but were more likely to be at the moment of our

interaction. As it turns out, because I was investigating whites and whiteness in the new Trumpian era, race and racism may have already been salient.

Because of the racial upheaval of the past few years, in this racially liminal time, race was much more prominent a topic among whites than I was anticipating. Based on previous research I was expecting race not to be salient to most whites, especially in racially homogenous areas. However, this assumption no longer seems to fit our new racial reality, making empirical research dealing with racial perspectives all the more urgent. The racial upheaval is enough that whites are paying more attention, even if in the past they did not have to. The policies of the current administration, the prominence of stories about police violence against Black citizens, the prominence of BLM and the Women's March, all of these are hard to escape in American culture. They dominate screens big and small, get discussed online and in person. And they all contribute to an environment of racial awareness that is current in the United States, a new development for whites.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES:

Recruitment for this project was an important key to its success. It was crucial that I recruit participants who were not in the same social network, so snowball sampling was not an option. I wanted whites who were not in the same family or friendship circles, who would have talked about race with each other. I was hoping to avoid the social "bubble" of people associating with like-minded people with regards to race, which would limit the variety of my responses. Respondents were recruited through advertisements in local media, social media, as well as fliers posted in places like colleges and universities and

local cafes, coffee shops, libraries, offices, grocery store bulletin boards, and community centers. The recruitment materials indicated that I was a PhD student at the University of Virginia who was looking to speak to white men and women who had grown up in the target areas who fit one of the three situational criteria.

Fliers were made available to local food banks and the private organizations who facilitate the assistance programs, like churches or philanthropic organizations, after first obtaining permission and explaining my role and what confidentiality safeguards I had in place. I targeted local agencies who serve the poor, not just those who offered food assistance. Information, including fliers about the project, was made available at these agencies on bulletin boards and also was given to staff to hand out to interested parties if they wished. I made it clear on the recruitment material that participation in this study was absolutely voluntary and is in no way connected to the benefits a person may receive. This recruitment method mirrored those found in successful qualitative projects, such as Anderson, Halter and Gryzlak (2004).

I also placed free ads on local sites for Craigslist, on Twitter using locally popular hashtags, and in local Facebook groups for parents, local singles, and other residents. Recruitment of parents who were considering moves involved several strategies. Early in the research process, local real estate agents were contacted to see if they would be willing to have either a flier in their offices or some material to hand out to suitable clients. Additionally, I approached schools via Facebook and emails to Parent/Teacher organizations to see if I could include recruitment fliers on bulletin boards or if they would be willing to include my information in newsletters. I offered to donate the $20 participants earned to the schools. I set up a contact email address gabriella.research@gmail.com

which was printed on the fliers and advertisements. I also had my phone number available on the fliers. Upon having the potential interviewees contact me I confirmed that they identified as white, that they were over 18, that they resided in the target area for most of their lives, and that they were involved in one of the three racially informed situations. If they met these benchmarks I set up a meeting at their convenience at a location of their choosing. Copies of recruitment materials and consent form are available in Appendix C.

Because of the need for finding individuals who were adult whites with limited racial exposure, active in one of the three defined situations, and a balance between men and women, recruitment proved challenging at times. I did not mention race in my recruitment material, rather I waited for individuals to contact me and then asked about their age, racial identity, and their relationship to the area I was recruiting in. This meant that numerous potential interviewees were disqualified because they did not identify as white, or often because they were relatively new to the area and had come from a more diverse place. The other particular challenge I faced was recruiting fathers, particularly during the summer in Montana.

To protect the identity of participants, and also to create a sense of trust necessary to discuss personal issues, especially as they relate to race and identity, I took several steps to ensure confidentiality. First, pseudonyms are used for all participants and some personal details are also changed to protect their identity. In any published materials the locations will be protected as well.

RESEARCH LOCATIONS:

Regional variability was important to this project. While the proposed research never sought to compare region to region, I wanted to get a snapshot of white perspectives in several areas of the U.S. with higher than average portions of whites among their populations. Additionally, I wanted to avoid areas that are characterized by assumed racial or racial-ethnic divides, such as the Deep South (Black/white) or the South West (Hispanic/white). The theoretical rationale behind the selection of these three research sites was that they are areas in which whites were likely live lives segregated from racial and ethnic minorities. Ideally this meant that whether they gave no thought to racial diversity or whether they celebrated its value, they would likely not have lives which intersected often with racial others. Places like these remain important to understanding how, in areas of low racial diversity, whites are able to develop a sense of race and racial identity and how they understand racial others.

To represent the North West, participants were recruited in Northwest Town, which according to 2010 census figures, had a population of 109,299 that was 92.7% white.[35] The Midwest was be represented by Middletown County, a suburb of a mid-sized city with a 2010 census population of 544,179. In 2010 whites made up 86% of the population.[36] Mountainville represented the south, and its 2010 census population of 92,439 was 90% white.[37] I had personal and professional contacts in each of these locations which helped facilitate housing as well as recruitment of interviewees.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS:

[35] http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/30063
[36] http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/20091
[37] http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/51161

I grew up in the Midwest, and on the surface much of Middletown County seems like a relatively affluent suburban idyll. Neighborhood after neighborhood that I drove around for interviews felt familiar to me, being similar to my own growing up. So, I knew the reality was more complicated than these carefully maintained veneers suggested. This also meant that my "Midwestern Nice" credentials were well honed, and were particularly useful for discussing difficult topics like race. As a nice, white woman from the Midwest I cultivated a friendly, interested, and non-threatening persona for my interviews. People were sharing their life stories with me, and whether I agreed with their perspectives or not, I honored their willingness to sit and talk with me by maintain an empathetic friendliness. My interviewees spoke to me as their white audience for an honorable performance of their white identity, and most acted as though they assumed I shared their perspectives on race and racial inequality. The rapport and trust necessary for this type of research is something that I've sharpened over the years through various projects.

Woke white performances in areas of low racial diversity are given to majority white audiences. In the case of my interviews, this meant I was witnessing their performances. But they were also performing their identities to themselves. This performance for the self is important because it is reinforcing what elements they see as defining characteristics of a good white person for their own ideas of self-worth (Sullivan 2008). But it is also important to receive feedback from others, especially other whites, who can reinforce that they are on the right track and are performing an honorable version of whiteness. In this instance, I served as the affable white audience for such performances. My presence as a researcher required me to mirror their stated views to a certain degree, and to avoid stating my own perspectives in a way that made them uncomfortable or too focused on

what I might think. A particularly revealing topic for evaluating their self-perception as woke whites and their relationship with ideas about racial inequality was the concept of white privilege.

For a woman who is invested in anti-racist work, some of the interviews were difficult. While I did not encounter any avowed white supremacists, there was a small group of male interviewees who espoused sexist and homophobic views, and in a few cases racial slurs were uttered and I needed to hide my discomfort. Because no one, not even avowed white supremacists, want to be called racist since the rise of color-blind ideology (Petri 2015). I had to maintain empathy and non-judgement. I would argue that "Midwestern Nice," variously described as "steadfast" and "sincere" (or even "stultifying" for some of those who live with it) (Kix 2015) is good training for a qualitative researcher, particularly with interviews. It's an ingrained innocuousness that smooths out the rough bumps when dealing with contentious issues and challenging, often incoherent, testimonies.

Interviews allow access to people's "*imagined* meanings of their activities, their self-concepts, their fantasies about themselves (and about others)" (Lamont and Swidler 2014:159, emphasis original). As Pugh reminds us, "rather than seek to resolve incoherence [in respondent's testimonies], perhaps we should instead expect it, and try to figure out the conditions more likely to produce more or less contradiction, or the patterned ways in which one versus another contradictory schema is deployed" (2013:48). Race and gender are difficult to talk about, and for those with either race or gender privilege, it can be emotionally difficult to dissect the anxiety to find its source. Fraught issues like race and gender can lead people to reach for contradictory

explanations (Pugh 2013), and the concurrent usage of color-blind and woke logics by my participants is testament to this. Interviewees were asked about their history of contact with people of color, family attitudes, media usage, and questions about the particular racially informed moment in which they recently participated (online dating, choosing a neighborhood school district, or utilizing food assistance). Interviewees were asked about their knowledge of racial or gender stereotypes related to the particular situation that relates to them. They were asked about their feelings about their own racial identity as white, and if and how race was a factor in the decisions they made moving forward. See Appendix B for the complete interview protocol for each of the three situations.

Drawing on a vast literature of coded language, tropes, and stereotypes, I was on the lookout for racially coded language and any hints of the controlling images and stereotypes these may represent. Because this project aimed, among other things, to explore the possibilities of disjunction and discontinuity, during my analysis I was particularly aware of looking for emotional disjunctures (Pugh 2013), the use of humor and jokes to indicate discomfort (Pugh 2015), moral or honorific stories (Pugh 2013, 2015), proximity-talk (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Perry 2002) as well as language that is color-coded (Collins 2009[2000]), color-blind (Bonilla-Silva 2004, 2014), and explicitly race-aware (Hughey 2014; Warikoo and de Novais 2014). Analysis focused on how each of these types of talk were used as frames to help respondents make sense of the racialized moments. Particular attention was paid to the various ways race talk is linked to gendered notions, both with the respondent's personal gender identity, and that of racial others.

Everyday lives are frequently characterized by contradiction and unpredictability, and the interview setting can promote narratives of meaning that dampen these more

chaotic aspects (Lamont and Swidler 2014). However, by specifically choosing moments in people's lives that, if not "unsettled," are specifically racially punctuated, the fragmentation of racial and gender landscapes was more evident. As Pugh (2013) points out, data from in-depth interviews allows us as interpretive scholars to "think about the cultural context of these meanings, to situate the feelings people feel in an emotional landscape they themselves sometimes ascertain, and always convey" (47). In keeping with Pugh (2013) and Bonilla-Silva (2017, 2003), I expected to find a measure of inarticulate responses, indicating that respondents are wrestling with their own feelings about race and gender, and how well this fit within the various racial ideologies they potentially drew on. For example, Bonilla-Silva (2003) talks of the "styles of color-blind racism" wherein color-blindness has linguistic particulars and rhetorical strategies. These strategies include the avoidance of direct racial language, semantic moves, projection, the use of diminutives, and the tendency of whites operating within a color-blind framework to become incoherent – using repetition, long pauses, or stumbling over grammar - when difficult topics are brought up. This echoes Pugh's (2013) assertion that verbal missteps, pregnant silences, and facial expressions offer the interviewer a "tell" as to what is particularly visceral for respondents. I did find evidence of these kinds of "tells", but notably they were indicative of the transitions between color-blind and woke perspectives rather than between overtly insensitive and color-blind.

I expected a certain level of discomfort to be found through the use of humor and jokes to diffuse the potentially uncomfortable moments when whites participate in race talk, so I paid attention to the strategies of levity. Using culture playfully, by describing their reactions to racial others, or how conscious they were of racialized gender

stereotypes, provided insight into the struggle whites making sense of race. Ortner (1996) famously pointed out how "serious games" create meaning and aid learning and adaptation in new or unfamiliar situations. Jokes, humor, metaphors, even non-verbal cues, give us access to what Pugh (2013) dubs "the schematic," cluing the researcher into the types of frameworks people are utilizing to make sense of their world. The extant literature on the frames whites use to discuss race were considered during analysis (for example color-blind frames of Bonilla-Silva [2017], diversity frames [Berrey 2015; Warikoo and de Novais 2014], and culture of poverty frames [Warikoo and de Novais [2014]). As a result, the new frame of wokeness was developed, its overlapping use with color-blindness.

Moral talk and "honorable" (Pugh 2013) responses were also given particular attention. Not just what interviewees say, but the way in which they express it is central to understanding how they make meaning of any situation (Pugh 2013). Regarding race and gender, these potentially loaded topics often reflect moral stances in people. White interviewees who do not want to seem racist or sexist may harbor racist and sexist viewpoints (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Ridgeway 2011). Phrases such as "I'm not a racist/sexist, but…" are part of the lexicon of color-blind racism which indicates the morally charged nature of the topics. Overt racist or sexist sentiments are widely deemed socially unacceptable (Feagin 2014; Bonilla-Silva 2017). Respondents took the "politically correct" route to different extent, but they expressed their feelings about *how they are supposed to feel about racism and sexism.* Woke-identified whites clearly felt that the honorable approach to whiteness was not a color-blind approach, but an explicitly racially progressive performance. I also asked interviewees not only about the exact punctuated

moments that provided the basis for their recruitment, but also about “what if” or “for example” questions meant to get at items that “ethnographize” (Ortner [2003] quoted in Pugh 2013) the interview experience; the goal was to illicit self-constructed scenarios including racial others to help get to framing logics (Pugh 2013). This helped to complete the picture of wokeness, especially in relation to how people understood their white privilege.

INTERVIEWS NOT INCLUDED IN ANALYSIS:

For this project I interviewed 64 people, but only 46 exhibited elements of wokeness, so some were not included in the final analysis of woke whites. Some, like Gary and Raymond, are mentioned in this dissertation as foils for woke white interviewees. The eighteen people who were not included in the final analysis tended to be on the older side of my sample range, with ages from 45 to 72. Six were female and twelve were male. While these individuals did not make it into my dissertation, interviewing them played a vital role in the analytical development of this work. While woke behaviors and color-blind behaviors co-existed in the performances of the “woke whites” included in this dissertation, the individuals who were not included demonstrated mostly color-blind behaviors and some more overt racial hostility. Even though they were not included in the final write-up, these interviews represented an important component of this project by helping to delineate what made wokeness different from color-blindness. While color-blind elements were found in the performances of all of my interviewees, the ability to compare woke whites’ discussion of, for example white privilege, allowed me to see wokeness as emergent and racially aware.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Demographic Questions:

- Can you tell me your name, please?
- Can you tell me your current age, please?
- Can you tell me a little about your educational background?
    - Highest level?
- What kind of work do you do? Can you tell me about it?

Personal Background Questions:

- Tell me what it was like to grow up in [NRV, MT, JoCo KS]?
- Who would you say were the most significant people for you growing up?
- Do you have a memory about what it meant to you to be a girl/boy, and how that was different from being a boy/girl?
- What was the role of religion in your life growing up?
- How important was religion to your social life?
- What sort of music did you listen to? What sort of shows did you watch growing up? Who were your favorite performers?
- What is your first memory of any person of color? It can be in person or from, for example, a TV show.
- WHAT ABOUT FOR A PERSON FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY? Another religion?
- Can you remember conversations, with friends or family or anyone close to you, from when you were growing up that had to do with people of color, or issues of race? What about nationality?
- Describe to me the most contact you had with a person of another race growing up. Did you have any direct contact? A friend? A family friend? A co-worker? Someone at school or church maybe?

Specific Situation Questions:

- Let's talk about your current situation _____.
    - Online Dating
        - What led up to your decision to use dating apps/sites?
        - What were you looking for in the apps? What type of relationship? How has it been so far using them?
        - Let's talk about some of the filters in the apps. Can you tell me about any you might have used? Like education level, employment, etc?
            - What made you chose these filters?
            - How strictly do you abide by them?

- Let's talk about which racial categories you DID select to receive matches with. What influenced you to choose these categories?
- Let's talk about which racial categories you DIDN'T select to received matches with. What influenced you not to choose these categories?
- Did you feel comfortable with these decisions?
- Have you received messages from people from the categories you didn't choose? How did you react/feel?
- How did it make you feel to decide on a racial component? Are you glad it was an option? Why?
    - Do you have these same preferences when meeting people in real life, or is it more for the apps?
    - Have you ever gone out with people from these categories in real life?
        - If yes, how did it go?
    - Do you have any concerns or thought about cross-racial interactions?
- Walk me through a GOOD date you might have. What do you imagine might influence how the date goes?
- Walk me through a BAD date you might have. What do you imagine might influence how the date goes?
- Can you tell me what dating via app IN THIS AREA might look like for someone who is another race? Walk me through the example and what might be the same or different.

- <u>School District Selection</u>
    - What made you decide to look for a house at this time?
    - Which factors did you consider in deciding on a neighborhood?
    - What role did school district reputation play in your decision?
        - Where did you get your information?
    - Can you imagine being in your child's shoes for a day in the school you chose? Imagine them going through a normal day. What kind of people does your child interact with?
        - How do you feel about these interactions?
    - Did you think about race at all in this decision process?
    - Did other people give you advice or weigh in on your decision making process? What sort of things did they say? Did they make any references to race?
    - When you think about your kids experience with school, how does your own experience with school come into play?
        - How was school for you?

        - What sort of friends did you have?
        - What was the best/worst aspect of your own school experience?
    - Can you tell me what BUYING A HOUSE IN THIS AREA might look like for someone who is another race? Walk me through the example and what might be the same or different.

- <u>Public Assistance</u>
    - Can you tell me about your experience with the food bank?
    - Did you ever envision a food pantry as something you would need? Did you imagine what it would be like to decide on getting help with food?
    - What did a typical visitor to a food bank look like in your mind before your experience? Were they young, old? Male/female? Race? Nationality?
        - Is that different from the experience you've actually had?
    - Were you aware of any stereotypes associated with needing help with food? What were they? How do you feel about them?
    - Can you talk to me about how you think your experience as a white person might differ from that of a person of another race who visits a food bank or pantry?
        - Have you seen people of other races in the food bank when you were there?
        - How do you think they have similar/dissimilar experiences from you?
    - Can you tell me what LOOKING FOR FOOD HELP IN THIS AREA might look like for someone who is another race? Walk me through the example and what might be the same or different.

<u>Current Experiences Questions:</u>

- Can you tell me about your media usage?
    - What sort of music do you listen to? What sort of shows do you watch? What are your favorite movies? Who are your favorite performers? Video games?
    - Talk to me about one of your favorites as if you were convincing me to read/watch/play it.
    - Is it important for you to relate to characters?
    - How would you rate yourself in terms of the amount of media you consume?
    - Where do you think your tastes in entertainment come from?
- If you could have dinner with anyone FAMOUS in the world, living or dead, who would it be and why?

    - (Choose opposite gender of what they have chosen) If you could have dinner with any man/woman in the world, living or dead, who would you choose and why?
    - (If they have chosen a white person) If you could have dinner with any person of color in the world, living or dead, who would it be and why?
- CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE?
    - WHAT PLATFORMS?
    - What sorts of things do you share?
    - Do you use it to talk about politics?
    - How has politics on social media impacted you or your relationships with people?
- What is the closest relationship you currently have with a person of color? It doesn't have to be a "close" relationship. If you don't have any that's fine too.
- Can you talk to me about the last time you thought about an interaction with a person of color?
- When was the last time you talked about race with someone?
- Is there a time when you felt particularly "white" or conscious about your race?
- Would you say race plays a role in your daily life? Is it something you think about?
    - Talk to me about what it means for you to be white.
    - What does the phrase "white privilege" mean to you? Can you give me an example of what it might look like to have it or not have it (can be real or imagined)?

Closing:

- Is there anything else you would like to add, or something you think I should take into account that maybe I didn't think of?
- Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT MATERIAL EXAMPLES

FOOD INSECURITY

Are you someone who has recently needed to use a food bank or food pantry for the first time, or are you thinking about it? Are you needing some kind of help making sure you or your family has enough to eat?

I'm a graduate student looking to speak with men and women who are new to using food banks or are thinking about using them for the first time to help make ends meet. If you are *18 or older*, *are from (AREA)*, and *are thinking about visiting a food bank or have begun using a food bank in the last two years*, I would love to talk to you!

Participants are paid $20 cash as my way of saying thanks. Interviews are voluntary, completely confidential, and last about an hour. If interested, please contact gabriella.research@gmail.com or 540-XXX-XXXX.

PARENTS

Hey (AREA) Moms and Dads!

- *Are you perhaps thinking of moving, and schools are on your mind?*

  OR

- *Have you moved in the past couple of years and schools were a factor in your decision?*

My name is Gabriella Smith and I'm a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Virginia. I'm looking to interview moms and dads here in the (AREA). Are you *18 or older* and *from (AREA)*? Are you vaguely thinking of moving, actively moving, or have you moved in the past couple of years? Are schools for your kids part of the equation? If so I'd love to interview you for my dissertation project.

Participants are paid $20 cash!

Interviews are completely confidential and take about an hour. The money is my small way of saying "thank you for participating." If you're interested, please reach me at gabriella.research@gmail.com or 540-XXX-XXXX.

DATING

Are you new to online dating or using dating apps? Thinking about using dating apps or online profiles for the first time?

My name is Gabriella Smith and I'm a graduate student looking to interview men and women here in the (AREA). *Does this describe you*? Are you *18 or older* and *from the area*? You may qualify to be interviewed.
Participants are paid $20 cash

Interviews are completely confidential and take about an hour. The money is my way of saying "thank you." If you're interested, please contact gabriella.research@gmail.com or 540-XXX-XXXX.

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