

**Ethical Awakenings: Stories of White Male Educators' Commitment to  
Social Justice and the Interruption of Privilege**

by

**Bryan Stephany**

Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, Geneva College, 2002

Master of Arts in Higher Education, Geneva College, 2007

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This dissertation was presented

by

Bryan Stephany

It was defended on

November 13, 2019

and approved by

Dr. Greg Loving, Faculty, University of Cincinnati, Department of Philosophy

Dr. Michael Quigley, Robert Morris University, Department of Organizational Leadership

Dr. Noreen Garman, Professor, Administrative and Policy Studies

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Michael Gunzenhauser, Associate Professor and Associate Dean,

Administrative and Policy Studies

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This study is an anti-racist counter-story of white male educators' commitments to social justice and their attempts at interrupting privilege. The author uses a qualitative methodological approach to unite personal narrative essay and phenomenological interviewing to collate narratives around the exploration of whiteness and power. At the heart of the project is a deep interest in seeking an ethic that fosters a social justice praxis for educators by exposing the underlying structures of whiteness through "witness" testimony. Using Butler's (2005) theory of subject formation, the author advances a theory of social justice that focuses on *relation*.

The author makes active the context for tensions between his white male subjectivity and social justice praxis and then interweaves the narratives from participant interviews to elucidate how white subjectivity works with and against social justice in complex ways, especially within educational contexts. A close look is given to white educators' experiences in communities of color and the connections between the participant narratives and the author's own. The author highlights the significance of personal *rupture*, in which the self is exposed to new ontological, epistemological, and ethical possibilities at critical junctures on the life journey. A case is made for the curricular value of utilizing self-study – examples of which include personal narrative essays, autoethnography, and autobiographical approaches – in shaping students' ethical commitments to responsibility towards others as well as potentially exposing fissures at the ontological horizon that might lead authentic personal and social changes.

The author draws meaningful interpretations by discussing relevant themes shared among the personal narratives and identifies key experiences that led participants to new ways of understanding and relating to others, exemplifying ethical responsibility. By drawing connections between white subjectivity and ethical commitments to social justice, the author makes a case for the curricular value in considering new and creative ways of fostering student interaction with difference and how those interactions might draw students towards responsible action. Conclusions from the interpretations suggest the importance of relation as a key component of ethical responsibility, highlighting the significance of recognizing the self's opacity as a form of social justice activism.

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## **1.0 Chapter 1: Introduction**

“I’m asking for you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you are racist. I’m now daring you to face a racist history which, paraphrasing Baldwin, has placed you where you are and that has formed your own racism. Again, in the spirit of Baldwin, I am asking you to enter into battle with your white self. I’m asking that you open yourself up; to speak to, to admit to, the racist poison that is inside of you.”

-- George Yancy, December 24, 2015

### **1.1 Context**

I read this quote by Yancy over and over again. Each time I read it, I cringe. And yet it speaks so succinctly to what I have been wrestling with here in this research process. This dissertation is a snapshot of my ongoing battle with my white self. Within this research process, I have sought to come to terms with my racism and how I perpetuate it. My investigation takes the reader on a sojourn through my narrative beginning, lingering in certain critical moments of my journey that I find troubling. The inquiry also makes use of personal narratives drawn from interviews with eight white men, all of whom have committed their careers as educators to troubling their whiteness and complicity in normalizing racism. The experiences of each of these

men, all of whom have spent considerable time immersing themselves in communities of color, adds a richness to my narrative account. The experiences discussed in these pages provide a layer of nuance to the larger story that this dissertation represents, the collective narrative that whites continue to (re)craft day-in-day-out. This dissertation is a sincere attempt to speak to, to admit to, the racist poison that affects us all. Furthermore, this dissertation is a representation of the ongoing and evolving process of my becoming. It is not the final truth, a set-in-stone conclusive depiction of past, present, or future. To that end, the narratives crafted from the participants' interviews are inconclusive as well. I recognize the crisis of representation in using their accounts in this dissertation.

Racism unsettles me, even as a white man who benefits from it. I wrestle with addressing racism while at the same time fostering equity and justice. It is not easy. There are significant frustrations in trying to do "good" work. Many times I feel that no matter what I do, I still fall short of what is required to bring equity and justice to the spaces around me. And that, I believe, is a collective struggle. It is the consequence of history, the powerful lingering effects of white supremacy. Regardless, I heed Yancey's challenge to confront my racist demons. Bringing equity and justice to bear is the only way forward. This dissertation is intended to call attention to how whiteness is manifest in space, in particular communities of color, and to offer insight into what it means to be white and privileged while also being committed to anti-racism.

How did I get here? Not all that long ago, I was a colorblind racist, one of those people that did not see color. I would never have called myself a colorblind racist, which pains me now to admit it, but it is true. And yet, my experience is, unfortunately, quite normal for most white Americans, who are raised to avoid seeing race, inequality, and marginalization. I grew up around other whites in a predominantly white space with very little difference and few challenges to my

whiteness. While I did not openly hate individuals of color, under the surface, my white privilege and colorblindness cultivated within me an *apathy* towards injustice.

I gained a new sense of empathy and an understanding of justice when I left home for college. Over time, as my sense of self began to change, I became more reflective and more curious about things that happened to me and the things that happened to others. My understanding of justice began to evolve, and I slowly became more interested in identity boundaries such as race, gender, and ethnicity. Goodson (2013) suggests that this moment of narrative reflexivity is a re-selfing, a "repositioning of the self through narrative construction" (p. 115). My narrative characterization of selfhood shifted. Turvey (2016) describes these moments of reflection as threshold experiences, critical moments of reflexivity that often lead to rupture. My threshold experiences built on one another as my journey progressed into graduate school, at which point I found that theory gave me a voice for understanding who I was, whom I wanted to be, and how I wanted to live. Thinking through theory gave me a greater sense of my fallibility and helped me to see that there are infinite possibilities for being in the world. Thinking through theory has since helped me to make sense of my lived experience. This dissertation is born out of my growing curiosity regarding the governance of categorical differences like race, gender, and sexuality. In particular, I am intrigued by how those differences evolve, are made intelligible, and legitimized within daily life.

## **1.2 Roadmap for the dissertation**

### **1.2.1 Remainder of chapter 1 – Introduction**

In the remainder of this chapter I lay out a framework for understanding post-structural ethical subjectivity. I then draw from the literature to discuss the workings of whiteness, explicating the significance of conducting a study focused on whiteness and the potential challenges in doing so. I also make connections between whiteness and neoliberal governmentality by first defining these terms and then identifying the possibilities for resistance. The focus of these sections is to provide a review of the relevant literature and to lay out a conceptual framework for the study.

### **1.2.2 Chapter 2 – Theory, methods, and research design**

In this chapter I begin by discussing the theoretical underpinnings post-structuralism and its relevance for the dissertation. Of importance for the reader is the way that I use post-structuralism to handle racial identity formation, choosing instead to replace identity with the post-structural *subject*. I then outline my epistemological and ontological commitments relative to my use of post-structural theory. In this chapter I also discuss the methods of post-structural narrative inquiry and personal narrative essay as well as my rationale for using them in the dissertation. Finally, I conclude the chapter with an outline of my research design, discussing the sampling and analysis strategies, limitations of the project, and the connection to the field.

### **1.2.3 Chapter 3 – A personal narrative of whiteness in place**

In Chapter 3 I take a deep dive into my personal history, laying out for the reader the context for how I came to be in this particular moment. The background information proves relevant for the vignettes offered throughout the remainder of the chapter, where I discuss various life moments that highlight the challenges of and possibilities for working with whiteness. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the narrative inquiry and offer key takeaways for the reader.

### **1.2.4 Chapter 4 – Profiles: Meet the men**

In this chapter I turn away from myself and focus on three of the study participants: Lucas, Frank, and Marcus. All three of these men have critically engaged in understanding, working with, and when at all possible, troubling their whiteness. I offer these profiles to provide the reader with an understanding of how varied whiteness can look, with all three of these men sharing commitments to social justice but having arrived at this moment via very different journeys. I hope the reader will see these profiles as examples of how subjectivity is impacted in nuanced ways by our life journey, and that social justice is understood and practiced in creative and varied ways.

### **1.2.5 Chapter 5 – Thematic analysis**

In Chapter 5 I dive into the data collected from the participant interviews. Although eight men were interviewed, totaling over 25 hours of audio, three participants were chosen as focal points for connecting to themes. I developed themes from all eight interviews and utilize the three



cases as exemplary of those themes in action. Throughout the chapter I walk the reader through my analysis. For example, I discuss how most of the men experienced what Turvey (2016) describes as threshold experiences, which for some of the men led to a rupture in their knowing. Consequently, their sense of self and other was reshaped by the experiences gained on their journey, leading to a re-selfing that aligned their relative vocations with a commitment to social justice. From there I draw connections between their threshold experiences and the development of white identity formation and ethical whiteness, explicating how Butler's (2005) notion of opacity illuminates the recognition of fallibility and selflessness. I conclude the chapter with a caution about reading the various accounts as transcendence of whiteness, and how these men embody a refusal to remain silent while also recognizing their complicity in a system of white racial dominance and privilege.

### **1.2.6 Chapter 6 – Conclusions and implications**

In this final chapter I provide concluding reflections on the process of the dissertation and offer additional insights by drawing connections between the interview data and personal narratives. I then provide implication is for what this project might mean for the field of education and for future research.

### **1.3 Ethical subjectivity**

The privileged subject positions within which I am imbricated – e.g., White, male, heterosexual, middle class – and the praxis of critique that I advance makes me curious about how

it is possible to work successfully toward the mitigation of oppressive conditions within the context of a discursive system where the status quo seems intractable. My curiosity concerning possibilities for being socially and ethically just was piqued anew in the past two years as I worked in a community that was, relative to my privileged subject positions, radically Other. The neighborhood where I worked was in a one-square-mile section of Pittsburgh's east end. Working in this community illuminated several complexities, and this experience juxtaposed to my lived experience at home in the suburbs complicated the way that I saw the various realities of difference coming to bear in my life and the lives of others. It is here that I began to wrestle deeply with what it meant to be White, as well as the benefits my privilege brought me. Not only that, but I began to wonder how my privilege operated differently *in location*. It was during my time spent working in this community that poverty, neglect, violence, racism, and whiteness emerged, or re-emerged, for me as attributes of social reality. My privilege, constituted in and through subjectivity, seemed to get me one experience in the suburbs while giving me something different in the city.

While working in this community, fissures began to emerge in my understanding of how *contested social spaces* impact the operationalization of privilege and subjectivity. The juxtaposition of living and working segregated communities confused my understanding of privilege and power. The threshold experiences during this time on my journey ruptured the taken-for-grantedness of my identity. It seems evident that neoliberal governmentality impacts ethical commitments related to social justice (Read, 2009). Yancy (2016) illuminates my involvement in white supremacy, regardless of my intentions. I am, without question, uncomfortable with this association, but remain committed to seeking social justice, which involves mitigating marginalization and breaking down barriers. My view of *social justice* is directly related to Hoy's (2005) call for critical resistance to normalization. **Critical resistance in service to social justice**

**is the heart of this study. With that, my focus is on seeking subject positions that are ethical and socially just in the face of neoliberal governmentality.**

I recognize that social and cultural norms lead to both privileged and marginalized subject positions at the same time. In using post-structural theory, I suggest that subject positions are not primordial. Instead, I see them as fluid, evolving, and historically contingent social constructions. Rather than referring to identity, post-structural theory leads me to suggest that social reality is discursively constituted, making the concept of identity more like an amalgam of *subject positions* rather than a coherent whole. My experience in varied social spaces leads me to question how subject positions operate relative to space, and how we concurrently make and are made through subjectivity. With this study, I consider the possibilities for reconceiving social justice. My threshold experience of traveling daily between two varied communities illuminated how subject positions are, at times, disconnected from each other. As a social justice educator, this was more than a curiosity but an untenable case.

### **1.3.1 Making the personal public**

Judith Butler (2005) suggests that "there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence" (p. 7). The narratives that we tell about ourselves are always married to our historical antecedents. The historical conditions that form us also shape our intellectual, professional, and personal trajectories. With this dissertation, I take up the task of interrogating personal narratives while acknowledging that the stories told are always already fractured and, perhaps, incomplete. I write about my journey to live ethically in service to social justice, providing experiential texts that illustrate how the complexity of personal experience counts as evidence.

Furthermore, I legitimize the use of personal narrative as the locus of investigation. The account that I give is not in search of a foundational "I" that Butler speaks of. Rather, the "I" under investigation is fully embedded in myriad discourses and histories. The intention is not to offer the reader a final account. This is a critical feature of social theory that I advance with this research. Again, Butler (2005) is salient on this point:

When the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist. (p. 7)

Butler's language helps explain the complexity of, and value in researching, the experiences that constitute the self. Locating the self as a focus of research has become more accepted in the social sciences. Indeed, the social sciences ushered forth various "turns", such as the cultural turn, the linguistic turn, the narrative turn, the narrative turn, and, more recently, the performative turn (Denzin & Lincoln 2017; Vinen 2011). Several examples from the literature illustrate the emergence of self-study as a methodology. In many ways, Pinar's (1975) method of *currere* was a precursor to the self-study movement in the field of education, specifically in curriculum studies. Since then, several scholars have advanced self-study and narrative inquiry to cover a range of experiences and concepts. For example, scholars have examined their experiences with silence as a manifestation of whiteness and privilege (Burke, 2007; Magnet, 2006; Potter, 2015) as well as the challenges they have faced as teachers of color (Acevedo-Febles, 2016), and even the potential health and wellness benefits of self-study (Wooten, 2016). Most recently, scholars have advanced personal narrative inquiry even further by making *performance* central to the investigation (Denzin, 2018; Spry, 2011).

## 1.4 Critical whiteness studies

### 1.4.1 Overview of the field

In this section, I explore the concept of whiteness and the multitude of manifestations of power directly associated with it, namely white privilege, white fragility, and white fatigue. A significant portion of the literature discusses various explanations as some combination of structural and behavioral in nature. Furthermore, much of the literature up to this point has advanced a notion of whiteness as irrefutable and essential, in effect making whiteness a monolithic, immovable aspect of identity. More recent research pays particular attention to framing whiteness as a *subject position* that is complicated, contingent, and relative. I follow a line of contemporary scholars working to understand whiteness in the same vein. Given my interest and concern for the possibilities of critically resisting whiteness as a key ethical commitment to social justice, I conclude with an overview of the compelling literature on vigilance and critique from a social justice perspective.

Critical Whiteness Studies scholars attempt to better understand the social construction of whiteness and the dominance it holds as a subject position throughout all areas of social life. In this way, whiteness continues to operate as hegemonic and perpetuates a vast array of inequalities and injustices in society. Whiteness as a form of domination activates or enables those that are recognized as white to have certain benefits or *privileges* that are only available to them. Critical Whiteness Studies has been undertaken by looking at the interconnectedness of white subjectivity and white privilege to gender, sexuality, and social class (Morgensen, 2009). Critical Whiteness scholars use an array of transdisciplinary approaches to investigate how whiteness “is manifested, exerted, defined, recycled, transmitted, and maintained, and how it ultimately impacts the state of

race relations (Matias & Mackey, 2009, p. 34). Initial studies on whiteness examined how whites utilize their privilege, both consciously and unconsciously, as well as the ways that whites *evade* issues of race in their daily life. Jupp, Berry, and Lensmire (2016) suggest that traditional studies on whiteness represents the first wave of research on the topic and characterize them as *race-evasive* in nature. Meanwhile, the authors identify a contemporary, second wave of research on whiteness characterized by attempts to understand how whites recognize or are conscious of their power and privilege. The second-wave research is categorized as *race-visible* studies on whiteness that consider the advancement of whiteness and white identity as non-essentializing, including a recognition that white identity is complex, multi-dimensional, and both historically and spatially contingent. In step with second-wave whiteness studies, with this dissertation, I recognize that white identity is not monolithic, but is instead expressed in myriad, complex ways by whites. Furthermore, the relations of power and privilege associated with whiteness are space and time contingent.

Many whiteness scholars have been working within second-wave whiteness studies, several of whom have provided first-hand accounts through autobiographical narratives and interpretations (Alcoff, 2015; Lensmire, 2008; Vance, 2016; Wise, 2011). The challenge, however, with white perspectives working in service to antiracist ends is that, as noted by Mayo (2012), “the expertise of the white perspective provides expertise on the problem, not the solution generally, so it does remain a deficient perspective from which to address changing white superiority” (p. 215). Several other scholars have issued similar caveats to the dangers inherent in white declarations of anti-racism (see Ahmed, 2004; Applebaum, 2013; DeAngelo, 2018; Hayes & Juárez, 2009; and Thompson, 2003). The conundrum whites face in declaring their whiteness, as well as their sincere aversion to racism and white privilege, is that the declaration itself puts race, racism, and privilege

at the center of the conversation. The consequence is that race talk within whiteness discourse becomes a vicious circle, where racism and oppression are never fully overcome. This should not dissuade whites from a commitment to antiracism, however. Rather, as I detail throughout the dissertation, whites must commit with vigilance to antiracism through creative and otherwise yet unknown avenues for exposing the fissures on the ontological horizon of white supremacist reality.

Researchers need to consider the ways that normalized forms of address and narration are part and parcel of the white supremacist machinery. Again, Mayo is persuasive in suggesting that white antiracist commitments have “echoes of white demands for truth and agreement that structured etiquette under slavery” and that white antiracist “intervention is always complicit in the system it critiques” (p. 214). Complicity, however, does not mitigate the need nor the possibilities for white anti-racist address. Indeed, white complicity is an issue addressed throughout this dissertation, and is a challenge to whiteness studies that I take seriously. And yet, the challenge of complicity is all the more reason to consider alternatives to normalized forms of white address and narration. Taking heed of Mayo’s caution means working to transgress forms of white anti-racist address and to consider creative alternatives of address that might create a rupture or fissure in the ontological framework of our normalized understandings (Butler, 2003). For Mayo that exposure rests in creative use of humor, but for others, it might mean, for example, the conceptualization of new categories of identification. Notably, this process begins with understanding that categories of identification (gender, race, ethnicity, class) are not essential and monolithic, but rather are contingent and historically situated. This does not, of course, dissolve the reality of these categories on our daily lived experience. It does, however, trouble the certainty of their operationalization, which, as will become apparent throughout the dissertation, provides an opening for critique that can lead to new and creative ways of bringing social justice to fruition.

### 1.4.2 Whiteness as neoliberal governmentality

In the same way that neoliberalism operates as governmentality, so too does whiteness. One of the more nefarious ways that whiteness operates as governmentality is through the reinforcement of *innocence* and the obscuring of privilege in textbooks, media, and public policy (Leonardo, 2004). Whiteness is manifest in the various practices and values that become reinforced as *normal* over time. This normalization of white values privileges whites with an array of benefits. Through a process of normalization, whiteness enables the perpetuation of a view of racism and white supremacy as something that happens to whites, rather than something for which they are the architects. The result of which is that those afforded white subjectivity get a pass at engaging with troubling the structural explanations of poverty, inequality, and unequal access that are consequences of historical white hegemony. While scholars such as McIntosh (2003) articulate the often-hidden benefits that come along with being white, much of the theorizing on white privilege has positioned whites as neutral beneficiaries rather than as subjects with an investment in the maintenance of a system that rewards them. The normalization of white “innocence” renders actionable change insufficient at best and impossible at worst. I stand with the many scholars that have challenged the essentialist “innocence” perspective of white privilege (Ellsworth, 1997; Lensmire et al., 2013; Leonardo, 2004).

The Other's participation in society is limited by their dissociation with whiteness and the resultant problematics that come with being an outsider. Consequently, addressing social dilemmas become problematic for non-whites as the issues they face are often understood in highly individualistic terms. Lipsitz (2018) suggests that explanations for racism that rely on individualism and normalized whiteness often lack nuance and complexity, which forecloses



structural explanations for racism. I now turn to the literature on the consequences of white normalization and the privileging of the white experience.

### **1.4.3 Consequences of whiteness**

#### **1.4.3.1 White privilege.**

The preeminent text on the concept of white privilege is Peggy McIntosh's "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1988). In her original text, she lists 46 items, strategies, and practices that enable whites to maintain an advantage over individuals of color, writing that white privilege is "an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions" (McIntosh, 2003, pp. 1–2). The assets and advantages associated with white privilege are a form of white racial hegemony (Leonardo, 2004).

White privilege has a long history, dating back to the early days of the American Revolution. Thandeka (2018) offers an excellent synopsis of the historical account of whiteness in America, noting that "White racial privilege was created in America as a legal shill to economically disempower most of its wage-earning white members" (p. 33). Indeed, blacks were not the only slaves and disenfranchised people during the construction period. For those in power to quell potential uprising between disenfranchised blacks and whites, a racial classification system was established that protected white servant property while confiscating that which belonged to black slaves. The result is that:

Race work thus began in America—at an affective level—as a way to transform the inner emotional lives of whites so that they could *not* see and feel what they had in

common with blacks: feelings of loss, fear, sorrow, and remorse, feelings of being at risk, and anger and rage at being taken advantage of. (Thandeka, 2018, p. 34)

A system of “race work” set the machinery of white supremacy in motion, manifestations of which are privileges named by McIntosh. However, white privilege is more than what is represented on McIntosh’s list, not all scholars find favor with how McIntosh’s work is used in education. Lensmire et al. (2013) note, “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” has served as a “stand-in” for anti-racist work in education circles, and consequently limits possibilities for action by essentializing whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy.

The consequence of essentialization is smoothing over of racial complexities and a rendering of Whiteness as monolithic. Leonardo (2004) warns of the danger in focusing too much attention on white privilege compared to white supremacy. Whereas white privilege is considered racial hegemony, white supremacy is racial domination, the latter of which makes the former possible. Focusing too much attention on white privilege leads to the “innocence of whiteness,” where white “privilege and dominance happens to whites without their knowledge, thus they are not culpable of doing anything about it and not at fault for its perpetuation” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 139). From this perspective, whites can step back from taking responsibility for racial inequality. White privilege is a consequence of white racial domination that must be resisted. It is a matter of social justice.

#### **1.4.3.2 White fragility.**

Engagement with white privilege and whiteness is a key first step in recognizing the oppressive conditions of whiteness. However, engagement with whiteness and privilege often can

go awry as a consequence of white privilege itself. Many whites respond to being confronted with their whiteness and white privilege by getting defensive, simply refusing to engage, claiming of victimization and “reverse racism” and sometimes tears. Robin DeAngelo (2018) refers to this response as *white fragility* and describes it as a posture held by many whites that might morally object to racism but refuse to acknowledge their culpability in a racist hierarchy. DeAngelo (2018) sums it up succinctly, "the capacity for white people to sustain challenges to our racial positions is fragile" (p. 112). White fragility is particularly troubling because the self-defensive posture exhibited by whites serves as a re-inscription of racist imagery and rhetoric of violence toward people of color. Anti-racist educators, workshop leaders, and/or colleagues become dangerous attackers to the fragile white's sensibilities and moral norms, as incongruous and contradictory those moral norms and sensibilities may be.

#### **1.4.3.3 White fatigue.**

For many whites, the knowledge of their implication in a racist social structure and the importance of engaging with social justice to alleviate racism is vital. However, it is also true that many whites simply do not know what to do. Overwhelmed by the complexity of whiteness and racism, as well as their culpability in a racialized society, these whites simply throw up their hands. Joseph Flynn (2018) describes this phenomenon as white fatigue, where whites easily recognize individual acts of racism but disengage from taking action. White fatigue can also be recognized when whites fail to understand the complex structural arrangements of racism.

#### 1.4.4 Vigilance, critique, and social justice

What to do, then, as a white person committed to being otherwise? Is it possible to be anything other than in a position of dominance? How should whites address white racial hegemony and dominance? Given the impact that white supremacy continues to have on every aspect of American life, resisting white supremacy is critical. The challenge is that white subjectivity is not a matter of choice, even though its formation is socially constructed. If, then, one cannot disown or “unrobe” themselves of their whiteness, how then can concerned whites resist white supremacy to avoid its consequences, while also embodying whiteness and its effects? That is to say, what are the possibilities for *being different* as a white person while also being committed to social justice work? Scholars in the post-structural tradition have expressed the importance of critique as a matter of ethical daily living (Butler, 2003; Foucault, 1997; Hoy, 2005). Life is lived not from standpoints bound by rigid categories of identity, but instead through myriad historically contingent and evolving subject positions. Whiteness is but one of the varied, shifting, and fluid subject positions enabled by the machinery of discursive practices and norms (Foucault, 1977/1995).

Engaging in critique involves recognizing that structures and norms precede the self but also do not determine the self. Being critical, then, means seeking an understanding of both the limited determinacy of the structure of social life as well as the possibility for its alteration. Said another way, critique means seeking the fissures in social reality that enable different modes of being to be called into existence. How critique is actualized is always relative and contingent, but a constant is resistance to essential, monolithic determinations of identity. Categorization itself – whether racial, gendered, classed, or otherwise – becomes a point of contestation and a matter of ethical consideration (Butler, 2003; Hoy, 2005).

Within the fields of whiteness studies and education, some scholars have begun to creatively imagine what critical resistance to white supremacy might look like. Barbara Applebaum suggests that educators espouse and enact *vigilance* as a key strategy in critiquing and resisting whiteness. Specifically, Applebaum (2013) suggests educators employ “a type of vigilance that emphasizes critique...staying in the anxiety of critique and vulnerability can be helpful to social justice researchers and educators in their attempts to teach white students about their complicity in systemic racial injustice” (p. 32). An example of this can be the use of narrative portrayals to reinterpret and reimagine life history events, especially for white educators and scholars committed to resisting whiteness. Lensmire (2008), for example, uses a story from his high school days to reinterpret the implications on himself and others through three different lenses. In each case, he reimagines the truth of the events that took place as well as the nuanced ways that the story was co-created within contingent and evolving social, cultural, and political contexts.

While there are certainly risks associated with using narrative inquiry for such work, especially for whites, retelling and reinterpreting narratives enables educators and scholars committed to social justice a way to “look at the varied and variable patterns in which different social groups are historically incorporated into the institutional life of systems and structures such as those associated with education” (McCarthy, 2003, p. 132). My use of “social justice” as a concept has its risks. In the chapter that follows I explain in-depth my conception of social justice, but here I want to parse out a comparison between one of the more common definitions of social justice found in the literature and my own. Social justice is not, as Lister (2008) suggests, primarily policies and practices focused on the equitable (re)distribution of goods. As is commonly the case, social justice viewed in this way relies on static understandings of identity with often rigid and

essentialized categorical social boundaries. My definition attempts to complicate the certainty of (re)distributive social justice by instead suggesting that social justice is tied to the self's *recognition* of opacity and to the *contingency* of social life (Butler, 2005). As I explain in the chapters that follow, social justice as recognition opens up possibilities for interrupting white supremacy, whiteness, and privilege in ways that (re)distributive justice does not. My view of social justice is not equality or egalitarianism rooted in neoliberal *certainty*. Rather, social justice is a stance towards fighting issues such as racism, which are constantly moving and with a future that we cannot possibly know, in a self that we cannot fully understand. In other words, we are opaque to ourselves, and yet our opacity is the reason why we need to be responsible. Indeed, it is the foundation of the ethics at the heart of this dissertation. Social justice in the context of this dissertation is not a utopian vision. Instead, social justice is a stance that leans towards anti-racism and a firm resistance to certainty.

## **2.0 Chapter 2: Theory, methods, and research design**

### **2.1 Theory**

This study is an exploration that is situated at the intersection of critical whiteness studies (personal), the social foundations of education (discipline), and curriculum studies (pedagogy). Each of these fields investigates issues in myriad ways through an array of interdisciplinary approaches. For this particular project, I employ personal narrative essay as a methodological approach in researching the possibilities for an ethical anti-racist subjectivity. Undergirding the methodological approach is a post-structural theoretical framework that lays bare how self-identity, social recognition, and ontological being are tied up in a politics that is contingent and historically situated. Furthermore, post-structural theory provides possibilities for the de-naturalization of reality, disruption of taken for granted assumptions, and demystification of often unquestionable truths about social life.

#### **2.1.1 Post-structuralism**

While post-structuralism has evaded a simple and uniform definition, generally it has been understood as criticism against essentialist, foundationalist, and universalist ontological and epistemological perspectives (Parkes et al., 2010). Chandler, Davidson, and Harootunian (1991) suggest that post-structuralism means the refusal of a theory-independent observation language, while Lather and St. Pierre (2013) takes this claim a step further by stating that a post-structural approach means that there is no “given out there, a brute datum, an object, that exists ahead of the

interpretation of a subject” (p. 224). A Post-structural approach is one that refuses certainty, and as such finds relative truth in language. Language, therefore, is recognized as competing discourses – comprised of all types of language: bodily, written, spoken, etc. – and from within a post-structural approach the researcher makes language a site of exploration and struggle. Key to this approach is an aversion to the idea that the researcher is an objective, neutral, and distant observer of independent truths. Within the social sciences, the objective and distant researcher has historically been the dominant perspective (Denzin, 2009). However, in recent decades, the “postmodern turn” in the social sciences (Susen, 2015) has ushered in research with an emphasis on the fallibility and historical contingency of knowledge claims and, consequently, truth. Post-structural narrative inquiry (Gannon, 2006; St. Pierre, 2013; Pascale, 2010), as a progeny of the postmodern turn, relocates the researcher as a participant, placing them at the center of the project by acknowledging, rather than shying away from, the uncertainty and relativism associated with claims to the truth.

Using post-structuralism allows me to make the assumption that prevailing identities, values, norms, and beliefs about the world are constructed and maintained in language, and that social reality is contingent and historical. My interest with this project is in exploring the various ways that the self is recognized *in relation* to its Other. Commonly referred categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, among many others are considered relative and contingent subject positions, in contrast to a perspective of essential, primordial, monolithic, or natural identities. Foucault in particular de-naturalized sexuality and gender in the latter years of his life, and this same approach to de-naturalization can be used to better understand the power relations associated with other aforementioned categories, such as race. This means that in using a post-structural theoretical framework I am less interested in studying the racialization of people,



places, times, events, or contexts for their *foundational truth*. Instead, I am interested in the racial *relations* that bind people, places, times, events, and contexts. Relations, therefore, are a core feature of post-structural research, and of importance for this study is the relation between the racialized (white) self and the racialized Other.

My ontological and epistemological commitments provide me with tools to examine and *name* the determining force of relationships of domination, such as white supremacy, as well as its effects (Pascale, 2010). Working a post-structural theoretical framework means that I do not strive to provide *correspondence* with general reality, such is often the case with a realist, objectivist, and/or positivist stance. The post-structural perspective I utilize prevents me from positioning myself as a neutral observer seeking an ascertainable, objective, independently verifiable truth. Rather, my theoretical framework positions me as in integral part of the study along with the participants that I interview. Some may even suggest that the researcher is always already the study, even when claims to the truth are made from participant voices. Rose (1999) provides a synopsis of the post-structural perspective that is worth quoting at length:

there is no independent access to one true world against which our versions of it can be compared and evaluated. All we have are different versions of the world, versions constructed out of words, numerals, pictures, sounds or symbols in various media. We take particular versions for real largely as a matter of habit...thought constructs its unreal worlds through very material procedures. Thought, that is to say, becomes real by harnessing itself to a practice of inscription, calculation and action. (p. 19)

Post-structuralism opens up opportunities for the researcher to “breach” neutrality and to trouble normalized epistemological and ontological boundaries. One way to do that is to put experience

under investigation and to wrestle with the contingency of various modes of recognition (e.g. researcher the narrator, researcher the interviewer, and/or researcher as a participant of the research project).

Personal narrative inquiry, which often relies on narrative essays and experience-based autobiographical texts, is a methodological approach to naming fluid and contingent points of recognition (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004). In traditional research approaches objective data is the metric to be analyzed, however with post-structural autobiographical approaches, data are derived from self-examination through narrative essays. The perspective that “personal” texts are data calls into question objectivist notions of neutrality and troubles conventional understandings of what gets to count as real and true, as well as the accessibility of reality and the truth. Post-structural interpretation of texts views claims about reality as a *representation* of reality rather than a correspondence to an independent, singular, objective truth. Notions of *being* and *truth* are found not in a singular subject but rather in multiple, contingent, and historically situated subjectivities. To quote Garman and Piantanida (2006):

[T]he text is primarily a written form with inherent meaning for the researcher – a chunk of related words or images that reflect an idea or ideas. Text may take the form of vignettes, profiles, stories, media excerpts, theoretic insights, images, pictures, and memos, to name only a few products of inquiry. *The concern here is that these crafted texts are capable of hermeneutic interpretations and are not generally used for reductive purposes.* (p.5 emphasis added)

This study explores the impact of the white/male/privileged subject and his ethical commitment to social justice within a context marked by difference and where subjectivity has to do with perceptions and negotiations of meaning in discursively, politically, and ethically contested spaces.

It has been noted that prevailing perspectives of key social boundaries (such as race, gender, and many other binaries, dichotomies, and/or demarcations) are operationalized in a rather *normalized* way (Taylor, 2009). My interest is in seeking out what Butler (2005) describes as “sites of rupture within the horizon of normativity” (p. 24). Said another way, with this project I seek out how sedimented ways of being can be thrown into – or perhaps out of – focus and thus deconstructed, de-naturalized, and reimagined for new ontological possibilities. Of interest to me are the ways in which privileged subject positions get manifest in nuanced ways within contested spaces and how subject positions in general are constituted relative to social justice commitments. My view of social justice, informed by post-structural theory, sees the disruption of oppressive conditions as virtuous (Butler, 2005; Foucault, 1997; Hoy, 2005).

My exploration into the matters of race, privilege, and power takes me down a path toward unpacking the nuanced ways in which my own subjectivity is normalized and consequently valorized over and above the Other within contrasting social spaces. Through personal narrative essays I explore the nuance of my experiences in varied spaces relative to my exposure to difference. In retrospect, I often found myself on opposite ends of a spectrum in each incident, such as being one in the crowd in the suburbs but often being one of the only White males in my work in the city. I weigh these experiences against those of the study participants: white men who worked in communities of color and were, for a time, “temporary minorities” (Strayhorn, 2010).

In critiquing experiences and mining them for possible fissures, I explicate how normalized notions of difference and the interwoven assumptions about *being* are more complicated and

incomplete. In other words, my interest is in *critiquing* the discursive structures that establish and maintain the boundaries of possibility relative to social conditions, practices, and forms of categorical differences. In this vein, Butler (2001) is informative in suggesting that *critique* constitutes an “interrogatory relation to the field of categorization itself” (p. 4). Critical interrogation of the “natural” forms of social categories, and the various ways in which those categories are manifest in social space, are a vital step in seeking social justice. I recognize critique as a stance against certainty and as a form of praxis, a commitment to a critical relation to pre-established and “natural” norms. It is not only that the self creates and enacts notions of difference, but rather that differences have histories and evolving systems of institutions, social conditions, and practices that normalize and naturalize how and why we should be in the world.

To understand the contemporary landscape of power relations, I make use of critique within the context of the Foucaultian notion of *governmentality*. Over the course of his career, Foucault traced the development of various forms of government, identifying the way in which sovereign leadership that held power via rules and laws gave way to a more diffuse type of population control and management. As societies became more diverse and more technically advanced, sovereign power became less significant, although still visible. Over time, new modes of power, in particular biopower, were used to manage the populace. The dominant discursive regime of truth governs categorization, effectively affirming and normalizing the certainty within which we are categorized as different from one another. Investigating governmental practices brings to bear the macro political context of contested spaces (e.g. the suburbs and the city) that are a part of this project. The troubling dilemma of working for social justice within the context of neoliberal governmentality has led me to consider an *ethical* line of inquiry that critiques the epistemological nuance of difference, privilege, and place while also calling into question the ontological certitude

of an essential entrepreneurial self. Rose (1999) clarifies my approach relative to the influence of governmentality on being and subjectivity:

The government of a population, a national economy, an enterprise, a family, a child or even oneself becomes possible only through discursive mechanisms that represent the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics, and whose component parts are linked together in some more or less systematic manner by forces, attractions and coexistences. *This is a matter of defining boundaries, rendering that within them visible, assembling information about that which is included and devising techniques to mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed.* (p. 33, emphasis added)

A post-structural approach to narrative inquiry (Pascale, 2010; St. Pierre, 2013) provides salient and meaningful avenues for researching, naming, and critiquing identity, difference, privilege, and neoliberal rationality. This approach is congruent with a commitment to Foucault's care of the self, an ethical position that is attentive to the micro and macro political situated-ness of the self. Furthermore, post-structural narrative inquiry is in alignment with what Butler (2005) refers to as "giving an account of oneself."

Post-structural theory enables the researcher to conceptualize the possibilities for being differently as a categorized subject within neoliberal governmental discourse in that post-structural theory advances a perspective of a subject formed in relation to the Other and always through a set of norms that govern the *recognition* of the Other. Butler (2005), for example, suggests that recognition of the Other occurs at the very moment that the Other recognizes me, and within that dual recognition is the site of subject formation, or what Foucault would call *subjectification*. The paradox found in subjectification, in which the self is governed by, and governs itself by way of, the available truth regime, is what leads St. Pierre (2000b) to ask a profound question: "What part of myself must I maintain in order to subvert myself" (p. 258)? I find this an intriguing question

in that it comes from a place that acknowledges not only a lack of originality of the self, but a contested and fractured self that is always evolving. Yet, the lack of originality does not foreclose agency, which I find critically important for seeking a subject position within the context of neoliberal governmentality that is ethical and socially just.

From within a post-structural account of the self that lacks originality, agency comes from a recognition of the self's plurality and that there is always already an ontological horizon worth pursuing. Butler (1997) is informative on this account:

subjection is a subordination that the subject brings on itself; yet if subjection produced a subject and a subject is the precondition of agency, *the subjection is the account by which a subject becomes the guarantor of its resistance and opposition.* (p. 14, emphasis added)

Importantly – regarding the possibilities for agency through subjection, and within a neoliberal governmental system that privileges certain subject positions – my aim is to explore the possibilities of exercising agency through the de-privileging of myself (if that is at all possible) as *(de)subjectification* (Foucault, 1984). Agency exercised as *(de)subjectification* is emblematic of a critically resistant stance against the normalization of the self, which is, consequently, also a stance against normalized oppression of the Other.

Critical resistance (Hoy, 2005) is a stance that enables me to consider how technologies of governing the self are put into place that privilege certain subject positions and to name the technologies of governing the self that operate *against* marginalized and/or liminal subject positions. Of course, subjectification occurs in space and location, thus it is incumbent upon me to consider how varying locales (e.g. all spaces inclusive of and between the suburbs and the city) take up certain meanings within the context of categorization and the operationalization of

oppression. St. Pierre (2000b), working from a Deleuzian conception of deterritorialization of space, describes a reimagined new space, what she calls “the new earth”, as “that different place, [which] can only be imagined from a particular location and requires risking the loss of the positivities that have coalesced and rooted themselves there” (p. 260). Place and location are particularly important for this analysis, thus I am interested in the ways in which a “new earth” can be, should be, envisioned for the locations under investigation. The virtue of (de)subjectification, itself an ethical commitment to critical resistance, acknowledges epistemological limits. In the process of reimagining and rewriting the self through my analysis, critical resistance works towards a rewriting of new discursive spaces.

To review: with this line of inquiry I have sought to understand the boundaries of modern subjectivity and to challenge the ways in which those boundaries are governed, searching for openings and sites of rupture within the horizon of normativity. To accomplish this, I utilize a critical post-structural approach that opens up the self to analytic scrutiny. In doing so, I critique my experiences in contested spaces to better understand how boundaries are governed. In addition to engaging in personal excavation (Pinar, 2004), I weight my experiences against those of other white men who have worked in communities of color. Through in-depth interviews, I mine their experiences to better understand how social justice and white privilege get negotiated in their unique circumstances. These eight men represent the pinnacle of white privilege, yet all were well aware of their social status and, in various ways, attempted to trouble the normalized notion of what it means to be white within a community of color. By combining narrative inquiry and phenomenological interviewing, this project lays bare how whiteness can be challenged within a context governed by neoliberalism. In the end, I make sense of how subject formation is governed

as well as the conditions of possibility for advancing a more ethical and socially just conceptualization of the self.

### **2.1.2 Neoliberal governmentality**

I take as a starting point that in the U.S., racial differences – as well as the language associated with race and the politics attached to it – manifest into privileges for those identified as white or Caucasian (McIntosh, 2003). The social, cultural, and economic inequality for which race is correlated has become a troubling dilemma for me personally, especially given that my race provides me with an array of advantages that I have not earned. As a social justice scholar with commitments to advancing equity and fairness in my work, my discomfort with white privilege and my culpability in a white supremacist society has led me to conceive an ethics that is congruent with seeking social justice while also acknowledging and owning my privileged subjectivity.

I consider it important to critically engage the conditions that allow injustices to persist, and from a post-structural Foucaultian lens this means contesting the norms associated with the dominant *regime of truth*, or the rules and parameters for determining and maintaining the demarcation between that which is natural and deviant. The regime of truth is the framework for determining what counts as appropriate modes of response to *being* in contested spaces. The conditions for social recognition are facilitated by the regime of truth. Foucault advanced a theory of subjectivity that recognizes the self as relational and historically contingent. This view of subjectivity sees modes of truth – i.e. rules that frame what is considered normal, rational, and intelligible – as maintained and proliferated by way of a prevailing, dominant discourse. The derivation of meaning, from a Foucaultian perspective on subjectivity, involves ebbs and flows with regard to prevailing boundaries of signification (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984). To this end,



Foucault advanced a new articulation of power that is diffuse and constant, relative to and found within every relation. Different forms of power are manifest in society, namely disciplinary power, sovereign power, and more recently bio-power. These various forms of power are exercised relative to the prevailing form of governance not only of the state but also of the self. Foucault has shown that the very form of governance over the past several centuries has morphed from pastoral governance, to sovereign governance, to what we can now call neoliberal governance. The way in which the state *and* the people are governed is what Foucault calls governmentality, which is the condition of modern power relations, a form of rationality that comprises sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower and legitimates the state. In outlining the nuance of modern governmentality, Foucault (2008) offers a critique of *neoliberalism* as a dominant governing rationality. Presently, neoliberalism continues to provide the dominant framework for understanding cultural, political, and social sensibilities (Harvey, 2005; Lather, 2012; Peters, 2011; Read, 2010).

Neoliberal rationality can be traced back several centuries but the crystallization of it as a governmentality began in the late 1970's (Peters, 2011). Prominent global leaders in the Western world were key in moving neoliberalism forward as a dominant global economic and social rationality (Harvey, 2005). At the heart of neoliberalism is a repositioning of the mode of production between capitalist and worker that sees exchange as the basis of all social relations, to a new production of subjectivity where *competition* is the driver of social relations. The economic subject, *homo economicus*, is consequently the model human (Foucault, 2008 in Read, 2009, p. 4). Radical self-interest, efficiency, and accountability provide the framework of neoliberal common-sense thinking, where “every action – crime, marriage, higher education, and so on – can be charted according to a calculus of maximum output for minimum expenditure; it can be seen as an

investment in *human capital*” (Read, 2009, pp. 8-9, emphasis added). Neoliberal governmentality, what Foucault called the “conduct of conduct” or the ways in which people are governed and, in turn, govern themselves, provides the “rules of the game” that help in determining the conditions of the self’s actions.

Within a governmental context of neoliberalism, we are all entrepreneurs and all actions are viewed in terms of the value added to personal human capital. Lather (2012) argues that “the neoliberal subject is one who conforms to the shifting requirements of global competition and blames themselves if they are not up to the task in a way ‘responsibilized’ out of a market driven morality” (p. 1024). Naturally, a politics of uncertainty in which social justice is defined in terms of complexity, multiplicity, and fractured subjectivities is incongruent with neoliberalism, where justice is found in the freedom of the deregulated self by way of a functionalist and self-interested rationality. This is the troubling dilemma from which I began to think about this project, especially as it related to my role and work in in a predominantly poor black community: a consideration of who benefits and who loses within the context of neoliberal rationality. Important for me is a deeper understanding of how social justice, as a practice of critical resistance, can be reconceptualized to acknowledge the messiness and contingency of our varied and shifting subject positions in response to neoliberalism.

I draw from the work of Sharon Welch and Judith Butler for the ethical framework of the project. Welch advances a feminist ethic of risk, and although she does not discuss neoliberalism directly, there are significant parallels between her notion of an ethic of control and neoliberal governmentality. Drawing on Foucault’s conception of biopolitics, Welch (1990) suggests that with an ethics of control “there is an ever-present hostility of the other, to inclusivity, to conflict, to opposition and difference” (pp. 36-37). Furthermore, Welch (1990) says that an ethic of control

assumes a monopoly of power which presents an all or nothing proposition as it relates to social and political action. As I have noted, neoliberalism is antagonistic to complexity and difference as a result of an overreliance on hyper-individualism. Similarly, an ethic of control is antagonistic towards complexity in that it sees responsible action enacted in self-righteous isolation and seeks only *total* victory. Conversely, Welch (1990) offers a counter to the prevailing dominance of an ethic of control, which she refers to as an ethic of risk. Within an ethic of risk, “victories are always partial, their value resident in the matrix of possibilities created” (p. 47). An ethics of risk allows the actor to seek the redefinition of social roles and power relations while recognizing the condition for future victory, not total victory in the present: “There are no victories here, only the condition for later victories” (Welch, 1990, p. 67). Victory in this context is social change and it is a non-totalistic perspective compared to the all-or-nothingness found within a neoliberal ethic of control.

Sharing congruence with Welch’s ethic of risk, Judith Butler advances a theory of subject formation that acknowledges how the limits of self-knowledge can work in the service of a conception of ethics and of responsibility. Butler begins by addressing critics of post-structuralism who often argue “that critical reconsiderations of the subject cannot provide the basis for an account of responsibility, because if we are divided, ungrounded, or incoherent, then it is impossible to ground a notion of personal or social responsibility on the basis of such a view” (Butler, 2001, p. 22). In other words, critics suggest that post-structural theory fails to allow for a coherent social justice praxis because of the refusal to recognize normative foundations, which would seem to suggest an inability to adequately theorize about ethics, morality, and even politics. However, in contrast to those critics who suggest that the historically contingent, divided, and ungrounded post-structural subject lacks responsibility, Butler sees these factors as constitutive of an opening for an ethics of the subject. In addition to the subject’s ungrounded status, it is its

*opacity* that provides a space for agency and, consequently, responsibility. By opacity Butler means that the subject is not completely knowable to itself, that the self-knowledge is limited by a language and a history that the self cannot fully recover. And yet, it is this opacity that provides an opening for responsibility, because “if the subject is opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself, it is not thereby licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its obligations to others (Butler, 2005, p. 19).

The post-structural subject (i.e. the self) is both crafted and crafting, formed and self-forming within language, and that “the terms we use to confer recognition are not ours, and because of that we are dispossessed by the language that we use” (Butler, 2001, p. 22). Embedded in language are norms that frame recognizability of the self and the Other. The norm, therefore, *conditions* what we can recognize but is not fully determinative. The self is not, however, imprisoned to the norm, as the subject is in fact forms the norm in as much the same way that they are formed by the norm. This relation to the norm, consequently, provides an opening for agency, which, Butler (2005) suggests:

[I]s neither fully determined nor radically free. Its struggle or primary dilemma is to be produced by a world, even as one must produce oneself in some way. This struggle with the unchosen conditions of one’s life, a struggle – an agency – is also made possible, paradoxically, by the persistence of this primary condition of un-freedom. (p. 19)

Freedom, informed by a post-structural theoretical framework, is realized in recognizing and accepting co-determined normalization, where discursive boundaries and processes of social relations are both made for and made by the subject. It is from this place of freedom that responsibility, and consequently social justice, is realized. This is perhaps best exemplified in the numerous instances in which study participants readily acknowledged an inherent connection to

their white racial identity, while also calling into question the ways in which their whiteness determines future actions. In many cases, the participants showed that they were working *with* their whiteness to then interrupt its deleterious effects. Thus, the norms associated with what it means to be racial form their subjectivity, but at the same time each of these men, in their own unique ways, take the available set of norms associated with racial subjectivity and move forward in (co)crafting a new normative racial arrangement. They are formed by whiteness, and then they work towards the formation of a different white subjectivity, one that is linked to a stance towards anti-racist social justice.

The ethical commitments put forth by Welch and Butler both provide a foundation for the ethics I advance with this project. Both theories also allow me to outline a stance against neoliberal ethical commitments and to put forth an articulation of social justice rooted in post-structural theory. As I have noted above, a key component of post-structural ethics is the embodiment and a stylization of critique, where the normative boundaries of social life are questioned. In the spirit of critique, I place neoliberalism under question, finding its ethics fundamentally problematic in that it forecloses possibilities for realizing social change. Butler (2005) notes that this makes the normalization of neoliberal ethical commitments “violent” (p. 5). I view neoliberalism as a dominant, prevailing form of governmental rationality, and make it a focal point of criticism and an important consideration for how to make sense of the contexts that I investigate. The overarching research question for this inquiry –What is the subject position that I seek within a neoliberal governmentality that is ethical and socially just? – is suggestive of my interest in the possibility for being differently relative to available subject positions within contested neoliberal spaces. Problematic, however, is the way neoliberal rationality recognizes collective social change as an affront to the status quo. Given that the impetus for social change is through transactional

social interactions – i.e. individual profit and an increase in human capital as the ultimate good – the individual alone becomes catalyst for making improvement to the social order. This contrasts with a perspective in which social change comes from the inherent relationality of the self, of a view in which social relations are the catalyst for addressing oppressive conditions. Thus, in communities plagued by oppressive conditions – where, for example, there have been decades of racial segregation, extreme poverty, and high-crime – the hope for reversal is negligible, as the possibility for social change resides in the individuals that are experiencing (or maintaining) the oppressive conditions. Beyond the boundaries of the individuals involved in a particular phenomenon, the problems do not exist within neoliberal rationality. Similarly, in communities where there is racial segregation but with incredible affluence and low crime rates, the same problem persists but by way of a slightly different veneer of individualism. Social change, or in this context changing the status quo, is rarely an overarching concern; indeed, the social conditions in affluent communities tend to be solely explained in individualistic terms, rather than the result of prevailing social structures and norms that solidify boundaries and facilitate achievement for a few.

If indeed neoliberalism oversimplifies complex social relations in such a way that the entrepreneurial self is privileged, then it stands to reason that the complexity found in contingent, fluid, and shifting subjectivities is reduced down to individual acts of human capital advancement. The consequence is that an understanding of identity formations as evolving, contingent, and fluid is foreclosed in favor of a singular, essential, rational self as entrepreneurial actor. The normalization of the entrepreneurial self has the consequence of disallowing an acknowledgment of the relational aspect of privilege, marginalization, and oppression. For the neoliberal subject, these phenomena do not exist. Oversimplification via neoliberalism brings with it a danger of

belying the complexities associated with being, which in turn forecloses possibilities for addressing complex, pervasive, and persistent social dilemmas like the growing divide between rich and poor, racism, and gender stratification.

I have sought with this study not to arrive at an authentic depiction of reality but rather to lay bare the multiple fictions that come to represent our reality, where our notion of the self is always already discursively constituted and historically contingent. Gunzenhauser (2006) suggests that “opening up to possibilities across difference, being mindful of hidden possibilities, and maintaining vigilance against oppressive power relations suggests a much more open-ended set of aims for education” (p. 255). With this study, I provide a way toward opening up to, and being mindful of, hidden possibilities that can come through post-structural social justice research.

My view of social justice is tied directly to Foucault’s notion of critique and elaborated on by Butler and Hoy. Butler (2002), for example, suggests that “virtue is...a critical relation to those norms, one which, for Foucault, takes shape as a specific stylization of morality” (p. 214). Hoy, in a similar vein, identifies the importance of critique through the desubjugation of the subject. This, Hoy suggests, “means that critique functions not by providing an alternative account of who you are and what you ought to do, but by dissolving your sense of who you are and disrupting your sense of what the right thing to do is” (p. 89). Critique in this sense is all about disruption of the taken-for-granted and the possible realignment the self towards *uncertainty* and resistance to domination. “The point of critique is to enhance the lives and the possibilities of individuals, to allow them the space to try to create themselves as works of art.” (Hoy, p. 92). Social justice is critical resistance to domination. In *practice* this means doing whatever is possible to make sure that the games of power are played with a *minimum of domination*. Domination and constraint, of course, are not the same thing. Power and constraint are simply part of what it means to be a in

relation to the Other. As we know from Foucault and more recently in Butler, there is no primordial freedom nor is there a subjectivity without constraints; this is what it means to live in *opacity*. Constraint, however, can and should be open to critique. The question, then, is whether one is living with constraints that imbue conformity, such as with neoliberalism, or living with constraints that imbue critical reflexivity, such as with the social justice praxis that I am advancing here through Butler's *ethics of recognition*. Social justice, then, is a way of living in opacity and, in the context of the story-telling within this study, towards anti-racism.

Butler illustrates that Foucault's project is an example of *critique as practice*, in that "moral experience has to do with a self-transformation prompted by a form of knowledge that is foreign to one's own" (Butler, 2002, p. 218). The question remains, however, regarding the nuance between the view of social justice that I am advancing here and neoliberalism that I am critiquing. How exactly does social justice distance itself from the tenets of neoliberal thought? First, my view of social justice requires significant personal and social intervention on and distortion of market forces. Not only that, I view social justice as inherently *relational*. Conversely, neoliberalism advances a *laissez-faire* view of social justice that is inherently *individualistic*. This is a significant demarcation in thought that Manne (2018) makes by suggesting that

A constitutive dependency—or, better, entanglement—is at issue here. Subjectivity is not thinkable without inter-subjectivity. Who I am depends partly on how I am regarded, treated, addressed, called upon, and spoken of by other subjects, with whom I share a historical, social, and material world. Our impressionability or susceptibility—and hence vulnerability—haunts our attempts to make something of ourselves, or to break with our history. (p. 234)



That which we are impressionable and susceptible is a history for which we cannot recover, and in that lack of recoverability we are opaque to ourselves which, in turn, leads to responsibility of the subject. To pretend to be otherwise, to live lives as neoliberal subjects that are certain, independent, and “pre social” individuals that are atomic, self-interested and entrepreneurial, is irresponsible. That irresponsibility is precisely how whiteness, racism, and oppression persist. Responsibility, on the other hand, rooted in opacity and a recognition of the relational and a commitment to risking uncertainty and speaking truth to power through parrhesia is representative of social justice. It is not social justice as the denial of truth, but rather social justice as critiquing the veracity of the truth.

## **2.2 Methods**

### **2.2.1 Narrative inquiry**

This project is inspired by Pinar’s concept of *currere*, which he first conceptualized in the 1970’s as a response to the growing divide among curriculum theorists in what has become known as the “reconceptualist period.” *Currere* served as an original method of research and new form of curriculum theorizing, with Pinar himself as a pioneer of the movement. Specifically, *currere* means “to run a course”, and is a study of the *lebenswelt*, or the level of existence of one’s inner experience. The method of *currere*, therefore, “seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one’s understanding of his or her life (and vice versa), and how both are imbricated in society, politics, and culture” (Pinar 2004, p. 36). By engaging in the project of *currere*, the subject dialogues with him or herself by studying their history, their present, and their

future in an attempt to understand their traditions, experiences, and prejudices. Curren also facilitates the understanding of the social, cultural, and political surround by seeking not only what the milieu is but who we are in a given milieu. This examination, or what Pinar (2004) has called “autobiographical excavation” (p. 22) works in service to the re-construction of the public sphere. McKnight (2006) suggests that curren “is about finding a kind of orderliness within the chaos of the individual and a narrative means by which to articulate it” (178). The method of curren inspired the autobiographical storytelling within this study. My interest in using narratives to dig deep into the personal is a response to Pinar’s (2004) call to “engage the world with passion and competence while never breaking the bridges of psychic attachment that makes the process of education subjectively meaningful” (p. 248). I am enabled by these methodological commitments to illuminate complexities associated with subjectivation at the intersection of the personal and social.

I utilize narrative inquiry because it complicates the idea of an original and authentic self. Rather, the self is put under erasure in narrative inquiry, with *intention* towards making the researcher present. The fractured, contingent subjectivity of the self is located as a site of possibility. Gannon (2006) merges post-structural theory and narrative inquiry into a method where “the subject and object of research collapse into the body/thoughts/feelings of the subject located in his or her particular space and time” (p. 475). The fallibility of knowing, along with the evolutionary nature of experience, positions the researcher as a viable site of investigation. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to examine relations that bind people, places, times, events, and contexts against their personal and political selves. In employing narrative inquiry, I examine my experiences of working with a place-based community organization – e.g. doing research and evaluation, working with community members, teaching students – as exemplary of various social

structures and constructs, in particular race, racism, and whiteness. Using narrative inquiry provides an opportunity to bear witness to the illusion of a humanist rational self and opens the reader to new spaces of possible of selfhood, of being differently in the world.

Narrative inquiry often employs a process of *self-reflexivity* wherein the researcher/participant engages in an act of self-reference and self-critique. The researcher observes their personal reflections by recursively and self-reflexively (re)reading and critiquing various texts, such as audio recordings, personal notes, essays, and/or photographs. Lived experiences are reflected upon, unpacked, and analyzed in multifaceted ways. Of interest to me is how narrative inquiry gives purchase to raising awareness about injustices *in context* while also placing the analysis of this experience within the field of education.

This project is about exposing the underlying structure of whiteness through what some may call *whistleblower* or *race traitor* testimony by those in power (Segrest, 2019; Wolfson, 2019). The collection of narratives in this study represent a unified anti-racist counternarrative against normalized whiteness and privilege. To the extent that the narratives are anti-racist, they are also anti-majoritarian stories rooted in de-naturalizing whiteness and oppression. Although counternarratives often consist of stories of the marginalized, the participants in this study illustrate the ways that white men *can* work to challenge the prevailing systems of oppression and privilege of which they are the beneficiaries. In unique ways, these men operate at the fringe of white society, often taking a stand against whiteness and the status quo.

Anti-racist counter-storytelling has roots in African American, Chicano/Chicana, and Native American resistance movements. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) provide a critical race methodology for anti-racist counter-storytelling by drawing from the vast literature across many fields. As a critical race methodology, counter-storytelling is intended for marginalized groups to

“challenge racism, sexism, classism and work towards social justice” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 23). Drawing from those same intentions, I use the anti-racist counter-narratives of this study to also challenge white dominance by highlighting how some white men interrupt their own privilege in service to seeking social justice.

Throughout the textual portrayals, I unpack notions of place, the racial body, and human subjectivity. As I probe the depths of the experiential, I am mindful of what these concepts mean in different places, in different cultural contexts, and in different historical moments. I ask questions about norms, values, and realities that are constructed and maintained given the conceptual nuance of the gendered/racial/political body in varied spaces. I consider the nuance between the spatial and the social – as well as the meaning of *place* – and what that nuance suggests for the efficacy of viewing subjectivity as fluid and contingent. I suggest that different places have their own conceptual and discursive spaces, making subjectivity nuanced relative to normalized boundaries. The meaning of place is relative to norms that are place-specific. I consider the relationship between location and power, specifically how power associated with racial identity is relative to the local context.

### **2.2.2 Personal narrative essay**

This inquiry utilizes *personal narrative essays* as a mode of analysis, where personal experiences serve as the source of “data.” Ellis (2004) suggests that

personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives. (p.46)

Taking this a step further, personal narrative essays provide a way to theorizing dialogically with the reader. As a form of narrative inquiry, personal narrative comes from a tradition that sees *writing* as a way of knowing (Richardson, 1994; St. Pierre, 2000a). Working against conventional, correspondence-oriented and “foundational” qualitative research approaches, St. Pierre suggests that meaning generated from personal essays is “uncertain, contingent, not present, not yet, but always to come, never brute” (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, p. 224). In this mode of inquiry, analysis is theoretical reading, analysis is *thinking with theory* (Lather, 2013) and decidedly critical.

The narrative portrayals explicate my experience in a placed-based, community centered non-profit organization, embedded in a highly segregated, high crime, high poverty urban neighborhood. Utilizing my experiences in this context provides for me a space to open new territories for subjectivity. The portrayals provide an opportunity for the reader to challenge sedimented, taken-for-granted ways of knowing, holding the potential for critiquing normalized notions of reality. My interest through this study is to unfold the possibility of new worlds *through* narrative in which we might think, speak, and live differently. Critically, these portrayals are presented as unfolding through opacity. That is, the experiences in question are always already beyond an objective grasp of reality and the truth. This is valuable to the unfolding narrative of the inquiry itself, which include the reflexive (re)reading of participant and researcher experiences. The opacity of the subject and of the narrative portrayals leave experience open to a reimagining. Experience, therefore, is not finalized, but left open to revision. It is no less true with the story that is this dissertation. The collection of narratives shift in meaning with each new reading and set of interpretations. The story of this dissertation is certainly not finished, because it never can be.

### **2.2.3 In-depth personal interviews**

As with any narrative, there are spoken and unspoken happenings that unfold and shape the story. This is no less true with this inquiry, which has its own multi-layered story. This dissertation journey began as an auto-ethnography, but has morphed through a series of twists and turns towards what is depicted in these pages. This certainly does not mean I am ashamed or disappointed in what this study now represents relative to its beginnings. It is just to say, this document is a metaphor for the phenomenon that is under study. Our histories and experiences change as we reengage with them and put them under scrutiny, which make this inquiry particularly unique in its approach to studying the self. The blending of personal narrative with phenomenological interviewing presents as a strange hybrid, however. To what end does this blended methodology serve?

Along the way of my I was advised by one of my mentors that in an effort to address the potential limitations of focusing on the solely personal, as is the case with self-study or auto-ethnography, it would be in my best interest to include interviews with men who have similar experiences to my own. Thus, in an effort to add robustness to my personal narrative portrayals, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with self-identified White men who had experience working in communities of color. I interviewed eight men in total, seven of whom worked in predominantly poor black communities while one worked on a Native American reservation. Particular attention was paid to how these men defined themselves racially and whether they viewed privilege as a component of their lived experience. I then had them articulate their experience in communities of color and how their race and/or privilege played a role in managing their work and the relationships that they developed.

Following Seidman's (2006) three-interview protocol, I interviewed each of the men three times. The first interview consisted of life history questions in an effort to get a fuller picture of the way these men came to be at their current place in the world. The initial interview was followed by a more in-depth interview focusing on their day-to-day work in communities of color. The final interview consisted of conceptual questions where we did a deep dive into concepts such as whiteness, privilege, and power. Throughout the interviews I attempted to let these men speak on their own terms, allowing myself to move outside the protocol whenever the conversation warranted a different line of questioning.

The credibility of crafting narrative portrayals from personal interviews is well supported in the literature (see Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Polkinghorne, 2007). In addition to these justifications for personal narrative interviewing, the interviews portion of this project serves a very practical purpose of heeding the call from a faculty mentor at the outset of the study. However, as will be evident in the following chapters, engaging with the participant narratives allowed me to imagine my subject position differently, to explore how similarly positioned privileged men had negotiated similar struggles with regard to race, power, and whiteness. I certainly could not have known this from the beginning, but as is the case with any (re)reading of experience, the past has taken on new meaning.

## **2.3 Research design**

### **2.3.1 Sampling strategy**

I used a snowball sampling strategy to recruit participants. Eligibility criteria were as follows: self-identifies as Caucasian or White; self-identifies as male; works or has worked in a predominantly non-White context (such as a school, neighborhood, or community); ages 35 and older. These eligibility criteria were most closely aligned with my own experiences and served as reliable parameters for the inquiry. Eight men were ultimately selected and interviewed. Of those, three were chosen as focal points for making connections between my experiences and the driving concern for opacity as being highly significant.

### **2.3.2 Analysis and reporting**

Hatch (2002) offers an approach “to provide a framework that builds in analytic integrity so that findings are grounded in data while acknowledging the political nature of the real world and the research act” (p. 191). The framework, however, is not a hard and fast plan but rather a guide of possible approaches to reading the data. My own approach was to utilize the most relevant strategies offered in the framework relative to the data I was working with. I modified Hatch’s 7-step framework to include the following steps for my own approach:

1. Reading the data for a sense of the whole;
2. Identifying all of the voices contributing to the data, including my own.
3. Reading the data, marking places where particular voices are heard.



4. Reading the entire data set, searching for data that refine or alter my stories.
5. Write revised stories that represent each voice to be included. (p. 202)

I analyzed the interview data using an *interpretive* approach (Hatch, 2002). I began by reading the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a sense of the data overall. Then, I reviewed and recorded my initial impressions in analytical memos. After studying the memos for salient interpretations, I re-examined the message transcripts to identify and code instances where interpretations were supported. Through multiple reviews of the data, I fine-tuned my interpretations and revised my coding scheme. Finally, I selected excerpts from the data to support my interpretations.

### **2.3.3 Limitations and ethical considerations**

There are challenges and potential limitations with conducting research that uses narrative inquiry and personal narratives from participants. One key challenge is that I might run the risk of essentializing the self, placing the rational human subject at the center of the story. Through the interpretive process, a core self is found and applied to the narrative. Although most versions of narrative inquiry express an appreciation for the unfolding process of the research, and consequently a desire for and value in improvisation in practice, there still remains a strong bent towards a post-positivist epistemology and a realist ontology. Post-positivism holds that things exist as they appear in daily life, and that there are laws of social nature, just as there are laws in physical sciences (Pascale, 2011). It is true that the underlying values for recursive and improvisational processes are often shared between narrative and post-structural approaches. However, a post-structural approach resists a focus on certitude as found in post-positivism,

instead relying on an ontology that recognizes the historical contingency of what counts as real and an epistemology that recognizes the relationality of knowledge production. Of chief concern is that I do not adhere to the underlying theoretical framework of the project and instead fall into a post-positivist temptation to recognize and hold up a “core” self as the locus of analysis. A limitation of using interpretive theory and post-structuralism as a framework for this project is that it does not involve generalization (of course, this limitation is relative to the reader’s values). Rather, I am investigating, illustrating, exploring, and evaluating based on the narratives of the participants and myself.

There is also a limitation in that the sample size does not lend itself to provide a broad scope of the issue. Again, this is a limitation but also not of my concern. What this research does do is provide a nuanced perspective on how white males negotiate their identity in non-white spaces (i.e. communities of color). There is also always a limitation with this kind of research in that the voices of the participants are always already represented by my own. That is to say, although their words are quoted and used in the analysis, ultimately it is my voice that is represented. That being said, because I am not concerned with generalization this is perfectly acceptable. Instead, this is one of the benefits of the research, in that a complicated subject matter is given new light, a new way of seeing the issue similar to a parallax effect (Sameshima, 2006).

On the issue of representation, the concern for representing participants is perhaps the most significant ethical dilemma I face as a researcher. I will attempt to make sense of the chaos of experience through a recursive and reflexive interview and narration process, while also appropriately representing study participants with proper respect and dignity. The challenge is that narrative portrayals of the researched are always already the projections of the world that the researcher sees. Consequently, as the researcher I inherently dominate the interpretation and

dissemination stages of the research (Denzin, 2018). The stories that emerge from the interviews, as well as the proposed solutions derived from analysis, are my own. The resultant claims are not generalizable. Rather, the conclusions drawn from analysis are a presentation of possibilities toward understanding an infinitely complex story. The value of this project is not that it will lead to better prediction and control of social life, but that it can provide an opening toward new possibilities for interpretation, knowing, and being.

The complexity of the approach I am taking lies in the fact that both the interviewer and the men I interview are knowing subjects, and that there is an intersubjective relation between us. Although little is known about the subject, the shared experience with my participants allows for trust and reciprocity. This is a unique opportunity as far as the research is concerned. The possibility for richer and more nuanced recommendations is but one example of how bringing other voices into the project might prove beneficial. However, some challenges exist as well. Ethical concerns over representation are critically important. How is it that the interviewer/participant relation facilitates meaning making of narrative portrayals? How is power and privilege (re)enacted within the interviewer-participant relation and what are the potential impacts on representation?

The challenge is to avoid falling into the logical positivist trap, in which readers are led to assume that narratives represent rational portrayals of the truth. Pascale (2011) makes the case that even with the advancements in qualitative research, the data collection techniques, analysis, and analytical processes have remained tied to the philosophical foundations of the natural sciences. The consequence is that the ontological commitments tied to logical positivism leads the qualitative researcher, regardless of epistemological and methodological commitments, toward “pragmatic concerns of systematic data collection – as if data exist independently and need only

to be collected properly” (Pascale, 2011, p. 3). An ethical approach to using personal narrative interviews is to resist the temptation to see the participants, and their narratives, as simply objective, rational, and independent representations of the truth (i.e. their objective knowledge of an objectively knowable world). Citing Butler (2005, p. 83), Pascale (2011) claims that “in order to be ethically responsible scholars, ‘we cannot be tied to the conceit of a fully transparent self – our own or others” (p. 3). Following this ethical commitment, the researcher and the participants reflexively and recursively co-create texts in the processes of the research. The co-created texts are meaningful, indeed truthful, relative to available discursive categories and the *relations* that those categories enable, which certainly includes the relation between participant and researcher.

#### **2.3.4 Researcher subjectivity**

As the researcher, I am a knowing subject that learns with and from the participants (Gunzenhauser, 2006). Relative to any truth drawn from the texts, my interest is in understanding the horizon of possibility that enables subjectivity with respect to claims on the truth. This does not mean dismissal of erroneous claims or intentional falsehoods. On the contrary, the interviews are aimed at validating the narrative portrayals by providing a recursive and self-reflexive check on the reliability and trustworthiness of the participants’ claims. When I suggest, however, that I am more interested in subjectivity and the relations enabled relative to truth claims, what I mean is that so long as the account is reliable and trustworthy, the absolute truth about an event drawn from memory texts does not supersede the meaning and impact on the participant. For reason that are not always clear, particular events have particular meaning to each participant. Importantly, those meanings are not divorced from the reality created and maintained by the researcher. I receive the text from the participants and then, through interpretation and analysis, create a text

for the reader. In mining meaning from the data, my interest has been in what is revealed through a particular event that brings the other to bear on the participants. The interview protocol also led me to inquire into how the participants' privilege and whiteness operated in their lives, especially in their work environment. What was particularly important for me was understanding how a participant's privilege enabled or disabled their work, as well as the consequences or challenges they faced due to their white subjectivity in predominantly non-white space. Furthermore, the participants' experiences impacted how I looked at my own relationality. Engaging in dialogue with these men shifted how I understand my prior experiences in light of what the participants offered through their own narratives.

### **2.3.5 Connection to the field**

I see this project being of value to the fields of curriculum studies and the social foundations of education. Working from the reconceptualist tradition in curriculum studies, I envision this dissertation being valued by educators and educational theorists looking for new and interesting ways to put self-study and narrative inquiry into educational practice. Additionally, given my focus on social justice and resistance, I see this research adding to the literature in the field of social foundations of education, which has traditionally emphasized the importance of context in education; whether social, cultural, discursive, or political. Scholarship within the social foundations of education tends to focus on what Maxine Greene (1976) articulated as "learning to think otherwise" and pushing back against normative standards of educational praxis. Given this, the social foundations of education places great emphasis on social justice concerns by analyzing issues through interpretive, normative, and critical lenses (Tozer & Butts, 2011). This dissertation is an effort to address social problems through those three lenses by critically resisting the

normalizing effects of neoliberalism in educational research (Denzin, 2009; Klees, 2008; Kuntz and Petrovic, 2011). A foundational principle of neoliberalism is the rational human subject. Consequently, definitions for how to be an educated subject, how to be a scholar, and what counts as “good” scholarship are defined in very specific ways within a neoliberal framework, which adheres to certain ontological and epistemological commitments that hold up the value in rational humanism. Neoliberalism relies on a cartesian dualism of mind vs. body, where thoughts and actions are separate and social sciences hold the same aims as the physical sciences: to predict and control. Neoliberalism provides the rationale for certain scholarship being deemed “gold standard.” Social science in this context sees definitions of rigor and validity informed by the importance of certitude (Denzin, 2009; Marttila, 2015).

One of the key consequences of neoliberal rationality is its reliance on “common sense,” which, according to Bogue (2007), “organizes the world according to fixed identities and stale spatial temporal coordinates” (p. 206). This is what makes neoliberalism as a discourse, as a governmentality, so dangerous (Foucault, 1982; Read, 2013). Largely driven by a realist ontology (Pascale, 2010) and an objectivist epistemology (Crotty, 1998), the field of education in the current moment is witnessing a strong push for research projects that provide “valid” and “clear” “evidence” with an aim towards ascertaining certainty. This push for objectivist projects is witnessed in education reform and public policy, where there is a strong emphasis on, and privileging of, “evidenced based research” (Denzin, 2009; Stanley, 2007; Willis, 2009). Giroux (2008) claims that neoliberalism ranks human needs as less important than property rights, and subordinates “the art of politics...to the science of economics” (Giroux, 2008, p. 100). Given this discursive terrain, scholars who find influence from the humanities and hold constructivist or post-structural ontologies are marginalized in favor of scholarship imbuing objectivist, neoliberal, and

neoconservative virtues. I am, ultimately, concerned about what is being foreclosed by shutting out other forms of knowing and being manifest in neoliberal-informed projects.

Following a post-critical framework put forth by David Couzins Hoy (2005), “gold standard” objectivist research is problematic because it forecloses the possibility of multiple, contingent realities. In this case, post-structural research is “othered” through a process of normalization and domination. The impetus for this project, therefore, is critical resistance to the dominating conditions within the field of educational research. Hoy (2005) suggests that domination is the result of an overreliance on certainty, through which binaries and dualities remain entrenched. Critique is thus the dissolution of domination, or perhaps a more precise way to put it, resistance to normalizing practices. Again, Hoy (2005) is salient: “domination is bad because it misrecognizes that power itself implies openness and possibilities. The asymmetry introduced by domination works against this openness and against possibilities, and thus provokes and validates resistance” (p. 92). In the context of this project, of importance is a consideration of the locus of domination within the given discursive terrain as well as a consideration of how I can insert myself into the fray by way of critically resisting dominating, normalizing practices. Intentionally, then, I am interested in disrupting normalization and working toward a more ethical and socially just life space through a certain mode of critique. As both personal narrative and a cultural critique, through this study I seek to autobiographically “interrogate cultural experiences from the inside out” (Boylorn and Orbe, 2013, p. 234).

### 3.0 Chapter 3: A personal narrative of whiteness in place

In this chapter, I engage in the *narrative beginning* of the study by autobiographically, and self-reflexively, examining some of the key experiences that brought me to this inquiry. Dubnewick et. al. (2018) define narrative beginnings as “the beginning of the self-facing, the autobiographical inquiry that keep us each asking who we are in each research study” (p. 413). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a framework for understanding why I took up this investigation, but it is not intended to be an autobiographical overview of my life to this point, a type of chronological profile. Neither is it intended to be a confession or an absolution of racist guilt. It is, rather, the beginning of an *un-suturing* (Yancy, 2016), of tarrying in the space of vulnerability and angst while opening up whiteness to critique. This chapter, therefore, is an opening up of *my* whiteness in context and serves as the introduction of a critical anti-racist tale. The subsequent chapters, which include the narratives of the study participants, serve as the body of the larger critical anti-racist tale that this study represents. With this in mind, it is important to note that the vignettes included in this chapter are not narratives that fit seamlessly together into a larger whole. This chapter is not a coherent set of pieces to a larger puzzle *per se*. Rather, the vignettes are fragments of whiteness in place, examples of how our racial bodies commingle in an ontology of connectedness (Yancy, 2016).

My upbringing prevented me from facing many challenges to white middle-class norms, and my college experience ended up being much of the same in terms of the social and cultural context of the college community. However, graduate school gave me a space to appreciate the educational experience of learning. It was then that I started to appreciate differences and cultivate a sense of concern for social injustices. Social justice has since become critically important to my



pedagogical praxis. My journey into social justice work began when I first read Cornel West's *Race Matters*. At the time I had a pretty close-minded attitude about social problems. Reading that book opened my eyes to a new perspective that created a fissure in my thinking about taken-for-granted practices. Reading *Race Matters* initiated a curiosity about injustice, race, and social differences that frames the background for my connection to this study. It served as a text for troubling the certainty of whiteness and opened up a sense of vulnerability. The following stories of this chapter offer the reader a glimpse into personal experiences where the intersection of race, power, and ethics converged.

### **3.1 The dinner party**

I headed to a banquet hall in the community for an annual community holiday party that was put together by a local congressman. The event is critical for me because it showcases how relatively sheltered I was at that moment even though I had been working in the community for one and a half years. To that point, I had prided myself on the work we were doing as an organization as well as my role in that work. But the truth is, I had very limited exposure within the community, as most of the work I was doing allowed me to remain in the office. Thus, when it came time for the community holiday party held right around the corner from our offices, it made sense that he wanted some of us to represent the organization at the party. I was both excited and nervous. I was excited to start a new chapter for the organization and myself, to branch out and to engage with community members and forge a grass-roots initiative to provide positive change in the community. But I was also nervous because this would be one of the first times that I was actually out in the community.

After work, a few colleagues had agreed to meet me at the banquet hall. I was to drive separately, as my colleagues were working at the schools that day. The party started at six o'clock, and we were to meet shortly before that. I arrived at our agreed upon time and hung out in my car for a few minutes waiting until they arrived. After a few minutes with no sight of them, I decided that I would venture in on my own. Again, this was both exciting and nerve-racking. Here was a community getting together to break bread and fellowship with one another, which, to my knowledge, is not something that often happens in the predominantly white community where I live. I was also thrilled at the possibility of meeting new contacts in the community, which was a major part of my boss' initiative that would help strengthen our organization. But as I walked through the parking lot and into the lobby, I passed several members of the community, all of whom I did not know. It was also immediately apparent that there were few, if any, white folks within eyesight. To be fair, as I passed by the attendees, many of them were courteous and friendly, issuing a hello or a caring smile as I passed by. I never felt threatened. Why would I be? But the caring demeanor of those I engaged did not assuage my personal feeling that I was an outsider. As I entered the banquet hall that feeling led to profound anxiety and, over the course of the next hour, frustration.

I entered the banquet hall and saw that it was already well-attended. There were perhaps a few hundred people mingling about or sitting at one of the many dinner tables. I smiled politely as I walked through the crowd, trying to find someone that looked familiar. My personality isn't such that I typically feel comfortable in social gatherings, so I was inherently a little uneasy as I moved about the room. However, the more I walked around I continued to feel out of place for no reason other than my skin tone. I was not led to feel like an outsider due to anyone's attitude or action, but simply by virtue of my own psyche, my whiteness. It became clear to me that I felt like an

outsider because I was in the presence of more individuals of color in this space than I have been in my whole life. I reflect on this and realize that my upbringing did me a disservice in failing to expose me to anything other than whiteness. In realizing my lack of exposure I am not only frustrated but made even more nervous to be in this space of difference. I pondered whether I was prepared to be there, at the party, as a white man in a room with mostly black men and women. I started to wonder if I knew enough to socialize, as if the color of our skin precluded conversation. I continued to walk around the room looking for familiar faces. I reached for my phone but saw that I had no messages. I texted my colleagues to see where they were, hoping that they were soon to arrive. After periodically checking my phone for a few minutes and not hearing from them, I put my phone away and moved about the room.

It felt like I was looking more foolish with every passing second, like a lost, scared child. Nobody made me feel uncomfortable. I just felt embarrassed that I was not the person I thought I was. By that I mean, I thought I was someone who was comfortable in my own skin, confident that I understood the dynamics of race enough to move beyond any kind of discomfort associated with difference. But in that moment at the party of moving about the room, I realized that I had been working at an organization aimed at achieving social justice, at breaking down barriers, at disrupting the status quo, all while never really engaging in the kind of personal change that I had been an advocate for. It hit home to me that I had a lot of growing to do, and that as hard as the exposure had been, it was exposure that I desperately needed. At the very least, that moment helped me to align my beliefs with my actions as I moved forward in my work in the community.

I arrived in the community with what I thought were progressive ideals and a sense of social justice advocacy coupled with a commitment toward resistance to white normalization. I took the job in the community because I wanted to put my boots on the ground, working with the

marginalized, trying to make a difference. As I walked through the ballroom, I recognized that although I was well read on issues of race and well versed in the language about privilege, oppression, white supremacy, and marginalization, I was painfully inexperienced at engaging with members of the black community. The experience is something that I continue to grow from and has better informed how I conduct myself. And yet the experience of being at the party gives me a painful realization of how much I have to learn. I continued on though in my journey through the banquet hall, making my way towards the left side of the room hoping to find something familiar. That side of the ballroom was lined with tables of vendors giving out information on insurance policies, non-profit groups, and churches. I figured I would wait there to buy me some time before my colleagues arrived, figuring it might help ease the tension I was feeling. As I was looking at the information on each table, a woman approached me. I think she noticed me aimlessly walking around.

“What organization are you with honey?”

“Uh, the local non-profit” I tell her. I’m confused as to how she knows I’m with an organization and a little taken aback by the engagement, even if that is what I’m here to do.

“Oh, the non-profit? Let me see, I think you might be right down here”.

She started looking around for an empty vendors table, presumably one with my organization’s name on it. I followed her as she looked for one of the empty tables, at which point she asked someone with a binder, who I took to be the person in charge of this space, about the

local non-profit table. When he couldn't find any information on it, I told her that it must be a mistake, that I didn't recall ever having signed up for a table. We both realized the real mistake. She saw me hovering in the vendor area, slowly, perhaps awkwardly, looking around.

“Oh, I thought you were one of the vendors looking for your table,” she exclaimed with a laugh.

“No. Just checking things out.” I laughed nervously and thanked her anyway. I continued walking through the vendor area and ended up at a table in the far corner of the banquet hall, opposite of where I entered. I sat down and I looked out at the sea of black bodies. It was painful, realizing that I was supposedly doing community work for a place-based non-profit in this neighborhood, and I didn't know anyone. As I sat waiting for a friendly face to arrive, a white couple emerged from the vendor area and sat down across from me. We exchanged pleasantries and then sat in an awkward silence. I thought about the irony, that in a roomful of black bodies – hundreds of black bodies – three of white bodies ended up sitting together. Just three loners sticking together. I have no way of speaking to anyone else's experience from that night, but for me I find it interesting that the three of us – white folks who in this particular instance were temporary minorities – ended up sitting alone in the cafeteria (Tatum, 1997).

I gradually opened myself up to conversation with the white folks at my table and then roamed the room again hoping to find some familiar faces. I did end up connecting with one of my colleagues, made small talk with a couple of acquaintances, and after about an hour, headed home.

### 3.2 A narrative of race, privilege, power, and naming

As the meeting ended, I was asked to stay behind. He needed to talk to me. He was my boss. I was not surprised that he asked me to stay behind. I was expecting it. It was only a matter of time. It was late May of 2016, and for the past nine months he had been leading the organization through what he called “the pivot.” He brought with him a new attitude and a whole new leadership style that I was unaccustomed to. It was a bad mix from the get-go. Over the course of those nine months I had shown my displeasure on more than one occasion. I had shaken my head in meetings, snickered under my breath after comments he had made, and voiced my concerns about his leadership with colleagues who, it seemed, shared my sentiments about his leadership. And that was okay. We could have worked our way out of that incongruence of style. Except for one thing: he wanted to be called MISTER Tibbs.

I grew up in an environment where adults were addressed by their first name. Culturally, we were not required to show respect to our elders by calling them Mister or Miss. We addressed adults as Dick or Jane rather than Mister or Miss Smith. Enter Mister Alan Tibbs. When Mister Tibbs started working for the organization, he did not make it explicitly clear that he wanted to be called Mister Tibbs. But, over time, I began to notice one-by-one each of my colleagues refer to him as Mister Tibbs in meetings and daily conversation. I thought it was interesting, if not annoying. Based on how I was raised, calling someone “Mister” or “Miss” was submissive. To do so meant that I was elevating them to a role above me, to a position of power over me. It was thus troubling to see my colleagues make this immediate move of submission. We were supposed to be an egalitarian or “flat” organization, which meant we were all on par with each other regardless of our title or role. Why were they willing to give this up with this gesture of calling him Mister Tibbs? So, I resisted. I would stand my ground. I would not give up my...privilege and power.

“I got one more question for you...which is...are you fully vested here?”

I imagined that he had not noticed my verbal and non-verbal moves of resistance to his leadership. But now I knew he saw it all along. Given what I had perceived as his arrogant posture towards the rest of us, I had expected that he never really saw anything from us other than a bare minimum functionality. By that I mean, it just seemed like he only saw us as tools for getting his work done. Why would he notice our subtle nuances, including my gestures of displeasure with his leadership style? But he did, and now I knew it. Where do we go from here?

“I feel like you are fully competent, and you know what you need to do...but that ain't the same as being fully vested, right? And that's a concern for me. You're the type of guy that if you're given 10 things that's asked of you, you're going to get them done. But I'm looking for a different type of investment, and I don't feel that. I don't know what it is, but I'm not looking for someone who is just here for themselves and to hell with everyone else. That's important to me because I'm making concessions because I believe everybody's an asset to something. That's number one.”

Fair enough, he recognizes my attitude is not in congruence with what he expects from others in the organization. I found it troubling that he was calling me out for being selfish because I felt the same way about him. His rhetoric over the course of the past several months suggested that he intended to be a democratic leader. However, I did not experience that in his actions.

“Number two: I have a personal problem with...it seems to me that you have the inability to call me Mister Tibbs. You call me Alan and that bothers the heck out of me, and I don’t know if you realize this, but at the workplace don’t nobody call me Alan. That denotes a level of friendship that no one here has earned yet. At my last job my boss called me Mister Tibbs. You’re a pretty smart guy, and you are acutely aware of these kinds of things.”

While I am not surprised by this, given what I had witnessed around me over the past several months, I am still taken aback that he actually confronted me about it, that this was actually an issue that he had with me. Internally, I was incredulous, but I did not show it. My response was to acknowledge his grievance and from that point forward to acknowledge him by his preference: Mister Tibbs. I also indicated that I was not trying to slight him, but that those kinds of formalities, as I saw it, were not that important to me. I also let him know that I prefer to be called Bryan, and *not* Mister Stephany.

We parted ways and moved on with our respective days. But it was evident to me that my time was done at the organization. It was also clear that Mister Tibbs had little confidence in my ability to fulfill a role in the organization. More importantly, there was too big a gap between he and I in terms of our expectations and values. Or so I thought. I walked away from that meeting thinking that I was being disrespected, not the other way around. I took his chastising as a slight against me *personally*, and as a display of power (which, as I will show, might be true). How dare he require me to call him Mister Tibbs? Doesn’t he know that I am on his side, on the side of the organization and the community that we were serving? Doesn’t he know that I am a White advocate, a good White person? The next day I turned in my resignation letter.



Over the next few weeks I discussed the matter with trusted friends and colleagues. Most echoed my sentiments that his demand to call him Mister Tibbs instead of Alan was ridiculous. Thus, most of my allies were on my side, which made me feel validated in choosing to leave the organization. But a few days before I left, I was in the car with Virgil, an African American colleague that I had worked closely with over the past several months and deeply respected. He and I were on our way back from a meeting and the topic of Mister Tibbs came up. As I had done with my other trusted allies, I vented about the “Mister Tibbs” incident, fully expecting him to side with me. Virgil listened patiently, and then said, “maybe he was upset because the only person not calling him Mister Tibbs was a white guy.” Whoa. That was something I hadn’t thought of until this moment. Was this a racial thing? Was power at play here? Surely not. How could it be? I’m a White advocate, a good white person. I believe in social justice. I’ve read literature from black scholars. I did my master’s thesis on W.E.B Du Bois and Cornel West. I’m working in a poor black community. Isn’t it evident that I am to be appreciated for these things? Isn’t it crazy that I would be accused of executing my whiteness on a black man? Again, I was incredulous but also contemplative. Maybe there was something more to this.

Several weeks after I had left the organization, I was still thinking about this incident. Since that time, I have come to understand that there are multiple interpretations of the events that transpired, including my complicity in executing white privilege as a display of dominance over Mister Tibbs. In what follows, I want to unpack the incident in more depth and offer multiple interpretative readings of the incident. First, I will analyze and interpret the narrative through a post-structural lens, making use of the concept of *neoliberal governmentality*. Second, I will make examine the narrative through a critical whiteness lens an “ethics of vigilance” (Thompson, 2010; Applebaum 2013), which considers the political economy of race by paying particular attention to

the root causes of the perceived conflicts at play in my interactions with Mister Tibbs as well as the underlying motivation for why I chose to work in the community to begin with. One narrative, two interpretations.

### **3.2.1 Interpretation #1: Neoliberal governmentality**

Mr. Tibbs's demand for a formal address of "Mister" is itself a form of governance in the workplace, not only as a measure to regulate the personal/professional boundary but also as a means to firmly establish himself as the authority figure. The demand itself was not made explicitly clear, but was initiated covertly through his own patterns of behavior. Over time, through the use of his own exercise of power, the act of calling one another Mister or Miss became normative in the workplace. There were no rules written, no emails sent, establishing this as a practice. As such, the act of naming each colleague as Mister or Miss was not in service to a collective desire for formality and instead was borne out of Mr. Tibbs' individualistic concern for personal/professional boundaries and, as such, became taken up in a process of entrepreneurial self-making. To not name a person as Mister or Miss became, consequently, an act of abnormality. To engage in the act of naming one another as Mister or Miss was to acquiesce to the demand and give credibility to the power dynamic and authority that Mr. Tibbs was working to establish. This made the act of naming one another Mister and Miss entrepreneurial by virtue of the context in which the demand was placed.

One of the key features of neoliberalism is its aversion to egalitarianism. Indeed, it has been well documented that neoliberalism has an activist agenda against nation-state democracy as well as corrosive forces like labor unions, empowered populations, and anti-colonial struggle, to name a few (Slobodian, 2018). This feature of neoliberalism is what makes it so individualistic,

and one of the consequences of individualism is a virtue of the entrepreneurial self. The rational self that is articulated by neoliberalism sees value in competition and conformity. The demand to name one another Mister or Miss in my workplace was tied up in a context where new organizational leadership issued a series of tasks, tests, and/or challenges all presented as forms of competition, even if ambiguously. Mr. Tibbs would frequently make mention of the fact that we were not “his” people, that we were there before he got there and, typically, he likes to have his own people “leading the ship.”

The uncertainty within which I was viewed, respected, and appreciated by Mr. Tibbs made the ensuing gauntlet of tasks, tests, and challenges appear to be high-stakes. I, nor anyone else, seemed to be safe. Thus, the environment almost immediately became an individualistic battleground, where there would be frequent callouts in meetings to highlight one’s achievements and the implied “value” that we were bringing to the organization. There was an incredible amount of uncertainty about who was on Mr. Tibbs’s side, who was a trusted ally, and who was going to possibly be let go because they weren’t good enough to be on the “ship.” Therefore, the importance of the demand to name one another as Mister or Miss cannot be ignored. The demand itself is tied up in a game of competitive “Simon Says” or in this case “Mr. Tibbs Says.” If one wants to be valued as a vital member on the “ship” then they must take up the various challenges that have been issued. The “naming game” as I like to call it is but one of the tasks that our entrepreneurial, individualistic, competitive selves must take seriously and address in order to advance in the organization (and not get kicked off the boat).

Wendy Brown (2006) highlights the nuance of neoliberalism compared to classical liberalism by stating that “part of neoliberalism ‘neo’ is that it depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as achieved and normative, as promulgated through law and through

social and economic policy – not simply as occurring by dint of nature” (p. 694). With regard to its impulses toward entrepreneurialism, neoliberalism produces citizens “whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’ – their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions” (p. 694). Said another way, within a neoliberal framework, the worker-as-entrepreneur is one who is focused on their own individual needs for career satisfaction and professional respect. Playing the “name game” becomes a matter of responsibility. To play the “name game” is part of a larger struggle to stay on the “ship.” Indeed, echoing the broader neoliberal schema operationalized in society, the practices normalized by Mr. Tibbs’ leadership sought a certain subjectivity, or a new form of being, where we saw ourselves as vessels of human capital that needed to be maximized at all times in a competitive market struggle with our colleagues.

Another aspect of the Mr. Tibbs incident with regard to neoliberalism involves his concern for my being fully “vested” in the work of the organization. I initially glossed over his statement about this, leaving it as nothing more than a misinterpretation of my commitment to the work. However, a recursive engagement with the narrative calls into question whether I was indeed fully vested in the work, and leaves open a window for interpreting Mr. Tibbs’ comments as a legitimate concern. On the heels of the community Christmas party narrative, it seems more than fair to assess my apprehension of that context as a part of Mr. Tibbs’ concern. After all, if his concern regarding our commitment involved an eagerness to meet the community where they were, then my apprehension can easily be seen as not being fully vested in the work. Mr. Tibbs’ comment at the bar also suggests a direct link to his comments on my commitment, in which he identifies my residence in the suburbs as a proxy for white flight. As I noted in that vignette, it turns out that he was right. I did, after all, “fly” back to the suburbs in resigning from my role with the organization.

I was not, as he suggested, fully vested in the work. Or, at the very least, our interpretations about what it means to be vested were certainly not in alignment.

### **3.2.2 Interpretation #2: Critical race theory**

My initial response to Mr. Tibbs' request was one of incredulity coupled with offense. Were we not in a collegial environment, working for the same cause, on the same team? My perspective was that our particular workplace was more level rather than top-down and, consequently, naming conventions should be more relaxed. I also viewed the use of Mister or Miss as a power play, a way for my superior to leverage dominance over me. As I noted in the vignette above, my eyes were opened by one of my colleagues to a more nuanced way of looking at the situation. Indeed, where I once viewed the request by Mr. Tibbs to name him, and everyone else, as Mister or Miss as an act of dominance *over me*, I soon realized that the opposite might be true. That, in fact, my resistance to the demand might actually be an operationalization of my privilege and, more specifically, my whiteness. That is to say, my resistance was in service to white supremacy.

It was never lost on me that on an average day I was the only white guy in the building. Near the end of my tenure at the organization I was wrestling daily with the meaning of whiteness and privilege and place. As I've noted, there was an internal tension with what I was experiencing in my mostly white suburban life and my work in a predominantly poor black community. And yet it was completely lost on me that as the only person not adhering to Mr. Tibbs' naming demand that I was white and privileged. Conveniently for me, I ignored the request by Mr. Tibbs as an opportunity to build cohesion in an otherwise turbulent time for the organization, which was sorely

needed after a year of tumult and uncertainty. The request itself was indeed minor in the grand scheme of things yet I latched on to the ways that the request made me feel personally.

In addition to finding personal reasons for resisting the request, there was the larger context of power and privilege that played a role in informing my reaction. There are three main ways that the request by Mister Tibbs was an opportunity for advancing social justice that my privilege led me to ignore: 1) the history of men and women of color not being afforded the respect of being called Mister or Miss, 2) the lack of men and women of color in positions of power in organizational and geo-spatial-political contexts, and 3) my work at the organization as a proxy for the history of white flight.

### **3.2.2.1 Being called Mister or Miss: A brief history.**

Little did I know that by resisting the request to address Mister Tibbs by an honorific rather than by his first name I was walking right into a sordid and ugly aspect of racial history in the U.S. Citing renowned psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, Kathering Shaver of *The Washington Post* says that dating all the way back to slavery and segregation, “Black people were forced to use honorific titles for white people, who in turn degraded African Americans by using first names” (Shaver, November 27, 2006). Consequently, Poussaint notes that when it comes to forms of address, such as using honorifics rather than first names, “Black people are very sensitive to being treated with respect, particularly adults”.

There I was, the only white man in the building, calling Mister Tibbs by his first name. It’s no surprise then that he mentions that he is bothered by the fact that I call him by his first name, and that only his closest friends call him by his first name *outside of the workplace*. His name, and the form of address, is an asset for Mister Tibbs, one that is managed and guarded as a matter of respect. In the games we play for power, Mister Tibbs was using the honorific form of address as

a way to establish legitimacy and power in a circumstance that African Americans are otherwise rarely in: leadership of a community-based organization within a network of white power brokers.

Mister Tibbs cannot be faulted for drawing a line in the sand when it came to naming conventions in the workplace. It was not a hostile and arbitrary act to demean me, but rather was an act of resistance against being demeaned himself. My perceived act of resistance against the naming convention, one that I thought was a slight against me personally, was in fact a form of resistance against social injustice. I was, to put it bluntly, acting in service to white supremacy. This is indeed a hard pill to swallow but it can serve as a cautionary tale for white men and women who work in service to social justice: not every action on the part of progressive white social justice advocates is one of righteousness for the cause. Indeed, white men and women cannot escape their whiteness and with that cannot escape the problems that come with white supremacy. Namely, “good” whites can, and usually will, do bad things. The real issue is whether whites will own up to it, as I have attempted to do here. Every action needs to be closely scrutinized and certainly acts of resistance are no exception.

### **3.2.2.2 Men and women of color in power.**

It has been widely noted how there is a dearth of men and women of color in leadership positions in the U.S., not least in government, business, and professional sports ownership. Indeed, an article in the New York Times noted the significant lack of representation across many leadership areas, cheekily comparing the dearth of leadership to the “Oscars so White” controversy (Park, Keller, and Williams, NYT, February 26, 2016). This lack of leadership by individuals of color, as a matter of social justice, is critically important. As it relates to Mister Tibbs requesting honorifics over first name designation, him being a man of color in power became a point of the wrong kind of resistance.

Individuals in power are not to be given carte blanche to do what they want. Indeed, it is imperative to hold individuals in power accountable for their actions, especially if and when those actions have a direct negative impact on others. With that being said, it is all too easy for white individuals of privilege to guard their positionality when interacting with individuals of color that are in positions of power.

### **3.2.2.3 A proxy for white flight.**

One of the great tensions that arose during my time working in the community was between the experience I had living in a mostly affluent white suburbs and working in a mostly poor black city neighborhood. The community that I live in was established in 1788 and maintained its small-town population of approximately 4,000 residents until the 1960's when it began to see massive population growth. Not coincidentally, this is around the time when the U.S. began to experience "white flight" from urban neighborhoods to the suburbs. Today the suburb where I live has 20,079 residents according to the most recent census data, with 94.3% being white and 1.1% being black. Conversely, the urban community where I worked has seen significant population decline since the 1950's, going from a total of approximately 30,000 residents to just 6,442 today, most of whom are black and impoverished (U.S. Census Bureau). This is important because as a resident of an affluent suburb, I could "escape" to safety at the close of business each day. And by that I do not simply mean that I could go from poor community to affluent community, which I certainly did, but more importantly that I could go from black community to white community. I could easily go from what was foreign and "exotic" to what was normal and comfortable. This is critical because my actions leading up to my departure can be characterized by what has historically been deemed white flight. Indeed, my commute to and from work was a daily retracing of the route of white flight out of the city of Pittsburgh.



My work in the community was always challenging for numerous reasons. The work itself was hard and my direct boss was demanding, but that was not in and of itself the main challenge. Organizationally we had been through rather significant leadership changes almost since I started working there in February of 2014. Mister Tibbs came in with hope and a promise to turn things around and he meant business, bringing in a whole new leadership approach and a whole new set of demands. I was already feeling stressed leading up to the hiring of Mister Tibbs, so when he came along and started to change the culture of the organization it added a new layer to my stress level. When it became clear to me that I was not going to fall in line with Mister Tibbs' approach and strategy, I had an easy out: I could just leave. I was not in a position where I had to have another job lined up. And my commitment to the work, evidently, was only as deep as my fragile ego would allow under the circumstances. Indeed, looking back on it, my commitment to social justice and doing good work in the community was not as powerful as my white fragility (DiAngelo, 2016).

I remember a conversation Mister Tibbs and I had a few weeks before he pulled me aside and requested that I not call him by his first name. The entire staff went to a local bar in the community after work one Friday night, and out of interest in getting to know him more I decided I would strike up a conversation with him. When I told him that I lived in the suburbs he mentioned that where I lived is where "white people went to get away from blacks in the city." It was a clear reference to white flight, and even though he was right, it not only took me by surprise, but I also took it personally. I perceived that comment as a suggestion that, given where I lived and my circumstances (e.g. white, male, suburbanite, etc.), I somehow was not fully committed to the work in the community. I will never know for sure what he meant by his comment, but it is true that the suburb where I live is an example of white flight and in many ways, I very well may have

personified that phenomenon. I ended up proving it just a few weeks later when I turned in my resignation letter. It was just easier to quit and to go back to where I lived. I could “fly away” and be a stay at home dad in the suburbs for a while.

### **3.2.3 Interpretation #3: Ethical vigilance**

When I began work in the community, I viewed it as a dream job. The organization I worked for was modeled after full-service community school initiatives that were becoming popular in other cities around the country. I was excited to be a part of a similar initiative in my city. This type of work was firmly rooted in what I saw as social justice advocacy, caring for and giving voice to the marginalized. I felt pretty good about the fact that I was a part of something so core to my beliefs, and consequently I felt pretty good about myself. After all, I was a white guy doing social justice work in a black community, working for a black-led organization. How was this not awesome? How was *I* not awesome?

Audrey Thompson (2003) warns about whites unproblematic solidarity with people of color but at the time I had not read her article. There I was, feeling good about myself, doing good work for the poor black people in the community. My whiteness was key to my work because it evidenced the fact that white anti-racism was possible, that the problems associated with historical white supremacy such as failing schools, community blight, gang violence, were important issues for even white people. Just look at me, there I was doing anti-racist work. It was validation and, in my view, exemplary of what other whites should be doing. At the same time, it was important that others see my race and acknowledge how important it was that someone like me, a white person, was there. I wanted recognition but more importantly I wanted validation and respect. I wasn't just any white guy showing up in the community to do good work, I was a well-read ant-racist scholar,

someone who had spent considerable time *thinking* about the issues we were addressing. That was important and, I believed, should have been valued by my peers, most of whom were black.

The problem, however, is obvious. My experience *reading* bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Cornel West was not sufficient for earning me any credibility with the men and women of color that I worked with, let alone the members of the community that I was serving. Furthermore, having spent time thinking about social justice issues was not fully sufficient for the actual *doing* of social justice work in the community. My privilege tainted my perspective and I thought that being well-read was a stand-in for credible experience. Indeed, I fell into the trap of white exceptionalism, which is a trap that many whites get themselves caught up in, especially white progressives. As Thompson (2003) warns, “progressive whites must interrogate the very ways of being good that white identity theory offers to protect, for the moral framing that gives whites credit for being antiracist is parasitic on the racism that it is meant to challenge (p. 7). Indeed, I rested on how *different* I was from other whites, which somehow gave me a pass on thinking critically about my actions in the community and with my colleagues.

The challenge is that the inherent danger of exceptionalism that comes with attempts to do anti-racist work is often met with a genuine disinterest in being racist. As maddeningly antithetical, and indeed frustrating, as that may seem, white progressives often find themselves stepping on their own and others toes while trying to do “good” work. This is a tension not lost on poet Pat Parker, who in the poem “For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend” begins with “the first thing you do is to forget that I’m black. / Second, you must never forget that I’m black”. But the tension found in doing anti-racist work and harboring sins of whiteness should not dissuade whites from engagement. Again, Thompson (2003) is salient:

The very status of antiracism *as* anti- means that those of us who want to confront and challenge racism in ourselves, in institutions, and in others, can never forget race or racism but also cannot be trapped by it; we cannot allow it to be reified as meaningful in the particular ways we have learned to understand it (p. 24).

Thus, confronting and challenging racism in this way, as white person especially, requires a certain kind of *vigilance*.

### 3.3 Analysis

In this section I utilize literature, theory, and the experiences of others to better understand my own experiences and, in turn, give me a framework for offering implications. I spent a relatively short amount of time working at the non-profit; only two and a half years. Indeed, it was a turbulent time for the organization as a whole, but during that time I developed very few relationships outside of the organization. In fact, the organization provided for me a safe space to hide from the everyday happenings in the community. This, it should be noted, is something that the organization was criticized for on the whole, that the organization didn't have a strong enough presence out in the community. That criticism is something the new CEO desired to change and began a process of forcing staff members to develop contact in the community. That was a jarring experience for me personally, not least because of the combination of my racial and gendered subjectivity, my whiteness and privilege. The short duration of my "stay" at the organization is also emblematic of my privilege in action, proving that I was able to get out when I wanted to and retreat to the safety of the comfortable suburbs. Perhaps, had I developed stronger relationships within the community and built within me a security in my whiteness in that space, I might have

lasted longer. But I didn't stay, and that is a point of critique in terms of how I handled the moment as a social justice commitment.

When I left the organization, I felt a sense of failure, that I could not accomplish what I had intended to accomplish, and that I not only let the community and my colleagues down, I also let myself down. At the time, I viewed my departure as necessary given the challenges. But it's the illusory nature of those challenges that I want to critique here. The question is, what indeed were those challenges and were they warranted? One of the significant challenges was the violence in the community, which is known as a hotspot for gun violence in the city. Twice while working there, murders occurred within 500 feet from where I worked, in broad daylight as I sat at my desk. During one of my final days working in the community, I heard gunshots in close proximity to me as I drove back to the office from lunch. These events crystalized for me the danger of working there, and that my safety was in peril. I did not want to admit it, but it is evident that I was afraid. The truth is, however, that as a white male, I was in very little danger within the community. In fact, most violence in communities like the one I worked in (e.g. urban, poor, black) is black on black violence. It became clear to me in conversations that I have had since then that there is no incentive for random violence in the community. Of course, this does not legitimize violence. It does, however, indicate that my safety was not in jeopardy while working there, and using violence as a way to escape from an uncomfortable situation is an act of whiteness.

Another challenge I faced was my inability to form relationships with members of the community. This was something that bothered me when the CEO required that we build our own network of relationships as a component of our work with the organization. I hemmed and hawed about this for the better part of my last six months of working there. How was I, an outsider, supposed to forge new networks of relationships in the community? Wasn't I at a huge

disadvantage compared to my colleagues who not only had been working in the community longer, but some of whom had also grown up there as well? In my mind, it was all a valid excuse for dragging my feet, to not get out into the community and do my job. In truth, it was an excuse for me to resist taking action against social injustice, which just so happened to be the very reason that I wanted to work in the community in the first place.

### **3.3.1 The relevance of personal historical contingency**

A secondary line of questioning involves the impact of my personal history on the circumstances and outcomes of my time at the non-profit. To what extent did my personal history impact or inform the challenges and successes that I faced and continue to face? Certainly, life history has a great deal to offer in terms of insight. My upbringing in predominantly white space has had a lingering effect on how I view the world, no matter how evolved my thinking about difference, race, gender, and social justice. Can we, whether white or black, ever really move beyond the trauma of growing up in a segregated environment? In my view, we cannot. It is like a scar or a stain that can't be removed. As much as we may try to transcend race and, in my case, privilege, we are nevertheless held accountable for our relative subjectivities. That is not to say that we are trapped by experience, but that we cannot divorce ourselves from what we have experienced and what we consequently know as a result of that experience. It is like an image seared into our memory. But we can use that image to help make better informed decisions and to have a greater impact relative to what we now know. In the lead up to my time working at the non-profit, having spent years coming to a better understanding of issues of racism, oppression, and injustice, I thought I had moved beyond my history. Consequently, my history was something that

I thought very little about, at least as it pertained to my present life. And that was meaningful because it blinded me to what I was seeing and experiencing in the community.

A personal history with segregation and privilege is not a prison sentence. Rather, it is incumbent upon me to recognize how my history can inform my present and even my future. Recognition of whiteness and privilege provides an avenue towards freedom, where my knowledge of the boundaries gives me agency to seek out openings or fissures in the taken-for-granted. My upbringing in white space limited my exposure to difference. Thus, whereas segregated white space normalized whiteness, limited exposure further exacerbated what I had already come to know as “true” of the Other. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, much of my exposure to difference was either on the evening news, in Hollywood films, or in professional sports, and my face-to-face contact with African Americans typically occurred when I played sports throughout middle school and high school. Interestingly, several of the men I interviewed for this study shared similar experiences in which the majority of their exposure to difference was in competitive sports. Limited exposure to difference certainly has unfortunate consequences. For me, those teams comprised of African Americans typically defeated my teams. But even if the other way around, such limited exposure has the potential to ingrain an “us vs. them” mentality, especially if the only exposure one gets to difference is in a competitive environment. As I discuss in Chapter 5, one’s reaction to difference is contingent on their history of exposure. For me, limited exposure early on in my life presented challenges later on even when I had the best of intentions.

### **3.3.2 Social justice in white spaces**

It is evident, given the vast racial segregation that persists in many of our nation’s communities, that significant social justice work needs to be done in predominantly white spaces.

My experience, as well as those of the men I interviewed, shows that white spaces – not unlike the suburb where I lived – are places with little appreciation for social justice, empathy, and difference. The normalization of whiteness and neoliberal governmentality have deleterious effects on how whites in these spaces negotiate their identities. There is virtually no dialogue taking place about alternative ways of knowing and being. Unlike predominantly black spaces (or Latinx and Native American spaces) where there is a tacit understanding of the impact of whiteness on social life, white spaces are places of perpetual silence on these matters (Potter, 2015). While it remains to be seen how exactly social justice work can and should be done in white spaces, there is reason to believe that opportunities for self-study might create an avenue for recognition of complicity and openness to new ways of understanding. In the following chapters I will warrant this assertion by elaborating on the significance of self-study and self-interrogation with evidence from interviews I conducted with eight other white men. From these dialogues I was able to glean not only how whiteness operates in non-white spaces, but also how self-reflection can provide an avenue for new ways of knowing. Indeed, from the interviews with these men, it is evident that the process of excavating personal history opens up space for seeing both the past and the present with new eyes. Even for these men, who all are committed to social justice work in various ways, (re)viewing their life history opened up new meanings for how and why they have come to hold certain beliefs and values, which I find hopeful in the possibility of using as yet seen strategies in white spaces that might afford the same kind of self-study and, consequently, deeply engaging life history (re)view.



#### 4.0 Chapter 4: Narratives constellations of critical whiteness

Each of the men I interviewed has a unique story about their experiences with whiteness in place. Most of these men have stories of embarking on journeys that exposed them to difference, immersion in communities of color, and of challenges and stress in dealing with their racial identities. Some of the moments highlighted in their narratives appear to suggest transcendence of whiteness, but a closer look reveals otherwise. As much as there may be similarities between narratives, no two journeys are ever alike. That is no less true with these men. But there are elements that make particular stories unique to each of them. Although eight men were interviewed, in this chapter I profile three of the participants. Many of the men have parallel experiences to my own. I see myself in their stories. But for the three men highlighted in this chapter, there is a uniqueness to their varied experience that illustrate the complexities at the intersection of whiteness, social justice, and the self's opacity. My aim in highlighting these three particular narratives is to provide a sense of how varied their journeys are, while also illuminating the nuances that bind the narratives together, mine included. My hope is that the reader will gain a fuller picture of how whiteness is constructed, maintained, and challenged by way of narrativizing the experiences of these three men.

The three narratives comprising this chapter are structured and styled after what Garvis (2015) calls *story constellations*. A narrative approach making use of story constellations is done in an effort to seamlessly interlace the researcher's thoughts and interpretations with the participants own words. With this narrative aesthetic, the use of *italics* represents voice of the participants. Garvis (2015) notes that "when the two are written side by side it becomes easier to see the two perspectives" (p. 8). I begin the chapter with Lucas' narrative. In many ways, Lucas

personifies the challenge to white normalcy, having gained experience in his upbringing that exposed him to an array of differences outside the white norm. I follow with Frank's narrative, who grew up in a predominantly white community but later moved to a Native American reservation as a young adult to pursue a career as a teacher. His journey to the Southwest proved to be a catalyst for Frank, as it facilitated a shift in his outlook on life and a disruption to his sense of white identity. I conclude the chapter with Marcus' narrative, whose involvement in Christian ministry and non-profit work in a predominantly poor African American community resulted in coming to terms with and ultimately questioning his whiteness. Marcus' reflection on and continual engagement with whiteness is viewed through a different lens compared to the men in the other profiles. Taken together, these story constellations help illuminate complexities of white identity formation, and the struggles some white men face in critiquing the status quo.

I have provided these three constellations as exemplars of the challenges associated with navigating whiteness while also remaining committed to social justice. Each of these men offer their own stories that a full of nuance and complexity. And yet they each share many similarities. For each of them, and as will be highlighted in the following chapter, there was a journey outside of their familiar surroundings and an immersion in spaces of difference, where their identity as white men frequently put them in a position as a temporary minority. This experience seemed to be profound for these men, as is also the case of others that I interviewed. Not only the exposure to difference but also bearing witness to norms and values that were inconsistent from their own. As I discuss in the following chapter, this kind of journey away seems to have led to a sort of awakening in these men, at which point their sense of self and ethical commitments were altered. I view these journeys as critical to recognizing their own opacity and a commitment to ethical responsibility.

Offering these story constellations is also important because I want to provide the reader with the closest possible sense of the experiences these men discussed. Their narratives are profound in offering a better understanding of coming to terms with and interrupting one's whiteness. The narrative genre of story constellations is intended to offer the reader an insightful perspective on racialization and resistance. The story constellations narrativized in this chapter speak to the challenges associated with whiteness and ethical responsibility, specifically as it relates to opacity. Finally, the narratives of the three men highlighted in this chapter provide an avenue for better understanding the vignettes I offer from my own story in the previous chapter. The three themes discussed in the following chapter – rupture, loss, and activism – are threaded through the following stories and provide an opening for reconsidering the meaning of my personal narratives from the previous chapter.

## **4.1 Profile #1: Lucas**

### **4.1.1 Lucas' narrative beginning**

Lucas is from a small town in the Midwest with a population of about 12,000 people, most of whom are white. He identifies racial as white and as a gendered male. However, he does not feel like he is “typical” with regard to his race or gender, especially as those categories relate to white privilege. When I asked him to elaborate, he says that *even though at times I think I am outside of the white privilege bubble, I circle Caucasian as my race. But, I have always sort of been drawn to more racially diverse groups of people.* I continue to have wonderings about Lucas'

comment about being “outside the white privilege bubble,” but his narrative is informative to better understanding the possibilities for how he arrived at this sentiment.

Lucas went to a high school with around 900 total students, and by his estimation about one-third of them were black. Furthermore, social class distinctions tended to fall along racial lines, where *whites were generally more well off than blacks* and segregation occurred along racial lines as well. Lucas was raised in the less affluent side of town where many of the black families resided. After his parents divorced, he was raised by his mother in section 8 housing. *We didn't have a lot of money to buy clothes and shoes. I had a lot of insecurities about all of that growing up. I think that experience gave me a concern for having basic needs met and having an understanding of how it feels to be poor.*

Lucas graduated valedictorian of his high school and was a standout runner on the track team. He found school and running track to be important because both gave him a way to, in his word, *escape from reality*. Because his home life was strained, school and running track became ways for his focus his energy and attention in positive ways and ultimately led to successful outcomes. Track, specifically, was a place where he found consistency. Over time, Lucas started to identify as good student and he began to enjoy school.

### Post-High School Struggles

Lucas attended State University on a full academic scholarship that he earned for being valedictorian. However, the success he had in high school did not immediately translate to the college classroom. *I felt flat on my face in college. Everything in high school came very easy but I hadn't developed study skills. So, I went to college and kind of got very scared, like “oh my gosh I'm not going to be able to do this”. I didn't really spend much time with an advisor, and with a school as big as State University, that was a terrible idea.* Lucas went on to complete graduate

program in secondary science education, after which he and his wife moved to Chicago to pursue career opportunities.

#### **4.1.2 Lucas' teaching story**

Lucas took a job as a public-school teacher on Chicago's West Side in a high school with enrollment of approximately 1,000 students. The student body was, according to Lucas, comprised racially as predominately black and socio-economically as predominantly free and reduced lunch. By comparison, the faculty was comprised racially of about 50% white teachers and 50% black black teachers, *most of whom were younger, while most of the older teachers were black*. His typical day of teaching was not *unlike any normal high school*, consisting of eight periods. Some days Lucas would be at the school until five-thirty managing various clubs or coaching track.

Lucas faced many challenges as a teacher in Chicago, one of which was what he perceived as his students' lack of willingness to work in groups as well as a lack of willingness to try something that might be difficult academically. This resulted in his students' lack of engagement in a learning process. To address this, Lucas prioritized making his classroom a safe place to make mistakes by finding ways to let students know that making mistakes was important to him as the teacher. Lucas was further challenged by his students' apparent lack of life experiences. For most of his students, *their experiences were right there in that city block in close proximity to where the school was*. His students' limited life experience made it challenging to teach certain lessons. For example, although his students lived in close proximity to Lake Michigan, many of his students had little to no experience with Lake Michigan nor any other open water source. This limited exposure proved to be challenging in helping students to draw connections when Lucas taught a unit on water quality. His students simply had very little real-world examples to draw from in order

to make connections to the material. This led Lucas to realize the necessity for scaffolding in his teaching practices by providing his students with requisite information so that they could be successful. Over time, Lucas and his students made significant progress. It is notable that, in his words, *it didn't matter if I followed a state-administered curriculum to perfection. We just had to start from where we were. That made teaching a lot of fun. I learned that as a teacher, if you refuse to lower your expectations, then you can get kids to do all kinds of amazing things.*

Lucas developed several key relationships that sustained him in his work in Chicago. In particular, the guidance counselor and social worker were both individuals that Lucas could count on when times were difficult with issues inside and outside of the classroom. He also developed relationships with teachers from other schools in the district, which he found beneficial because, as Lucas states, *the relationships that I developed along the way, never left me feeling like I was alone or on an island.*

Of paramount importance to Lucas' success as an educator in Chicago was the establishment of respect. His smaller stature and race gave him a way of describing the nuance of establishing respect in the classroom. *It wasn't like I was going to walk into the classroom and tell these kids what they were going to do and they'd listen to me just because I said it. I had to earn that trust from them. Consistency and respect were important.* This was no less true with his colleagues where respect and trust played out in significant ways and had an impact on his ability to carry out social justice work in his teaching. *While much of teaching in Chicago could be considered social justice work, the concept of social justice isn't something that I went to Chicago with any understanding of. Teaching gives you an opportunity to formulate relationships with young adults. The excuse for the relationship is the subject matter, but the most important stuff is that ancillary life skills stuff like responsibility, which helps students no matter where they go. I*

*learned so much about the culture and the students I was teaching during that five-year period in Chicago. The first few years I wasn't as informed about things but over time I started to have conversations with students and tell them "look, I'm trying to help you understand that you are going to grow up in a world that has the odds stacked up against you." Those conversations only deepen the respect that you're trying to cultivate with those kids.*

Lucas' experience working in Chicago helped him to cultivate a greater sense of himself as a white male and what his whiteness means in his life. He now thinks of his whiteness as an increase in opportunity, but finds whiteness difficult to define whiteness precisely. *I suppose whiteness means reaping advantages in a system, even though I am not proud of how those advantages came my way. There's nothing I can do about it necessarily, and that's the real issue: what to do about whiteness. It's not like I can go back and erase four hundred years of racism.*

#### **4.1.3 Lucas' future**

Lucas currently teaches at a public school in the Midwest, not far from where he grew up. He sees himself working within the field of education for the remainder of his career, hoping to retire as a physics teacher from the school where he currently works. He has no desire to move into administration.

## 4.2 Profile #2: Frank

### 4.2.1 Frank's narrative beginning

Frank is a former schoolteacher currently pursuing a doctorate in cultural studies in education. He grew up in the Rust Belt and, by his own admission, did not value education early on in his life. This makes his journey all the more interesting considering his evolving views of education. Over time, as his perspective of and value for education changed, Frank went from caring little about his grades in school to an educational leader in the classroom.

There were a number of things that led Frank into Elementary Education. Upon graduating from high school, he was uncertain about what to do next. When an opportunity to do off-Broadway theatre was presented to him, he jumped at the opportunity. He did, after all, love to perform. However, after about a year spent performing in the theater, he knew he needed a change. At that point, Frank decided to head out to the Southwest to be a wilderness guide, where he could do something else unrelated to performance. Frank loved the outdoors and thought it would be an interesting opportunity to try something new. It turned out to be a formative experience for him. *I would take groups into the mountains and teach them basic backpacking skills. Through that experience I came to appreciate the art and the science of teaching. Even though being a wilderness guide was in an outdoor setting and not a typical classroom setting, teaching was still something I found enjoyment in and I felt I was good at.* Frank returned to his hometown to pursue the program in elementary education.

Pursuing a teaching certificate turned out to be a surprising choice for Frank given his educational background. By his own admission, he was not interested in school growing up. *My motto was, "D is for diploma". If there was anything else that could take my attention away from*



*school, it would.* Although Frank's parents highly valued education and tried to instill that value in him, he did not fully value education until his college years when he realized that, if he applied himself, he could be a successful learner. Contrary to when his attitude about school in primary and secondary grades, learning became *easier and fun* for Frank. His newfound passion for learning is what led Frank to pursue a PhD.

Frank defines himself racially as white. Although he is ethnically Irish and Croatian, Frank rarely identifies himself that specifically. During his upbringing, his family typically referred to themselves as "American". In recent years, after having spent considerable time on a Native American reservation, he refers to himself as European American. *Though I identify as white I don't consider myself white mainstream. I guess I would say that there are different shades of whiteness maybe, but if I need to perform my whiteness in a certain way then I'm able to do that.* According to Frank, his "performance" in certain situations is space dependent, because he is *perceived differently in different spaces.*

#### **4.2.2 Frank's teaching story**

Frank began his teaching career as a head start teacher for a year and then moved to The Southwest to teach elementary school on a Native American reservation. Frank lived and taught on the reservation for 6 years on the reservation. He got married during that time as well. After teaching on the reservation, he and his wife returned to his hometown where he taught 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at an urban charter school for a year. After his year spent teaching at the charter school, Frank began pursuing a doctorate at State University.

After earning his teaching degree, Frank realized that he did not want to live in the Rust Belt where he was from or from the Southern U.S. where his wife was from. He certified to teach

in The Southwest and began looking for teaching positions in that region. He subsequently applied and interviewed for a teaching position on a Native American reservation and was offered the job. He and his soon-to-be wife packed everything they could into their car and drove out West.

Frank and his wife got married the first year of living in The Southwest. Although his wife held a business administration degree, she eventually ended up teaching on the reservation because, as Frank describes it, *if you're a white person living on the reservation you either work for the school or you don't work at all. The school was the only place the tribe allowed us to have employment. Everything is run by the tribal entity on the reservation.* Frank and his wife lived in the town on the reservation.

The reservation where Frank lived and taught was one of 19 different pueblo groups interspersed throughout the state, but was relatively small compared to some of the other groups in the area. The particular tribal entity that Frank worked with had about 1500 members on their enrollment forms. According to Frank, increasing restrictions put on by the federal government have led to a decline in enrollment within the tribe. For example, a person could be considered tribal but due to the percentage of their blood they did not count on the enrollment forms. The tribe had a history of being nomadic, primarily throughout the plains, and there were two clans within the tribe: the Red Clan and the White Clan. The White Clan lived in the mountains of the Rockies and the Red Clan lived out in the plains, and both clans would come together for the harvest and the winter camps.

The school where Frank taught was located within reservation boundaries but, unlike other schools within the Bureau of Indian Affairs, still followed state-standards and regulations around accountability. This meant that the tribe had less control over school administration as other tribal groups, especially when it came to curriculum. Given that the school had never met “Adequate

Yearly Progress” as designated by No Child Left Behind standards, there was a constant threat that the school would be taken over from the state.

Frank describes being cast as an outsider early on during his time on the reservation. *My first day in town I was in the grocery store to pick up some supplies, and I had someone come up to me and spit on the floor in front of me and said something to the effect that outsiders were not welcome there. At first I was taken aback by and upset, but living there as long as I did and getting to know the context, I began to understand their resistance to outsiders.* According to Frank, there needs to be a compelling reason for outsiders being on the reservation, as the tribe regulates who can and cannot work and live on the land. Two of the primary employers on the reservation was the health clinic and the school. In both cases non-native employees could rent housing owned by either the clinic or the school. *There is this understanding that if you come in to work at the health clinic or the school, those entities are vouching for you.*

Like so many tribal groups, the culture, language, history, and artwork was taken by outsiders, put in museums, and exoticized by colonizers. Frank indicates that the tribe is very protective as a consequence of colonization. Even non-natives who married tribal members and have children and participate in tribal activities face resistance. Frank highlights that even though he was given a tribal name and was culturally adopted by two families within the tribe, that acceptance was only given by certain pockets of the community. There were some members of the community that did not trust him even after six years of living on the reservation. Frank is understanding, however, of their lack of trust. *It is no fault of mine and no fault of theirs, it's just a consequence of the historically trauma that has occurred, and it's just a fact of the interactions.*

Frank's sense of community, familiarity, and home has shifted over time, highlighted by the experiences he has had living in the Southwest and subsequently moving back to his hometown.

In coming back to his hometown, for example, that which used to be familiar is now foreign in certain ways. This is, according to Frank, because *being out there you have to immerse yourself 100% to succeed. You have to go to community events, you have to go to pow wows, you need to be part of the family experiences that make up that community. To truly understand and teach effectively you need to immerse yourself and become part of the community. It really changed the way I viewed education and I viewed the world around me, and this became more foreign to me when I came back.* After three years of living back where he grew up, however, things are starting to seem more familiar as they used to, even while still feeling drawn to what he came to know during his time in the Southwest.

As white educator teaching Native American students, Frank found little success in first few years of teaching. He realized that something needed to change in his teaching and leadership style, so he reached out to the tribe's cultural center to find different ways to work through his teaching challenges. He also enrolled in a graduate school program in an effort to find different strategies as well. His learnings led him to adapt the curriculum and his teaching style to meet the needs of the students, while still adhering to the common core state standards.

Frank adapted the curriculum to meet his students' needs replacing the stories in the English Language Arts curriculum and bringing in tribal stories. He began teaching fact and opinion activities but would use different stories from Native American history that were culturally relevant. He began referencing different locations on the reservation that the students would see and then he had them discuss. Frank enhanced the curriculum in an effort to provide his students with opportunities for success on the standardized tests. Over time, Frank came to the understanding that little things he did early in my teaching career were potentially oppressive. For

example, certain classroom management practices, such as making the students line up a certain way or requiring docility and silence during class.

As a white male in power on the reservation, Frank began to see those practices as potentially being harmful to his teaching and to his students. This realization of potentially oppressive practices, however, were issues raised early on in his teaching career by members of the community. Yet, by his own admission, Frank did not fully understand their criticism. Once realized, Frank re-evaluated his approach to discipline, reaching out to parents and community members in order to improve his interactions with his students and ultimately to meet their needs. *In the beginning I had that kind of perception, that education is the golden ticket out of there. Now, I don't think education is the golden ticket for a lot of people. There is this perception of school that we need to get kids to pass tests. But it's just a fallacy.*

Frank and his wife eventually left life on the reservation. But he and his wife continue to question whether they did enough, and whether they should go back. Frank loves teaching. He sees being a teacher as who he is. Teaching on the reservation brought him a lot of joy, even on the tough days. Frank says that his love for the kids is what kept him out there for six years, which according to him is much longer than the average white outsider. He also believes that he did great work while on the reservation, not only in his teaching but in the relationships that he developed. But he questions whether his perceived success is perhaps tainted by his whiteness or what he calls a *white savior mentality*. He questions whether he really did great work on the reservation or if his whiteness provides a framework in his thinking that limits his perception to the negatives and elevates the positives. He admits that it is something he continues to question. He is resolute, however, in his view of the impact that the community had on his life, especially on his identity development. *With the help of the community on the reservation, by letting me explore my identity,*

*they let me become who I wanted to be, somebody who was confident. Growing up I didn't feel that I was good enough, and out there I thought I was good enough.*

### **4.2.3 Frank's future**

Frank is uncertain about his long-term future. He knows he wants to complete his doctoral studies to, in his words, *prove that I'm better than my previous schooling experiences*. However, given his continual critique of the past present and future, he is less certain about what happens next in his life. To that end, he is far more open-minded to what the possibilities are. *I don't know that I have a complete understanding of any of this, because there is still so much internal questioning of what I'm doing, what I've done, what I'm planning on doing. I don't know how to make sense of it all right now. I'm having trouble making sense of my place in all of it because at the end of the day, I'm still a white male who has used his privilege and his power in his own ways.*

After leaving the reservation, Frank moved back to the community where he grew up. In doing so, he observed that there was poor infrastructure and a lack of accessibility. He started a pedestrian advocacy group and has been working on reaching out to the local community and the local government. It is work that he feels would not have been initiated if it were not for the experience he gained on the reservation. That time on the reservation helped him learn what advocating means, as well as how his power and privilege can be used in ways that can work to the service of the community and to the individuals of that community. This work speaks to Frank's passion for recognizing a problem or an issue and finding ways to address that problem or issue. And it is directly connected to his interest in education, which he says is the pillar of his life's work. *Teaching and researching are both are very fulfilling to me personally and professionally, so they're going to be a part of my life moving forward.*

### 4.3 Profile #3: Marcus

#### 4.3.1 Marcus' narrative beginning

Marcus was born and raised in the Rust Belt and graduated from high school in 1998. He was raised by two loving parents and has an older sister. One of the most important things for Marcus' family growing up was their faith in Jesus. During the early years of his life, Marcus spent time between various churches, with his mother's background being Roman Catholic Church and his father's being a mix between Mormonism and Christianity. Eventually his family ended up going to a Presbyterian church near where they lived, which they attended for about three years and then went to an Evangelical Free church shortly thereafter.

Marcus has memories of his faith in Christ being his own at an early age, caring about how God thought he should live and felt conviction when he did things that he deemed *stupid stuff*. But his parents' influence on him was also great, not only in keeping him involved in the church but also in the deep and meaningful conversations he had with his father about God and faith. Marcus was also pretty serious about basketball growing up and, aside from the church, that was a big influence on him. His basketball teammates ended up being like an extended family to Marcus, especially when his father ended up taking care of his sick grandparents and could not be around the house as much.

Neither of Marcus' parents went to college, but education was still pretty important to them and even though Marcus always knew he wanted to go to college, his parents were a big influence. I asked him to elaborate on what that influence meant. *Going to college was, for my parents and for me, a cultural norm, or our whiteness or white middle class values. Most of my friends and people around me went to college. I would say that going to college was normative.*

Marcus applied to three different colleges, all them Christian colleges. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, he worked in a variety of fields before settling into his current role in non-profit administration and ministry in his church. *Ministry has always been very important to me. I've always wanted to go deeper in relationship with others and in relationship with God.* It was during the early years of his time at the non-profit that Marcus began working through issues relating to social justice. I asked him to elaborate on what those injustices looked. *What happened was stereotypes surfaced in me that I didn't know I had. As I worked with people in the community, I began to realize that many of the people I was meeting with worked harder than I did. I began to ask myself why that notion surprised me, but I realized that the people I met with were predominantly African American, predominantly living in public housing. So, clearly, I had stereotypes that were informed by news sources or whatever.* An angst began to surface in Marcus as he met with people that were different from him socioeconomically, culturally, and racially.

Marcus' work in the community took him on a journey towards the next phase of his Christian mission in *wanting to see people get free and full.* For Marcus, his Christian mission is everything from intercessory prayer to the day-in-day out grind of doing social justice work in the city or school. He specifically describes his work as social justice, even though he recognizes that it can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people *because it's used anywhere and everywhere.* There is a direct link between Marcus' articulation of social justice and his Christian belief in a social gospel, the latter of which includes the social and the spiritual. The connection between social justice and a Christian social gospel is *the spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit of God himself.* Marcus views Jesus as a liberator that came to set right what was unjust. *Wherever I see things wrong, if my motivation is to love more than to be right, whether I'm talking about my*



*relationship to the church or to the city, I am able to have more of an impact because the love of God is the most transformational and attractive thing. That's what brings change. Whether it's in a city council meeting, at a non-profit, or teaching a workshop at the church.*

The Community that Marcus works in consists of six neighborhoods and approximately 10,000 residents, most of whom are African American, which means the kids and families that Marcus works with however are almost exclusively African American. The neighborhoods that comprise the community are quite segregated due to political gerrymandering. *We serve mostly black kids because we are serving these six neighborhoods that mostly make up the community school district.*

#### **4.3.2 Marcus' community story**

Marcus' role at the non-profit has transitioned to mostly doing high level administrative tasks such as writing grant proposals, meeting with donors and grant makers, and holding monthly government agency meetings. He also mentors a child once a week and finds that very rewarding. Marcus' church congregation is mostly white, but he believes that in the coming years *it's going to be about owning a multicultural vision as a church value*. Specifically, that has meant ongoing conversations within the church about the congregation being as diverse as the zip code in which they are located. According to Marcus, those internal conversations within the church involve moving the church to a location where there are fewer *sociological barriers* to attendance for members of the black community. One of the key reasons that Marcus' church has remained predominantly white is that African Americans are resistant to *coming up here into a prejudiced white neighborhood, which is where the church currently is*. Furthermore, members of the black community have difficulty with transportation to the church's current location. The church,

therefore, is not in a place to become as diverse as the zip code in which it is located, even if the congregation desires more racial diversity.

The mission and vision of having a more racially diverse and equitably representative church congregation involved nearly a decade of time spent working in the community for Marcus. His personal journey in that time involved breaking down his own personal stereotypes that he did not know he had about race, class, and poverty. Those stereotypes were broken down in Marcus through significant time spent in the street learning from the community and building relationships with people that were very different from him racially and socioeconomically. *We focused on learning from the city as an asset-based value, allowing it to speak into our programs and who we were as a ministry. We wanted to come in and listen and submit ourselves to the city – as much as we knew how, as people of white privilege who rarely have to submit to anything.* Code switching was a significant part of Marcus' work during this time, where he and his colleagues alternated meeting the needs of the community and grant makers.

*What was important was to build trust with people that had no power, that live in public housing. We didn't want to start with people in power and take a top down approach. That was the foundation of our ministry, so we had to get approval from within the community first. It is giving power where there is no power. We basically gave it to them by virtue of asking them for permission to serve their kids. The ball was in their court then, and they had the power to say no. We built and gained trust within the larger community and in 2013 we were able to develop a partnership with the local school board. Through a collaboration with the school superintendent and another local non-profit organization, Marcus' organization gained classroom space in the school for his program. They knew we were the real deal, and that we were not going anywhere and we were, and still are, for the kids and for the families, there's no agenda. They know we're*

*faith-based. This is a very religious county, so it's ok to be faith-based. It's not threatening, so it has not been an impediment. The religious values of the community play in our favor as a faith-based organization, in terms of trust. And that's especially true in the black community. It is very traditional, culturally religious Christian values.*

Prior to his organization's collaboration with the local school district, trust first needed to be built within the community, because, according to Marcus, *we were white, and they are black.* Once trust was developed, things really progressed for his organization. The road to trust began with relationships Marcus and his colleagues developed with the mayor and several other gatekeepers in the community. Even then, however, there were hurdles to building trust with members of the community, which, Marcus believes, very much revolved around race. *Because we were white, people who didn't know us thought we were the police. Once we got to know people they would say that to us. In fact, we would joke about it together once we built a relationship. We have a lot of relationships with drug dealers, for instance. But the founder of the organization bore the brunt of it before we even came along. So, generally we were met with distrust but never animosity. Not once have I ever been threatened.*

*One time I was talking to one of the kids from our program while I was waiting for an adult to come outside and this guy drove by and stopped his car who lived up there too. And he was like "what are you doing with him?" And I just told him who I was and thanked him for caring, and that I wasn't some sort of creeper. He just wanted to make sure I was there for a good reason. And that was because I was a white guy. If I was black, he would assume I was family. But he also did the right thing, and I thought it was cool. I mean, the black community here does community much better than the church.*

Building trust has been the biggest challenge for Marcus and his colleagues. As he indicated, there has not been any animosity directed at him, and yet an insider-outsider tension has been difficult to shake. Being an “outsider” that is not from the community has been met with resistance by some community members who feel that Marcus and his colleagues cannot possibly know what the black men and women from that particular community have been through. *There are some racial barriers. I certainly feel welcome in the community, but social class and race are limiting factors because in being able to identify with community members on an in-depth level. The reality is, I can only relate so far with the black community as a white person. I am learning and understanding the best I can, but I also acknowledge that I have limitations as a white middle-class male. Humility, however, does go a long way in building relationships. You can only go as far as you are willing to learn from another culture. Privilege can be prohibitive if it lends itself to blindness or pride or both.*

Although Marcus sees the many of the racial complexities in his community work, he believes that many of the issues that he and the community members deal with have more to do with social class than race. Incidentally, *because of systemic issues and systemic injustice, race and class both cross over pretty seamlessly.* Given how welcoming community members have been to Marcus and his colleagues, it seems to him that many of the racial dynamics that plague much of the country take a backseat to social class divisions and the attendant perceptions tied to those divisions.

We want our kids, through extensive partnerships, to literally have the same opportunities if they were middle-class white. The outcomes are college graduation rates. The goals are equal access to opportunity whether directly through us or through partnerships. Marcus’ work is not

limited to education, even though that is the primary avenue for reaching kids in the community. It's about members of the community having their own opportunities in their own right.

Marcus' work in his church has been focused on growing the church body to be as diverse as the zip code in which it is located. Currently, many of the African Americans that Marcus works with in the community call his church their home church, even though they are not regularly attenders. Thus, even though Marcus' church is their home church and their proverbial "family" even though they are not attending. In Marcus' view, his church has become *the closest thing they have to family, even though they do not come to church due to not having transportation or other barriers that prevent them from coming*. However, with diversity in church attendance being a priority, Marcus and the leadership team at the church have considered physically moving the church closer to the African American community so that more of them can attend. *The church would see an uptick in attendance when we do that, for sure. Literally people would just walk over. It would be a more neighborhood-based church*. Marcus also sees the importance of having black leadership at his church that reflects *true diversity*. Otherwise, it is just tokenism to have a diverse church membership yet a predominantly white leadership team.

Marcus had a great deal to say about his views on whiteness, power, and privilege. He suggested that fear is at the forefront of whiteness, a fear of losing control that comes with power and privilege. That particular kind of fear on the part of whites, he suggests, manifests in the perpetuation of injustice through apathy. However, as insightful and articulate as Marcus is about whiteness and social justice, he is also honest about the challenges he has faced in cultivating the kind of authentic and genuine relationships that are the bedrock of his Christian ethics. This is not to suggest that he is without meaningful relationships with individuals of color. Rather, authentic relationships that cross racial and socioeconomic boundaries require an openness to vulnerability

and potential failure. *When whiteness and racism are exposed through our genuine relationships, there is an opportunity through failure to learn and grow. It must be practiced. If I want to get better at understanding whiteness and its effects on my life and my family, my spirituality, my worldview, I need to really give myself over in the process, which includes opening myself up to vulnerability, pain, and failure. These things cannot be dealt with unless you know that they are there to be dealt with in the first place. There must be an intentionality to the process, a commitment to regularly engaging with and thinking about differences in race and class. It means doing life with people in a way so that race and class and privilege can actually surface, which will lead to growth and awareness.*

In addition to the real challenges Marcus faces in cultivating authentic relationships with individuals of color, Marcus finds it equally hard to reach white individuals who do not share the same commitments to social justice. An aspect of his social justice commitments is a focus on *bringing white brothers and sisters along so that through our own healing we can bring healing to others.* He sees *love* as the common denominator in forging relationships, especially with those that are different racially, socioeconomically, and even politically. *If your motivation isn't love, then there is no way to connect with that person whether white or black. But it is not easy. It is difficult to treat people well when you disagree. You can't fake it till you make it with that stuff. There has to be a sense of humility because we're not always going to get it right. And we shouldn't be expected to either. It's a march forward in an effort to be better.*

Letting go of control and opening oneself up to uncertainty is not just a matter of a social justice ethics for Marcus. It is foundational to his deeply held Christian faith. This view of letting control is what leads Marcus to view social justice as community work *rooted in the love of God.* *If God's Kingdom value is true multiculturalism, if it is His value and it is not my idea, then social*

*justice is the fruit he wants to bear and He wants to do it through a church that is full of the Holy Spirit, that is the love of God. He designed it this way. Love just cuts through all of it.*

### **4.3.3 Marcus' future**

Marcus is working towards ordination in his church but has no ambition to actually pastor a church of his own. He sees himself as being bi-vocational or perhaps even tri-vocational at times. His main interest moving forward is in *culture-making by way of humility*. Marcus does not see his future oriented around a career goal, per se. Rather, as a commitment to his Christian faith, his future is oriented around community restoration and social justice through the church. *I'm just trying to follow Jesus. It is a learning process though, and it looks different for each person.* Marcus sees himself being involved in the church with a shared leadership structure prioritizes racial and socioeconomic diversity. Consequently, Marcus recognizes that fulfilling his calling towards social justice means he will likely find himself involved in being a part of a church that is racially and socioeconomically different than his current church, which is mostly affluent and white. These commitments are in direct alignment with Marcus' Christian principles, in which he finds ultimate freedom through his faith. *There's so much creativity and innovation in following Jesus or pursuing the Kingdom of God that there's a lot of freedom there.*

## 5.0 Chapter 5: Thematic analysis

*“Consider that one way we become responsible and self-knowing is precisely by deferring judgments, since condemnation, denunciation, and excoriation work as quick ways to posit an ontological difference between judge and judged, and even to purge oneself of another so that condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the Other as nonrecognizable. In this sense, condemnation can work precisely against self-knowledge inasmuch as it moralizes a self through a disavowal. Although self-knowledge is surely limited, that is not a reason to turn against it as a project; but condemnation tends to do precisely this, seeking to purge and externalize one's own opacity, and in this sense failing to own its own limitations, providing no felicitous basis for a reciprocal recognition of human beings as constitutively limited”*

*(Butler 2005, p. 30-31).*

*“Neoliberalism’s orientation towards strong private rights, free market, and free trade avails itself well within the Dreamer’s need for innocence”*

*(Humphrey 2017, p. 25)*

What connections can be drawn between the personal narratives in the previous two chapters? To this point I have articulated through stories some of the various ways that I have encountered and troubled whiteness, privilege, and power. Through the examples of the wedding and the holiday party, I complicated the ways that whiteness operates in space, as well as how my perceptions in each context were colored by my history with whiteness and my proximity in space to other whites. In this chapter, I use participant narratives as a way to further complicate the



complexity of whiteness and advance an anti-racist social justice stance rooted in an ethics of recognition. Although there were eight total interviews that I generated themes from, I am going to use examples from the three participant narratives that I highlight in the previous chapter. The narratives are theirs and the words derived from their thinking, but the representations are my own. I cannot adequately claim to represent their “truth” in the narrative depictions that follow. Therefore, I utilize the narratives of these men to enrich the discussion about white anti-racism and ethical responsibility. To that end, in this chapter I take a broader look at the participants’ stories and outline the general framework I used in the interview process. I then parse out three main themes that cut across the interviews and explicate their meaning. Those themes are: 1) Threshold experiences and rupture; 2) white identity formation / ethical whiteness; and 2) non-transcendental activism.

I drew several similarities between the men, and in this chapter, I highlight some of those similarities as themes that help to illuminate my own experiences. But there were some stark differences as well, not least of which consisted in their various journeys into adulthood but also the various ways that each of the men came to confront their own whiteness and consequently their implication in a system of racial oppression. The divergences in these men’s stories provide a complicated and nuanced picture of what it means to be white in non-white spaces. And yet, as I will outline in the remainder of the chapter, there are some significant similarities that can be drawn from these men’s stories, as well as my own, for which meaningful interpretations can be made. I begin by discussing the effect of journeying away from home and the resultant awakening that said journey meant for many of the men. These journeys, in a sense, led to a kind of rupture in their normative horizon, where new ways of understanding and relating to others were forged. I then discuss the nuance of white identity formation and how the men came to grips with being

white while also being ethically committed to social justice. Finally, I conclude the chapter by discussing the significance of the participants' refusal to remain silent as a form of activism, and the way that their actions represented non-transcendence of whiteness.

**5.1 Table 3: List of participants**

<u>Pseudonyms</u>	<u>Community</u>	<u>Employment/Field</u>	<u>Number of Interviews Conducted</u>	<u>Length of Interviews (Total Time in Hours)</u>
Lucas	Midwest	Education: HS Science Teacher	3	3.0
Marcus	Rust Belt City: West	Non-Profit: Christian Ministry	3	3.7
Frank	Southwest U.S./ Rust Belt City: Center	PhD Student/ Former Elementary Teacher	3	2.6
Jerome	Midwest / Rust Belt City: Center	Education: HS Social Studies Teacher	2	3.5
Jack	Rust Belt City: Center	Education: HS English Teacher	3	3.8
Vince	Rust Belt City: Center	Education: Middle School Phys. Ed. Teacher	3	3.8
Melvin	Rust Belt City: Center	Education: HS English Teacher	3	3.0
Calvin	Rust Belt City: Center	Non-Profit: Food Access / Former Teacher	3	2.5

## 5.2 Theme #1: Threshold experiences and rupture

It might be a pithy aphorism but life is, indeed, a journey and that is evident in the participant narratives within this study. As white males, we are not born into social justice advocacy, but rather engage in a process, over time and through many ongoing experiences, of self-reflexivity in relation to whiteness, power, and privilege. There is no arrival but rather a continual engagement with new experiences in turn (re)shape and (re)mold our perspectives. From the outset, my contention has been that there is a complexity to the white experience, a complexity that does not mitigate one's implication in a racist society but nevertheless is expressed in nuanced ways relative to place and context. To that end, the pursuit of social justice and anti-racism by whites is itself complicated by factors relating to place and context as well.

For the participants in this study, there is a uniqueness to how each of the men came to trouble and complicate their whiteness. Using my own narrative as an example, my journey toward anti-racism and social justice began with reading books like *Race Matters* by Cornel West and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. Those particular experiences of engaging in new ideas in literature led to disruptions in my thinking, leading me to question taken-for-granted assumptions about racial identity. Other experiences of disruption followed, in which I further complicated what I held to be true about my identity, the social structure, and the perceived differences associated with various social categories.

Of course, some moments, shall I say, burned brighter than others, leaving a lasting impression that, for me personally, is impossible to shake. These unshakable, lasting moments are what Turvey (2016) defines as *threshold experiences*, or “those experiences that have recurring and notable significance throughout our life course, connecting our past with our future to shape and mold the present in ways that influence and challenge the on-going process of learning and

making meaning” (p. 116). A particular threshold experience or set of experiences, however, can lead to significant moments of *rupture*, which are those particular moments within a threshold experience “that set about a perturbation between the life story and the life history, casting the process of periodization as troublesome” (Turvey, 2016, p. 119). In this section I want to discuss further this idea of threshold experiences and the possibility of rupture by connecting those concepts with the experiences of the participants. In particular, I draw a connection between many of the participants’ journeying away as a catalyst for initiating some of their own threshold experiences and points of rupture along the normative horizon of whiteness. At these junctures in their life journey, which include critical moments of perturbation, the participants engaged in a process of anti-racist reinvention. For some of the participants it involved a literal journey away from home but for others it was a figurative journey that led to rupture.

My personal journey was initiated by what many consider to be a rite of passage: going away to college. In many ways, I left home for college and never looked back. Removing myself from the comfort of the familiar was a critical first threshold experience, but rupture would not occur until years later when my thinking began to change concerning how I viewed whiteness, privilege, and power. Like most of the men interviewed, I grew up in a white community with limited exposure to difference, and that experience ingrained in me a sense of power and privilege that still holds. As Yancy (2016) makes clear, I will never get out from under my whiteness and, consequently, my racism. But the norms associated with whiteness and privilege can certainly be troubled and, perhaps, interrupted. White norms, however, cannot be troubled or interrupted until the cracks at the normative horizon are illuminated and that illumination occurs, according to Turvey (2016), when we experience ruptures through threshold experiences. For me, that rupture occurred when I experienced the community Christmas party, experiencing for the first time what

it must feel like for so many individuals of color in predominantly white space. That moment left a mark on me and troubled what I thought I knew about social justice and anti-racism. To that point on my journey, I had gone through numerous threshold experiences, having been pulled in a new direction, my intentionality aroused as I re-evaluated my evolving life story and located it within a wider socio-cultural ecology (Turvey, 2016, p. 119).

Rupture certainly occurred when I was confronted by Mr. Tibbs. In addition to challenging my sense of right and wrong, that threshold experience led to rupture about my sense of professionalism, whiteness, power, and privilege. To that point on my journey I felt that I had a solid understanding of myself. And yet clearly I did not, as that experience and the ensuing time of reflection led me not only to re-evaluate my thinking but initiated a moment of *re-selfing* (Goodson, 2013). It is evident throughout my interviews that the participants had similar threshold experiences that led them to challenge their assumptions and beliefs about whiteness and privilege. For Lucas and Frank in particular, there were moments of rupture that left a lasting impression and initiated a re-envisioning of themselves.

The *journey away* as threshold experience looks very unique when applied to Marcus' story. Although Marcus grew up in predominantly white Johnson, he now lives with his wife and kids in a neighboring predominantly African American community. He previously described how historically the neighboring communities and school districts were strategically segregated by race. While Marcus did not elaborate in depth on what it meant to grow up in predominantly white space, he did offer a glimpse into what that experience meant in terms of certain values, especially those values relating to educational achievement and post-secondary matriculation. In this instance, it is something that Marcus explicitly names as an element of whiteness that directly impacted his life trajectory. Marcus now firmly believes in social justice as a matter of his Christian

faith. For him, serving other people and realizing justice in impoverished communities is an ethical *and* religious commitment. Marcus may have grown up not far from where he now lives, but the communities are worlds apart, not least because of their respective racial compositions. But through Marcus' work with his church, he began a journey of engaging with the Choctaw community in ministry. Marcus' journey away may have been proximally small, but the threshold experiences that came with being embedded in the community and cultivating authentic relationships with individuals of color initiated in him a line of questioning about what he previously held certain. Culturally, politically, and racially, Marcus has traveled significantly from where he started. As I will explain later in the chapter, it is the result of journeys like Marcus', in which white cultural norms are confronted and challenged, that ethical commitments to responsibility can be cultivated through recognition of the self's opacity.

The extant literature on whiteness suggests that white identity is varied rather than monolithic. Indeed, although the vast majority of whites continue to live in segregated white space, the white experience is sometimes quite complex, especially when the intersectionality of race and ethnicity do not coalesce within a white normative framework. Frank's time spent in the Southwest is illustrative of the complexity of threshold experiences that open up new ways of thinking about race and privilege. Throughout his time living on a Native American reservation, as well as taking graduate classes at a nearby university, Frank gained not only a greater appreciation of subaltern cultures but also a language for understanding his own whiteness, privilege, and power. During the six years he spent on the reservation, Frank developed a complicated understanding of racial and ethnic differences, encompassed in an array of attitudes radically different than those he held when he arrived. Frank's threshold experiences are in part what led him to pursue a PhD, where

he hopes to better understand oppression and marginalization in education contexts through his research.

For some of the men, the path toward a career committed to social justice did not occur through an rupture in their threshold experiences. Rather, the portal towards new ways of thinking about racial identity and privilege was opened through threshold experiences gained living with difference. Some of the men I interviewed grew up in white spaces but experienced difference to a much more significant degree compared to the other participants. These men spent considerable time with African Americans during their upbringing, which helped inform each of their social justice frameworks and played an important role in their trajectory later in life. The experiences of these men suggest that learning and socializing with students of color helped inform their outlook on life and initiated their respective commitments to social justice. Lucas, for example, was raised in small, racially segregated Midwest town. Whereas the majority of his white peers grew up proximally to other whites, Lucas lived, in his words, “on the other side of the tracks” in close proximity to African American families. The norm for Lucas was exposure to difference, and although he never felt completely comfortable in black or white spaces, the mixture of his threshold experiences between those spaces helped him formulate an sense of empathy and appreciation for difference.

As I have noted, many of these experiences closely resembled my own. My journey away led to threshold experiences that ultimately challenged my sense of self in relation to whiteness. Consequently, I began to challenge the white norms and taken-for-granted assumptions that were so fundamental to my reality. The rupture, however, was not immediate. The seeds were certainly planted when my sense of place was changed. The threshold experience of relocation, for me, initiated a re-evaluation of that which I considered secure, comfortable, and familiar. There was,

in a sense, a *re-selfing* that occurred as a result. That experience alone was liberating, but it would be years before a rupture occurred, at which point I began to experience racial difference on a level that deeply impacted my thinking and being.

Relocation and the loss of home was experienced by some of the men I interviewed as well. In unique ways, the experience of relocation facilitated exposure to difference for each of the men. For example, Lucas relocated to inner-city Chicago after graduating from college. Frank spent several summers during college in the Southwest as a wilderness guide, an experience that led him to take a teaching job on a Native American reservation in New Mexico. I resonate so strongly with these men because we share a similar experience with regard to developing strong relationships across difference that helped open our eyes to new ways of being in the world. For me, the relationships I developed working in the community have impacted my perspective of how I viewed the world and myself. Like the conversation I had with Virgil that led me to see my interactions with Mr. Tibbs in a new way, I had a number of other strong relationships that helped me to see things differently about myself. Many of those relationships were with colleagues, which makes the Mr. Tibbs accusation of being “vested” all the more challenging. However, I also had begun to cultivate relationships with organizational partners that were involved in our work within the community. Through many of those partnerships, I developed strong relationships with individuals of color that helped illuminate holes in my thinking regarding myriad issues, not least race and racism. I began working in the community feeling that I had a strong understanding of the issues at hand. Over time, however, as I cultivated relationships like I had with Virgil, my mind was opened further by my interactions with men and women of color who shared their experiences. The relationships that I developed during that time and in that space was both humbling and



transformative. I consider those formative relationships to be part of the collection of threshold experiences that continue to (re)shape my thinking about anti-racism and social justice.

The discussions I had with the study participants seem to suggest that they too had threshold experiences during their journeys, in which they began to see whiteness, privilege, and power in new ways. McKinney's (2005) study on white college students' understanding of whiteness serves as an example of how sustained contact with individuals of color often leads to "turning points" in the lives of whites. These turning points are often associated with a new understanding of their white selves and the various meanings associated with race, in which they begin to "better understand racial inequality, white privilege, and that being white may make one's perspective different than others" (p. 72). It is worth considering what is actually taking place at the site of the turning point. While I cannot reasonably be expected to get inside the heads of the men I interviewed, I can leverage their experiences to theorize how and why whites might work against their own self-interests, especially when those interests are in service to the maintenance of normalized white supremacy and white privilege. I interpret these turning points to be a corollary of Butler's (2005) recognition of opacity, in which there are moments when the horizon of intelligibility is fissured or ruptured.

Although Butler's theorization does not make the explicit a connection between ethics and racialization, I situate her theory of responsibility and self-formation at the juncture of whiteness and social justice. Thus, the turning points or moments of rupture are expressed by these men as a renewed understanding of whiteness. At these moments, they *recognized* their opacity, leading them to take risks in the face of uncertainty. The self is not fully transparent but is, rather, opaque to itself. This is because the self cannot fully take account of the arrangements that speak it into being. These arrangements – made up of language, social structure, and norms – are beyond the

self's capacity for fully knowing. The self is always already uncertain about what makes it an "I". As Butler (2005) notes:

I speak as an "I", but do not make the mistake of thinking that I know precisely all that I am doing when I speak in that way. I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. (p. 83)

Critically, Butler is suggesting that we are implicated by the fact of our opacity to ourselves, the notion that who we are is always already, in some way, fashioned for us and in direct connection with the other. It is, therefore, in that inherent connection to others that the locus of ethical responsibility can be found. Because we are always foreign to ourselves – which is to say that we are never fully in control or in full knowledge of ourselves – we are consequently responsible precisely because of that foreignness. The self is, therefore, inherently uncertain. While Butler does not call this a false consciousness, it might be better understood as a false sense of certainty. Of course, this does not stop me, or anyone else, from living with a false sense of certainty and adhering to the rigidity of certain social norms.

To live in that certainty, however, without fully acknowledging the self's opacity, comes with a cost. Indeed, there is a cost for giving an account of oneself as well. The question is, which cost is greater? Butler elaborates on the price we pay in giving an account of oneself by stating that "we are not simply the effects of discourses, but that any discourse, any regime of intelligibility, constitutes us at a cost. Our capacity to reflect upon ourselves, to tell the truth about ourselves, is correspondingly limited by what the discourse, the regime, cannot allow into speakability" (p. 120). The cost associated with giving an account of oneself is due to the limits of intelligibility, which means we can never fully tell the truth about ourselves. On the other hand,

there is a cost for refusing to acknowledge the self's opacity as well, namely the foreclosure of possibilities disallowed by the prevailing normative horizon. Again, Butler (2005) is salient on this point:

[T]he forms of rationality by which we make ourselves intelligible, by which we know ourselves and offer ourselves to others, are established historically, and at a price. If they become naturalized, taken for granted, considered as foundational and required, if they become the terms by which we do and must live, then our very living depends upon a denial of their historicity, a disavowal of the price we pay. (p. 121)

Each of the men, in their own way, recognizes their own opacity at different junctures of their experience in communities of color. It is at these moments that I suggest they had an awakening to that opacity, and consequently engaged in giving an account of themselves, where they reformulated the *style* of their living relative to the social, political, and discursive norms associated with neoliberal whiteness.

Frank provides perhaps the best example of this during his time spent teaching and living on the reservation. The slow fuse of change began when Frank realized that his style of teaching was ineffective in reaching his students, and that the cause of that ineffectiveness resided in his own misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about the community he was serving and the relations of power associated with his whiteness. For Frank, the realization that his training had not fully prepared him for teaching in a Native American community, as well as an understanding of his own fallibility, led him to make a turn against the prevailing normative style of teaching. To do so, however, required that he push normalized boundaries of professionalism and workplace etiquette to find and deliver new teaching methods and subject content.

Frank engaged in modifying the curriculum and his teaching style in order to be more culturally responsive to his students' needs. Frank went on to acknowledge that the turn in his understanding of difference has been an evolution, and he is yet to have arrived at a place of fully grasping the nuance of difference, power, and injustice. In his words, he likely never will:

I became aware of whiteness and privilege when I moved out to the reservation community because it was so distinctive, it was so unique, and it was so far out of my own understandings of the world. So, I became aware of it... even now as I move along in my studies, I'm working towards a certificate in gender sexuality and women's studies, so there's deeper understandings of race, whiteness, sexuality, gender, that all play into this. It's nuanced, I think. But I don't think I'll ever have a perfect view of the world, because it is so individualistic. I really view it as I've come to understand it better, but I'm not there yet.

Frank was immersed in a community quite different than the one he grew up in, and as a result went through a *turn* in his thinking about race, power, privilege, and whiteness. The experiences altered not only his sense of identity but also his pedagogy and his outlook on the field of education. Living on the reservation could have taken Frank on any number of paths but as I outline in the remainder of the chapter, the kind of turn he makes in his thinking is emblematic of the recognition to his opacity to himself, the result of which is a commitment to responsibility toward those he encountered. That is to say, Frank took a relational turn in which he took up the challenge of ethical responsibility, even in the face of uncertainty, that ultimately led to him giving an account of himself.

For the men I interviewed, there was, and remains, significant risk in giving an account of themselves. I suggest that at the moment of recognizing their opacity, what I am referring to as an

*awakening*, these men had a break from the comfortability of living life according to the status quo. Not only that, but they each, in their own way, risked the relative comfort of the relationships they had with friends and family. Butler and Foucault both suggest that an active giving of an account manifest in speaking up with great risk. Parrhesia, or risky speaking of the truth in public, is a critical component of giving an account of oneself that these men took up. There is a cost for giving an account of oneself in this way, in breaking from the taken-for-granted and speaking frankly about the truth. Again, following Foucault, parrhesia entails caring for oneself in a way that means changing one's life (Foucault, 2008 in Butler, 2005). Several examples illuminate this from the interviews I conducted. Again, Frank is salient on this point, articulating that his commitment to working and living on a Native American reservation presented challenges to his familial relationships.

Bryan:           So, you can't really resist whiteness, but wonder if you can interrupt it in a way?

Frank:           Well, I think that's what I'm doing with my work. I'm trying to interrupt whiteness. I just don't know that I can speak in my own personal life that I've ever done, if there's anything tangible, if there's anything I've done to resist it, because it's always worked to my advantage. So...And, I'm not saying that maliciously. I'm just saying that I never had to confront it, to have to push back against it other than trying to like, call people out on some things that they've said.

Bryan:           White people?

Frank:           Yes.

Bryan: How's that work?

Frank: Oh, it's always done poorly, but just-

Bryan: For you or for everybody?

Frank: Everybody. Everybody's involved, because it's always in family groupings. And, it's always me questioning them what they said, why they would say it, and other family members pushing me back, telling me to stop, so there's never really a resolution there, so there's just this tension hanging in the air. Anytime there is an officer involved shooting with an armed black individual, my brother and I tend not to talk for a little bit. Because, it's bound to come up and we stand on two different sides of things.

Bryan: He's in law enforcement?

Frank: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah.

Frank's commitment to ethical responsibility seems to have led him to speak in a way that put him at risk. I suggest that this is Frank's own way of engaging in parrhesia, and that the consequence of speaking in such a way about his convictions puts not only himself at risk, but his familial relationships at risk as well.

I have my own personal experiences similar to those expressed by these men. I recall sitting around my dinner table with friends and explaining the work I was doing in a poor black community. With all seriousness and concern one of my friends asked me if I carried a gun with me. It illuminated for me the chasm between the two worlds that I was moving between on a daily

basis. During my time working in that community I experienced a sense of failure in living up to my own ethical standards. But more than that, my immersion in black space, in direct relation with the Other, forced a kind of reckoning. No matter what I had read or studied up to that point, nothing could have prepared me for the encounters that I faced, where the address of the Other required me to confront my own constitution within a regime of neoliberal whiteness. And yet, the comment from my friend showed me that we were on two very different planes of existence, and that the commitments I had toward recognizing injustice was wholly incongruent with my white peers. I suspect that the men I interviewed, whose examples I have provided here, also wrestle with this tension, of knowing that the outlook, values, and commitments of our white loved ones are actually obdurate to the norms of recognition, whiteness, privilege, and are possibly, indeed likely, ontologically and epistemologically incommensurate with our own values. This is what makes the ethical commitment to parrhesia, to speaking up, to committing to a recognition of the Other, so risky. At some point these ethical commitments result in loss and it is then a matter of whether stepping outside, up to, or perhaps beyond the normative horizon is worth the risk.

### **5.3 Theme #2: Loss**

Some of the men I interviewed experienced *loss* of the kind mentioned by Butler (2005). In various ways, the participants committed themselves ethically towards a willingness to experience *loss*, however relative that loss may have been. Loss in this context means giving up of the self in some fashion and the creation of a new space at the normative horizon. Example of loss may be relational but also perhaps a loss of familiarity or comfortability with the status quo or taken-for-granted whiteness. The new knowledge gained through exposure to difference and the

recognition of the Other comes with an uncertainty. Engagement with uncertainty leads to one to dwell in the place of discomfort or obduracy to the norm. The consequence of my personal awakening was to dwell in uncertainty within the context of this research endeavor. For the men I interviewed, they refused the obduracy of the norms of whiteness by choosing to further engage difference and to commit themselves, in various ways, to resisting racial injustice.

There is also a connection between the norms of whiteness and neoliberal governmentality. Given that whiteness is reproduced under the governance of neoliberalism, I recognize from the interviews that these men represent examples of resistance to neoliberal governmentality. Humphrey (2017) has drawn the connection between whiteness and neoliberalism by stating that “the normativity of Whiteness camouflaged by centuries and centuries of unfettered privilege and access operates without recognition” (p. 22). Bonilla-Silva (2009) articulated the depth of colorblind racism, a manifestation of individualism and silence associated with neoliberal logic, as an agenda that maintains and re-inscribes the invisibility of whiteness. Humphrey makes the connection between neoliberalism and colorblind whiteness by stating that the latter is “a propaganda cultivated out of neoliberalism” that “urges us to accept White *innocence* through invisibility” where “innocence, like neoliberal policies and ideologies, disrupts and even stifles socially oriented thinking” (Humphrey 2017, p. 22). Whiteness, therefore, is marked by a colorblind refusal to socially oriented thinking as well as an aversion to remembrance of history. To step outside of the innocence of colorblindness would mean dwelling in a place of discomfort and, possibly, anxiety. Humphrey (2017) is worth quoting at length on this point:

Neoliberal movement towards individualistic frames of thinking privileges myth-making grounded in perspectives of individual social mobility devoid of historical narratives of privilege and White Supremacy. The privileging of mythmaking at the expense of accurate



historical reflection maintains the Dream and enables White hyper-invisibility to flourish, resulting in habitual ignorance as the norm. Forgetfulness facilitates violence and oppression against Black and Brown bodies to be viewed outside of a historical hegemony of oppression and violence, disconnecting the Dreamers from any awareness of oppressive systems. (p. 25)

Following Humphrey's logic, the converse of colorblind innocence is an ethical commitment to vigilance against the violence of normalization, which requires living in the anxiety of uncertainty (Applebaum, 2013; Butler, 2004). The men I interviewed showed themselves to stand contrary to the norms of neoliberal whiteness and its values of entrepreneurialism and individualism over social responsibility and public service. At the very least, service to the community through public education is but one way this is exemplified, but on a deeper level these men reiterated a commitment to losing a part of themselves in an effort to better understand those they work with and the broader social context within which whiteness, power, and privilege are operationalized.

As much as these men readily named and owned their whiteness, it is worth noting that none of the men suggested that their whiteness could be transcended or that they somehow could step outside of their whiteness. One of the more significant critiques of white anti-racism is that it often seems to suggest that white race traitors and anti-racism advocates are somehow better than other whites. While it has been noted that not all white experiences are the same, there remains an underlying attachment to the prevailing benefits of white identity regardless of gender, class, ableism, and so on. As Garner notes, "Not all white people have the same degree of power over all non-white people all the time, or in the same place" but "the uneven distribution of privilege does not invalidate the problematic" (p. 175). That is to say, white supremacy is pervasive all the time, regardless of how thinly it is availed relative to a particular white person's social position.

This is certainly a difficult case to make, however, given some of the responses white students have given to discussions of racism and whiteness in my teaching. A common refrain was either “I never owned slaves” or “I grew up poor”, both comments an attempt at mitigating their connection to white privilege and white supremacy. The point here is that white supremacy is utilized to maintain inequality in all social relations, including those among and between whites. Some whites do benefit from privilege more than other whites, but all whites benefit to some degree regardless.

I pressed several of the men with questioning about racial identity, white privilege, and the effects that their whiteness had on power relations in their life. Early on in my interviewing with Lucas, he said, “I don’t feel like I am a white male that is a product of the general white privilege schema in America”, suggesting that his experience was nuanced compared to the white middle-class norm. But he does acknowledge his whiteness, even if his experience is different than what he considers the average white experience, perhaps hinting at an understanding of white normalization. Lucas goes on to say:

I do know that I am a white man, regardless of the childhood that I had. Nobody sees all that stuff that took place for me growing up. All they know is that I am a white man. But, I know that I am living in a world that sees my children as white boys, you know. I have to be aware of that, even if I think that I am outside of the white privilege bubble. I do circle Caucasian as my race but I have always sort of been drawn to more racially diverse groups of people.

Lucas seems to be challenging the prevailing norms associated with the white experience, troubling the idea that his experience boxes him into a static category. Indeed, Lucas’ myriad experiences throughout his upbringing and into his early teaching career indicate that he was not

sheltered from difference, which enabled him to embrace it rather than run from it. And yet Lucas seems to struggle in terms of his reconciliation with a sociality that is outside of his control. As much as he wishes not to be attached to whiteness and what he calls the “white privilege bubble,” he understands that it is ultimately not of his choosing.

Wrestling with whiteness and agency was shared among the men. Marcus had an interesting take on whiteness by describing its connection between power and ignorance. He articulated a struggle to reconcile his attachment to whiteness with his desire for social justice and anti-racism:

Whiteness means power and privilege, and I think of fear at the forefront of whiteness, a fear of losing control that comes with power. I also think of blindness that comes with privilege. But when I think of whiteness I don't think of evil. I just think of our cultural realities and the blindness that comes with privilege. It's not that whiteness means a love of injustice. Rather, it may mean an ignorance of injustice, which leads to apathy. Personally, as a white man, I am working to give power away inasmuch as I'm in authentic relationship. It's just friendship. But, as much as I'm willing to engage in cultivating cross-cultural or cross-racial relationships in that way...man that's been hard.

Marcus recognizes his whiteness and the power and privilege that come with it. He also expresses his desire for authentic relationships that cross the cultural and racial divide. And yet, he links himself to the blindness that comes with privilege, alluding to the persistent challenges that come with harboring whiteness while also being interested in justice.

Marcus' sentiment is quite similar to the struggle that Lucas voiced in terms of his own experience trying to transcend an attachment to whiteness. Marcus alludes to experiencing opacity of the self. He suggests that fear, control, and power are all maintained by a state of white racial

ignorance, and that it is emotion to come to terms with that. He also seems to suggest that at the moment of recognition, when there is a coming to terms with opacity and complicity, there is also a moment of loss, where certitude, comfortability, and familiarity are put in flux. Marcus also commented on a willingness to experience pain (i.e. loss of comfort) and failure, which may very well represent the crux of what it means to yield to the opacity of the self.

In determining what my real motivation is, at the end of the conversation you're not trying to control the person, you're willing to let them go. And I'm not merely talking about a conversation, it might be a relationship. And that sounds like, well if it's love then the relationship is always going to be there. But I'll tell you man, there's been so much misunderstanding surrounding this issue. I've lost long relationships that didn't end in division or hate or disagreement. It was simply that we did not understand each other anymore. The relationship just kind of faded. I mean, we still might get coffee and talk about the weather, but the relationship isn't what we had before I came into some understanding of some things.

When Marcus also alludes to the desire of "not being ignorant toward this issue of whiteness and its effects on my life and my family, my spirituality, my worldview", he seems to suggest that recognition is a commitment towards *a practice* in his life. Along with that commitment he has come to recognize, respect, and perhaps even own the likelihood of failure. When he says that "there is an opportunity through failure to learn and grow", he is hinting at the idea that the self is never fully free, and yet never fully without agency.

The significance of recognizing the self's opacity is an emergence of a richer and more fuller being, one that is certainly more informed and, if we take Butler at her word, indeed more ethical. In considering the connection between the self's opacity and whiteness, there is a fluidity

to the white experience that can manifest in the expression of very different perspectives on white identity. Frank illustrates a good example of this when he suggests that there are different “shades of whiteness”, which seems to suggest an openness of the contingency of whiteness relative to space, language, and social context. For him, the way he operationalized his whiteness was contingent on where he was, but how his whiteness manifest as a form of power was consistent: white privilege pervades social situations even if the operationalization of whiteness takes on different forms across space and time. Of importance to the underlying question of this dissertation, I sought to find whether the pervasiveness of whiteness could in fact be resisted by whites themselves. If resistance is indeed possible in all social interactions (Foucault 1984; Hoy 2004) then it stands to reason that whiteness can be resisted and, perhaps, overturned. But the men I interviewed were skeptical of their ability to overcome whiteness. Frank, for example, conceded that whiteness and privilege, regardless of effort, are woven into the fabric of identity. Consequently, he suggested, resistance might be too totalizing of a word to use for how one engages with pushing back against whiteness and privilege:

As far as resisting whiteness and white privilege, I don't think it can be done. I mean, I guess in my own work when I'm doing this research and Critical Indigenous theory, I'm looking at it from different perspectives. But then, when I leave my office and I go into the real world, I still have that privilege, I still have that whiteness about me that has allowed me to maneuver as such for the past 35 years and continue to do so. I mean, I question things I see when I'm out at stores and things and question behaviors, or when I see things on TV, for example, I really start to process what messages are being sent. But then, that's pretty much it. I don't always speak up or act on it. I would just say I don't necessarily have to resist my whiteness in certain spaces, but I definitely am aware that it's there and it has

allowed me to reframe experiences and ways of looking at the events and the people around me.

Frank acknowledges his whiteness, as well as his capacity to find ways to push back against it, but also recognizes that he cannot separate himself from his privilege. It is always there, regardless of intentions. And yet, although Frank and the other men indicated an inability to resist whiteness and white privilege, many did suggest that their whiteness and privilege could be *interrupted*.

Rather than espousing a refusal of their identity, the participants indicated that an interruption of whiteness and privilege entailed a more cognizant and active living *with* their whiteness. Some of the men indicated that their whiteness was fluid in space and relative to context, even if they acknowledged that their identity was not a matter of agency. Frank's comments above are indicative of this. Other men suggested that they wanted everyone to have the same privilege regardless of race, social class, or gender, a perspective that in many ways speaks to an ethic of compassion and care, as well as to a desire for the marginalized to have equitable treatment. And yet it also speaks to a dilemma of working against one's privilege and the challenges associated with interrupting it. For example, two significant characteristics of privilege are trust and respect. That is, the privileged tend to be trusted and respected inherently as a social norm. However, trust and respect are positive relational qualities that are widely espoused. Certainly for the men I interviewed – all of whom imbue anti-racism in their work – trust and respect are foundational to what they view as an ethical leadership style. Their view of privilege and their model for ethical leadership are congruent. It makes sense, then, that a view of privilege tied to ethical leadership qualities is something difficult, or perhaps impossible, to resist. Privilege becomes something that one intends to provide for everyone. This kind of privilege, exemplified in characteristics of trust and respect, are not qualities that anyone wants to forego. To that end,

interrupting privilege very well might mean being intentional in extending trust and respect where it is otherwise rarely issued.

#### **5.4 Theme #3: Activism**

Citing an example of her own complicity in perpetuating whiteness through silence, Potter (2015) suggests that “white individuals have the ability and opportunity to use silence as a coping mechanism in denying one’s privilege in numerous situations” (p. 1445). The refusal to remain silent, to engage in activism against injustice with both words *and* deeds, represents an effective gesture toward seeking anti-racist social justice. By engaging in intentional community building with people of color, in spaces not dominated by white presence, the men I interviewed showed a commitment to disrupt normalized whiteness through their refusal to remain silent and passive. These men recognize that they cannot be removed from their whiteness and privilege, but that they must work within the frames of these signifiers to, in effect, challenge their veracity. Furthermore, their intentional efforts to seek out discomfort and to rupture their sense of familiarity stand as examples of how white innocence can be transcended, even if transcending whiteness is not conceivable.

Several examples from the participant narratives stand out in exemplifying activism. As was noted in Chapter 3, the stories provided by these men indicate that they each approach social justice and activism in unique ways. Marcus, for example, approached social justice activism through a Christian ministry lens, working in the community to forge new and effective relationships that were not tied directly to a church, but rather towards authentic bridge building

across the racial and social class divide. He explains the time it took, and continues to take, in building a network of authentic relationships through his work in the community:

Eight years of training ground for me in terms of ministry. I spent time daily in the streets learning from the community, just being with people and becoming friends in the city. I still lived in the suburbs at the time, but I was spending my days in the community just building relationships. That's what ministry looked like. There was that street presence, which is what we called it. Just being friends with the city. Learning from the city and allowing it to speak into who we were as a ministry. We wanted to come in and listen and *submit ourselves* to the city as much as we know how, as people of white privilege who rarely have to submit to anything.

Marcus is cognizant of his privilege, and it seems that his recognition of privilege is the very thing that helped motivate his efforts in forging authentic relationships in the city. The act of “submission” that he refers to is a kind of activism that pushes back against the norms in both the predominantly white community and the predominantly black community. Marcus recognizes that privilege is a barrier that needs to be addressed in moving toward anti-racist social justice.

Each of the men commented on their commitment to speaking up about racial injustice, often doing so as a critical praxis in their careers. For these men, it is not simply a matter of psychology or attitude in resisting racial injustice. Rather, it is about taking up activism as a vocational, and indeed ethical, commitment. Frank spoke to the complexity of actively working for social justice and the relative risks involved in doing so. In one of our conversations, I asked Frank whether his work in the community was risky, given that he was committed to anti-racism and social justice:



There was a risk in that I was breaking the mold and was standing up and speaking out against things that I thought weren't right. And I knew that there were going to be consequences if it didn't go my way. But, it wasn't like it was going to be life altering. I also knew that I could just find a teaching job somewhere else and continue what I was doing. Other people don't have that luxury.

Similar to Marcus' recognition of privilege, Frank also acknowledges that although he can easily find a job elsewhere, but his commitments remain the same. Frank expressed that standing back and remaining silent was not an option for his praxis. In a sense, Frank's privilege worked in service to his social justice commitments. Because he knew that there were other options waiting for him if he were to lose his job, it actually emboldened him to stand up and speak out against things that he thought were not right.

It would be easy to suggest that somehow these men have transcended their whiteness, that they are somehow operating outside of white normalization. Such a posture towards whiteness, and the suggestion of its transcendence, is warned against in the literature, notably by Ahmed (2004), Mayo (2010), and Thompson (2003), all of whom illuminate the challenges associated with whites claiming to resist their whiteness as well as those whites that engage in anti-racist work. While whites can, and should, engage in anti-racist work, it is altogether different to suggest that whiteness can be transcended. There are indeed dangers associated with whites taking up the task of conducting anti-racism. Regardless of one's intentions, there remain questions of whether whites can somehow move beyond their privilege and social status. Amidst the notable challenges, some have suggested that whites approach anti-racism in nuanced ways in order to effectively change the status quo. Both Martinot (2010) and Alcoff (2015) discuss the danger in viewing whiteness as monolithic, articulating instead a perspective where whiteness is historically and

spatially contingent. While all whites have privilege, for example, they all do not share the same privileges in the same way in every space.

In concluding this chapter, a key take-away is that transcending whiteness is too challenging an endeavor to take on for white anti-racists. However, there are some possibilities for interrupting whiteness through the use of nuanced and creative practices in which one owns their whiteness. Practices that work to interrupt whiteness by refusing to ignore white identity provide an opening towards altering oppressive conditions. The men I interviewed imbue openness, honesty, and vulnerability about their own experiences and in seeking understanding of/from others. They acknowledge their own fallibility, which undergirds most of the work of these men. They recognize that they don't have all the answers and that they are willing to learn from the Other in order to come to a place of better understanding the world. In most cases, the men were thrust into situations in which they had to negotiate their whiteness and "difference". Many of the men expressed challenges in talking with family and friends about their interest in working in communities of color. Sometimes retelling stories about how their parents resisted exposure to difference when they were younger. This resonated with me as I share this same experience of having difficult conversations with white friends and family who have not had the same kind of exposure to difference. I recall having friends over and sitting around the dinner table one of them asked me if I carried a gun to work given how dangerous it was. These men imbue openness, honesty, and vulnerability about their own experiences and in seeking understanding of/from others. They acknowledge their own fallibility, which undergirds most of the work of these men. They recognize that they don't have all the answers and that they are willing to learn from the Other in order to come to a place of better understanding the world.

## 6.0 Chapter 6: Conclusions and implications

*The educational task is to take the cover stories we as Americans tell ourselves and look to the back pages. We must teach what the cover stories hid, exposing and problematizing the 'hidden curriculum.' We do so for the sake of truth but not just for the sake of truth: Educational confession, including autobiographical confession...is for the sake of psycho-political movement, in order to create passages out of and away from the stasis of the historical present. (Pinar 2008, p. 39).*

*Ethics undermines its own credibility when it does not become critique (Butler 2005, p. 123).*

### 6.1 The progeny

In light of how my perspective continues to evolve since the events depicted in this dissertation, I am regularly faced with questions that remained unresolved but provide fertile ground for how I might approach future social relations. I continue to wonder, given what I know now, if I would have treated the Mr. Tibbs situation differently. To that end, would I have resigned? I almost certainly would have treated the situation differently but, of course, I cannot say with certainty how I would have responded and whether it would have been the right thing to do. And yet, to attempt to say how I might have responded to prior situations is not the point. To rehash the possibilities of what I could or should have done differently might be helpful to a degree. But what I know with certainty, however, is that I am different now. I am, indeed, constantly evolving and the events of my past are, over time, continually changing as I encounter new ideas, themes,

problems, and voices that allow me to re-interpret my experiences. I engaged the vignettes of my experiences not to find solutions or answers to the problems, but rather to open those experiences up to scrutiny and new possibilities. While I may not have realized it at the time, my hope with going deep into my experiences was always to shed more light onto the future, as well as to recursively make use of the present in order to reillumine the past. I will never fully know what my previous experiences mean. Indeed, they continue to mean many things and will always mean different things at different times. But to this point, and moving forward, I stand committed to revision.

I have been clear that this project is not interested in positivist objectives to find a “real”, definitive, or final self. The methodological choice to use personal narrative is informed by my interest in advancing a theory of the self that is fluid, at times plural, and always historically contingent. A personal narrative methodology focuses “on the development of the self as it forms through intense interaction with others” (Pinar, 2008, p. 54). At the heart of this study is my troubling dilemma concerning how interactions are shaped along racial lines and how whiteness is negotiated. If white men are, as George Yancy (2016) suggests, always already racist and sexist even in spite of their best intentions, how then might we also be ethical and responsible in spite of our racist and sexist subjectivity? Cognizant of the risks in taking on such an inquiry, personal narrative resonated as one of the most viable methods for coming to terms with the self’s complicity in racism and sexism but also in the possibilities for potentially rupturing the racist and sexist status quo. I continue to look at personal narrative and autobiographical excavation as responsible engagement with difference that opens up innumerable possibilities for changing the self and the status quo. Furthermore, I make use of personal narrative in recognizing that selfhood is reliant on others as a matter of existence, and therein lies the locus of responsibility. Pinar

(2004) hints at such responsibility by suggesting that:

Serious autobiography is possible only when the individual does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community...[where] lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being. (p. 38)

Throughout this dissertation, my attempts at authenticity have been made through a refusal of detachment from self and other, resisting the positivist temptation to find a true and authentic self, and to remain flexible to the possibility of where the method takes me. The vignettes offered in this study have served to push forward a value of being *in relation* to others through an intense engagement with daily life, and to trouble the notions that our identities are fixed, that whiteness is immovable, and that resistance is futile.

## **6.2 Connection to the social foundations of education**

This conceptual, philosophical project is rooted in the Social Foundations of Education. Scholars working in Social Foundations of Education have traditionally drawn from interpretive, normative and critical perspectives from within humanities disciplines to advance their inquiry. My effort here has been to situate this study within the field of Social Foundations by critically examining the ethics of whiteness and the impact of whiteness on ethical subjectivity. I have presented vignettes of personal accounts crafting, maintaining, and critiquing whiteness. I have also drawn from the experiences of men where they negotiated their whiteness while working in

predominantly non-white spaces (e.g. African American and Native American). My ultimate claim out of this investigation is that the work needed to be done with regard to advancing social justice and equity in our schools and communities must first begin with a critical examination of the self and its place in the matrix of power relations. The self is indeed fluid and contingent, but still socially responsible (Butler, 2005). And yet, a major claim I advance is that the self is responsible, but responsibility is situationally and contextually contingent. That does not suggest moments of willful irresponsibility, but rather that the responsibility we hold at any moment is relative to a matrix of factors. It is incumbent upon the self to remain critical, and vigilantly so, to an ethical style of living (Applebaum, 2013; Butler, 2005; Foucault, 2008).

### **6.3 Overview of intentions for the project**

I began this inquiry by going back to my own lived experience for understanding. It was not enough to go forward in finding an answer to the research question without first looking how I arrived in this present moment and understanding what my life history has meant for the questions at hand. To that end, I have learned a lot, and continue to do so, about how my upbringing impacts the present. The questions I seek to answer are largely informed by what I have experienced and how my experience has laid a foundation for my ontological and epistemological commitments. I have learned through this inquiry that those foundational commitments are not, however, set in stone. I am constantly becoming and in continual refinement. What this means is that as influential as my life history is for informing my present, my present is also pushing back against my history. The importance that experience has on how I live in the present is in constant evolution.

#### **6.4 Concluding remarks on findings**

Several conclusions can be drawn from this research that are relevant for the field of education. First, I lay down a foundational claim that ethical commitments to social justice and equity can be cultivated by self-examination and scrutiny, especially for those in power. This study focused on white males, individuals at the very top of most social hierarchies. The narrative portrayals within this study indicate that experiences concerning identity formation, social justice, and power are layered and not always easily understood. Indeed, the very meaning we make of personal experience evolves, requiring continual re-vision and analysis. The style of self-analysis that I advance in this dissertation is not limited to academic formalism. Rather, it is embodied in a praxis of critique, an attitude and a posture, perhaps a style, that is vigilant against normalization and taken-for-granted assumptions.

My use of an interpretive and autobiographical methodology is intentional. Experience in academia has taught me that positivist, quantitative methodologies are still considered the “gold standard” of academic research (Denzin, 2009; Pascale, 2010). I have actively worked against this assumption, and this dissertation is, hopefully, exemplary of the potential value in utilizing qualitative, interpretive, and autobiographical methodologies to better understand complex social phenomena. Of course, the inherent value of any methodology resides in its assumptive epistemological commitments. I have laid out the post-structural foundation of the project and its attendant ontological and epistemological assumptions. If knowledge really is contingent and relational, as I suggest, then social science research that advances new knowledge claims would be well-served by methodologies that rely on the experiential excavation of the researcher’s life history. In fact, forgoing such an inquiry with regard to racialization might be considered a missed opportunity. At the very least, what I have explicated in this dissertation is a value in identifying

the importance of recognition for the researcher and the potential for what self-study can illuminate with regard to new ways of knowing.

Working in a predominantly poor black community as a white man led me to trouble the idea that I could be effective in my work given the inherent complications associated with white supremacy and white privilege. I wondered how it was possible to ethically conduct social justice work while bearing the weight of my white subjectivity, which, regardless of my intentions or desires, acted upon me in ways that were well out of my control. My greatest concern was the perpetuation of the very problem that I was trying to address, that my anti-racist work in the community was in fact furthering racism and leading to further marginalize and oppress those individuals of color that I worked with and for.

Whiteness is complicated. As a subjectivity it is lived variably, relative to space and context. Although I suggest that the idea of a monolithic white experience is oversimplified, I do not go so far as to say that whiteness is without pervasive reach. Indeed, whiteness must be resisted. This study suggests that the white experience, which might or might not include growing up in segregated white space, often leads to myriad outcomes and perspectives relative to context. The men who participated in this study expressed varied life trajectories even as they shared similar commitments to equity and social justice. Some grew up with very little exposure to difference, while others were immersed in contexts with an abundance of difference.

Drawing on the interpretations from personal narratives, I come to the conclusion that in order for social justice and equity to be fully realized the self must first *rupture* or journey from home in order to be awakened from its normalized slumber. In U.S. society so entrenched with white supremacy and persistent class and racial segregation, one of the surest ways for the self to advance towards ethical social justice is to transcend that segregation and immerse oneself in



difference of some kind. Doing so, as evidenced from this research project, opens the self-up to scrutiny and new ways of knowing and being. In a sense, fissures are opened at the horizon of normativity (Butler, 2005).

## **6.5 Moving forward with anti-racism: Parting words**

The texts that emerge from this study – the personal narrative portrayals – collectively represent an anti-racist counternarrative against the normalization of colorblindness, whiteness, and privilege. Although anti-racist counternarratives are often associated with African American, Chicano/Chicana, and Native American resistance movements, I use narratives in this study to achieve similar goals for white narrators: to push back against the oppressive conditions of whiteness and to interrupt privilege in service to social justice. I certainly do not make use of counter-narratives to suggest the oppression of whites per se, but rather to make a connection between the various ways that whiteness is challenged from multiple sides. Indeed, the narratives told by the men in this study illustrate some of the unique ways that whiteness is resisted. It does make it particularly nuanced given that the narrators are men in power. This does not mean, however, that the men do not face their own arrangement of challenges and risks associated with speaking back and acting out against systemic oppression.

Anti-racist counter-storytelling comes with particular risks for those in marginalized groups. Similarly, whites who speak out in tandem with marginalized groups against oppressive conditions potentially face backlash as a consequence of their storytelling. Of course, the risks that whites face in seeking social justice are sure to be nuanced relative to social conditions, cultural norms, and local context, especially when compared to the potential risks faced by narrators from

marginalized groups. There is a long history of white *race traitor* testimonies from those that have pushed back in unison with the marginalized against an oppressive status quo (Segrest, 2019; Wolfson, 2019). The counter-narrative of white male resistance to normalization that comprises this study is a part of that ongoing legacy.

Martinot (2010) suggests that “for the white anti-racist, there is an ethics involved in not seeing below the surface. There is an ethics in ignoring the underlying social machinery or taking it for granted” (p. 3). However, the men I interviewed stood in contrast to this characterization of white anti-racism and Martinot’s suggestion of ethical ignorance of deeper structural factors. In fact, several of the men were very specific about addressing structural factors in their comments and acknowledged the ways in which the social structure continues to bolster white supremacy. Indeed, their ethical commitments seems to stand in contrast to white supremacy, rather than in toe with it. For Martinot, it would seem, anti-racist whites need to somehow go beyond race in order for their actions to truly transcend the racist social structure. To do so, Martinot suggests a “reverse double consciousness,” which is characterized as whites:

seeing themselves not as the norm but rather as the oppressors that they are in the eyes of those they oppress and racialize. It would be to see their hegemony, their dominance, their pretense to privilege through the eyes of those who suffer from it. This is not a question of guilt, but rather of seeing who one is, and who one is made to be, by one’s position, one’s role, and one’s complicity in the machinery of whiteness. (Martinot, 2010, p. 185)

Ethical whiteness, therefore, is a commitment to recognizing one’s inherent power, privilege, and dominance and making moves (rhetorical, political, physical, etc.) that perhaps complicate those relations, if not upend them altogether. This, of course, is a similar suggestion to what Butler is

advancing with opacity and ethical responsibility, where the self recognizes its own complicity in a structure that is not of their making.

My conversations with the participants concerning the recognition of their implication in racism are expressed saliently in Martinot's reverse double consciousness and Butler's opacity. To that end, whiteness was expressed not as a monolithic and uniform experience or set of experiences, but rather as a shifting and elusive performance that is constantly in need of challenge and reevaluation. I too recognize this in my own experiences, as I review those key moments when race emerged as a critical component to certain incidents, not least those narrated in this dissertation, where the clarity of what happened, and the weight that race and power and privilege had on those incidents, has shifted over time. Alcoff (2015) suggests that "whiteness is...produced by a complex of historical events, rather than a single originary moment...whiteness is far from ontologically empty: it is a historically emergent lived experience, variegated, changing, and changeable" (p. 8). How to be ethical while being white has proven to be challenging, not least because of the variability of whiteness and its elusive nature, but also because with time my perspective continues to evolve.

From the outset, I have been interested in reformulating a better understanding of whiteness and how to live ethically committed to social justice. It always seemed, however, that my perspective on whiteness and how to be ethical was "messy", flawed, incomplete, and, frankly, wrong. The implication moving forward is not only to reformulate new understandings, but to remain open-minded and flexible to new ways of being. My chief concern has always been that I somehow come to a place of resolution, or perhaps to a place of certainty, about the effects of whiteness and my place in a white-dominated world. I have attempted to resist that temptation and to resist leaning on certitude as a valid response to racism. To this end, I share with Alcoff (2015)

the belief that the philosopher's task is "to develop an adequate conceptual repertoire, and to advocate for the future" (p. 37). I take this to mean that the white anti-racist philosopher's role is not to come to a final set of beliefs, but rather to take up a commitment to continually evolving thought that recognizes how fluid and uncertain our future is with racism. It is a posture of cautious optimism: the work ahead is challenging and the territory foreign, but there is hope for social relations that are more humane and socially just than we currently experience.

It goes without saying that the vignettes in this dissertation have gone through several revisions. Those revisions relative to my evolving anti-racist commitments are of critical importance. I began this journey with what I thought was a firm understanding of my previous experiences. I carried with that initial set of interpretations the weight of guilt, shame, and unreasonable responsibility expressed in the early drafts of my story telling. While I readily claimed a commitment to open and fluid interpretations of life experiences, in truth I showed myself to have what seemed like set-in-stone beliefs about race, racism, identity, and social justice. This, of course, is a contradiction to what I thought I believed and what I openly espoused. The initial telling of my stories revealed that I carried the weight of personal responsibility and shame that was unreasonable given the situations I recollected. I was simply way too hard on myself. I had not given much thought or credence to the idea that there were other factors at play that were way outside of my control, that other people share responsibility in social relations, and that working at the intersection of race, gender, and social class identity is fraught with misunderstandings that I had no way of fully understanding at the time.

Engaging in conversations with the participants, however, has led me to new understandings of what the vignettes mean and how I can move forward with new social relations that share similarities with regard to racial, gendered, and/or social class differences. One of the

ways that I can do this moving forward is to accept my mistakes, regardless of intentions. My initial take on the incidents depicted in the vignettes was that my mistakes were epic failures, and my response to those failures was to berate myself about having allowed them to happen at all. That kind of perfection-seeking is not only unrealistic but also dangerous, as it runs the risk of disallowing room for learning. The presupposition that mistakes are failures inherently presupposes that whiteness, identity, and power are immobile. As I have learned throughout this process, however, social relations, which include the composition of our various identities, are far too dynamic for us to pin down with any certainty. How our relations can or should be is indeed relative. Accepting uncertainty, or maybe a vigilant stance against certainty, fosters the possibility for changing the status quo.

Another dilemma moving forward is how to be ethical in the midst of uncertainty. After all, if the nature of our social relations is that they are contingent and fluid, then to what extent is vigilance against certainty meaningful, or, at best, fruitful in generating positive social change? On the one hand, in being consistent with my posture towards uncertainty, I am inclined to say, “I don’t know.” In truth, I really do not have the answer. But I do find the semblance of an answer in the conversations I had with the men involved in this study. The varied experiences of these men, taken together, show that there are innumerable responses to addressing one’s whiteness and in turn working towards social justice in the midst of difference. Each of the men offered insight into how racism is experienced and dealt with, how whiteness is performed and combated, and how privilege is inescapable. They also illuminated how the responses to whiteness, racism, and privilege can take on many forms, which each offering a varied account of how they are continuing to move forward as white anti-racist educators. In so many ways these men have given me hope in the possibility of a brighter, more just future. In reflecting on my own stories of privilege,

whiteness, and racism, I cannot help but infuse the stories of the men involved in this study. Their stories have irrevocably altered not only how I view my own past, but how I see the present and envision the future. What I see as a result of engaging with the stories of these participants is a less individualistic account of experience, replaced instead by a much more relational and polyphonic perspective. It is not all on me. Rather, I am imbricated in a web of meaning, of voices, of language, and ultimately of circumstances that are much bigger than myself. So, while I do have agency, that agency is tinged with responsibility brought on by my opacity to the web in which I am imbricated. Moving forward, I am empowered by the fact of my unknowingness, which, I believe, opens up infinite possibilities for what the future holds.

## **6.6 Discussions with the men: Important takeaways**

My intention in using participant interviews was to get beyond the kind of limitations of only focusing on my story. This intention is connected to my chief concept of opacity in that conducting participant interviews helps me to appreciate aspects of *my own* opacity. By stepping back and talking to the men involved in this study, which meant engaging in relational knowing, I have been able to see that they went through some of these same struggles that I did. Furthermore, because some of the participants have different histories, especially those that I highlight in Chapter 3, I can appreciate how I am situated as a self differently than they are. The project has sought the different ways that white men committed to social justice have been constituted and how they have responded to coming to appreciate that self-constitution. The participant interviews have helped me to complicate my theorizing about social justice and whiteness, leading me to crystalize aspects of my own narrative. That being said, this certainly is not the definitive reading

of that situation as it currently stands. However, it is a new reading, and it affirms the importance for relational knowing.

Engaging in relational knowing leads to new and more profound understanding of our own experiences. The relation is critically important. Recognition of the Other's opacity helped me to recognize aspects of my own opacity. I see that there are myriad ways to do social justice, but more importantly, my conversations with the men illustrate the significance of the relations and the dual nature of opacity. Opacity means we cannot fully know, so we must not beat ourselves up. There will be failure along the way, but the response must be activism rather than passivity. To do nothing is a form of complicity in the status quo, a tacit approval of white supremacy. Opacity also means responsibility. Specifically, opacity must lead to being more careful and aware of how harm is done to others. Recognizing one's whiteness and privilege is a starting point. However, whites must be on the lookout for ways that actions lead to relational collateral damage. The stories I provide from my own experiences are illustrative of this point, showing how a good intention attached to certitude often leads to misunderstanding and, potentially, the perpetuation of racism.

Finally, social justice is not tied to a particular action, but rather to a refusal of certitude. Moving forward in recognition of opacity and in service to anti-racist social justice will likely lead to more questions than answers. However, I believe that seeking a better future filled with uncertainty is actually far more hopeful of an endeavor than seeking utopia.

## **6.7 Implications for future research and practice**

There is certainly a great deal more to be understood at the intersection of whiteness studies and education. The narratives depicted in this dissertation are only a snapshot of what was

ultimately collected. The remainder of those data, especially the stories collected from the five men not featured in Chapter 4, offer possibility for further developing of new understandings and concepts related to whiteness and racial subjectivity. The data continue to speak, well beyond the conclusion of this study. As I have illustrated in reexamining my narrative through the participant stories, the way in which particular experiences are understood changes relative to each new reading. The way in which my own story changed as I engaged in conversation with the men suggests that *relational knowing* is powerful in shaping one's perspective on historical experiences, the result of which is the potential for future change. That potential for change gives me hope and illustrates the possibility for what future research might look like in the context of focusing on relational knowing through narrative inquiry.

This study focused on the experiences of white men coming to terms with their whiteness and their efforts in actualizing social justice in work. There is certainly potential for studies in a similar vein. With racial segregation a continual part of American day-to-day life, mining the experiences of educators and administrators to gain an even better understanding of how racial subjectivity materializes in nuanced ways. Activist research that seeks to move the needle on equity in schools would be well served in taking up autobiographical projects, where students and teachers engage in life history or scholarly personal narratives to illuminate new understandings of subjectivation.

There are opportunities for taking up similar research to better understand whiteness in predominantly white communities. Now more than ever we need a richer and more nuanced understanding of how whiteness operates in white spaces. This study illustrates how personal narrative gives each participant the time and space to tell their experiences, to tap into the critical events of their upbringing, and to articulate their ethical values and commitments with regard to



racialization, power, and recognition. I remain troubled by the thought that whiteness is more complicated than the messages coming from the academic literature and the media. This study has further convinced me that too much of what is discussed about race and whiteness is in need of more nuanced perspectives. We need to enrich the dialogue.

To the extent that more conversations on racism, whiteness, and privilege need to be had, I see the potential for professional development with educators that engages with personal narrative and anti-racist counter-storytelling in practice. Too often, educators are led through professional development sessions where their voices are rarely heard. This study shows how engagement with story and speaking one's truth lead to enriching and insightful understandings. Giving educators a space to practice telling their own story and, in turn, engaging with the stories of others might facilitate learnings that lead to meaningful professional development.

While this study might provide possibilities for creating meaningful avenues for new and interesting professional development, I am hesitant to suggest that the findings from the study might lead to specific curricular implementations. That being said, there certainly might be possibilities for engaging students in writing and storytelling workshops that leverage personal narrative in ways that allow spaces for counter-storytelling to emerge. To the extent that counter-narratives emerge within a classroom setting given any particular pedagogical approach, there is value in the exposure that those narratives bring to those who are willing to listen. In an age when curricular and pedagogical norms are situated primarily around *objective* educational outcomes, it may be increasingly difficult, and consequently risky, to create educational spaces for the kind of narrativization that I am suggesting. However, as the men in this study illustrate through their own storytelling, resistance to normalization in service to social justice offers the potential for rewards that outweigh the risks.

There is significant value in taking up projects that facilitate relational engagement across difference. That certainly does not necessarily mean differences associated with race, as I have done with this study, but for any of the myriad intersections of difference for which we have personal barriers to understanding. As I have indicated throughout these pages, the intersection of race continues to be a prominent site of misunderstanding and, consequently, marginalization and oppression. But there is much to be learned at the intersections of any number of social categories that sort and divide us, not least gender, sexuality, and social. At any of these intersections, the process of critical reflexivity creates an opportunity for even greater understanding through engagement with experience. Indeed, I suggest that engagement across difference is an ethical responsibility for those committed to seeking social justice.

As much as I have drawn from dialoguing with the participants, I conclude the study with many more questions than answers. Whiteness is elusive by design, and as much as I have come to better understand its consequences, I'm still left with uncertainty about the complexity of its manifestations. The inability to fully understand whiteness is simply a part of being constitutively limited. My opacity to whiteness provides an avenue towards a shared responsibility. So, although I cannot fully grasp whiteness, I can continue pushing towards a more ethical and just version of my white self but only in relation to the Other. Although it may be a letdown for some readers to finish with uncertainty about moving forward with definitive answers, hope remains for those interested in advancing a research agenda that is reflexive. Critical resistance to certitude means that there is always more to the story.

That whiteness is elusive does not preclude it from requiring investigation. Taking up the challenge to better understand whiteness and the particulars of white subjectivity is critical to realizing a more ethical and just existence. There may not be a definitive way of practicing social

justice. However, this study illustrates that although social justice is varied, the underlying stance towards critique and questioning can lead to new knowledge. In 2005 David Foster Wallace gave a commencement speech at Kenyon College in which he told graduates that, “important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about” and that “blind certainty...amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up” (Wallace, 2009, p. 77). These sentiments echo what I done with this study through narrative storytelling; to expose the dangers of certainty and to highlight how some of the most important realities remain hidden from plain site. I have taken up the task of interrogating those hidden realities, exposing them and holding them under scrutiny.

The path that I took to get to insightful interpretations was not what I originally had planned. Getting there actually required my engagement with the participants in the study, and the exposure to their ways of knowing. Through their stories, I came to a greater appreciation for my own story, and began to see my story in new ways. Illuminating the dangers of blind certainty and unearthing the complexities of hidden realities is one of the major takeaways from this study. But another more important piece is what can be done moving forward, not just with an academic course of action but in day-to-day life. A stance towards critique seems obvious. And while I have made it clear that there are no obvious answers, there is an opening for engaging in relational knowing as a strategy towards self-improvement and achieving social justice.

## Appendix

### Interview protocol<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this interview is to develop an understanding about how white male educators understand and address whiteness in their work. As someone who is involved in research and education regarding whiteness, you are in a unique position to provide key insights into how social justice educators conceptualize whiteness and explore it in teaching/training/leading. And that is what this interview is about: your thoughts, insights, and experiences regarding how you conceptualize whiteness in your role as an social justice educator.

The answers from all the people I interview will be combined for this dissertation. Nothing you say will ever be identified with you personally. As we go through the interview, if you have any questions about why I am asking something, please feel free to ask. Or if there is anything you do not want to answer, just say so.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

#### **Interview 1 –Rapport Building (focused life history): Explore life history and interest in working towards social justice.**

- What kind of work do you do?
- How did you get to where you are today?
- How do you describe your education background?
- What has education meant for you?
- Can you describe your journey in doing this work?
- Who was your biggest influence growing up?
- What do your parents do?
- What are some key events in your past that have influenced you today?
- What led you to become an educator?
- How do you identify yourself racially?
- What is your ethnic background?
- What is your religious background?
- How has your religious background impacted you?

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<sup>1</sup> Interview protocol developed in part from Burchell, M. (2006). *The construction of whiteness by white anti-racism educators*. Unpublished dissertation, UMASS Amherst and Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. Teachers College Press.

**Interview 2 – Anti-Racism and/or Social Justice Education: Explore the details of their practice/experience (avoid opinions).**

- What is it like to work in this community?
- What, specifically, do you do day-to-day? Can you reconstruct a typical day?
- Can you talk about the key relationships that you've developed in your work?
- What are the challenges that you face in your job?
- What are the successes that you have had?
- Have you been able to build trust with members of the community? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Do you consider your work to be social justice activism?
- How does your identity influence or impact your [anti-racism] work? Why?
- What key concepts or models guide your anti-racism teaching/leadership? Have these changed over time? If so, how?
- What do you believe are the key learning goals or outcomes? Have these changed over time? If so, how?
- Can you describe your teaching/leadership style as an anti-racism educator/leader? Has this changed over time? If so, what influenced these changes?
- How do you sustain your energy and commitment to this work?

**Interview 3 – Whiteness: Reflecting on the meaning of whiteness.**

- Given what you have said about your life before you became a teacher and given what you have said about your work now, how do you understand Whiteness in your life? What sense does it make to you?
- How do you define whiteness? What are its critical components?
- How have you come to this definition? How has your understanding and experience of whiteness changed since you've begun this work?
- What role does whiteness play in your work? How do you teach whiteness?
- What are the key concepts in understanding how to interrupt whiteness? How does this understanding inform your anti-racism teaching/leadership?
- How do you make sense of where you are now, given how you've gotten here?
- Where do you see yourself going in the future?

Closure: Anything you would like to add that you think is important to my understanding of whiteness? Do you have any questions for me in particular?

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