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An Unexamined Life: White Male Racial Ignorance and the Agony of Education for Students of Color

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ABSTRACT
This article critically analyzes the narratives of 62 White male undergraduates at a single institution about their views on race and experiences with racism. It is framed by Mills’ (1997) conception of Whiteness that is founded upon an inverted epistemology or an epistemology of ignorance. Therefore, this analysis centers the ways in which White male undergraduates concurrently downplay the contemporary significance of White privilege while examining the role college experiences have at reinforcing this structured ignorance. The themes from their interviews included: (1) White ignorance and White identity as meaningless; (2) Evasive White racial ignorance; and (3) Racial arrested development and racial regression. These findings emphasize the need to creatively challenge White males to develop their racial selves, especially because their ignorance fuels the linguistic and physical violence Students of Color regularly experience.

There is an adage attributed to Socrates that “the unexamined life is not one worth living.” When the subjects of racism and racial privilege enter this formulation, things change dramatically. For White people, an unexamined racial existence helps make minority life expendable (Malewski & Jaramillo, 2011; Mills, 1997). That is, White racial ignorance is not just about a lack of self-awareness; their collective ignorance is a foundation of anti-People of Color racism (Applebaum, 2010). The racial dynamics of society at large frequently play out on college campuses (Cabrera, 2009; Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017). So how endemic is structured racial ignorance within higher education? This is a critically important question because institutions of higher education paradoxically serve as important sites that recreate racial inequality, and occasionally function as locales that generate some important challenges to systemic racism (Cabrera, 2009).

Just as Whiteness remains largely invisible to White people within the institutional cultures of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), it is also under-researched in the higher education scholarship (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017). Much of the foundational literature in higher education serves to center the viewpoints and knowledge of White men (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017; Morawski, 2004), but this literature lacks the critical analysis necessary to identify and challenge the oppressive role that Whiteness has on the student experience (Harper, 2012). To begin to address this void, while also critically examining the role of higher education in perpetuating racial stratification, the current research draws upon interviews conducted with 62 White undergraduate men at the University of Arizona during the 2014–2015 academic year. White men are the specific focus of this analysis because they hold disproportionate social power to both re-create and sometimes disrupt systemic racism (Cabrera, 2014d). Their narratives allow us to explore the ways that these men (mis)understand, or willfully ignore, their...
individual racial identities and the larger social impact of Whiteness and White privilege on campus. Interpreting these transcripts through Mills’ (1997) framework of epistemologies of ignorance, we shine a light on the discursive strategies White men use to avoid or ignore conversations around racism and Whiteness. Lastly, we examine the critical role that institutions of higher education can and should play in the challenging of Whiteness on their campuses.

**Racial analyses in higher education: From the “diversity rationale” to critical Whiteness**

How do higher education scholars study issues of race and racism? According to Harper (2012), they do not. That is, race is frequently used as a dichotomous variable in a regression model or a descriptor of personal identity, but the analyses are overwhelmingly divorced from the realities of systemic racism (Harper, 2012). Therefore, in this review of literature, we begin by highlighting how race is often framed within higher education scholarship, in particular through non-critical multiculturalism such as the “diversity rationale” (Denson & Chang, 2009). We then introduce critical race theory (CRT) in higher education as the central framework through which issues of racism and White supremacy have been explored. Lastly, we present a related framework, critical Whiteness studies (CWS), and explain how studies using this frame compliment the contributions of CRT scholars, thus positioning this article at the intersection of higher education, CRT, and CWS.

The bulk of multicultural analyses in higher education highlight the so-called diversity rationale, which explores the educational benefits of diversity to all students (e.g., Antonio, 2001; Bowman, 2009, 2010; Chang, 2002; Denson & Chang, 2009; Engberg, 2004; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003; Jayakumar, 2008; Milem, 1994; Milem & Umbach, 2003; Milem, Umbach, & Liang, 2004). These analyses often stress the social learning that comes from compositional diversity (i.e., the proportion of Students of Color on campus), cross-racial interactions, and diverse curricular offerings (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). The diversity rationale originated in the 1978 Supreme Court affirmative action case of Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, where racial diversity became an educational compelling interest to the extent that there was a link between diversity and student learning. Although the diversity rationale is a foundation of pro-affirmative action legal arguments (Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 2003), it sends two troubling messages. First, increasing the representation of Students of Color on campus is only permissible to the extent that it also benefits White students’ learning (i.e., interest convergence; Taylor, 2000). Second, there is no critical engagement with racism within this vein of scholarship (Cobham & Parker, 2005).

When scholars meaningfully engage systemic racism within the field of higher education, it tends to be an application of CRT (Harper, 2012). Scholars who approach their work through CRT simultaneously endeavor to uplift the voices of Students of Color, explore ways that White supremacy continues to structure educational inequality, and look for ways to challenge and transform these oppressive conditions (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, and Lynn (2004) describe CRT as “an analytical framework that examines and challenges the effects of race and racism on educational structures, practices, and discourses” (p. 4). Specifically as it pertains to the study of higher education, the work of CRT scholars demonstrates the importance of experiential knowledge within Communities of Color and challenges higher education scholars to think more broadly about what constitutes scholarship (e.g., Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, & Arrona, 2012; Osei-Kofi, Torres, & Lui, 2012). Other analyses have highlighted racism in educational policy, in particular involving segregation and affirmative action (e.g., Love, 2004; Taylor, 2000). A third strand of higher education/CRT scholarship analyzes the impact of racial microaggressions on Students of Color (e.g., Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Maylor, 2009; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Rollock, 2012; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). All of these have been critically important in highlighting and challenging racism within institutions of higher education, but few critically engage Whiteness (Cabrera, 2014d).

CRT examines the effects of racial marginalization on minoritized communities, and CWS centers analyses that explore how this marginalization occurs from the perspective of the racially privileged. CWS work can be found in many social science disciplines, however the bulk of the scholarship tends to emerge from sociology (Bonilla Silva, 2006; DuBois, 1920), philosophy (Mills, 1997;
Yancey, 1996), history (Allen, 1997; Painter, 2011), and education (Cabrera, 2009; Leonardo, 2009; Matias, 2016; McIntyre, 1997). When contextualizing CWS it is important to make a clear distinction between Whiteness and White people. Leonardo argued that “‘Whiteness’ is a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘White people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color” (2002, p. 31). Most of the analyses that take this approach in higher education focus on the development of racial justice allies or White people who use their White privilege to challenge racism (e.g., Cabrera, 2012; Patton, Bondi, 2015; Reason, Broido, 2005; Reason, Broido, Davis, & Evans, 2005; Tatum, 1994). While these are important, they do little to understand how White students are perpetuators of racism, which is essentially CWS minus the “C.” There are a few exceptions.

For example, within the last two decades, some scholars have offered critiques of White racism through discussions of White saviorism among preservice teachers (e.g., Hytten & Warren, 2003; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; McIntyre, 1997; Sleeter, 2001; Titone, 1998). Additionally, Cabrera (2014b) has explored how White male students partake in and justify the use of racist jokes in racially homogenous, White campus environments. He additionally documented the ways that White male undergraduates on a racially diverse college campus expressed racist beliefs about Asian-American students (Cabrera, 2014a). Cabrera (2014c) also explored White male racial emotions in relation to seeing themselves as targets of “reverse racism.” Finally, there are a number of analyses that engage the intersection of race and space in higher education settings that tend to prioritize White racial comfort at the expense of the racial safety of Students of Color (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Fox, 2007; Fine, 2004; Gusa, 2010). These interrogations of Whiteness in the ivory tower are few in number, which means there are numerous gaps to fill at the intersection of higher education/CRT/CWS. Unlike CRT, CWS does not offer a coherent theoretical orientation, but is rather a lens that scholars from a variety of disciplines apply to their research (e.g., Leonardo, 2009; Mills, 1997; Yancey, 1996). Therefore, we use one specific concept from CWS to orient this manuscript: epistemology of ignorance.

**Theorizing racial ignorance and racial violence**

To frame this analysis, we utilized Mills’ notion of epistemology of ignorance to explore the various discursive mechanisms that White men use to avoid engaging with issues of race. Mills (1997) uses the concept of the Racial Contract to describe the unspoken agreement among White individuals to establish and maintain a society that centers White supremacy. A core component of the Racial Contract, Mills (1997) argued, is that Whiteness relies on an inverted epistemology or an epistemology of ignorance. This ignorance is more than the colloquial “not knowing,” as Applebaum (2010) argues, “it involves not just ‘not knowing’ but also ‘not knowing what one does not know’ and believing that one knows” (p. 39). Frequently, this ignorance serves to shift the discussion from the nature of contemporary racism to centering perceptions of “reverse racism” or individualizing racism as opposed to framing it as a systemic reality (Cabrera, 2011, 2014d). This ignorance allows White people to dismiss claims of racism or view them as isolated and individualized. It also encourages White people to ignore and discredit claims of racism, as if closing their eyes and covering their ears to the possibility that systemic racism still exists will make it disappear (i.e., color-blind racism; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Mills (1997) refers to this as an “invented delusional world” (p. 18). Taking epistemologies of ignorance one step further Malewski and Jaramillo (2011) argue, “the idea is not merely ‘to reflect on where ignorance has transpired’ but to ‘change the damaging consequences of ignorance’” (p. 17). That is, it is not simply that White people have a racial ignorance, but that that ignorance also adversely affects People of Color. For White male students in a college environment, this means exploring the mechanisms that allow race to be ignored as well as the discursive practices that downplay the significance of race when causal ignorance is not possible and searching for methods to disrupt this ignorance.

**Methodology: Talking with White guys about racism**

The current analysis is part of a larger research project at the University of Arizona (UA), which explores the perspectives and understandings that White male undergraduate students have of issues of race,
racism, and Whiteness in society. White men were selected because, coming from a positionality of racial hyperprivilege (Cabrera, 2011), they hold disproportionate societal power to either reinforce or sometimes challenge existing social hierarchies (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003). Also, male-identified college students are strongly over-represented in code of conduct violations on campus (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005), and White male college students are at the center of both high profile and behind closed door campus-based racism (Cabrera, 2014b; Garcia, Johnston, Garibay, Herrera, & Giraldo, 2011; Picca & Feagin, 2007). Essentially, this work is taking up the provocative charge of Dr. Saida Grundy when she asked via Twitter, “Why is White America so reluctant to identify White college males as a problem population?” (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017, p. 16). Essentially, we are analyzing White male racial narratives as a method of going into the heart of White racial ignorance in higher education. This single institution case study involved interviews with 62 male undergraduates during the 2014–2015 academic year (four occurred early in Fall, 2015). The interviews averaged 100 minutes in length, and covered areas such as: definitions of racism, race in social media, race in family and friendship networks, views on racial politics, changes in views on race, and experiences with race on the college campus. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and participant names were replaced with pseudonyms.

**Researcher orientations**

I (Nolan) conducted all 62 interviews, and my positionality being a light-skinned, biracial (½ Chicano, ½ White) researcher posed an important methodological issue in terms of how the participants saw me racially. White students tend to be more reserved and racially politically correct in the presence of a racial minority (Picca & Feagin, 2007). I began the interviews by racially self-identifying verbally, and I had them do the same. This created a stated, explicit cross-racial interaction, which I thought would foster more reserved responses to the interview protocol. Given the racist nature of many of the comments (see Findings section), this was likely not happening and it required revisiting how much the participants considered my racial/ethnic background during the course of the interview. In my previous research also with White men a similar dynamic arose (Cabrera, 2016) where White men consistently said that my racial/ethnic orientation slipped into the background and they did not think about it during the course of the interview. As one participant offered, “I probably would not have been this open if you were Black.” Despite self-identifying as Chicano, this information slipped into the background of the interviews which created a situation where the participants tended to be very forthcoming with their views, even if these views were racist.

As co-author (Chris) of this piece, my positionality as a White man required constant assessment and challenging of my multiple privileged identities throughout the analysis and publication process. Most notably, as an anti-racist educator I noticed a tendency to place distance between myself and the White participants, preferring not to see their racist comments in my lived-experiences. Moreover, in reading through transcripts I found that I, too, struggle with an epistemology of ignorance, which could leave me at risk for overlooking key findings and necessitated that I read each transcript multiples times.

**Research site**

UA was chosen for a number of reasons. Approximately 60% of its students are White, and it has an enrolled student body of over 42,000. This created an interesting environment for White students to interact across race if they so desired. However, it also is possible that they could opt to have minimal contact with minoritized students due to the high proportion of White students on campus. This is especially important in the context of Arizona where the racial politics of the state (immigration and ethnic studies) have made national headlines (Mendez & Cabrera, 2015). We initially hypothesized that this context might affect the general racial awareness of the participants in the study, although it is still not clear how it is related to their engagement or disengagement from racial issues.
Recruitment procedures

I (Nolan) solicited White male participants using a purposeful sampling method (Babbie, 2007) which included using the university’s websites to retrieve lists of registered student organizations. I organized these groups by political orientation because expressed racial tolerance tends to vary by political ideology (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000). I sent mass form emails to these groups and solicited a targeted subsample in person at their weekly meetings (e.g., Young Democrats, Young Republicans, fraternities, Young Life, and Secular Student Alliance). I employed this outreach strategy as a means of obtaining a range of political views and, by inference, a range of racial ideologies. Additionally, participants were compensated $25 for their time, which was especially important in garnering the participation of White men who did not have strong views on race but were part of the campus community. This recruitment strategy was largely successful (see Table 1).

It yielded representation across the political spectrum including a number who described themselves as apolitical. There was an oversampling of liberal students that would likely skew the sample in favor of those who are more racially tolerant (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sniderman et al., 2000).

The recruitment strategy was effective and yielded a range of political ideologies among the participants. As part of the interview process, the participants were given a questionnaire, and two of the items on the questionnaire were measures of participants’ racial ideologies (Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale [CoBRAS], Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000) and masculinity ideologies (Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale [AMIRS], Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005). The higher the score on each, the more participants subscribed to color-blindness (CoBRAS) or traditional (i.e., patriarchal) forms of masculinity (AMIRS). This allowed us to determine that I (Nolan) was successful at recruiting a range of racial ideologies for participation in this research (see Figure 1). Also, we plotted color-blindness by masculinity because we thought that both of these ideological orientations would be mutually reinforcing (Cabrera, 2011).

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Table 1. Self-described political orientations of participants.

Figure 1. Color-Blind ideology × masculinity ideology of participants.
We did find a significant relationship between the two ($r(61) = 0.33, p < 0.01$), although it was not as strong as we initially thought. Additionally, it provides context to the interviews. The higher the scores on the measures should correspond to increased professions of racism (Neville et al., 2000). Interestingly, this only occurred for participants with extremely low AMIRS and CoBRAS scores. Beyond that, there were very few detectable patterns in the interview data.

**Interview procedures**

The lead author (Nolan) conducted all interviews using a semi-structured protocol derived from the 1997 Detroit Area Study focusing on racial ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Bonilla-Silva (2006) argued that to empirically explore racism, it was necessary to conduct one-on-one interviews because surveys contained too many normative cues and, therefore, underestimate the prevalence of racism. The interviews occurred on the UA campus in a variety of classrooms and conference rooms in the College of Education. The questions were modified to more specifically address issues of race in higher education. A primary focus of this analysis was a subsection of the interview protocol that explored the meaning participants associated with being White and White privilege.

**Analysis**

The transcripts were thematically coded by both authors to explore White students’ racial experiences in higher education. According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006), “a theme is most commonly understood to be an element that occurs frequently in a text or describes a unique experience that gets at the essence of the phenomenon under inquiry” (p. 89). While generating themes from the text, two levels of coding were conducted by two separate readers. The process began by *open coding*; during which each of the co-authors read all transcripts and performed thorough coding on a line-by-line basis. Then *axial coding* was conducted, where the authors met to group the open codes into more abstract and complex categories. When there were issues of disagreement, the co-authors were in constant dialogue to work through these issues and come to consensus about interview themes. To increase the trustworthiness of the analysis, we wanted to engage in member checking but only 14 of the 62 participants even acknowledged receiving the transcripts from their interviews, and 4 provided feedback. Therefore, member checking was not a viable option.

**White male undergraduate racial ignorance and the institution that sustains it**

The findings from this analysis revealed three interrelated themes: (1) White ignorance and White identity as meaningless; (2) Evasive White racial ignorance; and (3) Racial arrested development and racial regression. Collectively, they demonstrate how the White men interviewed were woefully ignorant on issues of racism, insisted that they did know, and how the college environment reinforced this ignorance.

**White ignorance and White identity as meaningless**

In each interview, the participants responded to two direct questions about how they viewed and experienced their personal Whiteness:

- What does it mean to be White?
- What is White culture?

The answers in this section tended to center around two responses. The most common response to the question about what it means to be White was silence and the most common response to “What is White culture?” was uncomfortable laughter. Most of the participants began their answers with some version of, “No one has ever asked me that before” (Stephen). For example, Ryan offered a fairly standard response:

Ryan: Oh wow! I mean … that is like asking what does it mean to be Jewish? What does it mean to be Black? I mean, I do not think that there is any one answer to that.

Nolan: In your lived experience, what does it mean to be White? And if it is that difficult, how do you think your experience would have been different if you were not White?

Ryan: That is the toughest question that you have actually asked so far.
Once they began working through their initial reactions, the responses tended to be surface level. Many described having light skin color but not attaching any substantive meaning to it. Austin was very direct in his assessment regarding his personal identity, “I don’t really identify with White because it doesn’t describe much.”

Many others had ways of describing White as relatively meaningless vis-à-vis systemic racism. For example, Casey offered, “I guess it’s just … meaning to be White, it just means to be human, I guess.” Overall, their narratives were largely divorced from any structural or systematic analysis of race, racism, and in particular, racial privilege. This is not to say that the participants were ignorant of the concept White privilege as almost all had heard the term. Rather, few actually applied it to their everyday lives.

Turning to White culture, the participants discussed a lack of knowledge or cultural orientation, often questioning whether White culture even existed at all. This is consistent with the CWS historical scholarship whereby European immigrants to the U.S. gave up their traditions, languages, and customs to assimilate into the category known as White (Allen, 1997; Ignatiev, 1995). As Zack articulated:

I guess maybe in the sense of like being an American White. It’s the lack of a distinguished ethnicity or cultural background because like just think you’re of European descent like most White people are. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you have strong ties to your family back from there or like total traditions of where you might be from.

Zack talked about White in terms of disconnection—from family, culture, and heritage. Within this paradigm, Zack did not see “White” as having any productive meaning. It actually signified a lack of knowledge and a lack of historical awareness.

When participants did engage in more depth what “White culture” meant to them, they frequently gave individual examples such as country music or hot dogs. They continually struggled to give any kind of overarching definition. For example, Jimmy said, “What’s White culture? White culture, geez. Kind of like everything, right? Like everything that we don’t think of as a culture belonging to another group. Like that would be White culture.” Essentially, White culture for Jimmy was all encompassing in American society, which made is so hard for him to define.

Being White began to take on meaning, however, as it related to perceptions of “reverse discrimination.” As Ryan elaborated:

[Being White] means that you have no protection against discrimination if you ever should come up against discrimination because people are being taught and are believing that it is OK to hold you accountable for all the actions of your distant ancestors and for people in the far past, even if you are on the same page as them on trying to go forward into a better future.

Later in Ryan’s interview, he tended to focus on racial issues that he saw as marginalizing White men, including affirmative action, ethnic studies, and anything that was racially conscious. In his understanding, these denied him opportunities as a White man.

**Evasive White racial ignorance**

Throughout the interviews, the participants had many opportunities to discuss issues of race and racism. However, they spent the bulk of the time describing specific incidents as not racist. There were times when they were challenged regarding their racial selves, beliefs, and experiences, but instead of engaging they tended to create ways around them. There were many mechanisms the participants used to explain race out of a situation in what Feagin and O’Brien (2003) refer to as semantic moves. Semantic moves take ostensibly racist situations, and find creative ways to describe them as not racist or reframe them as forms of “reverse racism.” This racial evasiveness was especially pronounced when the participants discussed the concept of White privilege. Instead of seeing White privilege as a reflection of being in a racist society, many took it personally, thought it undercut their personal accomplishments, and found several ways to dismiss White privilege or reframe it as harming White people. For example, Kraus offered, “[White privilege has] never really impacted my life that I know of. I’m here because of my merits, not anything else.”
Alan was very defensive about the subject of White privilege. He said, “I’ve never experienced an instance of White privilege in my life. I have experienced people assuming that I have White privilege though.” He elaborated:

I feel like people are taking away from my individual merit. I have scholarships and I have a 3.7 GPA in my college and I’m doing well in school, and I’ve done well in sports, and I just kind of generally do well in most things in life, and it annoys me when people talk to me about White privilege and assume that I’ve had it, because I feel like they’re taking away the hard work that I’ve put in.

Alan strongly believed White privilege undercut the meaning of his personal accomplishments and was either “annoyed” or “upset” by White privileged discussions.

One way of evading White privilege discussions was highlighting how some racial minorities are succeeding in society. Kipp offered, “I would say that I didn’t grow up in the best home ever, you know, and I wasn’t as privileged as the rest. Some kids that aren’t White, they’re more privileged than I was, you know.” The interesting component of Kipp’s description was that he grew up in Scottsdale, one of the wealthiest cities in Arizona. In the survey portion of the interview, it was apparent that his family was not hurting for money but they also were not the most affluent in his home area. Therefore, he did not feel privileged, and seemed to be downplaying the significance of White privilege in his life.

Another example of White evasive ignorance emerged in regards to media coverage of police officer shootings of unarmed Black people. Nathaniel was very direct: “Recently there had been a lot of police violence and stuff like that, and I don’t think every single case they made it to be something that was a racial incident, has been a racial incident.” Nathaniel was skeptical of race playing a role in any of the high-profile shootings discussed during his interview (e.g., Michael Brown), and he never identified an example where he thought racism was relevant.

James was particularly critical of race-conscious social programs when he offered, “Like a Black person today has experienced no more of what happened in 1960 than I have … I mean it’s basically unfair to associate someone with something that happened when they weren’t alive.” James believed that racism still existed but was not a strong contemporary social force. To alleviate White responsibility for contemporary racial inequality, he offered the following history lesson:

I mean a lot of the revolution especially within race has been carried by White people because they are in positions of power at the time of the Civil Rights Movement. And these people had to put their day-to-day lives aside because I mean they didn’t experience these problems of racism and they had to be compassionate about other people. (James)

In two sentences, James elevated White people to the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement, erased the efforts of People of Color, and then used this as a justification for how White people owe racial minorities nothing in the present day.

When the participants were confronted with issues of race during the course of the interview, they also had a number of ways that they redirected the conversation. David offered the most in-depth example of how evasive White racial ignorance can be. He said:

Like they just come here and I personally think it’s because there are [sic] some chip on their shoulder, but I personally also think because they have not been ready to acculturate. I think that also happens in Black communities, so I think in Black communities guys learn to be victims.

Whenever the subject of racism came up, David would give a nod that racism still exists, and then spend the bulk of the time explaining how minority communities see racism in places where, in his mind, it does not exist.

This created an interesting juxtaposition when David described his Jewish upbringing and how his parents taught him how to identify anti-Semitism, “So I’ve been trained from my parents, from everyone, to literally pick up and identify anti-Semitic use, like coming from anybody, like pick up on it.” I (Nolan) asked him if it was that he was “seeing anti-Semitism everywhere” or if it was actually happening in reality. He claimed that it was really happening, and his parents helped make it easier for him to see it. That led to the following exchange:
Nolan: OK. So then how do you juxtapose that with your view that Black people are reading too much into racism?

David: It's different when you say reading too much or into it than ... I see what you did there. I see it there. But I can't juxtapose it, all right? Because there is ... there's no measure ... I didn't measure anything. I didn't measure, you know, how prevalent it really is to how prevalent they perceive it to be.

Rather than simply state that he had a double standard for believing issues of anti-Black racism versus anti-Semitism, David simply said that I (Nolan) could not juxtapose the two. On the one hand he was talking about himself and anti-Semitism that he knew to exist, and on the other, minorities who he believed overstated the prevalence of racism. He even acknowledged the tension in his own words with “I see what you did there,” but instead of self-interrogating, his essential claim was that he saw real discrimination and minority communities imagined it.

Racial arrested development and racial regression

Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin (2016) has argued that a campus ecology that prioritizes the racial comfort of White students leaves these individuals in a state of racial arrested development. While Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin’s (2016) piece was theoretical, the empirical findings from this research demonstrate how an institution of higher education structures racial arrested development via epistemologies of ignorance. At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were asked how their views on race changed during their undergraduate years. They tended to describe college as having only a minimal effect on them in terms of changing their views on race. For example, responses included the following:

- Not much. I like to take myself as pretty racially tolerant, pretty tolerant in general, pretty open-minded. (Anthony)
- I do not think that back then, I was any less accepting of other people based on race. (Michael)
- I honestly do not think that my views on race have been changed much. (Norm)

The participants tended to think of themselves as racially tolerant in high school and that continued into their college years. That is, they thought of themselves as not racist throughout their lives.

There were some who thought that they became more tolerant and accepting as a result of being in college. As Jake offered, “I would say I’m a little more open now.” The accuracy of this statement came into question when juxtaposed with the rest of his interview. For example, he offered:

Without slavery, where would [Black people] be? Would you be alive? Would you be in this country? How much easier would it have been for some of those people to get to this country? Because you think about the parts of the world we took them from. They’re still … They still don’t have vehicles in a lot of those parts of the country. They’re dying every day from malaria, AIDS, the wild, starvation.

Jake made it clear that he did not support the institution of slavery, but he also argued that Black people in the present time should be grateful for being in the US instead of Africa. Maybe this view was more tolerant than Jake’s pre-college views, but that is an even more troubling proposition.

Many participants offered insights into why so few of them had meaningful racial developments during their undergraduate experiences. For example, Nathaniel stated, “I grew up like basically everyone was White where I’m from. And also, like, my school last year, basically, everyone was White as well.” There was strong continuity between the racial demographics of Nathaniel’s high school and college campus environments. Being a White man he fit in perfectly, and he not find anything problematic about it. Flynn also lived in predominantly White environments during his time as an undergraduate. He offered, “I’ve been pretty sheltered from most of that stuff, so I haven’t seen many first-hand examples of racism.” Flynn took his description one step further than Nathaniel by linking these environments to him not seeing racism in his daily life. Like Nathaniel, however, he did not find this racial insulation problematic and was generally unaware of how this exclusion could affect Students of Color.

In addition to the racial insulation many of these White men experienced in their friendship groups, they also tended to take courses that did not engage issues of race or racism. This was really troubling
because each one was required to fulfill a university-mandated diversity requirement, but that label ("diversity course") encompassed so much that it almost had no meaning. For example, Dominic took "Religion of Islam" to fulfill this requirement even though the class never engaged Islamophobia. Randy took a course on Chinese civilization, but it was rooted in 3000-year-old history with no connection to the present. Similarly, Zack offered:

Zack: Not really. I took a linguistics class about Asian ethnicities and their different linguistic properties, but … that's it.

Nolan: But it doesn't necessarily relate to oppression?

Zack: Yeah, nothing eccentric like that.

It was telling that Zack never took an ethnic studies course, but it was interesting that he framed it as "eccentric." This corresponded to him tending to view racism as an aberration—the negative actions of a few bad people. He did not consider it a systemic problem or a pressing social issue, and therefore the study of race was "eccentric."

There was another participant who took a class that did engage race and racism, and usually this is supposed to lead to students having more racially egalitarian views (Bowman, 2009). In this case, it had a counter-productive effect. In Casey's English class, they read Shelby Steele's (2006) *White Guilt* where the central thesis is that the primary cause of persistent racial inequality is, as the title infers, White guilt—not racism.

*So, it's kind of … I feel like, if anything, it's kind of reversing roles on how racism, Whites against Blacks, but kind of the guilt of, I guess, White Americans knowing that we rose up to power on enslaving, you know, a whole another race, you know, that guilt kind of lives on, in that sense. (Casey)*

After Casey described the book, he also discussed how it resonated with him because he did not see examples of racism in his everyday life, but did sometimes feel White guilt. This book allowed him to let go of this guilt as well as any responsibility for contemporary racial issues. Essentially, Steele allowed Casey to believe that racial equality would appear if White guilt disappeared.

There were some people who did take diversity courses that more meaningfully, relative to Casey's course, centered issues of racism and White privilege. When they encountered these courses, the discourse of "reverse racism" re-emerged. Ronald was particularly outspoken on one class he took. He offered:

*And you know, the whole class was just centered around, like the rich White man is responsible for all the world's problems. And we even had you know, a book, you know a textbook that listed all the plights of every minority and I think … I do not remember if White people are specifically mentioned but I remember pointing in class that you know, we just turned a blind eye to any White issue.*

Rather than engage issues of racism, Ronald turned his description of the class into a tirade against "reverse racism." In describing this specific course text Ronald made clear that any discussion of the oppression of People of Color should also include a discussion of how White populations also have been oppressed throughout history. He went on to express a general disbelief in the stories and histories of People of Color, suggesting that their experiences boiled down to feelings of hurt and disrespect that did not merit the importance placed on them by the instructor. Specifically he said, "And I think that is the biggest problem with race issues, and gender issues, and basically just people who feel slighted" (Ronald).

**White male undergraduate epistemologies of ignorance and searching for “cracks in the walls of Whiteness”**

Epistemologies of ignorance were not only individually present among the participants, they also were structurally reinforced by the UA. This is critically important because the stronger the epistemology of ignorance, the more that Whiteness is reified (Mills, 1997). In this sense the UA became an engine for the recreation of racial stratification (Cabrera, 2009). The White male participants in this research had almost no conception of what it meant to be White, and this corresponded to a lack of engagement with racial issues more broadly. However, when their epistemologies of ignorance (Mills, 1997) were
challenged, the participants did not see these as opportunities for engagement and growth. Rather, they found discursive ways to avoid the central issue and redirect the conversation via semantic moves (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003). This perpetual avoidance corresponded to minimal developments in the participants’ racial identity, even though they tended to hold many problematic views on race. In addition, the UA helped create a structure around their ignorance by having so many disparate classes count for the diversity requirement. That is, they were able to take classes that had nothing to do with racism, inequality, or oppression, and still graduate.

It is important to note that although the vast majority of participants operated under an epistemology of ignorance, there were a few participants who did have some meaningful engagement with race and racism. Of these students, many attributed their insights and perspectives to experiences that they had in college, notably through race-related courses or personal interactions with peers who helped them to explore their racial identity (AuthorXXXXX, 2017, this issue). While these students often shared a number of the same experiences as other participants, they tended to understand and explain them in very different ways. For example, many of these individuals referenced the then-recent killings of Black men like Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Walter Scott as examples of contemporary racism. This stood in stark contrast to others who saw the media coverage of these shootings as an attack on White people. Another participant who was actually majoring in Africana Studies, offered complex and structural analyses of contemporary racism and spoke insightfully about concepts like intersectionality and criminal justice reform. Again, this was markedly different than those who took ancient Chinese history to fulfill a diversity requirement. The participants who disrupted this epistemology of ignorance offered a great deal of possibility in the sense that they highlighted what Bush (2011) refers to as cracks in the walls of Whiteness. Unfortunately, their narratives were so disparate that it was not possible to theorize the commonalities that led to this disruption.

Finding cracks in the walls of Whiteness becomes the central challenge in working with White undergraduate men to examine their often unexamined racial lives. A certain amount of racial discomfort is necessary to grow and develop, but they have so many methods of avoiding this discomfort that many remain in a state of racial arrested development (Cabrera, Watson, & Franklin, 2016). What is to be done? The current analysis cannot answer fully answer this question; however, it appears that part of this puzzle involves existing in ostensibly White social environments and having largely monocultural educational experiences.

The problem lies in the following Catch-22. When these White men exist in primarily White environments and learn from a curriculum that does not challenge their racial understandings, they experience minimal emotional dissonance while continuing to profess racist views. When they are challenged, they frame it as “reverse racism,” shutdown the discussion, and profess more blatantly racist views. This is why the current analysis presented here is particularly troubling. There have been many previous examples of scholarship that have documented the positive effects that curricular diversity can have on all students, White students included (e.g., Bowman, 2010; Chang, 2002). Despite the documented efficacy of this approach, the current participants seemed immune to meaningfully engaging present day racial realities. The approach of leaving White men to their own racial devices is not viable because the end result is the status quo. Therefore, the question becomes, under what circumstances can diversity courses be effective at disrupting epistemologies of ignorance?

One critically important component is understanding White men’s emotional responses to issues of race; this concurrently highlights a glaring gap in the current knowledge base: as Cabrera (2014c) argues, “Despite this growing literature in psychology, there are currently few analyses of how White people feel about issues of racism. Most of the literature in racial theory tends to rely on a cognitive framing of race/racism” (p. 772). While it is true that the emotion/logic or affect/cognition is a false dichotomy as emotionality is a form of cognition (Cabrera, 2014c; Matias, 2016), it is the case that most analyses that explore Whiteness focus on what White individuals think about issues of racism at the expense of how they feel. As Cabrera (2014c) argues, “This is an important development because people are not fully rational beings, and their emotions frequently drive their actions” (p. 772). Essentially, analyses of
Whiteness in higher education literature might be inverting the analysis of Whiteness. Instead of seeing ideologies as driving particular actions, it could be that emotionality and this affective response to racial issues helps to form racial ideologies.

Regardless, institutions of higher education (in this case, the UA) bear a great deal of responsibility along two foci. First, the narratives highlight how the participants existed in predominantly White environments within the UA, and therefore, the university is complicit (Applebaum, 2010). The diversity of this land grant institution is not even close to that of the local school district which is over 60% Latina/o. Second, how are these young men engaging “diversity”? The short answer is that, despite the institutional requirement, they are for the most part able to avoid significant reflection on issues of racism and White supremacy. Through their courses they encounter general information on some cultural differences, often conveyed through an un-critical, multicultural lens. Exploring difference without a critique of the systemic roots of oppression, they are left thinking that the problem is one of individual difference. Therefore, the findings indicate that it is not only important to have a diversity requirement but also that the content of that requirement needs to center issues of inequality that relate to contemporary and systemic issues.

The next underlying question becomes how to engage racially privileged students in this type of curriculum if they are so racially evasive? There are some demonstrated practices, which hold a great deal of promise. Quaye (2012) highlights how White instructors can be extremely effective catalysts for offering this type of material, in particular to White students. However, being White is insufficient if the curricular content does not center issues of racial oppression. Additionally, Sulé (2015) highlights how a common interest in hip-hop also can be a catalyst for engaging racially privileged White males in issues of inequality. Much like Quaye (2012), Sulé (2015) does not simply argue that hip-hop by itself can develop a White racial social consciousness. Rather, this art form holds a great deal of promise in, for example, fostering cross-racial interactions where White people are in the minority (i.e., within hip-hop spaces) which can lead to social justice-oriented actions (Sulé, 2015). This is not to idealize hip-hop space, as these can also be sites of White appropriation of Black culture (Rodriquez, 2006). Another approach that has a lot of potential for disrupting epistemologies of ignorance among White men is intergroup dialogue as this also is a structured avenue for, if done properly, humanizing the experiences of oppression (Gurin-Sands, Gurin, Nagada, & Osuna, 2012; Zuniga, Mildred, Varghese, DeJong, & Keehn, 2012). However, just like hip-hop, intergroup dialogues also can be sites of racial violence against Students of Color when they prioritize White student comfort and safe space (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Ultimately, there is no silver bullet for this endemic problem, and holistic strategies are necessary as each of the above approaches by itself will be a drop in the racial bucket.

While the central focus of this analysis was on a lack of racial awareness amongst White men, this research was conducted because of the insidious effects that unchallenged Whiteness has on Students of Color in the collegiate environment (Yosso et al., 2009). If, for example, the microaggressions literature is correct (e.g., Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), then White students are constantly engaging in racist actions but usually without the knowledge that what they are doing is oppressive. Part of this denial is the epistemology of ignorance and it helps White students maintain a positive sense of self via the following train of thought, “To be a racist is a bad thing. I am a good person. Therefore, I am not a racist.” While the cognitive processes are much more complicated than this, the underlying issue is that a great deal of White racial denial exists to help White people maintain a positive sense of self (Mills, 1997; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008; Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008). The price of this false image comes at the expense of the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical well-being of Students of Color (Sue, 2010; Yosso et al., 2009). Therefore, although it is important for White students to work on their racial sense of self from the perspective of personal development, it is more pressing for the safety of their Peers of Color. Within this formulation there is an opportunity for these racially privileged students to act as a disruptive force to systemic oppression, not only alongside of marginalized students, but also out of service to themselves and society more broadly (Cabrera, 2012; Freire, 2000).
Conclusion

In the classic movie *Blade Runner*, the character Decker learned that cyborgs called replicants were being implanted with memories to make them appear more human. The replicants were not, however, aware that their memories were fabrications, leading Decker to ask the unintentionally profound question, “How can it not know what it is?” When it comes to White male students in a racialized society, a similar question can and should be lodged. “How can they not know who they racially are?” A large part of this question lies within epistemologies of ignorance; as the old adage goes, “Ignorance is bliss.” In this instance, racial ignorance is racial bliss, and when this bliss becomes disrupted, the young men find ways to avoid engaging the painful realities of race. These discursive turns allowed the White men in this study to maintain a positive, non-racist sense of self—again, reinforcing a lack of self-awareness.

Unfortunately, this exercise is more than just ignorance or lack of self-awareness because it becomes the jumping off point for linguistic and physical violence targeting fellow Students of Color (e.g., racial theme parties, microaggressions, social isolation, and racial battle fatigue). As institutions of higher education continually profess to “produce the leaders of tomorrow,” the question becomes: What types of leaders are they going to produce? Those who recreate racial oppression or those who challenge it? If the answer is the latter, how are the institutional structures going to change to reach this lofty goal? How much White student racial discomfort are they willing to foster in order to develop racially-transformative graduates? It is easy to profess to value diversity and inclusivity. It is a whole different level of engagement to actually do something about it. Policies, financial allocations, and institutional structures are demonstrations of a university’s values because, to adapt the cliché, racial actions speak louder than racial words.\(^6\)

Notes

1. One component of the title (“agony of education”) is riffing off Feagin, Vera, and Imani’s (1996) book about the systemic marginalization of Black students at PWIs, but it flips the analysis to explore how this campus-based racism is developed and maintained. This is where Feagin, Vera, and Imani are cited in text.
2. A previous version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, 2016, Columbus, OH.
3. Throughout this article, we capitalize all uses of White and Whiteness to emphasize the systemically privileged nature of this social identity (White) and racialized discourse (Whiteness). We also capitalize descriptors of minoritized groups (e.g., Black, Students of Color, etc.) to emphasize the centrality of these social identities in a racialized society.
4. Microaggressions are “the brief and common place daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target a person or group” (Sue, 2010, p. 5).
5. There are some who mistakenly frame CWS as subsumed within CRT, but it is worth noting that DuBois (1920) and Baldwin (1965) were conducting CWS decades before CRT was founded.
6. Throughout this article, we use “reverse racism” and “reverse discrimination” in quotation marks to signify that this accurately represents how the research participants feel while concurrently being divorced from any empirical reality.

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