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Whiteness at Whitman : a discursive study

Christopher Lee Cahoon
Whitman College

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Whiteness at Whitman: A Discursive Study

by

Christopher Lee Cahoon

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for graduation with Honors in Rhetoric Studies.

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Christopher Lee Cahoon has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Rhetoric Studies.

Heather Ashley Hayes

Whitman College
December 9, 2016

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Abstract

This study analyzes ethnographic interviews with white students at Whitman College. It examines how whiteness functions through discourse. The last significant study of whiteness discourse in rhetorical studies occurred in the work of Nakayama & Krizek in 1995. The historical context surrounding race has changed notably since this study. I provide an updated analysis of whiteness discourse. I use Nakayama and Krizek's theory of whiteness as a strategy. I examine how whiteness functions as a discursive strategy at Whitman College. I demonstrate that in the space of a university, whiteness is no longer invisible. White students at Whitman College talk about their whiteness. Whitman students talk about race primarily in terms of "diversity," "understanding," "comfort" and "privilege." The ways they talk about race, and as a result conceive of whiteness, strategically maneuver around the challenge to our dominance. Consequently, they are able to claim anti-racist work without enacting changes towards racial equity. By talking about whiteness in non-disruptive ways, they reinforce the racial hierarchy in our community.

“High in the tower, where I sit above the
loud complaining of the human sea, I
know many souls that toss and whirl and
pass, but none there are that intrigue me
more than the Souls of White Folk.”

— W.E.B. DuBois

Introduction

In September of 2014, activist Lawrence Grandpre published an article on *Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle*, the website of an advocacy organization in Baltimore, titled “This ‘Diversity’ Stuff Can Kill You: What I Learned as a Black Man at America’s Least Diverse Elite College.” Grandpre's next line: “A letter to Whitman College.” In the article, Grandpre describes the moment he realized that being a black man at Whitman College was a matter of life and death:

I didn’t see it...when I was called a nigger within two weeks [of arriving at Whitman]. I couldn’t see it when my roommate and his friends dressed up in blackface, or even when the desktop background picture in the college debate team’s office was switched to a picture of a naked black man with a laptop computer hanging from his penis. It wasn’t until I was riding my bike to my dorm and I heard a shotgun being racked behind me. To this day I’m not sure of the reality of that situation; I just pedaled as fast as I could and never looked back, appreciating the ironic possibility of escaping inner city Baltimore only to be shot in Walla Walla, Washington.¹

At Whitman College, most of us want to create an inclusive and equitable community. Yet, as Grandpre voices, we are not succeeding in doing so. How is it possible that many students of color do not feel safe or accepted in a community that claims, and genuinely desires, to welcome them? This project examines the contradiction between our professed commitment to racial inclusion and the reality of a racial hierarchy in our community. The aim of this project is not to demonstrate that a racial hierarchy exists

¹ Lawrence Grandpre, “This ‘Diversity’ Stuff Can Kill You: What I Learned as a Black Man at America’s Least Diverse Elite College.” *Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle*, September 29, 2014. <http://lbsbaltimore.com/this-diversity-stuff-can-kill-you-what-i-learned-as-a-black-man-at-americas-least-diverse-elite-college/>.

at Whitman. Rather, I offer an explanation as to *how* a racial hierarchy can exist despite our intentions against it.

Racial hierarchies, specifically whites' dominance over people of color, exist in numerous places across America. This project is an ethnographic discursive study of racial ideology in the space of an elite university, specifically at Whitman College. Whitman is a predominantly white institution. Among the student body, 70.5% of students identify as Caucasian. I examine white students in order to analyze the dominant racial ideology in our community. As Kirt Wilson argues in "Towards a Discursive Theory of Racial Ideology," ideology is produced and reproduced in communicative interaction. Thus, this project specifically looks at the ways that white students talk about race. I demonstrate that white students at Whitman College talk about race primarily in terms of "diversity," "understanding," "comfort" and "privilege." The ways we talk about race, and as a result conceive of whiteness, strategically maneuver around challenges to our dominance. Consequently, we are able to claim anti-racist work without enacting changes towards racial equity. By talking about whiteness in non-disruptive ways, we reinforce the racial hierarchy in our community.

When white people become complicit in whiteness, it becomes invisible to us that matters of race are matters of life and death. If we are to disrupt the racial hierarchy in our community, we must understand how whiteness functions as a strategic rhetoric.

The rhetorical study of whiteness coalesced around Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek's pioneering 1995 article, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric." Nakayama and Krizek argue that whiteness secures its dominance through discursive strategies that make whiteness invisible. I place interviews with white Whitman students in conversation with Nakayama and Krizek's 1995 article in order to update their claims about how whiteness functions through discourse.

This project proceeds in four parts. First, I track significant changes in the way race is talked about in public discourse. Second, I demonstrate how whiteness is talked about in the academy. Third, I analyze racial discourse in ethnographic interviews with white Whitman students.

Chapter 1: Shifts in Public Discourse on Race

In this chapter, I talk about how race discourse has developed in the public sphere. In the twenty years since Nakayama and Krizek's study on whiteness discourse, major shifts have occurred in the way the American public talks about race. In order to analyze contemporary race discourse, we must account for shifts in its historical context. I identify two moments which significantly shaped the discursive racial landscape. First, the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the country's first black president prompts a consideration of America as "post-race." Then, the Black Lives Matter movement emerged in 2012, calling attention to contemporary forms of white supremacy.

Obama's Election and the "Post-Race" Conversation

After the election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth President of the United States in 2008, many Americans proclaimed the end of racism. With a black man in the Oval Office, we had entered a "post-racial" era in which race as an indication of difference and equality was no longer significant. President Obama himself declared that "there is no black America, there is no white America, there is only the United States of America"².

Herakova marks the rise of a "post-race" paradigm in the wake of the election of Barack Obama. She argues that the emphasis on individualism and meritocracy

² "Barack Obama's Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention." *PBS Newshour*, July 27, 2004. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics-july-dec04-obama-keynote-dnc/>.

surrounding Obama’s presidency supported a “post-racial” colorblindness in which neither blackness or whiteness mattered. She demonstrates how Obama’s mantras of hope and unity also reinforced colorblind messages of individualism and meritocracy. His proposed policy reforms ignored structural racism while emphasizing individual responsibility.³ Herakova argues that Obama’s ambivalence around issues of race resulted in his being seen as “a model minority” and “a model citizen” whose status bolstered the “exception—overcoming considerable racial barriers through, among other things, ethnic, class, and education privileges, while ignoring the rule—systemic structural inequities that black and brown bodies face in this country.”⁴

Like Herakova, Hoerl delineates the ideology of a “post-racial” society in America. She examines the ways that public discourse around Obama’s election served a colorblind perspective on racial matters. Hoerl illustrates how public discourse crafted “a postracial narrative of national transcendence” through mainstream press characterizations of the Obama’s election as the realization of Martin Luther King’s dream.⁵ She cites public officials, citizens and former civil rights activists who described Obama’s election as the “fulfillment,” “embodiment,” “culmination,” and

³ Liliana L. Herakova, Dijana Jelaca, Razvan Sibii, & Leda Cooks, “Voicing Silence and Imagining Citizenship: Dialogues about Race and Whiteness in a “Postracial” Era,” *Communication Studies*, Vol. 62, no. 4, (2011): 372.

⁴ Herakova, “Voicing Silence and Imagining Citizenship: Dialogues about Race and Whiteness in a “Postracial” Era,” 373.

⁵ Kristen Hoerl, “Selective Amnesia and Racial Transcendence in News Coverage of President Obama’s Inauguration,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 98, no. 2, (2012): 178.

“validation” of King’s dream.⁶ According to post-racial logic, advancements made by individual black Americans are evidence of progress toward racial justice regardless of the overall prosperity of the black community. By extension, Obama’s election signaled that the major obstacles to opportunities for African Americans had been overcome. Hoerl illustrates how this post-racial discourse “elicits and extends the American myth of individualism” to the point at which racism can no longer be used as an excuse for disparities in income and education.⁷ She argues that this characterization of Obama’s election negates and silences those who would contest hegemonic narratives of national progress and unity.⁸

Bonilla-Silva provides a rejoinder to the post-race perspective. He argues that the ideology of white supremacy persists in the new ways we talk about race following Obama’s election. He asserts that, “Obama, his campaign, and his ‘success’ are the outcome of forty years of racial transition from the Jim Crow racial order to...the ‘new racism.’”⁹ This “new racism” reproduces racial domination mostly through subtle and covert discriminatory practices “which are often institutionalized, defended with coded language, and bonded by the racial ideology of color-blind racism.”¹⁰ Bonilla-Silva

⁶ Hoerl, “Selective Amnesia and Racial Transcendence in News Coverage of President Obama’s Inauguration,” 183.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006), 212.

¹⁰ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 213.

posits that in the “new America” that presumably began on November 4, 2008, “racism will remain firmly in place and, even worse, may become a more daunting obstacle.”¹¹

These scholars illustrate how Obama’s 2008 presidential election altered the discursive racial landscape in the US. Whites’ adoption of popular belief in a “post-racial” society further concealed whiteness and its oppressive forms. According to the logic of whiteness, if a black man could become President of the United States, then race no longer mattered. Therefore, we do not need to consider situations according to race, and any attempt to do so is creating a problem where one does not exist. This ideology obscures the ways that whiteness preserves its dominance by transforming its exertions of power from overt to more subtle practices. We see that Nakayama and Krizek’s notion of whiteness as a strategic rhetoric endures despite, or perhaps because of, changes in its discursive practices.

The Black Lives Matter Movement

The rise of post-racial ideology following Obama’s presidential election allowed white supremacy to thrive in its new forms. The continuation of whites’ domination came to a head on August 9, 2014, when white police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed an unarmed black man named Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The Black Lives Matter movement emerges in response to the killing of Brown, prompting a renewed discursive focus on what it means to be black in America.

¹¹ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 212.

The Black Lives Matter movement refutes colorblind ideology by highlighting the violence of state power against people of color. Jackson points to the ways this power is protected through colorblind ideology. He describes how “neoliberal colorblind politics” have rejected explicit political critiques of white supremacy as unnecessary or outmoded.¹² A new civil rights movement is necessary in a time when America is “overwhelmingly celebratory of its racial progress but silent on the lasting impact of its racial sins.”¹³ Black Lives Matter gained momentum through both its hashtag, which has been used more than 100 million times, and the persistence of activists, who have shutdown highways and interrupted presidential campaign rallies.¹⁴ Black Lives Matter’s founders, and other members of the larger Movement for Black Lives collective, insist on discourses of intersectionality that value and center all black lives, including, among others, black women, femmes, and queer and trans folk.

The Black Lives Matter movement prompts discourse on the experiences of people of color in America. Ross exemplifies this discourse as he describes Movement demonstrators who marched in Ferguson in the face of a militarized police force using armored vehicles and rooftop snipers. Ross asserts that the show of force by the state in response to activists in Ferguson is a “visual demonstration—as clear as when Birmingham, Ala., Police Chief Bull Connor turned German shepherds and water hoses

¹² Sarah J. Jackson, “(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism,” *Women’s Studies in Communication*, Vol. 39, no. 4 (2016): 375.

¹³ Jackson, “(Re)Imagining Intersectional Democracy from Black Feminism to Hashtag Activism,” 375.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 375.

on African-American schoolchildren in 1963—of how far a white supremacist police structure would be willing to protect a social hierarchy that made black bodies expendable, their deaths explainable and the protests of the black community discountable.”¹⁵ The Black Lives Matter movement opens up a dialogue about the systemic and institutionalized racism against people of color.

Within this dialogue, Bailey and Leonard describe Black Lives Matter as a movement that imagines a future for people of color apart from and beyond white supremacy. They demonstrate how the movement challenges white dominance and disrupts the status quo by forcing America to confront the ways in which state-sponsored agents target the lives of black Americans.¹⁶ To say “Black Lives Matter” is to challenge the presumed innocence and entrenched privileges afforded to whiteness. Bailey and Leonard emphasize how the criminalization of blackness works alongside the privilege and assumed innocence of whiteness.¹⁷ At the same time, Black Lives Matter “marks the indomitableness of Black Love and community... [it] is an act of collective imagination, one that both envisions and tries to bring about conditions that will guarantee that the voices, humanity, and lives of African Americans are protected,

¹⁵ Lawrence Ross, “2 Years After Ferguson, Mo., the Fight Grows, Goes On for Black Lives Matter,” *The Root*, August 9, 2016. <http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2016/08/2-years-after-ferguson-mo-the-fight-grows-goes-on-for-black-lives-matter/>

¹⁶ Julius Bailey and David J. Leonard, “Black Lives Matter: Post-Nihilistic Freedom Dreams,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, Vol. 5, no. 3 (2015): 68.

¹⁷ Bailey and Leonard, “Black Lives Matter: Post-Nihilistic Freedom Dreams,” 75.

valued, and embraced.”¹⁸ In refutation of post-racial ideology, Black Lives Matter exposes the way that white supremacy has led to hyper-segregation, the school to prison pipeline, housing discrimination and mass unemployment.¹⁹

Recent shifts in discourse on issues of race in America draw attention to the experiences of people of color in a white dominated society. Obama’s election created a sentiment that the US had entered a post-race era and that people of color in the US no longer face oppression. Black Lives Matter refuted this notion by highlighting the ways that state-sponsored systems continue to oppress people of color. The discourse that comes from these moments centers around what it means to be black in America. It prompts critical attention to systems of white supremacy which forces whiteness to adapt in order to survive. Consequently, the discursive landscape of whiteness has changed since Nakayama and Krizek’s 1995 study. In order to understand the contemporary strategies of whiteness discourse, we must examine the impacts of these public shifts on ideologies of whiteness. In the next chapter, I discuss whiteness in the academy—first by tracing the rise of whiteness scholarship, and then by considering universities as white spaces.

¹⁸ Bailey and Leonard, 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

Chapter 2: Whiteness in the Academy

There is a wide range of scholarship on whiteness in the academy. Scholars demonstrate the various aspects of whiteness that allow it to maintain its power: invisible, spatial, defensive and adaptive. I draw on this literature to examine the strategic rhetoric of whiteness as it plays out in a university space.

I start this genealogy of whiteness studies with work by black scholars. For those in the dominant position, whiteness may be invisible. For non-whites, however, whiteness is everywhere. Critical whiteness studies by white scholars would not be possible without the initial and continued critique of white domination by black scholars, who have seen and lived the effects of whiteness for four hundred years. They have opened up the territory of whiteness to critique, and remind us exactly why studying whiteness is necessary for anti-racism. I then move to the self-reflexive turn in scholarship in which whites critically examine their own whiteness.

Black Critique of Whiteness

Toni Morrison, in her study of whiteness in American literature, *Playing in the Dark*, brought whiteness to the attention of English studies, including rhetoric. Morrison focuses on the centrality and inescapability of black representation to the construction of white identity. She illustrates the assumption among literary critics that American literature is “free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States.”²⁰ She

²⁰ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 4.

proposes that scholars examine the impact of “notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions.”²¹ Morrison’s work shifts the gaze of scholars from the racial object to the racial subject, or to both subject and object together. She presents whiteness as a crucial trope to be examined.

Numerous black scholars have initiated the critical study of whiteness in addition to Morrison. Fanon provides a psychoanalytic interpretation of the white-black relationship in which he places himself inside the white’s imaginary and determines, “In a sense you reconcile us with ourselves.”²² Du Bois critiques the association of whiteness with morality.²³ Lorde locates power within the “mythical norm,” which is usually defined as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure.”²⁴ West illustrates the ways white supremacy persists by becoming covert.²⁵ hooks describes the usefulness of the term “white supremacy” instead of “racism” in order to account for the ways that liberal whites accept the presence of blacks only when they can control blacks for their benefit.²⁶

²¹ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 11.

²² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 111.

²³ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk,” *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine*, 55 (2003): 48.

²⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 116.

²⁵ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), viii.

²⁶ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1989), 192.

Taken together, the black critique of whiteness says that we cannot understand what it means to be black without also understanding what it means to be white. These scholars suggest some of the ways whiteness functions strategically to secure its dominance: as invisible, moral and adaptive. I consider the strategies of whiteness next.

The Invisibility of Whiteness

Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek initiate the critical study of whiteness in the discipline of rhetoric. Nakayama & Krizek examine the ways that whiteness remains invisible, and thus secures its dominance, through discursive strategies. They view race through a spatial metaphor in which whiteness occupies and defends a centered position.²⁷ They draw on Deleuze and Guattari's depiction of an assemblage and de Certeau's notion of strategies to describe whiteness as a strategic rhetoric; the ways of talking about whiteness secure its dominance.²⁸ They demonstrate that whiteness wields its power from an unarticulated position through six discursive strategies.²⁹ First, whiteness takes a hegemonic position, in which it assumes itself as the majority and therefore associates with power.³⁰ Second, whiteness defines itself as a lack of race (e.g. "not black").³¹ Third, whiteness describes itself in scientific terms, in which whiteness refers only to skin color without accounting for its history and social

²⁷ Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 81, (1995) : 292.

²⁸ Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness: A strategic rhetoric," 295.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

status.³² Fourth, whiteness associates itself with nationality, through which whiteness is bounded by and within national borders.³³ Fifth, whiteness acts as race blindness, in which whites refuse to label themselves.³⁴ Sixth, whiteness becomes ethnicity, in which whiteness associates with European ancestry.³⁵ Nakayama and Krizek conclude with an invitation for further reflexive studies of whiteness.³⁶

While Nakayama and Krizek were among the first scholars in communication studies to critically examine whiteness, they built their work on Richard Dyer's notion of whiteness as invisible. Dyer argues that whiteness maintains its hierarchal position through its ability to remain unmarked and, therefore, unquestioned.³⁷ Whiteness relies on the paradox in which it is everything and nothing, "literally overwhelmingly present and yet apparently absent."³⁸ Dyer posits that whiteness's refusal to speak about or represent race is among the subject position's most potent strategies for racial ascendancy.³⁹

Along with Nakayama and Krizek and Dyer, Ruth Frankenberg initiates the critical study of whiteness as an invisible position. Frankenberg examines the territory

³² *Ibid.*, 300.

³³ *Ibid.*, 300.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 302.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 303.

³⁷ Richard Dyer, "White." New York, NY: Routledge, 1988, 3.

³⁸ Dyer, "White," 39.

³⁹ Dyer, "White," 2.

of whiteness as it intersects with gender. She explains how the material and discursive dimensions of whiteness connect to form experience.⁴⁰ She argues that to name whiteness is to “look head-on at a site of dominance.” To speak of whiteness is to emphasize how racism shapes *everyone’s* identities and daily lives.⁴¹

These scholars argue that whiteness constructs itself as invisible in order to maintain its dominance. Where whiteness cannot be located, it cannot be challenged. This analysis reflects the rise of colorblind, “post-racial” ideology culminating around Obama’s presidential election. The construction of whiteness as invisible strategically maneuvers around challenges to whites power. The next section examines whiteness as racial and discursive space.

White Spaces

Another prominent way whiteness secures its power is through its attachment to space. Hoops extends the spatial metaphor of Nakayama and Krizek by arguing that whiteness is not just symbolically but materially spatial. Space is not confined to physical location, but instilled with meaning through representation.⁴² Racial exclusion often relies upon the “ideology of spatial transgression” that ascribes space as innocent

⁴⁰ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 2.

⁴¹ Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, 6.

⁴² Joshua Hoops, “Discourses of Affirmation in the Spatialization of Whiteness,” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, Vol. 7, no. 3, (2014): 195.

and irrelevant to race.⁴³ He demonstrates how spaces are both discursive and racialized, and how whiteness is constituted by and constitutes spaces. Hoops argues that social productions of space can reinforce colorblindness ideology, thus concealing inequality, and also “render whiteness visible for the satiation of specific identity needs, such as affirmation.”⁴⁴

Jackson continues the work of Nakayama and Krizek to map the discursive space of whiteness. He identifies five discursive strategies for defining and defending white space and white privilege. First, Jackson characterizes whiteness as incompleteness to suggest that whiteness necessitates fragmentation and ambiguity when defining it.⁴⁵ Second, he describes whiteness as uninterrogatable space, which accounts for the ways whites identify themselves as the center from which all societal norms come.⁴⁶ Third, whiteness is a metaphor for the universal insider, as whites are able to cross social boundaries and still gain acceptance.⁴⁷ Fourth, whiteness is a guilty and fair space in which white space is privileged but also open and shareable.⁴⁸ Fifth, whiteness is situationally immutable, which describes the option rather than necessity that whiteness

⁴³ Hoops, “Discourses of Affirmation in the Spatialization of Whiteness,” 196.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁵ Ronald, L. Jackson II, “White space, white privilege: Mapping discursive inquiry into the self,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, (1999): 45.

⁴⁶ Jackson, “White space, white privilege: Mapping discursive inquiry into the self,” 46.

⁴⁷ Jackson, “White space, white privilege: Mapping discursive inquiry into the self,” 48.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

code-switch, or adapt their language to a specific setting.⁴⁹ These characteristics of whiteness allow it to maintain its power; Jackson adds to our conception of whiteness as strategic.

Like Hoops and Jackson, Shome discusses whiteness as spatial. She calls for critical race scholarship to recognize the ways whiteness is contextual and secures its power in different ways through different spaces. She illustrates how whiteness is maintained and produced “not by overt rhetorics of whiteness” but by its “everydayness,” which makes invisible the ways whites participate in and benefit from their dominance.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Shome argues that when whiteness gets contested, it forms strategies of self-naming.⁵¹ Whiteness is now beginning to mark itself, and it is at these moments that whiteness needs careful attention. In response to the question of recentering whiteness through studying it, Shome posits that “the issue perhaps is less a matter of whether whiteness should be examined or not, and more *of how* whiteness should be studied and for what political and reflexive end.”⁵²

As these scholars demonstrate, whiteness constitutes and is constituted by spaces. In order to understand how whiteness functions, we must examine the spaces in which it operates. I consider this strategy by exploring how whiteness plays out in the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁰ Raka Shome, “Outing Whiteness,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 17, no. 3, (2000): 366.

⁵¹ Shome, “Outing Whiteness,” 368.

⁵² Shome, “Outing Whiteness,” 370.

specific space of the university. The next section illustrates ways that whiteness defends itself.

Defending Whiteness

As we see exemplified by the Black Lives Matter movement, contemporary whiteness faces many pressures. One of the ways whiteness survives these pressures is by responding with defensive strategies. DiAngelo argues that whiteness maintains its invisibility and thus its hierarchal position, through its refusal to talk about race. Whites live in an insulated social environment that builds whites' expectations for racial comfort while lowering their tolerance for racial stress.⁵³ When whites experience racial stress, they exhibit defensive moves such as the outward display of emotions like anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.⁵⁴ These behaviors allow whites to strategically avoid talking about their dominant, oppressive position.

Ahmed offers an alternative argument to that of DiAngelo, asserting that whiteness also maintains its dominance through the ways that it does talk about race. Ahmed analyzes six modes for declaring whiteness: "I /we must be seen to be white," "I am/we are racist," "I am/we are ashamed by my/ our racism," "I am/we are happy (and racist people are sad)," "I/we have studied whiteness (and racist people are

⁵³ Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol. 3, (2011): 54.

⁵⁴ DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 54.

ignorant)” and “I am/we are coloured (too).”⁵⁵ She illustrates that these modes constitute a “politics of declaration, in which institutions as well as individuals ‘admit’ to forms of bad practice, and in which the ‘admission’ itself becomes seen as good practice.” This mode of declaration involves a “fantasy of transcendence” in which what is transcended is the very thing admitted to in the declaration. Ahmed argues that such declarations of whiteness are non-performative: they do not do what they say. Whites who declare their whiteness are not necessarily non-racist or anti-racist. Ahmed’s argument illustrates how merely talking about race does not enact any changes towards racial equity.

Similarly to Ahmed, Marty offers a critique of white antiracist rhetoric. She examines the ways that such rhetoric often takes the form of apologia, or the speech of self-defense. This speech genre “enables rhetors to defend their moral character against accusation and attack as they deflect any recognition of wrongdoing or of the need for accountability.”⁵⁶ Despite our antiracist commitments, many white people protect our moral reputations and our versions of progressive politics rather than recognize and change our unfair and unearned racially based advantages.⁵⁷ Marty posits that in order

⁵⁵ Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,” *Borderlands*, Vol. 3, no. 2, (2004).

⁵⁶ Debian Marty, “White Antiracist Rhetoric as Apologia,” *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, Ed. Thomas K. Nakayama & Judith N. Martin, (California: SAGE Publications, 1999), 52.

⁵⁷ Marty, “White Antiracist Rhetoric as Apologia,” 52.

to move from admission to accountability, we must care more about our interracial relationships than we care for our antiracist self-image.⁵⁸

These scholars argue that whiteness defends itself through discourse. The ways whites do or do not talk about race strategically maneuver around challenges to our dominance. This analysis gestures a way forward from Nakayama and Krizek's argument that whiteness secures its power through invisibility. Even when whiteness is visible, it maintains its power. I ground my study of whiteness discourse in this assertion, as I examine the ways that whites secure their dominance *by* talking about race. The next section illustrates the ways whiteness adapts in form in order to survive.

Changes in Whiteness

Large public moments concerning race such as Obama's election and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement have prompted whiteness to alter its forms.

Whiteness's ability to adapt is one of the most prominent ways it maintains its power; therefore, we must study the way it changes. Kennedy et al. establish the need for whiteness studies in a post-civil rights era in which many codes of racism are no longer visible. They argue that discussions about representations of race are necessary to progress towards racial equality and "avoid misreading the absence of visible signs as the achievement of race neutrality."⁵⁹ Race must be studied not to reify its existence but

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁹ Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, Krista Ratcliffe, Kathleen Ethel Welch, Catherine Prendergast, Ira Shor, Thomas R. West, Ellen Cushman, Michelle Kendrick & Lisa Albrecht, "Symposium: Whiteness Studies," *Rhetoric Review* 24, no. 4 (2005): 361.

to expose its social construction and therefore interrupt injustices. In particular, scholars must study race and whiteness simultaneously in order to shift focus from just the raced bodies as victims of racism to the racializing bodies as the perpetrators of racism.⁶⁰ Kennedy et al. assert the potential for discussions of whiteness to disrupt rather than re-center whites' dominant position.

Bonilla-Silva complements Kennedy's call for further scholarship on white discursive practices by examining how people explain, justify, rationalize, and articulate racial viewpoints. He analyzes ethnographic interviews with the goal to uncover the collective ideological practices that help reinforce the contemporary racial order.⁶¹ Bonilla-Silva argues that most whites exhibit a color-blind racism that allows them to claim not to be racist while perpetuating the contemporary state of racial inequality.⁶² He delineates four frames of colorblind racism. First, he describes abstract liberalism, which assumes that individuals have equal opportunities.⁶³ Second, he describes naturalization, in which whites explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences.⁶⁴ Third, he describes cultural racism, which relies on culturally based arguments to explain the standing of minorities in society.⁶⁵ Fourth, he

⁶⁰ Kennedy et al., "Symposium: Whiteness Studies," 363.

⁶¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006), 15.

⁶² Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

describes the minimization of racism, which suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances.⁶⁶ Bonilla-Silva also illustrates the rhetorical moves through which whites navigate colorblind-racism. Whites avoid using direct racial language to express their racial views.⁶⁷ They use semantic moves, such as claims of ignorance, to avoid dangerous discussions or to save face.⁶⁸ They project blame in order to escape guilt and responsibility.⁶⁹ They use diminutives, such as “just a little bit...,” to soften their racial claims.⁷⁰ They become incoherent when discussing issues that make them uncomfortable, giving lengthy pauses or making grammatical mistakes.⁷¹ Bonilla-Silva's work illustrates how white discursive strategies adapt to changes in historical context surrounding race. Whites employ different discursive strategies in 2006 than they did during Nakayama and Krizek's study in 1995.

Happe offers an understanding of the embodiment of white discursive practices. She analyzes racial discourse using a theory of performativity. She illustrates how race operates as an ideology, and how “ideology is a rhetoric; as such, it exists within the discourse that gives it a name.”⁷² Happe argues that racial ontologies are the product of

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷² Kelly E. Happe, “The Body of Race: Toward a Rhetorical Understanding of Racial Ideology,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 99 (2013): 132.

rhetorical speech acts that social relations (of racism) in turn depend on. She suggests that in performative discourse, the act of constituting the racialized other is simultaneously the constitution of the grounds by which consent to a racialized order (by the privileged) can be secured.⁷³ The social relations of racism may be “materially real and reflected, not enacted, in language,” but consent to those relations must be obtained through “the calling into being of certain subject positions of racially marked and unmarked persons.”⁷⁴ Race is the result of the iteration of bodily norms that become unquestionable by persons whose interests are served by failing to question race's status as common sense.⁷⁵ Happe’s contribution confirms the central role of rhetoric in shaping and understanding race relations.

As whiteness scholarship expands, Moon and Nakayama identify a lack of attention in critical whiteness studies to the ways that white identities function strategically. They examine the interplay between strategic and tactical rhetorics with regard to social identities.⁷⁶ Moon and Nakayama argue that whiteness employs strategic rhetoric to “reinvent, re-secure, and reposition itself” in response to challenges to its dominant position.⁷⁷ Acts of naming dominant systems—such as whites calling

⁷³ Happe, “The Body of Race: Toward a Rhetorical Understanding of Racial Ideology,” 138.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷⁶ Dreama G. Moon & Thomas K. Nakayama, “Strategic Social Identities and Judgments: A Murder in Appalachia,” *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 16 (2005): 89.

⁷⁷ Moon and Nakayama, “Strategic Social Identities and Judgments: A Murder in Appalachia,” 91.

out their whiteness—are not innocent but in fact are strategic projects that control definitions.⁷⁸ Consequently, whiteness discourse must be given careful critical attention, especially when it responds to pressures from marginalized groups.

The academic conversation around whiteness illustrates how whiteness functions strategically. It acts as invisible, occupies space, uses defensive strategies, and adapts in form in order to maintain its dominant position. As we see, whiteness has adapted in the twenty years since Nakayama and Krizek’s discursive study of whiteness. In response to public pressures such as Obama’s election and the Black Lives Matter movement, we have changed the ways we talk about race. I contribute to critical whiteness studies scholarship by providing an updated study of whiteness discourse. In the next section, I conclude the discussion of whiteness in the academy with scholarship on universities as white spaces.

The Academy as White

I now talk about the university space as it constitutes and is constituted by whiteness. Universities are institutions that produce social positions; they give cultural and economic capital to those who attend them. They are historically elite spaces whose students often already occupy dominant positions. Consequently, universities preserve social hierarchies. I examine universities as sites that preserve whiteness.

Shome provides context as to how a space can enable specific relations of power. She argues that space is not just a “fixed” location, but encompasses “cultures,

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

languages, and complex configurations of meaning and power.”⁷⁹ These multiple and shifting locations that we inhabit “enable specific modes of knowing, reading and experiencing the dominant.”⁸⁰ Shome calls for scholars to recognize that whiteness is contextual, and must be understood through attention to its various “geopolitical locations.”⁸¹ Whiteness is not a monolithic formation but rather is constantly made and remade through its participation in unequal social relations. Whiteness is a nuanced formation that “secures its power in different ways through different sites—all of which nonetheless, secures its hegemony in a highly racialized global system.”⁸² Shome’s work illustrates how universities are influenced by social factors that in turn shape relations of power. In order to understand whiteness, we must understand how universities constitute dominance.

In their study on whiteness discourse, Nakayama and Krizek develop the theory of whiteness as a strategy using Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of an assemblage, and de Certeau’s description of strategies. I draw on Nakayama and Krizek’s use of these theories to consider how universities secure whiteness. Deleuze and Guattari offer the assemblage as a theory of how an institution such as a university protects the dominant. An assemblage is a machine that produces and reproduces power relations in particular

⁷⁹ Raka Shome, “Whiteness and the Politics of Location: Postcolonial Reflections,” *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, Ed. Thomas K. Nakayama & Judith N. Martin, (California: SAGE Publications, 1999), 110.

⁸⁰ Shome, “Whiteness and the Politics of Location: Postcolonial Reflections,” 110.

⁸¹ Raka Shome, “Outing Whiteness,” 368.

⁸² Raka Shome, “Outing Whiteness,” 368.

ways. It is particular to a territory and functions through expression.⁸³ An assemblage operates through a “semiotic system, a regime of signs,” and a “pragmatic system, actions and passions.”⁸⁴ Therefore, in order to examine an assemblage, one must ascertain both what is said and what is done. I consider the university as an assemblage, which produces and reproduces power through semiotics—discourse—and pragmatics—the distribution of resources. The dominant position of whiteness in universities can be understood through its discursive practices.

As assemblages maintain dominant relations of power, they can be said to operate through strategies. De Certeau defines a strategy as “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships [enacted by] a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution).”⁸⁵ A strategy assumes a place that serves as the base “from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats...can be managed.”⁸⁶ Strategies are actions that use a place of power to expand on “theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses” that articulate “physical places in which forces are distributed.”⁸⁷ By de Certeau’s argument, whites use universities as places from which to defend their dominance. We employ discourse that relies on the power of the institution to maneuver around threats to our position.

⁸³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 303.

⁸⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, 504.

⁸⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 36.

⁸⁶ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 36.

⁸⁷ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 38.

Institutional whiteness can be seen as an assemblage that operates through discursive strategies. Within this framework, universities are spaces that secure and facilitate whites' exertion of power. I consider the assemblage of a specific institution, Whitman College, and the strategies which secure its whiteness. The semiotic system of the assemblage of Whitman is its institutional discourse, such as its official statements on diversity. The pragmatic system of the assemblage is Whitman's distribution of resources, such as its admissions practices and allocation of financial aid. In the next chapter, I examine how the discourse within the assemblage of Whitman College strategically secures white dominance.

Chapter 3: Whiteness Discourse at Whitman College

“To be clear, I’m not saying Black people should not go to Whitman College for fear of violence. I am saying that violence, physical and psychological, is always on the table for black people in the United States of America, and in some places more than others. As someone who attended Whitman and engaged many different educational institutions in my works with college and high school youth, I don’t think the people at Whitman are any worse than any other school, but I do feel it is an especially difficult environment for black students, one that the school has yet to prove it has gotten serious about addressing. Any school, before it starts to recruit for racial diversity, must make a fundamental commitment to be responsible in the face of systemic racial violence in America, lest it risk, even in the face of good intentions, becoming an accomplice to or even a purveyor of that violence.”⁸⁸ - Lawrence Grandpre

Grandpre views Whitman College as a difficult environment for students of color. He argues that despite good intentions, Whitman has not taken the necessary steps to make itself a safe and equitable place. Grandpre’s is not the only or the most recent testimony by students of color who feel unsafe or uncomfortable at Whitman because of their race. This year, the Intercultural Center released a film titled I TOO AM WHITMAN which “create[d] a space where voices that are often silenced can be heard.”⁸⁹ The film features students from underrepresented groups at Whitman who describe being isolated by whiteness. Students expressed statements such as “I felt like I didn’t belong,” “I was uncomfortable to reach out,” and “I felt less than, seeing white faces everywhere.” From op-ed articles in the *Wire* to campus marches,⁹⁰ students of

⁸⁸ Lawrence Grandpre, “This ‘Diversity’ Stuff Can Kill You: What I Learned as a Black Man at America’s Least Diverse Elite College.”

⁸⁹ Intercultural Center, “I Too Am Whitman,” <https://vimeo.com/190623694>.

⁹⁰ “Whitman Lacks Diversity.” *Whitman Wire*, January 28, 2016. Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://whitmanwire.com/opinion/2016/01/28/whitman-lacks-diversity/>.

color at Whitman have expressed their feelings of isolation as well as lack of value and safety in our white community. These narratives depict a racial hierarchy that those in power are forced to confront. I now examine the ways whites at Whitman address their dominant position.

Institutional Discourse

The testimonies of students of color present a version of Whitman that not many white students see. They force a self-reflexive turn on our community's commitment to equity and inclusion. In light of the experiences of students at color at Whitman, we must ask what does "diversity" do? If diversity at Whitman does not support those students it hails as diverse, whom does diversity benefit? To address these questions is to consider the assemblage of Whitman College and the ways it distributes power regarding diversity. First, I look at its semiotic systems, or its institutional texts.

The headline of Whitman College's official statement on diversity reads: "Differences that Enrich Personal Growth."⁹¹ We see that Whitman values diversity for its enrichment of individuals in our community. Implied here is that the differences brought by diverse students benefit those who are necessarily not "different."

A separate site page contains the Trustee's statement on diversity:

⁹¹ "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion," *Whitman College*, Accessed November 25, 2016, <https://www.whitman.edu/about/diversity>.

Diversity enriches our community and enhances intellectual and personal growth. We seek to provide a challenging liberal arts experience for our students that prepares them for citizenship in the global community.⁹²

Rather than expressing a commitment to equity, Whitman presents diversity as a benefit to individuals who encounter difference. Nowhere in Whitman's statements on diversity do we find the words "access" or "opportunity." The college avoids any political referent in which diversity would be explicitly for underrepresented students. Rather, diverse bodies are a commodity to be consumed by those in the dominant group, which at Whitman are wealthy white students. The "different" experiences of underrepresented students—predominantly students of color and low-income students—offer wealthy white students opportunities to gain unique viewpoints and competence in multicultural environments.

When one views Whitman's diversity framework as a benefit for whites rather than an issue of access and equity for students of color, we can better understand the relationship between Whitman's rhetorical commitment to diversity and the racial hierarchy in our community. The semiotic system of the assemblage expresses that diverse bodies are incorporated only so far as they do not disrupt the centered position of whites. Whitman's pragmatic system—its admissions policies—reflects this investment in whiteness. The Whitman College Facebook states that last year, 55% of student applicants were Caucasian, while the college admitted 67% Caucasian students.⁹³ In contrast, 9.6% of student applicants were Hispanic, while the college

⁹² "Policies and Statements," *Whitman College*, Accessed November 25, 2016, <https://www.whitman.edu/about/diversity/policies-and-statements>.

⁹³ Whitman College Factbook: Academic Year 2016-2017, 15-16.

admitted 6.5%. Black participants made up 2.3% of the applicant pool, and the college accepted 1.9%. These numbers show that Whitman chooses to accept a greater proportion of whites than students of color. The college employs a rhetorical commitment to diversity that does not disrupt its racial hierarchy. When pressured to address our whiteness, our community responds with institutional discourse that maneuvers around the challenge to whites' dominance. The college's institutional discourse and admissions policies work together to secure whiteness. The consideration of Whitman as an assemblage which secures whiteness provides context to the environment in which students live and learn. I now consider student discourse as strategies within the assemblage.

Student Discourse

Approach

In this section, I analyze ethnographic interviews with students at Whitman who identify as white. I interviewed eight respondents, two from each class year and of different genders. I used a semi-structured interview method, which includes both open-ended and theoretically driven questions that allow the participant to narrate their experience within the topic of study.⁹⁴ In the interview, I asked about the participant's background and experiences with race in hometown and schools, the participant's general ideas about race and racism, the causes of structural inequality and the role of government intervention, diversity at Whitman, and the participant's personal racism.

⁹⁴ Anne Galletta, *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 2.

Interview Analysis

The students I interviewed are aware of the whiteness of our college community. Every participant in some way articulated Whitman as a white dominated space. When I asked Alex to describe the college we attend, he responded:

An extremely white institution in an extremely white part of America... To think of institutions like this, if they're designed by white people, then they sort of support and echo the cultural ideals that went along with the people that founded them and the system that was founded to celebrate certain methods of communication.

Alex acknowledges that Whitman is a white space. He articulates the ways that whiteness dominates not just the population demographic but also the cultural values and communicative norms of the institution. Furthermore, Alex recognizes the enduring historical context of the college as an institution founded by and for white people. He identifies the centrality of whiteness as an inherent and intentional characteristic of Whitman.

When asked to describe our college, Brendan also named the whiteness of the community:

[Whitman] is a small liberal arts college. It's mostly white dominant. One of the issues on campus is the student racial ethnic diversity in that it is mostly upper-crust white student predominant.

In Brendan's response, it is important to note that "white" and "diversity" are his chosen second and third descriptors of Whitman College. My question did not refer to the racial makeup of the college; I simply asked him to describe the college we attend. Rather than referencing Whitman's location, its academic caliber, or its extracurricular

opportunities, he talks about its whiteness. Though Brendan knew our conversation was to become about race, he brings up whiteness before I do. His response shows his awareness of whiteness and willingness to talk about it.

Brendan's description illustrates another theme between participant responses in which students associate whiteness with diversity—or lack thereof. He explains the problem of whiteness as one of diversity. Brendan's connection mirrors the move of the assemblage in its institutional discourse on diversity. He shifts focus from the centered position of whites to the position of minority groups at the margins. Brendan articulates whiteness, but does so in a way that directs attention away from the system of whites supremacy and instead looks at non-whites' attempts to become part of that system. His rhetorical move allows him to maneuver around a critique of whiteness by itself. Instead of challenging the system of white dominance, we become concerned with absorbing minority group representatives into that system. In response to the same question, Ann described Whitman as “a liberal arts school with not that great diversity.” Ann does not even name whiteness. She uses diversity instead of whiteness. Just as Brendan's does, Ann's rhetorical move allows her to talk about a white space without challenging it.

White Whitman students talk about diversity a lot. Participants mentioned how often they discuss diversity or hear it talked about on campus. Emily told me of how she talks about diversity with her friends, in classes, and even led a Race and Equity workshop in her dorm as an RA:

I feel like Whitman aggressively talks about it, and we're always like, "We're not a diverse school. Whitman is not diverse." But a lot of time when white people say that, they just say it.

Emily notes the recurrence of diversity discourse at Whitman. She describes talk on the subject as "aggressive," which could mean either that we are very concerned with diversity and therefore bring it up often, or that when we talk about it, we do so in a way that strongly condemns our lack of it. One could guess that Emily meant both. Furthermore, she remarks that for the amount we talk about diversity, we do little to change it. Ann echoes Emily's sentiments when she recounts a time she talked about diversity at dinner:

We talked about how undiverse we thought Whitman was. It was a pretty common conversation that I have with my friends. And it didn't hold a lot of action in it, just observation.

Both Emily and Ann illustrate how white Whitman students often talk about diversity and our desire for it in our community. However, they point out that the discussions rarely include ways that we can work to make our community more diverse. As a result, our discussions do not lead to concrete change. This rhetorical strategy complements the work of the assemblage which values diversity in its institutional discourse but through its distribution of resources does not allow diversity to threaten whites' dominance. Through these student responses we see how at Whitman, even when white people talk about whiteness, our community remains white.

The students I interviewed talk about diversity as a benefit to whites. They explained how diversity is important because it offers new cultural knowledge to the dominant group. Mary told me that she values diversity because she "learn[s] things

about other cultures and other races.” Mary views diversity in terms of the benefits she gets from being around people of minority groups. She spends her life in white dominated spaces, and diversity allows her to interact with people of color while maintaining her position of power as the racial majority. Kyle illustrates a similar view of diversity when he told me about his discussions during Whitman’s Power and Privilege Symposium:

[The discussions] helped me see maybe I haven’t been in as diverse communities as I could have been, or haven’t gone out of my way to make a diverse community.

I then asked if that is something he should be doing.

I think so. Like I said before, it expands your worldview and gives you new things to consider.

Like Mary, Kyle values diversity for the cultural knowledge diverse bodies offer him. Kyle implies that encountering diversity is something he should be doing. However, he supports diversity for his own advantage, not for the opportunities it gives underrepresented groups. Neither student describes diversity in terms of access of minority groups to an institution that gives its members social, cultural and economic capital. Neither student values diversity for the ways it might advance towards racial equity. We see that within the assemblage of Whitman College, the student discourse parallels the institutional discourse and thereby functions strategically to secure certain power relations which benefit whites.

Some participants recognized the ways that diversity is valued at Whitman for the benefits it brings whites rather than for access and equity for oppressed

groups. Kate described why she thinks diversity is important: “I think it’s pretty imperative that you have the ability to speak with people with different experiences.”

However, when I asked her who benefits from diversity the most, she replied,

That’s interesting...I don’t know. I mean the way I just described it, I’m inclined to say that whoever is considered the norm, those people would benefit the most because they’re gaining the diverse Otherized perspective.

Kate described diversity in terms of her own advantage, but also articulated who diversity is important for. She is able to identify how in our community, diversity is valued for the way it provides the dominant group access to cultural knowledge without challenging our dominant position. Similarly, Alex values diversity for the “important learning experiences,” but recognizes that such a view “commodifies race.”

Kate and Alex illustrate their awareness of our dominant position and of the ways in which we maintain that position. However, they do little to change this situation. Their responses indicate how whites at Whitman strategically talk about our dominance without challenging it. By just naming whiteness, we avoid discussions of how to disrupt it.

Out of all participants, one student offered an alternative view on the value of diversity. When asked about the importance of diversity, Brendan replied, “A diverse campus shows an equal opportunity campus.” Brendan is the only student I talked with who did not describe diversity in terms of the cultural knowledge it brings to the dominant group. He recognizes the value of diversity in increasing access of minority groups to an elite institution. He perceives how this access addresses unequal opportunities among groups for class mobility. Rather than seeing diversity at Whitman

for the benefit it brings whites, he sees the progress it makes towards an equitable community.

I want to offer an explanation for why Brendan is the only student I interviewed who articulated diversity in terms of access and equity rather than personal benefit.

Early in his interview, Brendan prefaced a response with:

Unfortunately, I might describe myself as slightly colorblind, where I try to say that there isn't much difference between blacks and whites...sometimes I laugh slightly when people get so caught up in the race issue, because it's like we're all the kinda the same.

Brendan minimizes the differences between racial groups. He looks past the social construction of race to point out that people of different races are genetically very similar. This view disregards the implications of race in social reality that severely disadvantage people of color. However, since Brendan minimizes the social differences between races, he does not see non-white people in terms of their cultural differences. Therefore, diversity is not about bringing in minority groups for the cultural consumption of the dominant group; for Brendan, there is nothing to consume. Instead, Brendan sees diversity arguably for what it should be for: increasing access and therefore equity between social groups. In this view, diversity challenges the dominance of whiteness. Brendan's responses illuminate how whites who do "see" race choose to view and discuss it in ways that are non-threatening to our dominant position. As is the case for diversity as cultural consumption, we support racial equity initiatives only when we benefit as well.

The white Whitman students I interviewed discussed anti-racist work through practices that are non-threatening and relatively easy to accomplish. One theme among participants is their view of racism as primarily due to a lack of understanding. When I asked Ann for her definition of racism, she said:

I think its a lack of understanding. Or a lack of a will to understand. I think someone who perpetrates racism in their life is someone who doesn't understand, or does not make the effort to understand anything that is different from their view.

Ann attributes racism to whites' ignorance. She believes that if white people "understood" people of color, we would not be racist. Her viewpoint does not consider the advantages whites hold through racist practices, and thus our social and material investment in maintaining our dominant position. However, at multiple points during her interview, Ann expresses awareness of the structural and personal benefits of racism for whites. She articulates the ways that racism is more than whites' ignorance, yet still chooses to describe racism in this limited way. She defines racism as a lack of understanding because this explanation establishes anti-racist work as simply understanding. Whites need only to educate themselves about different experiences. This rhetorical move strategically maintains white dominance in the way it talks about whiteness.

Another theme among participant responses is white students' conception of whiteness as comfort. Brendan discusses his experiences within the discipline of science:

You walk into any science building, you're going to find a lot of white guys. So it sort of feels like, ah I'm fine being here. If I was black maybe it would seem scary.

Brendan describes feeling comfort and belonging in the white dominated space of the science building. He imagines what it would be like as a black person in the same space, and determines the black person would feel scared. Brendan discusses racism in terms of how one feels. He does not acknowledge the reality of racial discrimination that gives whites an advantage in succeeding in science and obstructs the success of black scientists. Yet, at multiple points in his interview, Brendan acknowledges the greater opportunities for academic and professional advancement whites receive due to racism. However, he chooses here to describe whiteness as comfort. When he describes racial inequity in terms of the way he feels, then his anti-racist work is simply to feel discomfort. Whites need only to make themselves uncomfortable regarding issues of race. Again, we see how whites strategically secure their dominance *by* talking about race.

The next theme among responses is white students' description of whiteness as privilege. When I asked Kate what race she is, she said "white." I then asked her what it means to be white, and she replied:

I guess it comes with a lot of privilege. This whole concept that we talked about, that white is invisible but white is also the norm, the standard.

Kate describes whiteness in terms of privilege. For Kate, privilege is the ability to be the norm and go unrecognized as such. In a white dominated community, it makes sense that whiteness is the standard. However, recognizing the centered position of

whiteness does not change its position. By Kate's definition of whiteness, her anti-racist work is simply to "check" her privilege. Whites need only to recognize that we are the norm. Her rhetorical move strategically avoids disrupting whiteness.

The ways participants conceive of whiteness imply that whites' anti-racist work is fundamentally to talk about race. Whether we need to educate ourselves, feel uncomfortable, or check our privilege, we only need to talk. Participants demonstrated this implication explicitly when we discussed ways to combat racism. At the end of her interview, I asked Mary for one important thing she can do to combat racism. She said, "I think that one big way that white people can work to combat racism is talking to other white people." I asked Kate the same question and she replied, "to become more educated and have more discussions on the subject." Mary and Kate view discussing race as the most important action they can take against racism. All they must do to combat racism is have conversations with their family, friends and peers.

The participants demonstrated that white Whitman students view whiteness as (mis)understanding, comfort and privilege. By these conceptions of whiteness, we need only to have conversations about race. Through discussion, we can learn about non-white perspectives, feel uncomfortable and recognize our privileges. However, these conversations do not challenge whites' dominance nor create material change towards racial equity. Rather, they strategically avoid disrupting whiteness. We choose conversation as our anti-racist work because it is easy. We can talk about race in our classes, in dining halls, after guest speakers and at the Power and Privilege Symposium. We don't have to give up any advantages, and it makes us feel good about

doing something. Within the assemblage of Whitman College, student discourse secures whiteness. The ways we talk about race, and as a result conceive of whiteness, strategically maneuver around the challenge to our dominance. We are able to claim anti-racist work without enacting changes towards racial equity. Thus we maintain the racial hierarchy in our community.

Student Discourse as Strategies within an Assemblage

At Whitman College, whites talk about race in terms of “diversity,” “understanding,” “comfort” and “privilege.” These discursive practices function as strategies within the assemblage of the university to secure whites’ dominance. Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate the ways an assemblage produces and reproduces power relations through expression. At Whitman, the university is the assemblage that maintains a racial hierarchy through institutional discourse. Within the university space, students echo and confirm this discourse. De Certeau describes strategies that expand on discourses to distribute forces in defense of a position of power. In the university space, student discourse expands on institutional discourse to protect whiteness. At Whitman, these strategies are terms such as “diversity,” “understanding,” “comfort” and “privilege.” The association of whiteness with diversity shifts efforts from a critique of white dominance to an authorization of white dominance using people of color. The explanation for racism as a lack of understanding neglects the investment whites have in being racist. When whiteness is seen as comfort or privilege, then whites’ anti-racist work is only to feel uncomfortable or recognize

their advantages. Each of these terms protect whites from having to give up their dominant position. They function strategically to maintain a racial hierarchy.

Looking Ahead

Lawrence Grandpre heard a shotgun behind him and considered the possibility of it being aimed at him. When white people become complicit in whiteness, it becomes invisible to us that matters of race are matters of life and death. If we are to disrupt the racial hierarchy in our community, we must understand how whiteness functions as a strategic rhetoric.

In this project, I have demonstrated that white students at Whitman College talk about race primarily in terms of “diversity,” “understanding,” “comfort” and “privilege.” The ways we talk about race, and as a result conceive of whiteness, strategically maneuver around challenges to our dominance. In Chapter 1, I tracked significant changes in the way race is talked about in public discourse, specifically the consideration of a “post-racial” America after the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the attention towards contemporary forms of white supremacy in rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2012. In Chapter 2, I illustrated how whiteness gets talked about in the academy as invisible, spatial, defensive and adaptive. In Chapter 3, I examined the ways that whiteness discourse at Whitman College strategically secures white dominance.

This project continues the discursive mapping of whiteness started by Nakayama and Krizek in their article “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric.” Nakayama and Krizek concluded their study with a call for “further consideration and dialogue about whiteness.” This project answers their call. In 1995, Nakayama and Krizek found that whiteness secures its dominance by remaining invisible. Since their study,

significant moments around race have occurred such as the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the Black Lives Matter moment in 2012. These public moments pressured whites to alter the way we talk about race. This project contributes to the field of rhetoric by providing an analysis of white discursive strategies that is both updated and specific to the space of a university. I find that within contemporary race discourse at a small liberal arts college, whiteness is no longer invisible. White people talk about their whiteness. However, I confirm Nakayama and Krizek's argument that whiteness functions as a strategic rhetoric. The ways we talk about race, and as a result conceive of whiteness, strategically maneuver around the challenge to our dominance.

This project is grounded in the experiences of people at Whitman College. We can use the analysis to shape the practices of our community. In my conversations with white Whitman students, I found that we talk about race primarily in terms of "diversity," "understanding," "comfort" and "privilege." These ways of talking about race do not challenge our dominant position as whites. I suggest that we stop claiming anti-racist work around these discursive practices, such as when we name our privilege, educate ourselves, or feel uncomfortable. These practices are useful and important steps towards racial equity, but they will not achieve racial equity. We obstruct the progress of racial justice when we claim anti-racist work without actually doing that work.

My second consideration is that in order to achieve racial equity in our community, we must give up the advantages afforded us by our whiteness. One

suggestion of what that might look like is increasing the number of students of color who get to and through our college. I recommend that Whitman partner with The Posse Foundation.⁹⁵ Posse is a scholarship program that identifies high school students with exceptional academic and leadership potential who may be overlooked by traditional college selection processes. Posse brings these students to their elite private college partners in “posses” of ten students. These students, along with a Posse mentor at the college, support each other throughout their four years in college. Statistically, most Posse Scholars are low-income students of color. To bring the Posse Foundation to Whitman would take a substantial financial commitment from the college. This is where, if we are serious about our commitment to racial equity, we must be willing to give up advantages. In this case, Whitman must commit funds to this scholarship. We might draw these funds from sources which traditionally benefit the dominant group, whether by giving less merit aid (which often benefits wealthy white students), drawing funds from facility-building projects (such as the new residence hall which helps the college compete for more wealthy white students), or simply creating a fundraising campaign specifically for this scholarship. Regardless, we cannot claim a commitment to racial equity until we give up our advantages. Now that we have named our whiteness, lets disrupt it.

⁹⁵ *The Posse Foundation*, <https://www.possefoundation.org/>.

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