

BACKSTAGE DISCOURSE AND THE REPRODUCTION OF WHITE MASCULINITIES

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This article documents the shared patterns of private white male discourse. Drawing from comparative ethnographic research in a white nationalist and a white antiracist organization, I analyze how white men engage in private discourse to reproduce coherent and valorized understandings of white masculinity. These private speech acts reinforce prevailing narratives about race and gender, reproduce understandings of segregation and paternalism as natural, and rationalize the expression of overt racism. This analysis illustrates how antagonistic forms of “frontstage” white male activism may distract from white male identity management in the “backstage.”

“Sticks and stones may break bones, but words—words that evoke structures of oppression, exploitation, and brute physical threat—can break souls.”—Anthony A. Appiah

INTRODUCTION

On August 28, 2008—45 years to the day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his renowned “I Have a Dream” speech—Barack Obama accepted the Democratic Party’s nomination for President of the United States. Exactly 100 days later the nation awoke to headlines, such as that of *the New York Times*, that read: “OBAMA. Racial Barrier Falls in Heavy Turnout.” Seizing upon this watershed moment, many proclaimed the United States was “postracial” and that “racists” were no more than a few bad apples. Adam Geller (2008) of *USA Today* wrote, “The principle that all men are created equal has never been more than a remote eventuality in the quest for the presidency . . . that ideal is no longer relegated to someday. Someday is now.” Even Jared Taylor, editor of the White Nationalist journal *American Renaissance*, stated, “Electing him [Obama] will prove America is not ‘racist’ and many whites believe that rising above ‘racism’ is America’s sacred calling” (in Beirich and Potok 2008:17). From mainstream journalists to white nationalist activists, the election of Obama apparently signaled the realization that people are judged not, to cite Dr. King, “. . . by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (1963). Increasing numbers of people—especially white males—vociferously defend that claim that the United States is now a “postracial” nation (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gallagher 2003).

In concert with this discourse, racial segregation, inequality, and distrust prevails, as documented by a litany of social scientific research (Tilly 1998; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Collins 2005). By and large, the beneficiaries of our de facto racialized system are white men. Yet within a milieu objectively marked by white privileges, Charles Gallagher

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(2000:83) found, “Many whites took the opportunity to articulate a narrative of their whiteness that was based on victimization.” Hence, the need to take white male discourse seriously is well established among sociologists of race and ethnicity. Given the vast political, ideological, and material heterogeneity of whites and the increasing attention toward the flexibility of racial identities and categories (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002; Moore 2003; Vaquera and Kao 2006; Khanna 2010), there remains a fundamental charge for the sociological study of white masculinity: to evaluate why and how groups of white men, across varied contexts, make meaning of race and understand it as a salient category of human difference. As McDermott and Samson (2005:256) write, “Navigating between the long-term staying power of white privilege and the multifarious manifestations of the experience of whiteness remains the task of the next era of research on white racial and ethnic identity.” I take up that task here.

In particular, I examine how white men’s positioning in a white nationalist group and a white antiracist group employ strikingly similar “backstage” discourse to make meaning of racial difference. At this point, a brief caveat is necessary. While I examine two, localized groups that are formally disconnected, they do not enact their discourse in isolation. These two groups demonstrate reliance on similar discursive frameworks for the production of white masculinity. Despite the variety of white experiences in radically different white activist groups, the shared discursive expectations help to reproduce white male group positioning. This means that despite the heterogeneous variety of the white men encountered herein, the shared, “common-sensed,” ways of speaking about race in private areas may somewhat trump the diversity of white political orientations.

A significant strand within the sociological study of white masculinity and racial attitudes centers on how white racism—rather than publicly expressed in overt Jim Crow-style epithets—now finds public expression in subtle, symbolic, and polite forms (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Gallagher 2003). While the dominant form of racism has shifted form over the past half-century, I also argue that the “old-school” racism of years past has retained its vitriol by shifting in social location. Overt expressions of white male racism have moved from the disciplinary surveillance of a decidedly “politically correct” culture to inhabit private spaces deemed safe and comfortable (Myers and Williamson 2001; McKinney 2005; Myers 2005; Picca and Feagin 2007; Daniels 2009). Importantly, these backstage spaces should not be interpreted as locales free from the requirements of social interaction where one expresses their “true opinion.” Rather, these private settings demand certain expectations. These sites are crucial spaces for the reproduction of white male identity as a sense of group position in relation to both nonwhite “others” and idealized forms of the white male self. Moreover, given that white men experience even greater levels of social isolation than blacks and other nonwhites (Massey and Denton 1993), then the discourse they produce in these hyper-segregated and private areas is likely to affect how their own collective identity becomes normalized, expected, and *de rigueur*. In this sense, discourse is as much performative and constitutive as it is utilitarian (Goffman 1967, 1981; Howard 2000).

WHITE MASCULINITY AS GROUP PERFORMANCE

One of the fundamental questions motivating the contemporary study of white masculinity is how to conceptualize white men as a social group without essentializing them or portraying white masculinity as one-sided (Lewis 2004). This is a particularly difficult task given that most white men do not share a conscious group identity (Perry 2002). In addition, focusing on white men as a social collective entails speaking about domination, as both the gendered and racialized categories' existence depends on the continuation of patriarchy and white supremacy (Connell 1995; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Mills 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2002). Hence, the study of white men as racial and gendered actors must engage with issues of power. One must address how larger *trans*-local patterns, institutional processes, and everyday practices make *empowered* white masculinities possible, as well as study how and why *meanings* over these categories are made, reproduced, and contested.

In addressing this issue, it is not necessary to theorize white men as possessing shared group identities explicitly and universally. Rather, we may turn to a key insight afforded by cultural sociology; meanings are continually (re)attached to objects, behaviors, and identities through various processes of social production and reception. In this sense, identity is an ongoing accomplishment that is made possible by dominant and enduring cultural scripts. Accordingly, masculinity and whiteness represent a range of discursive positions that individuals emphasize in various settings and levels of social life. From this perspective, whiteness and masculinity are neither essential nor innate, but are accomplishments that appear natural. They materialize as ordinary and typical because all gendered and racialized individuals are compelled to adhere to culturally valorized mythologies taught in social interaction, and which over time are accepted as a priori reality (Hughey 2010). For example, throughout an average young white male's formative years, he is encouraged to adopt a special vision of white manhood as strong, autonomous, rational, neutral, objective, and meritocratic characteristics that commonly (yet never exclusively) characterize a dominant, idealized, or hegemonic form of masculinity and whiteness (Connell 1995; Lewis 2004; Hughey 2010). And it is from these scripts, internalized as the natural and existential background of who one *really* is, that a host of actions are simultaneously enabled and constrained.

Erving Goffman (1967, 1981) emphasized that processes of identity construction largely occur via discourse. Hence, discursive negotiations are fundamental for the mutual construction of reality, both externally (others, the world, objects) and internally (self-identity). As Judith A. Howard (2000:371–2) writes, "Identities are thus strategic social constructions created through interaction, with social and material consequences. . . . At the most basic level, the point is simply that people actively produce identity through their talk." Recent research in this area encompasses a wide-range of settings (Wetherell and Potter 1992; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Myers and Williamson 2001; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2002; Pollock 2004; Riggs and Augoustinos 2004; Myers 2005; Steyn and Foster 2008; Foster 2009; Goodman and Burke 2010). From the dramaturgical-linguist perspective, it is tempting to view these

studies and the specific locales or organizations in which they were undertaken, as collections of processes whereby either people rationalize their speech as dependent on either their desires or from normative interactions. While this perspective enables a view of identity as a process constituted in discourse, such a standpoint often relies on either functionalist or rational-actor paradigms. That is, the identity construction process is simply cataloged and oversimplified as the result of interactive effort. To mitigate this tendency, I interject a focus on power and identity formation as a “sense of group position” (Blumer 1958; Perry 2007).

Shared meanings (whether conscious, semiconscious, or unconscious) assist those marked as white to fit into their racial group. Yet, these meanings are neither merely individual nor entirely localized, nor are they always directed at racial out-groups. Feagin and O’Brien (2003:22) write, “racial stereotypes and prejudices . . . are usually rooted deeply in a positive sense of the ingroup’s *position* in the racial hierarchy.” Group positioning entails certain expectations and accountabilities. Members adhere to shared expectations that may differ by context. Yet, as Schwalbe et al. (2000:442) writes, “. . . the power to hold others accountable in one setting depends upon relationships, that is, a larger *net of accountability* with actors outside the setting.” In this sense, discursive adherence to white male group expectations does not take place in a vacuum. The interaction of people between and across various settings constitutes a net, making accountability hard to evade. This identity work, especially within the realm of speech, is about using “self-preservational techniques to communicate with others and to elicit predictable responses” (Schwalbe 2008:182) and ultimately helps reproduce larger “structural” inequalities.

There is a modicum of work that examines “backstage” forms of white male racial discourse, and even less that examines its connection to processes of raced and gendered identity formation. Among the few studies that do touch on this topic, Myers and Williamson (2001), Karyn McKinney (2005), and Kristen Myers (2005) all found that young whites often engage in intense and unmitigated racist discourse in private, all-white settings. Most notably, Picca and Feagin (2007) found substantial variance in how whites express ideas about race in public and how they act in private. They wrote that such “two-faced racism” shows, “. . . one must be careful here in reaching conclusions about a ‘new racism’ or a ‘colorblind racism’ that is greatly different from the past . . . this is not the case. The majority of whites still participate in openly racist performances in the backstage arena” (Picca and Feagin 2007:22).

Despite the modest growth of this research, there has been little attention paid to (1) how whiteness and masculinity intersect in the backstage, (2) how these discourses are not solely the product of already constructed racialized and gendered identities, but are rather constitutive of the identities that wield them, and (3) how disparate, disconnected, and seemingly antagonistic microperformances of white men may rely upon similar racist, reactionary, and essentialist scripts, thus reproducing macro structures of inequality. Accordingly, Charles Tilly (1998:7, 11) admonishes us to study the mechanisms of identity formation that “. . . lock categorical inequality into place” and which “. . . operate in similar fashion over a wide variety of organizational settings.” That is,

“being a white male” requires adherence to certain informal scripts and schemas, and to larger “nets of accountability” (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

ACCESS, DATA, METHODOLOGY, AND ANALYSIS

For little over one year (May 2006–June 2007) I spent at least one day a week with either or both members of the white nationalist organization National Equality for All (NEA) and the white antiracist organization Whites for Racial Justice (WRJ) (see Table 1). In order to receive institutional review board approval, all potentially identifying information regarding NEA and WRJ was changed and replaced with pseudonyms. I gained access after writing to the leaders of both organizations, in which I pitched my research proposal: to observe how members discussed, made meaning of, and interpreted racial identity. My relationship with the group was that of a known researcher.

I was keenly aware that, as a white male, members of both NEA and WRJ understood me as simultaneous insider and outsider. In that sense, they often stated that they saw me as “one of them,” but not “radical enough” in ideology. Hence, both groups often sought to challenge my inquiries, question my intent, and convert me. I took these moments of attempted “conversion” as opportunities to engage in heartfelt discussions with both nationalists and antiracists. Throughout this process, I was careful to explicitly reiterate my personal beliefs, interests, experiences, and position as a researcher in relation to white racial identity, so that no deception was employed and so as not to create an ethnographic “blind spot,” by which involvement might cause me to lose critical distance.

Both groups were male dominated in their headquartered chapters, even though WRJ claims to possess relatively equal gender demographics amidst their national membership. NEA claims to possess a national membership that is overwhelmingly male in number. In recognition of this gendered dynamic, I was attentive to changes in the tone and timbre of conversation when the few female members of NEA’s and WRJ’s headquartered chapter entered or left a room. Although conversations failed to radically change with the inclusion or exclusion of female members, I herein limit my analysis to white male discourse.

In order to illuminate backstage discourse, I triangulated (Golafshani 2003; Olson 2004; Downward and Mearman 2007) the data via (1) ethnographic fieldwork (I attended their meetings: 58 meetings in total; $n = 31$ with NEA, $n = 27$ with WRJ) (2) semistructured in-depth interviews with members ($n = 41$), and (3) content analysis inclusive of newsletter issues ($n = 7$), flyers ($n = 22$), and any textual information such as e-mails and office memos ($n = 467$). Specifically, I employed Dorothy Smith’s (2005) method of “Institutional Ethnography,” wherein I was attentive to how the everyday experiences of members were socially organized via the intersection of dominant ideas with patterns of local knowledge. There are two broad steps to this approach. The first remains the descriptive task of identifying the racial narratives through which actors make sense of their identity. The second step is to explain the logic of this discourse.

TABLE 1. Membership

NEA (n = 24)				WRJ (n = 21)			
Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Membership (years)	Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Membership (years)
Derek	34	Marketer	6	Blake	22	Retail sales	2
Erik	31	High school teacher	3	Malcolm	44	Consultant/counselor	5
John	42	Consultant	6	Sean	62	Gardener (PT)	6
Nick	28	Elementary school teacher	4	Bret	51	Writer	7
Laurence	55	Lawyer	6	Mark	33	Corporate sales	7
Paul	49	Police officer	5	Michael	36	Banker	4.5
Josh	20	Student	1	Patrick	28	Writer	2
Joey	36	Retail sales	3	Horace	41	Car salesman	4
Chris	44	Business manager	4	James	36	Construction manager	4
George	38	Accountant	2	Simon	27	Engineer	6
Tim	33	Counselor	4	Philip	53	Owns grocery store	5
Will	37	Real estate agent	6	Samuel	26	Works at music store	2
Steven	28	Banker	4	Duncan	30	Corporate sales	2.5
Richard	30	Assistant manager	3	Tristan	30	Waiter	5
Albert	58	Plumber	6	Andre	24	Graduate student	1
Charles	25	Graduate student	3	Colin	26	Student	1
David	33	Construction contractor	3	Wayne	44	Manager of retail store	5
Franklin	37	Sales associate	5	Jerry	38	Music teacher	7
Daniel	32	Registered nurse	4	Frederick	55	Federal government	6
Joseph	41	Lawyer	1				
Harry	39	Lawyer	6				
Adam	34	Consultant	6				
Robert	34	Police officer	5				

NEA, National Equality for All; WRJ, Whites for Racial Justice; PT, part time.

Explaining their logic depends on recognizing when regularly occurring plots connect to key characters. Identifying narratives is then an empirical task.

National Equality for All

NEA is a nationwide “white nationalist” organization founded in the early 1980s. The headquarters is located in a mid-Atlantic city I call “Riverside.” There are over 20 chapters throughout the United States and they boast a role of over 500 dues-paying members. Their national newspaper—billed as a “manifesto of white rights”—has a circulation of approximately 1,500 issues within the United States and is printed six times a year. Their headquarters is composed of 24 “part-time” volunteers. All identified themselves with pride and exuberance that they were “white.” NEA members explicitly advocate a racial definition (or redefinition) of the nation-state, so that racial groups are officially segregated from one another with separate social institutions, customs, and limited interactions. Members do not believe that successful racial integration is intelligent or even possible. They argue that predisposed genetic and cultural differences between racial groups only serve as a catalyst for racial antagonism. Recognition of the incommensurability of the races is labeled “race realism.” Hence, other ideologies, policies, or arguments to the contrary are understood as propaganda or political correctness that only obfuscate the “facts” that racial groups are essentially different and should be kept separate for the interests of all involved.

Whites for Racial Justice

The headquarters for WRJ is located just a couple hours’ drive from Riverside in another metropolitan area I call “Fairview.” WRJ, founded in the 1970s, has developed into a nationwide organization of over 30 chapters with a membership of about 800. All 21 members of the headquarters-chapter consider themselves white. The individual chapters are organized around teaching whites how they can end “racial oppression.” Ideologically, they draw from a combination of sources to ground their worldview, namely variations of psychoanalysis and Marxism. Specifically, they believe that racial inequality is a systemic and problematic issue which they attempt to fall and they attempt to solve these issues through interrogating their own racial guilt, projection, defensiveness, and desires. Many of them state that racial inequality is the direct result of the conditioned prejudices of whites. Both on a national and local level, WRJ generates publications, gives workshops, and promotes media events about what white people can do to eliminate racism from both their daily lives and from the social structures that surround them (education, religion, family, work, etc.). WRJ supports a variety of political and social agendas: from theoretical indictments of the white supremacist underpinnings of capitalism, to the more active disruption of white nationalist events, to the more mainstream activities such as counseling and training-focused organizations that operate with complicity within corporate business structures. By making their organization all-white, they believe they are making a “safe space” for whites to engage in the identification and isolation of racism in their own lives. Such an environment fosters, as many members

told me, active consultation, emotional release regarding their frustrations and setbacks in trying to live an “antiracist life,” and strategy-building on how to live as “allies” of people of color.¹

THE DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES OF BACKSTAGE IDENTITY FORMATION

The varying strategies deployed by members of both the NEA and the WRJ each represent a particular method by which white actors reproduce racist ideologies as well as their own white identities toward a particular supremacist and normative vision. During the span of research, three major themes (inclusive of seven secondary themes) were observed (see Table 2). Together, each of these strategies was observed a total of 1,904 times. Although categories derived from the sociological literature on white racial identity initially guided the study, the analysis consisted of reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation—a staple of ethnographic inquiry (Smith 2005). After then, each item was coded (0 = no, 1 = yes). The data were coded judiciously, identifying one of the strategies only when it was clear. (i.e., if an actor bespoke the concept of race as related to biology or genetics, but was describing the logic of their political opponents, I would not count such an instance. That is, I examined only those discursive strategies that were endorsed, not merely evoked). Many of these strategies were intimately linked so that, in instances in which actors employed more than one at a time, each was acknowledged to capture their overlapping nature.

BIOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL PATHOLOGIES: “THEY JUST HAVE BAD VALUES”

The Rebirth of Eugenic Logic

The resiliency of biological determinist arguments about race are manifest in diverse registers today—from the racialization of medicine that is intertwined with the for-profit pharmaceutical and insurance industries to the mapping of the human genome that enables layperson arguments about the “reality” of race. “Biology” provides seductively simple explanations for complex social processes that make and remake the meaning of racial difference, identity, and inequality.

Despite the attempts of the white nationalist members to rebrand themselves as little more than a civil rights organization for the attainment of racial equality, its everyday social relationships are governed by a belief system in which blacks and Latinos and Latinas rest on the lower rungs of a eugenic ladder that whites and Asians sit atop. Accordingly, many of the observed interactions with NEA members testify to the centrality of this discourse in their everyday lives.

Most members of NEA reside in almost exclusively white neighborhoods, refuse to let their children have interracial friendships, and believe that there is a genetic explanation for racial inequality. As Franklin (37 years old, sales associate, 5 years in NEA) stated:

TABLE 2. Discursive Strategies

Informants by organization	Observed strategies										Row totals
	Biological and cultural pathologies					Sexualized racism					
	Eugenic logic	Culture of poverty	Sexual segregation	Role reversal	Consuming the female "other"	Deracializing racial slurs	Caricatures and dehumanization				
Derek (NEA)	27	12	8	11	15	14	25			112	
Erik (NEA)	12	0	2	12	3	6	14			49	
John (NEA)	34	111	14	3	5	7	16			190	
Nick (NEA)	14	4	19	4	0	1	3			45	
Laurence (NEA)	38	28	14	12	8	5	6			111	
Paul (NEA)	13	13	8	11	0	32	12			89	
Josh (NEA)	12	17	13	4	4	22	6			78	
Joey (NEA)	5	8	0	13	9	6	5			46	
George (NEA)	34	21	12	3	1	12	5			88	
Richard (NEA)	12	7	23	6	6	4	7			65	
Albert (NEA)	27	13	17	7	12	17	10			103	
Franklin (NEA)	13	16	26	6	5	2	6			74	
Harry (NEA)	14	4	10	9	0	5	3			45	
Adam (NEA)	9	14	16	8	7	11	5			70	
Column Subtotals	264	268	182	109	75	144	123			1,165	
Malcolm (WRI)	8	23	0	18	33	12	0			94	
Bret (WRI)	0	26	7	16	0	4	8			61	
Mark (NEA)	9	41	10	0	3	13	12			88	
Michael (WRI)	12	25	15	12	5	23	6			98	
Horace (WRI)	1	19	5	11	24	2	0			62	
James (WRI)	24	15	3	0	0	12	12			66	
Philip (WRI)	7	24	12	1	14	0	3			61	
Duncan (WRI)	13	35	0	9	3	6	3			69	
Jerry (WRI)	5	24	0	5	2	24	12			72	
Frederick (WRI)	12	30	7	12	0	3	4			68	
Column Subtotals	91	262	59	84	84	99	60			739	
Column Totals	355	530	241	193	159	243	183			1,904	
Column %	18.2	27.6	12.4	10.2	8.9	13.1	9.6			100	

NEA, National Equality for All; WRI, Whites for Racial Justice.

Biological differences explain much of today's racial conflict. . . . Genetics makes clear that there is a connection between race and intelligence. . . . where the more melanin you have the less intelligent you are, you know, the less mental capacity you possess. . . . DNA and genetics are proving what we knew all along really. Blacks, Hispanics, darker skinned people are more aggressive, sexual, and dangerous. . . . it's not racist, it's a fact.

NEA frames such worldviews as indisputable "facts," often citing such pseudoscientists such as J. Phillip Rushton who claims that racial difference developed as a result of different evolutionary strategies.² As a consequence of accepting such views, much of NEA's publications and newsletters focus on "factual" comparative studies between white crime and black crime, showing that "black crime" is more violent. However, in these studies, they do not control for educational attainment or class status, which social scientific measures show to be the key variables in explaining violent crime. In addressing this research faux pas, members became incredibly defensive of their assertions that race, not education or class, was the defining variable:

Harry: No, black people, Mexicans, et cetera are poor and have low education because they are black. . . . the violence that is hardwired in them prevents them from getting advanced educations . . . sure you have exceptions, but overall, I mean, no, you're just trying to explain away the reality of the situation that black people are more violent than whites. . . . White people just don't carry on like that. Our culture reflects our biology.

To NEA members, if racial differences are simply inherent and immutable, then it is rather fruitless to attempt to change them, and those that try are simply chasing a pipe dream. Such white nationalist discourse relies on biological justifications for racial inequality. An NEA article on the subject of genetic difference states, "Even when the other minorities have equal or lower education and class, blacks still murder, assault, rape, and engage in other acts of wanton violence at a pace that far outmatches whites."

WRJ members also employed biological determinist rhetoric toward an understanding of whiteness as superior and normative—while at a much lower frequency than their white nationalist counterparts. As Patrick (28 years old, writer, 2 years in WRJ) stated:

I can't really say too much about why blacks are so good at certain sports. . . . it would seem logical to conclude that slavery bred out most of the weak blacks so that now the most athletic, even the most virile, are the ones left today. But even with that, I think there were already some biological differences because of evolution . . . I read somewhere they have more muscle mass [than other races]. . . . [White] Masters couldn't do all that work anyway, that's why the Native Americans died, they couldn't work in the hot sun like Africans could.

Patrick's words show how supposedly fixed and biologically encoded differences led to "natural" roles in the division of labor and power over a wide variety of contexts and time—from modern athletic events to the institution of slavery. In attempting to place biology as the causal variable for such stratification, the social causes for inequality are mystified.

The “Culture of Poverty,” Reloaded

In addition to appealing to “biological” arguments to explain racial inequality, both the WRJ and the NEA also invoked “cultural” explanations. The use of these arguments reveals how disparate white identity projects can reproduce a similar white supremacist vision of the world. The following two quotations from WRJ member Philip (53 years old, grocery store owner, 5 years in WRJ) and NEA member Franklin (37 years old, sales associate, 5 years in NEA) more clearly illuminates this similarity. As Philip told me:

. . . discrimination against blacks, reinforced by prejudicial media messages and unfair policies, creates a reality for blacks that is [sic] so ugly and violent that some whites are scared of their own creation. I think this then goes on to reinforce those stereotypes . . . but of course, this is the way that whites designed the system . . . I think that sociologists like you are too involved in trying to refute every bad thing that blacks do . . . strange because I’ve read Marx too, and you have to be more structural . . . I think we try to show to others how harsh racism is, you know, the material realities of things. The fact is that many fears by whites are realistic because of how we have treated blacks. If people are treated terribly they will become terrible. Now we may not like to admit that, but look at drugs and crime. Those are black things. If I get scared when a bunch of black boys walk down my street should I be scared, and if I am, am I racist? I’m not sure, but I do think that it’s logical to assume that black boys are more dangerous than white boys. . . . I think that if you aren’t scared more of the black boys, then you don’t really understand the realities of racism; racism has fucked up black people.

As NEA member Franklin explained:

Sure there is racism against blacks, it’s against whites too. But you don’t see whites running around shooting each other and getting high all the time. If prejudice really had that much of a social effect you would see it on both sides. Blacks can’t help it . . . they are not as intelligent or moral, and it’s unfair of us to expect them to be. Racial conflict is going to happen, prejudice is going to happen, . . . that’s natural. But that this happens everywhere and whites succeed and blacks fail, well, that’s a social experiment right that for you [laughing], the conclusions are right there. Whites are clearly superior and we deserve our own space. Maybe with time, if blacks had their own space and environment, that would somehow stabilize . . . In the meantime they are screwed up, and it’s not “racist” [emphasizing the word with “air quotes” as he spoke] of me to acknowledge that, yeah, to number one, acknowledge it and number two, act on it. That’s not racist to say that black people have a criminal culture.

One might be surprised by the similarities between a white antiracist with a quasi-Marxist understanding of racial inequalities (in which black boys have been transformed into a lumpen proletariat group of violent thugs because of the atrocities enforced upon them by the white bourgeoisie) and that of a neoconservative, white nationalist that argues that whites and blacks are culturally different. It is clear that WRJ employs social-constructivist logic when compared to NEA. That is, while NEA oft-relies on biological explanations, WRJ members rarely believe that racial inequality is the result of

genetics or physical adaptations to the environment. However, regardless of a formal white antiracist or white nationalist position, the differing political and causal arguments result in similar conclusions. In a hegemonic white regimen, unjust racial arrangements are internalized and endlessly reinforced in not only the organizations that aim to overtly rationalize such relations (white nationalists), but also within the very organizations delegated to recognize, facilitate, and empower nonwhite voices and help to educate and activate white allies (white antiracists). The meaning-making processes that underpin the interpretation of racial difference reinstall the significance of inequality within a cultural framework that leaves whiteness superior, pure and normalized.

GENDERED AND SEXUALIZED RACISM: "MIXING JUST MAKES IT HARD ON EVERYONE INVOLVED"

Sexual Segregation and the Protection of White Womanhood

Until recent years, African Americans were commonly framed as little more than property, as animals without a soul or soul worth saving, or as licentious and lecherous people. Today, these views have moved out of the sight of the public eye, yet these interpretive lenses still provide a particular way of seeing the world for whites that discuss race in private areas. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) finds that these interpretations of blackness are deeply historical, and often take particular gendered forms. She writes, "Because black men did hard manual labor, justifying the harsh conditions forced upon them required objectifying their bodies as big, strong, and stupid. . . . White elites reduced Black men to their bodies, and identified their muscles and their penises as their most important sites" (2005:56–57). As a consequence, social anxiety or moral panic over black male sexuality remains a pervasive tool for restraining interracial contact, surveilling the lives of white women, and for creating a sense of white male identity.

A common activity observed in NEA headquarters was the members' collective work on their newsletter, which they considered a vital mode of communication with other chapters and with recruiting those sympathetic to their cause. One afternoon, after hours of work on an article that argued that blacks should be racially profiled by law enforcement, the members took a short break and began to discuss the best way to present some of their collected "data" on the subject. After providing some statistics on the supposed propensity of black violence against whites, they agreed that more "lay-person" examples should be used for those that might not be "numbers friendly." One of them, Adam (34 years old, consultant, 6 years in NEA) stated:

I mean, there's plenty of examples really. . . . Mike Tyson and all his rapes of those women, he was a monster. . . . Then of course there's O.J. [Simpson] and all of his foolishness . . . from killing Nicole to that crazy chase in L.A. . . . Oh yeah, Kobe Bryant . . . he raped that girl in Colorado. Black athletes are a goldmine for that shit . . . I just need to go back and look through the paper over the past month or so and I'm sure I'll find a few more to give it some local context.

In comparison, the members of WRJ occasionally expressed a racialized and gendered fear for the safety of their female friends and family. This was especially apparent during WRJ's evening meetings or "outreach forums" they occasionally held in black or Latino neighborhoods. In numerous field-note entries, I recorded my observations of the white male members asking their wives, girlfriends, sisters, and female friends not to attend such events. One afternoon Michael (36 years old, banker, 4.5 years in WRJ) had a particularly heated telephone conversation with this girlfriend, in which he started yelling, demonstratively telling her not to attend that evening's function that was located in a predominantly Latino area of town. After the call was over, I asked whether he was all right, to which he bluntly replied, "The bitch doesn't know what's good for her." Later that afternoon I asked if I could follow up on his statement. He replied:

Michael: That was harsh, what I said. I didn't mean it like that. I'm just saying, I mean. She doesn't get it the way I see it, you know?

Author: How's that?

Michael: I mean, look, I'm going to be real with you [. . .] I've been to [the Latino neighborhood] lots of times, this is the same place from last month, remember? Anyway, I know how those guys are, they talk about white women all the time and I hate the way they look at her. They undress her with their eyes, you know? It's disgusting the way men can be so chauvinist, it's that machismo thing, you know? But it's like, talking about a white woman, the way they do with their friends, their homeys, you know? And they do it right there in front of you in Spanish, I can't stand it.

Author: Oh, I didn't know you speak Spanish.

Michael: Oh, I mean, I don't. I just [long pause] I can tell what they mean.

In synthesizing the discourse of NEA and WRJ, the segregation and regulation of interracial sexual relations are illuminated. Members in both organizations appear to do so not only for the protection of white womanhood and their essentialized characteristics of purity, but in order to protect future generations. That is, for members of NEA, miscegenation can have significant negative ramifications. As Lawrence (55 years old, lawyer, 6 years in NEA) said:

Race mixing can have very negative consequences for us [whites]. Namely, it dilutes the gene pool [. . .] It's a one-side trade-off. Blacks or whoever get smarter and we get dumber. We lose when we mix. Look at animals, they don't mix, it's not natural. [. . .] I don't think it's in our best interests to inter-marry [. . .] I'm all for multiculturalism when it works in people's interests, but what people are calling *multiculturalism* [said with emphasis], is little more than blacks and the spics trying to better themselves at our expense [. . .] that's not fair.

So also, a strangely similar logic exists in the member of WRJ. As Philip said in a private interview:

Mixing can be good ideally, I mean, the world is all going to look like Tiger Woods one day. But it's difficult, and I'm not sure it's time. I mean, one day it will all happen, these racial barriers will fall, I think that's inevitable. But really, when I think about how it plays out, I think we should, for now, try to avoid it simply because

mixed children don't fit anywhere. It's hard on them . . . so really I don't think it's a good idea to mix because the children will pay the price for our transgressions, for our activism. . . . They can decide if they want to do that when they grow up.

The white male protection of white women from Black and Latino men accomplishes three goals. First, it reestablishes patriarchy through the assumption that white women need white men. The reification of this belief guides both the inter- and intragendered social interactions. The overwhelmingly male membership of both organizations held one another accountable to a standard in which a patriarchal and chauvinistic form of "protection" was normalized and expected. Second, white male protective surveillance of white women from men of color discourages intimacy across the color line, maintaining a belief in white racial purity. Third, very few white members of either group questioned the assumption that black and Latino men posed a threat to white women, but instead used fear to propel their activism.

Role Reversal

During my time with WRJ, the antiracist organization held many public forums in order to gain support for their activities, attract new members and, in general, educate the public about the "disease of racism" (as many members frequently said). One such forum had no attendance from nonmembers, effectively turning it into a meeting for WRJ and a platform for Malcolm—one of WRJ's de facto leaders—to lecture his fellow members. Malcolm stated:

Racism had hidden costs. . . . We as whites are often taught not to see it, and to acknowledge it only when it is most blatant and in your face. . . . Well, what happens when racism has an effect you are not expecting? . . . maybe one that is so subtle to you that you don't see it. What if racism also works on gender relations? On people's very notions of gender identity? . . . What might seem normal in that area might be the effect of racism. . . .

During this forum, Malcolm jumped haphazardly from one topic to the next—from the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and the Black Codes, to the modern prison-industrial system that is engaging in the hyperincarceration of people of color at an unprecedented rate. He reiterated that racism ravaged the social organization of "the black community" and effectively reversed the "natural order" of black gender relations so that most black men now deal with the effects of "emasculat[i]on." Malcolm continued:

. . . black men today are an effect of years of oppression, . . . of having to see their women and children taken from them, of not being allowed to be the man of their household, of constantly being told to call white boys a fraction of their age "sir," while they were in turn called "boy" . . . the legacy of such degradations have not allowed black men to become men. [long pause] Some of you might think that black men are dangerous and destructive, violent criminals and what not. Many are. But how would you respond? Would you steal and do what you had to do to survive . . . would you do it if pressed by your family to support them. . . . how would you respond to a society that says you are little more than a boy, I think you might do

some childish things . . . Whites haven't had these pressures, we don't have to resort to such behavior. But we are the cause of much of blacks problems, and we have to start fixing it here.

Malcolm's words demonstrate how WRJ's framing of black masculinity is accomplished via the "emasculatation thesis." This position advocates that the processes of racism, colonialism, and imperialism feminize and weaken black men. To WRJ, such matriarchy is unnatural and unfair to black women, unfairly burdening them with the responsibilities that only a man should, and can, handle. As Bret (51 years old, writer, 7 years in WRJ) told me, "I feel sorry for black women . . . their men act like children and they are forced to hold it all together." So also Horace (41 years old, care salesman, 4 years in WRJ) said, "Black women are so overburdened today. . . . All those kids, no constant man in their lives . . . they're the ultimate victim."

In addition, WRJ often spoke of black women as sexually loose and immoral; searching for a man to fill the void in her life. As Sherrill (35 years old, consultant, 8 years in WRJ) said:

. . . it just kind of bothers me how loose and overly sexualized black women are portrayed . . . and I think they buy into it as well, or at least it promotes what is already going on as far as the decay of their families and communities. Women in need obviously need men in their lives and there is a shortage . . . and racism is so bad that black women are not going to start looking to white men, or Latino men, or Asian men to fill the void.

Both members of WRJ and NEA also demonized black women for licentiousness, promiscuity, and inferiority compared to white women—a historically grounded label known as the "jezebel" (Brown Givens and Monahan 2005). As Mark (33, corporate sales, 7 years in WRJ) stated, "It's a hard truth, and something I don't like to admit, especially around friends and what not, but uhhh, you know, you know how lots of like, poor and black women, Latina women are prostitutes? Well, it's you know, it's explainable, it's just on average, they are stuck in this pattern of bad moral choices and so they, you know, are more likely to give it up." As Albert (58 years old, plumber, 6 years in NEA) told me:

. . . black women just have tons of babies . . . they don't know how to say no and constantly are evading their duties in the black family. . . . you just can't blame the men you know. They aren't taking care of the children, letting them do what they want, . . . they act like children themselves . . . kids having kids [laughing].

The claims that black men are hypermasculine to the point of being "beast-like" and that black women are sexual "jezebels" are long-standing racist discourses that are still evoked, although now more in backstage contexts.

Consuming the Female "Other"

In particularly disturbing instances, the actual fetishization of nonwhite people as cultural objects for consumption by a white male gaze was illuminated. After I arrived at an NEA meeting, I learned it was cancelled. Another member named "Joey" (36 years old, retail sales, 3 years in NEA) showed up at the same time. Joey and I had a tense relationship throughout my study; he often expressed that I was a "race traitor" (meaning that I had

consciously turned my back on white nationalism and thus, “the good of the white race”). Hence, I was shocked when he invited me to his place so we could sit down and talk toward the end that I “get white nationalism right.” When we arrived, Joey asked me to make myself at home as he turned on the television and left the room. As the picture came into view, I saw the title screen for a pornographic DVD that was dedicated to women of color. As Joey came back into the room, he blushed and said, “Is this one thing we can agree on?” I quickly turned on my audio recorder and took the chance to follow up on his choice of pornographic material. “So . . .” I asked, “. . . why do you watch this kind of porn exactly? I mean, why black and Latina women?” He responded:

Joey: . . . I tried white porn for a while, but I just didn’t get as much out of it. . . . Man, those black girls do some crazy stuff, they are so much more free and expressive. . . . I like it because . . . they are just more sexy and voluptuous.

Author: So, that’s the kind of woman you are looking to settle down with one day?

Joey: Oh hell no! I would only marry a white girl . . . but I can take some tricks from watching that will sure liven up my ordinary sex life and whatever normal white girl I settle down with.

I never discovered other instances of explicitly “pornographic” material among the other overwhelmingly male NEA or WRJ members, but there was a collectively shared “taste” for women of color as a way of improving the normality of white sexuality. As one WRJ member I call “Michael” (36 years old, banker, 4½ years in WRJ) told me, “Black women have a way about them that is simply sexual. White women have been socialized to be prudes. That’s continued because there is too much guilt associated with sexual expression. White civilization has been too uptight; it has restricted sexuality. Black girls don’t have that problem.”

Both “racist” and “antiracist” whites continue to equate blacks and Latinos and Latinas with hypersexuality. The synthesis of sexist and racist narratives has deeply historical roots in our social structures, but is also reproduced on the micro level via both groups’ desires and tastes. In this light, the approach of racial practice illuminates the simultaneous presence, and reinforcement, of power and structure along with culture and context. In so doing, both white identity projects of NEA (that explicitly advocates racial–sexual purity and interracial distance), as well as WRJ (who argues that interracial marriage and increased interracial contact is good and necessary), are reproducing white identity (here, via sexuality) as dull, boring, and ordinary. To unabashedly draw from Marvin Gaye, the fetish of black and brown otherness is a kind of “sexual healing” for whites.

EVOKING RACIST SIGNIFIERS: “WHY DO THEY HAVE TO ACT LIKE NIGGERS?”

Deracializing Racial Slurs

Members of both organizations uttered many racial slurs during my 14 months of research with them. Such slurs were almost always uttered in private areas in which they

were confiding in me, or felt that no one listening would judge them harshly. For example, one NEA member told me that the white nationalist movement now had to evoke the concept of equality in order for people to listen to them. “Old school racism doesn’t work,” Derek told me. Continuing, he stated:

. . . In public, we know how to act. . . that is what makes [NEA] different. . . I mean, if we look at it scientifically, most blacks on average are more ignorant than whites and like my dad used to tell me, “ignorance is a common thing, niggers are a common thing.” You know, that word is not really about race, it’s about ignorance, if you’re ignorant, you’re a nigger. On average, most blacks are niggers. Understand? That’s not racist [long pause] it’s just the definition of the things. . . as they say, “a spade’s a spade.”

Derek attempts to explain that racist language is not about race. Rather, it is a simply a matter of recognizing “facts.” Such a framing of racial slurs as having little to do with race works as a strategy by which NEA members elide accusations of racism.

However, Derek’s caveat (“In public, we know how to act”) demonstrates that their racist language is not simply about stating “the definition of things.” Rather, they are more concerned with the context of that language. NEA members often warned one another about using racist language when they knew others would find it inappropriate. The implicit message that these whites give one another is apparent—the racist language is not problematic, it is the context and the burden they feel is unfairly laid upon them. In the context of safe and private settings, such speech acts are not simply words, they are the iteration and defense of an embattled yet competent white identity.

For members of WRJ, the use of racist slurs was reduced in comparison to NEA, but its usage was not absent. For example, WRJ members attended an event that addressed an occurrence of hate-speech directed at local African-American college students. With several hundred people in attendance at the event, many people expressed contrary and heated opinions—several people of many different races engaged in shouting matches before college administrators asked them to “calm down.” After the event, and once everyone in the room had cleared except for myself and Mark (33 years old, corporate sales, 2.5 years in WRJ), he gave a deep sigh, turned to look at me, and in a matter-of-fact fashion stated, “Why do they have to act like niggers?” After I simply stared back at him, he stated:

I mean, don’t get me wrong . . . seriously, you know me. [long pause] It’s just unfortunate, because it really makes our job harder, and it makes me not want to work with them. I mean, if you get called a nigger and then you start acting like a nigger, how can we stand up for you? It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy in the end. They lived up to what they were saying, those two guys, and all those whites were sitting there thinking it but no one said it, but I know they were thinking it.

A few days later, I sat down again with Mark and asked him to explain why he thought the two black men who were upset and had differing opinions acted like “niggers.” He told me in utter simplicity: “Because they acted like one.” In attempting to clarify, he stated:

I just think you took it too hard. You know what I meant. I prefaced it. I'm just saying, they acted crazy, *they did act like "niggers"* [said slowly with emphasis]. A fact is a fact, and that is what everyone else who is white and was there is going to think. It's what their friends are going to think when they run back to their dorm rooms and all they can remember is that these two "angry black men" were screaming at one another. "There you go! A couple of niggers complaining about how they are called niggers." That is what they will think. . . . Now we are going to have to deal with all that shit and help whites unlearn all that garbage. It's just ridiculous. They fuck it up for us sometimes. . . . We're that one's that have to deal with this because they act like that. . . . In reality, there's nothing really racial to it. It's really about ignorance. . . . It's the other white people that will racialize it.

Mark's framing of the situation reproduces racist views of blacks as incapable of acting "properly" in public, thus necessitating not only the presence of white instruction and control, but the insinuation that whites' views of blacks are predicated upon black actions, rather than white interpretation.

Caricatures and Dehumanization

The subjects of this study often used historical stereotypes to describe the racial world. In both groups, Latinos were called "beaners," Asians were belittled because they were "bad drivers," and African Americans were "criminals" and "crackheads" who commonly ate "fried chicken and watermelon." Such demarcations were often presented as humor, and often concluded with a remark like, "You know what I mean, it's just a joke." At a rather formal NEA function (formal attire was required), three members stood in a circle and ridiculed a white guest. The visitor wore a suit that was the shade of dark maroon, which the three NEA members coded as something a "black man would wear." My entry in my field notes describes their discourse:

[Richard], [James], [Jerry] (laughing) Said man's suit "looked like a pimp's." Thought he would ask where the "fried chicken was." [James] told [Jerry] that the suit reminded him of blacks at church or strip club. Non-member—asked about laugher—said "nothing"—wished to hide stereotyping from others.

Soon after I observed the discussion, I asked Jerry why he felt the suit was so funny. Seemingly embarrassed and replying with flushed face, he said:

Jerry: I mean, come on, that was a ridiculous get-up. . . . but that is how they dress, all flash and no substance. . . . that's what they mean by a monkey suit, get it? [laughing] Only those monkeys wear them.

Author: Aren't you trying to recruit that guy?

Jerry: Yeah, but I mean, we're not hurting anyone. . . . don't be overly sensitive.

CONCLUSION

I suggest that three hegemonic dynamics characterize the interactive "backstage" discourse of the white men studied herein. First, the backstage provides a secure location for navigation of what white masculinity means in these actors' everyday lives. The

privacy of these spaces allows for these actors to marshal the diffuse meanings of white masculinity toward the disparate political projects of white nationalism and white antiracism. At the same time, these actors are constrained by the dominant meanings of white masculinity so that they reproduce many of the essentialist and reactionary baggage historically connected with the particular identity (Feagin 2010; Hughey 2010). Second, it would be a gross oversimplification to state that the actors herein are only constrained and enable by these discourses. That is, discourse about white masculinity is just as much generative and performative as it is utilitarian. Here I reiterate an Althusserian point—identities are “always already” in formation (1970:164). The *méconnaissance* (mis-recognition) that we use discourse to position our identities in relation to particular political struggles can give short shrift to the recognition that we are “always already” created by the discursive categories we wield. Third, the actors’ activism is not merely a pursuit of explicit political aims, but is also an opportunity for ordering in-group hierarchy, strengthening and testing solidarity, and for chasing particular notions of white masculinity thought “ideal.”

With these findings illuminated, several questions remain for future research. First, with a dominant research on the “new racism” firmly underway, we must take care not to unintentionally obfuscate—because of either political correctness or antiracist activism—the fact that vehement racism is not dead, but has found new life behind closed doors. Research that pays careful attention to the myriad ways that racist praxis is invited into, if not constitutive of, private settings must be taken up with greater intensity. Such works promise to serve as a critical bookend to the important work on “color-blind,” “symbolic,” and “subtle” racism. Second, new sites and methodologies must be applied to the study of private white male discourse. The preliminary work thus far is limited almost exclusively to college and university settings and the methods applied are either in-depth interviews or analyses of journals/diaries. While this article serves a point of departure from this trend, more work inclusive of ethnographic field observations, participant observation, and content analysis are needed if we are to successfully map the topography of private white male discourse. Third and last, white male discourse is not only demonstrative of the continued existence of overt racism, but also illuminates how racist discourse confers the status of particular kinds of whiteness and masculinity on their users. In this vein, much of the recent literature on white male identity emphasizes its heterogeneity and contextuality. Such work throws the wide-sweeping claims that whiteness is a universal and monolithic category of privilege and power into needed relief. However, the findings of this article demonstrate that white men across and between varied, disconnected, and antithetical settings (e.g., from white nationalists to white antiracists) share in the embrace of, and reliance on, similar racist scripts. The hard work of theorizing the variation of white masculinity across disparate setting is now largely accomplished. What we are in need of now is work that moves toward a generalizable theory of white male identity formation. It appears that navigating between the structural power of white male privilege and the myriad manifestations of white masculinity is the charge of the next phase of scholarship on this topic.

NOTES

¹I have intentionally left the “thick description” of these two groups bare than I would prefer in order to protect their identity. Identifying their relationship to other nationalist and antiracist organizations (inclusive of their ideological and membership lineage), their particular regional focus, or the reasons for their interclass (blue- and white-collar) membership, together runs too high a substantial risk of identifying them. So also, I have intentionally refrained from quoting much of their printed materials as simple Internet searches of their prose would identify their group and sometimes, individual members.

²J. Phillip Rushton’s work has been the subject of much debate. His research procedures, analysis, and conclusions have been called into question for their dubious claims and for his selective dismissal of work that contradicts his own findings. To a large extent, his ideas are discredited among many within the scientific community (cf. *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* by S. Kühl; *The Funding of Scientific Racism* by W. H. Tucker; “Rushton Revisited” in *The Ottawa Citizen* [1 October 2005] by A. Duffy).

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