Everyday (Anti)-Racism: Rhetorical Formations of White Racial Consciousness in
Contemporary Public Discourse

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This dissertation entitled:

Everyday (Anti)-Racism: Rhetorical Formations of White Racial Consciousness in
Contemporary Public Discourse

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Dissertation directed by Associate Professor Lisa A. Flores

ABSTRACT

This critical rhetorical analysis interrogates contemporary public discourse on race and racism in a post-2012 U.S. American context characterized by proliferating consciousness and the waning hegemony of a colorblind racial ideology. Focusing on three overarching formations of whiteness—white nationalism, alt-right, and anti-racist whiteness—I investigate how efforts to raise white racial consciousness are rhetorically constructed and mobilized to hail an audience of everyday white U.S. Americans. Positioning themselves in opposition to a colorblind racial ideology and alternative orientations to racial consciousness, these discursive formations of whiteness work strategically against one another as they negotiate dominant affective circulations and push against normative expectations for race evasive discourse in the mainstream public sphere.

My analysis demonstrates that as they work to move everyday white folks from a colorblind racial ideology toward racial consciousness, white nationalist, alt-right, and white anti-racist rhetorics each strategically negotiate colorblind common sense, mainstream discursive expectations for race evasion, and the normative affective circulation of white fragility by rearticulating more extreme formations of racial consciousness into rhetorical formations more palatable to mainstream audiences. In this way, I argue, the discursive formations of whiteness interrogated here are constructed as rhetorical bridges between colorblindness and racial consciousness.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the lives lost to state sanctioned violence against people of color in the United States and to all those committed to the complex, intersectional struggle for social justice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without the tremendous support I've received from so many people throughout my time as a graduate student. From formal meetings with mentors to informal discussions with colleagues, the arguments and ideas that unfold across these pages have been developed and refined in conversation with the many brilliant, passionate folks with whom I've connected with over the years.

My advisor, Lisa Flores, has been a constant source of support and encouragement during my four years as a doctoral student at the University of Colorado Boulder. Thank you, Lisa, for providing me with space to learn and grow, pushing me to step outside my comfort zone, and giving me the quiet reassurance I needed to do what often seemed to be impossible. There were many times when your confidence in me exceeded my own and when you somehow knew exactly what I needed to hear to keep moving forward.

I am incredibly grateful to my rock-star dissertation committee—Karen Ashcraft, Emma Pérez, Phaedra Pezzullo, and Pete Simonson—who took the time to read and respond to my work and who supported me every step of the way. I am so fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with each of you. Many other members of the CU-Boulder faculty have helped to guide me through this journey, too. Thank you especially to Larry Frey, Jamie Skerski, Karen Tracy, Tiara Na'puti, and Seema Sohi.

As a first-generation college student, I began this journey with relatively few tools and without a clear understanding of what to expect during graduate school. My mentors and professors at California State University, Fresno were instrumental in preparing me for success. Thank you especially to Kevin Ayotte, Diane Blair, Kathy Adams, and Shane Moreman for molding me into a critical scholar. My graduate school colleagues in Fresno and Boulder have helped me to grow academically, politically, and personally—it has been an honor to learn with and from you. My students have also challenged and inspired me in many ways. Thank you all!

It may sound strange, but I never would have finished *any* degree without my beloved cats, Mom Kitty and Son Kitty. When I "rescued" them as tiny, sickly kittens twelve years ago, I never could have imagined the multitude of ways that they would rescue me.

I owe so much gratitude to my partner, Amani Husain, who has talked me through countless ideas and arguments, has painstakingly read multiple drafts of every essay, has cooked me food when I've forgotten to eat, and has picked me up and put me back together every time I've fallen apart. Your love, support, and encouragement have meant so much—I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you.

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PROLOGUE
On Self-Location

This dissertation is the work of a white, queer, working-class, U.S. American woman. I have strived to produce a theoretically rich, analytically rigorous, and critically reflexive investigation of rhetorical formations of white racial consciousness in contemporary U.S. American public discourse, but at no point have I attempted to remain "neutral," "unbiased," or "objective." Indeed, such attempts would be out of line with the theoretical and methodological orientations that have guided my analysis. I have researched and written from a wholly interested perspective formed by what amounts to over three decades of embodied experiences *as* a white, queer, working-class U.S. American woman in conversation with the racialized world around her. My embodied experiences with race (and gender, sexuality, citizenship, and class) have been instrumental in the formation of my own racial consciousness, have directly informed my interest in investigating formations of racial consciousness among white U.S. Americans writ large, and have undoubtedly informed the perspective with which I have approached this project.

Across the chapters that follow, I will interrogate a range of discursive formations that argue, in varying degrees and toward divergent ends, that this thing we call "race" does or does not matter. At times, the formations of whiteness interrogated will illuminate important intersecting relationships among race, gender, sexuality, and class and, although a full exploration of these complex relationships is outside the scope of this dissertation, their traces will haunt readers who are critically attuned to their significance. The significance of these intersecting relationships has haunted me, too, as I have worked through the fragments, ideas, and arguments considered over the next 250-or-so-pages as I have tried to remain focused on *whiteness* while also attending to its articulations to and intersections with other identities. As a queer white working-class U.S. American woman who studies race, racism, and anti-racism, I

am keenly aware of the ways that my own whiteness works with and against my other identities to orient the ways I see and act within this world that we share.

It is common in critical studies of whiteness engaged by white folks for personal experience and reflections to be integrated explicitly into—or in some cases to stand in for—analyses of whiteness. As I discuss in the final analysis chapter, "awakening" to one's (de)racialized position and privileged status **as** white is overwhelmingly framed as a necessary step in developing an anti-racist white racial consciousness. Given the importance of coming to terms with one's whiteness and its implications, the tendency of racially conscious scholars to reflect on their own journeys through this awakening and reckoning process makes sense. And, indeed, I have many stories that could be told about my experiences with (anti)racism and my own, on-going process of coming into anti-racist consciousness as a racially privileged person.

In this project, however, I have chosen not to highlight my own identities or experiences as a component of my analysis. In my perception, the common practice of personal reflection in critical studies of whiteness has, while contributing to narrative understandings of racial privilege, further re-centered whiteness and white scholars and has come to stand in for sustained critical analyses of whiteness in collective, public contexts and formations. Yet, this choice should not be read as an indication that I believe that my identities and experiences do not inform my analysis in important, consequential ways. By locating myself here, I signal a commitment to critical reflexivity that I have carried with me throughout this project.

CHAPTER 1
Crumbling Colorblindness, Emerging Racial Consciousness

In 2012, Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors formed the Black Lives Matter Movement to help organize efforts to address contemporary racial inequalities—particularly state-sanctioned violence against Black people in the U.S.—and their devastating impact on communities of color[1]. Borne out of protests following the death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teen who was killed in 2012 by a gun-toting neighborhood watchperson who was acquitted the following year, the Black Lives Matter Movement continues to place a spotlight on the tragic everydayness of extrajudicial executions of Black people in the United States. If not for the work of the Black Lives Matter Movement, most U.S. Americans would not know the name of Trayvon Martin…or Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Oscar Grant, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, or Alton Sterling.

And indeed, there are countless names that go unknown, as state sanctioned extrajudicial violence against black men continues to be—quite literally—an everyday act, and as similar formations of state sanctioned violence against black women continues to be virtually absent from the conversation.[2] So, the acts of naming and recognition—of people and of systems of violence—have been central to the movement. Protests and vigils organized in the wake of each new news-breaking tragedy provide space for the expression of grief and anger and affirm loudly and passionately the inherent value of the lives lost. These public demonstrations of grief, anger, and love have also spurred a nation-wide public conversation on issues of race and racism, with

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[1] Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *ProudFlesh*, no. 10 (2014):
[2] See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Andrea J. Ritchie, Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer, and Luke Harris, "Say Her Name," *African American Policy Forum* (2015): 1–5, http://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f20d90e4b0b80451158d8c/t/560c068ee4b0af26f72741df/1443628686535/AAPF_SMN_Brief_Full_singles-min.pdf.

the power of social media ensuring that nearly everyone is provided a platform for sharing their

opinions, however ignorant or well informed.

As has become predictable over the history of U.S. American discourse on racial justice,

the Black Lives Matter Movement's efforts have been met with widespread resistance. Some

(primarily far-right) pundits, including controversial media commentator Rush Limbaugh, have

labeled Black Lives Matter as an anti-white, anti-police terrorist organization—a framing that

has long been constructed for the group but has been mobilized more aggressively following the

July 2016 killings of five police officers at a Black Lives Matter demonstration in Dallas, TX.[3]

Relatedly, some have staged "Blues Lives Matter" counter-protests at Black Lives Matter events

in an effort to express uncompromising support for law enforcement.[4] Others have launched

"White Lives Matter" demonstrations, using the opportunity to oppose the Black Lives Matter

movement to interject pro-white rhetoric into mainstream public discourse and decry the many

ways that they perceive White U.S. Americans to be under attack.[5]

Perhaps the most widespread reactionary response to the Black Lives Matter movement,

though, has been the construction of a counter-discourse framed around the mantra "All Lives

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[3] Tim Constantine, "Black Lives Matter is a Terrorist Group," *Washington Times,* September 2, 2015, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/sep/2/tim-constantine-black-lives-matter-terrorist-group/; Andrew Blake, "Limbaugh Labels Black Lives Matter a 'Terrorist Group' After Dallas Shootings," *The Washington Times,* July 9, 2016, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/jul/9/limbaugh-labels-black-lives-matter-terrorist-group/.

[4] Amanda Oglesby, "Black and Blue Lives Matter Protestors Square Off in Middletown," *Asbury Park Press,* September 26, 2016, http://www.app.com/story/news/local/how-we-live/race/2016/09/25/middletown-nj-black-lives-matter-lincroft/90707434/.

[5] Andy Cush, "Philadelphia City Councilman Attends 'White Lives Matter' Rally," *Gawker,* June 5, 2015, http://gawker.com/philadelpihia-city-councilman-attends-white-lives-matt-1709105642; Michael E. Miller, "Armed, Confederate Flag-Waiving White Lives Matter Protestors Rally Outside Houston NAACP," *Washington Post,* August 22, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/08/22/armed-confederate-flag-waving-white-lives-matter-protesters-rally-outside-houston-naacp/.

Matter." Those who deploy the discourse of "All Lives Matter" come from a variety of

ideological and demographic backgrounds but have tended to unite around the argument that the

efforts to address social and political issues including and beyond police brutality should do so

with a focus on *all* people rather than "only" black people.[6] As such, proponents of "All Lives

Matter" draw on the rhetorical resources of a colorblind[7] racial ideology to shroud their

opposition to the Black Lives Matter Movement in a rhetoric of inclusivity while actively

attempting to exclude direct discourse on race from the mainstream public sphere.

As a racial ideology, "colorblindness" refers to the belief that people should be seen "as

individuals only, not as persons or groups whose identities or social positions have been shaped

and organized by race."[8] A colorblind ideology thus purports to oppose racism while ignoring

the ways in which race and racism continue to structure perceptions, lived experiences, and

opportunities in both (inter)personal and systemic ways. Advocates of racial colorblindness tend

to believe the U.S. is a "post-racial" society that has moved beyond its racist past—accordingly,

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[6] Shelina Assomull, "Black Lives and All Lives," *Huffington Post,* December 9, 2015,
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gvh-live-/black-lives-and-all-lives_b_8720364.html; Andrew
Flippo, "Are the Black Lives Matter Folks Wrong for Focusing More on the Victims of Police
Brutality than Brutal Police?," *Quora*, August 13, 2015, https://www.quora.com/Are-the-Black-
Lives-Matter-folks-wrong-for-focusing-more-on-the-victims-of-police-brutality-than-brutal-
police; Paul Joseph Watson, "Obama Gets it Right: This is About Police Brutality, Not Race,"
Infowars, December 4, 2014, http://www.infowars.com/obama-gets-it-right-this-is-about-police-
brutality-not-race/.
[7] I will use the term "colorblindness" throughout this dissertation to refer to the racial ideology
described here. The use of this term perpetuates ableism by appropriating language rooted in a
medical condition (the inability to See/distinguish certain colors) to refer to a problematic racial
ideology (See Shae Collins, "Here's Why Refusing to 'See Color' Doesn't Actually Mean
You're Not Racist," *Everyday Feminism,* June 26, 2016,
http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/06/refusing-to-See-color-still-racist/). I continue to use this
term because it is overwhelmingly the preferred term for this ideology across contemporary
critical race and whiteness studies scholarship. Calls for the invention of new, more inclusive
language to refer to this racial ideology are well taken and should be pursued.
[8] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States,* 3rd ed. (New York:
Routledge, 2015), 2.

they mobilize race-evasive discourse that infuses racialized assumptions into coded language that appears to be race neutral.[9] This race-evasive discourse enables persisting racial inequalities to be (re)constructed as products of cultural problems within communities of color and accusations of racism to be (re)framed as "playing the race card."[10] As rhetorical scholars have noted, "[T]he accusation of playing the race card itself serves as an argumentative trump that attempts to shut down deliberation and consideration of racism and privilege, shifting attention away from racial grievances."[11] Positioned in opposition to race-conscious approaches to combat racial inequalities in general and the Black Lives Matter movement in particular, "All Lives Matter" demonstrates how discursive formations of race evasion work to challenge and elide discursive formations of anti-racist racial consciousness in an attempt to (re)secure colorblindness as the dominant ideology on race (and, by extension, to reinforce contemporary formations of racism).

Positioning "All Lives Matter" in opposition to "Black Lives Matter" reinforces the dominant belief that direct discourse on race and racism is divisive and misguided and presumes that claims of persisting racial injustice are unwarranted. In the process, the discourse of "All Lives Matter" attempts to position those who believe in the abstract values of "equality" and "inclusivity"—*especially* white folks who uphold those ideals—in opposition to activists focused on the fight against anti-black racism. In the discourse of "All Lives Matter," then, the longstanding tension between equality/inequality manifests once again, as white U.S. Americans

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[9] Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1993), 139.

[10] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America,* 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 15–17.

[11] Christopher J. Gilbert and Jonathan P. Rossing, "Trumping Tropes with Joke(r)s: *The Daily Show* 'Plays the Race Card,'" *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 1 (2013): 97. See also Megan E. Morrissey and Christy-Dale L. Sims, "Playing the Race Card: Antiracial Bordering and Rhetorical Practices of New Racism," *The Review of Communication* 15, no. 2 (2015): 82.

demand a discourse of equality ("*all* lives matter") in ways that obscure a discourse designed to address racial inequality ("yes, all lives *should* matter, but patterns of state violence against Black US Americans indicate a need to proclaim that *Black* lives matter, too"). The discourse of "All Lives Matter" thus demonstrates the way a colorblind ideology works to push against the circulation of racially conscious discourse in the mainstream U.S. American public sphere.

Together, "All Lives Matter," "Blue Lives Matter," "White Lives Matter," construct a reactionary rhetoric premised on a politics of erasure that operates on different levels to shift attention away from state-sanctioned violence against Black U.S. Americans, dismiss racial justice efforts, and re-center whiteness.[12] As the Black Lives Matter movement continues fighting for racial justice and working to raise racial consciousness, discourses emerging in opposition to the movement demonstrate how whiteness mobilizes in anxious, reactionary formations.

By calling direct and sustained attention to persisting realities of racism, contemporary movements for racial justice are working to expose the flaws of a colorblind ideology in ways that are forcing white U.S. Americans to confront their position in the racial landscape. For many white people, direct discourse on race triggers affective responses characterized by emotional reactions such as withdrawal, defensiveness, emotional outbursts, and disengagement.[13] When operating within a colorblind ideology, white folks do not often have to think or talk about issues of race and racism and, when their sense of racial comfort is disrupted by engagements with these issues, they are ill equipped to respond productively. As I continue to discuss in Chapter 3,

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[12] Catherine L. Langford and Montené Speight, "#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 3/4 (2015): 83.
[13] Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54. See also Lisa M. Corrigan, "On Rhetorical Criticism, Performativity, and White Fragility," *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 87.

Robin DiAngelo has termed this affective phenomenon "white fragility," where discomfort around direct discourse on race and racism triggers reactions that minimize challenges to colorblind racism by centering white feelings and shifting the focus away from confrontations of racism and inequality.[14] In this contemporary moment, white fragility circulates through the formation of "All Lives Matter," "Blues Lives Matter," and "White Lives Matter" discourses, deflecting attention away from anti-black racial injustices highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement by rearticulating the terms of *who* "matters" in ways more comfortable and favorable to white folks.

<div align="center">Contemporary Formations of Explicit Racism</div>

Meanwhile, there has been a general resurgence of explicitly racist rhetoric circulating through contemporary political discourse, contributing to further shifts in mainstream public discourse on race. This resurgence of explicit racism has been articulated to the presidential campaign and political persona of now-President Donald Trump, who infused his rhetoric with explicitly and implicitly racist appeals and won the support of an array of disgruntled white U.S. Americans, including open and proud white supremacists and a relatively new group of far-right pro-white folks known as the "alt-right".[15] For example, former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke called the night of Trump's election "one of the most exciting nights of my life," adding,

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Michael D'Antonio, "Is Donald Trump Racist? Here's What the Record Shows," *Fortune,* June 7, 2016, http://fortune.com/2016/06/07/donald-trump-racism-quotes/; Nicholas Confessore, "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance," *New York Times,* July 13, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/us/politics/donald-trump-white-identity.html?_r=1; Ben Schreckinger, "The Alt-Right Comes to Washington," *Politico,* January/February, 2017, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/alt-right-trump-washington-dc-power-milo-214629.

"[M]ake no mistake about it, our people have played a HUGE role in electing Trump!"[16]

Echoing Duke's support, self-avowed white nationalist and "alt-right" leader Richard Spencer

has called Trump "an alt-right hero," noting that Trump embodies "that thing that makes the

white race truly unique and truly wonderful.[17] Additionally, sustained analyses of Trump's

campaign have concluded that racial resentment and fear of racial diversity were strongly

correlated to support for Trump in the 2016 election.[18] This finding supports previous research,

which has demonstrated that white U.S. Americans' resentment toward progressive measures

oriented toward racial equality and collective fears around their dwindling demographic majority

status shape their political ideologies in significant ways and drive their support for policies that

would undo racial progress.[19]

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[16] David Duke, Twitter post, November 8, 2016,
https://twitter.com/DrDavidDuke/status/796249464826687488?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=h
ttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.politico.com%2Fstory%2F2016%2F11%2Fdavid-duke-trump-victory-
2016-election-231072.

[17] Richard Spencer, "Richard Spencer at Texas A&M 12/6/16," [20:45–21:06], YouTube video,
1:44:58, posted by "Battalion Multimedia," December 6, 2016,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlbLNWIFEY0.

[18] Brenda Major, Alison Blodorn, and Gregory Major Blascovich, "The Threat of Increasing
Diversity: Why Many White Americans Support Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election,"
Group Processes & Intergroup Relations (2016): 1–10; Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel,
"Fear of Diversity Made People More Likely to Vote Trump," *The Nation,* March 14, 2017,
https://www.thenation.com/article/fear-of-diversity-made-people-more-likely-to-vote-trump/;
Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel, "Anatomy of a Donald Trump Supporter: What Really
Motivates This Terrifying Political Movement," *Salon,* May 16, 2016,
http://www.salon.com/2016/05/16/anatomy_of_a_donald_trump_supporter_what_really_motivat
es_this_terrifying_political_movement/; Ben Judah, "Donald Trump's Greatest Weapon is White
Americans' Fear That They're Quickly Becoming a Minority—Because They Are,"
Independent, November 7, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-us-
elections-hillary-clinton-race-hispanic-black-vote-white-americans-fear-minority-
a7402296.html.

[19] See Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal, *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American
Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A.
Richeson, "On the Precipice of a 'Majority-Minority' America: Perceived Status Threat from the
Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans' Political Ideology," *Psychological Science*
25, no. 6 (2014): 1189–1197.

Yet, it is not *just* that white U.S. Americans' latent racism helped to elect Donald Trump—analysts have also demonstrated that Trump's own racialized rhetoric and support for racist policies has helped to bring white folks' racism out into the open once again. Organized "hate groups," including pro-white groups associated with white nationalism and white supremacy, have increased their numbers and activity significantly in 2015–2016, which the Southern Poverty Law Center attributed in part to Trump's extremist rhetoric.[20] And, while the Internet has long provided a haven for radical fringe and hate groups, the "Trump-era" has emboldened these groups, helping them to move further into the mainstream as they continue to grow in ranks.[21]

Numerous sources have reported that "racist incidents" and "hate crimes" have risen dramatically since Trump launched his presidential campaign and spiked significantly after his election.[22] For example, a Maryland church's sign advertising services in Spanish was vandalized with, "TRUMP NATION WHITES ONLY," Black students at the University of Pennsylvania reported receiving violent racialized threats online, and swastikas and other racist graffiti have been reported in cities across the country.[23] And, after three protestors were

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[20] Mark Potok, "The Year in Hate and Extremism," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* February 15, 2017, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/year-hate-and-extremism.
[21] See Keegan Hankes, "Eye of the Stormer," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* February 9, 2017, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/eye-stormer; Abi Wilkinson, "We Need to Talk About the Online Radicalisation of Young, White Men," *The Guardian,* November 15, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/15/alt-right-manosphere-mainstream-politics-breitbart; Mark Potok, "The Year in Hate and Extremism."
[22] See Melanie Eversley, "Post-Election Spate of Hate Crimes Worse Than Post-9/11, Experts Say," *USAToday,* November 12, 2016, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/11/12/post-election-spate-hate-crimes-worse-than-post-911-experts-say/93681294/; Brian Beutler, "Trump Has Made America More Racist. Republicans Are OK With That," *New Republic,* July 18, 2016, https://newrepublic.com/article/135148/trump-made-america-racist-republicans-ok-that.
[23] Katie Reilly, "Racist Incidents Are Up Since Donald Trump's Election. These Are Just a Few of Them," *Time,* November 13, 2016, http://time.com/4569129/racist-anti-semitic-incidents-donald-trump/.

violently attacked by white nationalists at a pro-Trump rally, a U.S. federal judge ruled that

Trump's speech was not constitutionally protected and the now-President could be sued for

inciting violence against the protestors.[24] The Southern Poverty Law Center has reported that

rising racial tensions have constructed a climate of fear and anxiety among children of color in

U.S. American schools, terming this "the Trump effect."[25]As Dr. Brittany L. Stalsburg argued,

the point is not that Trump has somehow "made" people racist or *more* racist, but that "Trump

has energized these groups by igniting their hate and making the use of bigoted speech more

normalized, if not more acceptable."[26]

Even in the face of extreme resurgences of anti-black racism, the Black Lives Matter

movement remains controversial for its centering *of* anti-black racism. For his part, Trump has

tended to prefer the discourse of "All Lives Matter" when referring to the Black Lives Matter

movement.[27] In a July 2016 interview with the Associated Press, for example, Trump noted, "A

lot of people feel that [Black Lives Matter] is inherently racist. And it's a very divisive term.

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[24] See David Boddiger, "Judge Says Trump Can Be Sued For Inciting Violence Against Campaign Protestors," *Fusion,* April 2, 2017, http://fusion.net/judge-says-trump-can-be-sued-for-inciting-violence-agai-1793935044.

[25] Beutler, "Trump has Made America More Racist."; Maureen B. Costello, "The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Campaign on our Nation's Schools," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* April 13, 2016, https://www.splcenter.org/20160413/trump-effect-impact-presidential-campaign-our-nations-schools.

[26] Brittany L. Stalsburg, "Trump and the Normalization of Hate," *Huffington Post,* May 23, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brittany-l-stalsburg-phd/trump-and-the-normalizati_b_10101492.html.

[27] See Eric Levitz, "Trump Criticizes Black Lives Matter for its 'Horrible' and 'Divisive' Rhetoric," *NYMag.com,* July 12, 2016, http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/07/trump-blm-protesters-use-horrible-rhetoric.html, para. 5; Jonathan Swan, "Trump to Protestors: All Lives Matter," *TheHill.com,* February 29, 2016, http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/271159-trump-to-protesters-all-lives-matter.

Because all lives matter. It's a very, very divisive term."[28] Juxtaposed to his ability to energize

and normalize pro-white extremist groups, Trump's preference for framing Black Lives Matter

as divisive and misguided while attributing the more radical framing of the movement *as* racist

to "a lot of [other] people" may seem curious. Here, however, Trump's use of "all lives matter"

helps to reveal how colorblind racism functions. By adopting the race evasive rhetoric of "all

lives matter," Trump implicitly minimizes the presence and significance of racism in the status

quo, reframing efforts to address actual racial injustice as divisive and, therefore, as the actual

source of racial tensions. In this way, strategically adopting the language of colorblindness in a

context of proliferating racism contributes to the illusion of racial inequality and delegitimizes

racial justice efforts.

<div align="center">White Resistance to Racism</div>

Moving forward with the goal of actualizing racial justice requires, at a minimum, a

general consensus that the status quo is characterized by racial *in*justice. For white people, who

have traditionally occupied positions of racial privilege, moving past white fragility to come to

this realization has proven to be a challenge.[29] Still, there are hopeful glimmers of resistance to

this normative affective response among people in positions of racial privilege who are working

actively to find productive ways to become involved in the fight for racial justice.

Some white people have attempted to engage with contemporary anti-racist efforts in a

variety of ways, including sharing racially conscious posts on social media, attending rallies,

demonstrations, protests, vigils, and critically examining their own racial privilege. Groups like

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[28] Donald Trump, as quoted by Jill Colvin and Matthew Daly, "Trump Predicts More Protest
Violence to Come This Summer," *The Associated Press,* July 11, 2016,
http://elections.ap.org/content/trump-predicts-more-protest-violence-come-summer.
[29] See Jim Grimsley, "White Americans are Nearly as Blind to Their Racism as Ever Before,"
Los Angeles Times, February 23, 2016, http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0223-
grimsley-white-conversations-racism-20160223-story.html.

Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) are working actively to help white folks find productive

forms of engagement with anti-racism.[30] Additionally, a plethora of social media discourse on

whiteness and white privilege has been circulated to provide white people with knowledge about

whiteness, racism, and the importance of overcoming white fragility and guilt in ways that are

designed to be accessible to mainstream populations.[31]

In September 2016, for example, progressive news and social media outlet *Everyday*

Feminism sponsored an online interactive workshop called "Healing from Toxic Whiteness,"

which was designed to help white people overcome barriers—especially emotional and

psychological barriers—and formulate a white anti-racist identity and doing anti-racist work

from positions of racial privilege.[32] Even as they come into tension with dominant discourses and

mobilize forms of resistance charged with affective intensities, then, discourse mobilized by

contemporary movements for racial justice is resonating with some white folks in noteworthy

ways. Still, as I discuss in Chapter 6, precisely what it means for white people to "do" anti-

racism or "be" anti-racist is largely unclear and, as white folks continue to seek ways to become

involved in anti-racist praxis, critiques of their chosen forms of engagement abound.[33]

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[30] See "About," *Showing Up for Racial Justice,* accessed September 26, 2016,
http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/about.

[31] See Ann Friedman, "It's Time to Get Over Your White Feelings and Start Taking Action for
Black Lives," *NYMag.com,* August 3, 2016, http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/08/showing-up-for-
racial-justice-white-feelings-black-lives.html; Paul Kiefer, "Using White Privilege to Fight
Racism: A Young Activist's Dream," *KUOW.org,* October 1, 2015, http://kuow.org/post/using-
white-privilege-fight-racism-young-activists-dream.

[32] Materials were distributed via FaceBook and email…for more information See:
http://www.compassionateactivism.com/healing-whiteness-survey/.

[33] Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism*
(State University of New York Press, 2014); Friedman, "It's Time to Get Over Your White
Feelings"; Mia McKenzie, "How to Tell the Difference Between Real Solidarity and 'Ally
Theater,'" *Black Girl Dangerous,* November 4, 2015,
http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2015/11/the-difference-between-real-solidarity-and-ally-
theatre/; Collier Meyerson, "Dear White Friends: Here's How to Support BLM Without Making

Contemporary proliferations of racially conscious discourse suggest that significant shifts in mainstream U.S. American understandings of race and racism may be underway. These discursive formations of racial consciousness—both racist and anti-racist—exploit breaks in lines of power that form a colorblind racial ideology and gesture toward possibilities for doing whiteness differently. Yet, precisely how these emerging forms of racial consciousness among racially privileged people might be mobilized toward anti-racist ends and away from anxious formations of white fragility and reactionary racism and what rhetorical processes are involved remains relatively uninvestigated in contemporary literature in both critical rhetoric and critical race and whiteness studies. Additionally, critiques of white anti-racism suggests that sustained critical inquiry into these attempts is needed to illuminate its rhetorical and affective complexities and uncover the most productive forms of engagement, yet very little research has been done in this area.[34] Given the apparent rise in white folks attempting to engage with anti-racist praxis in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and the Trump-era, it is important to consider how contemporary proliferations of direct discourse on race and racial justice enable and constrain alternative formations of anti-racist whiteness.

Clearly, there is no shortage of material to analyze for rhetorical scholars interested in contemporary discourses on race, racism, and whiteness—the difficulty in beginning to approach this messy and continuously unfolding milieu is deciding precisely what to study and how to

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it About You," *Fusion,* July 27, 2016, http://fusion.net/story/329680/black-lives-matter-white-allies/.

[34] For noteworthy exceptions, See Dreama G. Moon and Lisa A Flores, "Antiracism and the Abolition of Whiteness: Rhetorical Strategies of Domination Among 'Race Traitors,'" *Communication Studies* 51, no. 2 (2000): 97–115; Lisa A. Flores and Dreama G. Moon, "Rethinking Race, Revealing Dilemmas: Imagining a New Racial Subject in Race Traitor," *Western Journal of Communication* 66, no. 2 (2002): 181–207; Debian Marty, "White Antiracist Rhetoric as Apologia: Wendell Berry's *The Hidden Wound,*" in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity,* ed. Judith Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 51–68; Sullivan, *Good White People.*

study it. I turn now to a discussion of how I will approach the task of interrogating whiteness in contemporary U.S. American public discourse.

My Project: Scope, Terminology, & Central Questions

With a focus on rhetorical formations of white racial consciousness in contemporary U.S. American public discourse, this dissertation investigates how whiteness is being discursively (re)negotiated in a context in which racially conscious rhetoric—both racist and anti-racist—is proliferating. Specifically, I analyze three overarching discourses—white nationalism, the "alternative right," and anti-racist whiteness—to reveal how each has been strategically constructed to hail an audience of mainstream white U.S. Americans into particular orientations to racial consciousness.

Across each analysis chapter, I take particular interest in revealing how contemporary formations of white racial consciousness are challenging a colorblind racial ideology, mainstream discursive norms of race evasion, the normative invisibility of whiteness, and the affective circulation of white fragility to construct pro-white and anti-racist orientations to race. Ultimately, I am interested in illuminating possibilities and limitations of rearticulating whiteness in anti-racist formations. To continue to describe the project that unfolds across the following six chapters, I turn to a discussion of issues of scope and terminology important to this dissertation.

By signaling *contemporary* public discourse, I mean to limit the temporal scope of this project. I am concerned with direct discourse on race and racism mobilized by U.S. American white people after 2012 and into the still-unfolding present (2017). As noted above, the year 2012 is significant as a starting-point because it marks the nascence of the Black Lives Matter movement—a movement that emerged in a *kairotic* moment of heightened racial consciousness fueled by the death of Trayvon Martin and the re-election of U.S. President Barack Obama and

has been working to sustain that racial consciousness in the years since.[35] Additionally, the 2015

emergence of the racially charged political persona of Donald Trump has been accompanied by a

resurgence in explicit formations of pro-white rhetoric—including from white nationalists and

the alternative right—that continue to circulate as I write this dissertation. The 2012–2017 time

frame is thus characterized by proliferating formations of racially conscious rhetoric coming into

tension with one another and with the discursive expectations of race evasive rhetoric

characteristic of a colorblind racial ideology.

By signaling *U.S. American* public discourse, I mean to limit the geographic scope of this

project. A focus on formations of whiteness in U.S. American public discourse is important

because although whiteness can be traced through formations of supremacy and superiority

across geographic borders, its historical and contemporary manifestations are nonetheless

specific to particular geopolitical contexts and thus warrant localized attention. As I explain

further in Chapter 2, I relied on the Internet to collect and assemble discursive fragments. As

such—and this is especially true in the case of fragments pulled from participatory social media

platforms—the "actual" source of the discourse was not always clear. I did not attempt to verify

whether every fragment collected for analysis originated from a U.S. American rhetor—rather, I

used a focus on U.S. American discourse as a way to target discourse that spoke from or to a

U.S. American context and to exclude discourse clearly from or specific to international

contexts.

Discourse & Rhetoric

When I refer to "discourse," I mean to invoke the concept in the Foucauldian sense, as

groups of statements that comprise the range of what can be said about a certain topic in a

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[35] Alicia Garza, "A Herstory."

particular context.[36] Yet, this is not *all* Foucault meant by discourse. Discourse here is

understood as having an inextricable relationship with power and knowledge, such that discourse

always mobilizes (and is mobilized by) power and, through this relationship, is continuously

(re)constituting what can be known—and, therefore, what can be said and done—in a particular

context. In this way, discursive power is simultaneously productive and restrictive—it both

produces and constrains possibilities for *being, saying, and doing* in a particular context. The

ways in which discourses of power organize and *take form* in particular contexts, such that they

are observable and therefore analyzable, are what Foucault termed "discursive formations."[37]

From a Foucauldian perspective, then, discourse constructs our social realities and shapes the

ways we (inter)act within them.

As I continue to unpack in the next chapter, a Foucauldian perspective on discourse helps

to frame the critical perspective on rhetoric that I adopt in this dissertation.[38] Following Darrel

Wanzer-Serrano, I adopt a basic understanding of *rhetoric* "as (the study of) situated public

discourse."[39] From this understanding, rhetoric is closely tied to discursive formations—both

terms invoke the analyzable, observable ways that discourse takes form in public contexts.[40] In

this project, I adopt a critical rhetorical perspective to analyze discursive formations of whiteness

and, in particular, to investigate how engagements with direct discourse on race among white

U.S. Americans mobilize racist and/or anti-racist formations of whiteness in ways that resist

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[36] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. AM Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 131.

[37] Ibid.

[38] See Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2 (1989): 91–111; Raymie E. McKerrow, "Foucault's Relationship to Rhetoric," *The Review of Communication* 11, no. 4 (2011): 253–271.

[39] Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015), 15.

[40] For stylistic purposes, I prefer the term "discursive formation" to "rhetorical formation" or "rhetoric" when discussing the subject matter to be analyzed in subsequent chapters.

normative, colorblind formations of whiteness in mainstream public contexts. I continue to

unpack the relationship among discourse, power, and knowledge in Chapter 2.

Racism & Anti-Racism

Additionally, it is important to establish clear conceptualizations of "racism" and "anti-

racism." Racism, in particular, is a highly-contested term, and confusion around contrasting

conceptualizations of racism has important implications for how contemporary issues of race and

racial (in)justice are understood and addressed. Dictionary definitions of "racism" are misleading

and contribute to decontextualized, a-historical misunderstandings of racism in contemporary

public discourse. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines "racism" as, "Prejudice,

discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief

that one's own race is superior."[41] To be sure, the beliefs and actions described in this definition

are problematic, but such definitions are overly simplistic and promote reductionist

misunderstandings of racism as personal beliefs and interpersonal actions. From this perspective,

any person can perpetrate racism against any other person based on individual beliefs.

In contrast, this project is framed around an understanding of *racism* as systemic and

structural—"a network of social relations at social, political, economic, and ideological levels

that shapes the life chances of various races."[42] In other words, racism is engrained into the very

fabric of our everyday realities and embedded in our political, economic, and social

institutions—in ways that are informed by a history of ideological and material relationships.

Racism is thus understood as a constellation of beliefs and practices, both (inter)personal and

institutional, that contribute to the mistreatment of individuals and groups that are deemed to be

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[41] "Racism," *The Oxford English Dictionary,* accessed February 11, 2017,
https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/racism.
[42] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 43.

inferior because of their perceived race. From this conceptualization, racism can manifest in a variety of formations, from overt forms of violence to covert racial micro-aggressions and everywhere in between.[43]

Racism can assume different formations in different societies and must be understood within its appropriate sociohistorical context—whereas anyone can be a perpetrator or victim of *prejudice*, *racism* is dependent on a historically embedded and multifaceted system of power relations that inform how people identify and are identified as members of racial groups and, further, shapes what these identifications mean in terms of social and material position.[44] This means that in the United States, racism must be understood in terms of a historical legacy of white supremacy, whereby U.S. American society was quite literally built on a foundation of white supremacy that justified everything from the extermination of indigenous populations to the forced enslavement of Africans to the extension of U.S. American citizenship only to "whites," even as who counted as "white" was subject to change.[45] Because this project focuses on a U.S. American context, then, I will often employ the term "racism" to signal a range of manifestations of white supremacy.

Throughout U.S. American history, "white people"—a somewhat flexible amalgamation of fair skinned folks from a number of culturally diverse regions in Western and, later, Eastern Europe—have been consistently placed at the top of the racial hierarchy and have, as a result, been extended a range of social and material privileges.[46] In contrast, groups that have been racialized as "non-white"—especially those racialized as "Black"—have, throughout U.S.

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[43] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation.*
[44] George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2002).
[45] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation;* Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, & Future Reparations* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 6.
[46] See Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010).

American history, been subjected to a range of social and material forms of oppression, violence, and marginalization.[47] A systemic perspective on racism affirms that this history cannot be separated from the persistence of racial inequalities in contemporary contexts and understands U.S. American racism as organized around an ideology of white superiority. The systemization of white superiority has a wide range of implications and manifests in formations that range from implicitly racialized "common-sense" assumptions to explicitly racialized hatred and/or violence.

As I will demonstrate in my first two analysis chapters, it is common for white folks to believe that *they* are the "true" victims of racism in contemporary U.S. American society. As with the case of Abigail Fisher, the white college student who sued the University of Texas at Austin on the basis that she had been unfairly denied admission because of her white racial identity, many white folks perceive efforts to promote racial justice by fostering diversity and inclusivity (as with affirmative action programs) to be unfair to white people.[48] Indeed, research demonstrates that white folks commonly believe that anti-white bias has become more of a problem than anti-black bias.[49] Relatedly, it is common for critiques of whiteness—as a system of (de)racialization rooted in domination and supremacy—and white people—as the benefactors of that system—to be read as "racist against white people," as is the case with conservative commentator Glenn Beck's (mis)reading of the show *Dear White People* (which, perhaps

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[47] W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998 [Originally published in 1935]); David R. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

[48] See Jamelle Bouie, "Easy AA," *Slate,* July 2, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/06/fisher_v_university_of_texas_the_supreme_court_might_just_gut_affirmative.html.

[49] See Michael Norton and Samuel Sommers, "White People Think Racism is Getting Worse. Against White People.," *Washington Post,* July 21, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/07/21/white-people-think-racism-is-getting-worse-against-white-people/?utm_term=.a25281088fe7.

ironically, attempts to demystify how black folks see and experience our racialized world) as

racist.[50]

Claims to anti-white racism, however, are unwarranted from a systemic perspective on

racism grounded in an understanding of the relationship between history and the present and

between discourse and materiality. In many cases, these claims stem from white folks' adherence

to a colorblind racial ideology. As Ian Haney López argues, colorblindness is:

> [A]n ideology that self-righteously wraps itself in the raiment of the civil rights
> movement and that, while proclaiming a deep fealty to eliminating racism, perversely
> defines discrimination strictly in terms of explicit references to race. Thus, it is 'racism'
> when society uses affirmative race-conscious means to respond to gross inequalities, but
> there is no racial harm no matter how strongly disparities in health care, education,
> residential segregation, or incarceration correlate to race, so long as no one has uttered a
> racial word.

In other words, by articulating anti-racism to race evasion and racism to racial

consciousness, operating from a colorblind ideology enables white folks to ignore the material

realities of systemic racism while believing that attempts to address systemic racism are unfair to

then. However, a colorblind ideology is an orientation to race steeped in privileged whiteness—it

centers the perspectives and experiences of people for whom race is not salient because they are

not subject to the negative impacts of racism and uses those perspectives and experiences to

construct common sense knowledge about how racism functions—through explicit references to

race. Further, as I will demonstrate across Chapters 4 and 5, the prominence of mainstream white

U.S. Americans' belief in proliferating anti-white bias provides fodder for proponents of white

superiority, who use claims of anti-white racism to warrant arguments for white solidarity, white

pride, and white supremacy. Thus, it is important for me to establish that my understanding of

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[50] "Dear Netflix, Why is Racism Against White People Okay?," *The Glenn Beck Program,*
February 9, 2017, http://www.glennbeck.com/2017/02/09/dear-netflix-why-is-racism-against-
white-people-okay/.

racism as described above does *not* leave room for "anti-white racism" because it is not possible for members of the dominant, privileged group to simultaneously be oppressed on the basis of their membership in that group.

Following from a historically and materially grounded, systemic perspective on racism, I understand *anti-racism* as conscious efforts to disrupt beliefs and practices that implicitly or explicitly perpetuate an ideology of white superiority and further the oppression and marginalization of people of color. There are at least two important components to anti-racism—anti-racist consciousness and anti-racist praxis. I conceptualize "anti-racist consciousness" as a deep awareness of the historical and contemporary existence and significance of racial injustice and ways in which whiteness has been constructed and positioned as ideologically superior and materially privileged. Following sociologists Pamela Perry and Alexis Shotwell, "anti-racist praxis" refers to "conscious thought and action to dismantle racism and end racial inequities" and refers both to direct action for racial justice (e.g. attending protests and demonstrations for racial justice) as well as more "everyday" engagements (e.g. making racially conscious decisions about how to vote and having informal conversations with friends and family about issues of racial (in)justice).[51] In other words, anti-racist consciousness is a necessary precursor to—but is not the same as—productive, sustained engagements with white anti-racist praxis.

An anti-racist orientation understood in this way is distinctly different from the assumption of a "non-racist" identity—in fact, identifying as "non-racist" is expected under the dominant ideology of colorblindness.[52] Whereas white folks operating from a colorblind orientation to race are likely to passively reinforce material and ideological formations of racism

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[51] Pamela Perry and Alexis Shotwell, "Relational Understanding and White Antiracist Praxis," *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 1 (2009): 34.
[52] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists,* 33.

by refusing to recognize the reality of racial inequality even as they identify as "non-racist," an

anti-racist orientation requires from white folks a nuanced understanding of our position within

the material and ideological landscape of white privilege and an *active* commitment to undoing

racial injustice.[53] To be clear, if racism in U.S. American contexts must be understood within the

framework of white supremacy, then anti-racism in this context is rooted in efforts to challenge

and dismantle the many ways that white supremacy works to privilege whiteness and white folks

as it marginalizes "non-white otherness" and people of color. As such, anti-racist rearticulations

of whiteness would be attempts to mobilize the privileges associated with whiteness in ways that

work toward dismantling racial inequalities *and* to construct a subject position from within

which white folks can engage in effective anti-racist praxis. In Chapter 6, I grapple more directly

with the complexities of anti-racism, including the possibilities and limitations of raising white

anti-racist racial consciousness and promoting productive anti-racist praxis among white folks.

Whiteness & "Everyday White Folks"

This dissertation is "about" whiteness, and at times, I will use the term in several

interrelated ways. Following Ruth Frankenberg, I conceptualize whiteness as an interlocking set

of "locations, discourses, and material relations. …that are historically, socially, politically, and

culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of

domination."[54] When I refer to "whiteness," then, I mean to signal a whole range of social and

material relations inextricably bound with discourses of power in ways that implicate and

racialize all bodies. Yet, within this conceptualization, whiteness is also a subject position that is

occupied by white bodies and a characteristic *of* white bodies. At times, I will use the term

"whiteness" to signal formations that include these embodied occupations.

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters,* 6.

In particular, when I employ the terms "everyday whiteness" and "everyday white folks," I intend to signal the normative formations of whiteness that tend to emerge in mainstream public contexts. As I have alluded to already and will continue to discuss in Chapter 3, whiteness tends to operate invisibly in contemporary U.S. American mainstream public contexts, where values, beliefs, and practices associated with white folks are normalized and universalized such that white people are seen as race*less* while everyone else is racialized and particularized.[55] The normativity of whiteness further means that white folks do not frequently have to think or speak about race—especially not their own—and, so, they tend to lack racial consciousness and be relatively ill equipped to engage in direct discourse on race and racism.[56]

Relatedly, "everyday white folks" would be unlikely to self-identify—at least openly, in public discourse—as being actively engaged in either racism or anti-racism. This is a loose and potentially troublesome category, to be sure—readers can likely think of white individuals who "play nice" in public but are prone to explicitly racist outbursts in private. In this way, "everyday white folks" signals the instability and performativity of identity—the same person can perform "normative whiteness" in one context and "explicitly racist whiteness" in another. Despite its potential limitations, then, conceptualizing "everyday white folks" in this way will be generative for a fuller understanding of the various formations whiteness might assume in contemporary public discourse by serving as a marker for racial subjects occupying a normative formation that whiteness *tends* to assume while underscoring its ability to shift and morph into alternative articulations. Additionally, conceptualizing "everyday white folks" in this way will help me to

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[55] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 121; Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, (1995): 291.

[56] See Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists;* Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility"; Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*.

reveal how contemporary formations of white racial consciousness mobilize strategic appeals

toward an audience of white folks imagined in these everyday terms.

A primary goal of this project is to uncover how racist and anti-racist formations of racial

consciousness are competing to interpellate everyday white folks in a contemporary U.S.

American moment in which the hegemony of a colorblind racial ideology is crumbling. As I

continue to discuss in Chapter 3, there is a robust body of existing scholarship that has explored

normative formations of whiteness in mainstream, everyday contexts.[57] These studies have

demonstrated that following the 1960s Civil Rights era and the dismantling of Jim Crow

segregation, U.S. American racism transformed into colorblind racism characterized by

discourse that evades race while continuing to mobilize implicitly racist assumptions. As

explicitly racist discourse became increasingly socially unacceptable in the mainstream public

sphere even as systemic racial inequalities persisted, subjects occupying positions of racial

privilege were able to distance themselves from issues of race and racism and became

increasingly committed to the belief that racial equality had been achieved. This shift enabled

"racism" to be defined as overt, explicit manifestations of race-based hatred and relegated to

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[57] See Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists;* Carrie Crenshaw, "Resisting Whiteness' Rhetorical Silence," *Western Journal of Communication* 61, no. 3 (1997): 253–278; DiAngelo, "White Fragility"; Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*; Ruth Frankenberg, "Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism,* ed. Ruth Frankenberg, 1–33, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism & Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Liliana L. Herakova, Dijana Jelača, Razvan Sibii, and Leda Cooks, "Voicing Silence and Imagining Citizenship Dialogues about Race and Whiteness in a 'Postracial' Era," *Communication Studies* 62, no. 4 (2011): 372–388; Ronald L. Jackson II, Chang In Shin, and Keith B. Hilson, "The Meaning of Whiteness: Critical Implications of Communicating and Negotiating Race," *World Communication* 29, no. 1 (2000): 69–86; Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness as Strategic Rhetoric"; Raka Shome, "Outing Whiteness," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17, no. 3 (2000): 366–371; John T. Warren and Kathy Hytten, "The Faces of Whiteness: Pitfalls and the Critical Democrat," *Communication Education* 53, no. 4 (2004): 321–339.

history and, contemporarily, to the margins of extremist fringe groups.[58] Meanwhile, encoding

racialized and racist assumptions in race evasive discourse (re)constructed whiteness as an

unspoken norm—thus, *normative whiteness*.[59]

This normalization of whiteness has allowed it to assume a position of unexamined

centrality and familiarity—a sense of "everydayness"—which enables it to operate mostly

invisibly in mainstream public discourse.[60] This foundational understanding of contemporary

racism as implicit, covert manifestations of racialized assumptions and biases produced a

plethora of critical scholarship that illuminated how whiteness functions to (re)secure its powers

and privileges through coded discourse.[61] In sum, existing understandings of normative

whiteness are grounded in a context in which a colorblind ideology dominates and whiteness

retains its position of privileged centrality by mobilizing race evasive discourse and remaining

relatively "under the radar."

However, as noted above, mainstream public and political discourse on race has shifted

significantly over the past decade. The Black Lives Matter Movement and other movements for

racial justice have been working tirelessly to ensure that issues of racial injustice remain at the

forefront of U.S. American public consciousness. Conversely, the emergence of increasingly

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[58] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists.*

[59] Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness as Strategic Rhetoric."

[60] Ross Chambers, "The Unexamined," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York University Press, 1997), 187.

[61] See Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*; Phil Chidester, "May the Circle Stay Unbroken: Friends, the Presence of Absence, and the Rhetorical Reinforcement of Whiteness," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 2 (2008): 157–174; Phil Chidester, "'Respect My Authori-tah': South Park and the Fragmentation/Reification of Whiteness," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 29, no. 5 (2012): 403–420; Crenshaw, "Resisting Whiteness' Rhetorical Silence," DiAngelo, "White Fragility"; Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*; Frankenberg, "Introduction"; Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*; Herakova, Jelača, Sibii, & Cooks, "Voicing Silence"; Jackson, Shin, and Wilson, "The Meaning of Whiteness"; Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness as Strategic Rhetoric"; Shome, "Outing Whiteness"; Warren and Hytten, "The Faces of Whiteness."

racially-charged formations of political discourse as well as counter-discourses mobilized in opposition to anti-racist efforts have contributed to a rise in explicitly racist discourse in the U.S. American public sphere. Together, these contemporary discursive formations of racial consciousness have compelled marked shifts in how (and how much) we engage in direct discourse on race in "everyday" contexts—this is apparent to anyone who watches U.S. American news, follows U.S. American popular culture, or is active on social media. Yet, we know relatively little about how these changes in U.S. American discourse on race have impacted the centrality and normativity of whiteness or how particular groups of people are (re)constructing and understanding their racialized identities within this shifting racial landscape.

In sum, this project is concerned with a set of questions that I believe to be critical to an understanding of mainstream contemporary public discourse on race and to the promotion of productive engagement with anti-racist discourse from positions of racial privilege: In this contemporary moment of heightened racial consciousness, how are everyday white folks being imagined and hailed by racially conscious rhetoric? How are reactionary formations of white racial consciousness discursively mobilizing racist rearticulations of whiteness to hail everyday white folks? How is the formation of white anti-racist consciousness enabled and constrained by normative and reactionary formations of whiteness, and what are the possibilities and limitations of white anti-racist praxis? What affective energies circulate through these multiple, competing contemporary formations of whiteness, and what is their role in maintaining and resisting racial (in)justice? And, given all of these questions, what are the possibilities and limitations for resisting the domination and privileges of whiteness from within?

On Reflexivity

To embark on a project that (re)centers whiteness as an object of analysis in a time when de-centering whiteness is imperative to actualizing racial justice may seem counterproductive. Additionally, moving toward an analysis of possibilities and limitations of rearticulating whiteness in anti-racist formations may be interpreted as a misstep given the importance of deep, sustained investigations into the plethora of ways in which whiteness functions to (re)secure its dominance and privilege in shifting contemporary contexts. I have begun to sketch a rationale that demonstrates why continuing to cast a critical eye on whiteness and moving toward an exploration of attempts at anti-racist rearticulations are urgently important in this contemporary context, yet there is at least one remaining reason to discuss.

Perhaps the most practically important reason to investigate how whiteness is being (re)negotiated in contemporary discourses on race is because these negotiations have important and direct implications for racial justice and anti-racist efforts. Whiteness constrains and enables resistance to the racist status quo—as *the* normative formation of race(lessness), whiteness is both what is being resisted and what sets the conditions of possibility for resistance. And, as the racial group who continues to hold the most power and privilege in U.S. American society, white people can act either as a roadblock or a propeller for racial justice. Indeed, acting as a roadblock for racial justice requires little more than doing nothing, while move productively toward anti-racism from positions of racial privilege requires much more effort.[62]

One important area in need of sustained research is thus how whiteness continues to operate in ways that constrain racial justice, both through normative formations of race evasion and through the (re)appearance of explicitly racist formations of whiteness. Yet, as a queer white

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[62] Sullivan, *Good White People.*

U.S. American woman who is committed to a politics of dismantling white supremacy and actualizing racial justice, I want so badly to believe that there are possibilities—however tempered, however messy, however contentious—for doing whiteness differently. For articulating anti-racist formations of whiteness that work reflexively within and against the norms and privileges articulated to racially privileged bodies in ways that engage productive forms of resistance. And so, I turn toward these possibilities for rearticulating whiteness in anti-racist formations in Chapter 6—a turn made cautiously and reflexively, grounded in a critical understanding of its own constraints.

As such, it is not my intention to celebrate white resistance to racism or "alternative" formations of whiteness—I am not interested in applauding racially privileged folks for their awareness of and/or attempts to resist their racial privilege. Rather, I will work to expose the complexities of contemporary formations of whiteness in ways that gesture toward possibilities for anti-racist rearticulations of whiteness by placing such possibilities within their appropriate context—a historical legacy of white supremacy that bleeds into contemporary discourse in both explicit and insidious formations.

Chapter Preview

This dissertation will unfold across six subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2, I unpack the theoretical and methodological orientations I adopt across this project. Here, I sketch how a critical orientation to rhetoric informed by theories of articulation, performativity, and affect shapes my critical perspective and discuss how I found and compiled rhetorical artifacts for analysis. Chapter 3 reviews relevant disciplinary and interdisciplinary literature on critical studies of race and whiteness and continues to point to the gaps in research addressed by this project. Together, these first three chapters provide a foundation and framework for my analysis

of rhetorical formations of white racial consciousness in contemporary U.S. American public discourse.

In Chapter 4, I turn toward white nationalist rhetoric to reveal how this tempered rearticulation of pro-white racial consciousness attempts to resist both a colorblind racial ideology and mainstream opposition to white supremacy. Here, I reveal that white nationalist rhetoric attempts to hail an audience of everyday white folks by mobilizing appeals to common sense and positive affects to construct rhetorical distance between white nationalism and white supremacy and imagine white nationalism as a positive orientation toward pro-whiteness. Working from this understanding of white nationalism, Chapter 5 turns toward the emergence and evolution of the "alternative right" or "alt-right" in contemporary U.S. American public and political discourse. By tracing the evolution of alt-right rhetoric through the white nationalist intelligentsia, anonymous online trolls, and alt-right celebrity trolls, I argue that the articulation of appeals to intellectualism to appeals to absurdity enables alt-right rhetoric to act as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse.

In Chapter 6, I move away from pro-white formations of white racial consciousness and turn toward attempts to hail everyday folks into anti-racist formations of whiteness. Here, I illuminate the differences between white anti-racist consciousness and praxis and explore how the normative affective circulation of white fragility constrains both. Ultimately, I argue for the importance of fostering reflexive and resilient formations of white anti-racist consciousness and promoting productive anti-racist praxis rooted in accountability to communities of color. Chapter 7 offers concluding reflections and unpacks this projects implications for critical rhetorical inquiries into whiteness and the possibilities and limitations of rearticulating whiteness. Here, I

suggest conceptualizing white racial (un)consciousness along a mainstream–extreme perspective

and argue for the utility of a critical rearticulationist perspective rooted in tempered optimism.

CHAPTER 2:
Theoretical & Methodological Orientations

You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.

<div align="right">-Ta-Nahisi Coates[63]</div>

Rhetoricians and critical cultural scholars have long been concerned with questions of discourse, power, and identity. How does discourse shape who we are and what we (can) know? Are our identities fixed and stable, or is identity (re)construction an ongoing, fluid, and malleable process? What is the role of power in the discursive construction of identities and subjectivities, and what forms of resistance are possible? As I will expand on below, contemporary critical perspectives on race have tended to conceptualize race as an ideologically-laden-discursive-construct made real through its historical embeddedness and contemporary embodiment and have argued that existing racial logics are not fixed, but malleable.[64] Yet, if the fundamental constructedness of race necessarily means that race and racial logics can be (re)constructed, then why have processes of racial formation and racialization consistently functioned in ways that privilege bodies (de)racialized as "white" while disadvantaging other racialized groups?[65] And, if different ways of constructing and understanding race are indeed possible, how do these processes of reconstruction—or *rearticulation*—function and with what implications?

Interconnections between discourse and power inform these large, important questions—questions that frame the impetus for this project. Because social identities, including race are

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[63] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 10.
[64] Jonathan Xavier Inda, "Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body," *Latino Studies Journal* 11, no. 3 (2000): 75; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation.*
[65] See Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation.*

discursive constructions intertwined with normative operations of power,[66] a rhetorical

perspective and approach that attends critically to the relationship between discourse and power

is necessary to reveal how dominant and resistant formations of whiteness have been constructed

and made meaningful throughout history and across contexts and, further, to reveal how subjects

are interpellated into identification with affect-laden formations of whiteness through discourse.

There is a long history of culturally inflected studies of rhetoric.[67] This scholarship has

demonstrated that the production of culture, identity, and knowledge is fundamentally discursive

and political processes, and rhetorical scholars attuned to these processes can productively

illuminate implications for how social life is engaged and understood in particular contexts.[68]

More recently, critical cultural studies scholars[69] and critical rhetoricians[70] have explored the role

of affect in discourses of power and identity formation, demonstrating its significance as an

object of and perspective for critical inquiry.

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[66] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 18; Inda, "Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body"; Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness as Strategic Rhetoric."

[67] See Peter Simonson, "Rhetoric as a Sociological Problem," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 50 (2014): 243–245; Ronald Walter Greene, "Rhetoric (Dis)Appearing," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2–3 (2013): 259–264.

[68] See Bonnie J. Dow, "Politicizing Voice," *Western Journal of Communication* 6, no. 2 (1997): 243–251; Carol Blair, "We Are All Just Prisoners Here of Our Own Device," in *Making and Unmaking the Prospects For Rhetoric,* eds. Theresa Enos and Richard McNabb (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997), 29–36; John M. Sloop and Mark Olson, "Cultural Struggle: A Politics of Meaning in Rhetorical Studies," in *At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies,* ed. Thomas Rosteck (New York: Guilford, 1999), 248–265.

[69] See Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–139; Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[70] See Josue David Cisneros, "Looking 'Illegal': Affect, Rhetoric, and Performativity in Arizona's Senate Bill 1070," in *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Frontier*, ed. D. Robert DeChaine (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012): 133–150; Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 548–567; Jenny Edbauer Rice, "The New 'New': Making a Case for Critical Affect Studies," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 2 (2008): 200–212.

This chapter grounds my analysis in particular theoretical and methodological traditions to provide a foundation and framework for this project. As I engage in this discussion of theory and methodology, it is important to remain critically aware, as author Ta-Nehisi Coates urges, of the significance and implications of scholarly work. This is not a discussion of "theory for theory's sake," nor is my primary interest centered on demonstrating the utility of any particular perspective or approach or "furthering the field," although this project will indeed make theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary contributions. Rather, I am interested in what theory and method can do to help us understand, address, and resist hegemonic power in our social worlds—an interest that affirms the importance of building more robust, reflexive, and responsible theoretical and methodological tools for those endeavors.

As such, my primary objective across this dissertation is to take a critical rhetorical approach informed by a pastiche of interdisciplinary theories to illuminate issues of social (in)justice relative to race and to provide insight into how to productively engage those issues from positions of racial privilege. Below, I discuss the theoretical and methodological orientations that frame the perspective and approach I take toward my analysis. This discussion will provide insight into how my analysis unfolds and will point to its key scholarly contributions.

Discourse, Power, & Identity: A Foucauldian Perspective

As noted in the previous chapter, this project is grounded in an understanding of the relationship among discourse, power, and knowledge articulated by 20th-century French philosopher Michel Foucault. Moving away from Marxist conceptualizations of power as top-down, predetermined, and primarily repressive, Foucault developed a perspective on power as

complex, omnipresent, shifting, productive, and fundamentally discursive.[71] Although power is

often conceptualized as being held by particular people and/or institutions and imposed on the

masses in ways that restrict and repress human action, Foucault demonstrated that repression is

just one manifestation of a broader system of power relations. More broadly, power is "a moving

substrate of force relations" that "is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or

rather in every relation from one point to another."[72] This means that subjects mobilize power in

their everyday interactions and relations with the world—we have produced (and continuously

(re)produce) through discourse the meanings, norms, expectations, and rules by which we are

then governed. When applied to understandings of race, this view on power means that racialized

power—namely, white supremacy—is not housed in particular institutions (economic, political,

religious, etc.) or people, but rather runs through the relations among institutions and people and

operates in ways that cannot be reduced to (but unquestionably include) domination and

repression.

Because power is most explicitly observable in its repressive and violent manifestations,

it is easy to overlook the ways in which power is (re)produced in everyday social life. This

tendency contributes to the reduction of power to repression/domination and the failure to

account for its productive capacities—the ways in which power produces the conditions of

possibility for being a particular kind of subject (raced, gendered, etc.) in the first place, and the

ways in which it functions through everyday discourses to imprint meaning and expectations on

human bodies and enable and constrain human thinking and action. As a result, the dominant

norms and expectations that govern everyday human social life in particular contexts become

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[71] Foucault developed his theory of power over many published and unpublished works. I draw my understanding of this theory primarily from: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Volume I) (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [Originally published in 1978]).
[72] Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* 93.

taken for granted as "commonsense knowledge"[73]—we presume to "know" the world without recognizing that what is known is a product of discursive power. What is knowable, in other words, is what is sayable within a particular temporal and spatial context, within which other possible ways of knowing are subjugated.[74]

From a Foucauldian perspective, then, power and knowledge are joined together in discourse. And here, discourse is understood as both instrument and effect of power—discourse is what mobilizes power, and power is what mobilizes discourse. By tracing what is (and can be) said on a particular topic by particular types of subject in a particular time and place, knowledge about that topic and the subjects implicated by it has been constructed in a given context can be uncovered, which can further illuminate how normative (and abject) subjects are constructed through knowledge produced by these power-laden discourses.[75] Foucault developed and applied this perspective on discourse-knowledge-power through analyses of how normative understandings of issues such as madness, criminality, and sex and sexuality were constructed and imposed on human bodies in particular contexts. More recently, a Foucauldian perspective on power has been applied to inquiries into race and racialization. For example, sociologists Howard Omi and Michael Winant have adopted a Foucauldian understanding of power to analyze the role of discourse in constructing race and imposing racialized norms and expectations on bodies and social practices, demonstrating how racialized discourses of power

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[73] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–1977,* ed. Colin Gordon. Trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 82.
[74] Ibid., 81–82.
[75] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 81–82.

have functioned in both repressive and productive ways throughout contemporary U.S. American history.[76]

In terms of race, a Foucauldian perspective on power suggests that discourses of power produce and impose meaning upon racialized subject positions that bodies are then called to occupy—or interpellated into (more on this below)—in ways that both enable and constrain differently racialized subjects' ways of being-in and knowing the world. As Foucault argued, the discursive construction of race functions to divide and categorize the human population, and racism intervenes as a formation of power that justifies the valuation of some lives over others.[77] Whereas the most explicit and violent manifestations of racism—hate speech, assault, murder, for example—may be readily identifiable as such[78], racisms more implicit, everyday functions are often overlooked.

From this perspective, then, white supremacy—the racialized formation of power that has been dominant throughout U.S. American history—does not *only* oppress and repress, and also that it does not *only* act on bodies racialized as non-white. In addition to mobilizing oppressive and violent formations of hate speech and action against non-white bodies, a white supremacist ideology has *also* been integral in constructing and organizing "normal" social life in ways that more implicitly position white bodies and whiteness in positions of superiority and normativity relative to non-white bodies and non-whiteness. That common-sense knowledge tends to elide the ways in which discourse on race produces different possibilities for being and knowing for

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[76] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation.*

[77] Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997), 254–255.

[78] It is noteworthy that even here, there is debate over precisely what constitutes "racism," as the introduction chapter's discussion of state-sanctioned violence against U.S. American black folks and debates around the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrated.

differently racialized subjects illustrates how power masks a substantial part of its operations, where racial identities are is taken for granted as essential truths or natural, pre-given characteristics rather than recognized as social, ideological constructions mobilized through complex relations of discourse and power.

Illuminating power's productive functions demonstrates its inescapability—because power relations produce possibilities for human social life in the first place, humans cannot escape the workings of power.[79] Yet, by exposing the interconnections among discourse, power, and knowledge, possibilities for resistance are opened up. In other words, understanding how norms, expectations, and rules were constructed makes it possible to construct them differently. As Foucault argued, power contains the seeds of resistance within itself.[80] Because it does not come from any particular place or necessarily serve any particular interests, power relations are fluid, unstable, and subject to change. Still, discourses of power and the effects they produce are sedimented by an accumulation of force relations over time, meaning that although resistance is possible, it is always already constrained by the power relations that produce its possibilities. Foucault provided relatively little insight into the practical mechanisms of resistance but to say that it, like power, is discursive. Illuminating Foucault, rhetorician Barbara Biesecker argued that resistant practices are those that do not make sense within the available lines of intelligibility— they are everyday discursive practices that confuse our common sense.[81] One goal of the present project is to explore how white folks occupying positions of racial privilege are working to challenge the lines of intelligibility that construct normative whiteness in an attempt to identify possibilities for (and limitations of) anti-racist rearticulations of whiteness.

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[79] Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* 93–96.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Barbara Biesecker, "Michel Foucault and the Question of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 4 (1992), 356–357.

In addition to its ability to illuminate how contemporary white subjects sustain normative whiteness by participating in its normative discursive formations, then, a Foucauldian perspective on power is important to this project for its ability to shed light on the possibilities and limitations of discursive resistance and its emphasis on the importance of sustained critique. The perspectives on critical rhetoric, articulation theory, performativity, disidentification, and affect to which I will now begin to turn will complement (and, in some cases, explicitly extend) a Foucauldian understanding of power to provide additional insight into discursive mechanisms of domination and resistance.

<div align="center">Critical Rhetoric: A Methodological Orientation to Discourse</div>

As a critical orientation to discourse and power, critical rhetoric emerged in the wake of widespread turns to ideology and power among rhetoricians in the post-Wingspread era.[82] Raymie McKerrow conceptualized critical rhetoric as an alternative to traditional "methods," which he and other rhetoricians working in this turn came to perceive as rigid and restrictive in ways that unproductively constrained the research process.[83] Grounded in a Foucauldian perspective on the relationship among discourse, power, and knowledge, critical rhetoric was developed as an *orientation* to discourse grounded in a foundational understanding that operations of power cannot help but construct and mobilize knowledge, knowledge can never be free of power, and discourse is the force that circulates both in ways that construct and solidify social relations.[84] From this perspective, discourse becomes a primary site of analysis for power,

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[82] See Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds., *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report to the National Development Project* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971); Blair, "We Are All Just Prisoners."

[83] Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 91–111.

[84] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric"; Raymie E. McKerrow, "Foucault's Relationship to Rhetoric," *The Review of Communication* 11, no. 4 (2011): 253–271.

where identifying and problematizing how power functions through discourse can help to reveal

its relationship to dominant forms of knowledge and, further, can open possibilities for

resistance.

Working from a Foucauldian understanding of power as simultaneously repressive and

productive, a critical rhetorical perspective was conceptualized around a dual critique of

domination and freedom.[85] A critique of domination seeks to unpack and demystify repressive

relations of power, while a critique of freedom attempts to make sense of power's productive

functions and, especially, to hold efforts to use these productive forms of power toward

resistance to a practice of constant critique. Where the critique of freedom casts a critical light on

the ways that power mobilizes in less predictable ways, especially in everyday discourses, the

critique of domination illuminates how dominant discourses—especially those mobilized

authoritatively by the state and social/political institutions—construct oppressive and repressive

social relations as normal and natural. This dual-critique model will guide the analysis of the

present project, in which I will attend both to dominant formations of whiteness and attempts at

constructing resistant rearticulations of whiteness.

In exploring possibilities for resistance to dominant forms of power, a critical rhetorical

perspective adopts Foucault's maxim that power always contains the seeds of resistance within

itself.[86] As I began to discuss above, this perspective maintains that power does not flow from

any particular determining institution or system—rather, power flows through all institutions and

systems as well as through everyday discursive practices. Power is everywhere, which means

that it can mobilize and manifest in ways that are not able to be fully determined in advance.

These indeterminacies can be exploited in efforts to resist existing forms of power and construct

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[85] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric."
[86] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95–97.

possibilities for freedom—not freedom as the quest for something predetermined, but freedom as the quest for something different.

In terms of the present project, the possibilities of resistance intrinsic to systems of power means that it *must* be possible to reconstruct race. Yet, as Foucault warned, all such efforts to resist dominant forms of power and construct new possibilities will necessarily mobilize relations of power, however unintentionally, to organize social life in ways that privilege some groups at the detriment of others.[87] Resisting normative formations of race, for example, will produce new formations of race—but these new ways of understanding and doing race will not be free of the workings of power…they, too, will organize social reality in uneven ways that must be further critiqued and transformed. For this reason, McKerrow emphasized the importance of constant critique—although critics can and should be committed to working toward *better* ways of organizing social life, they must do so with the understanding that any new forms of knowledge or ways of organizing social life produced through resistance must also be subjected to critical interrogation.[88]

The goal of a critical rhetoric is, ultimately, transformation. Critical rhetoric produces transformative critiques by serving a demystifying function where discourses of power are concerned. Particularly in critiques of domination, critical rhetoric aims to expose how knowledge and social relations that appears to be normal and natural have been constructed through discourses of power. This exposure, therefore, transforms knowledge *of* knowledge. Perhaps most importantly, though, critical rhetoric is transformative because it seeks to effect change in social relations. McKerrow argued that the very act of critique through a critical rhetorical orientation can effect this change, while Ono and Sloop argued for the importance of a

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[87] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* 95–96.
[88] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 100.

commitment to a more specific *telos* that imagines a particular type of "better" alternative to the

relations of power being critiqued.[89] Thus, critical rhetoric can be intellectually transformative

and/or socially/politically transformative. The telos of the current project is primarily intellectual

transformation—I want to understand the *possibilities for* (re)constructing whiteness in anti-

racist formations. Yet, it is my sincere hope that through this process of intellectual

transformation, new possibilities for social transformation will emerge. By exposing potentials

for alternate ways of "doing" whiteness, in other words, I also hope to provide actual white

individuals with the knowledge necessary to do whiteness differently themselves.

A critical rhetorical perspective can help illuminate how whiteness, despite being a social

construction, has systematically (re)secured and retained its privileged position of normative

centrality throughout United States history by pointing to how the malleability of racial logics

and identities is significantly constrained by dominant discourses of power that work to

naturalize essentialist understandings of race grounded in an ideology of white superiority.

Naturalizing race in this way reifies a racial logic in which whiteness is continuously (re)situated

in a privileged position of normative centrality and non-white Otherness is particularized and

marginalized.[90] A critique of domination is thus needed to illuminate how whiteness operates in

these implicit, normative formations.

Yet, rhetorically significant moments of disruption to the dominant racial formation of

normative, privileged whiteness can and do occur. In contemporary U.S. American contexts, the

Black Lives Matter movement and other movements for racial justice are working to challenge

systemic racism and dismantle dominant formations of whiteness. Some white folks have

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[89] Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "Commitment to *Telos*—A Sustained Critical Rhetoric,"
Communication Monographs 59, no. 1 (1992): 49–60.
[90] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Nakayama
and Krizek, "Whiteness as Strategic Rhetoric."

engaged with these movements to resist normative whiteness from within, such as by exposing and explicitly problematizing the privileged invisibility of whiteness as an element of protesting racial injustice.[91] And, as my first two analysis chapters will demonstrate, attempts to (re)secure the dominant and privileged position of whiteness *also* frame themselves as disruptions to the dominant racial ideology of colorblindness by calling for racist formations of white racial consciousness. Across these formations, a critique of freedom is needed to hold these attempts at resistance under a critical light in order to illuminate the ways in which they mobilize discursive resistance to normative formations of whiteness and to explore what the implications of these formations of discursive power might be.

The dual critique model of critical rhetoric frames the overarching perspective through which this project engages in an analysis of how contemporary white folks are mobilizing discourse on race in ways that reinscribe and/or resist normative whiteness. My interest in exploring how whiteness is articulated and *rearticulated* in contemporary public discourse draws me to articulation theory as a complementary orientation—I turn now to a discussion of that perspective.

<div align="center">Articulation Theory: Tracing Contingent Relations</div>

As with a Foucauldian perspective on power, articulation theory emerged during the 1970s, as cultural theorists increasingly critiqued traditional Marxism for its reduction of all social inequalities to capitalist modes of production and searched for more complex explanations for how humans come to see and act within the world in ways that reinforce particular relations

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[91] See Stephanie Hartzell, "An (In)Visible Universe of Grief: Performative Disidentifications With White Motherhood in the We are Not Trayvon Martin Blog," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 10, no. 1 (2017): 62–79.

of domination and subordination.[92] Opposing the notion that social relations among different

groups of people are determined by any one particular power structure or natural order,

articulation theory is a framework for understanding how different ideas, people, objects, values,

etc. come to be connected to one another through discourse to form ideologies that help to

organize social life, and, how different types of connections and relationships might be formed.

As theorized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, an *articulation* is a link between

two or more elements or entities that have no necessary or essential relation but, rather, have

been connected—or *articulated*—to one another through discourse in a particular context.[93] From

this perspective, human social life is organized and made meaningful through a complex web of

articulations, where disparate elements come to have meaning through their connections with

other elements. As Lawrence Grossberg explained, "Articulation is the production of identity on

top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices. Articulation links

this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience

to those politics."[94] Further, as Mouffe has argued, "What is at a given moment considered as the

'natural' order – jointly with the 'common sense' which accompanies it—is the result of

sedimented hegemonic practices; it is never the manifestation of a deeper objectivity exterior to

the practices that bring it into being."[95] In other words, whereas "common sense" understandings

of social life tend to frame articulatory relations as part of a "just the way things are," articulation

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[92] Jennifer Daryl Slack, "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 117.

[93] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* [2nd ed.] (London: Verso, 2001): 105; Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (London: New Left Books, 1977): 7.

[94] Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54.

[95] Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research* 1, no. 2 (2007): 2–3.

theory provides a framework for investigating how discourses of power construct particular

relations and minimize the possibility for others.

From the perspective of articulation theory, then, there is no necessary relationship

between the people, ideas, objects, and values that make up a particular ideology—rather, as

meaning is constructed and contested through relations of discourse and power, so are

relationships among meaningful entities. Put differently, individual social elements (people,

ideas, objects, values, etc.) become meaningful *through their relationships* (articulations) to one

another, where these relationships are understood as always already bound up with the

circulation of hegemonic power through discourse. Here, the normative or dominant way of

seeing and acting within the world is constructed through meaning-and-relationship-making

discourse that masks the articulations it constructs as natural, common-sense interpretation of

how the various elements of our social world fit together. In turn, possibilities for organizing

social life *differently* are minimized and masked.

However, as with a Foucauldian perspective on power, articulation theory contains within

it a blueprint for resistance. If there is no necessary, natural relationship among the various

entities articulated together in dominant discourse, there is always a possibility for social

elements to enter into different types of relationships—thus, disarticuation and *rearticulation*.[96]

Yet, as Stuart Hall made clear, to say that a particular connection or articulation is not necessary

or natural is not to say that it is free-floating. Rather, articulations exist "historically in a

particular formation, anchored very directly in relation to a number of different forces."[97] Much

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[96] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,* 18, 126; Kevin DeLuca, "Articulation Theory: A Discursive Grounding for Rhetorical Practice," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 32, no. 4 (1999): 336.

[97] Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 55.

like conceptualizations of resistance from a Foucauldian perspective on power, then, resistance via disarticulation and rearticulation must work *within and against* the dominant relationships that act—in very real, material, felt ways—to organize human social life in a particular context.

As I will continue to unpack below, remaining grounded in the tension between the arbitrary-yet-sedimentary character of the connections that form an articulation is particularly important to studies of whiteness that adopt a (re)articulationist framework. Rearticulationist projects in critical whiteness studies attempt to illuminate the possibilities and limitations of doing whiteness differently. Yet, efforts to *rearticulate whiteness*—to put a white racial identity into social relationships *different* from that characterized by privilege and domination—must be deployed from a critically reflexive recognition of the history of whiteness *as* domination precisely because the effects of this hegemonic articulation of whiteness are the very foundation of a white racial identity.

By drawing attention to the importance of contingent and contested relationships in constructing dominant and alternative worldviews, articulation theory provides "both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects."[98] As such, articulation theory is both a theoretical framework and a methodological orientation—analyses guided by articulation theory involve examining discourse to trace how particular relationships are being constructed in particular social contexts and illuminating what social forces are enabling and constraining the formation of those articulations.[99] Because of its discourse-centered perspective and approach emphasizing the complexities and contingencies of the relationship among discourse–power–knowledge–

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[98] Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation," 53.
[99] Slack, "The Theory and Method," 113–129.

identity, articulation theory is a useful framework for projects oriented around critical analyses of rhetoric in general[100] and is a particularly well-suited perspective to complement the theoretical and methodological orientation of this project in particular.

This project approaches whiteness *as* an articulation. In its dominant formation, "whiteness" is comprised of the articulation of white bodies to heightened social value, to locations of material privilege, to a history of domination and violence, to feelings of superiority, and so on. Working from this foundation, my analysis traces how whiteness is articulated and *rearticulated* in contemporary public discourse. Methodologically, this entails examining how white folks articulate their relationship to race and racism to illuminate the ways that a white racial identity is connected to particular meanings, values, and feelings in particular contexts and to expose the conditions of possibility that make those connections possible.

<center>Performativity: A Discursive Orientation Toward Identity</center>

The concept of performativity has a rich history in the field of communication, theorized initially by J. L. Austin as speech acts or utterances by which subjects bring into being the conditions they name.[101] Austin's central example of a performative utterance is the pronouncement of marriage, where uttering "I do" under particular conditions is bound up with the action of marrying. Performativity thus illuminates the integral relationship between speech and action, where *saying* is bound up with *doing* (and vice versa). As an extension of Austin's speech act theory, Judith Butler reconceptualized performativity as a framework for describing the on-going, everyday process of subject and identity formation whereby individuals are called—interpellated—into occupying subject positions (e.g. womanhood, whiteness, American-ness, etc.) and are compelled to continuously (re)cite the norms and expectations of those

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[100] DeLuca, "Articulation Theory," 334–348.
[101] J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 6–7.

subjectivities to maintain social intelligibility (or recognizability).[102] For Butler, in other words,

performativity is not reducible to a cause/effect relationship between individual speech acts and

resultant conditions but is understood rather as a complex, ongoing, everyday process of

compulsory citation and reiteration.[103]

In developing a poststructuralist conceptualization of performativity, Butler directly

extends Foucault's theorization of power as simultaneously productive and restrictive by

illuminating how power works through discourse to construct sex and gender categories, assign

them to particular bodies, and then use those designations to construct rules around what

differently sexed and gendered subjects can and cannot say and do.[104] Rejecting the common-

sense assumption that sex and gender designations are prescribed by already-given material,

anatomical characteristics, Butler argued:

> Materiality' designates a certain effect of power or, rather, *is* power in its formative or
> constituting effects. Insofar as power operates successfully by constituting an object
> domain, a field of intelligibility, as a taken-for-grated ontology, its material effects are
> taken as material data or primary givens. These material positivities appear *outside*
> discourse and power, as its incontestable referents, its transcendental signifieds. But this
> appearance is precisely the moment in which the power/discourse regime is most fully
> dissimulated and most insidiously effective. …in accepting this constituted effect as a
> primary given, successfully buries and masks the genealogy of power relations by which
> it is constituted.[105]

In other words, what we consider to be "material reality" is meaningless outside of

discursive construction of meaning for that reality—yet, the presumption that there *is* a

materiality outside of discourse lends significant power to what is presumed to be "natural" or

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[102] Butler's work with the theory of performativity has been developed over several published works—I draw my understanding primarily from *Bodies that Matter.*

[103] Gender, for example, is performatively assigned through a professional proclamation (e.g. a doctor uttering "it's a girl," but the norms and expectations of a particular gender identity must be continuously recited throughout a person's life in order to maintain intelligibility.

[104] Foucault, *History of Sexuality.*

[105] Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* 35.

pre-given. Butler applied this perspective to sex and gender, where common-sense assumptions presume that babies are born either male or female, are labeled as such according to clear, material, anatomical characteristics, and are then socialized into appropriate gender roles based on their natural, biological sex. Within this frame, the presumption that biological sex is natural and pre-given is what gives hegemonic gender roles a sense of normative authority—males *should* be socialized into a particular formation of masculinity because they have natural tendencies toward leadership, rationality, aggression, etc.

In contrast, a performative perspective clarifies that both sex and gender are discursive constructions that are deployed to organize possibilities for human social life in ways that uphold an ideology of heteronormativity. From within this framework, a doctor's proclamation of a child's sex (e.g. "It's a boy!") is understood as the articulation of particular norms (e.g. penis = boy, absence of penis = girl) that interpellate the child into a sexed identity which then becomes the basis of a set of gendered norms and expectations that will continue to be imposed across the child's lifetime. In other words, a child proclaimed "boy" at birth will be socialized *as* a boy and will be compelled to perform the norms and expectations of boy-ness (e.g. leadership, rationality, aggression) to maintain gendered intelligibility and to avoid being labeled as abject or deviant. Of course—as with the arbitrariness yet sedimentation of articulations—there is no necessary relationship between the appearance of a penis (or a Y chromosome) and any particular personality traits or life choices, and yet human social life is organized around these sexed and gendered assumptions such that they become *expected* and therefore *compulsory*. A performative perspective thereby illuminates links between discourse and materiality by revealing how power-laden discourse constructs particular meanings and ways of being-in-the-world for particular bodies, naturalizes those meanings and ways of being-in-the-world into a set of compulsory

norms and expectations, and then compels individuals to recite those norms and expectations in

order to identify and act as (sexed, gendered, racialized, etc.) subjects within a field of

intelligible possibilities.

Extending Butler's arguments about how performativity constructs and organizes

gendered bodies, other scholars have mobilized a performative perspective to demonstrate how

individuals become racialized subjects via interpellation into and (re)citation of racialized norms

and expectations.[106] Normative discourses naturalizing race as marked on the skin and coded in

the blood interpellate bodies into racialized subjectivities, and subjects are then enabled and

constrained by corresponding norms and expectations around how differently racialized groups

should be positioned and treated within a society. Put differently, physical characteristics are

articulated to racial identities, which are then articulated to bodies, which are then articulated to a

normative set of possibilities and expectations. Yet, as Foucault made clear, where there is

power, there are possibilities for resistance to—but not escape from—the norms and expectations

by which we are constrained (and enabled).[107]

Extending a Foucauldian perspective on resistance, Butler locates agency to resist in

performative processes of the discursive recitation of normative expectations. Because

recitations of normative expectations are always already imperfect and incomplete

approximations, it is possible to strategically exploit these imperfections to "do" identities

differently.[108] In this way, subjects can work within and against the subject positions into which

they have been interpellated to resist normative formations of power. Some scholars have

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[106] Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles Against Subjection* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); Kelly E. Happe, *The Material Gene: Gender, Race, and Heredity After the Human Genome Project* (New York University Press, 2013).
[107] Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* 93–96*;* McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 100.
[108] Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* 15.

suggested possibilities for how subjects might disrupt and destabilize racial identities by reflecting critically on their subject positions and seeking to develop a new embodied reality—to "do" race differently by violating normative expectations.[109] "For white subjects," Nadine Ehlers argues, "this kind of work might mean crafting an embodied reality that is actively conscious of racial contingency, and engaging in practices that destabilize the supposed 'fixedness' of the category of whiteness."[110] Scholarship on performative resistance demonstrates that although we cannot escape the racial identities into which we are performatively interpellated, we can disrupt and destabilize normative ideas and ideals about race that have constructed whiteness as a privileged center against which racialized bodies have been constructed as abject and positioned on the margins.

Possibilities of performative resistance suggest that white subjects can rearticulate whiteness in ways that disrupt its privileged invisibility by working within and against the normative expectations associated with "being white." "Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counter identification, utopianism)," José Muñoz argues, "this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance."[111] Yet, existing scholarship has not yet explored the possibilities and limitations of engaging in performative resistance from privileged subject positions.

An underlying goal of the present project, then, is to illuminate possibilities and limitations of resisting whiteness from within. Approaching resistance from a performative

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[109] Nadine Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives;* José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[110] Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives,* 137.
[111] Muñoz, *Disidentifications,* 11–12.

perspective reveals how everyday acts of transgression can re-work dominant subjectivities by exploiting imperfections in identity (re)citation. In other words, although performativity constrains the possibilities for racial identity by constructing norms of intelligibility, performativity is also the vehicle through which the subversion of these norms is made possible. Unpacking engagements with resistance to normative whiteness from positions of racial privilege can therefore reveal how racially privileged subjects can work within and against the norms of the racial identities into which they have been interpellated.

<div align="center">Critical Affect Studies: Discourse, Power, & Feeling</div>

Whereas a performative perspective illuminates how bodies are interpellated into and come to (dis)identify with normative or abject subject positions through continuous citation and reiteration of norms, a critical perspective on affect is useful for uncovering how meaning and value "stick to" and "slip from" (or become articulated to/disarticulated from) performatively constructed subject positions, shaping what it means and how it feels to be a particular kind of subject in a particular context.[112] A critical perspective on affect helps to illuminate what Raymond Williams termed "structures of feeling," where cultural norms and expectations are articulated to bodies and act in ways that structure embodied experiences, including emotions and feelings, of subjects differently positioned within a particular sociocultural landscape.[113]

"Affect" is generally understood as a concept that is related-to-but-not-the-same-as emotion—and, of course, rhetoricians have been interested in emotion from at least the time of Plato and Aristotle. Scholarship theorizing and applying the concept of affect has exploded since the 1990s, when a widespread interdisciplinary turn to affect was compelled by discontent with

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[112] See Ahmed, "Affective Economies"; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[113] See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

the tendency of some poststructuralist and deconstructionist scholarship to elide the relationship

among the materiality, the body, and identity.[114] Importantly, women of color feminists such as

bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and others had been producing

"theories of the flesh" and affirming that lived, felt, embodied experiences *matter* to our

scholarship many years prior to the "affective turn," but their work is often erased from affect

studies scholarship in favor of citations to high theory produced by white philosophers and white

affect studies scholars.[115] I want to resist that tendency even as I engage the work of some

scholars who have exacerbated it.[116] Together, contemporary proliferations and contestations of

affect theory have produced a diverse and divergent range of understandings of "affect," and so it

is important for contemporary scholarship taking up this concept to be clear about how affect is

(and is not) being conceptualized in the context of a particular project.[117]

  In this project, I am working within a strand of affect theory loosely known as "critical

affect studies."[118] Critical affect studies scholarship offers an alternative to the tendency of some

affect studies scholarship to conceptualize affect outside of structures of power, in optimistic

iterations that emphasize its free-floating nature, transcendental capacities, and extra-discursivity

and tend to invoke and/or produce high theory in ways that threaten accessibility and eschew

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[114] See Patricia T. Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 25, no. 1 (2008): 1–22.

[115] Claudia Garcia-Rojas, "(Un)Disciplined Futures: Women of Color Feminism as a Disruptive to White Affect Studies," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (2016): 1–18.

[116] For me, this resistance is a performative process of reflexivity and a politics of citationality—reflexivity as implicit and explicit awareness of the whiteness of traditional affect studies, and a politics of citationality that situates the work of women of color feminists alongside the work of (mostly white) affect studies scholars and underscores the contributions of scholars of color.

[117] For a relatively diverse compilation perspectives on affect, See Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[118] as termed by Rice, "The New New."

practical applicability.[119] In contrast, a critical perspective on affect affirms that although affect may well be pre-discursive or extra-discursive and might indeed have no necessary relationship to any particular power structure or material condition, investigations of how affect *becomes* articulated to power and how affect-laden power mobilizes through discourse are necessary to understand the role of affect (and emotion) in constructing, maintaining, resisting, and transforming oppressive power relations and manifestations. So, it is not so much that critical affect studies "opposes" other strands of affect theory—rather, critical affect studies takes up affect within the context of historically embedded structures of power, emphasizing critique before (and as a necessary prerequisite to) transformation. The differences here are a matter of focus and emphasis—and the focus and emphasis of critical affect studies on articulations of affect/power/identity/the body provide a productive foundation for rhetorical scholarship that seeks to track the discursive manifestations and mobilizations of these articulations.

I am fond of Christian Lundberg's conceptualization of affect as "the set of forces, investments, logics, relations, and practices of subjectivization that are the conditions of possibility for emotion."[120] This definition helps to clarify the relationship between affect and emotion, where emotion is understood as the subjectively felt states that are made possible by the circulation of affect through public collectivities. Critical affect studies scholars have argued that affect circulates within *affective economies*, which are constituted by the repetitive flow of signs and objects that become articulated to values as they move in, with, and through one another, sticking together and slipping apart to construct contingent relationships among signs and

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[119] Brian Massumi is perhaps the most prolific affect theorist whose work is subject to this critique. See also Hemmings, "Invoking Affect," which echoes this critique.

[120] Christian Lundberg, "Enjoying God's Death: *The Passion of the Christ* and the Practices of an Evangelical Public," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 4 (2009): 390.

objects, discourses and bodies.[121] In this framing, discourse articulates identities and value to

bodies through the circulation of value-laden symbols, objects, emotions, and energies. The

concept of an affective economy helps clarify that identities and affect are not located *within*

bodies or discourse, but emerge relationally through their circulation among and contact with the

symbolic and material, ascribing meaning and value to performatively constructed subject

positions.

Within affective economies, affect can be traced through discursive manifestations of

feelings and emotions. Affect circulates through public discourse in ways that repeatedly

underscore particular associations among bodies, objects, values, and feelings and, in the

process, participates in the constraining and enabling function of discourses of power, where

certain ways of being, knowing, doing, and *feeling* are opened up and others are foreclosed. And,

in this way, there is a clear performative dimension to affect. As Catherine Chaput explained,

"Affective energy precedes our conscious decisions, cajoling us into habituated movements that

are valorized through repetition."[122] And so, affect can be traced through its performative

articulations, or the ways that normative and abject subject positions are constructed through

performative processes of citation and reiteration, which then become sticky with value and

affect as they circulate through discourse and attach to bodies.

From a critical affect studies perspective, racial identity is both a performative

articulation and an affective orientation—it is a symbolic, material, *felt, and embodied* process of

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[121] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*; Catherine Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010): 1–25.

[122] Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation," 15.

being, knowing, and acting in the world and with its inhabitants.[123] And, if the crux of

performative agency is the disruption of the cycle of citation and reiteration *and* these

performative processes circulate within affective economies, then performative resistance

through disidentification also involves an affective dimension. In this way, as Jenny Rice has

argued, critical inquiries into the relationship among affect, discourse, and power can mobilize "a

process of disarticulation, or an unsticking of those figures that seem to be glued together,

followed by a rearticulation, or a new way of linking together images and representations that is

less oppressive."[124] For the present project, which seeks to illuminate how whiteness is

(re)articulated in contemporary public discourse and takes particular interest in how those

(re)articulations enable and constrain white antiracist praxis (essentially, white resistance to

racism), it is important to understand what affective energies and attachments participate in the

construction of normative whiteness as well as how affect circulates through attempts to resist

normative whiteness.

Contemporary rhetoricians have affirmed the utility of affect theories for grappling with

the energies that circulate through discourse to articulate bodies and objects to senses, feelings,

and emotions.[125] And, when grounded clearly in an understanding of how power functions

through discourse to enable and constrain ways of being, knowing, and doing, affect theories can

take on a decidedly critical inflection, helping to reveal how power is articulated to bodies and

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[123] Henry A. Giroux, "Racial Politics and the Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York University Press, 1997), 294. See also Cheryl E. Matias, *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016).
[124] Rice, "The New 'New,'" 210.
[125] See Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation"; Cisneros, "Looking 'Illegal'"; David R. Gruber, "The (Digital) Majesty of All Under Heaven: Affective Constitutive Rhetoric at the Hong Kong Museum of History's Multi-Media Exhibition of Terracotta Warriors," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2014): 148–167; Hemmings, "Invoking Affect"; Lundberg, "Enjoying God's Death"; Rice, "The New 'New.'"

feelings through discourse.[126] Critical education scholars have begun to illuminate the utility of

critical affect studies for critical studies of whiteness by revealing how embodied emotional

experiences enable and constrain white students' ability to engage productively with complex

critical theories of race and whiteness, but these studies tend to leave the rhetorical mechanisms

of these processes uninterrogated.[127] As such, a rhetorical perspective informed by critical

theories of affect will be valuable in speaking to how discourses of power mobilize affective

energies to interpellate white folks into particular types of (de)racialized subject positions and

attachments and, in so doing, to orient them toward racialized issues and bodies in particular

ways. And, further, such a perspective can illuminate how affective energies might be harnessed

through oppositional discourses to (re)articulate whiteness in ways that encourage productive

forms of resistance to normative whiteness and facilitate antiracist reorientations. An underlying

goal of this project, then, is to contribute to understandings of the relationship among affect,

discourse, and race by illuminating how normative and resistant affects are articulated to

whiteness and mobilized through discourse in ways that enable and constrain formations of

resistance in public discourse.

<div align="center">On Artifact Selection</div>

A critical rhetorical perspective informed by interdisciplinary perspectives on

articulation, performativity, and affect guides the overarching theoretical and methodological

orientation I bring to this project. The three-part trajectory of my analysis spanning white

nationalist, alt-right, and anti-racist rearticulations of white racial consciousness required

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[126] See Rice, "The New 'New.'"

[127] See Matias, "Feeling White"; Michalinos Zembylas, "Rethinking Race and Racism as Technologies of Affect: Theorizing the Implications for Anti-Racist Politics and Practice in Education," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 18, no. 2 (2015): 145–162; Zeus Leonardo and Michalinos Zembylas, "Whiteness as Technology of Affect: Implications for Educational Praxis," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 46, no. 1 (2013): 150–165.

engagement with three overarching groups of artifacts that demonstrate how racially privileged

subjects are grappling directly with explicit discourse on race, each of which emerged in the

context/against the backdrop of post-2012 movements for racial justice.

In a move foundational to contemporary rhetorical studies, Michael Calvin McGee

argued that discourse, like culture, is fragmented, and any particular text that appears "finished"

must be considered in relation to its larger cultural context.[128] Because of the fundamental

fragmentation of discourse and the ways that texts are made meaningful through their

relationship to culture and context, critics must "*[invent] a text suitable for criticism*" before

rhetorical analysis is possible.[129] Working from a recognition of the fragmentation of discourse

and the significance of culture and context, I have approached the process of text selection for

this dissertation by compiling an archive of discourse on the formations of white racial

consciousness considered in each chapter.

For both practical and theoretical purposes, I relied on the Internet to find and collect

discursive fragments each of my analysis chapters. Practically speaking, the Internet provides

open access to a wide range of discursive fragments, both for scholarly research and public

consumption. Whereas a differently oriented project on direct discourse on race and racism

mobilized by white U.S. Americans in post-2012 contexts might have engaged in participant

observation, interviews, or other useful field methods, I am most interested in compiling and

analyzing discourses that are easily and widely accessible to a majority of mainstream white U.S.

Americans. By providing both space for interactive direct discourse on race (e.g. social media)

and access to direct discourse on race mobilized in offline contexts (e.g. videos and transcripts of

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[128] Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54, (1990): 274–289.
[129] Ibid., 288.

speeches, news reports), the Internet is an accessible platform for a range of discursive

formations of race and racism.

There is a great deal of rhetorical scholarship exploring the ways that the advent of the

Internet and, later, of social media has impacted contemporary public discourse. In general, this

scholarship has demonstrated that the Internet provides a way to communicate rapidly across

geographic borders, networking what used to be smaller, local communities together in a

globalized electronic public sphere.[130] In particular, participatory social media provides a

platform for organizing networked counterpublics and mobilizing resistance online and off.[131] As

Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street,[132] and other contemporary social justice movements, the Black

Lives Matter movement was organized largely on social media, and even as these movements

evolved into organized offline demonstrations, social media continued contribute to their energy

and growth.[133] In a different vein, scholars have revealed that pro-white groups such as the Ku

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[130] See Barbara Warnick and David S. Heineman, *Rhetoric Online: The Politics of New Media*
[2nd ed.] (New York: Peter Lang, 2012); James P. Zappen, "Digital Rhetoric: Toward an
Integrated Theory," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (2005): 319–325; Joshua
Reeves, "Temptation and its Discontents: Digital Rhetoric, Flow, and the Possible," *Rhetoric
Review* 32, no. 3 (2013): 314–330; Laurie Gries, *Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist
Approach for Visual Rhetorics* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2015).
[131] See Florian Toepfl and Eunike Piwoni, "Public Spheres in Interaction: Comment Sections of
News Websites as Counterpublic Spaces," *Journal of Communication* 65, (2015): 465–488;
Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles, "Hijacking #myNYPD: Social Media Dissent and
Networked Counterpublics," *Journal of Communication* 65 (2015): 932–952; Sophie Sills,
Chelsea Pickens, Karishma Beach, Lloyd Jones, Octavia Calder-Dawe, Paulette Benton-Greig, &
Nicola Gavey, "Rape Culture and Social Media: Young Critics and a Feminist Counterpublic,"
Feminist Media Studies 16, no. 6 (2016): 935–951.
[132] Joel Penney and Caroline Dadas, "(Re)Tweeting in the Service of Protest: Digital
Composition and Circulation in the Occupy Wall Street Movement," *New Media & Society* 16,
no. 1 (2014): 74–90.
[133] Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *ProudFlesh*, no. 10 (2014):
103–104, http://www.africaknowledgeproject.org/index.php/proudflesh/article/view/2150; Sarah
J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles, "#Ferguson is Everywhere: Initiators in Emerging
Counterpublic Networks," *Information, Communication, & Society* 19, no. 3 (2016): 397–418;

Klux Klan have also harnessed the power of the Internet to form online, often anonymous

communities as their explicit presence in the mainstream offline public sphere has—at least until

relatively recently—been suppressed.[134]

I focus on direct discourse on race unfolding or available on the Internet, then, precisely

because online participatory social media platforms have been so influential in shaping and

sustaining contemporary public discourse on social justice issues, including racial (in)justice.

Because each chapter considers a different discursive formation of white racial consciousness, I

discuss the selection of sites and artifacts within those chapters and, in those discussions, point to

how I made particular decisions about what to include in and exclude from my analysis.

Catherine L. Langford and Montené Speight, "#BlackLivesMatter: Epistemic Positioning, Challenges, and Possibilities," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5, no. 3/4 (2015): 83.
[134] See Christopher Brown, "WWW.HATE.COM: White Supremacist Discourse on the Internet and the Construction of Whiteness Ideology," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 20 (2009): 189–208; Denise M. Bostdorff, "The Internet Rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan A Case Study in Web Site Community Building Run Amok," *Communication Studies* 55, no. 2, (2004): 340–361; Pete Simi and Robert Futrell, "Cyberculture and the Endurance of White Power Activism," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 34, no. 1, (2006): 115–142; Jessie Daniels, *Cyberracism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2009); Kenneth S. Stern, "Hate and the Internet," *Journal of Hate Studies* 1, no. 1, (2001): 57–99.

CHAPTER 3
Interrogating Critical Race & Whiteness Scholarship: A Literature Review

Once upon a time, academics believed race to be a natural, innate trait among humans. Prior to World War I, race was widely understood as a phenotypically observable biological characteristic encoded immutably in genetics in ways that had direct and significant impacts on human aptitude and ability.[135] Early scientific understandings of race worked largely from rough observation, where scientists worked from perspectives informed by ancient philosophy and religious ideology as they attempted to categorize groups of humans based on a number of arbitrary physical characteristics and articulated these groups to an imagined set of intellectual, moral, and behavioral qualities.[136] In this way, early scientific understandings of race played an essential role in categorizing and organizing humans into a hierarchy of abilities, aptitudes, and value—characteristics that were used to rationalize white supremacy and justify genocide, enslavement, and other extreme forms of violence against groups that were deemed racially inferior.[137]

Between the first and second World Wars, however, scientific opinion shifted dramatically away from an understanding of race-as-biological, as researchers increasingly discovered inconsistencies and contradictions in leading scientific theories of race and cultural and environmental theories of human difference began to emerge.[138] During this time, the essence of race was called into question and the faulty and ideologically imbued foundations

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[135] Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–11.

[136] John P. Jackson, Jr. and Nadine M. Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 1–24.

[137] Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550–1812* [2nd ed.] (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 482–511.

[138] Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism,* 1–11.

upon which biological explanations of race had been constructed began to be revealed.[139] The

incredible evils of Nazi Germany's promotion of "Aryan racial purity" through eugenics and the

genocide of Jews, Gypsies, and other groups illustrated the abhorrent implications of biological

views of racial superiority and inferiority and, by the end of World War II, most scientists

vehemently rejected biological understandings of race.[140]

Evolving scientific opinion and a shifting social climate paved way for diverse

perspectives on race to emerge and take shape, producing an ever-growing and increasingly

interdisciplinary array of scholarship on race. With the exception of a small group of studies

conducted by neoconservative scholars,[141] contemporary interdisciplinary research from

biological science, social science, and the humanities has consistently demonstrated that race is a

socio-historical construction and *not* an essential, biological reality. Nonetheless, as the first two

analysis chapters of this dissertation will demonstrate, scientific and philosophical writings by

neoconservative scholars attempting to affirm the biological or essential reality of race remain

influential among proponents of various contemporary pro-white movements. And, of course, the

retreat of scientific theories of race did not result in the dismantling of the racial hierarchies these

theories helped to construct—instead, racial differences were reasoned through cultural theories

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[139] Leonard Lieberman, Blaine W. Stevenson, and Larry T. Reynolds, "Race and Anthropology: A Core Concept Without Consensus," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1989): 67–73; Patricia Mccann-Mortimer, Martha Augoustinos, and Amanda Lecouteur, "'Race' and the Human Genome Project: Constructions of Scientific Legitimacy," *Discourse & Society* 15, no. 4 (2004): 409–432; Richard Cooper and Richard David, "The Biological Concept of Race and its Application to Public Health and Epidemiology," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 11, no. 1 (1986): 97–116; Troy Duster, "Race and Reification in Science," *Science* 307, no. 5712 (2005): 1050.
[140] Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism*; Jackson, Jr. and Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science.*
[141] For example, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, (New York: Free Press, 1994).

and common sense arguments in ways that continued to uphold assumptions of white superiority.[142]

In the mid-1970s, critical race theory emerged from critical legal studies as a theoretical framework for investigating historical and contemporary formations of race, uncovering relationships among race, racism, and power, and exposing systemic and structural forms of state-sanctioned racial inequalities and violence.[143] Building on this foundation, interdisciplinary scholars studying race from critical perspectives have theorized race as a social phenomenon continuously (re)constructed through complex, power-laden interactions of social structures and symbolic representations.[144] From a critical race studies perspective, in other words, race is both a social construction and a material reality—race is real precisely because it is treated and experienced as such, but it is a product of power rather than a naturally occurring biological trait. As such, it is impossible to understand what race "is" without understanding how race has been constructed in ways that have made it *appear* natural as it is mobilized to divide and (de)value in ways that serve the interests of dominant systems of power.

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[142] Jackson, Jr. and Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science,* 130–159.

[143] Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* [2nd ed.] (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 4.

[144] See Alan Hyde, *Bodies of Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 222–240; Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* [3rd ed.] (New York: Verso, 2007); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* [3rd ed.] (New York: Routledge, 2015); Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Race and Racialization: Essential Readings,* eds. Tania Das Gupta, Carl E. James, Roger C. A. Maaka, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, and Chris Andersen (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2007), 56–60.

Today, scholarship grounded in critical race theory proliferates across disciplines and

has, since at least the 1990s, had an increasingly robust presence in the field of rhetoric.[145]

Below, I point to arguments and concepts from critical race theory and critical race rhetorics that

most significantly inform the perspective on race that informs my work with this project. I turn

first to a discussion of the construction of race, focusing on perspectives that underscore the

interplay of discourse and power in the ongoing process of making race and making race real.

Then, I move to a discussion of existing scholarship that has interrogated whiteness before

concluding by addressing the gaps in existing research that this dissertation will fill.

Racial Formation: Making Race, Real

When studied historically within the context of European settler-colonialism and the

formation of the U.S. nation-state, the emergence of race as a meaningful concept and identity

has been tied to the developing social structures of modernity[146] and capitalism.[147] These

historical inquiries have demonstrated European colonization was enabled by appeals to religious

doctrine, where Biblical texts were used to articulate the concept of race to skin color and an

ideology promoting the superiority of white-skinned peoples became naturalized through divine

ordinance.[148] As critical historians have demonstrated, this ideology was mobilized in the

Americas to rationalize the extermination of indigenous populations, the enslavement of Africans

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[145] Lisa A. Flores, "Between Abundance and Marginalization: The Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism," *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 4–24.

[146] See George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[147] See W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013 [originally published in 1935]); Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181, (1990): 95–118; Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness.*

[148] Jackson, Jr. and Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science.*

and African-Americans, and the development of modernist, capitalist frameworks built on the presumption of white supremacy and manifest destiny.[149]

Religious arguments for white superiority helped to lay a foundation for early scientific understandings of race, which helped to sediment a common-sense understanding of race as innate and biological. As noted above, scientific arguments for white superiority dominated U.S. American perspectives on race until World War II, when significant attention was drawn to the horrific racism of Hitler's Nazi Germany, prompting increased reflection on and criticism of the persistence of racism in the United States.[150] These WWII-era discourses mobilized a major paradigm shift in U.S. American conceptualizations of race and opened space for social constructionist perspectives to emerge.

Building on the work of early critical race scholars, Michael Omi and Howard Winant proposed a theory of racial formation to make sense of the shifting ways that race has been conceptualized throughout U.S. American history.[151] Contemporary disagreements over the meaning and social significance of race, the authors argued, stemmed from tensions between the now-widely-accepted recognition that race is socially constructed on the one hand and the need to account for how a socially constructed concept can have such significant material dimensions and implications on the other.

Within this framework, *race* is understood as "a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies."[152] From this perspective, race is conceptualized as a discursive process of classification that always already includes a material dimension—the physical appearance of human bodies. The process of

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[149] Mills, *The Racial Contract*; Jordan, *White Over Black.*
[150] Jackson, Jr. and Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science.*
[151] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation.*
[152] Ibid., 110.

"making race" is what Omi and Winant refer to as *racial formation*—"the sociohistorical process by which [race and] racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed."[153] Here, *formation* acts as a verb, signaling the making of race as a *process* rather than a *product,* again emphasizing its fundamental instability. The *formations* of whiteness considered in this project can thus be considered through this framework as ongoing processes of (re)making whiteness.

Within the framework of racial formation, the concepts of *racialization* and *racial projects* more fully account for how race manifests in everyday life. *Racialization* refers to "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group."[154] The fact that human bodies present with different skin tones, facial features, body types, etc. has long driven the popular assumption that race is a biological fact. Yet, as the concept of racialization demonstrates, the grouping of bodies with particular phenotypic characteristics into racial groups is a fundamentally discursive process—the process of racialization has historically been mobilized through discourse to construct differences among groups of people in ways that unevenly distribute power and access to rights and resources. *This* process—of interpreting, representing, and/or explaining race and racial identities in such a way that facilitates the organizing and distributing political, economic, and cultural resources along particular racial lines—is what Omi and Winant call *racial projects*. The study of *racial projects* provides insight into how social constructions of race become materially significant by demonstrating how social and political structures are organized according to dominant racial meanings and providing a framework for pointing to specific, particular instantiations of these processes at work.

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[153] Ibid., 109.
[154] Ibid., 111.

In contemporary contexts, the dominant racial project of colorblindness has come into tension with anti-racist and differently-racist racial projects, resulting in a crisis of meaning around race. This dissertation grapples with tensions among these racial projects by investigating how racially privileged people discursively (re)form whiteness in the context in which racially conscious discourse and movements for racial justice are actively challenging the race-evasive discourse that characterizes the colorblind racial project. I turn now to a discussion of existing scholarship focused on whiteness and racial privilege.

<div align="center">Critical Studies of Whiteness</div>

To understand contemporary formations of race and racism and their relationship to discourses on race throughout history, many scholars across a wide range of disciplines have turned to critical studies of whiteness. Critical whiteness studies emerged as an institutionally recognized area of academic inquiry in the 1990s, although scholars of color have been producing sustained critical inquiries into whiteness since at least the beginning of the 20th century.[155] This ever-growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on whiteness has helped to illuminate how power is mobilized through discourse to construct and position subjects within a racialized framework characterized by systemic racism that has, throughout history and into the present, positioned those (de)racialized as "white" in positions of social and material privilege while exploiting the bodies and cultures of other racialized groups.

Critical studies of whiteness have produced a range of conceptualizations of whiteness and white identity, some of which will be explored and interrogated below. In general, it is important to understand distinctions and connections between *whiteness* and white racial identity. As noted previously, this project conceptualizes whiteness as an interlocking set of

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[155] See DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America.*

"locations, discourses, and material relations. …that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination."[156] White racial identity, in contrast, refers to a subject position that white-skinned individuals are interpellated into. In other words, *white* is a racial identity constructed through processes of racial formation, while *whiteness* is a manifestation of processes of racialization—it functions through discourses of power to assign social meaning to relationships, social practices, groups, etc.

Both a white racial identity and whiteness as a process of racialization are constructed according to the organizational schema of dominant racial project(s)—in U.S. American society, dominant racial projects have, throughout history, been organized to privilege white people and whiteness.[157] So, whiteness and white identity are clearly connected in that whiteness structures the norms, expectations, and experiences of white people in particularly significant ways—there would be no white racial identity without whiteness. Here, however, analytic separation is important to avoid making individual (white) people the targets of inquiries and critiques more productively aimed at discourses and systems of power (whiteness).

Interdisciplinary critical whiteness scholarship can be divided into two overarching groups: historical genealogies of whiteness and inquiries into contemporary formations of whiteness.[158] Although both strands of scholarship are still being taken up today, historical inquiries into the construction of whiteness were more common in earlier critical inquiries into whiteness. This body of scholarship focused primarily on the social construction of race and

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[156] Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters,* 6.

[157] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation.*

[158] Mike Hill, "Introduction: Vibers in Shangri-la: Whiteness, Writing, and Other Ordinary Terrors," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 1–20.

whiteness during the colonization and settlement of what is now the United States. I discuss key

findings of these studies below, demonstrating how historical genealogies of whiteness have set

an important foundation for more contemporary critical studies of U.S. American whiteness,

which tend to focus on how whiteness functions as an invisible or coded norm in post-Jim Crow

contexts.

Historical Genealogies of Whiteness

Historical genealogies of whiteness have uncovered and problematized the construction

and evolution of white racial identity. This scholarship has demonstrated that whiteness is a

relatively recent social construction, emerging in the American colonies as a way to differentiate

European wage laborers and indentured servants from enslaved African laborers.[159] This

demarcation made on the crude basis of skin color and ethnic origin helped to construct a

capitalist economy that exploited a wide ranger of laborers by affording social privileges to poor

white wage workers who might otherwise lack material privilege but could now receive the

"psychological wages" of presumed racial superiority.[160] In other words, whereas the

presumption that Africans were exploited and enslaved *because* of pre-existing understandings

of racial superiority and inferiority is common, historians have demonstrated that slavery pre-

dates the concept of race.[161] Thus, whiteness and blackness were constructed *in opposition to one*

another for the expressed purpose of constructing a hierarchy of humans and justifying the

enslavement and exploitation of Africans and, later, African Americans.

Through this oppositional construction of whiteness/blackness, emerging possibilities for

solidarity between poor white wage workers and black slave laborers (and, eventually, black

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[159] Jordan, *White Over Black.*
[160] DuBois (1935) *Black Reconstruction;* Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness.*
[161] Jordan, *White Over Black.*

wage workers) was quelled as poor whites exercised their privileges—dependent on black

inferiority—to access social capital. Cheryl Harris has extended this argument by revealing ways

in which whiteness was constructed *as* property and through property ownership, such that

individuals could "own" whiteness to the extent that they were recognized as owners or potential

owners of private property.[162] Indeed, historical constructions of white superiority and black

inferiority were coded into the very formation of the United States through the 3/5ths clause in

the Constitution, which regarded black people *as* property and mandated that only white people

(then, white men) could be considered whole humans and full citizens.

The ideological assumption of white superiority and black inferiority was engrained in

early scientific discourse, as various "races" were identified, studied, and described in ways that

constructed "whites" as superior to all other races (and "blacks" as *most* inferior).[163] Discourses

of white superiority were further sedimented by the mobilization of racialized Christian rhetoric,

which invoked the curse of Ham to rationalize slavery and justified worldwide European

colonization and westward expansion of the United States under the doctrine of manifest

destiny.[164] By appealing to racialized science on the one hand and religion on the other, claims to

white superiority attained a widespread air of legitimacy even as slavery was abolished and calls

for equal treatment under the law gained traction.

Historical genealogies of whiteness further demonstrate that as the United States

continued to grow and new groups of immigrants arrived, the boundaries of whiteness

constricted and expanded to initially exclude and eventually include some groups (e.g. Irish-

Americans and Italians-Americans) while continuously re-constructing those boundaries to

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[162] Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1710–1770.
[163] Fredrickson, *Racism;* Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation.*
[164] Jackson, Jr. and Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science.*

exclude others (e.g. Chinese-Americans and Indian-Americans).[165] This scholarship suggests that, throughout U.S. American history, the boundaries of whiteness have been demarcated in ways that uphold the interests of capitalism and maintain the perception of white superiority. In turn, the ways in which whiteness has been (re)constructed throughout history have directly shaped who is perceived to "belong"—both legally and socially—and whose presence within the borders of the U.S. nation-state should be treated with great suspicion.

In sum, historical genealogies of whiteness have exposed how discursive power has been articulated to material—especially economic—interests to construct a privileged "white race" and has helped to make whiteness a site of critique by revealing the calculated, purposeful practices through which racialized discourses of power function as simultaneously productive and restrictive. This research demonstrates that throughout history, the extension of legal rights and social and material privileges have *always* been articulated to the on-going production of whiteness, even as criteria for determining who should be considered white has remained in flux. And, further, this scholarship suggests that the privileges associated with whiteness have been directly articulated to the marginalization of Otherness—especially blackness—in ways that have significant implications for white folks' orientations to race and the (im)possibilities of racial solidarity. Specifically, if white folks' special access to social and material privileges is dependent on *other* folks' lack of access (and it is), then moves toward equality and racial justice are perceived as losses for white U.S. Americans. White folks are thus normatively positioned to oppose racial justice and uphold white superiority and dominance—whether explicitly or implicitly—because doing so is in their own best interest.

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[165] See Ian Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York University Press, 2006); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010).

Critical Studies of Whiteness in Contemporary Formations

Critical studies of whiteness focused on contemporary contexts have revealed that, whereas whiteness maintained a status of dominance and superiority in quite explicit terms prior to 1960's-era civil rights movements, the waves of social change mobilized by these movements compelled major shifts in the ways that racialized power functions. Specifically, in the post-Jim Crow United States, whiteness has maintained a status of dominance and centrality by operating under the radar, masking itself through race-evasive discourses of normativity and universality rather than explicit claims to superiority. As I noted in the introduction, this shift to race evasive discourse is a hallmark of a colorblind racial ideology, or the belief that people should be seen (and referred to) "as individuals only, not as persons or groups whose identities or social positions have been shaped and organized by race."[166] By moving away from direct engagements with race (and, by extension, racism), a colorblind racial ideology imagines a post-racial world in which "racists are few and far between…discrimination has all but disappeared since the 1960s, and…most whites are color blind," which Bonilla-Silva referred to as the "white commonsense view on racial matters."[167] Thus, from a colorblind orientation to race, the belief that race is no longer a significant social variable is explicitly proclaimed even as racist assumptions continue to be mobilized through race-evasive language and systemic racism continues to structure social and material life along racialized lines.

Research on normative whiteness and rhetoric within contemporary contexts has helped explain how racial domination functions through "[s]ubtextual or 'coded' racial signifiers, or the

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[166] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation,* 2.
[167] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists,* 64.

mere denial of the continuing significance of race,"[168] underscoring how an ideology of white superiority has adapted to contemporary contexts of colorblindness. Accordingly, many critical studies of whiteness focused on this context have explored how whiteness operates implicitly in everyday discourses.[169] In this vein, Ian Haney López has demonstrated how politicians deploy coded references to race to appeal to white Americans in ways that compel them to vote against their own interests.[170] From these perspectives, whiteness functions as a discourse of power, maintaining its dominance through its ability to mask itself as race-neutral.

By remaining invisible, whiteness functions as the universal standard of normativity against which other racial formations are particularized and compared. Nakayama and Krizek argued that whiteness maintains a position of normative centrality by masking itself as the absence of culture and racial identity while simultaneously particularizing and problematizing other cultures. As a result, the beliefs and practices that characterize white culture are understood as norms against which all other cultural beliefs and practices are measured and judged. Carrie Crenshaw has concurred, arguing that whiteness mobilizes as rhetorical silence precisely because it is often ignored as having any relationship to a meaningful cultural or racial identity.[171] By remaining uninterrogated, normative discourses of whiteness continue to privilege white people in ways that they may neither recognize nor consent to.

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[168] Howard Winant, "The Theoretical Status of the Concept of Race," in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader,* eds. Les Back and John Solomos (New York: Routledge, 2000), 186
[169] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists;* Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, (1995): 291–309; Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (eds.), *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999).
[170] Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism & Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[171] Carrie Crenshaw, "Resisting Whiteness' Rhetorical Silence," *Western Journal of Communication* 61, no. 3 (1997): 253–278.

This foundational understanding of the normative invisibility of whiteness has informed a diverse array of critical scholarship that attempts to expose, particularize, and problematize whiteness. As such, many critical communication scholars have worked toward exposing these hidden formations of whiteness and their implications, often by focusing on how whiteness operates in mediated texts. So, for example, many scholars have explored artifacts from mainstream media or popular culture and have attempted to expose how whiteness is functioning implicitly therein.[172] Critical studies of mainstream media and popular cultural artifacts comprise the most significant body of scholarship on critical whiteness studies from within the field of communication and rhetoric, producing an array of insights into how diverse artifacts (re)produce norms of whiteness, primarily through modes of absence and invisibility.

Some communication scholars have explored white folks' processes of learning about and understanding their white racial identities. In critical intercultural communication, Dreama Moon has explored processes of racial enculturation among white students, focusing on their recollections of formative experiences with learning about race.[173] Other communication scholars have explored self-labeling strategies among white U.S. Americans.[174] In general, these studies have demonstrated that most white folks have not thought consciously about their

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[172] See Phil Chidester, "May the Circle Stay Unbroken: *Friends,* the Presence of Absence, and the Rhetorical Reinforcement of Whiteness," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 2 (2008): 157–174; Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Rachel Alicia Griffin, "Problematic Representations of Strategic Whiteness and 'Post-racial' Pedagogy: A Critical Intercultural Reading of The Help," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 8, no. 2 (2015): 147–166; Raka Shome, "Race and Popular Cinema: The Rhetorical Strategies of Whiteness in *City of Joy," Communication Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1996): 502–518.

[173] Dreama G. Moon, "'Be/coming' White and the Myth of White Ignorance: Identity Projects in White Communities," *Western Journal of Communication* 80, no. 3 (2016): 282–303.

[174] Ronald L. Jackson II, "White Space, White Privilege: Mapping Discursive Inquiry Into the Self," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, (1999): 38–54; Judith N. Martin, Robert L. Krizek, Thomas K. Nakayama, and Lisa Bradford, "What Do White People Want to be Called? A Study of Self-Labels for White America," in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity,* eds. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 27–50.

relationship to race and racism prior to being asked and, further, when white folks are asked about their relationship to these issues, their responses often signal uncertainty and reservations. These studies help to illuminate how whiteness maintains a status of privileged centrality by remaining invisible and unrecognized—white folks have been taught not to "see" their own race, which, in turn, masks the ways in which their white racial identity affords social and material privileges.

Other scholars engaged in contemporary critical studies of whiteness have focused on how white folks understand issues of race and racism, including their own racial identities. For example, Bonilla-Silva[175] and Frankenberg[176] each interviewed white people about race and have critically analyzed their interview transcripts to particularize white experiences and to draw more general conclusions about how white people tend to understand race, including their own. Like work in critical (inter)cultural communication, this research demonstrates that white folks have significant difficulty articulating their understanding of race in direct terms and even more difficulty identifying their own position in the contemporary U.S. American racial landscape. This scholarship also demonstrates that, when confronted with direct discourse on race and pressed to talk about race and racism in explicit terms, white folks often react emotionally— either with anger and frustration, such as by proclaiming that *white people* are the true victims of contemporary racial injustice, or with guilt and sadness around the recognition that they are identified with a racial group that has unfairly benefited from racial injustice.

White Fragility: Whiteness, Affect, & Direct Discourse on Race

White folks' tendency to react emotionally when confronted with direct discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege exemplifies what Robin DiAngelo has called "white fragility,"

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[175] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists.*
[176] Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters.*

where white folks—who enjoy the benefits and comfort of racial privilege without really ever having to think or talk about race—are unable to engage directly with issues of race and racism without responding defensively.[177] As DiAngelo demonstrates, white fragility is characterized by negative emotional reactions steeped in guilt, shame, and/or anger as well as the tendency for white folks to psychologically and/or physically withdraw themselves from direct discussions of race. These reactionary emotional responses tend to emerge when whites experience "an interruption to what is racially familiar"[178] which, in mainstream contemporary public contexts, is characterized by race evasive discourse and the normative assumptions of a colorblind racial ideology. Scholars have suggested that there is a gendered component to emotional reactions triggered by white discomfort around direct discourse on race, noting that white women in particular tend to cry when confronted with issues of race and racism, which deflects attention toward white women's emotions and away from the actual injuries caused by racial injustice.[179]

DiAngelo provides a long list of common ways that white folks' sense of racial familiarity is disrupted by direct encounters with race to "trigger" reactionary emotional responses, most commonly when engaging with people of color. These instances include white folks having their objectivity challenged and being told their viewpoint is racialized, engaging in a conversation where a person of color is speaking directly about their racial experiences or perspectives, feeling like people of color are disregarding white folks' feelings or experiences, being told that their own behavior has racist implications, and hearing critiques of

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[177] DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 54–70.

[178] Ibid., 57.

[179] Karen L. Dace, "What Do I Do With All of Your Tears?," in *Unlikely Allies in the Academy: Women of Color and White Women in Conversation,* ed. Karen L. Dace (New York: Routledge, 2012), 76–88; Mamta Motwani Accapadi, "When White Women Cry: How White Women's Tears Oppress Women of Color," *The College Student Affairs Journal* 26, no. 2 (2007): 208–215.

underrepresentation of other racial groups in media or in positions of power.[180] The point here is

that within a contemporary context in which a colorblind racial ideology is hegemonic, white

folks have become comfortable *not* thinking or talking or hearing about race in their everyday

lives, and when they encounter discourse that disrupts that comfort, they tend to respond

emotionally.[181]

DiAngelo points to several factors that, together, contribute to everyday white folks'

emotional fragility around engagements with direct discourse on race. These factors include the

tendency for white people to live, work, and socialize among only or mostly other white folks,

the overrepresentation and overvaluation of whiteness and white folks in media, and the

universalization of whiteness that constructs white folks as "just people" (and not as members of

a racial group) which, in turn, enables white folks to proclaim individuality while people of color

are racialized *as* a group. Cutting across these factors is the construction of racial comfort for

white U.S. Americans who, because they operate within a colorblind racial ideology and live,

work, and socialize among other white folks and see diverse representations of other white folks

in popular media, become incredibly comfortable *in* their whiteness and rarely have their

perceptions, values, or behaviors challenged for their racial implications.

Critical education scholars have explored discursive manifestations of white fragility in

pedagogical contexts that feature direct discourse on race and racism. Some have used their

experiences with teaching whiteness to explore various responses that tend to be common among

white students, ranging from denial, to guilt, to acceptance.[182] Following this focus on emotional

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[180] DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 57.

[181] Lisa M. Corrigan, "On Rhetorical Criticism, Performativity, and White Fragility," *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 87.

[182] John T. Warren and Kathy Hytten, "The Faces of Whiteness: Pitfalls and the Critical Democrat," *Communication Education* 53, no. 4 (2004): 321–339; John T. Warren, "Doing

responses to race conscious pedagogy, Cheryl Matias interrogated links between emotionality

and whiteness, revealing that emotional reactions can both constrain and enable white students'

ability to understand the complexities of race and racism.[183] Henry Giroux has further argued

that white students who are receptive to learning about racial privilege often find themselves

stuck in cycles of guilt absent the presentation of possibilities for doing whiteness differently.[184]

These studies have demonstrated that teaching students about whiteness is a complex, messy,

emotionally charged task that requires instructors to negotiate white students' fragility without

centering their feelings and further marginalizing students of color.

Critical scholarship on whiteness focused on pedagogy and education is important

because it provides unique and rare insight into how everyday white folks learn about race,

racism, and whiteness in formal, institutional contexts and affirms the role that affect and

emotion play in constraining and enabling this learning process. And, engaging in critical studies

of race within educational institutions is an important potential point of entry into anti-racist

consciousness—I first learned about "white privilege" in an undergraduate women's studies

course, and it blew my mind. Yet, as Giroux has argued, educational exposure and interrogation

of whiteness is insufficient at bringing most white students into anti-racist consciousness because

it so commonly fails to move them past the guilt that they tend to experience as they realize that

they are implicated in this system of racial privilege and oppression.[185] Although my own

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Whiteness: On the Performative Dimensions of Race in the Classroom," *Communication Education* 50, no. 2 (2001): 91–108.

[183] Cheryl E. Matias, *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016).

[184] Henry A. Giroux, "Racial Politics and the Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 294–315.

[185] Ibid.

experience learning about white privilege as an undergraduate was transformative, most of my white peers mobilized the hallmark emotional reactions of white fragility.

As a set of normative affective responses among everyday white folks, white fragility acts as a barrier to anti-racist efforts by impeding the productive possibilities of directly addressing issues of race, racism, and privilege. In other words, if white folks are unable to have a direct dialogue about race and racism without either reacting emotionally and, in the process, centering their own feelings and experiences, or shutting down completely, then white folks are unable to engage productively in anti-racist efforts and will continue to retreat to the comfortable assumption that race simply does not matter. In this way, I argue, white fragility is the normative affective economy of white racial colorblindness. Within an affective economy of white fragility, affects of comfort and familiarity are articulated to race evasive discourse and the ideological assumption that race does not matter in contemporary U.S. American society. Additionally, affects of discomfort, guilt, shame, and anger circulate with direct discourse on race and become stuck to formations of white racial consciousness. Together, the comfort articulated to racial colorblindness and the discomfort articulated to racial consciousness help to uphold a hegemonic racial order in which the systemic marginalization of communities of color and the normative privileging of white folks are rationalized through race evasive rhetoric.

Given the post-2012 proliferation of various formations of racial consciousness and direct discourse on race, additional research into how racial consciousness emerges and functions among white folks is required. There is a need for inquiries into how white folks come to understand, communicate, and *feel* about race, racism, and whiteness in everyday contexts in which racial consciousness and direct discourse on race are on the rise. Critical scholars of race and whiteness must be able to understand how competing formations of racial consciousness

attempt to negotiate the affective economy of white fragility to construct points of identification with mainstream, everyday white folks in order to discourage racist formations of white racial consciousness and promote anti-racist formations. And, white folks who are beginning to critically examine their racial privilege need to be provided with ways to productively resist that privilege in order to help them engage productively in anti-racist praxis without retreating to the comforts of colorblindness. Yet, whether there is any hope to "do whiteness differently" at all remains a contested point of inquiry.

<div align="center">New Abolitionism vs. Rearticulation: Contested Possibilities</div>

As they have worked to make sense of how whiteness has been constructed and how its normative functions of domination and oppression might be resisted, scholars engaged in critical studies of whiteness have frequently expressed a set of oppositional concerns. Some scholars have worried that critical studies of whiteness might be taken in directions that negate the necessary link between whiteness and domination, while others have worried that critical studies of whiteness might center on discourses of domination and superiority while ignoring other potential ways in which whiteness might be understood. These concerns speak to an overarching problematic within the field of critical whiteness studies centered on tensions between new abolitionist perspectives on whiteness and rearticulationist perspectives, respectively.

New Abolitionist Perspectives

Scholars advocating for "new abolitionist" perspectives on whiteness have argued that because whiteness was constructed as a system of domination and superiority and because whiteness has predominantly functioned through discourses of domination and superiority throughout U.S. American history, there is no hope for (re)constructing whiteness in positive terms and no productive possibilities for "doing whiteness differently" (where "differently" is

understood as "better").[186] Instead, these scholars argue, there must be a sustained effort to "abolish" whiteness, which involves, in part, persuading people who currently identify as white to reject that identification and to carve out new ways of identifying (as "race traitors," for example).[187]

New abolitionist perspectives on whiteness are provocative, but scholars working within this vein have largely neglected to attend to the potential complexities of whiteness (for example, at its intersections with other social identities) and have failed to provide practical advice for how white people might be persuaded to reject whiteness, how whiteness might be abolished, or what a world in which whiteness has been abolished might look like.[188] Instead, their work tends to read as utopian and reductionist. For example, prominent new abolitionists Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey argue, "The key to solving the social problems of our age is to abolish the white race. Until that task is accomplished, even partial reform will prove elusive, because white influence permeates every issue in U.S. society, whether domestic or foreign."[189] Setting aside the improbabilities of solving *all* social problems with any single-focused action, even if Ignatiev and Garvey's pronouncement were true, their work provides no practical vision for how to accomplish anything close to the *abolition* of the white race. Instead, the remainder of their edited volume is comprised of a collection of personal stories with witnessing and/or addressing instances of racial injustice and reflections on its historical and/or contemporary manifestations.

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[186] Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, "Abolish the White Race By Any Means Necessary," in *Race Traitor,* eds. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9–14; John Garvey and Noel Ignatiev, "Toward a New Abolitionism: A *Race Traitor* Manifesto," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 348–349; David Roediger, *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1994).
[187] Garvey and Ignatiev, "Toward a New Abolitionism," 348–349.
[188] Howard Winant, "Behind Blue Eyes: Contemporary White Racial Politics," in *Off White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance,* eds. Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Linda Powell Pruitt, and April Bums (New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.
[189] Ignatiev and Garvey, "Abolish the White Race," 10.

Where new abolitionist scholars do provide a direct discussion of what new abolitionism might look like in practice, their vision sounds less like *abolition* and more like resisting dominant formations of whiteness from within. For example, in another short essay on new abolitionism, Garvey and Ignatiev argue that in order to abolish whiteness, white folks would have to "break the laws of whiteness so fragrantly as to make it impossible to maintain the myth of white unanimity. Such actions would jeopardize their own ability to exercise the privileges of whiteness."[190] The authors proceed to offer a handful of suggestions for "breaking the rules of whiteness," including responding incidents of racism when witnessed, questioning one's own whiteness, and participating in the disruption of institutional reproduction of racial inequality. All good suggestions, to be sure, but following them is not likely to "abolish the white race" so much as to carve out ways of "doing whiteness differently"—which is, as it turns out, precisely what most critical rearticulationist scholarship attempts to accomplish.

In line with the portrait I am beginning to paint, analyses of new abolitionist rhetoric have argued that this orientation to race reduces whiteness to a monolith and, paradoxically, has relied on and reproduced white privilege even as they have advocated for its abolition.[191] As critical rearticulationist scholars have argued, the practice of rejecting one's whiteness in a sociopolitical context in which one continues to be read *as* white is an act of privilege in and of itself.[192] Yet, new abolitionist perspectives should not be rejected outright, as they provide a necessary reminder that it is ultimately impossible to separate whiteness from its history of domination and supremacy. An awareness of the inseparability of whiteness from domination and supremacy is

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[190] Garvey and Ignatiev, "Toward a New Abolitionism, 348–349.
[191] Dreama Moon and Lisa A. Flores, "Antiracism and the Abolition of Whiteness: Rhetorical Strategies of Domination Among 'Race Traitors'," *Communication Studies* 51, 2 (2000): 97–115.
[192] Frances E. Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

crucial to engaging in productive analyses of whiteness from critical rearticulationist perspectives.

Rearticulationist Perspectives

Rearticulationist perspectives (or, what new abolitionist scholars refer to as "preservationist perspectives"[193]) on whiteness are far more common than new abolitionist perspectives in interdisciplinary critical whiteness scholarship. Rearticulationist perspectives are relatively diverse but coalesce in their belief that whiteness can be done differently—that formations of whiteness that resist reproducing domination and superiority either exist or are possible. Scholars working from these perspectives suggest that if whiteness is to be understood as an *articulation* of "locations, discourses, and material relations. …that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced,"[194] then perhaps it is possible to imagine and/or produce a different set of relations from which whiteness can operate.[195] And, perhaps it is possible to resist whiteness from within. However, as Nakayama and Martin argue, "we must first understand how whiteness works before we can undo it."[196]

Most contemporary scholars engaged in critical studies of whiteness from rearticulationist perspectives do not deny new abolitionists' central claim that whiteness is fundamentally rooted in domination and supremacy, but rather consider whiteness's roots in domination and supremacy as the constraints that must be worked within and against if

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[193] See Noel Ignatiev, "The Politics of Studying Whiteness," in *The New Black Renaissance: The Souls Anthology of Critical African-American Studies,* ed. Manning Marable (New York: Routledge, 2016), 212–214.

[194] Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1993), 6.

[195] See Giroux, "Racial Politics," 294–315.

[196] Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin, "Introduction: Whiteness as the Communication of Social Identity," in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity,* eds. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), xiii.

rearticulations of whiteness are to be made possible. As Giroux argues, "Analyzing the historical legacy of whiteness as an oppressive racial force means that [we] must engage in a critical form of memory work while fostering less a sullen silence or paralyzing guilt and more a sense of outrage at historical oppression and a desire for racial justice in the present."[197] This foundational understanding is key to engaging in critical, reflexive, and productive rearticulationist projects— it is ultimately *impossible* to separate whiteness from its history of violence, domination, and oppression, but this inseparability does not mean that resistance to the reproduction of whiteness in this dominant formation is not urgently important.[198] In the presence of critical understandings of how whiteness is constructed and functions in its dominant formations—and critical studies of whiteness from communication and rhetorical perspectives are especially valuable for their exposure work here[199]—it becomes possible to identify potential points of resistance and imagine alternative ways of understanding and doing whiteness.

Some rearticulationist projects, however, are not explicitly grounded in a clear understanding of the rootedness of whiteness in domination and supremacy and move too quickly toward attempts to recuperate whiteness in more positive terms. In my reading of the literature, this tendency is particularly common with projects that focus on whiteness at its intersections with particular marginalized identities—especially economic marginalization. For example, in "What is 'White Trash'? Stereotypes and Economic Conditions of Poor Whites in the United States," Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray claim that "white trash" is a classist *and racist* slur and argue that the media's negative portrayal of poor whites *as* white trash is an act of

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[197] Giroux, "Racial Politics, 309.
[198] Karen Brodkin, "Whiteness: A Mixed Bag," in *The New Black Renaissance: The Souls Anthology of Critical African-American Studies,* ed. Manning Marable (New York: Routledge, 2016), 227–230; Haney López, *White By Law,* 137.
[199] See Nakayama and Martin (eds.), *Whiteness.*

racism.[200] In a particularly egregious section of this piece, the authors—both of whom are

white—draw direct parallels between "white trash" and "n*gger":

> We don't say things like *n*gger trash* precisely because 'n*gger' often implies poverty.
> Are some African Americans 'n*ggers' because they are black or because they are poor?
> There is no one answer to this one; it is difficult to distinguish between race and class
> when discussing the derogatory meanings of 'n*gger.' **In this way, *n*gger* is a term like**
> ***white trash.*[201]**

Beyond being profoundly disturbed by these white authors' uncritical use of the

uncensored form of "the N word" five times in four sentences, I find the comparison between

what is widely understood as *the* most offensive racial slur in U.S. American English and a

derogatory term for poor white folks to be entirely unwarranted. The history of material and

psychological violence waged against Black folks alongside the use of that horrible word bears

no comparison to the impacts of "white trash" on poor white folks who, to be clear, *still benefit*

from racial privilege, as demonstrated by comparative analyses of impoverished Black

neighborhoods and impoverished white neighborhoods.[202]

Projects that attempt to illuminate "marginalized" formations of whiteness tend to elide

the relationship between historical and contemporary formations of systemic racism almost

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[200] Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray, "What is 'White Trash'? Stereotypes and Economic
Conditions of Poor Whites in the United States," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill
(New York: New York University Press, 1997), 168–186.
[201] Ibid, 169, italics in original, boldface and censorship of "the n word" mine.
[202] Paul Jargowsky, Architecture of Segregation: Civil Unrest, the Concentration of Poverty, and
Public Policy," *The Century Foundation,* August 7, 2015,
https://tcf.org/content/report/architecture-of-segregation/; Emily Badger, "Black Poverty Differs
From White Poverty," *The Washington Post,* August 12, 2015,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/08/12/black-poverty-differs-from-white-
poverty/?utm_term=.0c0291586a31

entirely and, in the process—whether intentional or not—minimize the importance and

implications of the systemic privileging of whiteness.[203] As Kivel argues,

> We must notice when we try to slip into another identity to escape being white. We each
> have many other factors that influence our lives, such as our ethnicity, gender, sexual
> orientation, class, personality, mental and physical abilities. Even when we're talking
> about these elements of our lives we must keep whiteness on stage with us because it
> influences each of the other factors.[204]

To be sure, it is important to analyze whiteness at its intersections with—and articulations

to—other salient identities and social positions, and some work does this well. For example,

Kate Davy offers a complex investigation of the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class,

demonstrating how white womanhood has been structured through middle-class respectability

and heteronormativity, which positions women with different racial and class identities and

sexual orientations in relation to white heteronormative middle-class womanhood as an ideal.[205]

As Davy argues,

> [W]hen the unmarked category of white is saturated with bourgeois middle classness, it
> too produces something else, that is, an ideal of whiteness or an epitome of whiteness,
> whose dynamics bestow privilege on all white people and justify white supremacy.
> ..Played out in the politics of respectability, whiteness becomes the dynamic
> underpinning a process of racialization that feeds privilege to *all* whites, so to speak,
> without letting all white people sit at the table.[206]

Here, Davy acknowledges that the relationship between whiteness and gender, class, and

sexuality is complex. Although not all white folks benefit from the full range of privileges

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[203] For two additional examples of projects that fall into this problematic approach, See Fred
Pfeil, "Sympathy for the Devils: Notes on Some White Guys in the Ridiculous Class War," in
Whiteness: A Critical Reader, ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 21–
34; Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (eds.), *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (New York:
Routledge, 1997).

[204] Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (Philadelphia,
PA: New Society Publishers, 1996), 11.

[205] Kate Davy, "Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project," in *Whiteness: A Critical
Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 204–225.

[206] Ibid., 217, emphasis mine.

possible at the intersection of bourgeois middle class whiteness, all white folks are nonetheless occupants of positions of *racial* privilege. Analyses of whiteness at its intersections with other forms of identification can help to reveal precisely how these relationships work to uphold white dominance while also being experienced in different ways by white folks occupying different intersectional positions. The important point here is that when exploring whiteness at its intersections, it is crucial to do so in a way that avoids eliding the systemic privileging *of* whiteness.

At various points in the analysis that unfolds across this dissertation, I will point to how whiteness is functioning at intersections with sexuality and gender in particular contexts. Yet, applying an intersectional perspective to whiteness must be engaged critically and reflexively to avoid flattening out the dominant, privileged status of whiteness in ways that ignore its historical roots and systemic functions and misappropriate the theoretical framework of *intersectionality*. Conceptualized in 1989 by critical legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, "intersectionality" was developed to explain the ways that Black women experience compounded forms of discrimination and oppression based on their position at the intersection of gendered and racialized marginality.[207] As a theoretical framework rooted in women of color feminism and developed to make sense of interlocking forms of discrimination and oppression, then, intersectionality should be taken up in ways that further the project of historically and materially informed racial justice rather than mobilized to explain away racial privilege by invoking other forms of marginalization. Further, *any* project that adopts a rearticulationist perspective to investigate whiteness must do so with a critical orientation.

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[207] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 139–167.

Toward a Critical Rearticulationist Perspective

Reductionist and uncritical rearticulationist projects run the risk of eliding the historical and material dimensions of whiteness rooted in domination and supremacy and, in the process, contribute to the uncritical re-centering of whiteness. Thus, I frame this dissertation as a "critical rearticulationist project" to signal its move toward investigating alternative ways of "doing" whiteness in public discourse without removing its understanding of whiteness from a rootedness in domination, supremacy, and power.

Critical rearticulationist perspectives on whiteness provide insight into possibilities and limitations of working within and against whiteness as a (de)racialized subject position rooted in domination, supremacy, and privilege. A person with white skin cannot avoid being interpellated into a white racial identity, which carries with it a whole host of privileges that white folks access each time they knowingly or unknowingly (re)cite a norm or expectation of whiteness. Some norms and expectations are (re)cited involuntarily—I necessarily carry my white skin with me, and I receive countless privileges on an everyday basis based in part on the ways in which my white skin is read. The skin of white folks consistently (re)cites whiteness in ways impossible to escape (absent, perhaps, incredibly problematic "darkening" practices, which implicitly (re)cite rather different norms of whiteness). But, the inevitability of being read as "white" and the understanding that racialized systems of power are ultimately inescapable does not mean that white people must only ever reproduce normative forms of whiteness—to make that argument would be to let white people off the hook far too easily and would also negate the knowledge that power contains within itself the seeds of resistance.

If the sustaining power of whiteness is dependent on the consistent collective (re)citation of its norms and expectations that sustain its privileged position of centrality through its

discursive invisibility, it *must* be possible to "do" whiteness differently by strategically (re)citing those norms and expectations imperfectly, subversively. Yet, precisely what rhetorical mechanisms characterize these imperfect, subversive, resistant (re)citations and what their implications (both productive and problematic) might be remains relatively uninvestigated in existing critical whiteness and critical rhetorical scholarship—as a critical rearticulationist project, this dissertation seeks to fill that gap.

Identifying Gaps, Moving Forward

Critical studies of whiteness have proliferated over the past several decades and have done a great deal of work to expose how whiteness functions, both through its historical constructions and contemporary manifestations. Yet, additional and sustained research into (re)articulations of whiteness is needed—especially in this contemporary moment of heightened racial consciousness. In particular, whereas there has been a great deal of research into normative, everyday formations of whiteness through the types of coded, race-evasive rhetoric mandated by a dominant colorblind ideology, there has been relatively little research into how whiteness functions in direct discourse on race and racism in contemporary U.S. American contexts—both in racist and anti-racist formations.

Explicitly Racist Formations of Whiteness

Explicit and direct affirmations of whiteness and pride in white racial identity have gone largely unexamined in contemporary critical scholarship, which has tended to argue that these formations of whiteness are not representative of the ways racial domination functions in contemporary U.S. American public contexts. Yet, a handful of scholars have maintained that explicitly racist formations of whiteness remain important objects of analysis for expanding

contemporary understandings of how race, racism, and whiteness are constructed and mobilized.[208]

Research on explicit formations of pro-whiteness has been organized around concepts of "white supremacy" and/or "hate speech," although there are indications that more nuanced descriptions of radical whiteness are warranted. For example, Moon and Hurst and Meddaugh and Kay each revealed shifts toward what each term "reasonable racism" in explicit formations of pro-whiteness on the Internet, suggesting that radical whiteness can adapt context-bound standards of reasonability to make arguments that may appeal to more mainstream white Americans while still upholding an ideology of white superiority.[209] Still, explicit formations of pro-whiteness and their complexities are significantly understudied—particularly from critical rhetorical perspectives, which are uniquely positioned to trace discursive connections among direct and explicit affirmations of pro-whiteness and more implicit, coded formations of whiteness in mainstream public discourse. It is here, at the point where "extreme" slips into "mainstream," that this project makes a crucial contribution to critical understandings of discursive formations of white racism.

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[208] See Christopher Brown, "WWW.HATE.COM: White Supremacist Discourse on the Internet and the Construction of Whiteness Ideology," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 20 (2009): 189–208; Denise M. Bostdorff, "The Internet Rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan A Case Study in Web Site Community Building Run Amok," *Communication Studies* 55, no. 2, (2004): 340–361; Pete Simi and Robert Futrell, "Cyberculture and the Endurance of White Power Activism," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 34, no. 1, (2006): 115–142; Jessie Daniels, *Cyberracism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2009); Kenneth S. Stern, "Hate and the Internet," *Journal of Hate Studies* 1, no. 1, (2001): 57–99.

[209] Dreama G. Moon and Anthony Hurst, "'Reasonable Racism': The 'New" White Supremacy and Hurricane Katrina," in *Through the Eye of Katrina: Social Justice in the United States,* eds. Kristin A. Bates and Richelle S. Swan (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), 125–145; Priscilla Marie Meddaugh and Jack Kay, "Hate Speech or 'Reasonable Racism?' The Other in Stormfront," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 24, (2009): 251–268.

Anti-Racist Formations of Whiteness

In addition, this project fills another crucial need for research on the *other* end of a spectrum of racist–anti-racist white racial consciousness. In particular, this project is interested in investigating possibilities and limitations of resisting normative whiteness from positions of racial privilege and exploring the roles of discourse and affect in attempts at rearticulating white anti-racist subjectivities—a productive and important area of inquiry for critical whiteness studies that has been severely understudied.

A bit of existing research in communication and rhetoric has addressed various aspects of "white anti-racism," producing valuable insights into some of its possibilities and limitations. For example, Susan Zaeske analyzed 19th-century white women's engagement with anti-slavery petitions and found that these white women simultaneously articulated a shared gender identity with enslaved Black women and reinscribed racial and class differences as they attempted to lay claim to their own right to engaged in increased political participation.[210] Additionally, Debian Marty analyzed the anti-racist rhetoric of Wendell Berry, demonstrating that white individuals attempting to engage in anti-racist discourse tend to minimize personal accountability through rhetorics of apologia, underscoring a significant limitation to white anti-racist discourse.[211] Finally, Lisa Flores and Dreama Moon's analyses of *Race Traitor* investigated the new abolitionist approaches to anti-racism discussed above and uncovered the problematic implications of attempting to abolish whiteness without first abolishing racism.[212]

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[210] Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity,* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[211] Marty, "White Antiracist Rhetoric as Apologia: Wendell Berry's *The Hidden Wound,*" In *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity,* eds. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 51–68.

[212] Lisa A. Flores and Dreama G. Moon, "Rethinking Race, Revealing Dilemmas: Imagining a New Racial Subject in *Race Traitor,*" *Western Journal of Communication* 66, 2 (2002): 181–

Outside the field of communication, a similarly small but valuable body of scholarship has emerged. Sociologists Pamela Perry and Alexis Shotwell have argued that anti-racist transformation among white folks "arises from a confluence of propositional, affective, and tacit forms of knowledge about racism and one's own situatedness within it" and have underscored the importance of affective understanding—particularly feelings of empathy and compassion—in moving toward an anti-racist white racial consciousness.[213] Philosopher Shannon Sullivan has explored middle class formations of white anti-racism and critiqued the tendency for "good" middle-class whites to focus on individual consciousness and interpersonal decorum while failing to attend to systemic and structural racial injustices.[214] Speaking to the complexities of white anti-racism, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed has argued that the possibilities for white anti-racism are murky at best and has urged scholars engaged in critical studies of whiteness to eschew investigations of white anti-racism in favor of focusing on the multitude of ways in which whiteness continues to operate in ways that reinforce white superiority and oppress racial others.[215] Collectively, interdisciplinary scholarship on anti-racist whiteness has found that attempting to work from positions of racial privilege to push for racial justice has often been plagued by problematic practices and has often perpetuated white privilege.

In sum, critical investigations of whiteness in contemporary contexts have overwhelmingly focused on exposing how whiteness is constructed as privileged and superior

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207; Dreama Moon and Lisa A. Flores, "Antiracism and the Abolition of Whiteness: Rhetorical Strategies of Domination Among 'Race Traitors'," *Communication Studies 51,* 2 (2000): 97–115.

[213] Pamela Perry and Alexis Shotwell, "Relational Understanding and White Antiracist Praxis," *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 1 (2009): 34.

[214] Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (State University of New York Press, 2014).

[215] Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," *Borderlands* 3, no. 2 (2004): 52–59.

through coded, race evasive discourse adapted to the norms and expectations of a colorblind

ideology on race. There is a dearth of research into how white folks engage with direct discourse

on race and grapple with emerging formations of white racial consciousness—whether in racist

or anti-racist formations. By focusing on formations of white racial consciousness in

contemporary public contexts, this dissertation addresses a crucial gap in existing literature made

all the more urgent by a contemporary sociopolitical context in which direct discourse on race is

proliferating.

CHAPTER 4
Reasonably White: Common Sense & Affect in White Nationalist Rhetoric

Race is a biological fact. Does anyone think that the differences between Danes and Pygmies are a sociological illusion? A barely socialized two-year-old can tell races apart at a glance.

-Jared Taylor[216]

*We are a community of racial realists and idealists. We are White Nationalists who support **true** diversity and a homeland for **all** peoples. Thousands of organizations promote the interests, values and heritage of non-White minorities. We promote ours. We are the voice of the new, embattled White minority!*

-Stormfront Homepage[217]

We need to create a thriving White Nationalist community. We need to transform people's worldviews by influencing the education system and the culture at large. We need to deconstruct the hegemony in its place. And when our values and worldview have sufficiently permeated the culture, it will be possible for White Nationalists to gain actual political power and put our ideas into effect.

-Greg Johnson[218]

From the extermination of indigenous populations, to the centuries-long enslavement and abuse of Africans and African-Americans, to the terrorism and violence waged by organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, to the internment of Japanese-Americans, to the exploitation of migrant labor for corporate profit, the history of the United States of America is rife with examples of hatred and violence deployed in the name of white supremacy. And, even as the dominant manifestation of racism has shifted toward more implicit formations of "colorblind racism" in the post-Jim Crow era,[219] glaringly explicit formations of white supremacist violence have continued well into the present. The 2015 massacre of nine parishioners at Emmanuel AME

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[216] Jared Taylor, "What is the Alt Right?," *American Renaissance,* October 11, 2016, http://www.amren.com/news/2016/10/what-is-the-alt-right-jared-taylor/.

[217] Homepage, *Stormfront,* accessed January 17, 2017, http://www.stormfront.org, emphasis in original.

[218] Greg Johnson, "Interview on White Nationalism & the Alt Right," *Counter Currents,* October 19, 2016, https://www.counter-currents.com/2016/10/interview-on-white-nationalism-and-the-alt-right/.

[219] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists,* 2–4.

Church in Charleston South Carolina at the hands of avowed white supremacist Dylann Roof,[220]

the 2016 murder of a black teenager by a white supremacist couple in Oregon,[221] and the 2017

murder of two Indian men in Kansas by a white man who first yelled, "Get out of my

country!"[222] are just a handful of examples of explicit white supremacist violence in a

contemporary U.S. American context that many have described as "post-racial."[223] In fact,

despite normative associations of "terrorism" with "radical Islam" in mainstream contemporary

discourse, empirical evidence demonstrates that, since September 11, 2001, white supremacist

terrorism has claimed far more U.S. American lives than Islamic terrorism.[224]

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has been tracking and following active "hate

groups" for nearly 30 years and, in February 2017, released longitudinal data demonstrating the

explosion of organized extremist activity. In the year 2000, for example, SPLC catalogued 602

hate groups. Five years later, that number had risen to 803—in another five years, it rose to

1,002. In 2016, the SPLC collected data on 917 hate groups—close to the all-time record of

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[220] See Jamie Morrison, Gabe Gutierrez, Mariana Atencio, and Jon Schuppe, "Charleston Massacre Trial Concludes With Dylann Roof Saying 'I Had to Do It,'" *NBC News,* January 10, 2017, http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/charleston-church-shooting/church-massacre-trial-concludes-dylann-roof-saying-i-had-do-n705211.

[221] Kristine Phillips, "White Supremacist Charged with Mowing Down and Killing Black Teen Because of Race," *The Washington Post,* September 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/09/14/white-supremacist-accused-of-running-over-killing-black-teen-faces-new-hate-crime-charge/?utm_term=.4e959efadd2f.

[222] See Mark Berman, "FBI Investigating Shooting of Two Indian Men in Kansas as a Hate Crime," *The Washington Post,* February 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/02/28/fbi-investigating-shooting-of-two-indian-men-in-kansas-as-a-hate-crime/?utm_term=.695d0e43ecd3.

[223] See Catherine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media & Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

[224] "Terrorism in America After 9/11," *New America,* accessed April 22, 2017, https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/. See also Maggie Ybarra, "Majority of Fatal Attacks on U.S. Soil Carried Out By White Supremacists, Not Terrorists," *The Washington Times,* June 24, 2015, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/24/majority-of-fatal-attacks-on-us-soil-carried-out-b/.

1,018 catalogued in 2011.[225] As Mark Potok of the SPLC noted, these disturbingly high numbers

of active hate groups "undoubtedly understate the real level of organized hatred in America,"

because contemporary extremist groups operate primarily in cyberspace and can be difficult to

track.[226] Although precisely what SPLC defines as a "hate group" or "extremism" is somewhat

unclear, the organization's latest report places particular emphasis on the rise of far right-wing

and pro-white groups, such as "neo-Confederate groups," "anti-Muslim groups," and "white

nationalists." As noted in Chapter 1, the presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump

provided mainstream recognition and legitimacy to extremist pro-white groups as Trump's anti-

immigrant, anti-Muslim, racially insensitive rhetoric helped to normalize their views.[227] And,

this recognition and normalization has had significant material implications—in the one-month

period following the election of Donald Trump, SPLC recorded 1,094 hate crimes and bias-

related incidents, the overwhelming majority of which were characterized as "Anti-Immigrant,"

"Anti-Black," or "Anti-Muslim."[228]

Despite the contemporary proliferation of hate groups, pro-white extremism, and racist

violence, at least some of the groups tracked by the Southern Poverty Law Center would

vehemently deny any affiliation with hate, racism, or violence. In response both to mainstream

expectations of colorblindness and race evasive discourse as well as the practical need to bolster

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[225] Mark Potok, "The Year in Hate and Extremism," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* February 15, 2017, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/year-hate-and-extremism.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Hatewatch Staff, "Update: 1,094 Bias-Related Incidents in the Month Following the Election," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* December 16, 2016, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/12/16/update-1094-bias-related-incidents-month-following-election; as the report notes, it has been common for far-right fringe media to create doubt around this figure by suggesting that a majority of these incidents were "false reports." SPLC staff note that they are actively tracking all reports and have, to date, found a total of 13 false reports (or about 1% of total reports).

their numbers and influence, contemporary pro-white groups actively attempted to distance

themselves from associations with hate and extremism and have attempted to rearticulate an

ideology of white superiority into tempered rhetorical formations that are more likely to make

reasonable sense to mainstream white audiences—what I term "common sense pro-

whiteness."[229] As suggested by the fragments from white nationalist discourse above, this

process involves establishing reality and significance of race as common sense truths, reframing

white people as victims of racial inequality, and advocating for the reasonability and importance

of protecting their heritage and interests by forming a strong pro-white community.

And, as suggested largely by what is *absent* from the discursive fragments that introduce

this chapter, this process of appealing to mainstream white audiences with explicitly pro-white

rhetoric also involves the construction of pro-whiteness in more positive terms. Here, explicit

formations of hate speech such as slurs, racial epithets, and calls to violence, all of which have

distinctly negative affective associations, are traded in for calls for community, support for "true

diversity," and the preservation of values and heritage—all of which have positive affective

associations, at least in their abstract formations. In contemporary U.S. American contexts in

which everyday white folks are negotiating the proliferation of racially conscious discourse

alongside the longstanding hegemony of a colorblind racial ideology, these tempered formations

of pro-white rhetoric construct white nationalism as a reasonable and affectively pleasant pro-

white formation of racial consciousness. As I demonstrate below, the articulation of appeals to

common sense to positive affects positions white nationalist rhetoric in resistance to both the

common sense understanding of race through a colorblind frame and the affective economy of

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[229] See Dreama G. Moon and Anthony Hurst, "'Reasonable Racism': The 'New" White
Supremacy and Hurricane Katrina," in *Through the Eye of Katrina: Social Justice in the United
States,* eds. Kristin A. Bates and Richelle S. Swan (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press):
125–145.

white fragility that tends to be articulated to emerging racial consciousness among everyday

white folks.

While the dawning of the "Trump-era" has, as discussed in Chapter 1, spurred a

proliferation of new pro-white groups and an accompanying explosion of pro-white rhetoric in

mainstream public discourse, attempting to frame pro-white beliefs in ways that appeal to

mainstream audiences is nothing new. Consider, for example, the political career of former Ku

Klux Klan leader and still self-avowed white supremacist David Duke, who, as Michael Lacy

demonstrates, mobilized a rhetoric of innocence to distance himself from accusations of racism

while affirming beliefs rooted in white superiority. Just 11 days before he was elected to the

Louisiana House of Representatives in 1989, Duke had a letter to the editor published in a New

Orleans newspaper in which he explained,

> When you have difficulty with a man's ideas the only thing they have left is to attack his
> character. Gill [a reporter for that paper] accused me of being a "racist." He said I refuse
> to accept that moniker, and I do *if you define a racist as someone who hates other races
> and wants to suppress them.*
> I am certainly proud of my heritage and want to preserve it, but I truly believe in equal
> rights and opportunity for all. The real racists are the ones who sponsor the massive racial
> discrimination called "affirmative action."[230]

Here, Duke—as someone with a known history of involvement with and explicit

promotion of white supremacy—appropriates the language of liberalism to mobilize rhetorical

appeals to innocence and equality.[231] Yet, Duke does not disavow an ideology of white

superiority—rather, he disavows a particular understanding of "racism" rooted in hate and

domination while rearticulating racial justice initiatives, such as affirmative action, as the "real"

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[230] David Duke, as quoted by Michael G. Lacy, "White Innocence Heroes: Recovery, Reversals,
Paternalism, and David Duke," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 3, no.
3 (2010): 211, emphasis mine.
[231] Michael G. Lacy, "White Innocence Heroes: Recovery, Reversals, Paternalism, and David
Duke," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 3, no. 3 (2010): 206–227.

source of racial discrimination (implicitly, white people are framed as the victims of this discrimination).

As others have demonstrated, the strategies mobilized by Duke—of re-defining racism as explicit hatred and domination, rearticulating his pro-white views as innocent and reasonable, and reframing racially conscious racial justice efforts *as* racism—have continued to be common elements in more contemporary formations of pro-white rhetoric.[232] And, importantly, research on contemporary pro-white groups has demonstrated that the rise of the Internet and emergence of increasingly participatory forms of social media has enabled these groups to reach a much wider, more mainstream audience with pro-white rhetoric.[233] In this way, the use of the Internet and the strategic rearticulation of an ideology of white superiority to more tempered rhetorical formations have worked together in an effort to hail a broad audience of mainstream, everyday white folks for interpellation into fringe online pro-white communities.

This chapter begins an investigation of contemporary formations of pro-white rhetoric that will continue through the next chapter. Here, I investigate how white nationalist rhetoric attempts to rearticulate an ideology of white superiority to positive affects and common sense understandings of race. As I continue to demonstrate below, white nationalism is an ideology

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[232] See Moon and Hurst, "'Reasonable Racism,'": 125–145; Priscilla Marie Meddaugh and Jack Kay, "Hate Speech or 'Reasonable Racism?' The Other in Stormfront," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 24, (2009): 251–268; Christopher Brown, "WWW.HATE.COM: White Supremacist Discourse on the Internet and the Construction of Whiteness Ideology," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 20 (2009): 189–208.

[233] Meddaugh and Kay, "Hate Speech or 'Reasonable Racism?'"; Denise M. Bostdorff, "The Internet Rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan A Case Study in Web Site Community Building Run Amok," *Communication Studies* 55, no. 2, (2004): 340–361; Brown, "WWW.HATE.COM"; Pete Simi and Robert Futrell, "Cyberculture and the Endurance of White Power Activism," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 34, no. 1, (2006): 115–142; Jessie Daniels, *Cyberracism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights* (New York: Roman and Littlefield, 2009); Kenneth S. Stern, "Hate and the Internet," *Journal of Hate Studies* 1, no. 1, (2001): 57–99.

that upholds a view of race as biological, affirms natural differences among racial groups, and promotes the advancement of the "white race" by advocating for racial segregation and the establishment of an exclusively white nation-state.[234] The construction of rhetorical separation between white supremacy and white nationalism is a key element in white nationalists' attempts to construct a more palatable pro-white orientation to race.

The analysis that unfolds in this chapter demonstrates how white nationalist rhetoric resists both a colorblind racial ideology and mainstream opposition to white supremacy by constructing a pro-white identity that mobilizes appeals to common sense racial differences alongside positive affects. Specifically, appeals to common sense affirm racial realism—where race and racial difference are real and significant—as reasonable, while affective appeals attempt to construct white nationalism as a positive, affirmative identity and frame oppositional ideologies and identities as dangerous. Together, appeals to common sense and affect construct rhetorical distance between white nationalism and white supremacy, where white supremacy is constructed as domination, oppression, and hate and white nationalism is constructed as freedom, equality, and love. Ultimately, I argue that appeals to common sense and the articulation of positive affects to white nationalism enables white nationalist rhetoric to work against the normative affective circulation of white fragility while providing an orientation to race positioned as an alternative to both colorblindness and white supremacy. In this way, white nationalism has been constructed as a reasonable, affectively positive point of identification with pro-white racial consciousness positioned between mainstream formations of colorblindness and extreme formations of white supremacy.

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[234] See Joe Sterling, "White Nationalism, A Term Once on the Fringes, Now Front and Center," *CNN*, November 17, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/16/politics/what-is-white-nationalism-trnd/; See also Yggdrasil, "White Nationalism FAQ," *Stormfront*, accessed February 17, 2016, https://www.stormfront.org/whitenat.htm.

On the Relationship among Rhetoric, Common Sense, & Race

"Common sense" has been an important concept in European and American philosophy since at least the mid-18th century, when Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Thomas Reid founded the "School of Common Sense."[235] Emerging from the influence of Enlightenment-era perspectives, the "philosophy of common sense" presumes that material reality is observable and, therefore, knowable to the human mind, and argues that objective knowledge—what we are able to know through observation—should be the primary knowledge to guide human action. As Hamid Mowlana argues, "common sense" is the doctrine of "common men, in that, when articulated, [it is] assented to at once by men of common sense—by men, that is, of *normal* understanding whose minds have not been tinctured indelibly by superstition, prejudice, or philosophy."[236]

In other words, what is considered to be "common sense" is that which is known to be true because it can be observed and verified by a majority of *reasonable* people, where "reasonability" is understood as the ability to operate from an "objective" perspective, or to see things as they *really* are (or, more accurately, as most other "reasonable" people see them). In this way, "common sense" is articulated in relation to reasonability and objectivity, all of which refer back to one another for verification and validation—what is "reasonable" is that which can be observed, understood, or otherwise presumed to be true from within a normative common sense perspective. Common sense, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, is positioned in opposition to "absurdity," or the absence of reason, logic, and sense of purpose that compels

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[235] Hamid Mowlana, "On The Common Sense of Communication and the Communication of Common Sense," *China Media Research* 12, no. 3 (2016): 1–6.
[236] Ibid., 2, emphasis mine.

folks to, among other things, question their common sense understandings and doubt their own observations.

Of course, interpretivist and critical scholars have revealed that "objectivity" is an illusion and have demonstrated that to observe is to interpret, and to interpret is to impose a perspective.[237] The impossibility of objectivity suggests that "common sense" is a rhetorical construction—and, indeed, the rhetoric of common sense functions in powerful ways. As Derek Edwards argues, "The rhetorical force of [common sense] is that it appears to be invoking self-evident, undeniable, obvious knowledge, while at the same time accomplishing things. …in a manner that makes denial difficult."[238] As such, "common sense" occupies the hegemonic territory of the taken-for-granted—which, as Antonio Gramsci and, later, Stuart Hall have demonstrated, masks its ideological functions and bolsters its power.[239] In other words, what is considered to be "common sense" is also what is understood as "just the way things are" which, when placed under critical scrutiny, can be understood as the rhetorical, ideological construction of a normative perspective. In this way, common sense is both a tool and effect of power—it is a rhetorical construction that should be understood as context-bound, multiplicitous, and historically sedimented yet subject to change.

Appeals to "common sense" thus mobilize arguments based on the presumption that something is true because it is readily apparent or is commonly believed to be true by most

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[237] Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 77; James W. Carey, "Afterword/The Culture in Question," in *James Carey: A Critical Reader,* eds. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 308–339.

[238] Derek Edwards, *Discourse and Cognition* (London: Sage, 1997), 256.

[239] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1997/1971), 323–342; Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of Ideology: The Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society, and the Media,* eds. Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennet, James Curran, and Jane Woollacott (New York: Methuen, 1982), 56–90.

reasonable people, which simultaneously dismisses the need for interrogation and frames dissent

as unreasonable.[240] As Bethan Benwell argues,

> [W]hen propositions are rhetorically packaged as 'reasonable' or 'commonsensical', any
> ideological or biased underpinnings are rendered invisible, and possible alternatives are
> omitted from the discussion. In this way, common sense is not merely a category or
> repository of knowledge, but also operates as a type of reasoning, justification, or
> accounting of its own right. It is a form of rhetoric that is invoked to support a particular
> view or argument, to naturalise ideological positions, and crucially suppress debate.[241]

In discourse, rhetorical appeals to common sense may be relatively explicit, such as in

this chapter's first epigraph from Jared Taylor, which framed race as a "biological fact" and

argued that "barely socialized two-year-old can tell races apart at a glance."[242] Or, they might be

more implicit, such as the second epigraph from the Stormfront homepage, which uses common

sense reasoning to argue that because organizations exist to represent and protect "non-White

minorities," it makes reasonable sense that organizations that represent white folks should also

be accepted.[243] Whether explicit or implicit, appeals to common sense use plain language and a

matter-of-fact framing to reason that an argument should be accepted because of its obviousness,

reasonability, undeniability, and/or self-evidentiary nature.

As a rhetorical construction with ideological, hegemonic functions, what is perceived as

"common sense" is constructed by the perceptions of dominant groups in ways that serve their

interests.[244] By extension, then, I argue that members of the dominant group are normatively

positioned as *comfortable* within mainstream, hegemonic constructions of "common sense"

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[240] Edwards, *Discourse and Cognition, 256;* Bethan Benwell, "Common-sense Anti-Racism in
Book Group Talk: The Role of Reported Speech," *Discourse & Society* 23, no. 4 (2012): 360–
361.
[241] Benwell, "Common-sense Anti-Racism," 360–361.
[242] Taylor, "What is the Alt-Right?"
[243] Stormfront, *Homepage.*
[244] Stuart Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist
Debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, no. 2 (1985): 91–114.

precisely because they have participated in and had their interests represented by those

constructions—"common sense" understandings *make reasonable sense* to them. In this way,

appeals to common sense are articulated to affects of comfort—common sense is, I argue,

charged with positive affect. In contrast, members of subordinate groups, who are positioned to

see and experience the world differently, may find normative "common sense" to be

uncomfortable and unreasonable, because it does not take into account their own observations

and experiences. In turn, marginalized perspectives that push against normative common sense

are unlikely to "make sense" to people operating from dominant, privileged perspectives—

indeed, they may be perceived as "absurd." Whereas normative common sense is positioned as

the objective "way things are," marginalized perspectives that oppose normative common sense

understandings are positioned as biased and inaccurate and, therefore, unreasonable. Yet, as with

all formations of power, constructions of and resistance to normative common sense are complex

and subject to change. Common sense is powerful, then, but it is also vulnerable—dominant

formations of common sense must be reiterated and recirculated to maintain their hegemonic

status as the circulation of alternative, subordinate perspectives works to challenge and resist

these taken-for-granted understandings.

One such taken-for-granted understanding concerns the issue of race—including whether

race is a biological reality or social construction and whether there are natural, meaningful

differences among differently racialized groups. On the one hand, the contemporary hegemony

of a colorblind racial ideology has constructed a dominant formation of common sense

knowledge that maintains that race is meaningless and people should be understood and treated

as individuals rather than as members of racialized groups.[245] On the other hand, rhetorical

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[245] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation,* 2.

appeals to common sense to establish the obvious, essential reality of race and the natural

superiority of whiteness have been mobilized throughout the history of U.S. American discourse

on race and, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, continue to play an important role in

contemporary formations of white superiority and pro-white racial consciousness. For example,

Bonilla-Silva has argued that "because the group life of the various racially defined groups is

based on hierarchy and domination, the ruling ideology expresses as 'common sense' the

interests of the dominant race, while oppositional ideologies attempt to challenge that common

sense by providing alternative frames, ideas, and stories based on the experiences of

subordinated races."[246] In other words, because common sense is constructed in ways that serve

the interests of dominant groups and subordinates the perceptions and experiences of

marginalized groups, it follows that common sense knowledge about race is constructed and

mobilized in ways that upholds the symbolic and material privileging of whiteness, even when

that common sense knowledge is expressed through the race evasive rhetoric of a colorblind

ideology.

Ian Haney López has demonstrated that the construction of "common sense" as the

common knowledge of well-informed white folks throughout U.S. American history has had at

least three overarching implications. For one, the articulation of common sense to the common

perceptions of white folks positions white understandings of race as objective truths. Relatedly,

the positioning of whiteness as objective minimizes the ways in which the perspectives of people

positioned *as* white are shaped by whiteness, which further contributes to the deracialization of

whiteness and contributes to white folks' perceptions of race neutrality. Additionally, the

presumption of white objectivity and neutrality racializes and particularizes the perceptions and

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[246] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists,* 9–10.

experiences of people of color, such that they are positioned in opposition to "common sense."[247]

Moreover, appeals to common sense in contemporary public discourse on race enable white folks

to distance themselves from accusations of racism by offering "*reasoned* support" for prejudicial

views grounded in their own personal experiences and observations.[248]

Finally, white constructions of "common sense" are used in both legal and de facto

senses to determine the meaning of whiteness—and, this has been especially true as scientific

understandings of race-as-biological were found to be indefensible.[249] As Haney López has

demonstrated, the Supreme Court cases of *Ozawa* and *Thind* centered on debates surrounding

precisely *who* was considered "white enough" to be granted U.S. American citizenship. Haney

López analyzes the rationales put forth in each case and demonstrates that "the Supreme Court

abandoned scientific explanations of race in favor of those rooted in common knowledge when

science failed to reinforce popular beliefs about racial differences."[250] These cases demonstrate

that although contemporary scientific knowledge overwhelmingly affirms that race is a social

construction, dominant formations of common sense continue to uphold its essential realness.[251]

Thus, whereas science frequently investigates common sense understandings of worldly

phenomena by subjecting them to methodical investigation and scrutiny,[252] when scientific

knowledge about race comes up against common sense understandings rooted in whiteness, the

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[247] Ian Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York University Press, 2006), 115–116.

[248] Benwell, "Common-sense Anti-Racism," 363.

[249] Haney López, *White By Law,* 115–116.

[250] Haney López, *White By Law*, 56.

[251] Michael Yudell, *Race Unmasked: Biology and Race in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[252] See Jacob Bronowski, *The Common Sense of Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

hegemonic power of common sense tends to be more persuasive.[253] In terms of who is and is *not* considered "white," the implication of the power of common sense understandings of race is, as Haney López as argued, that "'white' is common knowledge. 'White' is what we believe it is."[254]

As I turn toward constructions of pro-white orientations to race that require the essential realness and knowability of whiteness, the significance of appeals to common sense and their affective attachment to comfort will become increasingly clear. Below, I unpack how white nationalist rhetoric mobilizes appeals to common sense and positive affect to construct a tempered orientation to pro-whiteness positioned between extreme formations of white superiority and mainstream, colorblind orientations to race. As this analysis demonstrates, the construction of this tempered formation of pro-whiteness is positioned to resist an affective economy of white fragility by restoring the comfort of everyday white folks moving toward pro-white orientations to racial consciousness that instill pride and love.

Common Sense Pro-Whiteness: White Nationalist Rhetoric on Stormfront

A prime example of how an ideology of white superiority is rearticulated into tempered formations through appeals to common sense and positive affects can be gleaned from a case study of Stormfront—a longstanding and popular online white nationalist discussion forum. As noted above, the Internet has enabled pro-white groups to reach far wider audiences than was possible with other forms of in person or mediated communication and, further, has enabled pro-white community building by providing an interactive platform with the possibility of remaining anonymous. Indeed, there are a plethora of websites dedicated to the promotion of white

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[253] Haney López, *White By Law*, 115.
[254] Haney López, *White By Law*, 76.

superiority, but Stormfront.org is one of the oldest and—even as new white nationalist websites

emerge and gain popularity—remains one of the most influential.[255]

Created in 1995 by former Ku Klux Klan leader Don Black, Stormfront has been called

the "first major hate site on the Internet" and heralded as "the most powerful active influence in

the White Nationalist movement.[256] In 2005, Stormfront was independently ranked as the "338th

largest electronic forum on the Internet," placing it within "the top 1% of all sites on the World

Wide Web."[257] Since 2005, Stormfront has grown by nearly 300,000 members—and although

the relatively recent proliferation of new "hate sites" has led to a decline in its dominance,

Stormfront remains an influential pillar in the pro-white online network.[258]

Stormfront.org is home to a variety of content, including a blog, chat room, and radio

show, but its interactive message board—which boasts 321,034 members (as of February

2017)—is my focus here. Registration is required to post messages on a majority of the site's 61

forums (there are four "open forums" for unregistered guests to ask questions), but most content

is available for viewing by the general public (there are two "private forums" that only select

registered members can view and use). Forums are organized by topic and categorized under

general headings, including "News," "Activism," and "White Singles." Although both white

nationalism writ large and Stormfront are international efforts, most of the content across a

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[255] See "The Forums," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 2015, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/forums; Keegan Hankes and Sam Zhang, "A Waning Storm: Once the World's Most Popular White Nationalist Website, Stormfront is Running out of Steam," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* February 22, 2017, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/02/22/waning-storm-once-world%E2%80%99s-most-popular-white-nationalist-website-stormfront-running-out.

[256] T. K. Kim, "Hate Website Stormfront Sees Rapid Growth of Neo-Nazi Community," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* July 27, 2005, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2005/hate-website-stormfront-Sees-rapid-growth-neo-nazi-community.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Keegan Hankes, "Eye of the Stormer," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* February 8, 2017, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/eye-stormer.

majority of Stormfront's forums is oriented around white nationalism in either generalized or

U.S. American contexts—discussions of international issues are largely contained within 15

forums dedicated to other regions of the world. Previous research has demonstrated that

Stormfront has been constructed as a platform for a more palatable form of hate speech with the

potential to reach a wider audience than traditional white supremacist texts—a finding that

speaks to broader trends in white nationalist rhetoric.[259]

Below, I begin to demonstrate how Stormfront constructs rhetorical distance between

white nationalism and white supremacy. Here, I focus on how the site's rules and regulations for

acceptable communication are constructed and justified in ways that articulate appeals to

common sense and positive affects together in the imagination of a positive, pleasant white

nationalist community. By constructing itself in this way, Stormfront attempts to resist

mainstream, common sense understandings of pro-white groups and encourage mainstream,

everyday white folks to break away from the normative affective economy of white fragility and

move from colorblindness toward white nationalism.

Regulating Pro-Whiteness: Rules, Regulations, & Outreach

On Stormfront, there are a strict set of rules and regulations that all members are expected

to follow, and an understanding of these rules and regulations begins to demonstrate how appeals

to common sense are mobilized alongside positive affects in attempt to construct a positive white

nationalist image. Founder Don Black mandates that all members engage only in "civil and

productive" discussions and avoid the use of profanity, racial epithets, and the suggestion of any

illegal activities.[260] Common racial epithets—such as "the n word"—are automatically censored,

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[259] Meddaugh and Kay, "Hate Speech or 'Reasonable Racism?.'"
[260] Don Black, "Welcome: Guidelines for Posting" [Msg. 1], *Stormfront,* October 26, 2001,
http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t4359/.

traditionally racist imagery (especially swastikas) are banned, and posts openly suggesting

violence are subject to removal by moderators. Proper spelling and grammar are encouraged in

an explicit effort to reach a wider audience—as one moderator noted, "we are trying to

encourage many more people to come and read what we have to say. We can do a much better

job if our posts show that we actually take care in making ourselves look good."[261] Additionally,

moderators screen all messages posted by new members before they appear on the message

board, and members are required to build a good reputation before they are able to bypass

moderation and post directly to the site.[262] Woven explicitly and implicitly throughout

explications of these rules on Stormfront is an overarching imperative to resist mainstream

public perceptions of pro-white groups (uneducated, hateful, violent) and construct an

alternative, more pleasant image of pro-whiteness.

My time spent on Stormfront suggests that—aside from the suggestion to adhere to

proper spelling and grammar—its rules are strictly enforced for the expressed purpose of

enhancing its outreach efforts and promoting a "positive" orientation to pro-whiteness.

"Stormfront has a purpose," one moderator notes, "to give our people hope and information, *to

feel positive about being white*, and to suggest constructive solutions to our problems. When you

significantly violate our guidelines you may be undermining the purpose of this site."[263] If

Stormfront is to reach mainstream white audiences with "positive" messages of pro-whiteness, in

other words, a majority of members must participate in the co-construction of a pro-white

community that resists normative expectations around how pro-whiteness looks, sounds, and

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[261] Hawthorn, "FAQ New Members Please Read This Before Posting" [Msg. 7], *Stormfront,*
January 17, 2009, http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t437170/.
[262] John Law, "FAQ New Members Please Read This Before Posting" [Msg. 1], *Stormfront,*
November 15, 2007, http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t437170/.
[263] Hawthorn, "FAQ New Members Please Read This Before Posting" [Msg. 4], *Stormfront,* July
8, 2008, http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t437170/, emphasis mine.

feels. Implicitly, Stormfront's rules and regulations are constructed as common sense approaches

to re-branding pro-whiteness—certain words, images, and content will make most everyday

white folks feel uncomfortable, which will inhibit efforts to bring them into the community.

Here, then, appeals to white comfort are articulated as both common sense and affective—white

nationalists must make white folks *feel good about themselves* in order to grow their movement.

Users generally adhere willingly to Stormfront's rules and regulations for acceptable

discourse, and when these rules are called into question, they are justified and reiterated as

matters of common sense. Interestingly, I have not encountered much resistance from users who

oppose having their speech "policed" or regulated as part of Stormfront's larger outreach efforts.

The occasional exception is with some members' desire to use imagery, especially swastikas,

that have been banned by the site, which results in debates around whether that particular

regulation is productive or restrictive. For example, one disgruntled member posted,

> I can not believe what I've been reading here. You people say that NAZI'S are bad…and talk of the swastika as if you were a bunch of 1930's JEWS! Savage *****s are running ramped, Mexicans are flooding our country, and jews have taken over our media, government, and even our religions. And every mud monkey in the world is moving in next door. **And you are worried about hurtting someones feelings. has political correctness taken you over?**[264]

Several members responded to this concern to underscore the role that Stormfront's rules

play in constructing a particular public image for white nationalists. One member chastised the

original poster's aggressive approach, noting, "We really need smart arguments if we are

actually going to win this."[265] Another member added, "some of the volk who have been around

awhile are against the swastika because they have also been around long enough to see the

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[264] Hank, "When Political Correctness Is Not Correct.," [Msg. 1], *Stormfront,* April 26, 2002, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t20098/, errors and censorship in original post, emphasis mine.
[265] Freg, "When Political Correctness Is Not Correct.," [Msg. 3], *Stormfront,* April 26, 2002, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t20098/.

RESULTS that parading it around in public have netted. In short, not only zero results but tons

of backlash."[266] This discussion illustrates the common sense rhetoric mobilized to justify

Stormfront's rules. White nationalists can *see* that mainstream white folks are resistant to

traditionally racist imagery such as the swastika and so, if their goal is to bring mainstream white

folks into their community, they should avoid using that imagery.

In general, then, discourse around Stormfront's rules and regulations demonstrates that

most members are willing to follow the guidelines outlined above because they understand their

practical purpose—the construction of a "positive" white nationalist public image that works

against mainstream understandings of and opposition to pro-white groups. Words and images

that are directly associated with more traditional understandings of racism represent extreme

deviations from mainstream expectations for how race should be discussed and are likely to

make everyday white folks feel uncomfortable and are, therefore, counterproductive. In

response, Stormfront users strategically temper their own rhetoric to be more palatable for

mainstream discourse while also actively pushing against mainstream discursive norms around

colorblindness and race evasive discourse by speaking openly and directly about race in ways

that explicitly promote whiteness. Because interpellating mainstream, everyday white audiences

is a primary goal of white nationalist rhetoric and because everyday white audiences largely

continue to operate within a colorblind orientation to race, white nationalist rhetoric must

rearticulate its ideology into formations that will be more comfortable for mainstream audiences

and avoid triggering the uncomfortable affects articulated to white racial consciousness by an

affective economy of white fragility. In this way, white nationalist rhetoric does not position

itself to enact a radical revolution against mainstream rhetoric on race—rather, it positions itself

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[266] New Hickory, "When Political Correctness Is Not Correct.," [Msg. 5], *Stormfront,* April 27, 2002, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t20098/.

to seep in slowly and insidiously by mobilizing formations of pro-white rhetoric that deviate from mainstream expectations.

Mobilizing Positive Affects: Rearticulating Hate of "Them" to Love of "Us"

In addition to enforcing a set of rules designed to construct a more "positive" image of pro-whiteness, white nationalist rhetoric mobilized on Stormfront attempts to subvert mainstream expectations of pro-white rhetoric by disarticulating pro-whiteness from white supremacy and articulating white nationalism with more pleasant, positive affects. The construction of rhetorical separation between white supremacy and white nationalism is a key element in white nationalists' attempts to construct a more palatable pro-white orientation to race and disarticulate white nationalism from the extremist elements of white supremacy that fuel guilt, shame, anger, and discomfort.

White nationalism has been carefully crafted as a tempered rearticulation of an ideology of white superiority for the purpose of interpellating everyday mainstream white U.S. Americans into pro-white racial consciousness. Although scholars studying racist white groups and rhetoric have tended to group various formations of a "pro-white" ideology together under the label of "white supremacy" to signal common ideological assumptions,[267] white nationalists have argued that they represent a distinct branch of the "white power" movement. As I illustrate below, white nationalists commonly contrast themselves with white supremacists by framing their own movement in terms of protecting and preserving the "white race" and framing white supremacy

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[267] See Meddaugh and Kay, "Hate Speech or 'Reasonable Racism?,'" 251–268; Moon and Hurst, "'Reasonable Racism,' 125–145; Bostdorff, "The Internet Rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan 340–361; Brown, "WWW.HATE.COM," 189–208; Simi and Futrell, "Cyberculture and the Endurance of White Power Activism,"115–142; Daniels, *Cyberracism*; Stern, "Hate and the Internet," 57–99.

as the oppression and domination of other races.[268] In the process, white nationalist rhetoric

attempts to take beliefs rooted in white supremacy, such as the belief that white people are

intellectually, psychologically, and/or morally superior to people of other races and disarticulate

those beliefs from their normative articulation to ignorance, violence, and domination and related

affects of hate, disgust, and contempt directed at other races. By disidentifying with white

supremacy and identifying with white nationalism, then, Stormfront users are interpellated into

an affectively pleasing pro-white identity and are compelled to recite the norms of white

nationalism, which, as discussed above, include adhering to a particular speech code.

By constructing itself as a "white nationalist community" (rather than a "white

supremacist" group), Stormfront positions its users to actively participate in the disarticulation

and rearticulation of a pro-white ideology into more "reasonable" terms associated with more

pleasant affects, such as love, protection, and preservation. For example, in a thread dedicated to

the discussion of differences between white supremacy and white nationalism, one member

posted:

> A White Nationalist believes in the value of diversity & the beauty of every race's &
> ethnicity's God-made characteristics. We want to preserve those. The so-called Liberals
> who claim to value them are really destroying them by allowing them to mix with each
> other & destroy their differences. A White Nationalist wants every Nation to be
> populated by its own Folk, & them alone; this will obviously involve making more
> nations than there are today & closing them off to immigration. …Now, contrast this with
> a White Supremacist, who believes that Whites should control everyone. We believe that
> that's an unnecessary burden on our race, & that it disables & infantilizes the subordinate
> races. Just look at what's happened to Blacks in currently or formerly White-controlled
> areas: they're having severe problems managing themselves & are crippled by a culture of
> inaction. So that's the difference. A White Nationalist wants freedom for the White race
> (& really for all races, but we consider that their own responsibility). A White

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[268] See "What's the Difference Between a White Supremacist and a White Nationalist" (thread)
Stormfront, June 18, 2014 (6:27 p.m.), http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t819574/; Yggdrasil,
"White Nationalism FAQ."

Supremacist wants to create a master-slave relationship, but they don't understand how it debilitates both master & slave.[269]

This post exemplifies how white nationalist rhetoric attempts to strategically rearticulate

an ideology of white superiority by appropriating the affect-laden language of diversity to work

within and against a contemporary milieu in which multiculturalism has become mainstream.

Here, white nationalist rhetoric appropriates the language of "diversity," apparently affirming its

abstract value but claiming that the liberal left has adopted a dangerous understanding of

diversity through the promotion of multiculturalism. Once that abstraction is made, nationalism

can be reframed as the true protector of diversity by promoting separatism as a way to preserve

difference across distinct cultures. Diversity and difference are thereby associated with positive

affects through their articulation to terms such as "value" and "beauty," while multiculturalism is

rearticulated to negative affects through its articulation to terms such as destruction, which

invokes an implicit reference to common white nationalist anxieties around the perception of

declining demographic and cultural dominance of white folks in the United States (and Europe).

White supremacy is framed above as an attempt among white people to achieve

domination and control in a racially and ethnically diverse society—which is, according to this

poster's invocation of the historically significant "white man's burden,"[270] unreasonable and bad

for all involved. The related allusion to the "master-slave" relationship here implies opposition to

the United States' historical involvement with and reliance on the enslavement of Africans and

African Americans and suggests that this history is related to contemporary formations of racial

inequality—a claim that, at least as a general premise, is also frequently mobilized by anti-racist

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[269] CeltandProud, reply to "What's the Difference Between a White Supremacist and a White Nationalist" [Msg. 8], *Stormfront,* July 27, 2011 (12:46 p.m.), http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t819574/.

[270] Rudyrad Kipling, "The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands," *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1929), 321.

advocates. And so, this inflection of white nationalist rhetoric strategically rearticulates a series

of progressive, affect-laden anti-racist arguments to make a claim for the value of racial

separatism—not in the name of supremacy for the purpose of domination or violence, but in the

name of preservation for the good of all. In the process, rhetorical distance is constructed

between white nationalism and white supremacy, where the positive affective articulation of

white nationalism is dependent on the articulation of negative affective attachments to white

supremacy.

As I continue to discuss below, white nationalist rhetoric relies on a fundamental belief in

natural differences between races—in the post above, those differences are given a moral

inflection through their construction as God-given; elsewhere, they are understood more

generally to be both biological and cultural.[271] Above, an appeal to naturalized racial differences

is mobilized through a rhetoric that strategically neutralizes the assumption of white

superiority—elsewhere, that assumption is made explicitly and emphatically, both through the

explicit construction of racial Others as inferior and through the explicit construction of "the

white race" as superior.[272] Moving toward a fuller understanding of how white nationalist

rhetoric attempts to construct a pro-white orientation to race through appeals to common sense

and circulations of positive affects requires a discussion of how a mainstream hegemonic

ideology that proclaims the constructedness and insignificance of race and mandates race evasive

discourse in public contexts is negotiated and resisted on this fringe online public platform.

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[271] See "WN Position Statement Zero: Whites and White Nationalists," [thread] *Stormfront,*
February 17, 2017 (9:32 a.m.), https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t222175-12/.
[272] See "What Did Negroes Ever Have to Do With Us Whites?" [thread], *Stormfront,* accessed
February 17, 2017, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1199413/; Priscilla Marie Meddaugh and
Jack Kay, "Hate Speech or 'Reasonable Racism?.'"

Challenging Colorblindness & Affirming the Reality of Race through Appeals to Common Sense

In order to have any hope of impacting mainstream rhetoric on race, white nationalist rhetoric—which is premised on the assumption that race is real and meaningful—must directly confront and oppose the dominant mainstream racial ideology of colorblindness. Challenges to the colorblind assumption that race is a social construction with no bearing on natural, innate differences across groups of humans are commonly mobilized through appeals to common sense, often alongside generalized and decontextualized appeals to racially inflected biological and social science. Exemplifying the typical content and tone of an appeal to common sense racial realism, one Stormfront user wrote:

> The left's goal…To make us all the same…grey masses who have no freedom or independent thought, they would like nothing more than huge bands of monkeys. I have a newsflash for the loopy diversity pushing leftist in America…There is only **one** of me. I am the progeny of a white man and a white woman. My DNA pattern is unique. I will never be the same as anyone else. I am WHITE, my Birth Certificate from the State of Texas clearly states so, RACE: **WHITE**.[273]

This user makes a common sense appeal against the colorblind maxim that "we are all the same" by constructing their identity around their simultaneously unique individuality and membership in a distinct racial group. The implicit line of reasoning here is that both individuality and racial group identity are encoded in our DNA and, if race were not "real," it would not be listed on our birth certificates. There is a clear tone of resentment mobilized by this poster toward perceived attempts to deny their unique individuality and their ability to claim a positive racial identity and, given the posters' use of caps-lock to emphasize their racial identity, a sense of urgency and empowerment around the affirmative proclamation of whiteness. Further, by framing the discourse of racial equality as a leftist attempt to ignore the significance of race,

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[273] Lonestar Lady, reply to "Loony Leftists Claim That 'We Are All the Same,'" [Msg. 69] *Stormfront,* April 21, 2013 (1:40 p.m.), https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t958433-7/ (post unedited, emphasis in original).

colorblindness is constructed as an attempt to "trick" the public into embracing diversity,

whereas racial realism is framed as the common sense orientation to race. In other words, race

and racial difference are readily observable once the illusion of sameness constructed by a

colorblind ideology is recognized *as* an illusion.

It is not enough to simply construct a realist orientation to race, however—because a

white nationalist ideology is premised on assumptions of white superiority, white nationalist

rhetoric must construct an understanding of racial realism that upholds these assumptions. One

way this is accomplished on Stormfront is by making frequent reference to what white

nationalists perceive to be the inherent primitiveness, criminality, and deviance of other races—

especially Black folks. Often, common sense appeals to the inferiority of non-whiteness[274] is

accomplished through both decontextualized references to crime statistics and by posting news

stories, images, and videos of individual events. For example, there is a 639-page thread[275]

dedicated to sharing and discussing news stories reporting on "ethnic crimes" that was created

after another similar thread grew too large to accommodate new posts.[276] In another 93-page

thread devoted to sharing and discussing videos that depict "black-on-white racism," the original

poster noted,

> Aggressiveness, lack of impulse control, lack of emotional control, lack of reasoning
> skills, irrationality, infantile communication skills, disregard for authority, intolerance,
> racism…these are just some of the typical traits of common Negro behaviour. …if we
> have an archive of videos on Negroes all displaying similar patterns of behaviour,
> perhaps people will realise that they *are* different from us in this way.[277]

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[274] This term runs the risk of re-centering whiteness by collapsing race into a white/non-white
binary—I use it here for the sake of simplicity and because a white/non-white binary is precisely
how race is understood on Stormfront.
[275] Stormfront threads contain 10 posts on each page.
[276] Scott, "Ethnic Crime Report II" [thread], *Stormfront,* August 18, 2009,
https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t631153/.
[277] Eternus, "Black Behaviour Video Archive" [Msg. 1], November 6, 2010, *Stormfront,*
https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t754757/.

Across posts on each thread, the supposed demonstration of observable black inferiority
is used to construct a noble position of white superiority, where shifting the focus onto the
racialized Other and constructing narratives of white victimhood tempers the still-present
articulation to white supremacy. By making discourse around "black-on-white" crime a key
element of white nationalist rhetoric, Stormfront users attempt to make appeals to common sense
as they simultaneously construct black folks as naturally deviant and inferior and construct white
folks as innocent victims. *Of course* white folks are afraid of black folks, this line of reasoning
argues—look at all the ways they harm us. Individual cases of black-on-white crime—most of
them anecdotal, decontextualized, or linked to reports from other "pro-white" media outlets—
construct a sense of fear around the presence of the racialized Other and position white folks as
vulnerable targets in an increasingly multicultural U.S. American society.

As others have demonstrated, appeals to white innocence and victimization are common
tropes in "white supremacist" rhetoric and function to rearticulate white folks as the primary
targets of contemporary racial discrimination (via immigration, affirmative action, desegregation,
etc.).[278] In white nationalist rhetoric, these appeals rearticulate a pro-white racial consciousness
as anti-racist heroism, where the way for white folks to "save" themselves is understood to be
bound up with a white nationalist orientation to race and politics. Moving from "white
supremacy" to "white nationalism" through common sense appeals to the reality of race and
racial difference thus provides rhetorical ground on which a white supremacist ideology can be

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[278] See Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,"
Borderlands 3, no. 2 (2004): 52–59; Michael G. Lacy, "White Innocence Myths in Citizen
Discourse, the Progressive Era (1974–1988)," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 21
(2010): 20–39; Michael G. Lacy, "White Innocence Heroes: Recovery, Reversals, Paternalism,
and David Duke," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 3, no. 3 (2010):
206–227.

further disarticulated from negative affects associated with violence and oppression, such as hate

and disgust, and rearticulated to positive affects, such as innocence and love. In this way, "white

nationalism" and "white nationalist" provide a comfortable point of performative identification

that can be used to maneuver rhetorically around mainstream opposition and resistance to white

supremacy, rearticulating accusations of hate (of racial Others) into proclamations of love (of

whiteness).

To underscore the common sense reasonability of taking an explicit and uncompromising

interest in the protection, celebration, and preservation of one's own racial group, white

nationalist rhetoric deploys frequent references to initiatives to protect, celebrate, and preserve

the rights, resources, and cultural value of historically marginalized groups. "Thousands of

organizations promote the interests, values and heritage of non-White minorities. We promote

ours," reads the welcome banner on Stormfront's homepage.[279] "All non-whites are expected to

have a strong racial identity; only whites must not," exclaims self-avowed white nationalist Jared

Taylor.[280] The framing of white nationalism as "just another movement" framed around group-

based interests is an appeal to common sense that attempts to place white nationalism on equal

ground with racial justice organizations such as the NAACP. Because we can readily observe

racially conscious efforts to protect and promote the identities and interests of other groups, this

line of reasoning goes, it is only fair that similar efforts be mobilized to protect and promote

whiteness. Of course, this move disarticulates an ideology of white superiority from a history of

power and material oppression and rearticulates it to a contemporary discourse on identity

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[279] http://www.stormfront.org.
[280] Jared Taylor, "What is the Alt Right?," *American Renaissance,* October 11, 2016,
http://www.amren.com/news/2016/10/what-is-the-alt-right-jared-taylor/.

politics in which "all" groups should have the right to celebrate their cultures, protect their

interests, and preserve their heritage.

The move to equalize power relations in ways that support arguments for the

acceptability of explicit promotions and celebrations of whiteness will continue to be important

in my analysis of "alt-right" rhetoric across the next two chapters, where I will demonstrate how

alt-right rhetoric attempts to mobilize these arguments in mainstream public discourse. In

anticipation of another important thread running through subsequent analysis chapters, I turn

now to an analysis of how white nationalists' concern for the protection and preservation of the

"white race" is articulated to anxieties around the importance of maintaining the biological and

cultural "purity" of whiteness and how these anxieties illuminate the significances of

intersections among race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

(Re)producing Pure Whiteness: White Nationalism at the Intersections of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, & Sexuality

Above all else, race is the primary concern of white nationalists, and race and whiteness

are overwhelmingly the primary topics of discussion on Stormfront. However, because white

nationalists are particularly concerned with the protection and preservation of the "white race,"

white nationalists frequently discuss concerns around reproducing "pure" whiteness. Working

from an understanding of race as both biological and cultural, white nationalist rhetoric frames

the maintenance and (re)production of "pure whiteness" as a common sense imperative in both

biological and cultural terms. Biologically, the (re)production of pure whiteness requires the

literal production of white babies via white mothers and fathers. Culturally, the (re)production of

pure whiteness requires a policing of the boundaries around precisely who is considered "white"

and what groups can be reasonably permitted to identify as white nationalists. Together, these

concerns contribute to a substantial amount of white nationalist rhetoric on the intersections of

race and other identities—particularly ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—that will continue to be important to the analyses that unfold in subsequent chapters of this dissertation. Here, a consideration of intersections among race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality illuminates how white nationalist "common sense" is actively negotiated, both in discourse on precisely how to reproduce and protect "pure whiteness" and in discourse on precisely what *type* of white person can identify as white nationalist.

Although white nationalist rhetoric often mobilizes a white/black racial binary to frame its claims to racial superiority and inferiority, white nationalists orient themselves in opposition to any ethnic group that they perceive to be outside the boundaries of "pure" whiteness. These groups include Hispanic, Latina/o, and Jewish folks, all of whom are ethnic groups that have been gradually subsumed into whiteness by the contemporary U.S. American government despite experiencing a still-present history of legal and de facto racialization as non-white Others.[281] White nationalists perceive Hispanic and Latina/o folks to be a "mixed breed" and therefore impure[282] and perceive Jewish people to be a racialized group of mass conspirators who control the media and economy on both U.S. American and global scales.[283] Perceived as promoting interracial mixing and therefore as a threat to the reproduction of whiteness and, by extension, white European-American hegemony, Hispanic, Latina/o, and Jewish folks are frequent targets of white nationalists' ire.

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[281] See Karen Brodkin Sacks, *How Did Jews Become White Folks & What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 79–96; López, *White By Law,* 151–153.

[282] See "Are Hispanics White?" [thread], *Stormfront,* December 21, 2013, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1005114/.

[283] See "Jews are Dangerous" [thread], *Stormfront*, February 27, 2016, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1150727/.

In a somewhat similar vein, white nationalist rhetoric is also frequently mobilized in opposition to "feminist" understandings of sex and gender that, among other things, attempt to expand the range of freedoms and choices offered to women. Because white nationalists are directly concerned with the creation of a majority-white society, they understand white women and the "traditional" white family to play a particularly important role in the (re)production of whiteness. Using the (re)production of pure whiteness as a grounding premise, white nationalists adopt a view of sex and gender rooted in biological essentialism and argue that white women should be cherished and respected but should also be committed to "their role" as wives, mothers, and domestic laborers.[284]

Precisely *how* the biological (re)production of pure whiteness can and should be promoted is a common topic of discussion on Stormfront, and these discussions demonstrate how relatively absurd arguments are rationalized through appeals to common sense. For example, in a 37-page thread dedicated to discussing white nationalists' position on "the status relationship between men and women," a debate about the rights and freedoms of white women unfolds. The original poster suggests that white women should not be subjected to "forced marriage or forced breeding," which several repliers take issue with. Exemplifying opposition to this proposition, Stormfront member "Xenologist" wrote,

I believe that it was… Locke (?) who said that women must be forced to stay in the home and 'homemake', otherwise they would not have children of their own free will and society would die as a result. The last 30 years would seem to indicate that he was on to something. If that is the case, should we die rather than force women to reproduce?[285]

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[284] See "WN Position Statement 5: The Status Relationship of Men and Women" [thread], *Stormfront*, July 14, 2011, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t220999/?postcount=1#post2050685.
[285] Xenologist, reply to "WN Position Statement 1: The Status Relationship of Men and Women," [Msg. 5] *Stormfront*, July 28, 2005, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t220999/?postcount=1#post2050685.

Here, an abstract reference to John Locke is used to reason that perhaps white women *should* be forcibly compelled to (re)produce white children for the good of the white race. After all, an *observable* history of the implications of more progressive gender relations has demonstrated that when women are given more freedom, the birth rate of white babies declines (no evidence is offered to support this connection). For the good of the white race, this poster argues, white women should be subjected to the control of white men.

Following some back-and-forth among posters regarding whether women should be *forced* to reproduce (e.g. through rape) or whether reproduction of pure whiteness should be constructed as a collective duty and expectation, Xenologist clarified that although they believed it important to allow white women to choose who to "breed" with, if miscegenation—or, "genetic betrayal—among white women rose to extreme rates, white women would need to be "captured and re-educated" (read: kidnapped and raped) because "the goal of White Nationalism is to insure the survival of our people by any means necessary. Any."[286] Later, another member responds, "Let me tell you something in plain language. If you take away a woman's right to consent to sex—let alone marriage—with you, you are a **rapist**.[287] That some formations of white nationalist rhetoric attempt to rationalize *rape* as a common sense approach to reproducing whiteness while others attempt to expose the absurdity of these rationalizations illustrates how "common sense" is negotiated rhetorically in white nationalist rhetoric. More importantly, though, the promotion of "traditional" gender norms (read: the patriarchal control of women by men) speaks to the articulation of race and gender, such that progress toward gender equality is

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[286] Xenologist, reply to "WN Position Statement 1: The Status Relationship of Men and Women," [Msg. 18] *Stormfront*, July 30, 2005, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t220999/?postcount=1#post2050685.
[287] Sang d'Or Rouge, reply to "WN Position Statement 1: The Status Relationship of Men and Women," [Msg. 84] *Stormfront*, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t220999-9/.

understood as a threat to racial purity and separatism. The not-so-implicit line of reasoning here

is that if white women are free to make their own decisions about who to reproduce with, they

are unlikely to make decisions that promote the interests of white nationalism and so, promoting

the interests of white nationalism requires taking a patriarchal orientation toward gender. Still,

the suppression of women's rights is framed not as an effort to control and dominate women, but

as a common sense approach to protecting and preserving whiteness by promoting the

reproduction of pure whiteness.

Also premised on the commitment to (re)produce pure whiteness, orientations to

sexuality that fall outside of traditional heterosexual monogamy are constructed as

un(re)productive, unnatural, and largely unwelcome in white nationalist circles—even if a

particular "homosexual" is otherwise adamantly pro-white.[288] Yet, there is some debate here, too.

For example, in a 101-page thread devoted to discussing the relationship between white

nationalism and opposition to "homosexuality," one user wrote, "As a gay White man, I find this

disappointing. I want to support the White race just like any other White individual."[289] Some

members offered relatively sympathetic responses, such as, "I am against homosexual activism

but if they keep it private then I say leave them alone."[290] These responses suggest that if white

gay folks are committed to a white nationalist ideology and are willing to perform white

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[288] See "Why are you Guys so Against Homosexuality," [thread], *Stormfront,* February 3, 2016, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1037970/; I place "homosexuality" and "homosexual" in quotation marks throughout because, although these terms are frequently deployed in white nationalist rhetoric, they are antiquated references rooted in the pathologization of non-normative sexual orientations.

[289] JonMcCullaugh, reply to "Why are you Guys so Against Homosexuality," [Msg. 6], *Stormfront,* December 30, 2012, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1037970/.

[290] Nothumbrian, reply to "Why are you Guys so Against Homosexuality," [Msg. 28], *Stormfront,* December 31, 2012, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1037970-3/.

nationalist formations of respectability (e.g. by not openly proclaiming/affirming/displaying their

gayness), it is reasonable to embrace their involvement.

Strong opposition to "homosexuality" among white nationalists is much more common

than any guise of acceptance, however, and this opposition is typically rationalized through

common sense appeals to the cultural depravity of "homosexuals" and the threat this depravity

poses to pure whiteness. Representative of the ways this opposition is commonly articulated

through appeals to common sense, one user wrote:

> A homosexual is a person with a dangerous mental illness. They molest children at a truly
> alarming rate—thirty times the rate of heterosexuals according to one of the studies.
> Their lifespans are shorted by decades due to their behaviors."[291]

Here, opposition to "homosexuality" is mobilized through common sense language and

articulated to vague references to "scientific studies" that stand in for evidence of otherwise

absurd and wholly disproven arguments—that "homosexuals" are dangerous, mentally ill,

diseased child molesters. Another user voices opposition, noting, "Because they're just sick

people all-around. Have you ever seen what a Gay Pride parade looks like? It ain't a very pretty

sight. Homosexuality is a defect and a mental illness and should be treated as such—not

celebrated."[292] In this way, opposition to "homosexuality" in white nationalist rhetoric mobilizes

affects of disgust and fear through the language of common sense, attaching deviance to white

bodies that do not contribute to the reproduction of pure whiteness by failing to perform

normative white heterosexuality. In other words, white nationalists' opposition to

"homosexuality" is rationalized as common sense through the construction of "homosexual

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[291] Fading Light, reply to "Why are you Guys so Against Homosexuality," [Msg. 7], *Stormfront,*
December 30, 2012, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1037970/.
[292] Xizor, , reply to "Why are you Guys so Against Homosexuality," [Msg. 5], *Stormfront,*
December 30, 2012, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1037970/.

deviance" as clearly observable and recognizable. Even *if* some white "homosexuals" adopt a pro-white orientation to race that is otherwise in line with a white nationalist ideology, then, their efforts to identify with white nationalism are often constructed as a threat to the movement rather than an asset because they do not contribute to the biological reproduction of whiteness *and* they threaten to contaminate the cultural supremacy of whiteness with their perceived celebration of deviance.

As I will continue to demonstrate across subsequent chapters, formations of white racial consciousness are often articulated in intersectional terms, whether implicitly or explicitly. These articulations demonstrate that power works through complex, intersecting relations across multiple axes and illustrate how dominant formations of power are bolstered at these intersections. Racialized power, for example, extends beyond the material and ideological relations that construct race and a racial hierarchy in its articulations to systems of power that privilege heterosexuality, masculinity, and capitalist wealth. As such, rhetorics that promote the superiority of whiteness tend, either implicitly or explicitly, to promote the superiority of middle–upper-class heteronormative white masculinity—I return to this argument in Chapter 5's discussion of online alt-right trolls. As I demonstrate with my analysis of alt-right celebrity troll Milo Yiannopoulos in the third analysis chapter, however, there is certainly room for those who fall outside of heteronormative white masculinity to do the ideological work of white nationalists, provided they carefully and consistently articulate their outsider status.

<div align="center">Conclusions</div>

Throughout this chapter, I have illuminated how the rhetorical turn toward white nationalism—exemplified on Stormfront and echoed across other online fringe public

platforms[293]—rearticulates an ideology of white superiority in ways that attempt to resist a

colorblind racial ideology and its accompanying affective economy of white fragility as well as

mainstream opposition to traditional formations of white supremacy. By making common sense

appeals to the realities of race and racial difference and rearticulating pro-whiteness to more

pleasant affects, white nationalist rhetoric attempts to distance itself from mainstream

expectations of pro-white rhetoric (as hate speech characterized by racial slurs and calls to

violence) and, in the process, construct a more comfortable and palatable orientation to pro-

whiteness for everyday white U.S. Americans.

　　　Through strategic stylistic and substantive choices in an effort to appeal to a broad

mainstream white audience, tempered formations of an ideology of white superiority offer a pro-

white orientation to race positioned between mainstream expectations of colorblind racial

unconsciousness and extreme formations of white supremacy. This tempered pro-white rhetoric

hails for interpellation an audience of everyday white folks who, in a contemporary context

characterized by proliferating formations of racial consciousness, are negotiating tensions

between colorblindness and racial consciousness and are well positioned to identify with a

formation of white racial consciousness that resists normative affects of shame, guilt, and

discomfort by affirming the intrinsic value of whiteness and attempting to make space for

mainstream, public affirmations of white culture and pride.

　　　The analysis in this chapter provides a foundation for the analyses that unfold in the next

two chapters. Chapter 5 investigates the emergence and evolution of the "alt-right" and

demonstrates how the rhetoric of this pro-white far-right fringe group rearticulates white

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[293] Other noteworthy examples making rhetorical turns to white nationalism include *American Renaissance* (https://www.amren.com/), *The Daily Stormer* (http://www.dailystormer.com/), and VDARE (http://www.vdare.com).

nationalism through appeals to intellectualism and absurdity in ways that attempt to hail a simultaneously intellectual and youthful far-right pro-white audience. Here, I argue that the alt-right is constructed and positioned as a rhetorical bridge between mainstream publics and white nationalism. In Chapter 6, I turn toward formations of *anti*-racist whiteness to investigate white anti-racist consciousness and praxis. Here, I argue that white anti-racist consciousness and praxis are constructed through rhetorical appeals to white (dis)comfort, which attempt to mobilize resistance toward mainstream colorblind *and* white nationalist orientations to race while also strategically negotiating the affective economy of white fragility.

CHAPTER 5
Scholars & Trolls: Intellectualism & Absurdity in the White Nationalist Rhetoric of the "Alterative Right"

Have an identity. I don't need to tell black people in this room to have an identity because you all have got it. You know who you are. ...But I will tell that to white people. Have a goddamn identity. Have a sense of yourself. Be a part of this family. You are not an individual, you are not "just an Amurican," you are not just a citizen, you are part of this family. Be a part of it. ...find that within yourself. ...that European, that hero within you. Be that person.

-Richard Spencer[294]

The dynamic of the Alt Right has been to "red pill" and convert the best of [its supporters] to a White Nationalist outlook. Those who are unconverted will either remain in our circle because they are comfortable being around White Nationalists and thus serve as bridges and lines of influence to the mainstream, or if they are uncomfortable with the presence of White Nationalists, they will leave. But we aren't leaving. We built this house, and we will burn it to the ground before we allow ourselves to be evicted from it.

-Greg Johnson[295]

Bursting onto the mainstream political scene alongside Donald Trump's 2015 presidential campaign, the alternative right—or alt-right—is a far-right group broadly characterized by its opposition to "establishment conservativism," particularly the mainstream political right's supposed acquiescence to a perceived culture of political correctness, compulsory multiculturalism, and leftist identity politics.[296] As suggested by the fragments above, alt-right rhetoric attempts to articulate a different type of identity politics—a white identity politics positioned to hail mainstream white folks into pro-white racial consciousness rooted in white nationalism under the guise of an edgy alternative to mainstream conservatism and a culture of "political correctness."

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[294] Richard Spencer, "Richard Spencer at Texas A&M 12/6/16," [28:16–29:39], *YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlbLNWIFEY0.*

[295] Greg Johnson, "Interview on White Nationalism & the Alt Right," *Counter Currents,* October 19, 2016, https://www.counter-currents.com/2016/10/interview-on-white-nationalism-and-the-alt-right/.

[296] Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," *Breitbart,* March 29, 2016, http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

Despite attempts to construct a separation between an alt-right ideology and white

nationalism among some alt-right proponents, one need not look far to begin to glean their deep

interconnections.[297] For example, by calling for white racial consciousness and a collective white

identity through the metaphor of family, prominent alt-right persona and self-avowed white

nationalist Richard Spencer illustrates how alt-right rhetoric mobilizes rhetorical strategies

illuminated in the previous chapter's analysis of white nationalist rhetoric, such as rearticulating

whiteness to positive affects (familial belonging, noble heroism) and appeals to the common

sense reality of race and racial difference (other races have a racial identity, so should white

people). Self-avowed white nationalist Greg Johnson's candid insight illuminates the white

nationalist roots of the alt-right and imagines the alt-right as a bridge between white nationalism

and the mainstream public.

As with white nationalism, one primary concern of an alt-right ideology is the perceived

erosion of dominant whiteness from U.S. American society, which white nationalist and alt-right

rhetoric imagine as both material and symbolic. This ostensible erosion is constructed as material

in the sense that increased racial mixing, immigration, and the general promotion of a more

racially and ethnically diverse population are articulated to the perceived decline of a "pure"

white population, which both groups refer to as literal "white genocide."[298] Further, as with

white nationalist rhetoric, alt-right rhetoric takes issue with the perceived symbolic erosion of

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[297] See Mike Pesca, "The Alt-Right is Using Trump," *Slate,* November 23, 2016,
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/gist/2016/11/ben_shapiro_on_steve_bannon_th
e_alt_right_and_why_the_left_needs_to_turn.html
[298] See Oliver Willis, "What is the 'Alt-Right'? A Guide to the White Nationalist Movement
Now Leading Conservative Media," *Media Matters,* August 25, 2016,
http://mediamatters.org/blog/2016/08/25/what-alt-right-guide-white-nationalist-movement-now-
leading-conservative-media/212643#whitegenocide. See also Andrew Anglin, "A Normie's
Guide to the Alt-Right," *Daily Stormer,* August 31, 2016, http://www.dailystormer.com/a-
normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

whiteness in mainstream public discourse, arguing that "[a]ny discussion of white identity, or white interests, is seen as a heretical offense."[299] And, like white nationalists, proponents of an alt-right ideology perceive the material and symbolic erosion of whiteness to be directly related to the embrace of ideologies, practices, and policies that promote colorblind multiculturalism.

For instance, after pointing vaguely to liberal desires to create "an undifferentiated global…raceless, genderless, identity-less, meaningless population,"[300] Richard Spencer argued, "It isn't just a great erasure of white people. It isn't just an invasion of Europe, an invasion of the United States by the third world, it is ultimately the destruction of all peoples and all cultures around the globe."[301] Here, Spencer implicitly invokes the white nationalist argument that racial separatism is the way to protect "true diversity" while the promotion of multiculturalist diversity acts as a "great erasure of white people" and threatens mass global destruction. The first step in addressing this dilemma, Spencer suggests, is for white folks to discover and accept themselves *as* white—to recuperate a positive, affirmative white racial identity and to proudly proclaim that identity in mainstream public contexts. In this way, alt-right rhetoric is articulated in opposition to the race evasive discourse and perceived "political correctness" characteristic of a colorblind racial ideology and oriented toward recuperating the ability to speak openly and explicitly about valuing white identity and white culture in mainstream public discourse. Whereas white nationalist rhetoric is largely oriented toward constructing a strong pro-white community on the fringes of mainstream public discourse, alt-right rhetoric is more directly oriented toward intervening *in* mainstream public discourse to make space for affirmative pro-white discourse. These interventions promote white racial consciousness and attempt to make space in

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[299] Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide."
[300] Spencer, "Richard Spencer at Texas A&M 12/6/16," [18:08–18:18].
[301] Ibid., 19:04–19:22.

mainstream discourse for the explicit promotion of white racial identity and culture while also attempting to temper articulations between the alt-right and white nationalism by grounding their claims in the rhetoric of free speech and political correctness.

White nationalism and the alt-right thus have significant ideological, rhetorical, and material similarities and are, ultimately, oriented in similar ways—yet, maintaining analytic distinction between these two formations of pro-white rhetoric will help to reveal how whiteness maneuvers rhetorically to appeal to mainstream white audiences in different contexts. As I have begun to demonstrate above and will continue to illuminate below, the alt-right has been strategically constructed as a broad, "amorphous movement," that appeals to proponents of a vast array of ideologies and is primarily orientated in opposition to mainstream conservatism and "political correctness."[302] Branding itself in this way has helped enable alt-right rhetoric to mobilize a white nationalist ideology in mainstream public discourse while also constructing rhetorical distance between itself and white nationalism, much like the rhetorical distance constructed between white nationalism and white supremacy. By investigating how white nationalist assumptions and arguments are mobilized by alt-right rhetoric, this chapter will demonstrate how an alt-right ideology has been strategically constructed as an edgy alternative to mainstream politics and positioned to move everyday white audiences beyond an affective economy of white fragility and toward a white nationalist orientation to race.

What has become known as "the alt-right" is a relatively amorphous collective comprised of several slightly less amorphous subgroups among whom there is frequent infighting and

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[302] Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide." See also Rosie Gray, "How 2015 Fueled the Rise of the Freewheeling, White Nationalist Alt Right Movement," *Buzzfeed,* December 27, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/rosiegray/how-2015-fueled-the-rise-of-the-freewheeling-white-nationali?utm_term=.nmBr2r17v#.mmzoRovkp.

disagreement.[303] Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to identify and deconstruct each

of those elements, uncovering the history of the alt-right and illuminating its major evolutions

will help to reveal how an alt-right ideology has been strategically constructed as a rhetorical

bridge between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse. In the first portion of this

chapter, I trace the early emergence of the alt-right through articulations of white nationalism to

intellectualism and calls for a youthful, energetic, intellectual revival. In the process, I reveal that

the alt-right was initially imagined as a way to reach young, intelligent disgruntled conservatives

with a white nationalist message masquerading as a broad far-right political ideology. Here,

white nationalist appeals to common sense were rearticulated as appeals to intellectualism

through copious references to science and high theory deployed to construct pro-white racial

consciousness as an educated, intelligent orientation to race and, in turn, as an alternative to

fragile orientations to white racial consciousness. As my analysis demonstrates, however, the

emerging alt-right's appeals to intellectualism were ill equipped for circulation outside the elite

white nationalist ivory tower and were unsuccessful at interpellating the young energetic

audience imagined.

To reveal how alt-right rhetoric made strategic adaptations to reach a younger and wider

audience, the second portion of this chapter turns to an analysis of how an alt-right ideology has

been deployed through a rhetoric of absurdity by anonymous and celebrity alt-right "trolls." I

begin by conceptualizing "absurdity" and "trolling" before moving to illuminate how anonymous

online trolls exploited the anonymity and anything-goes discursive culture of fringe online

message boards to mobilize absurd formations of alt-right rhetoric for the purpose of provoking

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[303] See Tina Nguyen, "The Movement Formerly Known as the Alt-Right Tries to Evolve," *Vanity Fair,* April 20, 2017, http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/04/alt-right-movement-evolution; Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide."

outrage and offense among the mainstream public. Then, I explore how appeals to absurdity are (re)articulated to appeals to intellectualism in the rhetoric of alt-right celebrity trolls. In this section, I analyze the celebrity troll persona of alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos to reveal how alt-right rhetoric has been mobilized in formations that articulate intellectualism to absurdity to appeal to young white audiences under the guise of promoting free speech and opposing political correctness.

Across this chapter, then, my analysis illuminates the evolution of an alt-right ideology and reveals its (dis)articulations to white nationalism across its shifting discursive formations. Along the way, I uncover how alt-right rhetoric invokes an imagined culture of political correctness to construct a common sense foundation for an ideology that—at least in some formations—revels in absurdity. Tracing the evolution of alt-right rhetoric reveals that the articulation of intellectualism to absurdity mobilized by alt-right celebrity trolls has enabled alt-right rhetoric to reach the young, energetic, educated audience envisioned by the white nationalist intelligentsia. Further, the articulation of intellectualism to absurdity in alt-right rhetoric mobilizes affective resistance to white fragility by constructing identification with the alt-right (and, by extension, disidentification from both colorblindness and anti-racism) as simultaneously edgy and smart. Ultimately, I argue that an alt-right ideology has been strategically constructed as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse. Before moving too quickly ahead, however, I turn first to a discussion of the discourse on political correctness to provide context for the alt-right's arguments about the suppression of white identity and pride.

On "Political Correctness"

Concerns around "political correctness" are typically traced back to 1990s-era

conservative opposition to a supposed "liberal university culture," but the term has a longer

history in U.S. American political discourse.[304] Originally coined by U.S. American communists

in the 1930s, the phrase "political correctness" came into widespread use among U.S. American

leftists in the 1960s and 1970s, where it was used to mock overzealous, self-righteous liberals

who toed the party line to a fault.[305] "Political correctness" was re-appropriated by the political

right in the 1990s and, since then, has typically signaled the perception that contemporary public

culture is characterized by an obsession with leftist ideals of multiculturalism and diversity and,

as a consequence, an atmosphere of repression, particularly of "free speech."[306] Critiques of

political correctness have proliferated through conservative academic and political discourse

since the 1990s and became a key feature of Donald Trump's 2015 presidential campaign, where

Trump made copious appeals around the need to "stop being so politically correct in this

country," typically in response to critiques that his own rhetoric is insensitive to particular

groups.[307]

Though it has come to be broadly applied to U.S. American public culture, the roots of

"political correctness" in its contemporary conservative formations lie in critiques of U.S.

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[304] Paul Berman, "Introduction: The Debate and Its Origins," in *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses,* ed. Paul Berman (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992), 2.
[305] Moira Weigel, "Political Correctness: How the Right Invented a Phantom Enemy," *The Guardian,* November 30, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump.
[306] Berman, "Introduction," 2.
[307] Weigel, "Political Correctness."

American college campus culture.[308] In one of the first contemporary pieces published on

"political correctness," author Richard Bernstein explores the growing perception that "a cluster

of opinions about race, ecology, feminism, culture and foreign policy defines a kind of 'correct'

attitude toward the problems of the world."[309] On one side, Bernstein demonstrates, are those

who affirm that U.S. American society has long been dominated by power structures that have

privileged white heteropatriarchy, such that "everybody but white heterosexual males has

suffered some form of repression and has been denied a cultural voice."[310]

On the other side are those who believe that feminist, anti-racist, and pro-gay interests

have converged in a radical ideology pervading U.S. American college campuses. Those who

oppose "political correctness" argue that there is now only one "correct" opinion about issues of

race, gender, and sexuality, and any deviance from orthodox recitation of that opinion results in

accusations of racism, sexism, and/or homophobia, which has effectively shut down civil

discourse around these issues by forcing everyone "to walk on eggshells."[311] Implicitly, political

correctness is constructed in opposition to common sense, where common sense interpretations

of "free speech" as unrestricted public communication are violated by the perception of language

policing and speech codes and, as a result, common sense observations that defy "politically

correct" beliefs are censored from mainstream public discourse.

Whereas conservative critiques of "political correctness" attempt to frame themselves in

neutral opposition to a radical leftist agenda and in favor of unrestricted free speech, scholars

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[308] Paul Berman (ed.), *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992); Weigel, "Political Correctness."

[309] Richard Bernstein, "The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct," *New York Times,* October 28, 1990, http://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/28/weekinreview/ideas-trends-the-rising-hegemony-of-the-politically-correct.html?pagewanted=all.

[310] Ibid.

[311] Berman, "Introduction," 2.

make clear that the discourse of political correctness is commonly mobilized to shut down

identity-based conversations and suppress liberal and radical ideas.[312] In other words appeals to

political correctness function less as promotions of unrestricted free speech and more as

opposition to the open proclamation of liberal and radical ideas in mainstream public contexts. In

this way, when mobilized from positions of social privilege and power, appeals to political

correctness function similarly to appeals to counterpublicity mobilized from dominant

positions—as rhetorics of containment that attempt to (re)secure the dominant, privileged

position of the groups claiming exclusion.[313]

Just as the origins of discourse on political correctness are often (mis)understood to lie in

their popular 1990s-era formations, the rise of the alt-right tends to be (mis)attributed to its post-

2015 mainstream public articulations to Donald Trump. Below, however, I demonstrate that the

alt-right emerged from the elitist white nationalist intelligentsia in 2008 and tried for many

years—largely unsuccessfully—to become an energetic, youthful pro-white far-right movement.

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[312] Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson, "The Rhetorical Limits of Satire: An Analysis of James Finn Garner's Politically Correct Bedtime Stories," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 2 (2003): 132–153; John K. Wilson, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); Marlia E. Banning, "The Limits of PC Discourse: Linking Language Use to Social Practice," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2004): 191–214.

[313] See Christopher Duerringer, "The 'War on Christianity': Counterpublicity or Hegemonic Containment," *Southern Communication Journal* 78, no. 4 (2013): 311–325; Notably, discourse around political correctness is not "just" about issues of race and the symbolic erasure of pro-whiteness from mainstream public discourse—as suggested by this discussion, opponents of "political correctness" (and, likewise, proponents of an alt-right ideology) take issue with progressive discourse on gender, sexuality, religion, and other intersecting identities, too. Although my analysis in this chapter focuses primarily on articulations between alt-right rhetoric and a pro-white ideology, then, the importance of these intersections warrants future research.

The Emergence of the "Alternative Right": A Call from the White Nationalist Intelligentsia

The alternative right—or *alt-right*—is a group that seems to many to have come out of

nowhere. As discussed in the introduction chapter, mainstream media discourse on the alt-right

has tended to locate the origins and influence of this fringe political group in the 2015 rise of

Donald Trump as a public political persona.[314] And, indeed, there is a clear and important

relationship between Trump's presidential candidacy and the emergence of the alt-right in

mainstream public discourse. As journalist Ben Schreckinger has noted, support between Trump

and the alt-right has been mutual—Trump has done his part by promoting key tenets of an alt-

right ideology and bringing alt-right ideologues such as former Breitbart editor Steven Bannon

into his inner circle, and the alt-right has done its part by campaigning enthusiastically for Trump

and supporting his presidency.[315]

For example, acclaimed alt-right provocateur Richard Spencer, who famously concluded

a November 2016 speech with, "Heil Trump! Heil the people! Heil victory!,"[316] has elsewhere

explained,

> [Donald Trump] had a sense of height, of upward movement, of greatness. Of that thing
> that makes the white race truly unique and truly wonderful. That striving toward infinity,
> that however vulgar he might be, that he had a sense of it. And that's what inspired the
> alt-right. That's what made Donald Trump an alt-right hero.[317]

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[314] For common framing, See Rosie Gray, "How 2015 Fueled the Rise of the Freewheeling, White Nationalist Alt Right Movement," *Buzzfeed,* December 27, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/rosiegray/how-2015-fueled-the-rise-of-the-freewheeling-white-nationali?utm_term=.nmBr2r17v#.mmzoRovkp ; NPR Staff, "What You Need to Know About the Alt-Right Movement," *NPR,* August 26, 2016, http://www.npr.org/2016/08/26/491452721/the-history-of-the-alt-right.

[315] Ben Schreckinger, "The Alt-Right Comes to Washington," *Politico,* January/February, 2017, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/alt-right-trump-washington-dc-power-milo-214629.

[316] As quoted by Wilbert L. Cooper, "'Heil Trump': Members of the Alt-Right Are Looking Forward to a Whiter America," *Vice,* November 21, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/heil-trump-this-is-the-alternative-right.

[317] Spencer, "Richard Spencer at Texas A&M," [20:45–21:06].

As Spencer demonstrates, the alt-right was inspired by Donald Trump and saw in him an affirmation of their white nationalist ideology. And, as many journalists have noted, by articulating itself to Trump's political persona, the alt-right has gained a sense of mainstream legitimacy, attention, and recognition, and, in the process, bolstered its political power and extended its reach to a wide, mainstream audience.[318] Jared Taylor, head of the white nationalist think tank *American Renaissance,* affirmed the boost that Trump provided to the alt-right and, by extension, to white nationalists, noting, "The media have tried to attack Donald Trump by blaming him for our support. …But the media attention has backfired. It has introduced our ideas to millions of people, many of whom we are winning over to our side."[319]

However, the articulation of a pro-white racial consciousness to far-right conservativism through the language of an "alternative right" precedes Donald Trump and bears no necessary articulation to his presidency. Rather, the ideology currently known as the "alt-right" emerged from a small group of highly educated white nationalists—whom I have termed the "white nationalist intelligentsia"—who called for a youthful, energetic, intellectual revival of far-right, pro-white politics. Thus, while the articulation between Donald Trump and the alt-right is interesting and significant, it is not my focus in this section. Instead, I am interested in

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[318] See Patrick Strickland, "What is the Alt-Right and What Does it Stand For?," *AlJazeera,* March 4, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/alt-stand-170218115042196.html; Michael D'Antonio, "Is Donald Trump Racist? Here's What the Record Shows," *Fortune,* June 7, 2016, http://fortune.com/2016/06/07/donald-trump-racism-quotes/; Nicholas Confessore, "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance," *New York Times,* July 13, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/us/politics/donald-trump-white-identity.html?_r=1; Ben Schreckinger, "The Alt-Right Comes to Washington," *Politico,* January/February, 2017, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/alt-right-trump-washington-dc-power-milo-214629.
[319] Jared Taylor, "What is the Alt Right?," *American Renaissance,* October 11, 2016, http://www.amren.com/news/2016/10/what-is-the-alt-right-jared-taylor/.

uncovering the lesser-known and more nefarious history of the alt-right, which I have pulled

from fragments found in the archives of fringe-conservative online media outlets and

reassembled here.[320] As my critical rhetorical analysis of this history reveals, the alt-right is

firmly rooted in white nationalists' longstanding attempts to reach mainstream white U.S.

American audiences. Yet, whereas the white nationalist rhetoric on Stormfront analyzed in

Chapter 4 emphasized appeals to common sense and positive affects of comfort, love, and

community, alt-right rhetoric has tended to favor a different set of rhetorical strategies. Below, I

reveal that early alt-right discourse was characterized by rhetorical shifts from appeals to

common sense toward appeals to intellectualism, where references to the obviousness of race and

the reasonability of white superiority were traded for appeals to science and high theory that

circulated affects of elitism and intelligence. Later, I turn toward how more contemporary

formations of alt-right discourse have mobilized appeals to absurdity in ways that have

broadened its reach and influence.

Coining "Alternative Right": Paul Gottfried & the Mencken Club

       Although it is frequently misattributed to Richard Spencer's 2010 launch of

AlternativeRight.com,[321] the term "alternative right" was coined in November 2008—just weeks

after the (first) election of Barack Obama, the United States' first (half) black president—in a

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[320] To trace the emergence and early evolution of the alt-right, I searched the archives of Google News and ProQuest—comprehensive databases for mainstream news media publications—for the earliest mentions of "alt-right" and "alternative right" and found zero relevant results prior to 2013. I also searched for "alt-right" and "alternative right" using Fagan Finder's "search by date" feature which searches the entire Google archive.[320] This search yielded a robust and diffuse set of results, from which I was able to determine that all relevant mentions of the alternative right/alt-right prior to 2010 were mobilized on fringe-conservative and/or white nationalist online platforms.

[321] See "Alt Right: A Primer About the New White Supremacy," *Anti-Defamation League,* Accessed January 17, 2017, https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/alt-right-a-primer-about-the-new-white-supremacy.

speech delivered by Dr. Paul Gottfried to an audience attending the H. L. Mencken Club's

inaugural meeting.[322] Both Gottfried and the Mencken Club have significant connections to

white nationalism, and, further, provide metonymic representations of key elements in the white

nationalist intelligentsia—Gottfried as a white nationalist scholar, and the Mencken Club as a

white nationalist think tank. Illuminating the role of these figures and elements in the early

emergence of the alt-right will begin to reveal how the alt-right was initially constructed as an

elite intellectual pro-white far-right ideology and will demonstrate how white nationalist appeals

to common sense were rearticulated as alt-right appeals to intellectualism. Additionally, my

critical reading of Gottfried's 2008 address and its context begins to illuminate the pro-white

agenda implicitly at work in the construction of an "alternative right" and provides an

introduction to key elements of early alt-right rhetoric: intellectualization and the construction of

academic legitimacy, appeals to youth and energy, strategic use of race evasive or racially coded

language articulated to an ideology of white superiority, and the construction of the alt-right as a

broad far-right political ideology.

 Paul Gottfried is an Ivy League-educated professor emeritus of Humanities who has

published on a range of topics under the general umbrella of European intellectual history,

including liberalism and conservatism, and has commonly signaled his opposition to mainstream

Republican politics by coining and adopting the label "paleoconservative."[323] The term

"paleoconservative" (*paleo* = Greek for *old*) is meant to differentiate this inflection of

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[322] Paul Gottfried, "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right," *Taki's Magazine,* December 1, 2008, http://takimag.com/article/the_decline_and_rise_of_the_alternative_right/print#axzz4InOGAwpd.

[323] Helen Chernikoff, "Meet the Jewish 'Paleoconservative' Who Coined the Term 'Alternative Right,'" *Forward.com,* August 29, 2016, http://forward.com/news/national/348372/meet-the-jewish-paleoconservative-who-coined-the-term-alternative-right/.

conservativism from the emergence of "neoconservatives" in the 1980s and signal instead a far-right ideology rooted in conservative principles from the 1950s and 60s.[324] Paleoconservatives emerged in the 1980s as a far-right reactionary group who distance themselves from mainstream Republicans and conservatives most clearly through their opposition to interventionism and support for nationalism, which they express by taking hard isolationist, nationalist positions on American economic and foreign policy and by adopting anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalist positions that, by implication, are oriented toward maintaining a majority white United States.[325]

By 2008, it had become clear that the potential for paleoconservatives to have a lasting, meaningful impact on mainstream politics was limited by the old age and rough personalities of its core base of old white intellectuals. "Although spirited and highly intelligent," Gottfried explained, the "curmudgeonly" paleoconservatives were "temperamentally unfit for a counterinsurgency" and were, instead, more comfortable engaging in philosophical debates among themselves.[326] To construct a space for a "post-paleo" revival, Gottfried, who is Jewish,[327] co-founded the H. L. Mencken Club with self-avowed white nationalist Richard Spencer, who now runs the National Policy Institute—another white nationalist think-tank.

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[324] Samuel Francis, "The Paleo Persuasion," *The American Conservative,* December 16, 2002, http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-paleo-persuasion/.
[325] A longer history and deeper exploration of a "paleoconservative" ideology can be found in Michael Foley, *American Credo: The Place of Ideas in US Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2007): 318 as well as in Joseph Scotchie, *Revolt From the Heartland: The Struggle for an Authentic Conservatism* (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers, 2002). See also Samuel Francis, "The Paleo Persuasion," *The American Conservative,* December 16, 2002, http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-paleo-persuasion/.
[326] Paul Gottfried, "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right."
[327] Gottfried's Jewish identity is noteworthy here because (most) white nationalists are expressly anti-Semitic, including H.L. Mencken himself—however, exploring the complex history of the relationship between white nationalism and Judaism is outside the scope of this project. See Associated Press, "Mencken Was Pro-Nazi, His Diary Shows," *Los Angeles Times,* December 5, 1989, http://articles.latimes.com/1989-12-05/news/mn-198_1_h-l-mencken.

Gottfried and Spencer imagined the Mencken Club "as an organization for independent-minded

intellectuals and academics of the Right."[328] In keeping with this goal, the Mencken Club has,

since 2008, organized annual conferences that commonly host far-right conservative scholars,

including several self-avowed white nationalists, and are framed around panels and presentations

similar to those of a traditional (albeit small) academic conference.[329] For example, of the

fourteen presenters at the inaugural Mencken Club meeting, seven were professors, two were

attorneys, and the other five were writers, either of far-right racially inflected social science (e.g.

Charles Murray and John Derbyshire) or for far-right publications (e.g. Richard Spencer and

Taki Theodoracopulos).[330] Mencken Club meetings are not, in other words, positioned to hail

either a broad white nationalist audience or an audience of mainstream, everyday white folks.

Rather, these meetings are constructed for the white nationalist intelligentsia—a group of far-

right pro-white intellectuals and academics.

It was in the academic conference-style context of the first annual Mencken Club meeting

that the call for the formation of a far-right pro-white group was first made using the language of

"alternative right." In his brief keynote address titled "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative

Right," Gottfried tapped into his audience's pre-existing assumptions of white superiority and

familiarity with racialized science to call for the formation of an intellectual far-right alternative

to mainstream conservative politics implicitly grounded in white nationalism. Throughout,

Gottfried decried growing divisions among paleoconservatives and called for disgruntled

paleoconservatives committed to anti-multiculturalist values to (re)assemble a strong

"independent intellectual Right" capable of waging strong opposition to both the Left and,

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[328] "About," *The Mencken Club,* accessed November 4, 2016, http://hlmenckenclub.org/about/.
[329] Ibid.
[330] "Theme: The Egalitarian Temptation: November 21–23, 2008," *The Mencken Club,* accessed April 20, 2017, http://hlmenckenclub.org/2008-conference/.

especially, the mainstream Right.[331] Aside from remarking on his distaste for the tendency of mainstream conservatives to lump his brand of radical white populism together with "black nationalists, radical feminists, and open-borders advocates," there were no explicit invocations of race. And yet, there were veiled affirmations of white superiority throughout.

For example, in discussing the decline of paleoconservatism, Gottfried argued that traditional paleoconservatives had been committed to sociobiology (or the study of biological influences in human social life) but that the contemporary "paleo camp looks markedly different as well as much older, and it shows little interest in the *cognitive, hereditary preconditions for intellectual and cultural achievements*" (emphasis mine). Here, Gottfried signaled the foundational white supremacist belief that white people are cognitively, hereditarily predisposed for higher intellectual and cultural achievement than most other races—yet, he did so in a way that avoids explicating the particularities of the hierarchy invoked, which constructs rhetorical space for the possibility of maneuvering around accusations of white supremacy. Similarly, Gottfried later called for the rejection of the growing belief on the political left and right that "everyone would perform up to speed if he/she could avail himself/herself of the proper cultural tools" and accept the "fact that not everyone enjoys the same genetic precondition for learning," calling the push toward equality a "politically motivated experiment in wishful thinking." By framing "human cognitive disparities" as "stark fact[s]," Gottfried rearticulated the white nationalist rhetorical strategy of appealing to common sense to more sophisticated, academically oriented language. Here, vague references to decontextualized science are used to lend credibility to the common sense reality of race, racial difference, and, by extension, racial hierarchy.

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[331] Paul Gottfried, "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right."

In other words, Gottfried's use of academic language and appeals to science might, to an everyday audience, mask the assumptions of white superiority implicitly referenced in his speech. On the one hand, it seems as though Gottfried is making a common sense argument in more sophisticated terms—his explicit claim was, essentially, that not *everyone* has the same capabilities—which should be a *common sense* fact. Yet, among Gottfried's white nationalist intelligentsia audience—a group that is known to frequent in racially inflected science—his veiled references to "sociobiology" and "cognitive, hereditary preconditions for intellectual and cultural achievement" are likely to be understood as arguments for essential, natural racial differences that biologically predisposition white folks as intellectually and culturally superior. Indeed, as Ian Haney López demonstrated, slippery invocations of white supremacy through coded rhetoric couched in an air of common sense reasonability and articulated to abstract references to science are common in contemporary public and political discourse and function to uphold an ideology of white superiority under the guise of race evasive discourse.[332]

According to Gottfried, most paleoconservatives were growing old and complacent, becoming too quick to compromise with mainstream politics. Thus, far-right conservatives were in need of a new youthful and energetic "alternative"—an *alternative right*. Gottfried, who was himself in his late 60's when he delivered this speech, made numerous references to the "youth," "exuberance," and energy of the alternative right he was attempting to call into being, simultaneously identifying and disidentifying with the aging paleoconservatives from whose ashes the alternative right was presumed to emerge. As Gottfried noted,

> If the H.L. Mencken Club can achieve that for which it has been formed, it should have an eventful and for those who disagree with us, profoundly disruptive future. We are part of an attempt to put together an independent intellectual Right. …Our group is also full of

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[332] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*.

young thinkers and activists, and if there is to be an independent Right, our group will have to become its leaders.

The Mencken Club was thus constructed as an incubation space for an intellectualized pro-white ideology, where the white nationalist roots of a crumbling paleoconservative ideology could be transplanted into younger, more energetic vessels, positioned to become leaders of the revived white nationalist intelligentsia. Yet, precisely how the younger generation would be compelled to identify with a fringe far-right ideology was unclear at this point. Despite Gottfried's multiple references to the Mencken Club's "young thinkers and activists," "well-educated young professionals," and "younger members," the guest list for the Mencken Club's annual conferences reads like a roll call for old pro-white far right intellectuals (speakers at the 2008 conference included Charles Murray, John Derbyshire, Paul Gottfried, and Peter Brimelow). In fact, the only noteworthy "well-educated young professional" on the roster for the first several Mencken Club meetings was Richard Spencer, who had turned 30 a few months before the inaugural 2008 meeting.

It is noteworthy, then, that appeals to youth were foundational in the early articulation of an alternative right because they signal the white nationalist intelligentsia's keen awareness that interpellating a younger base of supporters was crucial to their movement while acknowledging that the old pro-white far-right intellectuals were ill-equipped to actually reach a youthful audience. As I continue to demonstrate below, the drive to interpellate young white folks shaped the alt-right's evolving rhetorical strategies in significant ways, but it would take many years for alt-right rhetoric to maneuver into formations that were well positioned to hail a young *and* intelligent white audience. In the meantime, the white nationalist intelligentsia's youngest member began attempting to harness the power of the Internet to reach a wider audience in ways

that continued to make appeals to intellectualism and articulate the alt-right as a broad political

ideology with white nationalist roots.

The Alternative Right Moves Online

In March 2010, Richard Spencer launched *AlternativeRight.com*[333]—a webpage, in

keeping with attempts to frame the alternative right as a broad political ideology that billed itself

as "an online magazine of radical traditionalism. …[marking] an attempt to forge a new

intellectual right-wing that is independent and outside the 'conservative' establishment."[334]

Despite this broad framing, content on *Alternative Right* focused primarily on exposing the

"illusion" of racial equality and arguing for the importance of embracing pro-white racial

consciousness. Here, Spencer and other contributors lamented the mainstream Republican

Party's perceived acquiescence to the political left's push toward multiculturalism, equality, and

affirmative diversity and echoed Gottfried's earlier call for a revival of intellectually grounded

pro-white far-right politics. Yet, where the rhetoric of Gottfried and other white nationalist

intellectuals had formerly been circulated primarily in the relatively insular context of Mencken

Club meetings and other white nationalist gatherings, *Alternative Right* was created for and

marketed to a broader public. Careful to frame *Alternative Right* in terms that elided his strong

commitments to white nationalism, Spencer attempted to harness the power of the Internet to

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[333] From this point on, I capitalize and italicize *Alternative Right* to signal this fringe online media outlet which, after having gone through several shut-downs and rebirths, has splintered into several still-aligned new media sites, including http://www.radixjournal.com, http://alternative-right.blogspot.com, and http://www.altright.com. The original content of *Alternative Right* has been archived (but re-formatted) at http://www.radixjournal.com/altright-archivehome/ or can be viewed in its original formatting using the "Wayback Machine" (https://archive.org/web/).

[334] "About Us," *Alternative Right,* accessed January 20, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20100504201511/http://www.alternativeright.com/about-us/.

reach mainstream white U.S. American audiences with radical pro-white rhetoric billed as the

musings of far-right intellectuals.

In this way, *Alternative Right* was imagined as a rhetorical bridge between white

nationalism and the mainstream public—a way to reach white folks who might not seek out

"white nationalist rhetoric" but would perhaps be sympathetic to white nationalist arguments. As

self-avowed white nationalist Greg Johnson noted, "[T]he *Alternative Right* webzine was

founded as a vehicle by which White Nationalists could interact with dissident Rightists who

were closer to the mainstream in order to convert them to our way of thinking."[335] In alt-right

rhetoric, this conversion process is known as "red-pilling," which is a nod to the 1999 film *The*

Matrix, in which the main character takes a red pill to awaken from the comforts of an illusory

world and see things as they "really" are—to recognize the external influences that control

human thought and action. In the film, the external influences exerting control on and power

over human perception and experience are sentient, parasitic machines. In alt-right rhetoric, these

external forces are (re)framed as ideological influences, such as multiculturalism, anti-racism,

and feminism, that deny the "reality" of natural, hereditary differences between people of

different races and sexes and trick people into believing that we are all the same.[336] Recall that

Stormfront users had similar concerns around exposing the perceived fictitiousness of colorblind

multiculturalism—the alt-right's articulation of this concern to the Matrix's popular "red

pill/blue pill" scene provides a metaphoric narrative that is likely to be meaningful to a

mainstream white audience because of its widespread recognizability.

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[335] Johnson, "Interview on White Nationalism."
[336] Harold Smyth, "I Was Never Red-Pilled: The Case Against the Metaphor," *Radix,* August 17, 2016, http://www.radixjournal.com/journal/2016/8/17/i-was-never-red-pilled-the-case-against-the-metaphor?rq=red%20pill.

To do the work of "red-pilling" everyday white conservatives to convert them to a white nationalist orientation, then, contributors to *Alternative Right* attempted to expose the reality of race and the natural truth of white superiority through common sense appeals articulated to intellectualized language and racialized science and philosophy. In general, this approach reasoned that the realities of race and white superiority *should* be obvious to everyone but, because of a rampant proliferation of political correctness among both intellectuals and the mainstream public, scientific evidence and philosophical arguments are needed to expose the illusion of racial equality and the realities of racial difference and white superiority. For example, in one of the first articles published on *Alternative Right*, contributor Richard Hoste argued that mainstream conservative politics have largely failed white U.S. Americans, and a movement that centers the needs and values of white U.S. Americans is needed.[337] Here, Hoste attempts to demonstrate that mainstream Republicans have done nothing to stop the political left's "March of Diversity" despite "irrefutable evidence" that some races are, as a matter of hereditary and nature, simply "better than others." "If the races are equal," Hoste asks in a tone of innocence, "why do whites always end up near the top and blacks at the bottom, everywhere and always?"

As examples of "irrefutable evidence" that some racial groups are naturally superior to others, Hoste cites a handful decontextualized crime statistics, rattles off anecdotal observations about the proliferation of anti-white violence as he rails against the growing acceptance and promotion of a multicultural ideal, and nods to a variety of racially charged scholars, including Charles Murray, the well-known affirmer of whites' innate intellectual, psychological, and moral

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[337] Richard Hoste, "Why An Alternative Right is Necessary," *Alternative Right,* February 24, 2010, http://www.radixjournal.com/altright-archive/altright-archive/main/the-magazine/why-an-alternative-right-is-necessary?rq=why%20an%20alternative%20right%20is%20necessary.

superiority[338], and John Derbyshire, who was fired from longstanding conservative media outlet

National Review after penning a particularly racially insensitive article for *Taki's Magazine*—

another fringe online platform for far-right pro-white rhetoric.[339] This practice—of citing highly

controversial, misleading, disputed, and refuted[340] research that constructs "natural" racial

differences and accompanying hierarchies as unquestionable truths and common sense

knowledge—is one way that alt-right rhetoric articulates common sense to intellectualism.

As I began to illustrate in the previous chapter, once a belief in innate racial difference

and, therefore, hierarchy has been established as a common sense fact, white racial

consciousness can be (re)constructed as a form of identity politics that, as with politics oriented

around gender, sexuality, or racial minority status, can become a foundation for calls for identity-

based solidarity. In another early piece on *Alternative Right*, contributor Andrew Yeoman

suggested that the Tea Party could become a movement that "nurtures white consciousness and

unity and will become the political basis for whites as a people,"[341] but argued that this potential

was significantly weakened by the group's attempts to rhetorically distance themselves from the

explicit promotion of racial solidarity—a perceived acquiescence to the Left's accusations of

racism. Here, Yeoman implicitly grounds his appeals to racial solidarity on the intellectualized

and common sense construction of innate racial differences exemplified above by Hoste in order

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[338] Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, (New York: Free Press, 1994).
[339] John Derbyshire, "The Talk: Nonblack Version," *Taki's Magazine,* April 5, 2012, http://takimag.com/article/the_talk_nonblack_version_john_derbyshire#axzz1rJPlABLB.
[340] See Claude S. Fischer, Michael Hout, Martín Sánchez Jankowski, Samuel R. Lucas, Ann Swidler, and Kim Voss, *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth,* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press: 1996); "Charles Murray," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, n.d., https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/charles-murray.
[341] Andrew Yeoman, "It Takes a Tribe," *Alternative Right*, April 27, 2010, http://www.radixjournal.com/altright-archive/altright-archive/main/blogs/untimely-observations/its-take-a-tribe?rq=it%20takes%20a%20tribe.

to argue that *because* whites are a distinct and intellectually/psychologically/morally superior

group whose vitality is threatened by growing multiculturalism, white racial solidarity is

necessary. During a time of growing factions and discontent within the mainstream Republican

Party, contributors to *Alternative Right* articulated this discontent in explicitly racialized terms—

they took broadly shared concerns around domestic and foreign policy issues and took white

nationalist positions on these issues by appealing explicitly to the importance of protecting and

preserving white culture.

Elsewhere, *Alternative Right* contributors focused on attempting to expose the ways that

a mainstream culture characterized by political correctness and colorblindness has skewed the

reality of contemporary and historical social life. For example, Paul Gottfried's "The Patron

Saint of White Guilt: The MLK Cult" attempts to argue that Martin Luther King Jr. was a "badly

flawed public figure" and "a notorious philanderer," all of which would be plainly obvious had

King not been made into "a martyred deity" by a culture characterized by "white guilt."[342] As

with his 2008 speech, Gottfried here rearticulates a common sense argument in intellectualized

terms. "It not [*sic*] hard to show King was a badly flawed public figure," Gottfried argued,

pointing to purported examples of King's plagiarism and extramarital affairs as evidence. Yet,

Gottfried's long-form essay and writing style move away from the common sense language

mobilized on Stormfront and toward an intellectualized language positioned to hail a more

educated audience. For example, Gottfried writes, "Lest I be accused of being unfair to my

subject, let me stress that he was not really responsible for this glorification. As far as I know,

King could never have imagined how he would be used after his death, any more than Karl Marx

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[342] Paul E. Gottfried, "The Patron Saint of White Guilt: The MLK Cult," *Alternative Right,* January 17, 2011, http://web.archive.org/web/20110118081309/http://www.alternativeright.com:80/main/blogs/untimely-observations/the-patron-saint-of-white-guilt/.

could have imagined that his ideas would be cited to justify Soviet tyranny." This article—which

makes two additional references to Marx and/or Marxism and regularly trades everyday plain

language for words such as "nexus," "beatified," and "plethora"—thus hails an audience of

educated white folks with an argument that articulates common sense to intellectual elitism:

Everyone *should* be able to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. as a fraud, but "white guilt" has

clouded the vision of most, such that only the smart/educated and *proud* white folks are able to

connect the dots. In this way, Gottfried's article begins to illustrate how alt-right rhetoric

positions both common sense and intelligence in opposition to racial progressivism, where racial

progressivism is articulated to the negative affects associated with white fragility.

Elsewhere, affects associated with white fragility are invoked in articulation with political

correctness and a colorblind orientation to race. For example, Colin Liddell's "Sub-Racism"

argues that "the rise of 'political correctness'" has forced contemporary U.S. Americans to

"repress all conscious racial feeling" or be "made to feel like freaks and outsiders" and remain

bound to the "guilt over the 'original sin' of slavery." Closely related to political correctness, a

colorblind orientation to race is, Liddell suggests, a product of emotional repression. White folks

are not *actually* colorblind or anti-racist (Liddell articulates colorblindness and anti-racism

together)—they have merely succumbed to the guilt imposed by a culture of political correctness

and have suppressed their "true feelings" about race. Yet, Liddell notes, statistical data

demonstrates that people still prefer "associating with their own kind": "This is just the way the

world works, as anybody not tied in knots by 'political correctness' knows."[343] Like Gottfried,

Liddell makes a common sense appeal ("*anybody*" who has not succumbed to political

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[343] Colin Liddell, "Sub-Racism: The Return of the Repressed," *Alternative Right,* December 8, 2010, http://web.archive.org/web/20110208212851/http://www.alternativeright.com:80/main/the-magazine/sub-racism/.

correctness knows that this is "just the way the world works") articulated to intellectualism—

Liddell's essay is also quite long and makes heavy use of references and language that would

likely be inaccessible to folks without at least some college education. And, like Gottfried,

Liddell also articulates racial progressivism to negative affects associated with white fragility

(guilt, repression), implying that moving toward a pro-white orientation to racial consciousness

is both more honest and more pleasant. On *Alternative Right*, then, a far-right orientation to

politics is explicitly articulated to a pro-white orientation to race to form the "alternative right"—

which is, ultimately, positioned as a racially conscious alternative to mainstream political

correctness and its accompanying unpleasant affects.

By articulating an ideology of white superiority to appeals to common sense, contributors

to *Alternative Right* suggest that pro-white racial consciousness *should* be an obvious and natural

orientation for white folks to take toward race. However, because colorblind race neutrality has

become the normative and expected orientation to race under a culture of political correctness,

direct discourse on race is discouraged in mainstream public discourse and everyday white folks

have been compelled to trade their common sense perceptions for the illusion of equality. The

emphasis on appeals to intellectualism circulating through rhetorical formations of pro-whiteness

on *Alternative Right* positions other orientations to race (whether framed as colorblind or anti-

racist) as both dangerous and stupid while using sophisticated language and racialized

philosophy and science to frame pro-white racial consciousness as an educated, intelligent

position. In other words, *Alternative Right's* articulation of appeals to common sense to appeals

to intellectualism reasons that if white folks were able to "see things as they really are," they

would inevitably understand that they should take pride in their whiteness and fight for the

protection and preservation of white culture—because this common sense awareness has been

obscured by political correctness, a revival of pro-white intellectualism is needed.

In contrast to earlier paleoconservative discourse on the "alt-right," content published on

Alternative Right was more clearly and explicitly oriented toward an ideology of white

superiority and more frequently mobilized appeals to common sense similar to those favored

among white nationalists on Stormfront. In keeping with the paleoconservative tradition,

however, the tone and content of the early discourse on *Alternative Right* remained relatively

intellectualized. Contributors often rooted their perspectives in the work of well-established and

fringe philosophers and theorists (Nietzsche is a favorite of Richard Spencer), made frequent

references to the work of racially inflected right-wing scholarship that claims to demonstrate

natural differences among differently raced groups, and peppered their pieces with words and

concepts like *hegemony* (e.g. Michael Parish's "Liberal Hegemony"[344])*, dispossession* (e.g.

Richard Spencer's "The God of White Dispossession"[345]*, and *zeitgeist* (an entire category of

content is organized under this label), which signals contributors' familiarity with some strands

of critical theory and provides an air of scholarly intellectualism to *Alternative Right's* decidedly

pro-white rhetoric.

In many ways, then, *Alternative Right* was positioned to fulfill Gottfried's 2008 vision for

a youthful, intellectual revival of far-right pro-white politics. With the formation of *Alternative*

Right, the torch was passed from the old paleoconservative vanguard to the younger far-right

generation. The younger and more explicitly pro-white Richard Spencer became the voice and

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[344] Michael Paris, "Liberal Hegemony," *Alternative Right,* January 20, 2013,
http://www.radixjournal.com/altright-archive/altright-archive/main/blogs/untimely-
observations/intellectually-privileged?rq=hegemony.
[345] Richard Spencer, "The God of White Dispossession," *Alternative Right,* January 20, 2014,
http://www.radixjournal.com/journal/2014/1/20/the-god-of-white-dispossession.

face of the alt-right, as, the older paleoconservatives stepped into the background (where they

remained influential—Gottfried became a senior contributing editor of *Alternative Right* along

with the similarly aged head of the white nationalist, anti-immigration website VDARE, Peter

Brimelow). [346] However, the emergence of *Alternative Right* as an online platform for the alt-

right and the crowning of Richard Spencer as an alt-right leader appeared to do little to actually

extend the reach of alt-right rhetoric toward the audience of *young* intellectuals imagined by

Gottfried in 2008. Instead, as with Mencken Club meetings, the jargon-and-theory-heavy content

on *Alternative Right* hailed a relatively elitist academic audience and appeared, as evidenced by

the list of early contributors and commenters, to circulate within a similarly insular fringe group.

Richard Spencer, Paul Gottfried, and the rest of the white nationalist intelligentsia continued to

publish long think pieces and hold annual academic-style conferences—which *Alternative Right*

began to promote and publicize—but the archives show that contributors and attendees were

consistently comprised of the same relatively small group of far-right pro-white older

intellectuals.

Where Spencer and *Alternative Right* did receive some mainstream recognition prior to

the alt-right's 2015 articulation to Trump's campaign and presidency, it was for their association

with other fringe pro-white online figures and communities, not for any particular influence *on*

mainstream discourse.[347] And, although the now-redirected site has consistently averaged over

10,000 visitors since July 2010, traffic history suggests that visitors spent an average of just 3

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[346] Jeffrey Imm, "VDARE Friend Richard Spencer Starts New Group 'Alternative Right,'" *Real Courage,* March 11, 2010, http://www.realcourage.org/2010/03/richard-spencer-alternative-right/; Stephen Piggott, "Peter Brimelow Starts New Anti-Immigrant/White Nationalist Website," *Imagine2050*, March 4, 2010, http://imagine2050.newcomm.org/2010/03/04/peter-brimelow-starts-new-anti-immigrantwhite-nationalist-website/.
[347] See Imm, "VDARE Friend."

minutes on the site and typically left after viewing just one page[348] —not nearly long enough,

based on my own reading, to engage deeply with the intellectualized, long-form content featured

on the site. In other words, everyday white U.S. Americans—young or old—were not engaging

with the intellectualized articulations of alt-right rhetoric mobilized through *Alternative Right's*

online ivory tower. Spencer and crew were preaching to their own choir, and new tactics were

needed to reach and red-pill a wider audience—especially the younger generation hailed by

Gottfried's earlier call for a youthful, energetic alternative right. In the remainder of this chapter,

I investigate how an alt-right ideology was rearticulated to a rhetoric of absurdity—both in lieu

of and alongside appeals to intellectualism—and explore how this shift toward "trolling" enabled

the alt-right to reach a younger, wider mainstream audience.

From Intellectualism to Absurdity: The Construction & Mobilization of Alt-Right Trolls

Although *Alternative Right* was largely unsuccessful at reaching a wide audience of

everyday white folks in its first few years of existence, Richard Spencer's status as a rising white

nationalist leader and the presence of Gottfried and Brimelow on the site's editorial staff helped

to bring *Alternative Right* to the attention of the broader white nationalist online network and,

from there, the circulation of alt-right rhetoric across fringe and mainstream online public spaces

began to increase. However, the long-form, intellectualized formations of alt-right rhetoric

common on *Alternative Right* were ill suited for these platforms and their larger, more diverse

membership. As an alt-right ideology began to resonate with a wider audience, new formations

of alt-right rhetoric emerged. Whereas alt-right rhetoric had previously been mobilized in

formations that emphasized the reasonability and intellectual credibility of its pro-white

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[348] "Traffic and Alexa Rank History," accessed January 30, 2017,
http://www.rank2traffic.com/alternativeright.com.

ideological underpinnings, these new formations rearticulated an alt-right ideology to a host of new symbols and strategies.

The remainder of this chapter continues to trace evolutions in alt-right rhetoric by revealing how an alt-right ideology has been mobilized in absurd formations by "alt-right trolls." Whereas the analysis above illuminated the early emergence and evolution of alt-right rhetoric via the white nationalist intelligentsia, the analysis below turns toward how online and celebrity "trolls" have rearticulated alt-right rhetoric in absurd formations to provoke controversy and, in turn, reach a wider, younger mainstream audience. Here, I investigate how alt-right rhetoric has strategically mobilized trolling—conceptualized below as a rhetoric of absurdity—to interpellate a younger audience of mainstream white U.S. Americans into an alt-right ideology and, by extension, pro-white racial consciousness.

I begin with a brief overview of how absurdity is conceptualized from a rhetorical perspective before turning to a discussion of anonymous fringe online message boards and how these platforms foster and promote rhetorical formations of absurdity, including trolling. I then unpack how these fringe online publics became a platform for absurd formations of alt-right rhetoric and enabled these formations to be proliferated across *mainstream* social media platforms via alt-right trolls. Finally, I point to the emergence of alt-right celebrity trolls and discuss how these non-anonymous far-right, pro-white figures attempt to interpellate young white audiences by articulating appeals to absurdity to appeals to intellectualism as they exploit on-going debates about free speech and "political correctness" on U.S. American college and university campuses. Ultimately, I argue that mobilizing a rhetoric of absurdity enables alt-right celebrity trolls to fan and exploit widespread affective circulations of fear and distrust in contemporary U.S. American public contexts in ways that position mainstream white folks to

crave the illusion of common sense and intellectualism constructed by white nationalist

formations of pro-white rhetoric.

On Absurdity

Absurdity is a strange and slippery concept that is conceptualized in a relatively small, largely dated body of philosophical, literary, and rhetorical scholarship.[349] Across this scholarship, absurdity is generally understood as that which makes a significant departure from reason and common sense. In philosophy, for example, absurdity is conceptualized as irrationality and the absence of reason. Ruminating on the works of Sarte and Camus, Stephen Halloran explains that for these philosophers, absurdity describes an "essential disharmony between man and the world he must live in," which is a product of the existential restlessness experienced upon recognizing that the world is entirely "superfluous, gratuitous, wholly without explanation—and therefore man's need to make sense of things is a joke."[350] In this formation, absurdity is a philosophical state achieved by recognizing that common sense understandings of reality are illusions and is affectively experienced as simultaneously distressing and amusing. From this perspective, rhetorical formations of absurdity defy conventional rules of logic and syntax to demonstrate "the possibility of a reality that is infinitely various, wholly without rational foundation, and thus 'more real' than the systems of convention within which we ordinarily live."[351] In this way, absurdity and common sense are positioned in opposition to one another along a spectrum of (un)reasonability—absurdity is understood as the absence of reason

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[349] Søren Kierkergaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death,* trans. by Walter Lowrie (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1954), 46; Kenneth Burke, "The Kill and the Absurd," in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 252–260; Martin Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 6; Stephen M. Halloran, "Language and the Absurd," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6, no. 2 (1973), 97–108.

[350] Stephen M. Halloran, "Language and the Absurd," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 6, no. 2 (1973): 97.

[351] Ibid., 106.

and impossibility of common sense, while common sense is understood as the rational, logical

observations and understandings of reasonable folks.

Outside of philosophy, absurdity has been conceptualized more concretely in terms of

drastic deviations from reasonable ways of speaking and behaving. For example, advertising

scholars have defined absurdity as "the incongruous juxtaposition of pictoral images that viewers

perceive as irrational, bizarre, illogical, and disordered."[352] According to this scholarship,

advertisements that deploy "absurd" images can positively impact brand recall and can move

some customers toward more positive attitudes toward the brand—effectively by breaking their

common sense associations and presenting them with something new and unexpected.

Importantly, Kenneth Burke has demonstrated that what is considered "absurd" is articulated to

both context and framing. Burke interrogated conceptualizations of "the Absurd" in philosopher

Søren Kierkegaard's discussion of the biblical story of God ordering Abraham to kill his son,

Isaac, in sacrifice.[353] By pointing to the ways that this story is characterized as *absurd* when

framed as infanticide but might be characterized as *reasonable* if framed as a call to sacrifice,

Burke's analysis demonstrates the dialectical, context-bound relationship between absurdity and

reasonability. In other words, what is considered "absurd" in one context from a particular

perspective might be considered reasonable from a different perspective or in a different context

and, conversely, what is reasonable in one context might well be considered absurd in another.

In the analysis that unfolds in the remainder of this chapter, I adopt a rhetorical

conceptualization of *absurd(ity)* as discourse that is positioned as wildly unreasonable, illogical,

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[352] Leopoldo Arias-Bolzmann, Goutam Chakraborty, and John C. Mowen, "Effects of Absurdity in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Product Category Attitude and the Mediating Role of Cognitive Responses," *Journal of Advertising* XXIX, no. 1 (2000): 37
[353] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* 46; Burke, "The Kill and the Absurd," 252–260.

inappropriate, or ridiculous in a particular context.[354] The context-boundedness of absurdity

underscored by Burke provides an important reminder that what is considered wildly

unreasonable, illogical, inappropriate, or ridiculous in one context or from a particular

perspective might, in a different context or from a different perspective, be considered

reasonable, logical, and appropriate. As such, I ground my understanding of absurdity in relation

to the previous chapter's discussion of context-bound standards of reasonability and common

sense—labeling a particular discursive fragment as an "appeal to absurdity" implies that it

blatantly and flagrantly defies normative standards of common sense and mainstream

conventions of reasonable discourse. Rather than attempting to shift or expand mainstream

common sense by appealing to the reasonability of a particular proposition, in other words,

appeals to absurdity mobilize outrageous and/or offensive speech and promote the abandonment

of reasonability and common sense altogether.

For example, in the previous chapter, I demonstrated that the pro-white rhetoric

mobilized on Stormfront makes frequent appeals to common sense to construct white

nationalism as a reasonable orientation to race—in part by attempting to frame the reality of race

and the natural existence of white superiority as reasonable and obvious. To appeal to everyday

white audiences, Stormfront has further established a strict set of discursive norms and rules that

require members to avoid using the types of speech most closely associated with white

supremacy—racial epithets, hate speech, and calls to violence, in particular—with the

understanding that common sense colorblindness positions white supremacy as unreasonable, or

absurd. By attempting to mobilize a pro-white ideology in common sense terms, Stormfront's

discursive norms are oriented toward bolstering the reasonability of white nationalism in ways

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[354] "Absurd," *Oxford English Dictionary,* Accessed March 17, 2017,
https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/absurd.

that make everyday white folks more comfortable identifying with pro-white racial

consciousness and mobilizing pro-white rhetoric in public discourse. In this way, white

nationalist rhetoric attempts to shift the common sense understandings of everyday white folks

from a colorblind orientation to race toward pro-white racial consciousness while minimizing the

discomfort that accompanies having one's worldview challenged.

To be sure, much of the pro-white rhetoric on Stormfront would be considered "absurd"

by many despite the site's efforts to make common sense appeals. Within the framework of

critical rhetorical analysis, the point is not to determine whether a particular discursive formation

is "common sense" or "absurd" but to identify how rhetorical appeals to common sense and

absurdity are functioning in ways that help to produce and restrict possibilities for mobilizing

pro-white rhetoric in mainstream public discourse. In contrast to the common sense appeals

mobilized on Stormfront, then, appeals to absurdity unapologetically deploy rhetorical

formations that would be considered unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate according to

mainstream discursive norms and are positioned to invoke confusion, outrage, and offense

among everyday audiences. Whereas appeals to common sense are articulated to positive affects

such as comfort and acceptance, appeals to absurdity are articulated to negative affects, such as

discomfort and offense. As my analysis below demonstrates, alt-right appeals to absurdity

include racial epithets, hate speech, and calls to violence as well as the mobilization of symbols

and discursive fragments that are positioned to offend and/or disorient mainstream audiences

who occupy a colorblind orientation to race.

Across the analysis that follows, then, I am interested in how alt-right rhetoric deploys

formations of unreasonable, illogical, or inappropriate discourse—in speech, imagery, and other

symbol-laden forms of communication—designed to provoke offense, outrage, and/or

amusement by flagrantly and unapologetically from mainstream standards of reasonable public

discourse. Whereas the appeals to common sense uncovered in the previous chapter's analysis of

white nationalist rhetoric functioned to restore comfort among everyday white folks by affirming

the reasonability of taking a pro-white orientation to racial consciousness, the appeals to

absurdity illuminated below are positioned to exacerbate and exploit white folks' discomfort as

they attempt to resist and undermine mainstream common sense understandings of race. With

this understanding of absurdity in mind, I turn to an exploration of how alt-right rhetoric

mobilizes appeals to absurdity to spread an ideology of white superiority across fringe and

mainstream social media platforms in ways that help to bolster appeals to reasonability rooted in

white nationalism.

<div style="text-align:center">The Emergence of Online Alt-Right Trolls</div>

As calls to establish a far-right pro-white ideology gained traction and *Alternative Right*

began to establish itself as a platform for pro-white content, this rhetorical formation of pro-

whiteness began to circulate across fringe online message board communities—and it was from

here that alt-right rhetoric exploded across mainstream public discourse. On public platforms

such as 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit, anonymous Internet users who were already active in online

fringe publics—especially in white nationalist communities such as Stormfront[355] and/or in

"men's rights movements"[356]—began to discuss the content on *Alternative Right* and

increasingly came to identify with an alt-right ideology and mobilize alt-right rhetoric.

This circulation of alt-right rhetoric through broader fringe public online communities

enabled an alt-right ideology to extend beyond the white nationalist intelligentsia's elitist ivory

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[355] Keegan Hankes, "Black Hole," *Southern Poverty Law Center,* March 9, 2015,
https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/black-hole.
[356] Anglin, "A Normie's Guide."

tower to reach a wider, younger audience by tapping into rhetorical norms and strategies of anonymous online communities. The articulation of these rhetorical norms and strategies—which, as discussed below, include memes, hashtags, trolling, and doxxing—to an alt-right ideology constructed an anonymous alt-right online rhetorical persona that I will refer to as the "alt-right online troll." Alt-right online trolls exploit the anonymity and "anything goes" discursive culture of fringe online message boards to construct and mobilize absurd formations of alt-right rhetoric, which they spread across mainstream social media platforms to provoke outrage and offense for the dual purpose of self-gratification and the promotion of white heteropatriarchal domination. Before I discuss how alt-right online trolls rearticulated and mobilized alt-right rhetoric across fringe and mainstream online publics to reach a wide audience of disgruntled young white men, however, a discussion of the unique fringe publics constructed on online anonymous message boards is warranted.

Anonymous Online Message Boards as Fringe Public Spaces

Online message boards are a rhetorical phenomenon in their own right—they enable rapid-fire interaction around an infinite array of topics among users across the globe and allow those users to construct, conceal, and manipulate their identities in a variety of ways. Whereas many online message boards are constructed for specific communities to discuss a particular set of topics—as with Stormfront, for white nationalism—Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan are, to slightly varying degrees, "anything goes" spaces that allow users to post and/or view discussions about virtually anything.[357] To help their hundreds-of-thousands-of users navigate the diverse array of

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[357] Caitlin Dewey, "Absolutely Everything You Need to Know to Understand 4chan, the Internet's Own Bogeyman," *Washington Post,* September 25, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/09/25/absolutely-everything-you-need-to-know-to-understand-4chan-the-internets-own-bogeyman/?utm_term=.f445cae57102

content that proliferates across these fora, each is divided into several topical boards.[358] At the

time of this writing, users of 4chan can select from among 69 boards organized rather loosely

under 7 categories (including categories labeled "Misc." and "Adult" and "Other").[359] On 8chan,

there are over 11,000 user-created boards, with the homepage displaying the most popular 50.[360]

Reddit users can navigate among hundreds of user-created "subreddits" or view the most highly

rated posts on the site's homepage.[361] From there, users can either create new topics or contribute

posts to topics created by others, which allows for discussion of a near-limitless, user-determined

array of things.[362] According to an analysis by the Southern Poverty Law Center, "Many of

Reddit's racist subreddits are among its most popular," and, whereas the racist rhetoric deployed

on Stormfront is tempered, the type of racist rhetoric deployed on Reddit is often explicitly

hateful.[363] The same is true of 4chan, whose "Politically Incorrect" or "/pol/" board has been

identified both as a space for extremely offensive content and a platform for the alt-right.[364]

Unlike on Stormfront, where rules are plentiful and are strictly enforced, Reddit, 4chan,

and 8chan enable relatively unrestricted communication. All three sites have a primary rule

prohibiting the posting of anything illegal[365]—beyond that, Reddit and 4chan each have a set of

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[358] https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/about/traffic/;
[359] http://www.4chan.org/
[360] http://8ch.net
[361] https://www.reddit.com/
[362] Dewey, "Absolutely Everything You Need to Know."
[363] Hankes, "Black Hole."
[364] Gabriel Emile Hine, Jeremiah Onaolapo, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Nicolas Kourtellis, Ilias Leontiadis, Riginos Samaras, Gianluca Stringhini, and Jeremy Blackburn, "A Longitudinal Measurement Study of 4chan's Politically Incorrect Forum and its Effect on the Web," *ArXiv E-Prints* (2016): 1–15, https://arxiv.org/pdf/1610.03452.pdf.
[365] Sam Machkovech, "'I Don't Even Pretend I Can Stop It': 8chan's Founder Talks Doxing, Internet Freedom," *Ars Technica*, March 20, 2015, https://arstechnica.com/business/2015/03/were-a-common-carrier-8chans-founder-on-the-link-between-doxing-net-freedom/.

additional rules and built-in modes of self-regulation.[366] The website 8chan—which was created

for the expressed purpose of providing an even *more* unrestricted, uncensored forum than 4chan

or Reddit—is home to such extreme and offensive material that it is not indexed by most major

search engines, ensuring that its content will only be accessed by users who intend to access it by

typing in the site's URL.[367] To somewhat varying degrees, then, all of these fora underscore their

commitments to "unrestricted" speech, and all three are known bastions for sharing offensive or

"politically incorrect" thoughts under the protection of anonymity.[368]

Anonymity is a key feature of 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit. Users of 4chan and 8chan do not

register at all, while Reddit requires only a working email address for registration—users create

original usernames and are free to disclose as much (or as little) about their actual selves as they

wish. And, users who are particularly concerned about maintaining anonymity can (and often do)

use additional forms of protection, such as a Virtual Private Network (VPN) or proxy server.[369]

This high level of anonymity functions as a veil of protection for users to post whatever they

want with almost no accountability, and all three sites have become known as sanctuaries for

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[366] On Reddit, users can "upvote" and "downvote" posts—posts with more "upvotes" receive more visibility than posts with more "downvotes," and moderators for subreddits (smaller communities within Reddit, typically focused on particular topics) can elect to delete posts and users who violate rules unique to their communities. On 4chan, moderators occasionally peruse discussions and delete posts (and, sometimes, ban users) that violate the community's rules. See http://www.4chan.org/rules; https://www.reddit.com/help/contentpolicy.

[367] Noah Kulwin, "Racist Trolls of 8chan are Driving Traffic to Donald Trump's Website," *Vice News,* August 31, 2016, https://news.vice.com/article/racist-trolls-of-8chan-are-driving-traffic-to-donald-trumps-website.

[368] During the late-stages of writing this chapter, Reddit deleted and banned two of the most popular subreddits associated with the alt-right. Though this development is noteworthy and of consequence to future research into the alt-right's online discourse, it does not impact the analysis unfolding in this chapter.

[369] Machkovech, "'I Don't Even Pretend."

racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic, ableist, and other content that would be deemed

"absurd" according to mainstream standards of reasonability.[370]

In many cases, content on fringe anonymous online message boards would also be

deemed unreasonable on Stormfront. For example, as Keegan Hankes of the Southern Poverty

Law Center explained,

> One thing that's distinct about Reddit that drew our attention … was very violent videos
> — typically of black men being killed very graphically — that you can't even put on
> Stormfront or other white supremacist sites. They will get taken down. And that's one
> thing that sets Reddit apart … the fact that it has much less oversight.[371]

As detailed in the previous chapter, Stormfront's enforcement of rules and regulations

and its general concern for the public image of white nationalism compel users to mobilize a

tempered version of racism that, while still vile, adheres to a set of normative expectations

around content and style. Additionally, although Stormfront users can also elect to remain

anonymous, many users do disclose personal details about themselves and many more construct

online personae (and accompanying reputations) around their Stormfront usernames. The

articulation of anonymity to the "anything goes" discursive norms of Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan

have enabled these sites to become platforms for speech that would be deemed wholly

unacceptable and unreasonable in the mainstream public sphere *and* in more regulated online

fringe public spaces such as Stormfront. On fringe anonymous online platforms, absurdity rules.

In general, Hankes explains, users of fringe anonymous online platforms are also likely to

be younger than members of dedicated white nationalist and white supremacist communities,

which makes sites such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan "fertile ground for recruiting young people

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[370] Dewey, "Absolutely Everything"; Elias Isquith, "Reddit's Ugly, Racist Secret: How it
Became the Most Hateful Space on the Internet," *Salon,* March 18, 2015,
http://www.salon.com/2015/03/18/reddits_ugly_racist_secret_how_it_became_the_most_hateful
_space_on_the_internet/; Hine et. al, "A Longitudinal Measurement."
[371] Keegan Hankes, as quoted by Isquith, "Reddit's Ugly, Racist Secret."

to the pro-white movement."[372] Obtaining demographic data for anonymous discussion platforms

is understandably difficult,[373] but according to all knowable information, users of Reddit[374],

4chan[375], and 8chan[376] are overwhelmingly likely to be white, male, and under the age of 30. The

articulation of these demographics to 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit's "anything goes," anti-PC

discursive culture positioned these fringe public spaces as a prime platform for the youthful re-

articulation of a pro-white alternative right that Paul Gottfried envisioned in 2008 and Richard

Spencer attempted to mobilize in 2010. On 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit, young white men who are

looking for an outlet to express their socially unacceptable viewpoints and feelings (according to

mainstream standards) began to encounter alt-right rhetoric that spoke to their frustrations as

young *white* men and put those frustrations into terms that appeared smart and well-reasoned.[377]

In turn, users of Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan rearticulated alt-right rhetoric couched in appeals to

provocative intellectualism into absurd formations that more closely resembled the relatively

unique discursive norms of anonymous online message boards.

Here, an alt-right ideology elsewhere mobilized through think-pieces and formal

speeches was crassly rearticulated and mobilized through hashtags—words or short phrases

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[372] Ibid.

[373] Because these fora are anonymous and do not require users to present any verifiable information during the registration process, demographic information is both incomplete (because not all users provide it) and potentially inaccurate (because users who are asked to provide information can easily misrepresent themselves). However, the reported demography of Reddit and 4chan users is so clearly skewed toward a particular population (young, white, male), that it would be highly unlikely for a drastically different demographic make-up for users of these sites to be true in (unknowable) reality.

[374] Michael Barthel, Galen Stocking, Jesse Holcomb, and Amy Mitchell, "Reddit News Users More Likely to Be Male, Young, and Digital in Their News Preferences," *Pew Research Center,* February 25, 2016, http://www.journalism.org/2016/02/25/reddit-news-users-more-likely-to-be-male-young-and-digital-in-their-news-preferences/.

[375] "Demographic," *4chan,* n.d., http://www.4chan.org/advertise.

[376] "8ch.net Traffic Statistics," *Alexa,* accessed February 6, 2017, http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/8ch.net.

[377] See Anglin, "A Normie's Guide."

preceded by a pound sign (#) that provide clickable ways to identify and search for messages on

a specific topic[378]—and memes—cultural symbols or social ideas captured with imagery and/or

text and transmitted virally across social media, typically with some humorous intent.[379] As

others have demonstrated, by packing an articulation of meanings into shorthand form (whether

text or image-based), both hashtags and memes offer users a way to tap into the vast

intertextuality of the World Wide Web.[380] Hashtags link comments, posts, and other material to

content circulating elsewhere that bears the same hashtag,[381] whereas memes often layer

culturally meaningful symbols atop of one another, creating a complex intertextual reference as

images and text are articulated together in a single graphic.[382] The viral proliferation of hashtags

and memes expands the layers of meaning signified by a particular hashtag or meme at

astounding rates, as new thoughts/reflections/comments/arguments/rants are articulated to

hashtags and memes already circulating through the online public sphere.

Thus, where Gottfried and Spencer's attempts to build an *intellectual* far-right ideology

framed around the supposed protection and preservation of white American identity and culture

had been carefully curated on edited sites such as *Alternative Right*, the "anything goes"

discursive cultures of 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit could ensure no such standard. Yet, as I continue

to demonstrate below, these sites could offer a wide audience of young disgruntled white men

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[378] See Rebecca Hiscott, "The Beginner's Guide to the Hashtag," *Mashable*, October 8, 2013, http://mashable.com/2013/10/08/what-is-hashtag/#zmfAGDX7RPq1.

[379] See Paul Gil, "What is a 'Meme'?," *Lifewire*, November 30, 2016, https://www.lifewire.com/what-is-a-meme-2483702.

[380] Davi Johnson, "Mapping the Meme: A Geographical Approach to Materialist Rhetorical Criticism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2007): 27–50; Susan A. Sci and Alexa M. Dare, "The Pleasure and Play of Pepper Spray Cop Photoshop Memes," *The Northwest Journal of Communication* 42, no. 1 (2014): 7–34.

[381] See Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States," *American Ethnologist* 00, no. 0 (2015): 4–16.

[382] Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 2–4.

who were well-positioned to be receptive to the alt-right's key arguments and were well-aware of how to exploit the Internet's capacities for the rapid, wide-reaching circulation of discourse. As such, the rearticulations of an alt-right ideology mobilized on these anonymous online fringe spaces moved away from the intellectualized rhetoric and common sense approach of *Alternative Right* and the white nationalist intelligentsia and toward an articulation of an alt-right ideology rooted in the mobilization of offensive, outrageous speech that flagrantly defied mainstream discursive norms associated with "political correctness." On anonymous fringe platforms, an alt-right ideology was disarticulated from the long-form, theory-laden essays published on *Alternative Right* and rearticulated to short bursts of fragmented, intertextual discourse, including hashtags and memes, which were mobilized through a set of rhetorical practices known as "trolling." Below, I conceptualize trolling as a rhetoric of absurd provocation before turning toward a discussion of the emergence of anonymous alt-right online trolls.

Trolling: A Rhetoric of Absurd Provocation

The term "trolling" comes from a fishing technique in which "a lure is dragged through the water to provoke a feeding frenzy amongst the fish."[383] In anonymous online fora, the metaphor of using bait to send a population into a frenzy (thereby making them easier to catch) essentially refers to a rhetorical practice whereby a troll (or group of trolls) "baits" an online community with offensive or vile content in order to provoke frenzied, outraged responses from offended posters.[384] Trolls receive amusement from watching the frenzy play out, often while using the responses of offended posters as fodder for future fun-poking and offending. And, because online trolls can exploit the Internet's capacities for anonymity, they are able to mobilize

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[383] Amy Binns, "Don't Feed the Trolls!: Managing Troublemakers in Magazine's Online Communities," *Journalism & Practice* 6, no. 4 (2012): 547.

[384] Erin E. Buckels, Paul D. Trapnell, and Delroy L. Paulhus, "Trolls Just Want to Have Fun," *Personality and Individual Differences* 67 (2014): 97–102.

outrageously offensive discourse while largely protecting themselves from any significant

negative repercussions. In other words, online trolls are protected by the comfort of anonymity as

they promote extreme discomfort among their targets.

There is a growing body of research on trolling that attempts to speak to how and why

people engage in and respond to trolling. In general, this scholarship demonstrates that trolls

commonly use aggression, shock, digression, antipathy, and (hypo)criticism to antagonize users

for the sake of self-amusement and pleasure.[385] Some scholars have connected trolling to a desire

to achieve revenge and/or to cause harm to a particular community,[386] and others have identified

a strong relationship between trolling and sadism, where trolls receive pleasure and amusement

because their targets express distress, outrage, and offense.[387] In non-academic terms, the

purpose of trolling is more commonly understood as "for the lulz"—in other words, behaving

absurdly for a laugh.[388] At any rate, the goal of trolling is not to initiate or participate in a

reasoned debate or to appeal to the common sense perceptions of its audience. Rather, trolling is

oriented toward violating common sense perceptions and the expectations for reasoned,

respectful dialogue to provoke negative reactions.

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[385] Claire Hardaker, "Trolling in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: From User Discussions to Academic Definitions," *Journal of Politeness Research* 6, no. 2 (2010): 215–242; Claire Hardaker, "Uh…..Not to be Nitpicky,,,,,But…the Past Tense of Drag is Dragged, Not Drug," *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 1, no. 1 (2013): 57–86; Whitney Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology: 2015).

[386] Pnina Shachaf and Noriko Hara, "Beyond Vandalism: Wikipedia Trolls," *Journal of Information Science* 36, no. 3 (2010): 357–370; Susan Herring, Kirk Job-Sluder, Rebecca Scheckler, and Sasha Barab, "Searching for Safety Online: Managing 'Trolling' in a Feminist Forum," *The Information Society* 18, no. 5 (2002): 371–384.

[387] Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus, "Trolls Just Want to Have Fun," 97–102.

[388] Dale Beran, "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump," *Medium,* February 14, 2017, https://medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb#.648paij6e.

In this way, I argue that trolling can be appropriately understood as a rhetoric of absurd provocation. Trolling is premised on the deployment of wholly unreasonable, offensive content into online message board discourse to provoke the reactions it seeks (shock and/or outrage for the target, amusement for the troll). Hashtags and memes are particularly valuable rhetorical tools for trolls because they enable an individual troll to connect to a web of meaning signified by the shorthand form of the hashtag and/or meme. Further, trolls can exploit the intertextuality of hashtags and memes discussed above to find discourse on a particular topic and interject absurd disruptions to provoke offended responses.

Importantly, there is no necessary articulation between trolling and any particular ideology or political affiliation. Trolling is a discursive practice that disregards normative boundaries of reasonable common sense and acceptable public discourse and is aimed at producing reactionary responses mobilized by affects of shock, outrage, and personal offense. Additionally, no discussion of any topic on any public online forum is safe from possible trolling. Trolls can be found interjecting absurd and offensive jokes, remarks, images, and other content into discussions of everything from sports to anime to cancer to suicide. Perhaps by definition, nothing is off limits to trolls.

Yet, precisely because their anonymity protects them from the consequences of violating mainstream norms of reasonable, acceptable speech, trolling is particularly prevalent in online discussions of political and social justice issues. In post-2012 contexts, there has been a particularly strong articulation of trolling to reactionary opposition mobilized against progressive, social justice oriented discourse and advocates—especially feminists.[389] One recent

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[389] Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab, "Searching for Safety Online, 371–384; Kirsti K. Cole, "'It's Like She's Eager to be Verbally Abused;' Twitter, Trolls, and (En)Gendering Disciplinary Rhetoric," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015): 356–358; Emma Alice Jane,

and highly publicized example is the "#Gamergate" scandal, in which users of Reddit, 4chan,

and/or 8chan actively harassed gamers, activists, and journalists who were pushing for more

equitable representation of genders and sexualities in videogames.[390] Understanding how

#Gamergate acted as a precursor to absurd formations of alt-right rhetoric reveals how politically

inflected trolling helps to promote the dominance of white heteropatriarchy. As with white

nationalist rhetoric, then, alt-right appeals to pro-white racial consciousness often simultaneously

promote dominant formations of gender and sexuality.

#Gamergate as a Precursor to Alt-Right Trolling

In what appears to have started with a disgruntled ex-boyfriend's online rant against his

game developer ex-girlfriend, #Gamergate quickly became a discourse through which

disgruntled and disaffected young white men could unleash their apparently pent-up opposition

toward all things perceived as "feminist" or "social justice" oriented.[391] Taking offense at "social

justice warriors" efforts to curb rampant sexual harassment and promote more equitable and

diverse representations in online multiplayer videogames, anonymous online message board

users used the power of the Internet to construct a reactionary fringe public discourse around

maintaining the status quo and resisting attempts at progressive change.[392] The hashtag

#Gamergate was used to link discursive fragments opposing social justice efforts in the gaming

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"'Back to the Kitchen, Cunt': Speaking the Unspeakable About Online Misogyny," *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 28, no. 4 (2014): 558–570.

[390] See Keith Stuart, "Gamergate: The Community is Eating Itself but There Should be Room for All," *The Guardian,* September 3, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/03/gamergate-corruption-games-anita-sarkeesian-zoe-quinn; Brianna Wu, "Doxxed: Imact of Online Threats on Women Including Private Details Being Exposed and 'Swatting," *Index on Censorship* 44, no. 3 (2015): 46–49.

[391] Casey Johnston, "Chat Logs Show how 4chan Users Created #GamerGate Controversy," *Ars Technica,* September 9, 2014, https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2014/09/new-chat-logs-show-how-4chan-users-pushed-gamergate-into-the-national-spotlight/.

[392] See Stuart, "Gamergate."

community together and to draw trolls to pro-social justice discussions unfolding around those

efforts on more mainstream online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Once linked to

online discourse promoting social justice in the gaming community, anonymous online trolls

targeted communities and individuals for absurd and vile forms of harassment.

Harassment mobilized by #Gamergate trolls was deployed in a range of formations,

including absurdly sexist insults, rape threats, and death threats.[393] On the even more extreme

end, this harassment also included organized doxxing—a practice in which trolls seek and reveal

compromising personal information about their targets (such as personal or business email

addresses, home addresses, details about family members, contact information for employers

and/or clients, social security numbers, etc.) on public fora as a way to facilitate a swarm (or

barrage) of trolling and to threaten and intimidate targets.[394] And, because they were able to

exploit the anonymity offered by many mainstream and fringe online public platforms,

Gamergate trolls had the benefit of being able to discover a great deal about their targets while

being required to disclose absolutely nothing about themselves.

For example, software engineer and videogame developer Brianna Wu received a barrage

of personal insults, sexual messages, and threats of rape and murder stemming from her open

involvement in efforts to make the videogame industry a more women-friendly space.[395] Because

Wu had been doxxed—her personal information had been disseminated across anonymous

online message boards—she lived in very real fear that online harassment would eventually

become in-person assault, or worse. Yet, the perpetrators of these attacks—the trolls—remained

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[393] See Feminist Frequency, "I Usually Don't Share the Really Scary Stuff…," Twitter post, August 27, 2014, https://twitter.com/femfreq/status/504718160902492160.
[394] See Jenn Frank, "How to Attack a Woman Who Works in Video Gaming," *The Guardian*, September 1, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/01/how-to-attack-a-woman-who-works-in-video-games.
[395] Wu, "Doxxed."

anonymous and relatively protected from consequence. The articulation of anonymity to the

rapid-fire and organized potentialities of online message board discourse enables trolls to

mobilize similar attacks far and wide—once targets' personal details have been revealed, it takes

mere minutes for a swarm of trolls to flood one target with intimidating, harassing messages

before moving on to the next.

As a rhetoric of absurd provocation, trolling allows for the widespread and—as with

#Gamergate—collective and organized dissemination of incredibly offensive speech to target,

harass, and provoke already vulnerable groups. And, because trolling as a rhetorical strategy of

absurd provocation extends far beyond its articulations to politically charged initiatives such as

#Gamergate and is understood more broadly as a practice of disruption for the sake of

amusement,[396] the activities of trolls are often brushed off as "just jokes" or "just trolling" and

are dismissed as absurd annoyances. This tendency to dismiss trolling *as* absurd creates a sense

of plausible deniability for offensive discourse mobilized on online message boards—racist,

sexist, homophobic, or otherwise offensive content can be written off as "just trolling," where

the responsibility can then be (re)located onto the target(s) of trolls' attacks to avoid reacting in a

way that satisfies—or "feeds"—the troll.[397] Because outrage, offense, and protest are precisely

the responses that trolls seek to provoke and because the categorically absurd content and style

of trolling make reasoned, logical responses unfeasible, the people and groups targeted by

trolling are left with relatively little recourse for productive response.

Organized trolling as deployed by users of anonymous online message boards during the

#Gamergate scandal received a wealth of mainstream and fringe online media coverage and

galvanized a geographically diffuse base of young white men in impassioned opposition to

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[396] Hardaker, "Trolling in Asynchronous," 237.
[397] See Binns, "Don't Feed the Trolls!."

progressive affronts against their cultural hegemony. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that this

scandal provided a core foundation for articulations of alt-right rhetoric on anonymous online

message boards.

Mobilizing Anonymous Online Trolls for the Alt-Right

Because both the "alt-right" and #Gamergate trolls orient themselves similarly in

opposition to progressive social justice efforts and each imagine themselves as victims of

enforced multiculturalism, #Gamergate trolls were well positioned to take their organized efforts

against progressive online multiplayer videogame reform and refocus them in the more general

direction of an opposition to social justice discourse and political correctness.[398] As self-avowed

white nationalist Andrew Anglin remarked, "Gamergate provided a direct entry-point to what is

now called the Alt-Right, as it was made up of young White men who realized they were being

disenfranchised by feminism and political correctness."[399] Armed with their savvy knowledge of

the digital world on the one hand and fueled by reactionary anger, frustration, and fear on the

other, anonymous online message board users took the pro-white assumptions of the alt-right,

rearticulated them to new buzzwords and taglines often represented through memes and

hashtags, and deployed them in mainstream online discourse through trolling. This rearticulation

of alt-right rhetoric effectively provided a new lexicon for the alt-right and vastly expanded its

reach into mainstream online public discourse.

The plethora of racist memes and hashtags mobilized by alt-right online trolls has gained

a fair amount of mainstream media recognition and attention, suggesting that these memes and

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[398] Ari Waldman, "Donald Trump and Steve Bannon Need Angry Young Men. They're Using Gamergate Culture to Get Them," *Quartz,* February 3, 2017, https://qz.com/901761/donald-trump-and-steve-bannon-are-using-gamergate-culture-to-attract-angry-white-men/.
[399] Anglin, "A Normie's Guide."

hashtags have been at least somewhat successful in invading mainstream public discourse.[400]

Some memes and hashtags attributed to the alt-right are rooted in imagery and catchphrases that

have been mobilized across fringe online white nationalist media and/or anonymous online

message boards for years, while others have emerged in the more recent and immediate context

of alt-right rhetoric. Regardless of their origins, a majority of memes and hashtags that have

come to be associated with the alt-right were first became articulated to this ideology on Reddit,

4chan, and 8chan and were then mobilized across mainstream online platforms to troll a broader

audience. Below, I analyze three common alt-right memes to demonstrate their explicit and

implicit articulations to a pro-white ideology and reveal how anonymous online alt-right trolls

have mobilized these memes as absurd formations of pro-white rhetoric.

"Dindu (Nuffin)"

In some cases, alt-right trolls have taken racist memes and hashtags that have long been

circulating in fringe white nationalist online discourse and have used them to troll a broader,

more mainstream audience. For example, "Dindu (Nuffin)" is a phrase that has been frequently

articulated to narratives and images slain black men when discussing black victims of police

brutality in fringe public white nationalist online outlets like Stormfront.[401] Journalist Justin

Caffier describes the phrase as "a bastardization of 'didn't do nothing,' in reference to the claims

of innocence that parents, friends, and community members make about the victims of unlawful

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[400] See Justin Caffier, "Get to Know the Memes of the Alt-Right and Never Miss a Dog-Whistle Again," *Vice,* January 25, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/get-to-know-the-memes-of-the-alt-right-and-never-miss-a-dog-whistle-again?utm_source=vicefbusads; Justin Caffier, "Every Insult the Right Uses to Troll Liberals, Explained," *Vice,* February 6, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/every-insult-the-right-uses-to-troll-liberals-explained.
[401] See "Dindu Nuffins 1996-2014" [thread], *Stormfront,* August 29, 2014, https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t1060657/; I recall the frequent deployment of the "Dindu" meme when conducting research on Stormfront discourse around the death of Trayvon Martin.

police shootings."[402] The particular way in which "Dindu (Nuffin)'" is rearticulated in these

memes is meant to racialize the proclamation that the victim "didn't do anything wrong"—it is

implicitly articulated to an absurd, racist caricature of an impoverished, poorly educated,

inarticulate black person who speaks in a way perceived to be "improper" according to white

U.S. American normative expectations.

Image 1. Anonymous 4chan user references "dindu nuffin" in discussion of killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown.[403]

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[402] Justin Caffier, "Get to Know the Memes."

[403] Anonymous, "What Was Your First Redpill" [Msg. 18], *4chan /pol/,* March 25, 2017, https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/118193155/#118194522
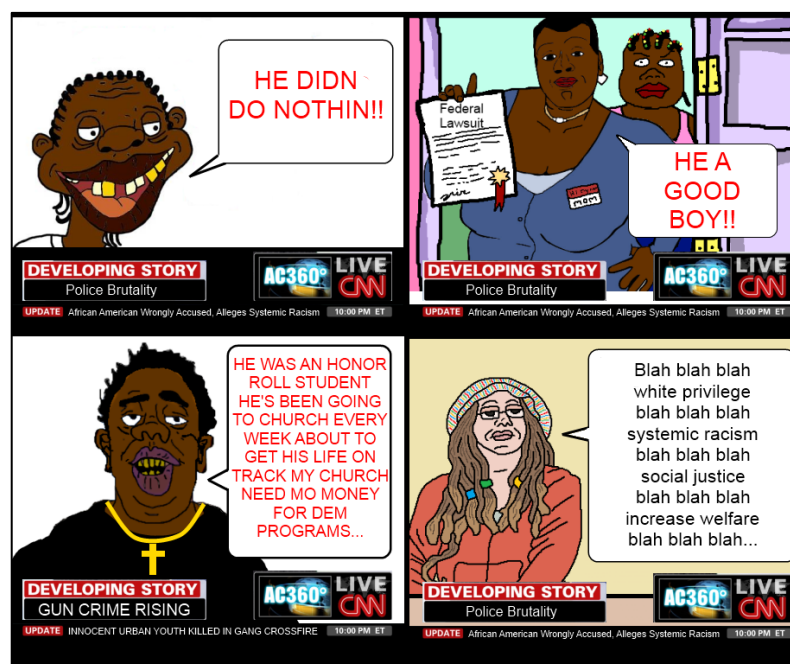
Image 2. Dindu meme from 4chan's /pol/ board.[404]

In the images above, the "Dindu (Nuffin)" meme is mobilized in two different

formations. The first image exemplifies how "he a good boy he dindu nuffin" is articulated to

news media framings of reports on slain black men. Both Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown

were young, unarmed black teens killed by people acting in law enforcement roles—Martin by a

neighborhood watch person and Brown by a police officer. The deaths of both teens—for which

their killers were acquitted—fueled mass protests mobilized by the Black Lives Matter

movement. In this screenshot (Image 1), an anonymous 4chan poster references the media

framings of Martin and Brown as innocent victims as a "red pill moment" that awakened their

anti-black racial consciousness. In the process, this poster constructs Martin and Brown as

violent criminals and implies that their deaths were justified. Whereas a common sense framing

of this argument might attempt to present evidence and reasoning to support the claim that, in

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[404] Anonymous, "N****r Scholarships Stand Your Ground Edition," [Msg. 12], *4chan /pol/,*
April 14, 2017, http://boards.4chan.org/pol/thread/121069124/nigger-scholarships-stand-your-
ground-edition, censorship of title is mine.

these two instances, particular circumstances justified the use of lethal force, this particular

fragment substitutes evidence and reasoning for racist caricatures and offensive language.

The second example (Image 2) represents an image-based "Dindu" meme that abstracts

the type of news reporting invoked by the anonymous poster in the first image. Here, the meme

articulates racialized caricatures of black folks (and a caricature of a liberal white person) to

media reports on "police brutality" and "gun crime rising." Of particular interest, the image in

the second frame features caricatures of black women (presumably family members) holding a

paper that reads "federal lawsuit," suggesting that claims to black innocence are mobilized to

seek financial incentives. When considered in the context of the intertextual meanings of the

"Dindu (Nuffin)" meme, the implied meaning of Image 2 is that the appeals to innocence,

racism, and white privilege attempt to mask a "real story" in which a black man did, in fact, "do

something" wrong. This type of image is used to cast widespread doubt on any appeals to black

innocence and racialized police brutality by suggesting that claims to black innocence always

already suspicious.

Absurd alt-right provocateurs mobilize the "Dindu (Nuffin)" meme to troll public news

and social media posts mourning the death of black folks at the hands of police. So, whereas the

"Dindu (Nuffin)" meme has long been mobilized *within* fringe public white nationalist online

outlets, alt-right trolls are now proliferating this racist meme across mainstream online outlets to

provoke offense and outrage among those expressing grief and/or anger in the wake of anti-black

violence. Harassing grieving communities is certainly *absurd* by mainstream standards, but is not

unheard of. The Westboro Baptist Church, for example, frequently protests funerals of victims of

violence—including members of the military and victims of terror attacks—to spread its anti-gay

message that the deaths are a result of God's hatred toward the United States for its perceived

acceptance of the LGBTQ community.[405] Whereas the practice of publically protesting funerals

using anti-gay messages is so clearly absurd that it is largely considered counterproductive and

frequently met with larger, more powerful protests,[406] the alt-right's use of memes to troll

grieving communities on social media is more insidious. The "Dindu (Nuffin)" meme, for

example, functions to raise questions about what victims might have done before they were

killed by police—casting perpetual doubt over claims to black innocence.

"Pepe the Frog"

    Other memes and hashtags associated with absurd alt-right provocateurs are not directly

connected to the longer history of white nationalist and/or white supremacist rhetoric but are

connected to pre-existing memes on anonymous online message boards. The most recognizable

alt-right meme of this sort is "Pepe the Frog." Pepe the Frog was a relatively innocuous character

in the comic-style illustrations of artist Matt Furie, initially appearing in print in 2005 and online

in 2008.[407] Soon after, Pepe became a popular meme on 4chan, Reddit, and 8chan, where the

image of the frog was commonly articulated to the phrase "Feels good, man" (see Image 3).[408]

Pepe circulated across these fringe online platforms in a variety of articulations and was

commonly mobilized as an explanation for questionable behavior.[409] In this way, Pepe was a

fitting mascot for the "anything goes" discursive culture of anonymous online message boards—

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[405] See Lindsay Deutsch, "Five Incendiary Westboro Baptist Church Funeral Protests," *USA Today,* March 21, 2014, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/03/21/westboro-baptist-church-pickets-funerals/6688951/

[406] See Arelis R. Hernández, "Hundreds Counter-Protest Westboro Baptist Demonstration in Orlando," *Washington Post,* June 18, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/06/18/hundreds-counter-protest-westboro-baptist-demonstration-in-orlando/?utm_term=.dd4da831c337

[407] "Pepe the Frog," *Know Your Meme,* Accessed February 27 2017, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog

[408] "Feels Good Man," *Know Your Meme,* Accessed February 27, 2017, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/feels-good-man

[409] Ibid.

the innocuous frog came to stand in for the sentiment, "If it feels good, say it." And, as it turns

out, what felt "good" for many users of anonymous online message boards—a majority of whom

are young white males—was to (re)assert their position of cultural centrality by saying extremely

racist things.

Image 3. Early (2008–2009) Pepe meme.[410]   *Image 4. Pepe as Hitler/Nazi.[411]*

As anonymous online message board users increasingly began to identify with the alt-

right, Pepe was rearticulated as an alt-right symbol and became a mascot for anonymous online

alt-right trolls. Images of Pepe articulated to well-known, explicitly racist symbols began to

emerge and proliferate—Pepe with a Hitler mustache, Pepe with swastika-shaped eyes, Pepe

tattooed with the numbers "14" and "88," both of which are white supremacist symbols.[412] These

memes were then deployed across fringe and mainstream online social media platforms,

provoking offense and outrage around the absurdly racist symbolism and providing fodder for

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[410] "Pepe the Frog," *Know Your Meme.*
[411] Sheena Goodyear, "Pepe the Frog Joins Swastika and Klan Hood in Anti-Defamation League's Hate Symbol Database," *CBC,* September 28, 2016, http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/pepe-the-frog-hate-symbol-adl-1.3782035.
[412] Olivia Nuzzi, "How Pepe the Frog Became a Nazi Trump Supporter and Alt-Right Symbol," *The Daily Beast,* May 25, 2016, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/05/26/how-pepe-the-frog-became-a-nazi-trump-supporter-and-alt-right-symbol.html

trolls who reveled in their amusement around how offended people could be at a cartoon frog.[413]

Pepe was so widely and frequently articulated to racist symbols and text that in 2016, the Anti-

Defamation League labeled the cartoon frog a hate symbol.[414] As Pepe became a recognizable

alt-right meme, anonymous (and non-anonymous) alt-right trolls began to identify themselves

and one another as such through symbolic gestures such as including the frog emoji in their

social media handles.[415]

"Cuckservative"

Still other memes and hashtags associated with absurd alt-right trolls are rearticulations

of cultural symbols in ways that are relatively unique to alt-right rhetoric. Perhaps the best

example of this is the use of "cuck" or "cuckservative," either in hashtag or meme form, to refer

to mainstream Republicans who are perceived to have acquiesced to the Left by taking

affirmative orientations toward diversity and multiculturalism and thereby failing to protect the

interests of white U.S. Americans. For example, one popular "cuck" meme features an image of

Jeb Bush superimposed with the text, "If you think illegal immigration is an 'act of love' you

might be a cuckservative" (see Image 5).[416] This meme is an intertextual reference to Bush's

2014 statement that many people who come to the United States without documentation do so

out of an "act of love" for their families—which the isolationist alt-right perceived as an affront

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[413] Ibid.

[414] "Pepe the Frog," *Anti-Defamation League,* Accessed February 17, 2017,
https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/pepe-the-frog

[415] Nuzzi, "How Pepe the Frog."

[416] See Milo Yiannopoulos, "'Cuckservative' is a Gloriously Effective Insult That Should Not be
Slurred, Demonised, or Ridiculed," *Breitbart,* July 28, 2015, http://www.breitbart.com/big-
government/2015/07/28/cuckservative-is-a-gloriously-effective-insult-that-should-not-be-
slurred-demonised-or-ridiculed/

against white U.S. Americans.[417] As Richard Spencer put it, "cuck" is "an apt psychological portrait of white 'conservatives,' whose only identity is comprised of vague, abstract 'values,' and who are participating in the displacement of European Americans—their own children."[418]
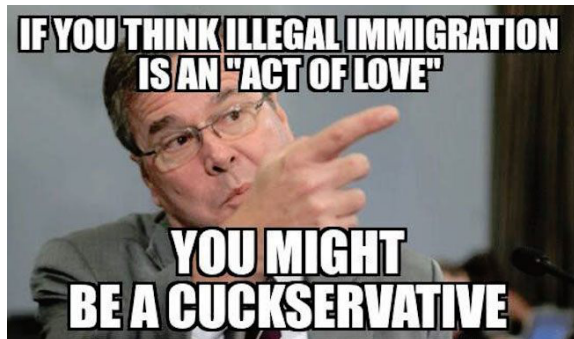
Image 5. Jeb Bush as "cuckservative.[419]"

Image 6. Racialized "cuck" meme.[420]

"Cuckservative" and "cuck" are rearticulations of "cuckold"—a term for a husband who remains with his wife despite her sexual infidelity.[421] Here, the association of the term "cuck" with the image of a passive, submissive man is rearticulated to the mainstream Republican Party, imagined as a group of spineless white men unwilling to stand up to anti-racist activists, feminists, queers, Muslims, and any other group who the alt-right perceives to threaten white

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[417] See Ed O'Keefe, "Jeb Bush: Many Illegal Immigrants Come Out of an 'Act of Love,'" *The Washington Post,* April 6, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/04/06/jeb-bush-many-illegal-immigrants-come-out-of-an-act-of-love/?utm_term=.0ccae8e83295

[418] as quoted in David Weigel, "'Cuckservative'—The Conservative Insult of the Month, Explained," *The Washington Post,* July 29, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/07/29/cuckservative-the-conservative-insult-of-the-month-explained/?utm_term=.a2c83b23facc

[419] Milo Yiannopoulos, "'Cuckservative' is a Gloriously Effective Insult.

[420] Slippery_People, "Maximum Cuck" [Msg. 1], *Reddit,* May 16, 2015 https://www.reddit.com/r/WhiteRights/comments/3661ma/maximum_cuck/

[421] Weigel, "'Cuckservative.'"

straight Christian male hegemony.[422] As mainstream journalists have pointed out, the term

"cuck" itself has racist connotations, referring to a genre of pornography in which white men

playing the part of "passive husband" watch white women having sex with black men.[423] The

racialized articulation of "cuck" is evident in Image 6 above, where three black men with raised

fists are standing behind a white woman holding a sign that reads "welcome to the fall of white

supremacy." The Reddit user who shared this image titled it "Maximum Cuck." Comments on

this thread include, "White supremacy isn't a movement, it's a fact. It can't fail," and, "She's

about to get culturally enriched."[424] Together, the articulation of this image to the "cuck" meme

and its subsequent comments suggests that white folks who work to dismantle white supremacy

are "race traitors" and implies that white women's associations with black men are always

already sexual. When mobilized to troll politicians who are perceived as conceding to

multiculturalism, then, the implied meaning of "cuck" or "cuckservative" is that these

mainstream politicians are passively allowing white U.S. Americans to be "fucked" by racial

diversity and inclusion.

Memes and hashtags associated with the alt-right provide a purportedly "playful"

language with offensive and outrageous overtones, enabling individual anonymous Internet users

to identify themselves and others with the alt-right and, in the process, construct a sense of

community. And, because they are assembled in such absurdly offensive and outrageous

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[422] See Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," *Breitbart*, March 29, 2016, http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/

[423] Joseph Bernstein, "Behind the Racist Hashtag that is Blowing Up Twitter," *Buzzfeed,* July 27, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/josephbernstein/behind-the-racist-hashtag-some-donald-trump-fans-love?utm_term=.wixqPVW06#.jc6zlgoa8; Jeet Heer, "Conservatives are Holding a Conversation About Race," *New Republic,* July 26, 2015, https://newrepublic.com/article/122372/conservatives-are-holding-conversation-about-race

[424] "Maximum Cuck" [thread], *Reddit,* May 16, 2015 https://www.reddit.com/r/WhiteRights/comments/3661ma/maximum_cuck/

formations, these memes and hashtags can be deployed under the guise of trolling which, as argued above, allows them to be written off as "*just* trolling" and dismissed, even as they continue to spread their virulently, absurdly racist messages to broad mainstream Internet audiences. Moreover, the mobilization of an alt-right ideology through trolling as a rhetoric of absurd provocation provided fodder for broader alt-right opposition to "language policing" and a culture of "political correctness" by provoking the types of outraged and offended reactions it attributes to "social justice warriors" and "liberal snowflakes"—terms which, like "#altright," have themselves been rearticulated into prominent alt-right memes and hashtags.

Further, memes and hashtags are not the only way that anonymous online trolls mobilize for the alt-right. Alt-right trolls have been instrumental in proliferating misinformation aimed at casting doubt on actual news stories (such as allegations against Donald Trump) and promoting faux or misleading reports of crime associated with immigrants and/or the Black Lives Matter movement.[425] Fake or misleading news stories—such as the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory claiming that an underground child pornography ring shielded by prominent politicians, including Hillary Clinton, was being run from a D.C. pizzeria—are pulled from fringe online spaces, shared and discussed on anonymous online message boards, where users organize informal campaigns to disseminate the stories across mainstream social media platforms. [426]

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[425] See Ryan Broderick, "Alt-Right Trolls Are Trying to Trick People Into Thinking Trump Dossier was a 4chan Prank," *Buzzfeed,* January 11, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatesthis/alt-right-trolls-are-trying-to-trick-people-into-thinking-tr?utm_term=.hfAGPXda5#.uaVZxQ6Ap; Bryan Menegus, "Alt-Right Trolls Use Chicago Kidnapping to Spread Lies About Black Lives Matter [Update]," *Gizmodo,* January 5, 2017, http://gizmodo.com/alt-right-trolls-use-chicago-kidnapping-to-spread-lies-1790802011
[426] See John Whitehouse, "Misinformer of the Year: The Ecosystem of Fake News and the 'Alt-Right,'" *Media Matters,* December 27, 2017, http://mediamatters.org/blog/2016/12/27/misinformer-year-ecosystem-fake-news-and-alt-right/214899

Here, absurd fake and misleading stories mix with the plethora of *actual* news, political, and social discourse circulating across these platforms.

Despite their absurdity, manufactured stories are received as believable and valid by a sizable portion of the mainstream public, largely because much of this content confirms false narratives perpetuated by the alt-right and affirmed by the current presidential administration.[427] Additionally, U.S. Americans' distrust in mainstream media has dropped to its lowest level in recorded history, which has compelled the public to search for "more" trustworthy news sources in ways that open the door for far-right propaganda to be accepted as believable.[428] And, as with conspiracy theory-driven stories such as "Pizzagate," much of the fake news circulated by the alt-right is accepted as reasonably believable because it is nearly impossible to *dis*prove.[429] The persistent proliferation of fake and misleading information in a contemporary U.S. American sociopolitical climate already pulsating with affects of fear, paranoia, and frustration exploits these negative affects, distorts reality, and overwhelms the mainstream public with the feeling that it is impossible to know what information is true and what sources are trustworthy.[430] In a seemingly perpetual state of disorientation fueled by misinformation and negative affects, the mainstream public becomes vulnerable to appeals to authority leveraged by the current presidential administration—which is, of course, closely articulated to an alt-right ideology. In this way, absurd alt-right trolls are doing the work of both the alt-right and the current federal government.

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[427] Tristan Bridges, "There's an Intriguing Sociological Reason So Many Americans are Ignoring Facts Lately," *Business Insider,* February 27, 2017, http://www.businessinsider.com/sociology-alternative-facts-2017-2

[428] Art Swift, "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low," *Gallup,* September 14, 2016, http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx

[429] Andrew Couts, "The Stupid Truth About Pizzagate," *The Daily Dot,* December 7, 2016, https://www.dailydot.com/layer8/pizzagate-fake-news-conspiracy-theories/

[430] John Whitehouse, "Misinformer of the Year.

Additionally, as with #Gamergate, alt-right anonymous trolls have launched doxxing campaigns to harass and intimidate targets with the threat of real-life violence. For example, David French, a writer for mainstream conservative outlet *National Review*, details how he and several other conservative journalists have been targeted by alt-right trolls after speaking out against Donald Trump.[431] French, his wife, and their young daughter all experienced severe online harassment and intimidation, while other journalists have had their personal details released on anonymous online message boards and have experienced in-person forms of intimidation and harassment.[432] Journalist Mickey White shared her experience as a target of alt-right trolls, detailing how anonymous trolls sent her a barrage of social media messages, emailed her personal and professional contacts suggesting that she was planning to harm herself, and made believable threats against members of her family.[433] These more severe examples of absurd provocation have a number of implications. First, they demonstrate that the harassment mobilized by anonymous online trolls has significant psychological effects—Mickey White was admitted to a psychiatric facility after alt-right trolls harassed her so severely that it triggered her PTSD. Additionally, the proven ability of alt-right trolls to gather personal information about their targets through doxxing campaigns demonstrates that the threat posed by alt-right trolls is dangerously *real* but also that the volume and sheer absurdity of anonymous alt-right online

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[431] David French, "The Price I've Paid for Opposing Donald Trump," *National Review,* October 1, 2016, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/441319/donald-trump-alt-right-internet-abuse-never-trump-movement

[432] Erick Woods Erickson, "Erick Erickson: The G.O.P. After Donald Trump," *The New York Times,* October 14, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/14/opinion/erick-erickson-the-gop-after-donald-trump.html

[433] Mickey White, "Here's What Happened…," *Medium,* October 14, 2016, https://medium.com/@BiasedGirl/it-all-really-started-going-sideways-the-morning-of-the-first-republican-primary-debate-85f5dc02d932

trolling can overwhelm and disorient targets in ways that make it difficult to discern serious threats from the barrage of other formations of harassment.[434]

Rearticulations of alt-right rhetoric through hashtags, memes, and trolling opened space for young white men who might have been excluded from the relatively elitist orientation to the alt-right constructed by white nationalist intelligentsia to identify with an alt-right ideology on different terms. The anonymity afforded by the Internet and exploited in fringe online public spaces such as 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit enabled these young white men to mobilize explicitly, virulently racist messages through memes and hashtags, providing a youthful rearticulation of alt-right messages mobilized through trolling as a rhetoric of absurd provocation. And, these youthful yet absurd rearticulations of alt-right rhetoric provided an expanded vocabulary and audience for alt-right trolls—the use of hashtags and memes gave the alt-right a sort of "edgy" vibe, and the use of trolling allowed alt-right provocations to reach a far wider audience than would ever read the think pieces published on *Alternative Right* or attend a Mencken Club meeting to hear Paul Gottfried speak. Additionally, the ability to say *anything* from behind the veil of online anonymity enabled online trolls mobilizing alt-right rhetoric to spread misinformation and mobilize radical forms of resistance against the norms and expectations of mainstream U.S. American public discourse around race, racism, and whiteness—where members of traditional hate groups like the KKK have long worn hoods and masks to protect their identities, absurd alt-right trolls hide behind screen names and avatars.

Yet, even as rearticulations of alt-right rhetoric on anonymous online message boards expanded the alt-right's rhetorical repertoire and reach and provided, via trolling, a strategy for resisting norms and expectations of mainstream U.S. American online public discourse, these

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[434] Mickey White, "Here's What Happened…"

rearticulations also threatened to dampen the white nationalist intelligentsia's efforts to construct

a reasoned and intellectualized alternative right and expose the underlying absurdity of an alt-

right ideology. In other words, alt-right rhetoric mobilized by anonymous online trolls might

have the potential to reach a wider audience, but it is positioned to be disregarded as a nuisance

rather than taken seriously as a political orientation. One important way that alt-right rhetoric has

been rearticulated *as* a serious pro-white far-right orientation to politics has been through the

emergence of non-anonymous provocateurs—or alt-right celebrity trolls—who have built a

public platform characterized by performances of absurd intellectualism and intellectualized

absurdity.

<div align="center">Articulating Intellectualism to Absurdity: The Alt-Right Celebrity Troll</div>

As the alt-right became increasingly articulated to the public political persona of Donald

Trump during the 2015–16 U.S. American presidential election campaign season and, in the

process, gained a sense of mainstream political legitimacy, several key figures have emerged to

publically articulate themselves to the alt-right. Some, such as White House chief strategist and

former Breitbart editor Stephen Bannon, have been appointed to powerful political positions,

providing an alt-right ideology with an air of mainstream political legitimacy and signaling its

potential to have significant influence on Trump's policies.[435]

Others, such as Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos, have become infamous *as* alt-

right provocateurs, amassing such significant mainstream media attention and recognizability

that they have risen to "alt-right celebrity troll" status. I conceptualize alt-right celebrity trolls as

recognizable, non-anonymous provocateurs who openly deploy alt-right rhetoric in mainstream

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[435] See David Horsey, "Bannon Opens an Alt-Right Door to the Trump White House," *Los Angeles Times,* November 23, 2016, http://www.latimes.com/opinion/topoftheticket/la-na-tt-bannon-door-20161122-story.html

public discourse in ways that exploit on-going debates around "political correctness" and "free speech" to provoke outrage and offense among the mainstream public. By articulating intellectualism to absurdity, I argue, alt-right celebrity trolls have helped bridge the alt-right's elitist, academic formations with its youthful, absurd formations, enabling alt-right rhetoric to mobilize intellectualized absurdity in online and offline contexts and, ultimately, to effectively hail the audience of youthful intellectuals imagined by Gottfried in 2008. I focus here on the most recognizable alt-right celebrity troll— Milo Yiannopoulos, who is an absurd provocateur with ties to #Gamergate and revels in performances of intellectualized absurdity.

Milo Yiannopoulos: Alt-Right Celebrity Troll

Milo Yiannopoulos gained mainstream public recognition as a flamboyantly gay, enthusiastic supporter of Donald Trump and rose to infamy as his U.S. American college tour— *Dangerous Faggot*—prompted polarizing and electrified protests at nearly every stop.[436] Before becoming an alt-right celebrity troll, Yiannopoulos, who is a British but resides in the United States, was a Cambridge University dropout who became a controversial technology blogger in the late 2000s.[437] Having already amassed a small but cult-like following of anonymous online trolls, Yiannopoulos became more widely known when he began covering #Gamergate for Breitbart News—once heralded by former editor Steve Bannon as "*the* platform for the alt-

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[436] See Jamie Altman, "Conservative Journo Milo Yiannopoulos Loves to 'Shock and Outrage' College Students," *USA Today College,* June 30, 2016, http://college.usatoday.com/2016/06/30/conservative-journo-milo-yiannopoulos-loves-to-shock-and-outrage-college-students/

[437] Dorian Lynskey, "The Rise and Fall of Milo Yiannopoulos—How a Shallow Actor Played the Bad Guy for Money," *The Guardian,* February 21, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/21/milo-yiannopoulos-rise-and-fall-shallow-actor-bad-guy-hate-speech

right."[438] Here, Yiannopoulos railed against feminism and "social justice warriors," decrying

their alleged "terrorising" of the gaming community and minimizing the severity of the

harassment that journalists and activists faced through trolling and doxxing.[439] As a noteworthy

#Gamergate journalist comfortable associating with anonymous online trolls while both speaking

their language and intellectualizing their efforts, Yiannopoulos was well suited to help bridge

anonymous online trolls from #Gamergate into the alt-right.[440] And, although more recent

revelations of his past remarks on the issue of pedophilia within the gay male community have

caused many proponents of the alt-right to distance themselves from him,[441] Yiannopoulos' role

in popularizing and proliferating alt-right rhetoric among mainstream audiences should not be

discounted.

As an alt-right celebrity troll who seems to embody ideological contradictions,

Yiannopoulos has constructed a public persona that revels in absurdity—he is recognizable

precisely because he says and does things that are considered absurd. He refers to now-President

Donald Trump as "daddy" and calls himself a "Trump-sexual."[442] He has suggested that his

birthday should be recognized as "World Patriarchy Day," saying, "World Patriarchy Day is the

day on which you should feel free to express your masculinity in the most odiously toxic manner

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[438] As quoted by Sarah Posner, "How Stephen Bannon Created an Online Haven for White Nationalists," *The Investigative Fund,* August 22, 2016, http://www.theinvestigativefund.org/investigations/politicsandgovernment/2265/how_stephen_bannon_created_an_online_haven_for_white_nationalists/

[439] See Milo Yiannopoulos, "Feminist Bullies Tearing the Video Game Industry Apart," *Breitbart,* September 1, 2014, http://www.breitbart.com/london/2014/09/01/lying-greedy-promiscuous-feminist-bullies-are-tearing-the-video-game-industry-apart/

[440] See Kristen V. Brown, "The Ultimate Troll: The Terrifying Allure of Gamergate Icon Milo Yiannopoulos," *Fusion,* October 27, 2015, http://fusion.net/story/220646/the-terrifying-allure-of-gamergate-icon-milo-yiannopoulos/

[441] See Lynskey, "The Rise and Fall"—a recording of Yiannopoulos defending relationships between older men and younger boys went public in early 2017.

[442] Ana Marie Cox, "Milo Yiannopoulos Doesn't Have Feelings," *New York Times,* May 4, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/milo-yiannopoulos-doesnt-have-feelings.html

imaginable" before suggesting that his followers celebrate with a list of activities that include

"Shoot something," "Cat-call at least five women," and "Tell your wife to lose weight."[443] He

has sympathized with white nationalist arguments that compulsory multiculturalism is

facilitating "white genocide"[444] and has started a "white privilege grant" to fund white male

college students[445] while simultaneously proclaiming that he could not possibly be racist himself

because he very much enjoys engaging in sexual relations with black men.[446]

In many ways, Yiannopoulos is a strange figure to have become an alt-right celebrity

troll. He makes abundant, continuous references to his gay, "half-Jewish" identity and his

penchant for Black men (or, more accurately, disembodied black penises[447]), which positions his

persona at an intersection of identities that should make him an outsider in alt-right and white

nationalist communities. As discussed in the previous chapter, white nationalists are adamantly

anti-Semitic, express strong opposition to "homosexuality," and loathe miscegenation.

Referencing his identity-based incommensurability, Yiannopoulos is adamant that he does not

identify as a member of the alt-right (but does affirm the ideology) and actively threatens

mainstream media outlets that label him a "white nationalist," "white supremacist," or "racist"

with lawsuits, proclaiming that these labels constitute libelous accusations and are entirely

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[443] Milo Yiannopoulos, "It's My Birthday and I've Got You All a Present," *Breitbart,* October 17, 2015, http://www.breitbart.com/big-journalism/2015/10/17/its-my-birthday-and-ive-got-you-all-a-present/

[444] Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide."

[445] Ana Marie Cox, "Milo Yiannopoulos."

[446] Lynskey, "The Rise and Fall."

[447] See Rich Robinson, "Conservative Columnist Posts Racially Charged Attack on Reddit: 'Black Men Are Notorious for Lusting After a Well-Rounded Caucasian Butt Cheek,'" *Rise News,* Accessed February 14, 2017, http://risenews.net/2015/09/conservative-columnist-posts-racist-attack-on-reddit-black-men-are-notorious-for-lusting-after-a-well-rounded-caucasian-butt-cheek/

unsubstantiated.[448] And, self-avowed white nationalists such as Andrew Anglin have disavowed

Yiannopoulos as a "homosexual Jew" who is "subversive and a disease," adamantly arguing that

he does not speak for the alt-right.[449]

Yet, Yiannopoulos's position at the intersection of white–gay–Jew who proclaims non-

racism functions in ways that actually bolster his ability to act as a celebrity troll and alt-right

provocateur. As Yiannopoulos explained in a January 2017 interview,

> [The left is] particularly upset with me because I happen to be a conservative gay guy and
> have black boyfriends and God knows what else so they can't get me on racism, they
> can't get me on sexism, they can't get me on homophobia, they can't get me with any of
> their usual strategies.[450]

Here, Yiannopoulos constructs a sense of plausible deniability around his ability to be

racist, sexist, or homophobic based on his own intersecting identities and preferences. Similar to

the plausible deniability constructed to separate white nationalist rhetoric from white supremacist

rhetoric, this rhetorical distancing through performative identification enables Yiannopoulos to

promote racism, sexism, and homophobia while simultaneously proclaiming that the intersecting

identities he embodies make him incapable of doing so.

For example, in a February 2017 appearance on the television show "Real Time With Bill

Maher," Yiannopoulos—clad in thick black eyeliner and a multi-layered pearl necklace—found

himself in a debate about efforts to provide the transgender community with basic access to

public facilities. Yiannopoulos, who frequently disparages transgender folks by proclaiming they

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[448] See Milo Yiannopoulos, "Milo: How I Forced Glamour Magazine to Admit I'm Not a 'White Supremacist,'" *Breitbart,* January 27, 2017, http://www.breitbart.com/milo/2017/01/27/forced-glamour-magazine-admit-im-not-white-supremacist/
[449] Andrew Anglin, "A Normie's Guide."
[450] Milo Yiannopoulos [interview], "What Motivates Professional Troll Milo Yiannopoulos?," *The Jason and Burns Show,* January 19, 2017, http://kiroradio.com/listen/10014733/

are mentally ill and disproportionately involved in sex crimes,[451] was speaking out against trans-

inclusive restroom initiatives, while panelist Larry Wilmore attempted to refute the dangerous

and invalidated misinformation Yiannopoulos presented.[452] After making a comparison between

contemporary misinformation around transgender folks and historical misinformation around

"homosexuality" as a mental disorder, Yiannopoulos rolled his eyes, smiled, and said mockingly,

"Well, maybe it is! I feel pretty disordered." After a period of back-and-forth insults between

Yiannopoulos and the other panelists filled with copious slurs and insults peppered by

uncomfortably inappropriate laughter, the conversation turned to Milo's role in the alt-right and

connections among himself, the alt-right, and racism. In a defiant tone, Yiannopolous exclaimed,

> This is one of the enduring mysteries of the American media…how can this movement be
> an anti-Semitic, white supremacist, hateful, bigoted, racist, homophobic movement and a
> gay Jew who never shuts up about his black boyfriend is the head of it…something's not
> quite right.

Here, Yiannopoulos constructs a relationship of impossibility—he cannot *possibly* be

involved in a white nationalist movement, because white nationalists hate him and the alt-right

loves him. So, either he is not associated with the alt-right, or the alt-right is not associated with

white nationalism, or both. And, as noted above, Yiannopoulos has been more interested in

separating himself from the alt-right and white nationalism than separating the alt-right *from*

white nationalism.

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[451] See Daniel Reynolds, "Milo Yiannopoulos Takes Transphobia on Tour," *The Advocate,*
October 26, 2016, http://www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/10/26/milo-yiannopoulos-takes-transphobia-tour
[452] Video available from Ruthie Blum, "'Gay Jew With Black Boyfriend' Milo Yiannopoulos
Mocks Media for Calling Alt-Right Movement He Purportedly Heads 'Antisemitic, White
Supremacist, Homophobic,'" *The Algemeiner,* February 19, 2017,
https://www.algemeiner.com/2017/02/19/gay-jew-with-black-boyfriend-milo-yiannopoulos-mocks-media-for-calling-alt-right-movement-he-purportedly-heads-antisemitic-white-supremacist-homophobic/

Elsewhere, however, Yiannopoulos frequently mobilizes appeals to white pride that pull directly from alt-right articulations of a white nationalist ideology. For example, in a discussion on BBC's *The Briefing Room,* Yiannopoulos affirms the alt-right and speaks directly to their concerns about the perceived repression of white pride. He argues,

> You're constantly telling us white people are the source of all evil, that white people have all this stuff to apologize for. Well you know what? We're not that bad. We did some pretty good stuff. We did Mozart, and Rembrandt, and Descartes, and Beethoven, and Wagner, and we went to the stars, we explored the oceans, we built Western civilization. **Can't white people be proud of what white people have done?**[453]

Here, Milo affirms the alt-right's frustration with mainstream discursive norms around race and the perceived repression of open proclamations of pride in whiteness and invokes appeals to common sense and innocence as he challenges those norms. By making sweeping references to various examples of the "pretty good stuff" white folks have done, Milo questions the reasonability of repressing pride in whiteness. After all, what's wrong with celebrating cultural achievements? This line of reasoning is reminiscent of appeals to common sense in white nationalist rhetoric, which are frequently deployed to reason that since members of other races have space for celebration and pride of their identities, why should white people not be given the same?[454] Yiannopoulos's oscillation between disidentifying with white nationalism and the alt-right and mobilizing white nationalist arguments demonstrates how rhetorical distance is constructed between the alt-right and white nationalism while the two ideologies continue to share foundational connections.

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[453] Audio available from Mike Ma, "Milo on the Alt-Right: 'The Most Serious Free Speech Advocates in Decades,'" *Brietbart,* August 26, 2016, http://www.breitbart.com/milo/2016/08/26/milo-bbcs-briefing-room-alt-right/, emphasis mine.
[454] See CeltandProud, reply to "What's the Difference Between a White Supremacist and a White Nationalist" [Msg. 8], *Stormfront,* July 27, 2011 (12:46 p.m.), http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t819574/

In part, Yiannopoulos seems to amass attention *because* he embodies so many apparent

contradictions. His public persona is built on an articulation of absurdities, and his willingness to

revel publically in these absurdities has propelled him to alt-right celebrity troll status. In spring

2016, Yiannopoulos took his alt-right celebrity troll act on the road, embarking on a highly

controversial and heavily publicized tour of U.S. American colleges, where he exploited ongoing

debates around political correctness and free speech on U.S. American college campuses to reach

a young white audience and bolster his own celebrity troll status.

Trolling Political Correctness, Free Speech, & U.S. American College Campuses

As noted in the beginning of this chapter, contemporary conservative critiques of

"political correctness" are rooted in the belief that U.S. American universities have become

bastions of radical, far-left propaganda and sites of liberal indoctrination. Across his year-long

"Dangerous Faggot" U.S. American college campus tour, Milo Yiannopolous used this

longstanding controversy over "political correctness" to rationalize the proliferation of absurd

rhetoric alongside appeals to the intellectual integrity of his mission. For example, in an

interview with USA Today College, Yiannopoulos explained,

> I don't care if you come away agreeing with me on any subject I talk about. I want you to
> laugh and be entertained. Come away with the idea that more speech and not less is
> always a good thing. If you don't like something people say, challenge them and have a
> good conversation about it.[455]

Framing his approach as "all in good fun" on the one hand and directed toward the

promotion of civil debate on the other, Yiannopoulos constructs himself as simultaneously

entertaining and educational and frames his mission around the noble goal of promoting free

speech and open dialogue. "So long as people are prevented from saying true things in public life

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[455] As quoted by Altman, "Conservative Journo Milo Yiannopoulos."

for political correctness, there'll still be a need for me," he told a CNN reporter, "And I'll never

stop."[456]

Yet, the framing and content of Yiannopoulos' talks betrays his claims to open dialogue

and demonstrates that the ultimate goal—and, more importantly, implication—of his

appearances is sheer provocation.[457] During his 40+ stop "Dangerous Faggot" tour, Milo

delivered talks focused on topics such as, "10 Things I Hate About Islam,"[458] "Feminism is

Cancer for Men… and Women!,"[459] and, "Master Baiters: The Liberals Keeping America's Race

War Alive."[460] Regardless of their titles, all Yiannopoulos' talks are framed around challenging

the perceived culture of "political correctness" on U.S. American college campuses. During the

opening segment of his talks, Yiannopoulos challenges "political correctness" by making

historically marginalized groups and protesters the site of jokes and misinformed critiques and,

frequently, by making explicit references to individuals, groups, and campaigns at the specific

schools at which he is speaking.

For example, during a December 2016 talk at the University of Wisconson-Milwaukee,

Yiannopoulos devoted the first several minutes of his talk, "Master Baiters: The Liberals

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[456] As quoted by Dan Lieberman, "Milo Yiannopoulos is Trying to Convince Colleges that Hate Speech is Cool," *CNN,* February 2, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/02/us/milo-yiannopoulos-ivory-tower/

[457] Lieberman, "Milo Yiannopoulos is Trying."

[458] Milo Yiannoloulos, "MILO at UCF: '10 Things I Hate About Islam,'" YouTube video, 1:51:32, posted by "MILO," September 27, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prO7R1l2kZI&index=22&list=PLFRepYxcWGfAZe30ljAe2j5p80wRISlIW

[459] Milo Yiannoloulos, "MILO at Auburn University: 'Feminism is Cancer for Men… and Women!," YouTube video, 1:31:33, posted by "MILO," October 7, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKFA6RKIHSc&list=PLFRepYxcWGfAZe30ljAe2j5p80wRISlIW&index=21

[460] Milo Yiannoloulos, "MILO at UW-Milwaukee, "Master Baiters: The Liberals Keeping America's Race War Alive," YouTube video, 2:31:19, posted by "MILO," December 13, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t1ufzttyUM&list=PLFRepYxcWGfAZe30ljAe2j5p80wRISlIW&index=6

Keeping America's Race War Alive," laughing along with the audience as he played footage of

protestors outside the talk, which he used to demonstrate the way "free speech," including his

own was being suppressed on that campus.[461] Yiannopoulos went on to speak about other

formations of "political correctness" on U.S. American college campuses, continuing to invoke

examples specific to UW-Milwaukee by, for example, referring to an "Inclusive Excellence

Center" that had launched a "Just Words" campaign designed to educate students about avoiding

offensive forms of communication. For the next several minutes, Yiannopoulos attempted to

(re)construct the "Just Words" campaign as absurd by demonstrating what *real* offensive

communication sounds like by, of course, saying very offensive things. During this segment,

Yiannopoulos posted the picture of a transgender student at UW-Milwaukee and spent several

minutes making jokes about transgender folks in general and that specific student in particular.

In general, Yiannopoulos' delivery is disorganized and emphasizes provocation over

education or argumentation. He goes on frequent tangents, speaks to individuals in the audience,

cracks offensive jokes, and arouses raucous laughter. During the opening segments of his talks in

which rhetorical formations of absurdity (and harassment) proliferate, Yiannopoulos performs

flamboyancy—he talks in a high-pitched voiced, uses grandiose, exaggerated gestures, and

giggles playfully. At a certain point, however, typically 12–20 minutes in, Yiannopoulos'

speaking style shifts—at least intermittently—to a more serious, somber verbal and nonverbal

delivery and his focus shifts to a prepared lecture on a particular topic.

During a January 2017 appearance at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, for

example, Yiannopoulos spent the bulk of his talk laying out claims about how and why the

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[461] Ibid.

Democrats had alienated the "white working class."[462] During this portion, Yiannopoulos

showed infographics that illustrated shifting demographics among voters along racial lines and

attempted to demonstrate why Democrats had lost the "white working class vote." Yet,

Yiannopoulos is better at absurdity that argumentation, and his attempt to lay out an argument is

interrupted by frequent tangents, jokes, and loosely related examples. So, at UCCS, what is

framed as an argument about white working class voters and the Democratic Party devolves at

many points into extended jokes about Ghostbusters, the transgender community, Muslims, and

other groups. It is clear, in other words, that Yiannopoulos is more interested in provocation than

reasoned argumentation.

As a provocateur, Yiannopoulos is wildly effective. Not only do his appearances provoke

mass protests at every stop, but Yiannopoulos and other far-right commentators have referred to

these protests as evidence of precisely the culture of "political correctness" and suppression of

"free speech" that the alt-right claims to be opposing.[463] For example, during one of the last stops

of his "Dangerous Faggot" tour, where he was set to speak at the University of California at

Berkeley, protests of his presence and planned talk rose to levels that caused local and university

police to cancel the event.[464] This event fueled debates around the limits of "free speech," raising

questions about the most productive ways to promote free and open communication while also

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[462] Milo Yiannoloulos, "MILO at UC – Colorado Springs: Why The Dems Lost The White Working Class," YouTube video, 1:43:17, posted by "MILO," January 26, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szi1TolCIaI&list=PLFRepYxcWGfAZe30ljAe2j5p80wRISlIW&index=2

[463] See Altman, "Conservative Journo Milo."; Ryan Holiday, "I Helped Create the Milo Trolling Playbook. You Should Stop Playing Right Into It," *Observer,* February 7, 2017, http://observer.com/2017/02/i-helped-create-the-milo-trolling-playbook-you-should-stop-playing-right-into-it/

[464] See Madison Park and Kyung Lah, "Berkeley Protests of Yiannopoulos Caused $100,000 in Damage," *CNN,* February 2, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/01/us/milo-yiannopoulos-berkeley/

protecting society's most vulnerable groups from the symbolic and literal violence mobilized

against them by some speakers.

Many people argued for relatively limitless understandings of free speech, proclaiming

that if people like Milo are prohibited from sharing their absurd, ignorant, and hateful opinions,

then—in theory—*anyone* who is considered to be "too radical" might also experience censorship

and, therefore, any form of suppression is dangerous.[465] Others have argued that protests and

demonstrations are *also* forms of "free speech," affirming that people who oppose a controversial

speaker have the right to voice their opposition and, especially when absurd or offensive speech

could pose a credible and serious threat to the safety of particular individuals or groups, can and

should attempt to mitigate that threat by any means necessary.[466]

For his own part, Yiannopolous reported the events at Berkeley on Twitter, after which

he proclaimed that "the Left is absolutely terrified of free speech and will do literally anything to

shut it down."[467] Donald Trump took to Twitter to speak out against Berkeley's supposed

suppression of Yiannopoulos's "free speech," suggesting that he may cut federal funding to the

campus as a result.[468] This particular event demonstrates the ways that alt-right celebrity trolls

attempt to provoke the mainstream U.S. American public into confirming alt-right arguments

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[465] See Peter Beinart, "Milo Yiannopoulos Tested Progressives—And They Failed," *Atlantic,* February 3, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/everyone-has-a-right-to-free-speech-even-milo/515565/

[466] See Jay Barmann, "Free Speech?: Milo Yiannopoulos Planned to Out Undocumented Students by Name in His Berkeley Talk," *SFist,* February 8, 2017, http://sfist.com/2017/02/08/free_speech_milo_yiannopoulos_plann.php

[467] See Julia Carrie Wong, "UC Berkeley Cancels 'Alt-right' Speaker Milo Yiannopoulos as Thousands Protest," *Guardian,* February 2, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/01/milo-yiannopoulos-uc-berkeley-event-cancelled

[468] Thomas Fuller and Christopher Mele, "Berkeley Cancels Milo Yiannopoulos Speech, and Donald Trump Tweets Outrage," *New York Times,* February 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/01/us/uc-berkeley-milo-yiannopoulos-protest.html

around political correctness and free speech in ways that pose important problems and expose the

complexities of resistance. On the one hand, ignoring alt-right celebrity trolls like Milo

Yiannopoulos enables him to mobilize his absurdly problematic arguments unchecked. On the

other hand, virtually any form of protest bolsters the mainstream media and public attention

Yiannopoulos receives and leaves itself open to be used as evidence to support the alt-right's

claims to censorship.

Had Yiannopoulos confined his absurdity to the pages of Breitbart, he would be far easier

to write off as just another alt-right troll and to ignore in the name of not "feeding the trolls."

Yet, by launching a U.S. American college tour, Yiannopoulos has mobilized absurdity on a

platform rooted in intellectualism (the college campus) to exploit the polarized debate around

"free speech" and "political correctness" on these college campuses by provoking outraged

reactions to his talks. In the process, an alt-right ideology has reached a much wider audience

and has received a great deal of mainstream media attention, which has, in turn, bolstered

Yiannopoulos's alt-right celebrity troll status.

Articulating his mission to a larger conservative debate around political correctness in

academic contexts mobilizes appeals to intellectualism has enabled Milo Yiannopoulos to

ground his absurd provocations in an air of reasonability and nobility. By simultaneously

mobilizing a rhetoric of absurdity, Yiannopoulos has effectively infused mainstream public

discourse with a more radical iteration of pro-whiteness than is common even among the white

nationalist intelligentsia, pushing the boundaries of "reasonable" free speech in more explicit

ways. And, by seeking out platforms on U.S. American college campuses, Milo has been

instrumental in enabling the alt-right to *finally* reach the audience that Paul Gottfried had

originally envisioned in 2008—a youthful, energetic, *and* intellectual audience.[469] Richard

Spencer, who has become the most recognizable alt-right figure hailing from the white

nationalist intelligentsia, praised Yiannopoulos' tour as an inspiration for his own efforts to reach

out to students on U.S. American college campuses. In an interview with *Mother Jones*, Spencer

noted, "People in college are at the point in their lives where they are actually open to alternative

perspectives, for better and for worse. I think you do need to get them while they are young."[470]

Yiannopoulos, more than any other alt-right figure to date, has been able to effectively reach this

audience of young, impressionable, educated folks.

Yiannopoulos's appeal to the alt-right masses may have been threatened by his public

proclamation of an apparently pro-pedophilia position, but his construction of an alt-right

celebrity troll persona has opened space for others to pick up where he has left off. Organizations

such as "The Proud Boys" have emerged to provide space for young male proponents of the alt-

right to gather and organize—in solidarity with one another and in opposition to anti-alt-right

factions—and are actively mobilizing absurd formations of alt-right rhetoric in mainstream

public contexts.[471] Further, Yiannopoulos's "fall from grace" helps to pinpoint the line between

alt-right common sense and absurdity by providing a rare glimpse into the type of rhetoric

considered "too extreme" by a group of extremists. Explicit formations of racist, sexist,

transphobic, Islamophobic, rhetoric are, as Yiannopoulos has demonstrated, deemed widely

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[469] Paul Gottfried, "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right," *Taki's Magazine,* December 1, 2008, http://takimag.com/article/the_decline_and_rise_of_the_alternative_right/print#axzz4InOGAwpd

[470] as quoted by Josh Harkinson, "The Push to Enlist 'Alt-Right' Recruits on College Campuses," *Mother Jones,* December 6, 2016, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/12/richard-spencer-alt-right-college-activism

[471] See Will Sommer, "The Fratty Proud Boys are the Alt Right's Weirdest New Phenomenon," *Medium,* February 5, 2017, https://medium.com/@willsommer/the-fratty-proud-boys-are-the-alt-rights-weirdest-new-phenomenon-7572b31e50f2

acceptable among alt-right trolls, while the affirmation of romantic and sexual relations between older men and younger boys is quickly deemed repulsive. Yiannopoulos may have always been an "outsider within" alt-right circles—however, so long as he mobilized rhetoric that affirmed straight white male hegemony, he was allowed to play. As new alt-right celebrities continue to rise—and fall—lessons learned from Yiannopoulos's time in the alt-right lime light will undoubtedly prove instructive for both proponents and opponents of the alt-right.

By attracting so much mainstream media and public attention, alt-right celebrity trolls have opened space for alt-right rhetoric to mobilize across mainstream online and offline public spaces, which has effectively enabled proponents of white nationalism and its alt-right articulations to troll the U.S. American public online and off. This practice of ideological trolling has been effective in more ways than one. Alt-right rhetoric has certainly agitated mainstream U.S. Americans and has mobilized simultaneous appeals to intellectualism and absurdity to provoke the types of responses—frenzied, offended, outraged—that are broadly understood to be sought by trolls. And, these frenzied, offended, and outraged responses have become fodder for the alt-right's claims to the suppression of "free speech" around issues of white racial identity and culture, which, in turn, bolsters the alt-right's ability to couch their rearticulations of a white nationalist ideology in appeals to reasonability grounded in the language of free speech.

Conclusions

In reflecting on the construction of the alt-right and the ways it has evolved from its fringe online incubators into mainstream public discourse through a series of rearticulations, it is clear that there is substantial overlap—in core beliefs and assumptions and in rhetorical style and strategy—between an alt-right ideology and a white nationalist ideology. By now, that overlap

has been made clear by many in the mainstream. For example, in an August 2016 speech, then-

presidential candidate Hillary Clinton proclaimed,

> No one should have any illusions about what's really going on here. The names may have changed…Racists now call themselves "racialists." White supremacists now call themselves "white nationalists." The paranoid fringe now calls itself "alt-right." But the hate burns just as bright. [472]

However, appeals to intellectualism and absurdity function, in different ways, to

obfuscate the deep relationship between an alt-right ideology and white nationalism and to

imagine "alternative" formations of pro-white racial consciousness. By mobilizing

intellectualized rearticulations of pro-white racial consciousness, alt-right rhetoric exploits the

spaces between coded, race evasive discourse and explicit formations of white superiority to

construct the alt-right as a broad political ideology informed by philosophy and science. By

mobilizing absurd rearticulations of pro-whiteness, alt-right rhetoric frames explicitly offensive

formations of racist speech as ridiculous jokes. In each case, these formations of alt-right rhetoric

construct rhetorical distance between the alt-right and white nationalism to offer everyday white

folks a way out of fragile, colorblind orientations to race and into pro-whiteness without

necessarily consciously identifying *as* white nationalist.

As I have demonstrated in this and the previous chapter, an ideology of white superiority

strategically exploits this rhetorical distance as it maneuvers from its extremist formations on

fringe online platforms into more coded formations in mainstream public discourse. By making

these rhetorical maneuvers, alt-right rhetoric positions itself as a point of identification for

disgruntled everyday white folks who might be sympathetic to the core assumptions of white

nationalism but who would initially resist identifying *as* white nationalist. In other words, alt-

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[472] Hillary Clinton, as quoted by Politico Staff, "Transcript: Hillary Clinton's Full Remarks in Reno, Nevada," *Politico,* August 25, 2016, http://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/transcript-hillary-clinton-alt-right-reno-227419

right rhetoric imagines a racially conscious white identity articulated to pride and audacity and

positioned in opposition to white fragility, colorblindness, and political correctness, yet this

identity is framed as an alternative to mainstream conservative politics rather than a racial

ideology per se. In this way, the alt-right is constructed a rhetorical bridge between mainstream

public discourse and white nationalist rhetoric, allowing white nationalist rhetoric to seep into

mainstream discourse and provide a path for everyday white folks to transition gradually into a

pro-white formation of racial consciousness.

Notably, my analysis in the previous chapter demonstrated that white nationalism is, too,

a rhetorical bridge to a more extreme formation of pro-whiteness. Whereas alt-right rhetoric

attempts to construct rhetorical distance between itself and white nationalism, white nationalist

rhetoric attempts to construct rhetorical distance between itself and white supremacy. And, as

alt-right rhetoric provides a bridge over the rhetorical distance it has itself constructed, so does

white nationalist rhetoric provide a rhetorical bridge into white supremacy. In this way, my

analysis has demonstrated that a white supremacist ideology seeps rhetorically into

contemporary mainstream U.S. American public culture and discourse by strategically exploiting

a series of tempered rearticulations mobilized by white nationalist and alt-right discursive

formations.

As I have been noting, mainstream standards of reasonability around public discourse on

race are framed by a dominant ideology of colorblindness, where common sense understandings

suggest that race and racism are insignificant in contemporary society and direct discourse on

race is discouraged while racist assumptions continue to circulate through coded rhetoric.[473]

Whereas the white nationalist rhetoric analyzed in Chapter 4 might be considered "absurd" from

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[473] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists.*

mainstream perspectives rooted in colorblind common sense, appeals to common sense mobilized by white nationalism attempt to re-frame racial realism *as* a common sense perspective by constructing rhetorical distance between white nationalism and white supremacy and, in the process, framing white nationalism as reasonable and white supremacy as unreasonable.

In contrast, the formations of absurdity analyzed in this chapter function differently—rather than making appeals *to* common sense, rhetorical absurdity eschews reasonability and rationality to revel in wildly unreasonable, illogical, inappropriate, and ridiculous discursive formations that, to mainstream audiences, do not "make sense" and are profoundly uncomfortable. In the process, I argue, mobilizing absurd formations of rhetoric enables the alt-right to disrupt and disorient mainstream audiences' "common sense" in ways that leave them grasping for any semblance of reasonability and rationality. In turn, alt-right formations of absurdity make mainstream public audiences vulnerable to white nationalist appeals to common sense, which are positioned to restore a sense of reason, order, and comfort from a pro-white orientation to racial consciousness.

And, as with white nationalist rhetoric, alt-right rhetoric attempts to resist the negative articulations of racially conscious whiteness to guilt and shame to offer everyday white folks an orientation to pro-white racial consciousness articulated to positive affects. Alt-right rhetoric's mobilization of appeals to intellectualism—from its formation *as* an academic and intellectual alternative to mainstream conservative politics, to its subsequent development by degreed academics within so-called "intellectual think tanks," to its circulation through contemporary debates on political correctness and free speech on college campuses—frames the alt-right as a rational, smart political orientation for educated, intelligent, reasonable white folks (or for white

folks who wish to appear educated and intelligent). At the same time, the articulation of alt-right

discourse to online troll culture mobilizes a rhetoric of absurdity that offers a scapegoat for

accusations of "real" racism while also providing a point of "playful" identification for

disgruntled white folks with whom appeals to intellectualism might not resonate but for whom

the alt-right's opposition to perceived political correctness and compulsory multiculturalism are

attractive and igniting. In each formation, alt-right rhetoric implicitly argues that there is no need

to feel guilty or ashamed when proclaiming pride in one's whiteness—doing so, it suggests, can

be smart, noble, funny, and gratifying.

The final analysis chapter of this dissertation will investigate appeals to white

(dis)comfort among rhetorical formations of white anti-racist consciousness working against

colorblindness, white fragility, and pro-white racial consciousness and will explore the

possibilities and limitations of rearticulating whiteness in anti-racist formations. Thus, I turn

from here toward more (temperedly) optimistic formations of racial consciousness.

CHAPTER 6
Everyday Anti-Racism for Everyday White Folks

We need to be aware white people on our own personal growth journey, who want to bring large numbers of other white people into movements to bring down white supremacy."

-Chris Crass[474]

We must have an inclusive, open-hearted approach to organizing, calling people into this work rather than creating barriers to participation while maintaining a clear political line. When those of us who are white realizing that racial justice is core to our liberation as well, then masses of white people will withdraw support from white supremacy.

-Showing Up For Racial Justice[475]

The pain and struggle of people of color should be enough to convince this country that we have a problem, but sadly we've seen that this isn't the case. White people who care about racial justice need to listen to black people, believe them, amplify their voices and help them carry the burden of changing a broken and unjust system. We must hold other white people accountable and stand in solidarity, while supporting people of color as they lead this movement.

-Rebecca Griffin[476]

In April 2017, junk beverage-and-food conglomerate *PepsiCo* released a commercial

aimed at promoting "a global message of unity, peace, and understanding" featuring imagery of

transracial solidarity and white allyship.[477] The commercial opens by oscillating between scenes

of creative expression and protest, with people who appear to represent various races, ethnicities,

religions, and sexual orientations playing music, painting, dancing, marching, and—of course—

drinking Pepsi. As the initially soft music begins to build, the artists gradually join the march—

an issue-ambiguous demonstration characterized by signs that read, "Join the Conversation" and

"Love" with throngs of smiling people, fists raised, marching and chanting something

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[474] Chris Crass, *Towards the 'Other America': Anti-Racist Resources for White People Taking Action for Black Lives Matter* (St. Louis, MS: Chalice Press, 2015): 18.

[475] "About," *Showing Up For Racial Justice,* accessed April 22, 2017, http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/about

[476] Rebecca Griffin, "For White People Who Believe Black Lives Matter," *Huffington Post,* July 10, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rebecca-griffin/for-white-people-who-beli_b_10917900.html

[477] As quoted by Daniel Victor, "Pepsi Pulls Ad Accused of Trivializing Black Lives Matter," *New York Times,* April 5, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html

unintelligible. Meanwhile, white reality television star Kendall Jenner is modeling in a photo

shoot when she, too, sees the march and—after receiving a smile and affirmative nod from a

racially ambiguous young man—decides to join.[478] Jenner rips off a blonde wig, wipes off her

lipstick and, with a proud smile, walks toward the crowd of demonstrators. Rather than joining

the demonstration, though, Jenner goes straight to a bucket full of Pepsi, and grabs a can.

Smiling confidently as she walks through the crowd, Jenner approaches a line of uniformed law

enforcement personnel standing in opposition to the protestors and extends the can of Pepsi to an

officer. The music cuts out for a moment of silence as the officer takes the can of Pepsi, smiles,

and enjoys a drink. The crowd erupts in cheers and applause, and the commercial concludes with

the message "Live Bolder."

In a contemporary U.S. American context characterized by sustained protests of on-going

racialized police brutality, the public was quick to call out Pepsi for its irresponsible

appropriation of protest imagery and implicit trivialization of the Black Lives Matter

movement.[479] Critics argued that by positioning Jenner—a white woman—at the center of the

commercial and portraying the act of offering a soda as solution to tensions between protestors

and police, the Pepsi commercial demonstrates "a total misunderstanding of any social, minority

driven movement, resulting in blatant promotion of the white savior complex and totally

minimizing the legitimacy of these movements."[480] In response to the commercial, Martin Luther

King Jr.'s granddaughter Bernice King tweeted, "If only Daddy would have known about the

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[478] Video available from Victor, "Pepsi Pulls Ad."
[479] Victor, "Pepsi Pulls Ad."
[480] Jackie Rocheleau, "4 Times Pepsi 'Missed the Mark' in Kendall Jenner Commercial,"
Odyssey, April 6, 2017, https://www.theodysseyonline.com/problems-pepsi-kendall-jenner-ad

power of #Pepsi."[481] Pepsi pulled the ad the next day, and Kendall Jenner is reportedly reeling

from the pain and embarrassment triggered by the public backlash.[482] Setting aside the

implications of the Pepsi ad for neoliberalism and consumerism, Pepsi's attempt to promote

"unity, peace, and understanding," by positioning Kendall Jenner as the quintessential white

savior is a poignant example of how performances of white allyship are often fraught with

problematic (mis)understandings of the severity and complexities of the injustices plaguing

marginalized communities. And, as Diyora Shadijanova argues, Jenner's own refusal to

apologize for her role in an irresponsible advertisement suggests that she cares more about

protecting her career and feelings than actually combating the issues of injustice facing

communities of color—a common problem among white allies that underscores the need to

move beyond white fragility to adopt resilient and reflexive formations of anti-racist white racial

consciousness.[483]

    Across the previous two analysis chapters, I have been investigating efforts to promote

racist formations of white racial consciousness by exploring how an ideology of white

superiority mobilizes across fringe online publics and into mainstream public discourse by

appealing to context-bound standards of common sense, intellectualism, and absurdity. Yet,

while racist formations of white racial consciousness continue to proliferate and challenge the

norms of race evasive public discourse, these are not the only formations of white racial

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[481] @BerniceKing, Twitter post, April 5, 2017,
https://twitter.com/BerniceKing/status/849656699464056832
[482] Lauren Evans, "Kendall Jenner is 'Traumatized' By the Backlash Over Her Pepsi Ad,"
Jezebel, April 8, 2017, http://jezebel.com/kendall-jenner-is-traumatized-by-the-backlash-over-her-1794138888
[483] Diyora Shadijanova, "Kendall Jenner's Supposed 'Trauma' Over Her Pepsi Ad is the Epitome of Performative White Feminism," *The Tab,* April 9, 2017,
https://thetab.com/uk/2017/04/09/kendall-jenners-supposed-trauma-pepsi-ad-epitome-performative-white-feminism-37117

consciousness circulating in contemporary contexts. As noted in Chapter 1 and signaled in the epigraphs above, anti-racist formations of white racial consciousness have also emerged, challenging both colorblind and pro-white orientations to race in ways that position everyday white folks as potential allies in the contemporary struggle for racial justice. However, as demonstrated by the pitfalls of the Pepsi commercial, engagements with white allyship require a deep anti-racist consciousness that understands the complexities and severity of the formations of racial injustice faced by communities of color to avoid engaging in shallow, fragile performances of allyship that re-center whiteness and disrupt racial justice efforts.

The analysis that unfolds in this chapter makes a turn toward investigating these anti-racist formations of whiteness to illuminate efforts to resist both mainstream and extreme formations of whiteness in post-2012 online public discourse targeted at everyday U.S. American white folks. Following a brief introduction to key concepts and ongoing conversations germane to white anti-racism, I discuss *Everyday Feminism* as an online archive of discourse on anti-racism for everyday white folks. Then, I investigate *Everyday Feminism* contributors' attempts to raise white anti-racist consciousness among everyday white folks by attempting to shift common sense understandings of race and racism and resist reactionary white fragility. I conclude by pointing to critiques of white anti-racist praxis, and argue that these critiques demonstrate a need for resilient and reflexive formations of white anti-racist consciousness.

My analysis demonstrates that the affective circulation of white fragility among everyday white audiences constrains possibilities for white anti-racist consciousness and praxis in ways that require careful rhetorical negotiation. *Everyday Feminism* contributors attempt to rhetorically negotiate white fragility by strategically appealing to white (dis)comfort, sharing personal experiences, and providing empirical evidence in an effort to gradually move everyday

white folks from a colorblind ideology into anti-racist consciousness. Ultimately, I argue that

white folks committed to anti-racist praxis should position themselves as bridges between

mainstream and anti-racist publics to help everyday white folks develop resilient and reflexive

anti-racist consciousness rooted in accountability to communities of color. Attempting to

rearticulate whiteness in anti-racist formations is fraught with the haunting presence of a still-

unfolding history of white domination, violence, and supremacy. For white folks to engage in

productive anti-racist praxis thus requires a commitment to resist dominant whiteness while

remaining vigilantly aware of the ways it continues to operate.

<div align="center">On Anti-Racist Consciousness & Praxis</div>

Operating from a historically and materially grounded perspective on systemic racism, I

understand *anti-racism* as conscious efforts to disrupt beliefs and practices that implicitly or

explicitly perpetuate an ideology of white superiority, in the process, contribute to the oppression

and marginalization of people of color. As noted in Chapter 1, there are at least two important

components to anti-racism—anti-racist praxis and anti-racist consciousness. Anti-racist praxis

and anti-racist consciousness are interrelated concepts with important analytic distinctions that

are often elided in discourse on white anti-racism.

Following sociologists Pamela Perry and Alexis Shotwell, "anti-racist praxis" refers to

"conscious thought and action to dismantle racism and end racial inequities."[484] From this

understanding, anti-racist praxis encompasses both direct-action for racial justice (e.g. attending

protests and demonstrations for racial justice) as well as more "everyday" engagements (e.g.

having informal conversations with friends and family about issues of racial (in)justice and

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[484] Pamela Perry and Alexis Shotwell, "Relational Understanding and White Antiracist Praxis," *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 1, 2009: 34.

making decisions about how to vote).[485] As a conscious, *informed practice,* anti-racist praxis is

implicitly premised on the formation of a critical consciousness around issues of race and racism.

Despite its crucial importance to anti-racist engagement—especially from positions of

racial privilege—"anti-racist consciousness" has not been explicitly theorized in existing

literature, although it is often referenced. I conceptualize "anti-racist consciousness" as a deep,

critical understanding of the ways in which race has been constructed and made *real* for the

purpose of dividing humans and constructing a racialized hierarchy. As discussed in Chapter 3,

the process of racial formation involves both the social construction of race and racialization, or

"the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice,

or group."[486] Anti-racist consciousness thus requires an awareness of how race is simultaneously

constructed and experienced as real and, especially, an understanding of how whiteness has been

constructed and positioned as ideologically superior and materially privileged while non-

whiteness has been systemically constructed as inferior and positioned to be disadvantaged.

Relatedly, this awareness requires an understanding of the relationship between historical and

contemporary forms of racial injustice and the continuing significance of race and racism in

contemporary U.S. American contexts.

The primary distinction between anti-racist consciousness and praxis, then, is that anti-

racist praxis makes a move toward *informed* action-oriented resistance to racism. Put differently,

anti-racist praxis is a practical application of anti-racist consciousness. Underscoring the

differences and connections between anti-racist praxis and consciousness is important for

building nuanced understandings of white anti-racism and for moving toward the type of

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[485] Ibid.
[486] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* [3rd edition] (New York: Routledge, 2015)*,* 111.

resilient, reflexive white anti-racist consciousness needed to engage in productive white anti-racist praxis.

Thus, white anti-racist consciousness is a necessary precursor to—but is not the same as—productive, sustained engagements with white anti-racist praxis, where both are understood as necessary for productive anti-racist engagement among white folks. In this chapter, I investigate how white anti-racist consciousness is constructed and fostered among everyday white folks and explore engagements with and critiques of white anti-racist praxis. Through this analysis, I find that strategic appeals to white (dis)comfort help to move everyday white folks beyond emotional reactions to direct discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege circulated by an affective economy of white fragility, but also problematically re-center white feelings. The burden for doing the important work of raising resilient and reflexive white anti-racist consciousness must, as I argue below, fall primarily on white anti-racist allies as a necessary component of their commitment to anti-racist praxis. Before moving to this analysis, I explore concerns around moving toward critical investigations of white anti-racism and review existing scholarship on engagements with anti-racism from positions of racial privilege.

White Anti-Racism: Uncertain Possibilities, Certain Limitations

As noted in Chapter 3, research into white anti-racism—whether focused on anti-racist consciousness and/or praxis—is virtually absent from communication and rhetoric scholarship. The reasons for this absence are likely both practical and theoretical. Practically speaking, manifestations of white racism have far eclipsed manifestations of white anti-racism in historical and contemporary contexts. The United States was founded, developed, and expanded as a white

settler colonialist project,[487] and white racial identity was constructed for the expressed purpose

of justifying the enslavement of darker skinned Africans (and, later, African Americans) and

extending privileges to poor European-American wage laborers.[488] In this way, an ideology of

white superiority has been woven through the history of this nation-state and into the fabric of

the present. And, although historical examples of various formations of opposition to racism on

the part of white people have been uncovered—in, for example, John Brown's involvement with

the abolitionist movement[489] and the Young Patriots' involvement in 1960's–70's era civil rights

and racial justice movements,[490] these examples are quite few and far between, making them

easy to lose sight of when manifestations of white racism have long proliferated so profusely.

Stemming from the practical, material reality that discursive formations of white racism

are far more common and far more powerful than formations of white anti-racism, scholars

involved in theorizing whiteness and engaged in critical analyses of its discursive and material

formations have tended to focus on dominant formations of white racism and have made

powerful arguments for why critical studies of whiteness should remain so focused. For example,

philosopher and cultural theorist Sara Ahmed has argued that the possibilities for white anti-

racism are murky at best and has urged scholars engaged in critical studies of whiteness to

eschew investigations of white anti-racism in favor of focusing on the multitude of ways in

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[487] See Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[488] See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2007).

[489] See David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

[490] See Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011).

which dominant formations of whiteness continue reinforce white superiority and oppress racial

others.[491]

Arguments to remain focused on formations of whiteness rooted in domination and

oppression are incredibly important and speak to persisting debates among scholars engaged in

critical studies of whiteness. As noted in Chapter 3, opposition to "rearticulationist" perspectives

on whiteness often hinges on the perception that these perspectives move too quickly past the

roots of whiteness in domination and oppression and too optimistically toward imaginations of

other, "better" ways of doing whiteness. Yet, when engaged critically—as this dissertation

attempts to do—rearticulationist projects can remain firmly grounded in the recognition that

whiteness is inextricably rooted in oppression and domination *and* explore "alternative" modes

of doing whiteness.

Of course, "alternative" modes of doing whiteness are not free from the power of

normative whiteness. As philosopher Shannon Sullivan has demonstrated and Kendall Jenner's

Pepsi commercial illustrates, even "good white people" can impede anti-racist efforts, as white

fragility emerges consistently as an emotional and psychological barrier to anti-racist racial

consciousness among these "well intentioned" white folks.[492] For example, many committed

advocates for racial justice—especially activists of color—have critiqued "white allies" for their

tendencies to center their own voices and feelings, to drain the energies of activists of color by

insisting they tell white allies what to do and how to do it [493], and to perform allyship for self-

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[491] Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,"
Borderlands 3, no. 2 (2004): 52–59.
[492] Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism*
(State University of New York Press, 2014).
[493] Ann Friedman, "It's Time to Get Over Your White Feelings and Start Taking Action for
Black Lives," *NYMag.com,* August 3, 2016, http://nymag.com/thecut/2016/08/showing-up-for-
racial-justice-white-feelings-black-lives.html

congratulatory purposes rather than to act with a deep commitment to racial injustice.[494] And, even when white allies engage in anti-racism in critically conscious and self-reflexive ways, mainstream and social media circulation of their participation can overshadow the issues compelling a fight for racial justice.[495] In these ways, then, this chapter's move toward attempts at anti-racist rearticulations of whiteness does not negate consideration of how whiteness operates to (re)secure racial domination and privilege. Rather, this chapter recasts the relationship between whiteness and domination and the normative affects it produces as an ever-present rhetorical constraint to anti-racist rearticulations.

As some white folks continue to develop anti-racist consciousness and attempt to engage in anti-racist praxis, it is urgently important to turn critical scholarly attention toward these formations of resistance. And, to the extent that formations of white anti-racism are necessarily imperfect and can only work within and against dominant formations of whiteness *as* domination and oppression, anti-racist formations of whiteness should *also* be subject to critical analysis precisely for the reasons that Ahmed and others have lain out. There is a need, then, for critical rhetorical analyses of anti-racist formations of whiteness because this framework provides a dual critique of domination and freedom that allows for complex analyses of how attempts to do whiteness differently and *better* might be productive in some ways and problematic in others.

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[494] Mia McKenzie, "How to Tell the Difference Between Real Solidarity and 'Ally Theater,'" *Black Girl Dangerous,* November 4, 2015, http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/2015/11/the-difference-between-real-solidarity-and-ally-theatre/

[495] Collier Meyerson, "Dear White Friends: Here's How to Support BLM Without Making it About You," *Fusion.net,* July 27, 2016, http://fusion.net/story/329680/black-lives-matter-white-allies/

Existing Literature on White Anti-Racism

There are a small handful of academic books and articles that have been published on white anti-racism, typically with a focus on white anti-racist praxis.[496] This scholarship is overwhelmingly focused on historical engagements with racial justice movements and anti-racist praxis via organized activism and protest. For example, Amy Sonnie and James Tracy's *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power* details the work of the Young Patriots who, as a group of poor and working-class white folks in the 1960s–1970s, formed an alliance with the Black Panthers and the Young Lords to advocate for racial and economic justice. Spanning a broader history of engagements, Becky Thompson drew from in-depth interviews with white anti-racist activists to construct a social history of white anti-racist activism from the 1950s to the late 1990s. Scholarship on historical engagements with white anti-racist praxis demonstrates that moves toward anti-racism among white folks are not unique to this contemporary moment by illuminating a long history of working against racial injustice from within positions of racial privilege.

In a somewhat different vein, some scholarship on white anti-racist praxis has critiqued engagements with anti-racist praxis from positions of racial privilege for their tendency to re-center whiteness. Within rhetoric and communication literature, for example, Susan Zaeske analyzed 19th-century white women's engagement with anti-slavery petitions and found that these white women simultaneously articulated a shared gender identity with enslaved black women and reinscribed racial and class differences as they attempted to lay claim to their own

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[496] See Reynolds, *John Brown*; Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists*; Becky Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Mab Segrest, *Memoir of a Race Traitor* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1994).

right to engage in increased political participation.[497] Additionally, Debian Marty analyzed the

anti-racist rhetoric of Wendell Berry, demonstrating that white individuals attempting to engage

in anti-racist discourse tend to minimize personal accountability through rhetorics of apologia,

underscoring a significant limitation to white anti-racist discourse.[498] This research demonstrates

that although there is indeed a noteworthy history of white folks attempting to engage in anti-

racist praxis, those attempts have often had problematic implications.

Collectively, interdisciplinary scholarship on historical engagements with white anti-

racist praxis offers a sense of tempered optimism. By demonstrating that white folks have been

actively involved in racial justice efforts throughout history, this scholarship highlights the

possibilities of continued, sustained engagements with anti-racist praxis from positions of racial

privilege. Additional research is needed to investigate contemporary formations of white anti-

racist praxis as well as engagements with anti-racist praxis that mobilize in everyday formations

not typically considered by scholarship that focuses on more traditional formations of organized

activism. I have begun to address this gap elsewhere, with an investigation of how white mothers

using social media to protest the death of Trayvon Martin mobilized performative

disidentifications with normative whiteness to make active commitments to racially conscious

parenting as a form of anti-racist praxis.[499]

In this chapter, I focus primarily on attempts to raise anti-racist *consciousness* among

everyday white folks. As noted above, white anti-racist consciousness is a critical precursor to

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[497] Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity.* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
[498] Debian Marty, "White Antiracist Rhetoric as Apologia: Wendell Berry's *The Hidden Wound*, in Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (eds) *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999): 51–68.
[499] Stephanie Hartzell, "An (In)Visible Universe of Grief: Performative Disidentifications With White Motherhood in the We Are Not Trayvon Martin Blog," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 10, 1 (2017): 62–79.

productive engagements in anti-racist praxis from positions of racial privilege. As discussed in

Chapter 3, scholarship on "white identity development" demonstrates that white folks do not

tend to see themselves as part of a racial group and often have difficulty articulating their

position in the contemporary U.S. American racial landscape.[500] Further, scholarship on critical

pedagogy around race and whiteness indicates that when white folks are pushed to think and

speak directly about issues of race, racism, and racial privilege, they tend to react emotionally[501]

or, as Robin DiAngelo has argued, in ways that signal their "white fragility."[502]

By turning toward efforts to foster white anti-racist consciousness, the analysis that

unfolds across this chapter demonstrates the importance and difficulties of negotiating the

affective economy of white fragility that supports a colorblind racial ideology by articulating

white racial consciousness to discomfort, guilt, and shame. I argue that raising white anti-racist

consciousness is necessary to facilitate productive white anti-racist praxis and requires, as with

pro-white formations of white racial consciousness, a shift in common sense understandings of

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[500] Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1993); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Dreama G. Moon, "'Be/coming' White and the Myth of White Ignorance: Identity Projects in White Communities," *Western Journal of Communication* 80, no. 3 (2016): 282–303; Ronald L. Jackson II, "White Space, White Privilege: Mapping Discursive Inquiry Into the Self," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, (1999): 38–54; Judith N. Martin, Robert L. Krizek, Thomas K. Nakayama, and Lisa Bradford, "What Do White People Want to be Called? A Study of Self-Labels for White America," in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity,* eds. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999): 27–50.
[501] Henry A. Giroux, "Racial Politics and the Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York University Press, 1997), 294; Cheryl E. Matias, *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education* (Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2016); John T. Warren and Kathy Hytten, "The Faces of Whiteness: Pitfalls and the Critical Democrat," *Communication Education* 53, no. 4 (2004): 321–339; Karen L. Dace, "What Do I Do With All of Your Tears?," in Karen L. Dace [ed.] *Unlikely Allies in the Academy: Women of Color and White Women in Conversation* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 76–88.
[502] Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.

race, racism, and racial privilege among everyday white folks. Toward the end of this analysis, I

turn to considerations and critiques of white anti-racist praxis to demonstrate importance of

fostering resilient and reflexive anti-racist consciousness. First, I explain how I compiled an

archive of discourse on white anti-racist consciousness and praxis directed at and accessible to an

audience of everyday white folks.

<div align="center">Anti-Racism & Everyday White Folks</div>

Whereas the academic books and journal articles on white anti-racism signaled above hail

an academic audience, there have also been a handful of books and manuals directed at helping

everyday white folks break away from colorblind orientations to race to recognize their position

in the contemporary racial landscape in an effort to raise white anti-racist racial consciousness

and promote productive anti-racist praxis.[503] These texts are specifically designed to be

accessible to mainstream audiences and are written in plain, non-academic language with simple

sentence structures, frequent explanations, and the use of personal narratives to describe the

process of coming into white anti-racist consciousness and engaging in anti-racist praxis. For

example, the editors of *Everyday White People Confront Racial & Social Injustice* note that they

sought to compile a collection of stories about white anti-racists that would be accessible to

everyone, not just academic audiences. Each story in this volume is written in a narrative style

that focuses on the personal experiences of its author, demonstrating how actual people have

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[503] See Judith H. Katz, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978); Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1996); Frances Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Eddie Moore Jr., Marguerite W. Penick-Parks, and Ali Michael (eds), *Everyday White People Confront Racial & Social Injustice: 15 Stories* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2015); Robin DiAngelo, *What Does it Mean to Be White?: Developing White Racial Literacy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

broken away from colorblind and racist orientations to develop critical anti-racist consciousness and engage in productive anti-racist praxis.

Books and manuals on white anti-racism offer easily accessible, relatable discussions of and experiences with rejecting problematic orientations to race and moving toward anti-racist consciousness and praxis. Yet, despite explicit attempts to appeal to everyday audiences, the actual audience for these texts would seem to be quite limited and still, paradoxically, relatively academic. For example, I, as a white person who studies whiteness and anti-racism and is already committed to anti-racist praxis, would certainly read a book on white anti-racism, but I wonder who *else* might invest the time, energy, and money to read such a text.[504] In other words, despite their careful framing, the *actual* audience for these books and manuals is not likely to be everyday white folks, who, as existing research has demonstrated, tend to avoid engaging in direct discourse on race and express profound discomfort when doing so.[505]

In contemporary contexts, however, discourse on white anti-racism has proliferated across social media networks, undoubtedly reaching a far wider audience—even if just in headline/tagline form—than print books and manuals ever could. Just as the Internet enables white nationalist and alt-right rhetoric to reach broad, mainstream audiences, the Internet provides a platform for the wide dissemination of various formations of anti-racist rhetoric, too. Thus, I focus my analysis of discourse on white anti-racist consciousness and praxis on online discursive fragments targeted explicitly toward "everyday" white folks.

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[504] Some newer manuals are available online and are therefore more accessible to broader publics. For example, Chris Crass's *Towards the "Other America": Anti-Racist Resources for White People Taking Action for Black Lives Matter* (Chalice Press, 2015) is offered as a free e-book—even still, interested audiences must register for an account on the publisher's website, wait for an e-mail link, and download the text.

[505] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*; Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility"; Frankenberg, *White Women.*

Everyday Anti-Racism on Everyday Feminism

The analysis that unfolds across this chapter focuses on online discursive fragments that attempt to foster anti-racist racial consciousness and promote productive engagements with anti-racist praxis among everyday white folks in contemporary U.S. American contexts. I pull a majority of fragments for this analysis from articles published or re-printed by *Everyday Feminism (EF)* because this site makes explicit appeals to *everyday* audiences throughout its mission, content, and style and frequently publishes content that addresses everyday *white* audiences in particular. Additionally, as a social media platform oriented explicitly around feminism, *EF* approaches the topic of white anti-racism from an intersectional perspective while continuing to ground its discourse on whiteness in a critical perspective that affirms its rootedness in domination and supremacy.

Everyday Feminism is a progressive social media outlet that produces and shares resources designed to promote social justice and personal liberation. Launched by founder and executive director Sandra Kim as an online magazine in 2012, *EF's* mission is "to help people dismantle *everyday* violence, discrimination, and marginalization through applied intersectional feminism and to create a world where self-determination and loving communities are social norms through compassionate activism."[506] Driven by a commitment to social transformation *through* personal transformation, *EF* seeks to make intersectional feminist perspectives available and accessible to "everyday" people in ways that address a range of formations of oppression, including racism, sexism, heteronormativity and homophobia, and ableism. "Everydayness" is thus a theme throughout the ways that *EF* articulates its mission and presents its content. Because identity-based oppression manifests in "everyday violence, dominance, and silencing,"

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[506] "About Everyday Feminism," *Everyday Feminism,* accessed August 3, 2016, http://everydayfeminism.com/about-ef/, emphasis mine.

the site notes, it is crucial for "everyday people" to be critically conscious and committed to "everyday" forms of resistance.[507]

As part of its commitment to an intersectional approach to social justice, *Everyday Feminism* has taken a particular interest in raising anti-racist racial consciousness and promoting productive engagements with anti-racist praxis among white U.S. Americans, especially in more recent years. Although an exploration of the intersection of *feminism* and *anti-racism* is not my focus in this analysis, it is noteworthy that this feminist social media platform has made a sustained commitment to producing and circulating content on racism, anti-racism, and whiteness, because as women of color feminists have long argued, the history of feminism is fraught with white domination.[508] In this way, *EF's* efforts to raise white anti-racist consciousness and promote white anti-racist praxis act as interventions into white feminism.

For the purposes of this analysis, I collected nearly a hundred articles featured on *Everyday Feminism* that cover issues of race and (anti-)racism in ways that hail a racially privileged audience.[509] Almost all of these articles (89 of 92) were published between 2014–2016—a temporal context characterized by a major surge in racial justice movements and reactionary racism following the August 2014 killing of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown at the hands of law enforcement and extending into the presidential candidacy and election of

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[507] "Our Vision," *Everyday Feminism,* accessed August 3, 2016, http://everydayfeminism.com/about-ef/our-vision/

[508] See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* [2nd ed.] (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[509] I collected 92 articles for the purpose of this analysis. Articles were found using search terms "white privilege," "whiteness," "anti-racism," and "racism," which returned hundreds of results. I saved only those articles that hail a white audience—a determination made by considering articles' explicit framing (e.g. articles that speak explicitly to white people) and implicit approach (e.g. articles focused on dispelling myths held primarily by white people, such as the belief that race and racism are insignificant in contemporary U.S. American society).

Donald Trump. It is clear, then, that *EF* editors and contributors have made a concerted effort to respond to a context in which racial consciousness and direct discourse on race are heightened.

Given its sustained interest in promoting white anti-racist consciousness and praxis and its unique appeals to everyday white audiences, *Everyday Feminism* is a fitting primary site of analysis for this particular project. Where relevant, I pull in information from other online sources—these were gathered primarily by following links embedded in *EF* articles and, in some cases, by drawing from content encountered in my own everyday uses of social media. Below, I investigate how *EF* articles discussing race, racism, and racial privilege attempt to navigate competing formations of whiteness (colorblind, racist, anti-racist) circulating through mainstream public discourse while strategically negotiating white fragility and white (dis)comfort to provide everyday white folks with a range of constrained possibilities for developing anti-racist consciousness and engaging in anti-racist praxis.

<center>Waking Up to Whiteness: Raising Anti-Racist White Racial Consciousness</center>

Across discourse on white anti-racism in older printed books and manuals and online, there is a strong emphasis on the need for white folks to establish anti-racist consciousness by becoming educated about historical and contemporary issues of race, racism, and white privilege. As Ian Haney López has argued, the process of establishing a deep, critical anti-racist consciousness is a necessary first step for white folks committed to dismantling whiteness. This process requires breaking away from the "common sense" knowledge of colorblindness and coming to terms with the contemporary significance of race and racism and their own position in the contemporary racial landscape.[510] Similarly, Paul Kivel notes, "We are responsible for how we respond to racism…and we can only do that consciously and effectively if we start by

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[510] Ian Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York University Press, 2006): 136–137.

realizing that it makes a crucial difference that we are white."[511] Although it is not *enough* for

white folks to develop a conceptual understanding of race, racism, and racial privilege, then, a

deep and critical understanding of these issues is necessary to engage productively in anti-racist

praxis.

Affirming the importance of raising white anti-racist consciousness, a significant portion

of articles on *Everyday Feminism* addressing issues of race and racism are framed in ways that

are directed toward a white audience focused on raising white racial consciousness in ways that

also attempt to minimize emotional reactions steeped in fragility and guilt. One important way

that *EF* contributors attempt to raise white anti-racist consciousness is by using the normative

structure of *EF* articles to oscillate between discomfort and comfort to push white folks outside

of their colorblind comfort zone while also actively attempting to minimize their discomfort to

negotiate the affective circulation of white fragility.

Making White Readers (Un)comfortable

As Robin DiAngelo has argued, the "insulated environment of racial privilege builds

white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial

stress" and, by extension, contributes directly to the circulation of white fragility as a normative

affective circulation in mainstream white publics.[512] As such, when white folks experience

discomfort around direct discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege, reactionary emotional

responses are often triggered and productive engagement is severely compromised. Yet, it is

profoundly problematic that racial comfort is a normative experience for white folks in a

contemporary context in which symbolic and material manifestations of racial inequality position

people of color in perpetual states of *discomfort.* So, white folks must experience discomfort in

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[511] Kivel, *Uprooting Racism,* 14.
[512] Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 55.

order to break away from fragile orientations to race and must come to experience the

contemporary racial landscape *as* uncomfortable in order to move toward productive formations

of anti-racist consciousness.

Articles on *Everyday Feminism* follow a normative structure to provide everyday readers

with a brief, accessible discussion of complex social justice topics in ways designed to ease their

comfort while also making them uncomfortable. The way that articles published and shared by

EF are framed and structured has interesting potential implications for its attempts to hail an

audience of everyday white folks into engagements with direct discourse on race, racism, and

racial privilege, particularly given the widespread prominence of white fragility among this

targeted audience. Below, I demonstrate how *EF* articles on race, racism, and racial privilege

negotiate white fragility by using a normative structure to promote white (dis)comfort and, in the

process, to gradually bring everyday white folks into an anti-racist consciousness.

Articles on *Everyday Feminism* begin strategically triggering white (dis)comfort prior to

readers' actual engagement with their content. Most articles are marked with simple, provocative

titles, such as: "10 Ways White Liberals Perpetuate Racism"[513]; "6 Ways Well-Intentioned

People Whitesplain Racism (And Why They Need to Stop),"[514] "4 Reasons Black People Can

Feel Responsible for White Feelings (And Why We're Not)."[515] This type of provocative title is

the first thing a potential reader encounters when an article is shared on social media. The use of

provocative titles invoking race, racism, and whiteness is interesting for its potentially

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[513] George Sachs, "10 Ways White Liberals Perpetuate Racism," *Everyday Feminism,* October 2, 2016, http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/10/white-liberals-perpetuate-racism/

[514] Maisha Z. Johnson, "6 Ways Well-Intentioned People Whitesplain Racism (And Why They Need to Stop)," *Everyday Feminism,* February 7, 2016, http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/how-people-whitesplain-racism/

[515] Hari Ziyad, "4 Reasons Black People Can Feel Responsible for White Feelings (And Why We're Not," *Everyday Feminism,* December 30, 2015, http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/12/not-responsible-white-feelings/

(counter)productive implications. On the one hand, provocative titles function as "clickbait"—they grab attention, arouse curiosity, and heighten anticipation, all of which make readers more likely to actually click on the link and navigate to the article.[516]

On the other hand, considering the prominence of white fragility among everyday white folks, provocative titles around race, racism, and whiteness threaten to move readers toward a dismissive or defensive position before they ever engage with the actual content of the articles. In other words, although provocative titles might compel white readers to click a link, for everyday white folks who are reluctant to engage with direct discourse on racism and whiteness, titles that explicitly signal these themes may position readers to either dismiss or engage with the content defensively. Yet, as I demonstrate below, because *Everyday Feminism* articles on race, racism, and racial privilege oscillate rhetorically between promoting discomfort and comfort, everyday white folks who do engage with the content of these articles are sure to encounter moments of reassurance and affirmation to help temper emotional reactions.

The opening paragraphs of *Everyday Feminism* articles typically begin with a brief discussion of the context for the issue around which a particular article is framed. Here, the author provides background information, defines key terms, and links readers to outside resources (e.g. other *EF* articles or pieces published elsewhere, books, academic journal articles). Often, as I continue to discuss below, this section also includes a brief narrative description of relevant experiences the author has had with issue the article is framed around, which helps to illustrate the everydayness of the issues being covered and elicits identification with readers on the basis of shared experiences and/or feelings.

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[516] Bryan Gardiner, "You'll Be Outraged At How Easy It Was to Get You to Click on This Headline," *Wired,* December 18, 2015, https://www.wired.com/2015/12/psychology-of-clickbait/

The quick discussion that unfolds in the opening paragraphs of *Everyday Feminism*

articles on race, racism, and racial privilege almost always includes affirmations and

reassurances of white folks' presumed "goodness." For example, in "10 Defensive Reactions to

White Privilege That Make No Damn Sense—But Are Super Common," *EF* contributor Maisha

Johnson opens by discussing the importance of having honest discussions about the privileges

associated with whiteness. After providing several links to longer discussions about white

privilege, its relationship to white supremacy, and its impacts, Johnson shares a story about an

experience she, as a Black woman, has had while discussing white privilege with white folks

who reacted defensively and dismissively. Then, Johnson explains,

> I know white privilege can be <u>hard to grasp</u>.[517]
> I know being white doesn't mean you've had it easy. I get that you, too, have experienced oppression through classism, homophobia, ableism, or any number of forces.
> And because of this, I know that my perspective on white privilege might be a difficult one to understand, and that conversations about the topic can be uncomfortable and distressing.
> But I want us to actually be able to have those conversations—to honor the complexities of our truths without nonsensical, defensive reactions getting in the way.

Here, Johnson affirms that learning about white privilege is often difficult and

uncomfortable for white folks. Implicitly, Johnson appeals to white readers' presumed

"goodness" by constructing them as non-racist. The reader being hailed here is not the white

nationalist or the proponent of the alt-right who has already committed to a pro-white orientation

to racial consciousness. Rather, the reader Johnson hails is the everyday white person who, at

least until recently, operated comfortably within a colorblind orientation to race. After likely

raising some discomfort with a provocative title and frank opening discussion about white

privilege, then, Johnson's acknowledgment of white folks' likely *discomfort* alongside their

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[517] Throughout this chapter, underlined content within quotes signals a hyperlink to an outside source.

presumed non-racism serves to (re)establish white readers' comfort and minimize reactionary

manifestations of white fragility.

Following an opening discussion of context and personal experience, *Everyday Feminism*

articles turn to a discussion of a list of issues, which is typically signaled in each article's title, to

illustrate elements of a social problem and/or a set of possible responses. Often, the discussion of

listed items also links readers to outside resources for additional information and primary

evidence. For example, after using the introductory section of his article to identify with fellow

white liberals ("Like me, you probably voted for Barack Obama…") and introducing readers to

the concept of microinvalidations (seemingly small, often unconscious speech acts that invalidate

another's' experiences or feelings), George Sachs' "10 Ways White Liberals Perpetuate Racism"

offers a brief, narrative discussion of ten general ways that white liberals mobilize

microinvalidations to derail direct discourse on race and racism.[518] Many microinvalidations

Sachs discusses, which include "denial," "shame and hurt," "checking out and ignorance," and

"defensiveness" are directly articulated to the types of emotional responses characteristic of

white fragility.

Sachs offers examples of common reactionary microinvalidations and brief explanations

of why they are harmful to people of color. For example, to illustrate how "shame and hurt" are

mobilized as microinvalidations, Sachs notes that when white folks are informed that something

they have said or done has racist implications, responses such as, "I'm so embarrassed I said

that," or, "I'm hurt that you think of me like that" are common. This type of self-centered

response "draws the attention back to us, and away from the real issue of pain felt by the person

of color," Sachs explains. This discussion demonstrates how the emotional reactions mobilized

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[518] Sachs, "10 Ways White Liberals Perpetuate Racism."

when white folks' racial fragility is triggered by direct discourse on race and racism

simultaneously re-center white emotions while invalidating the experiences and perspectives of

people of color.

By confronting everyday white folks with a series of microinvalidations with which they

can identify on a felt, experiential level, Sachs' list may well raise discomfort among some

readers. However, as Bryan Gardiner demonstrates, lists help readers to feel more comfortable

approaching complex topics because they facilitate spatial processing of information, provide

clear expectations for how much information will be provided, and reduce anxiety by providing

an illusion of certainty and simplicity.[519] So, the structure of this discussion may simultaneously

help restore white readers' sense of comfort by providing a tangible, finite set of issues and

elements to consider, even as the actual content being discussed may be experienced as

uncomfortable. In this way, *Everyday Feminism* contributors can use a list-based discussion to

strategically move white folks from discomfort to comfort in ways that begin to raise anti-racist

consciousness while negotiating normative affective circulations of discomfort, shame, and guilt

associated with white fragility.

After moving through a discussion of listed items, *Everyday Feminism* articles end with a

brief conclusion that reflects on the larger significance and implications of the issue being

covered and attempts to leave readers with a sense of restored comfort and optimism. Here, as in

the introductions, explicit attempts to identify with white readers and restore a sense of comfort

are common. After discussing 10 common ways that white liberals mobilize microinvalidations

steeped in white fragility, Sachs notes, "If you're still with me and not asleep, totally checked

out, totally confused, overwhelmed, or defensive, then you're probably an open-minded white

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[519] Gardiner, "You'll Be Outraged."

person. If we as white liberals want to walk the walk, we have to do more." By affirming the

value of engaging with potentially uncomfortable direct discourse on their own racial privilege,

misconceptions, and missteps, Sachs positions white readers who perceive themselves *as* open-

minded to sit with the discomfort of this engagement while also pushing them to "do more" as a

way to affirm their own liberal political commitments.

Here, Sachs begins to push readers toward engagements with anti-racist praxis.

Encouraging white readers to reject the common ways they might unintentionally invalidate the

experiences and people of color, Sachs notes that now that they are aware of how

microinvalidations are unintentionally mobilized, they can be critically reflexive about their own

reactions to direct discourse on race and can actively work to do better. Sachs moves to identify

with his fellow white readers, affirming, "It hurts to know that my words might have invalidated

another, and that I may have contributed subtly to racism. For a 40-something White liberal, I'm

acknowledging I have more to learn." By positioning himself as "like" his targeted readers,

Sachs avoids taking a position of moral superiority and frames the move toward white anti-racist

consciousness and praxis as something "we all" must continuously work toward.

Sachs ends by saying, "Only through continued growth, awareness, and

acknowledgement that words matter can something as ugly as racism be overcome."[520] Here,

Sachs suggests that *by* being critically aware of and actively avoiding implicit formations of

racism such as microinvalidations, white folks can help work to resist and overcome racism. On

the one hand, this closing statement is certainly overly optimistic and simplistic—white folks

awareness of microinvalidations and acknowledgement of their harms is important but is

unlikely to be a primary (let alone the "only") force in "overcoming" racism. On the other hand,

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[520] Ibid.

by leaving readers with a clear sense of the importance of the information they have just learned and suggesting that this information can be used to work against racism, Sachs positions everyday white readers as potential active agents of anti-racist change.

In addition to using the normative structure of *Everyday Feminism* articles to strategically negotiate white (dis)comfort and fragility, *EF* contributors attempt to redirect white (dis)comfort by raising anti-racist consciousness. Below, I demonstrate how *EF* articles on race, racism, and racial privilege attempt to bring white folks from colorblind orientations to race into anti-racist racial consciousness by continuing to strategically negotiate white fragility and white (dis)comfort. Articles by *EF* contributors construct anti-racist racial consciousness as a two-step process of learning to "see" race (especially their own) and understanding racism and white privilege as systemic.

Step One: Learn to "See" Race

Emerging in response to a context characterized by the longstanding dominance and hegemonic power of a colorblind ideology in mainstream U.S. American society, a great deal of anti-racist discourse that hails everyday white U.S. American audiences focuses on exposing colorblindness as a problematic orientation toward race and affirming the contemporary significance of race and racism. Indeed, attempts to raise anti-racist consciousness by first affirming the contemporary significance of race and racism are *necessarily* focused on mainstream white audiences, because this is the primary group for whom the contemporary significance of race and racism remains uncertain.[521] In other words, "common sense" knowledge about race and racism circulating among white U.S. Americans presumes that racism

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[521] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 24.

has been eradicated (because white folks do not see/experience racism) and, therefore, race is

unimportant (which contributes to the belief that continuing to talk about race is divisive).[522]

Articles on *Everyday Feminism* focused on helping white folks move away from a

colorblind racial ideology attempt to dispel the belief that colorblindness is the "right"

orientation to race for white folks to take in contemporary society in a way that attempts to

affirm the presumably good intentions of this belief. For example, in "If You 'Don't See Race,'

You're Not Paying Attention," *EF* contributor Jarune Uwujaren begins by noting, "It seems like

a noble, enlightened thing to say: '*I don't see race.*" And in a sense it is, right? I mean, race isn't

a biological fact, it doesn't determine the content of a person's character, and it really *shouldn't*

matter."[523] Uwujaren then begins to illustrate the harmful implications of claiming a colorblind

orientation to race—doing so denies racial privilege, elides the institutional problem of poor

racial diversity and inclusion, and discounts the experiences of people of color whose everyday

lives are directly impacted by racism. Here, Uwujaren first validates the underlying premise of a

colorblind racial ideology—that race *should not* matter—before illustrating why uncritically

adopting that premise as a way of understanding material issues of race is problematic. By front-

ending their discussion of the negative implications of colorblindness by affirming the

presumably well-meaning but misguided intentions of those who might adopt this orientation,

Uwujaren attempts to mitigate the discomfort that white folks often experience when

encountering direct challenges to their colorblind racial ideology.

In a similarly framed article titled "Here's Why Refusing to 'See Color' Doesn't Actually

Mean You're Not Racist," *EF* contributor Shae Collins takes a slightly different approach than

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[522] Haney López, *White By Law,* 14–24.

[523] Jarune Uwujaren, "If You 'Don't See Race,' You're Not Paying Attention," *Everyday Feminism,* September 11, 2013, http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/09/dont-See-race/

Uwujaren to reach similar ends.[524] In this piece, Collins opens by reflecting on her own

experiences with "not noticing color" by telling a story about how, as a little girl, she once

observed her parents display very negative reactions after accidentally purchasing her a white-

skinned version of a doll she had been wanting. Collins, who is black, noted that she was excited

to receive the doll regardless of its skin color, but her parents felt strongly that it was important

for her to have a collection of dolls that looked like her, which she now understands as an

intentional move to help her love her complexion in a society that overwhelmingly privileges

white standards of beauty.

Collins relates her personal experience with her own racial (un)consciousness to a

colorblind orientation to race as a way to affirm that the impetus to "not see race" may come

from an innocent or common sense place. Then, she argues, "In fact, because colorblindness

silences voices of people of color, disregards culture and history, neglects privilege, and makes

whiteness the default, the well-meaning colorblind approach is actually *counterproductive* to

solving racism." With this approach, Collins first makes an effort to identify with well-meaning

white folks by revealing that she—a black woman—can understand the impetus to "not see

color" before explaining how that impetus is misguided. Collins' attempt to first construct

common ground by identifying with white readers is positioned to mitigate defensive and

dismissive reactions to her subsequent discussion of the counterproductive implications of a

colorblind racial ideology.

Attempts to demonstrate the problematic implications of a colorblind orientation to race

while also affirming white readers' presumed good intentions work to raise white racial

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[524] Shae Collins, "Here's Why Refusing to 'See Color' Doesn't Actually Mean You're Not Racist," *Everyday Feminism,* June 26, 2016, http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/06/refusing-to-See-color-still-racist/

consciousness in ways that strategically negotiate white fragility and (dis)comfort while also (re)orienting white folks toward anti-racism. Importantly, learning to "see" race is the first step in raising racial consciousness—not necessarily in raising *anti-racist* racial consciousness. Recall that both white nationalist and alt-right formations of pro-white racial consciousness also spend a significant amount of rhetorical energy on affirming the contemporary significance of race and the importance of speaking openly about issues of race in the mainstream public sphere. In this way, anti-racist formations of whiteness are competing with various racist formations of whiteness in a battle of identification. As everyday white folks continue to awaken to the contemporary social reality that race does, in fact, matter, it matters very much what they learn and do after coming to that realization. Articles on *Everyday Feminism* suggest that the next critical steps for white folks to take involve unlearning harmful myths about race and understanding systemic racism and white privilege.

Step 2: Understanding Systemic Racism & White Privilege

As everyday white folks begin to understand the problems with a colorblind racial ideology and the importance of "seeing" and acknowledging race, fostering anti-racist consciousness requires that they reject common harmful myths about race and develop a critical understanding of how the U.S. American racial landscape is systemically structured in ways that privilege whiteness and marginalize racialized difference. *Everyday Feminism* articles approach this task in a variety of ways, including by providing overwhelming empirical evidence of systemic racial injustice and white privilege and highlighting personal experiences with racism and/or racial privilege. Across these approaches, the underlying goal is to challenge harmful myths and problematic common sense understandings of race constructed by colorblind and pro-

white discourse by providing a different set of information, evidence, and experiences in an effort to demonstrate how systemic power functions.

It is important to consider how the use of personal experience and empirical evidence might function, in different ways, to enable and constrain attempts to move everyday white folks toward anti-racist racial consciousness because, as discussed in Chapter 4, both personal experience and empirical evidence are key elements of "common sense." In the discussion that unfolds below, then, I demonstrate how attempts to raise white anti-racist consciousness hinge on efforts to shift white common sense understandings of race and racism through appeals to personal experience and/or empirical evidence. To continue illuminating how the structure of *Everyday Feminism* articles facilitate appeals to white (dis)comfort, I approach this analysis through extended discussions of individual articles with the understanding that each of these articles is representative of a larger thread of discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege mobilized on the site.

Challenging Common Sense through Personal Experience & Insight

Many articles on *Everyday Feminism* focus on directly opposing common sense (mis)understandings about racism and power that lead white folks to believe that *they* are the true victims of racism.[525] These articles demonstrate that, operating from a colorblind orientation to

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[525] See Jarune Uwujaren, "3 Reasons Why Being Anti-Racist Isn't Code for Being Anti-White," *Everyday Feminism,* October 16, 2014, http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/10/anti-racist-isnt-code-for-anti-white/; Wazi Maret Davis, "4 Reasons Why Being Pro-Black Isn't the Same as Being Anti-White," *Everyday Feminism,* November 16, 2015, http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/11/pro-black-isnt-anti-white/; Maisha Z. Johnson, "Why We Don't Need #WhiteOutDay, White History Month, or a National Association for the Advancement of White People (Really, It's Racist)," *Everyday Feminism,* March 20, 2015, http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/why-we-dont-need-whiteoutday-or-any-dominant-groups-equivalent/; Jamie Utt, "'That's Racist Against White People!' A Discussion on Power and Privilege," *Everyday Feminism,* August 20, 2013, http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/08/racist-against-white-people/

race, everyday white folks commonly believe that racial equality has been achieved through the repeal of legal forms of discrimination such as Jim Crow laws and fail to understand the ways in which a history of systemic discrimination continues to produce systemic racial inequality in contemporary contexts. For example, in "Stop Saying Affirmative Action Disadvantages White Students," *EF* contributor Jamie Utt works to dispel the common myth that white students are being treated unfairly by proactive attempts to increase racial and ethnic diversity in U.S. American colleges and universities.[526] Drawing from his personal experience and insights as a white educator Utt notes,

> White folks will tell me time and time again that Affirmative Action is "unfair" because it discriminates against White people. What the term "fair" assumes here, though, is that we live in a society where there's an equal playing field for all students, regardless of race or wealth. Unfortunately, we just don't live in that society.

By affirming the shared value of fairness and equality but opposing the assumption that an equal playing field has already been achieved, Utt begins to reconceptualize what "fair" means in a society still structured by racial and economic inequality. Moving toward an understanding of fairness grounded in a recognition that racial and economic inequality differently structure opportunities and experiences for white folks and people of color requires, first, a clear demonstration of inequality in the status quo to help bring white folks out of a common sense colorblind orientation to race and move them toward anti-racist consciousness.

To demonstrate persisting racial inequalities in higher education that privilege white students and disadvantage students of color, Utt again draws from his experience and knowledge as a white educator to argue that the *real* factors that predict students' access to a college education—parents' education and level of wealth—cannot be separated from a history of

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[526] Jamie Utt, "Stop Saying Affirmative Action Disadvantages White Students," *Everyday Feminism,* July 2, 2014, http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/07/affirmative-action-disadvantages-white-students/

legalized racial discrimination. For example, Utt notes that although there are no longer formal

legal restrictions that bar people of color from accessing higher education, the fact that these

barriers existed in relatively recent history continues to impact the present. Utt writes,

> Sure, we no longer live in a country where it's legal to bar, say, Black folks from
> attending your college, but when the system values the skills and knowledge most easily
> acquired through a parent who went to college, the end result is the same when Black
> folks have been historically denied access to education.

Here, Utt first affirms that the dismantling of legal segregation may provide the illusion

of equality before explaining that because parents and grandparents of students of color were

denied equal access to higher education under the law, students of color do not have the same

access to the experience-based support or academic/professional networks as do white students,

whose parents and grandparents are disproportionately likely to have attended college. By

affirming that the belief of extant racial equality in the contemporary status quo is a powerful

common sense understanding, Utt attempts to ease white folks' comfort by making an implicit

appeal to their presumed good intentions and positive values before then demonstrating how that

belief is misguided. In the process, Utt moves white folks toward an understanding of how

systemic racism functions by tracing connections between historical formations of discrimination

and persisting material racial inequalities. This awareness of how systemic racism is upheld by

articulations of past to present is an important element in the process of white anti-racist

consciousness raising.

Part of revealing how systemic racism functions entails challenging common sense

(mis)understandings of racial inequality by demonstrating that issues of race, racism, and racial

privilege are actually much more complex then they may appear to be *while also* making the

complexities of these issues accessible for an everyday audience. For example, Utt argues that

because students of color are disproportionately more likely to come from poor families than

white students—a reality that stems from historical lack of access to higher education as well as

other forms of legalized discrimination (employment, housing, health care, etc.)—their access to

resources needed to prepare for and succeed in college is further limited. As an implication of

systemic racial inequality that contributes to wealth inequality, students of color are much more

likely to attend impoverished K–12 schools and are far less likely to have access to important

resources, such as SAT preparation classes, prior to attending college. Here, Utt anticipates a

possible reaction from white readers,

> Now, do some students of Color have access to these kinds of opportunities? Absolutely!
> Are some White students denied those opportunities? Undoubtedly (which is why
> Affirmative Action programs often take into account family income for White students).
> The reality, though, is that students of Color are disproportionately denied access to these
> resources because of a simple thing called trans-generational wealth accumulation.

Affirming that systemic racial oppression and privilege do not impact *all* individuals in

the same way, Utt is able to acknowledge "exceptions to the rule" while also arguing that they

are just that—*exceptions* to the ways that systems of power work to differently structure

opportunities and experiences along racialized lines. Notably, by framing "trans-generational

wealth accumulation" as a "simple thing," Utt pushes against the common sense belief that

historical formations of racism and economic marginalization can be separated from the present

status quo. The implied meaning here is that "of course" a history of poverty and racism

continues to inform the present. By beginning to uncover how a history of legalized

discrimination continues to contribute to contemporary formations of institutional racial

inequality, Utt attempts to move everyday white folks toward a new common sense

understanding of racism *as* systemic.

For readers who are already aware that racial inequality exists in the status quo and are

sympathetic to arguments that this inequality is a product of systemic racism, Utt's discussion is

likely to ring true. Additionally, his self-identification as a white man invites white readers to

identify with Utt as a well-meaning white person and, in the process, may position white readers

more comfortably and sympathetically toward Utt's arguments. Yet, because a majority of

evidence offered by Utt is attributed to personal conversations and is unaccompanied by clear

citations or links to primary research, skeptical readers firmly committed to a colorblind racial

ideology are likely to be unconvinced, either by the validity of Utt's narrative evidence or of his

claims that existing inequalities are a result of systemic racism rather than some other set of

factors. It is difficult, in other words, to break strong commitments to common sense

understandings of race without empirical evidence.

Demonstrating Systemic Racism through Overwhelming Empirical Evidence

While some contributors rely primarily on narrative discussions of systemic racism and

forgo a careful demonstration of the validity of their claims, many articles on *Everyday*

Feminism take a different approach by attempting to provide overwhelming empirical evidence

of contemporary material racial inequality. These articles make strategic use of embedded

hyperlinks to connect readers to primary and/or alternative sources of information while still

maintaining an accessible narrative style. For example, in "Here's Your Proof That White

Americans Don't Face Systemic Racism," *EF* contributor Jon Greenberg attempts to demonstrate

how systemic racism manifests in material inequalities that privilege white folks and

disadvantage black folks across eight areas: primary and secondary education, higher education,

employment, criminal justice system, wealth, housing, health, and media representation.

Adopting a framing common across *Everyday Feminism* articles that attempt to

demonstrate material realities of racial privilege and oppression, Greenberg develops this piece

around a refutation to the commonly held belief that white folks are the primary victims of racial

injustice in contemporary U.S. American society. After opening by laying out evidence of

various (mis)understandings that white folks hold about race—such as a report that found that

"20% of Clinton supporters described Black Americans as 'less intelligent' than White

Americans"—Greenberg explains that he wants to lay out empirical evidence that will refute

white folks' belief that there are "legitimate reasons" to believe that people of color do not face

systemic racism. Greenberg writes:

> You might believe that the evidence of systemic racism is 'anecdotal,' argue that sources
> are 'out of date,' or feel skeptical about information from op-eds or radical lefty
> publications. So you should know that, for this one article, I'm sticking with numbers, not
> stories. Also know that, for the most part, I'm citing publications only from the last few
> years and from mainstream news publications, government or academic studies/data, or
> coverage of such studies/data from mainstream news publications.

Here, Greenberg appeals to the persuasive punch of empirical evidence and

acknowledges that narrative reflections can often be read as anecdotal and/or biased. He

proceeds with a brief discussion of each of the eight areas in which systemic racism privileges

white folks and disadvantages black folks, frequently pointing readers to outside evidence by

embedding hyperlinks within the text of the discussion, which are signaled by orange-colored

typeface. For example, in his discussion of systemic racism, Greenberg links to evidence

demonstrating that, in the U.S., "Black men are six times more likely to be incarcerated than

White men, according to the Pew Research Center." Preemptively refuting the myth-based

counterargument that this disparity in incarceration rates is a result of black folks committing

more crimes, Greenberg argues,

> Well, not if you start with drug use. In our federal prisons, 46% are incarcerated because
> of drug offenses. Yet a 2013 government survey of 67,500 people revealed that White
> and Black Americans use drugs at similar rates (9.5% and 10.5%, respectively).

> Greenberg goes on to connect higher incarceration rates among black folks to racial

disparities in practices employed by U.S. American law enforcement, where black folks are stopped and searched more frequently, are arrested more frequently, and more likely to be subject to use of force, and are then disadvantaged by a host of compounding disparities throughout the pre-trial, trial, and sentencing stages, providing ample links to evidence along the way.

The approach of demonstrating material forms of racial equality by providing copious—almost overwhelming—empirical evidence of racial inequalities to substantiate well reasoned claims *should* be effective in persuading white folks to challenge pre-existing common sense notions about the existence and causes of racial inequalities. In very accessible, non-academic language, Greenberg walks readers through a series of examples of racial injustice, providing ample links to credible evidence and more extended analyses of each issue along the way. Greenberg frequently links readers to reputable mainstream media news sources, including *NPR*, *CNN*, and the *Washington Post*, which provided extended analyses of evidence specific to elements of the larger issues he discusses.

For example, in his discussion of systemic racism in the employment sector, Greenberg links readers to a report by Jeff Guo of *The Washington Post* to demonstrate a racialized link between unemployment and mass incarceration. In this article, Guo offers a plainly worded, accessible analysis of data compiled from different primary sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau, peer reviewed academic journal articles, and reports compiled by governmental and non-profit organizations.[527] Guo's analysis demonstrates that black U.S. American men face unemployment at nearly triple the rate of white U.S. American men when incarcerated

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[527] Jeff Guo, "America Has Locked Up So Many Black People it Has Warped Our Sense of Reality," *Washington Post,* February 26, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/02/26/america-has-locked-up-so-many-black-people-it-has-warped-our-sense-of-reality/?utm_term=.c1b8b798e001

populations are taken into account. Read independently and from a position of racially privileged

ignorance, it might be possible to presume that the disparities in both unemployment and

incarceration underscored by Guo stem from some form of pathology within the black U.S.

American community—perhaps, as white nationalist and alt-right rhetoric argue, black folks are

unemployed at higher rates because they are lazy, or perhaps they are more frequently

incarcerated because they are more likely to be criminals. Within the context of Greenberg's *EF*

article, however, readers are presented with a litany of evidence to disprove racist

misconceptualizations and to demonstrate that these disparities are a product of systemic racism.

On the whole, then, Greenberg makes good use of this and other evidence.

However, recall the previous chapter's discussion of how the alt-right constructs and

circulates false information and "fake news"[528] and how conservative paranoia has contributed to

widespread distrust of mainstream media.[529] Because many of Greenberg's links point to *reports*

of evidence by mainstream media sources, this approach leaves his carefully crafted and well-

supported arguments open to dismissal by those who are skeptical of mainstream media in

general or his particular intermediary sources in particular. In other words, uncritical readers

positioned as skeptics by larger discursive circulations of distrust in mainstream media are likely

to be unmoved by Greenberg's evidence, though it is both ample and credible.

Articulating Personal Experience to Empirical Evidence

Taking a different approach, many *EF* articles focused on demonstrating the realities of

racism and white privilege articulate personal experiences to empirical evidence. Exemplifying

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[528] See John Whitehouse, "Misinformer of the Year: The Ecosystem of Fake News and the 'Alt-Right,'" *Media Matters,* December 27, 2017,
http://mediamatters.org/blog/2016/12/27/misinformer-year-ecosystem-fake-news-and-alt-right/214899

[529] Art Swift, "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low," *Gallup,* September 14, 2016, http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx

this approach, *EF* contributor Andrew Hernández opens "Yes, Racism is Still a Problem – Here

are 4 Ways to Fight it Together" by detailing his personal experiences with witnessing and

experiencing a range of formations of anti-Latinx[530] bias.[531] After recalling a "Tacos and

Tequila" party at his alma mater at which the predominantly white party-goers dressed as racist

caricatures of Latinx cultures, including "illegal immigrants" and "pregnant teens," Hernández

recalls, "Seeing myself as generations of racists saw my family, I felt ugly, contaminated, and

worthless." By sharing the felt experiences of racism, Hernández builds an emotional connection

with readers who may not otherwise understand the implications of racist cultural appropriation.

Continuing to carefully hail and address an everyday white audience, Hernández notes,

> I do not share these experiences to throw myself a pity party. I do not share them to
> victimize minority groups in the United States. Nor do I share them as an attack on white
> people. I share these experiences as a way to reflect upon systemic racism and white
> privilege that is neither over and done, nor is it confined to the likes of certain
> organizations or a few "bad apples."

Here, Hernández responds pre-emptively to readers' potential to react to his sharing of

personal experience from within a colorblind orientation to race, which positions white folks to

discount the experiences of people of color with accusations of over sensitivity or "playing the

race card." With this rhetorical move, Hernández works to raise anti-racist consciousness by

inviting readers to begin making connections between his personal experiences and systemic

racism.

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[530] "Latinx" is a gender-neutral term that refers to people and cultures descendant from Latin
American origins. The use of Latinx (as opposed to Latina/o or Latin@) is meant to encompass
expressions of gender that include and fall outside of the traditional masculine/feminine binary.
For more, See Raquel Reichard, "Why We Say Latinx: Trans & Gender Non-Conforming People
Explain," *Latina*, August 29, 2015, http://www.latina.com/lifestyle/our-issues/why-we-say-
latinx-trans-gender-non-conforming-people-explain
[531] Andrew Hernández, "Yes, Racism is Still a Problem – Here are 4 Ways to Fight it Together,"
Everyday Feminism, November 2, 2014, http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/11/racism-is-still-a-
problem/

To demonstrate that the experiences he has shared are indicative of larger, systemic patterns, Hernández then turns to a discussion of his proposed 4-part approach to addressing contemporary racial injustice across lines of racial privilege and marginalization. Echoing the calls of critical race and whiteness scholars and activists as well as many other *Everyday Feminism* contributors, Hernández notes that the first step in this process is for everyone—especially white folks—to acknowledge that racism and white privilege exist.

Throughout this discussion, Hernández offers hyperlinks to outside reports that provide empirical evidence that people of color are disadvantaged by systemic racial inequalities in a number of areas: academic and professional opportunities for advancement, disparities in loan availability and interest rates, and treatment by law enforcement and the criminal justice system. These links signal Hernández's implicit awareness that shifting common sense understandings of race among everyday white folks working from colorblind orientations requires him to back up his personal experiences of racism with empirical evidence.

Additionally, although Hernández begins this discussion by encouraging white folks to acknowledge their racial privilege, his first extended point is framed as a demonstration of the ways that systemic racism disadvantages people of color. This framing thus approaches a discussion of white privilege by first providing evidence of the harms of systemic racism on communities of color, which may mitigate some of the resistance and defensiveness white folks often mobilize in direct discussions of white privilege. By easing into the issue of whiteness by way of racism's negative implications, this approach positions white readers to experience the discussion less personally than they might experience a discussion about white privilege that is more explicitly about *them*.

Next, Hernández turns back to whiteness, arguing that we must stop associating whiteness with goodness. Here, Hernández again echoes the work of critical race and whiteness scholars, noting, that values and practices associated with white folks become the norm by which everyone is measured, which associates whiteness with both goodness and normalcy while racializing and particularizing values and practices associated with communities of color.[532] The implication of these associations, as scholars have argued, is that people of color are pushed to approximate whiteness to be seen as successful and socially valued.[533] Yet because the symbolic valuation of whiteness and devaluation of racialized difference has been systemically engrained in mainstream, "common sense" notions of normativity, everyday white folks must first recognize that what they perceive to be "normal" is actually a product of racialization. Coming into anti-racist consciousness, then, requires white folks to challenge their taken-for-granted understandings of themselves and the world around them.

To help challenge common sense notions of normativity, Hernández encourages readers to listen to and affirm the experiences of people of color. Here, Hernández returns to his personal experiences with racism, explaining that when he attempts to share his feelings around the problems of cultural appropriation with white folks, they often accuse him of "being overly sensitive, of playing the 'race card' or of promoting political correctness that supposedly forces everyone to walk on eggshells" while simultaneously centering their own feelings and underscoring their own colorblindness and non-racism. Hernández's account of having his experiences disregarded further demonstrates how white fragility mobilizes in reactionary emotional formations when white folks are confronted with direct discourse on race and racism. In other words, rather than seriously considering lived experiences with racism shared by people

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[532] Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness," 293.
[533] Ibid.

of color and reflecting on how those experiences challenge colorblind common sense, white folks tend to invalidate and disregard those lived experiences *because* they do not conform to colorblind common sense.

Lastly, Hernández argues that everyone must remain open to engaging in a sustained conversation that avoids adopting a defensive or aggressive position toward people who are different than us. Here, Hernández makes an appeal to white comfort by affirming the good intentions of most privileged folks, noting that being defensive or aggressive is not a productive way forward. "Instead," Hernández offers, "we must all commit to open dialogue about our experiences. If we all more effectively communicate and listen to one another, we can better empathize with each others' positions." It is noteworthy that Hernández concludes this piece with a call for *everyone* to communicate openly and respectfully. Here, he adopts a formation of race evasive rhetoric that signals a rhetorical shift away from a focus on raising anti-racist consciousness—racial consciousness grounded in an awareness of material and symbolic formations of racial inequality that disproportionately privilege white folks—and toward a position that seems to equalize responsibility for productive dialogue across lines of racial privilege and oppression. In other words, Hernández's language choices in this section ("we all," "everyone") imply that people of color and white folks must share equally in the burden of creating a respectful, open dialogue on race and racism.

The idea that everyone must share equally in the burden of constructing productive conversations about race across lines of racial privilege and oppression has been heavily critiqued. Many critics of this approach point back to white folks' demonstrable inability to engage productively in conversations about race and racism and argue that it is a waste of time and energy for people of color to continue trying to speak with white folks about race. For

example, Zack Linly explains that when black folks talk about issues of race and racism, they do so passionately, from positions "of genuine frustration, outrage and fear. When most white people debate the very same issues from an opposing stance, they do so from a place of perpetual obtuseness and indifference."[534] In other words, because the grounds for having interpersonal conversations about race and racism are unevenly constructed by differing experiences *with* race and racism, people of color *already* bear the unequal burden of having to convince white folks that their experiences are real and meaningful—and this process often overwhelms the conversation, leaving people of color emotionally drained. As I discuss below, one way to address this issue is by (re)centering the burden of educating white folks about race and racism *on* white folks, where critical conversations about race, racism, and white privilege with one's circle of white family, friends, and acquaintances is understood as a necessary form of white anti-racist praxis.

Moving from Anti-Racist Consciousness Toward Anti-Racist Praxis

Anti-racism cannot remain in the realm of principle and thought—rather, as historian Becky Thompson has argued, anti-racism must be approached as a way of life and a deeply committed practice.[535] As white folks develop critical anti-racist consciousness, then, moving toward productive engagements with anti-racism requires a turn toward anti-racist praxis. And, one of the most important formations of white anti-racist praxis involves the work of reaching out to other white folks to promote anti-racist consciousness and offer them an intermediary point between colorblind and anti-racist orientations to race.

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[534] Zack Linly, "It's Time to Stop Talking About Racism with White People," *Washington Post,* September 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/09/07/its-time-to-stop-talking-about-racism-with-white-people/?utm_term=.b605ab550365
[535] Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life,* 362.

As *Everyday Feminism* contributor Jamie Utt notes, it is common for white folks who are working to develop their own racial consciousness to become frustrated or impatient with white folks who are operating from colorblind or explicitly pro-white orientations to race.[536] This frustration and impatience can lead racially conscious white folks to either "cut off" or "call out" white folks who say or do racially problematic things. Rather than helping other white folks to recognize why a particular belief or behavior is problematic and offering alternatives, in other words, some white anti-racist allies either stop interacting altogether or attempt to make other white folks feel guilty or ashamed.

Critics have demonstrated that the tendency for white anti-racist allies to cut off or call out other white folks for their racially insensitive beliefs or behaviors is a problematic reaction that prioritizes the comfort of white anti-racist allies over the importance of attempting to address and correct other white folks' racist views and behavior.[537] Instead, white folks committed to anti-racist praxis should work to call out problematic beliefs and behaviors while "calling in" other white folks. As Utt argues,

> The language that denies systemic oppression they are using must be called out as problematic and silencing to the experiences of those actually experiencing oppression. But that doesn't mean the person saying that language can't be brought into a thoughtful conversation about the nature of oppression in the world around us.[538]

Here, Utt appeals to the importance of having open and respectful dialogue with white folks who express racially ignorant or insensitive beliefs. Importantly, is speaking *to* white anti-

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[536] Jamie Utt, "Hey, White People! If You Really Want to Help End Racism, You Need To Invest in Other White People (Yeah, We Know it Sounds Counterintuitive)," *Everyday Feminism,* May 25, 2015, http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/05/invest-in-other-white-people/
[537] Kivel, *Uprooting Racism,* 16; Utt, "Hey, White People!"; DiDi Delgado, "Whites Only: SURJ and the Caucasian Invasion of Racial Justice Spaces," *Huffington Post,* April 3, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/whites-only-surj-and-the-caucasian-invasion-of-racial_us_58dd5cf7e4b04ba4a5e25209
[538] Utt, "'That's Racist Against White People!'"

racist allies rather than attempting to spread the burden of having these conversations between

white folks and people of color. In other words, white folks committed to anti-racist

consciousness and praxis must do the uncomfortable, difficult work of addressing racially

problematic beliefs and behaviors while also engaging the white folks mobilizing those beliefs

and behaviors in a respectful conversation in an attempt to move them into anti-racist

consciousness. And the burden for doing this work *must* be on white folks who are committed to

anti-racism, precisely because people of color *already* bear the full weight of racism in their

everyday lives. As Spectra, a popular Black blogger, argues:

> I don't need your condolences. I don't need rash actions that absolve you of the
> responsibility of facilitating hard conversations with folks I know I will never be able to
> reach.
> I need you to step up in a major way, and leverage the connections you DO have to
> address ignorance with conversation and interrogate white privilege with compassion.
> Because I will not do this. I *cannot* do this.[539]

Underscoring the emotional intensity of witnessing perpetual manifestations of systemic

racism as a Black U.S. American, Spectra calls for white folks committed to anti-racist praxis to

engage other white folks with "conversation" and "compassion." The strategic approaches

outlined in *Everyday Feminism* discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege, such as appealing

to white (dis)comfort by re-affirming perceived good intentions, and sharing personal

experiences and empirical evidence to shift common sense understandings of race and racism,

can help assist white anti-racist allies in their efforts to call racism *out* and call everyday white

folks *in* to anti-racist consciousness.

At the same time, white anti-racist praxis cannot *just* involve white folks working with

other white folks to raise anti-racist consciousness. As DiDi Delgado argues in a critique of

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[539] Spectra, "Dear White Allies: Stop Unfriending Other White People Over Ferguson,"
Huffington Post, December 12, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/spectra/dear-white-allies-
stop-un_b_6249902.html

white-led anti-racism groups, "If there's one thing white people DON'T need, it's more spaces

reserved for their comfort at the expense and exclusion of people of color."[540] Rather, for white

anti-racist praxis to be productive and avoid re-centering whiteness, creating a "safe space" for

white feelings, and perpetuating white privilege, white folks must commit to sustained

accountability to communities of color. This accountability includes taking leadership advice

from historical and contemporary anti-racist leaders of color, fostering meaningful affective

connections with people of color, investing financially in communities of color, believing people

of color when experiences of racism are shared, and, importantly, remaining open to the constant

possibility that their own well-intentioned efforts to promote anti-racism might have problematic

implications.

In sum, white folks moving from anti-racist consciousness toward praxis must build

resilience and reflexivity and must help other white folks do the same. Anti-racist consciousness

and praxis should not be comfortable, and white folks must learn to negotiate this discomfort

without slipping back into emotional reactions characteristic of white fragility. As Utt notes,

> The truth is: You're going to screw up. Strive for justice anyway. …It's our responsibility
> as people of privilege to earn trust because we all benefit when oppressive systems are
> dismantled, and true solidarity means setting aside our ego to work for collective
> liberation. So when you make mistakes, as we all inevitably will in aspiring for solidarity,
> listen to those who are calling you out. Apologize earnestly and without caveat. And then
> work to do better.[541]

In other words, white folks can and should "call each other in," but they must also be

prepared to be called *out* by people of color when they slip up, no matter how good their

intentions might be.

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[540] Delgado, "Whites Only."
[541] Jamie Utt, "5 Ways to Avoid Common Ally Pitfalls by Learning From Your Mistakes,"
Everyday Feminism, February 8, 2016, http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/learn-about-allyship-mistakes/

In this way, engaging in anti-racist praxis from positions of racial privilege is not unlike engaging in critical rhetorical analysis with commitments to both sustained critique and a *telos*.[542] As critical rhetorical analysis must strive for something "better" with the recognition that whatever is achieved must also be subject to renewed critique, white folks must work to be *better* white folks while remaining open to critique and maintaining a critical awareness that it is ultimately impossible to escape the rootedness of whiteness in privilege and domination.

Conclusions

As demonstrated by the backlash to Kendall Jenner's Pepsi ad, there are no easy solutions to complex social justice problems. From a critical rhetorical perspective, it is possible to consider the ways that *Everyday Feminism's* approach to making complex topics such as (anti-)racism accessible to mainstream, everyday audiences might be functioning in ways that are simultaneously problematic and productive. On the one hand, *EF's* translation of complex issues involving race, racism, and white privilege into brief, plain-language, simplistic explanations, and lists runs the risk of reductionism and over-simplification. Everyday white folks who read a handful of *EF* articles on racism and/or racial privilege might learn a few pieces of critical information, but these encounters alone are unlikely to provide the extensive knowledge or prompt the deep critical reflection necessary to shift their colorblind common sense understandings of race or to develop resilient and reflexive anti-racist consciousness and promote productive anti-racist praxis.

Additionally, because white folks' tendency to respond to direct discourse on race, racism, and white privilege with emotional reactions steeped in defensiveness, guilt, and/or anger

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[542] Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "Commitment to *Telos*—A Sustained Critical Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 59, (1992).

has been well documented by critical race scholars[543] and everyday people of color,[544] *Everyday Feminism* contributors often couch their messages in attempts minimize these reactionary emotional responses, such as by affirming white readers' presumed good intentions and pre-emptively reassuring them that holding common problematic views about race does not make them "bad people," only misinformed. In the process, white readers' sense of comfort is restored as their feelings are re-centered and affirmed.

In many ways, this careful approach to engaging everyday white folks in direct discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege is both necessary and problematic. In order for everyday white folks to move from colorblind orientations to race toward anti-racist consciousness and praxis, they must be able to move beyond reactionary responses to direct discourse on race characterized by white fragility, and strategic affirmations and reassurances mobilized alongside frank discussions of power and privilege are well positioned to help mitigate white fragility. Yet, this approach also runs the risk of re-centering white feelings in ways that prioritize white comfort over critical education. White folks who engage with *Everyday Feminism's* brand of direct discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege might expect that they be similarly affirmed and reassured in *any* direct engagement with these issues and may, therefore, be ill equipped to engage in direct discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege in contexts where their comfort is not a priority.

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[543] See DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 54–70; Giroux, "Racial Politics and the Pedagogy of Whiteness," 294; Matias, *Feeling White*; Warren and Hytten, "The Faces of Whiteness," 321–339.

[544] See Kevin Allred, "White People's Feelings," July 14, 2015, http://www.kevin-allred.com/blog/white-peoples-feelings; Awesomely Luvvie, "About Writing While Loving Blackness and Hurting White Feelings," February 10, 2016, http://www.awesomelyluvvie.com/2016/02/about-writing-blackness-race-white-hurt.html; Monique Judge, "White Fragility Leads to White Violence: Why Conversations About Race With White People Fall Apart," *The Root,* January 15, 2017, http://www.theroot.com/white-fragility-leads-to-white-violence-why-conversati-1791233086

On the other hand, the structure and approach of *Everyday Feminism* articles provides a possible point of entry into complex social justice issues and makes data, information, and experiences related to (anti-)racism accessible to everyday folks from a wide range of backgrounds, and the importance of these points of entry should not be understated. Whether they "follow" *Everyday Feminism* on particular social media outlets or not, its content is widely shared and commented on across social media platforms, which helps to bring direct discourse on racism, whiteness, white privilege, and anti-racism into mainstream public discourse. Given that everyday white folks are hesitant to engage in direct discourse on race and racism while racism continues to be a life-or-death issue for people of color, efforts to confront white folks with these issues in ways carefully crafted to raise white anti-racist consciousness and promote productive engagements with anti-racist praxis should be mobilized widely.

As a strategy for reaching out to mainstream, everyday white folks to raise racial consciousness and encourage (more) productive engagements with anti-racist praxis, *Everyday Feminism's* simplistic approach is positioned as a rhetorical bridge between mainstream, colorblind orientations to race and anti-racist consciousness. Establishing reflexive and resilient anti-racist consciousness, however, requires a deeper and more nuanced engagement with the complexities of race and (anti-) racism. Yet, what everyday white folks do (and do not do) after engaging with *Everyday Feminism's* discourse on racism, anti-racism, and whiteness is impossible to predict or track. Because moves toward these deeper and more nuanced engagements with anti-racism are uncertain, I see the role of *EF* discourse on racism, anti-racism, and whiteness as facilitating a different type of bridge between everyday white folks and anti-racist consciousness.

Specifically, the content on *Everyday Feminism* is most productive for the smaller portion of white folks who are already moving toward deeper, more nuanced engagements with anti-racist consciousness and are mobilizing anti-racist praxis. *Everyday Feminism* articles on race, racism, and racial privilege provide a potentially useful framework for committed white anti-racist allies to use when engaging with other white folks. In this way, white anti-racist allies can provide a bridge for everyday white folks to move from colorblind orientations to race toward anti-racist orientations, because white anti-racist allies are able to work from already-established bonds (with their white family, friends, associates, etc.) to have critical conversations about racism and racial privilege and, over time, work to foster anti-racist consciousness within their own spheres of influence. For white folks committed to being anti-racist allies, this type of everyday consciousness raising work is a fundamental component of anti-racist praxis.

CHAPTER 7
Conclusion: Toward A Critical Rearticulationist Perspective Rooted in Tempered Optimism

If they refuse to hear us, we will make them feel us.

-Sybrina Fulton, Mother of Trayvon Martin

Trayvon Martin was killed on February 26, 2012. In the days and months that followed his death, Trayvon—a 17-year-old black high school student who left his father's house to purchase snacks and never returned—became a household name. Although the acquittal of his killer ensures that there will never truly be justice *for* Trayvon, the calls for justice in this case spawned the Black Lives Matter movement, which has grown in size, strength, and influence as it continues its multifaceted racial justice work more than five years later.[545] In August 2016, Black Lives Matter affiliates released a platform aimed at policy-driven efforts to dismantle systemic racial injustice.[546] And although the long-term policy and material implications of the Black Lives Matter movement remain to be seen, its sustained work has helped to awaken U.S. American racial consciousness and has brought the material realities of anti-black racism and white supremacy in contemporary society to the forefront of U.S. American public discourse.

As the myth of a post-racial United States continues to crumble and the hegemony of a colorblind ideology wanes, an age of racial consciousness is emerging. With these shifts comes an urgent need to activate white anti-racist racial consciousness and to resist the anxious formations of white racial (un)consciousness manifesting in reactionary responses to movements

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[545] See Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Andrea J. Ritchie, Rachel Anspach, Rachel Gilmer, and Luke Harris, "Say Her Name," *African American Policy Forum* (2015), http://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f20d90e4b0b80451158d8c/t/560c068ee4b0af26f72741df/1443628686535/AAPF_SMN_Brief_Full_singles-min.pdf

[546] "Platform," *The Movement for Black Lives,* accessed April 22, 2017, https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/. See also Trymaine Lee, "Black Lives Matter Releases Policy Agenda," *NBC News,* August 1, 2016, http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/black-lives-matter-releases-policy-agenda-n620966

for racial justice. Across this dissertation, I have been exploring contemporary U.S. American public discourse on race and investigating how efforts to raise white racial consciousness are rhetorically constructed and mobilized to hail an audience of mainstream, everyday white folks who have, until recently, been operating comfortably within a colorblind racial ideology. Each analysis chapter grappled with discursive formations of whiteness that, through their direct and explicit attempts to promote white racial consciousness, oppose both a colorblind orientation to race and contemporary normative formations of whiteness, wherein whiteness maintains a status of privilege and dominance by remaining largely invisible and unspoken.

In their efforts to move mainstream, everyday white folks from colorblindness toward racial consciousness, white nationalist, alt-right, and white anti-racist rhetorics have each challenged colorblind common sense by affirming the contemporary significance of race and calling on everyday white folks to become racially conscious. White nationalist and alt-right formations of racial consciousness construct pro-white orientations to race that attempt to move white folks toward openly and proudly affirming their racial identity and perceiving other races as both essentially different from and inferior to themselves. In contrast, anti-racist formations of racial consciousness attempt to move white folks toward a conscious recognition of their privileged position in the contemporary U.S. American racial landscape and an awareness of the systemic and structural inequalities facing communities of color. In this way, pro-white and anti-racist formations of white racial consciousness are simultaneously oriented in opposition to one another *and* to normative formations of white racial colorblindness—or *racial unconsciousness*. The process of raising racial consciousness among everyday white folks is, in other words, more than *just* a matter of moving them from normative colorblindness into racial consciousness—it is also a matter of convincing white folks to take a particular orientation toward race and reject

others. In the process, efforts to raise pro-white and anti-racist white racial consciousness must

negotiate the affective economy of white fragility circulating alongside a colorblind orientation

to race in order to avoid triggering emotional reactions that often prevent white folks from

engaging with direct discourse on race.

<div align="center">On Affect, Race, & Rhetoric</div>

Indeed, occupying a particular orientation to race and racial (un)consciousness should be

understood as a profoundly affective process—it is a symbolic, material, felt, and embodied

process of being, knowing, and acting in the world and with its inhabitants.[547] On a very practical

level, racial orientations help to shape who and what a person will be attached and attuned to,

who and what they will extend their attention and care toward, and who and what they will

distance themselves from. Where pro-white orientations to racial consciousness bring white folks

into affective attachments with other white folks and with a vested interest in protecting the

dominant, privileged position of whiteness, anti-racist orientations to racial consciousness bring

white folks into affective attachments with people of color and with a vested interest in

dismantling the dominant, privileged position of whiteness. These affective attachments are

deeply political—they help mobilize the circulation and direct the flow of power through

everyday public discourse.

A colorblind ideology circulates affects of comfort and apathy among racially privileged

communities by normalizing race evasive discourse to minimize racial consciousness, while the

affective economy of white fragility articulates racial consciousness to affects of discomfort,

guilt, shame. White folks occupying a colorblind orientation to race are unlikely to understand

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[547] Henry A. Giroux, "Racial Politics and the Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader,* ed. Mike Hill (New York University Press, 1997), 294; also see Cheryl E. Matias, *Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education* (Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2016).

their perceptions and experiences as racialized, but they are also profoundly ill-equipped to

create meaningful affective attachments with people of color, whose conscious, everyday, direct

engagements with race and racial inequality threaten to trigger their white fragility. In response,

discursive formations of white racial consciousness are rearticulated to positive affects as they

attempt to move everyday white folks beyond apathy and fragility to understand race as not only

something to "see," but something to care about deeply. As rhetorical formations of pro-white

and anti-racist white racial consciousness mobilize appeals to common sense and absurdity to

awaken everyday white folks from a normative state of racial unconsciousness, it is their

articulations to and circulations of affect that help to *move* white folks into a racially conscious

orientation.

My analysis across the previous three chapters has demonstrated that strategic appeals to

affects of (dis)comfort play an important role in moving everyday white folks outside an

affective economy of white fragility and into positive formations of racial consciousness. In the

white nationalist rhetoric analyzed in Chapter 4, tempered formations of pro-white rhetoric and

appeals to the common sense realities of race and white superiority mobilize affects of comfort

to reassure white folks that there is no need to feel guilty or ashamed to acknowledge and

express pride in their race. After all, other groups express racial pride, and it is only natural to

want to protect and preserve one's own culture.

In the alt-right rhetoric of the white nationalist intelligentsia analyzed in Chapter 5,

appeals to intellectualism are mobilized to argue for the natural realities of race and white

superiority, which must be demonstrated by philosophy and science after being obscured from

common sense observation by a culture of political correctness. Those who are able to break

through the veil of political correctness to appreciate the philosophical and scientific arguments

for racial realism and white superiority are thereby positioned to *feel* smart precisely because

they can see and understand what most others cannot. Here, normative circulations of

discomfort, guilt, and shame articulated to an affective economy of white fragility are framed as

manifestations of a lack of intelligence.

In contrast to the appeals to intellectualism favored by the white nationalist intelligentsia,

the alt-right rhetoric of online anonymous trolls analyzed in Chapter 5 mobilizes appeals to

absurdity to circulate extreme discomfort and disorient mainstream audiences. Rather than

appealing to comfort and common sense, anonymous online alt-right trolls revel in the

discomfort mobilized by proliferating formations of pro-whiteness considered explicitly

offensive, inappropriate, and/or unreasonable in mainstream public discourse. In their

unapologetic circulation of formations of pro-white rhetoric considered too extreme for

mainstream public discourse *and* more traditional white nationalist platforms such as Stormfront,

anonymous online alt-right trolls thus function as a scapegoat for accusations of racism against

the alt-right. Further, anonymous online trolls offer a "playful" point of identification for young

disgruntled white folks who receive pleasure and amusement from poisoning mainstream public

discourse with vile, virulently racist speech while hiding behind the anonymity of screen names

and avatars. Across its formations, alt-right rhetoric circulates appeals to intellectualism and

absurdity separately and together to construct a racially conscious white identity articulated to

pride and audacity and positioned in opposition to white fragility, colorblindness, and political

correctness.

Finally, in the anti-racist formations of white racial consciousness analyzed in Chapter 6,

strategic appeals to white (dis)comfort attempt to move everyday white folks gradually away

from a colorblind orientation to race and toward productive engagements with anti-racist praxis.

As I continue to discuss below, this approach attempts to work within and against the normative affective economy of white fragility by pushing everyday white folks to understand the contemporary significance of race and recognize their own privileged position while simultaneously attempting to restore their comfort through reassurances of their good intentions and affirmations of their discomfort as productive.

From a rhetorical perspective, then, articulations of affect to race can by studied empirically by tracing how appeals to emotions and values are mobilized and/or negotiated in discursive formations of race. In this dissertation, I have focused primarily on the affective economy of white fragility and the role of rhetorical appeals to (dis)comfort in moving everyday white folks beyond fragile, colorblind orientations to race and toward heterogeneous formations of white racial consciousness. Additional research is needed to further illuminate circulations and flows of affect in contemporary discourse on race and their articulations to dominant and resistant formations of power. Whereas some affect studies scholarship approaches affect through optimistic conceptualizations that emphasize its free-floating nature, and transcendental capacities, it is important for critical scholars to resist this trend and commit to sustained investigations into the role of affect in constructing, maintaining, resisting, and transforming relationships dominant formations of power. In a society rife with oppression and structured by intersecting inequalities, there is little room for engaging in theory for theory's sake.

<div align="center">On Critical Rhetoric, Power, & Resistance</div>

Critical rhetoric provides a valuable framework for studying complex discursive formations of race, racism, and anti-racism and their relationships with power and affect. By promoting a dual critique of domination and freedom, a critical rhetorical perspective on race attunes critics to the repressive and productive functions of power and invites complex

conclusions regarding the functions and implications of public discourse on race. In this project, a critical rhetorical orientation has enabled me to interrogate discursive formations of whiteness that purport to be working against domination and working for freedom.

From a critical rhetorical perspective, it is significant that white nationalism and the alt-right are explicitly constructed in opposition to the dominant racial ideology of colorblindness and its accompanying norms of racially coded and race evasive public discourse. It is this articulation that enables white nationalist and alt-right rhetoric to masquerade as rhetorics of noble resistance by orienting the fringe publics they imagine in opposition to colorblindness and toward racially conscious interventions into mainstream public discourse. Yet, holding white nationalist and alt-right rhetoric to a critique of freedom reveals that these formations of white racial consciousness uphold the dominant racial order wherein whiteness occupies a dominant, central position that affords symbolic, social, and material privileges while racialized difference confers various forms of symbolic, social, and material disadvantage.

White nationalist and alt-right formations of pro-white rhetoric each construct white U.S. Americans in a state of crisis and disadvantage—conceptualized as a product of both colorblind and anti-racist orientations to race—that can be addressed only by affirming and reclaiming the dominant power of whiteness. By exploiting circulating affects of frustration and fear and rearticulating pro-white racial consciousness to positive affects such as innocence, pride, and protection, white nationalist and alt-right rhetoric hail an audience of disgruntled white U.S. Americans who, in the context of proliferating direct discourse on race, are searching for a positive, affirmative alternative to colorblindness.

White nationalist and alt-right formations of pro-whiteness are thus framed by their interlocutors as rhetorics of resistance and freedom. Each provide points of identification that

promote pride in a white racial identity and offer language for resisting formations of anti-racism

that white U.S. Americans often associate with feelings of shame and guilt. Yet, it would be

clearly problematic to take white nationalist and alt-right proclamations of resistance at face

value. A critical rhetorical perspective provides the analytic framework necessary to reveal that

while these formations of pro-whiteness claim to mobilize resistance from places of exclusion

and marginalization, they instead function to uphold the dominant, privileged centrality of

whiteness.

        In a related yet different vein, anti-racist formations of white racial consciousness and

praxis are framed as rhetorics of resistance against both a colorblind orientation to race and the

formations of racial consciousness promoted by white nationalist and alt-right rhetoric. Anti-

racist orientations provide points of identification for white folks who, in the context of

proliferating challenges to colorblindness, wish to affirm racial consciousness but resist its pro-

white formations. Yet, as Chapter 6 demonstrated, anti-racist formations of whiteness can also

function in ways that (re)secure the dominant, privileged position of whiteness when white folks

attempt to engage in anti-racist praxis absent resilient and reflexive anti-racist consciousness.

Here, a critical rhetorical perspective provides a useful analytic framework for uncovering the

productive and problematic implications of attempting to work against privileged whiteness from

within.

        The primary contribution of a critical rhetorical perspective to the study of

(re)articulations of whiteness is precisely the recognition that these (re)articulations function in

ways that are complicated and inextricably bound within—rather than waged as outward

opposition to—the systems of power that they seek, in different ways, to resist. This recognition

need not destroy critics' hopes of imagining a better world but rather, as Kent Ono and John

Sloop have argued, should compel critics to commit to a "contingent *telos*" as "a sustained

critical praxis."[548] In other words, critics should adopt a position of skeptical—or tempered—

optimism to imagine a better alternative while remaining aware that any possible alternatives are

always already bound up with productive and repressive formations of power.

<div align="center">

Possibilities & Limitations of Rearticulating Whiteness: Toward a Critical
Rearticulationist Perspective

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Reflecting on lessons learned from adopting a critical rhetorical perspective to investigate

efforts to construct alternative, affectively positive, racially conscious formations of whiteness

helps to illuminate the limitations of attempting to rearticulate whiteness in positive terms. On

the one hand, my analysis demonstrates the heterogeneity of white racial formations—whiteness

manifests and mobilizes in a range of various formations, each of which attempts to position

itself as something "different" from other formations. So, white nationalist rhetoric imagines a

formation of whiteness that is different from white supremacy, while alt-right rhetoric imagines

formations of whiteness that are different from white nationalism, and anti-racist white rhetoric

positions itself in opposition to both. Further, each of these formations of whiteness is articulated

in opposition to normative colorblind whiteness. It is clear, then, that there are a variety of

different ways of "doing" whiteness, and approaching whiteness as heterogeneous can help

scholars to track the various ways that whiteness has been rearticulated in particular contexts.

Yet, my analysis has also demonstrated that these heterogeneous formations of whiteness

are always already constructed in relation to a dominant formation of whiteness rooted in white

supremacy. Whiteness—as an interlocking set of racialized norms, expectations, values, and

material relations—and white racial identity are fundamentally rooted in a history of racialized

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[548] Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "Commitment to *Telos*—A Sustained Critical Rhetoric,"
Communication Monographs 59, (1992): 48.

exploitation, violence, and oppression. In U.S. American contexts, whiteness has been built on the colonization and destruction of indigenous communities, on the exploitation of black bodies, on the forcible exclusion of racialized bodies from stolen land. To proclaim pride in whiteness is to take pride in this history and, in the process, to promote the symbolic and material violence that it continues to (re)produce.

Thus, even if "the benefit of the doubt" could be reasonably extended to white nationalists and proponents of the alt-right to assume that these are "good people" who simply want to find a way to be proud of their racial identity and create a positive pro-white culture, this type of rearticulation cannot be accomplished because whiteness cannot be disarticulated from its history of violence, domination, and supremacy. Although white nationalist rhetoric attempts to construct rhetorical distance between white nationalism and white supremacy and alt-right rhetoric attempts to construct rhetorical distance between an alt-right ideology and white nationalism, a disarticulation of pro-whiteness from white supremacy is ultimately impossible.

Articulations are contingent relations among material objects, symbols, affects, power, and so on—and whiteness, too, is a contingent articulation. But history is not contingent—it is lived, experienced, and sedimented, and the history of whiteness is violence. Does the violent history of whiteness mean that whiteness cannot possibly be rearticulated otherwise? New abolitionist scholars would say yes—as noted in Chapter 3, the crux of their argument is precisely that whiteness is so fundamentally rooted in violence and oppression that it must be abolished rather than reclaimed. However, as with attempts to separate whiteness from its rootedness in domination and violence, the abolition of whiteness is an impractical and utopian dream. Here, a critical rhetorical orientation can help move critical whiteness studies toward a more nuanced perspective—a perspective rooted in the recognition that a *disarticulation* of

whiteness from a history of violence and oppression is impossible and undesirable, but also that

rearticulations of whiteness are possible so long as they are rooted in a critically reflexive

understanding of the ways that this history is inseparable from the present and future possibilities

of doing whiteness differently.

I have worked to adopt this type of critical rearticulationist perspective in the previous

chapter's analysis of the rhetorical strategies mobilized by *Everyday Feminism's* attempts to

raise white anti-racist consciousness and promote productive white anti-racist praxis. Here, my

analysis suggests that attempts to raise anti-racist consciousness and promote anti-racist praxis

among everyday white folks by negotiating white fragility through appeals to (dis)comfort are,

perhaps necessarily, simultaneously productive and problematic. White folks must be brought

"out" of their normative positions of racial comfort from within a colorblind orientation to race.

And we *know* that when white folks feel a sense of racial discomfort, they so commonly react in

ways that signal the normative affective circulation of white fragility and reveal white folks'

investments in racial comfort. *And,* we know that emotional reactions mobilized by fragile white

folks often shut down productive discourse on race, racism, and racial privilege by (re)centering

the conversation on white folks and white feelings. If everyday white folks are to be brought into

anti-racist consciousness and moved toward productive engagements with anti-racist praxis,

then, the affective circulation of white fragility must be strategically navigated and negotiated.

White folks must be made to feel uncomfortable, but not too uncomfortable. Or, perhaps,

differently uncomfortable. But they cannot just be disregarded—because if anti-racists disregard

white folks, the white nationalist alt-right is ready to embrace them.

Yet white folks cannot be coddled, either, and it is certainly not the duty of people of

color to ease white discomfort and engage in the frustrating work of carefully raising white anti-

racist consciousness. As I underscored in Chapter 6, the burden of doing the work to move white folks beyond colorblind white fragility into anti-racist consciousness must be centered *on* white folks as a form of sustained white anti-racist praxis. White anti-racists must commit to acting as bridges between everyday white folks and anti-racism by helping to move our white friends, family, and acquaintances from colorblindness toward anti-racist consciousness. This form of everyday anti-racist praxis entails working within spheres of personal influence to engage white folks in direct dialogues on race and racism by pushing them gently but firmly to move beyond fragility. Moving white folks toward resilient, reflexive anti-racist consciousness requires making them more uncomfortable with the realities of systemic racism than with the guilt, shame, or anger they may experience while learning about these realities.

As part of a critical rearticulationist project, it is imperative for critical rhetoric and critical whiteness scholars to investigate formations of, engagements with, and critiques of white anti-racist consciousness and praxis to continue illuminating their possibilities and limitations and their productive and problematic implications. A critical rhetorical perspective with a commitment to *telos* can help to reveal how particular formations of white anti-racist consciousness and praxis function in complex ways as they attempt to carve out "better" ways of doing whiteness while working within and against its dominant centrality.

Why, then, are sustained analyses of dominant formations of whiteness important and necessary in the move toward a critical rearticulationist perspective on whiteness? Precisely because dominant formations of whiteness—whether they manifest in coded, tempered, or explicit formations—set the conditions of possibility for doing whiteness differently. As direct discourse on race continues to proliferate and the hegemony of a colorblind ideology continues to crumble, it is urgent that we illuminate how an ideology of white superiority is maneuvering

rhetorically through mainstream and fringe public discourse in ways that work to (re)secure the privileged centrality of whiteness while masking, to varying degrees, their relationship to white supremacy.

As Chapter 4 demonstrated, white nationalist rhetoric constructs a more palatable orientation toward racially conscious whiteness rooted in assumptions of white superiority by disarticulating white nationalism from white supremacy and its unpleasant affective associations and rearticulating white nationalism to common sense understandings of race and more pleasant and affirmative affects. In the process, white nationalist rhetoric acts as a rhetorical bridge between mainstream public discourse and a white supremacist ideology. Similarly, Chapter 5 revealed that the alt-right has been constructed as a rhetorical bridge between mainstream public discourse and a white nationalist ideology, adopting the language of the far-right alongside appeals to intellectualism and absurdity to mobilize a white nationalist ideology in mainstream public discourse. Together, these findings echo the work of scholars who have argued that discursive manifestations of white dominance can take a variety of forms—some of which may appear more "reasonable"; all of which work together to sustain the dominance of whiteness in changing cultural contexts.[549] Indeed, the formations of white superiority most frequently associated with racism—violence, racial slurs, and burning crosses, for example—have never been the *only* or even the *most powerful* formations of racism, only the most explicit and obvious.

In a contemporary U.S. American context in which multiple formations of racially conscious rhetoric are circulating alongside coded and race evasive rhetoric, exposing links among the various ways whiteness mobilizes an ideology of white superiority in a range of

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[549] Dreama G. Moon and Anthony Hurst, "'Reasonable Racism'"; Priscilla Marie Meddaugh and Jack Kay, "Hate Speech or 'Reasonable Racism?'"

formations can enable more robust challenges to the complex operations of power that maintain white supremacy. Critical rhetorical scholars are well positioned to work toward dismantling racial injustice by exposing its discursive formations and implications. Yet, fighting racism in its multiple manifestations requires a keen awareness of how an ideology of white superiority—made explicit in its more extreme formations—implicitly informs the more coded formations that have long circulated freely through mainstream public discourse under the hegemony of a colorblind racial ideology.

White nationalist and alt-right rhetoric each represent explicit formations pro-whiteness that have mobilized rhetorical rearticulations in an effort to appeal to a broader, more mainstream audience. In the context of its Trump-era proliferations, many mainstream journalists have begun to expose the white nationalist and white supremacist roots of the alt-right and have made compelling arguments to reject the language and framing of "alt-right." For example, progressive news outlet *ThinkProgress* has said that it "will no longer treat 'alt-right' as an accurate descriptor of either a movement or its members" and will use the term only when quoting others. When using language of their own, *ThinkProgress* contributors "will use terms we consider more accurate, such as 'white nationalist' or 'white supremacist.'"[550] While the move to reject the language and framing of the alt-right is well intentioned, I am concerned that the practice of erasing "alt-right" and replacing it with "white nationalist" or "white supremacist" elides the significance of the strategic ways that an ideology of white superiority maneuvers rhetorically into mainstream public discourse.

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[550] "EDITOR'S NOTE: ThinkProgress Will No Longer Describe Racists as 'Alt-Right,'" *ThinkProgress,* November 22, 2016, https://thinkprogress.org/thinkprogress-alt-right-policy-b04fd141d8d4

The move to reject the language and framing of "alt-right" is reminiscent of the tendency within critical whiteness studies scholarship to label all explicit formations of pro-whiteness as "white supremacy." As discussed in Chapter 3, by collapsing all explicit formations of pro-white rhetoric together under the label of "white supremacy," critical whiteness scholarship has largely neglected to attend to the ways that an ideology of white superiority maneuvers rhetorically into mainstream public discourse through a series of strategic rearticulations. Additionally, labeling all explicit formations of pro-white rhetoric as "white supremacy" has tended to position all of these formations at the margins of the mainstream public, where they are identified as "too extreme" for public discourse and, therefore, deemed unworthy of sustained analysis.

Although it is true that "alt-right"—and "white nationalist," "pro-white," "racial realist," and other rearticulations of white supremacy—use strategic practices of naming and framing to distance themselves from white supremacy and the process of affirming these naming and framing strategies can contribute to the construction of that rhetorical distance, erasure and replacement is not the most productive way forward. Instead, we must move toward ways of investigating and reporting on these various strategic rearticulations of white supremacy in ways that avoid uncritically adopting their language and framing *without* collapsing them all together in ways that elide their distinctions. These differences are strategic—they do ideological work— and we need to be able to expose and interrogate those differences so that our resistance can be strategic, too.

Toward a Mainstream–Extreme Spectrum, or, A Walk Across Rhetorical Bridges

Because the formations of white nationalist, alt-right, and white anti-racist rhetoric analyzed across this dissertation each position themselves as rhetorical bridges between mainstream public discourse and more explicit, extreme formations of white racial consciousness

and praxis, I want to propose a conceptualization of white racial (un)consciousness as a *spectrum.* Here, I imagine white racial (un)consciousness as mainstream–extreme spectrum, across which a series of rhetorical bridges pulsating with affective energies assist everyday white folks in moving from colorblind racial *unconsciousness* toward formations of racial consciousness that would, according to mainstream colorblind standards of common sense, be considered *extreme*.

Conceptualizing white racial (un)consciousness as a spectrum illuminates the various formations of racially conscious rhetoric that manifest in mainstream and fringe public discourse and helps direct critics toward complex, nuanced investigations of how these formations work together and separately to maintain and/or challenge a dominant ideology of white superiority. Exposing links among the various ways an ideology of white superiority mobilizes through public discourse in explicit and coded formations provides a way to map the nuances of whiteness in particular contexts and to trace connections across multiple discursive manifestations. In a contemporary racial landscape where movements for racial justice continue to push racial consciousness into confrontation with colorblindness, interrogating the nuances of whiteness is essential to enable more robust and productive forms of resistance.

On Tempered Optimism

In the wake of the 2016 election of a president who ran on a platform endorsed by white supremacists, amid the on-going proliferation of racist rhetoric from white nationalists and the alt-right, during a time when Black folks continue to die at the hands of U.S. American law enforcement on an everyday basis, when refugees are barred from entering the country, when people who have lived and worked in the U.S. for decades are being deported, when trans folks—especially trans women of color—are being slaughtered, when there is *so much violence*

waged against oppressed and marginalized communities at the hands of those wielding

domination and power, there is so much to be troubled by. There is so much to be pessimistic

about. Yet, as important as it is to continue holding dominant formations of power under critical

scrutiny, it is also urgently important to recognize that although dominant formations of power

are inescapable, rearticulations are possible. Guided by that critical awareness, we can work

toward better ways of being and acting within the world while remaining vigilantly aware of the

omnipresence of power and its tendencies to produce exclusions and injustice. I conceptualize

this mode of pessimistic optimism as *tempered optimism*—an affective and political commitment

to imagining and working toward a better, more just and caring world while remaining critically

aware of the ever-presence of injustice. In the spirit of tempered optimism, I want to close with a

story.

Derek Black is the son of Stormfront founder Don Black and the godson of former Ku

Klux Klan leader David Duke. Growing up in West Palm Beach, Florida—just across the water

from Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort—Derek was raised in an unapologetically white

nationalist family and, at the age of 10, launched a webpage for kids on Stormfront.[551] On the

homepage, he wrote,

> I used to be in public school, it is a shame how many White minds are wasted in that
> system. I am now in home school. I am no longer attacked by gangs of non-whites and I
> spend most of my day learning, instead of tutoring the slowest kids in my class. In
> addition to my schoolwork, I am also learning pride in myself, my family, and my
> people.[552]

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[551] Eli Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black," *Washington Post,* October 15, 2016,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-
8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html?utm_term=.713155cab5dc
[552] Derek Black, "Stormfront for Kids," *Stormfront,* accessed April 22, 2017,
https://www.stormfront.org/kids/

By the time he graduated high school, Derek Black was an emerging white nationalist leader—he was a regular contributor to his father's Stormfront radio show, was elected to the Palm Beach Republican committee, and was widely considered "the heir" to white nationalism.[553]

Then, Derek Black went to college—a top-ranked liberal arts college with a strong program in medieval European history, his chosen field of study. White nationalists pressed Don Black on the decision to send his son to a "hotbed of multiculturalism," to which Black responded, "If anyone is going to be influenced here, it will be them."[554] Rather than spread his white nationalist message through his college community, however, Derek kept his views quiet and, for awhile, he remained under the radar. Nonetheless, his white nationalist identity was discovered by a student researching a terrorist group online, and Derek's secret was quickly spread to the campus community. As public controversy around his presence at the school brewed, Derek became more involved in the white nationalist movement.

But then, things began to change. Derek's college classes in medieval European history were challenging, rather than affirming, his white nationalist views—and he started to realize that much of what he had been told about the history of white people and white culture had been radically distorted. Derek also began to have weekly Shabbat dinners with a group of Jewish students who questioned and pushed him on his views, providing evidence to refute his claims of racial realism and racial difference.[555] He became friends with students from diverse backgrounds—people his white nationalist family had taught him to loathe—and he learned that

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[553] Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black."
[554] as quoted by Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black."
[555] Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black."

everything he had been taught about them was wrong, too.[556] In summer 2015, Derek Black

formally left the white nationalist movement by sending an email to the Southern Poverty Law

Center—a long time adversary of pro-white extremist groups—with a request to publish in

full.[557] In part, he wrote,

> I can't support a movement that tells me I can't be a friend to whomever I wish or that
> other people's races require me to think of them in a certain way or be suspicious of their
> advancements. The things I have said as well as my actions have been harmful to people
> of color, people of Jewish descent, activists striving for opportunity and fairness for all. I
> am sorry for the damage done.[558]

Derek Black's disaffiliation and disavowal shook up the white nationalist community that

he left behind as well as the white nationalist family he continues to be a part of. Now, Derek is a

graduate student who writes and speaks publically about the importance of resisting white

nationalism, the alt-right, and Donald Trump.[559]

So, what are we to make of this unlikely story? I certainly do not wish to romanticize

Derek Black nor suggest that either higher education or interpersonal relationships with diverse

people are *the* solutions to racism—nor do I wish to suggest that Derek Black's disavowal of

white nationalism undoes the damage he helped to do over nearly two decades of active

involvement. However, I do think this story demonstrates that anti-racist awakenings and

transformations are possible—and that personal experience and empirical evidence are powerful.

And, if anti-racist awakenings are possible for born-and-bred white nationalists like Derek Black,

they are certainly possible for everyday white folks. For those of us committed to working

toward futures in which the violence of white supremacy is quelled by the power of radical love

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[556] Derek Black, "Why I Left White Nationalism," *New York Times,* November 26, 2016,
https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/opinion/sunday/why-i-left-white-nationalism.html
[557] Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black."
[558] As quoted by Eli Saslow, "The White Flight of Derek Black."
[559] Black, "Why I Left White Nationalism."

and solidarity, there is much work to be done. By uncovering glimmers of these futures in the

present, we can continue to move forward with tempered optimism.

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