"OUR GENERATION HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH DISCRIMINATION":

WHITE SOUTHERN MEMORY OF JIM CROW AND CIVIL RIGHTS

A Dissertation

by

KRISTEN MARIA LAVELLE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2011

Major Subject: Sociology

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ABSTRACT

"Our Generation Had Nothing to Do with Discrimation:" White Southern Memory of

Jim Crow and Civil Rights. (May 2011)

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The ways in which white Americans understand the racial landscape and their own racial identities are not well understood. Through the lens of the racial past, in this study I investigate how memory operates within the white racial frame, the dominant white-centric worldview, to uphold systemic racism and to maintain whites' collective and individual identities. Through a narrative analysis of original in-depth interviews conducted with 44 ordinary white southerners – lifetime residents of Greensboro, North Carolina – who lived through the legal segregation and civil rights eras, this research demonstrates the interviewees' contemporary investment in positive notions of the white self and white society.

The respondents' autobiographical narratives of life during legal segregation, a time of overt white supremacy, are typified by nostalgia for a childhood era of safety, security, and "good" race relations. Interviewees' narratives of the civil rights era, including nonviolent student sit-in protests for which Greensboro is known and school desegregation, have themes of disruption, danger, and white victimization. Overall,

respondents portray Jim Crow segregation as a calm and peaceful time and the civil rights era as chaotic and harmful to whites, at the same time as they acknowledge, to a limited extent, the unfairness of Jim Crow's blatant racial inequalities.

In this work I propose the concepts *white victimology*, *white protectionism*, and *white moral identity*. I argue that white victimology – whites' perception, largely imagined, of their own racial victimization – is a major ideological and emotional facet of the white racial frame, whereby whites dismiss the historical and contemporary reality of white racism. My analysis demonstrates that white victimology is a primary way in which whites assert themselves, individually and collectively, as racial innocents and "good" people. In this work I also conceptualize the dynamic of white protectionism, explanatory and rhetorical ways in which whites "rescue" white acquaintances and family members from potential accusations of racism. Ultimately, I argue that whites' investment in perpetuating white dominance and upholding the white racial frame occurs through white moral identity-making, myriad active and subtle ways that whites continue to construct themselves positively and construct people of color, especially black Americans, negatively.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: "OUR GENERATION HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH

DISCRIMINATION!"

In January 2009 I was making phone calls to potential interviewees for my study on

white southerners' memories of the racial past, and I called the home of a man whom

had been recommended to me by a previous interviewee. I wound up spending twenty

minutes on the phone with the elderly wife of this man. The first twelve minutes of the

call consisted of the woman's angry complaints, as she reprimanded me for choosing a

research project on "how terrible it was for the blacks" instead of all the positive things:

"Listen, I've had black people I've *loved* second only to my mama. Our generation had

nothing to do with discrimination!" She grilled me, wanting to know, What I was trying

to prove? I attempted to explain that I merely wanted to learn how ordinary people

remember experiencing the segregation and civil rights eras.

At this point it was late in my data collection process, and my telephone pitch for

the project was well honed; I had begun this particular phone call by saying simply that I

was looking to interview older, lifetime residents of Greensboro, North Carolina about

race relations. But this woman's visceral reaction was beyond anything I had yet

encountered, as she criticized me and what she assumed my research agenda to be,

believing I sought to wrest confessions from innocent white southerners. When this

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This dissertation follows the style of *American Sociological Review*.

woman heard "race relations from the past," she assumed that she was somehow going to be blamed, unfairly, for terrible things that had never occurred and which she had certainly not perpetrated. In fact, this woman, who likely was born as early as the 1920s or 1930s, argued that her entire (Jim Crow) "generation" was innocent of any charges of racial oppression. In her view, the only important and productive thing to talk about concerning the South's racial past was how nice things were for both African Americans and whites. Any focus on inequality was exhaustingly overplayed.

This early part of the phone conversation was a powerful illustration of white southern defensiveness and emotional investment regarding the racial past. And yet, in the last few minutes of the phone call with this woman, an unexpected transformation occurred: suddenly, she became a sweet, compassionate elder willing to help out a youngster any way she could. Calmer but still with fireball spirit, she suggested that both she and her husband would be good candidates for my interview study. Without hesitation in her voice, she said she "loved" young people like me, wanted to help me in any way she could, and looked forward to meeting me.

Upon reflection I could determine no specific reason for the woman to have changed her tune at that moment in the conversation; it seemed to come out of nowhere. She had been griping emphatically, and I was mostly listening and mildly asserting myself whenever she asked me pointed questions, for example, "Now don't you agree that black people have all the same opportunities as whites today?" "Actually, no, that's not my understanding from everything I have learned." We had certainly reached no agreement. But I did stay on the phone with her and let her do most of the talking, and

eventually she transformed into a gracious woman always willing to help a young person in need.

I was confused by the woman's delivery of so much venom and honey at the same time – until I began to realize that I had encountered all of this before. Having interviewed more than thirty white southerners at that point, I had heard numerous people romanticizing the past, defensively avoiding implications that white society had ever been oppressive, and expressing frustration with contemporary black activism and racial reconciliation efforts. This incident did not reveal a new perspective; it seemed to be demonstrating to the extreme the white southern emotional investment in race, and how swiftly defenses can come up when asked to comment on the racial past. All people have multiple perspectives and voices, and thus radical shifts in narratives, though confusing to the observer, should not be unexpected (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). My encounter with this woman sheds light on white southern complexities and illustrates how they balance southern hospitality with post-segregation southern angst. White southerners can both flash with anger and sweeten with a playful drawl, can be both attacking and defensive, thoughtful and ignorant, both willing to admit and in deep denial, wise and illogical, generous and self-absorbed, hard-hearted and loving. Perhaps they are not much different from anyone else; they are invested in understanding themselves as good, generous people.

WHITE SOUTHERNERS' RACIAL MEMORY NARRATIVES

How white Americans make sense of the racial past is not well understood. Much of the relevant collective memory literature analyzes historical and cultural artifacts, and

much of the racial attitudes and racial discourse literature interrogates young Americans about contemporary issues and does not illuminate how memory of qualitatively different racial time periods is linked to current racial views. This research study on white southern racial memory is a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews I conducted with elderly white southerners who were born during legal segregation. In my analysis I find that, when it comes to Jim Crow inequalities, white southerners employ a combination of some limited admission, denial, and ignorance, with very little acknowledgment of structural disadvantages and privileges, emphasizing instead positive relationships with and actions toward black southerners. When portraying the civil rights era, respondents focus on uncertainty and upheaval in the white community, expressing little appreciation towards civil rights activists, even while they claim to appreciate some of the benefits of an integrated society.

I argue that memory is used as a defense mechanism of both self and white southern society, which ultimately supports the white racial frame (Feagin 2010b) and a white-dominant status quo, past and present. I will demonstrate that white southerners work to establish a *white moral identity* of virtuousness and goodwill through 1) emphasizing the goodness of the legal segregation period – including the non-racism of themselves, their families, and white society in general, 2) engaging in othering African Americans, and 3) creating a *white victimology* describing their victimhood during the civil rights and post-civil rights eras. Additionally, I argue that white southerners' memory facilitates confusion and denial about contemporary racial realities. I contextualize my narrative analysis of the interviews with historical research of local

newspapers, narratives of black southerners, and narratives of white antiracist southerners. This research contributes to understanding, generally, how memory links to identity and interpretive schemes and, specifically, how memory sustains the white racial frame (Feagin 2010b) and the racial status quo.

Why Jim Crow White Southerners

Little research has been conducted by social scientists on the historical memory of the South (Brundage 2000). Historians have created most of the existing research, and a large proportion is dedicated to a broad understanding of the distinctiveness of (white) southernness and its memorialization. And while whites have long had the power to define what "southernness" was, is, and should be (Brundage 2005), most studies on the collective memory of segregation and civil rights look at the tangible cultural markers of memory, such as commemorative ceremonies and museum exhibits (e.g., Brundage 2005; Gerster and Cords 1974; Goldfield 2002; Romano and Raiford 2006; Woodward 1971; Woodward 2002). However, these analyses do not reveal how memory operates on the level of audience and how individuals may variably interpret or reject cultural products of memory (Kansteiner 2002). Rarely investigated are the experiences and interpretations of the white southerners who grew up during segregation – how ordinary people reconcile their identities against the reality of a history wherein they were favored citizens.

Recently, historians have approached southern whiteness from an everyday, behavioral and psychological angle, using data consisting of historical documents, biographies, and memoirs to explore what life must have been like for the ordinary white

southerner during legal segregation and the Civil Rights Movement (e.g., Ritterhouse 2006; Sokol 2006). During the segregation era of the late-1800s through the 1950s, southern whites had a largely unquestioned understanding of Jim Crow (Ritterhouse 2006). By adulthood they knew the complex racial etiquette "almost instinctively" and understood "just what is expected of them in all situations" (Kennedy 1990). Jim Crow etiquette was no set of official laws that people followed because they were good citizens; it was socially maintained through everyday repetition and, when deemed necessary by whites, backed by the force of local authorities or vigilantes (Feagin 2006). My study intersects the historical literature, adding the dimension of contemporary memories expressed in the form of narrative. This allows me to move beyond "how things were" for Jim Crow whites to exploring the ways in which white southerners today make sense of their past and how memory informs their views of their current selves in the post-civil rights era.

In this project I targeted "ordinary" white southerners. My usage of "ordinary" follows the research on post-World War II Germany, specifically contemporary conceptualizations of "ordinary" (non-Jewish, non-Nazi) Germans' levels of awareness of and participation in genocidal Holocaust practices and the forms of their post-War identities (i.e., Goldhagen 1997; Johnson 1999). "Ordinary Germans" have been conceptualized as the majority of German citizens – those who were not actively involved in oppressive Nazi actions or working against National Socialism. Similarly, I defined ordinary white southerners as people who were not actively involved in the institutional enforcement of Jim Crow policies, or leaders in white supremacist actions,

or antiracist or civil rights activists. I view ordinary white southerners as both products of their time and as agents of their time. In other words, they are the vast majority of white southerners who were subjected and socialized to Jim Crow etiquette and whose daily behavior contributed to the enforcement of southern segregation.

In the study of racial inequality and racial groups, much social science research looks at the experiences and perspectives of marginalized and oppressed groups – they may be immigrants, targets of police brutality, or burdened with negative stereotypes. This research helps us understand what it is like to bear the brunt of a racist society – how people cope, strategize, and manage to thrive. Far less research strives to understand the social dynamics of a racist society by interrogating the society's racially dominant members – their thought processes, their interpretations of racialized experiences, and their own racial identities. This second approach, which I use, is instrumental in establishing how the racial status quo is maintained. A racially stratified society, such as the United States, is not upheld by callous irrationality enacted by rabid racists, but by rational actions that support the society's racial hierarchy and patterns of racial inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

Research Method

I selected Greensboro, North Carolina, as the site of my research because of its notoriety as a place of significant civil rights activism and its long-term reputation as a racially progressive southern city (Chafe 1981). Between 2007 and 2009 I collected in-depth interviews with forty-four white southerners who were born between the early 1910s and early 1950s (aged mid-50s to late-90s) and were lifetime residents of the

Greensboro area. I targeted "ordinary white southerners," seeking to collect whites' narratives of segregation and civil rights era memories. I asked them to respond to questions regarding childhood and adolescence in the segregated South, noteworthy and local events from the Civil Rights Movement period, and the importance of remembering and sharing those memories of the South's racial past.

I interviewed white southerners who grew up during segregation and accepted and participated in its traditions, with many doing this well into adulthood. These traditions, Jim Crow laws, and everyday social etiquette are now, after civil rights laws and changing social interactions, considered unjust and racist. Asking white southerners in this contemporary context to speak on the racial past is likely to result in a good amount of defensiveness and attempts at positive self-presentation (Blee 2000; Johnson 1999; Olick 2005). An analysis that were to use my interviews to establish "the white southern *experience* during Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement" would miss the mark. My interviews are about memory and are best viewed as contemporary negotiations with ideas about the racial past.

I also add layers of analysis for historical context and structural understanding. In looking at what people say and how they say it, I utilize literature on racial discourse to assess what the narratives reveal about discursive projects of whiteness, or white southernness. When looking at respondents' segregation experiences, I incorporate black southerners' narratives, historical analyses, and editorials from local newspapers to assess their awareness of systemic racism and the accuracy of their recall. For theoretical grounding, I conceptualize respondents as operating from the white racial frame (Feagin

2010b), where thoughts, beliefs, memories, and emotions operate in a framework

constructed of practices of systemic racism and ideologies of white supremacy.

THE WHITE SOUTHERN CULTURE OF DENIAL

The woman I talked to on the telephone that day in January 2009 wanted to make

sure I was going to carefully consider her point of view. I never did conduct an interview

with her or her husband, but she encouraged me to take and use everything she had said

to me over the phone. In the field notes I wrote immediately after, I summarized the

messages she would have me broadcast in my analysis:

> In some ways blacks were better off when they were all "working together"
> (AKA slavery/sharecropping/segregation). Even way back when, she is certain
> that blacks were well taken care of and were quite satisfied with their lives, no
> complaints. "Discrimination" happened, but *not* at the hands of her "generation."
> Hey, women have been oppressed too, but look how far we've come, and let's
> focus on that. She has *loved* black people, and that's what really matters. Past
> racial inequalities have been *way* overemphasized – what about the wonderful
> things? In a nutshell, we should stop talking about the negative things, if
> anything must be said about the past let's have it be positive, and most of all let's
> celebrate how far we've come, how wonderful things are today, and let's share
> our dreams for the future.

This list of messages demonstrates an unwillingness to look at the past holistically or to

consider black southerners on their own terms. It is a white-centric, paternalistic

perspective that seeks to erase black critical consciousness and impose whites'

interpretations on the black experience. Not coincidentally, using this perspective, white

southerners come out looking like good neighbors. There is also extreme binary

thinking: either the past was good or it was bad, and speaking about the injustices only

negates the pleasant things. Note also the desire to disconnect recent black gains from

the racist past ("let's celebrate how far we've come"; "blacks were quite satisfied with

their lives"), which leads to an inherent contradiction: If we are celebrating anything, it is the reduction of overt oppression and injustice. How can we not only ignore but also deny past racism at the same time as we applaud overcoming it?

This woman illustrates well my primary argument in this research, that contemporary Jim Crow white southerners maintain a culture of denial, where past or current racial oppression is not fully acknowledged or comprehended. Key components of the culture of denial are also illustrated here, which I term *white moral identity* and *white victimology*. Moral identity is the establishment of oneself as superior and morally good, which serves as the foundation of a positive sense of self (Katz 1975). White moral identity, then, is whites' claim to an elevated moral status – segregation-era white southerners are painted as good people who treated black people well and did not discriminate. White victimology is evident when white southerners portray themselves as having been under assault since the Civil Rights Movement, made bona fide victims by actions that dismantled white supremacist systems as well as the contemporary overemphasis on past racial inequalities.

Claims of anti-black racism and discrimination – past and current – are an affront to white southerners' lingering Jim Crow sensibilities. Having grown up during a time when African Americans by and large could not voice criticisms of racial oppression, many white southerners resent today's social climate where claims of racism seem to be voiced readily and amplified by mainstream media. White southern memory fuels contemporary misunderstandings of the racial landscape. Not fully realizing or acknowledging the extent of oppression black southerners experienced under segregation

and still experience today, white southerners have a difficult time fathoming how, decades after the Civil Rights Movement, black Americans could be voicing complaints more now than they did in the past.

As Griffin and Bollen (2009) find, whites who deem the black freedom struggle as an "important" historical event have a more accurate understanding of the contemporary racial landscape – that systemic discrimination still hinders the advancement of people of color and white privilege is still the norm. Remembering accurately is crucial to our comprehension of the racial reality and to our building a more just society. The white southern culture of denial is a formidable ideological and emotional barrier to effective contemporary racial reconciliation efforts and a comprehensive understanding of how the racial past is related to today.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

In Chapter 2, the literature review, I explain my theoretical framework, Feagin's (2006) systemic racism theory, which offers a broad lens for understanding the historical foundation of the current racial arrangement and the connections between micro and macro racial processes. I explain also Feagin's (2010b) white racial frame concept – the dominant racial worldview, conceptualizing the roles of ideology, language, images, memory, and emotions in upholding systemic racism and solidifying the racial status quo. The white racial frame is the primary lens through which I analyze white southerners' racial narratives. In this chapter I also summarize relevant literature on collective memory and the politics of remembering (e.g., Blee 1991; Brundage 2005; Halbwachs 1980; Olick 2005; Schwartz 2000), segregation-era white southerners (e.g.,

Chafe 1981; Ritterhouse 2006; Sokol 2006; Tucker 1988), and contemporary racial discourse (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2010; Picca and Feagin 2007). I conclude that memory is a key component of the white racial frame and is essential to understanding contemporary racial thought, discourse, and white American identity.

In Chapter 3, the methodology, I first give a historical overview and discuss the contemporary racial dynamics of the site of the research study, Greensboro, North Carolina. I then explain the methods used to carry out the qualitative study, including my respondent selection process and the interview method, share the sample demographics, and discuss my approach of narrative analysis. I continue my discussion of methodology in Appendix A, where I analyze my experiences as I negotiated my role as a white interviewer, my strategies of interview management, and my struggles to reconcile my reactions to respondents.

In Chapter 4, "Only Love Under Our Roof: Jim Crow Childhoods in the Private Realm," my investigation focuses on the private realm of white homes and families, where white supremacist codes of interracial etiquette operated alongside cross-racial intimacy. Respondents' accounts of black domestic workers and employees have dominant themes of mutual love and affection and good treatment. *White protectionism* is a key dynamic here, whereby respondent narratives establish their parents and other family members as nonracist, good people. I contrast the narratives with accounts from black domestic workers, who did not view white homes as a safe haven from racial oppression. Countering also respondents' common claim that Jim Crow had no ill effects on them, I discuss the impact of Jim Crow on white children, including confusion and

difficulty reconciling contradictions between family teachings of equality and the overt racial oppression of the day. Ending the chapter is a discussion of *forgotten alternatives* (Ritterhouse 2006), i.e., how things could have been, and I do this by presenting the Jim Crow narratives I find missing or inchoate among my respondents, such as segregation as a stain on an otherwise happy childhood, or sorrow at being unable to experience empathy for black loved ones. I conclude that, contrary to respondents' claims, white southerners were deeply affected by Jim Crow; their warm and loving relationships with black individuals and their parents' teachings of equality did not give them immunity from white supremacy.

Chapter 5, "A Safer, Simpler Time and 'Just the Way It Was': Segregation in Public," analyzes white southerners' narratives of legal segregation as they explain and justify their negotiations with Jim Crow in public spaces. Overall, they claim having had a limited awareness of racial inequality. They emphasize the safety and security of childhood with its easygoing racial interactions. They freely acknowledge the blatant racial inequality in some public facilities and consider it an inevitable and mysterious time in history with laws and traditions created and enforced by unnamed people or institutions. Overall, white southerners accept that the period of legal segregation included some racial inequalities that black southerners faced, but this acceptance is minimized by the limited ways they conceive of systemic inequalities as well as assertions of their own nostalgic memories of their good society.

Chapter 6, "Distancing and Rejection: The Civil Rights Movement at Arm's Length," examines the transition period between legal segregation and a racially

integrated society. Respondents, who were mostly adults and parents in the 1960s, argue that desegregation was necessary for the sake of equality, but their narratives of civil rights era events downplay the importance of the movement and cast whites as victims and vulnerable subjects. Primarily in this chapter I analyze respondents' memories of the famed Greesnboro sit-ins of early-1960, highlighting the prominent themes of detachment, distancing, and *white victimology*. I conclude that white southerners demonstrate a failure to appreciate civil rights activism for moving the region away from overt racial oppression and toward equality and justice.

Chapter 7, "White Victimology: Trials and Tribulations of School Desegregation," analyzes in-depth respondents' narratives of school integration. The theme of white victimology was especially pronounced in these narratives. Respondents justified white resistance to school desegregation as a nonracist stance and presented integrating schools and busing programs as chaotic and traumatic for vulnerable white children. I argue that the white victimology emerging in respondents' civil rights era narrative story lines ultimately strengthens their assertions of the calm and purity of their lives under segregation.

Chapter 8, "White Moral Identity and White Protectionism: Micropolitical Maneuvers," is an analysis of how respondents constructed individual and collective identity through narrative (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). I propose the concept *white moral identity* to capture how respondents sustained a virtuous, innocent identity on both the individual level and the collective level, asserting their personal nonracism and the nonracism of white southern society, rationalizing the racism of other white people, and

engaging in othering and disparaging blacks. I also identify respondents' rhetorical moves of *white protectionism* whereby they avoid a full acknowledgment of white racism, a dynamic that ultimately serves to protect whiteness and strengthen the white racial frame.

In Chapter 9, the conclusion, "Eyes Wide Shut: Memory Management and the White Racial Frame," argues that white southern moral identity-making is implicated in a white southern *culture of denial* that is collectively maintained through memory and serves as a key component of the white racial frame. By profiling respondents' overwhelmingly negative assessments of the novel Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission process of the mid-2000s, I discuss the emotional extremity and pathology of white resistance to remembering the racial past. Ultimately, the collective forgetting of systemic white racism, resistance to remembering things unflattering to white society, and rationalizations of forgetfulness all allow a culture of denial to proliferate.

CHAPTER II

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary social science research on racism tends to use individualized, psychological concepts like attitudes, prejudice, and stereotypes, or focus on acts of discrimination either at the hand of individuals or large-scale, institutional practices (Feagin 2006). The traditional individualized concepts like prejudice and bigotry imply that race and racism may be embodied within certain individuals (and not within others) and enacted through belief and behavior (Feagin and Feagin 1986). Few scholars conceptualize racism comprehensively as a structural phenomenon, with racism defined comprehensively as systemic racial (white) supremacy that touches all aspects of society (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2006; Feagin 2010a; Feagin 2010b; Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2001; Knowles and Prewitt 1969).

In much contemporary race research and discourse, whiteness is still normalized and uninvestigated; the racial experience is still largely conceived of as being lived by people of color. White people are considered racial subjects when they interact with, or comment on, people of color and when they form white-exclusive groups and subcultures (e.g., Blee 1991; Ezekiel 1996; Shirley 2010). Additionally, most quantitative social science deems race an immutable characteristic and a causal factor for such phenomena as behavior and attitudes instead of a social construction that arose from the eugenics movement and is in a constant state of flux (Zuberi 2001). Most social

science research, then, reifies race as well as the notion that racial dynamics are most present in aberrations from the (read: white) norm.

The role of ordinary white people as carriers and maintainers of a racist society deserves further conceptualization. Recent survey research indicates that whites are expressing increasingly less racist views in the post-civil rights era (e.g., Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, and Krysan 1997). But, at the same time, whites continue to report agreement with negative stereotypes of blacks at rather high rates: one in four whites agree that blacks are "lazy," one in three whites say that blacks are aggressive or violent, and two out of five whites agree that blacks complain too much (Bobo 2004). Only half of whites agree that blacks are intelligent, and less than half regard blacks as hardworking people (Bobo 2004). Qualitative research has gone far as well in demonstrating the extent to which ordinary whites maintain less progressive and even overtly racist ideologies in white-dominant institutions (Bolton and Feagin 2004; Lewis 2008; Moore 2008), in "backstage" white informal spaces (Mueller, Dirks, and Picca 2007; Picca and Feagin 2007; Royster 2003), and to researchers during in-depth interviews and focus groups (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Feagin and O'Brien 2003).

Much contemporary thought on racism is inadequately historically contextualized. Feagin's (2006) theory of systemic racism addresses this deficiency by emphasizing the historical foundations of contemporary racial inequality and racial dynamics. Elite white men created and for centuries have controlled the major U.S. institutions, guaranteeing concrete and symbolic privileges for whites and dictating

where, below whites, people of color are situated in the racial hierarchy (Feagin and O'Brien 2003). Black Americans have been subjected to the "archetypal racial oppression" since the nation's founding, from the more than two centuries of chattel slavery to the century of legal segregation that ended just a few decades ago (Feagin 2006; Feagin 2010a). Since the 1600s, white Americans have received myriad forms of "unjust enrichment," such as whites-only government welfare programs, while black and other Americans of color have received "unjust impoverishment" due to legal and illegal exclusion, discrimination, and terrorism (Feagin 2006). Over a period of many generations, these racial advantages and disadvantages have accumulated, as is reflected in whites' disproportionate wealth and power and continued dominance in all major American institutions. The contemporary racial landscape and the normality of whiteness are best understood within this sociohistorical context.

THE WHITE RACIAL FRAME

Systemic racism theory and the *white racial frame* concept enhance our understanding of race in the U.S. by linking concepts that are typically investigated individually, such as institutional discrimination, racial attitudes, implicit associations, and racial discourse. The white racial frame is concerned with how people think, feel, and talk about race, how they process information and make sense of the racial landscape, and with how these micro processes are connected to structural processes, "constantly validating, and . . . validated by, the inegalitarian accumulation of social, economic, and political resources" (Feagin 2010b:16).

A white racial frame has been central to the persistence of systemic racism (Feagin 2006; Feagin 2010a). Feagin's (2010b) white racial frame is a concept of the dominant racial worldview that includes racial stereotypes, racial narratives and interpretations, racial images and language accents, racialized emotions, and inclinations to discriminatory action (Feagin 2010b:10-11). It is a web of thought, emotion, imagery, and action from which most people operate unknowingly – particularly members of the dominant white racial group who, unlike many groups of color, embrace no racial counter-frames. The white racial frame is ideological, providing a broad perspective on life and language and interpretations that help normalize and make sense of social life (Feagin 2010b).

Other frames exist simultaneously with the white racial frame in the U.S.A. (such as the liberty and justice frame) and provide alternative tools of interpretation that people may draw upon, but the white racial frame is the dominant racial frame; it is hegemonic, "part of a distinctive way of life that dominates all aspects of this society" (Feagin 2010b:11). Because of the normalized dominance of the white racial frame, few whites are fully aware of the frame or able to think critically about it. They reject or ignore important facts that do not fit the frame (e.g., evidence demonstrating that racial discrimination continues to be a significant barrier for people of color) and fail to accept or comprehend counter-frames and those who utilize them (Feagin 2010b).

According to Feagin, Vera, and Batur (2001), "the key to understanding white racism is to be found not only in what whites think of African Americans and other people of color but also in *what whites think of themselves*" (p. 5, emphasis in original).

The white racial frame, then, places utmost importance upon the interrogation of whiteness, white people, and white-created institutions. It emphasizes white peoples' simultaneous roles as agents (in supporting the racist structure and furthering its legitimizing ideology) and as subjects (being born into a deeply racist society), making it an invaluable concept for my research study on ordinary whites. According to Feagin (2010b) the white racial frame changes across time, but its primary purpose remains stable across many generations – to support white dominance in society via furthering positive views of white people and less positive views of groups of color. Whiteness is not only normalized; it is rendered heroic and imbued with virtuousness. People of color continue to be deemed as deviant and subordinate – as immoral, threatening, unintelligent, obsequious, ungrateful, impotent, exotic, and foreign.

A major strength of the white racial frame over traditional views of racism and racial ideology is its theoretical comprehensiveness. Feagin (2010b) conceptualizes the ideological frame as linked to myriad macro and micro processes: for example, media imagery, racialized emotions, individual behaviors, and institutional actions. The white racial frame is largely ideological, but it is closely related all racial dynamics and processes within institutional, social, and personal spheres. Feagin (2010b) asserts that the white racial frame can even be drawn upon in interpretations of seemingly non-racial phenomena in order to support the status quo, legitimize white dominance, or erase white oppressions. For example, the frame is at play in proud American narratives about courageous colonial "settlers" and raucous tales of "how the wild West was won," where whites who thrived in a time of overt white oppression (wherein people of color and

their lands were subjugated) are construed as true heroes. Thus, the white racial frame is a powerful ideological, emotional, and value-laden frame that encourages people to expect, work toward, and embrace the continued normalization and glorification of whiteness.

Memory and the White Racial Frame

Systemic racism theory and the white racial frame concept provide a strong structural and sociohistorical lens for understanding complex racial dynamics both past and present. Memory is the contemporary process that links present to past, for it determines which parts of the past are worth remembering and how they will be remembered (Brundage 2000; Schwartz 2000). According to Feagin (2006), the perpetuation of systemic racism in the U.S. has required a "sustained collective forgetting of society's harsh realities" and "selective remembering, most of which abandons white responsibilities for past oppression or glorifies white achievements" (p. 44). The people who have erected historical monuments across the United States have been "pillars of the white community," who have systematically glorified white dominance over people of color, omitting or warping "unfavorable" facts, and even giving the most commemorative attention to the *most* racist individuals and actions (Loewen 1999:16-17). Memory strengthens the white racial frame when it is used to justify past oppression of people of color and to idealize whiteness. Forgetting whites' systematic brutality and oppression of people of color is a key goal of mainstream American collective memory, and it feeds the patriotic, and still white, American identity.

Collective forgetting is not just about the past. It also enables inaccurate perceptions of the contemporary racial landscape to flourish. According to Feagin (2010b), "When such a momentous and bloody past is suppressed, downplayed, or mythologized by elites and historians, ordinary Americans, especially whites, understandably have difficulty in seeing or assessing accurately the present-day realities of unjust enrichment and impoverishment along racial lines" (p. 18). Collective memory, then, is a vital component of the white racial frame and systemic racism. It provides a faulty, incomplete, white-centric historical foundation for comprehending contemporary racial phenomena and inequalities.

Like counter-frames, memory also has the potential to be emancipatory if it is used to expose, and ultimately to reconcile, past oppressions and to challenge contemporary beliefs that rest upon white-protective selective remembering. However, because memory is essentially not a historical process but a contemporary process linked to contemporary (individual or collective) identity (Assmann 1995; Schwartz 2000), alternative memories that challenge deeply embedded beliefs or ideologies are not readily embraced, or even comprehended, by most people, especially members of the dominant group. According to Feagin (2010b), "if major groups in society hold significantly different collective memories of [the] racial past, they will as a rule have difficulty in sharing understandings of racial experiences in the present" (p. 17). Thus, dominant memories strengthen the white racial frame, prevent cross-racial understanding, and bar the large-scale acceptance of less oppressive racial frames, all of which ensures the continuation of systemic racism.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

By *collective memory*, social scientists generally mean the ways in which groups or societies remember, on institutional, cultural, and individual levels (Fine and McDonnell 2007; Schwartz 2000). Collective memory is a contemporary process of imposing meaning upon the past, whereby particular events and people are selection for incorporation into contemporary consciousness (Brundage 2000; Schwartz 2000). Collective memory provides both a model *of* society and a model *for* society, reflecting the past, shaping behavior in the present, and providing a frame within which people can find meaning in their current experience (Schwartz 2000).

Collective memory studies are rooted in the work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Drawing on the work of Durkheim, his mid-1900s work brought the concept of memory into the social sciences, shifting the focus from memory as contained within the mind to memory as a product of the outside world. Halbwachs (1980) argued that no memories are individual, and even personal memories are shaped by the social realm and social groups with which a person has been involved. Now it is understood that all memories, including those of highly personal or private events, are affected by one's experiences as a member of social groups and are mediated by one's social interactions over time. Indeed, individual recollection is so social in nature that a person modifies her memories based on social influences and can even "remember" things she did not experience personally (Olick and Robbins 1998). Thus, although the sociological perspective conceives of all memories as socially-created and -mediated, many collective memory scholars agree that collective memories are social products that are

incorporated into mainstream contemporary consciousness in some concrete way. In this view, collective memory is not actively kept alive by individuals or groups; it has institutional backing and can outlive people.

Among memory scholars there is substantial debate over the proper application of the term "collective" to memory, based on concerns that collective memory has been defined either too broadly or too exclusively. The field has evolved significantly since Halbwachs's (1980) basic view that memories shared by the most people are the most collective. According to Fine and McDonnell (2007), collective memory refers to "events that are not immediate concerns, but past events that can be referred to with the assumption of shared understanding" (p. 172), the knowledge of which being often spread via media, schooling, and commemorations. In this view, collective memories are those that are integrated into the common knowledge of the contemporary mainstream social world. Similarly, Kansteiner (2002) contends that a memory is at its most collective when it takes on an endurance of its own, does not require the survival of any certain group to maintain it, and has a potential staying power of more than one century (e.g., remembrance of the Holocaust). Going even further, Schwartz (2000) argues that a memory being shared by many people is not enough to qualify it as a collective memory; it must be recorded via memory projects, giving it a superordinate quality beyond individuals.

Recently, however, some memory scholars have begun to critique collective memory literature's emphasis on public memory projects. For example, oral historian Alessandro Portelli (1991) expresses concern with memory being conceptualized as a

cultural product that exists beyond or separate from individuals, arguing that

remembering is indeed socially-mediated but is ultimately a deeply personal process. In

fact, Portelli (1991) chooses to avoid the now-controversial term collective memory

altogether, reasoning that no two memories relayed by individuals are exactly alike;

responsible analyses must acknowledge individual variations. Memory scholars are also

beginning to conceptualize memory as an active, dynamic process – *collective*

remembering – as opposed to treating it as a thing to be discovered (Olick 2005).

Because of these debates, some memory scholars avoid the use of the term collective

memory and employ alternative terms that are more specific, such as Bodnar's (1992)

distinction between "official memory" and "vernacular memory," or more inclusive,

such as Olick and Robbins's (1998) "social memory," an umbrella category for

collective memory (the active past that informs our identity), historical memory (that

which is preserved in records), and autobiographical memory (events experienced

personally).

In Schwartz's (2000) view, collective memory involves a close relationship

between history and commemoration – historians record the details of the past deemed

worthy of recording, and power holders or social groups select events and people to

commemorate and integrate into public identity and memory. Through engaging these

cultural products that have been constructed and sponsored by institutions, people learn

which events of the past are worth remembering, how they should be remembered, and

which characters are worth our reverence or condemnation. Inevitably, these historical

renderings are abridged, incomplete, biased toward the dominant group, and even

completely fabricated (Knowles and Prewitt 1969; Loewen 1999; Loewen 1995; Schwartz 2000; Zinn 2003). However, anthropologist Elizabeth Tonkin (1992) criticizes even the conceptual separation of memory from history, arguing that memory, history, and cognition are interrelated and overlapping processes.

The prominent view among memory scholars is that memory is maintained and accessed within the social realm, and therefore research should target cultural memory products rather than the interpretations of individuals (e.g., Irwin-Zarecka 1994). Indeed, most collective memory research, which has focused on the creation and public presentation of memory, has largely neglected to measure effects on audience and therefore has not been able to illuminate much about memory interpretation and alteration at the level of the receiver (Griffin 2004; Kansteiner 2002). These studies assume that public memory projects directly influence individual memory and collective identity.

An alternative perspective on memory conceptualizes memory as that which is actively maintained and accessed, with all its complexities, by individuals, so therefore research should target individuals' memories (Cunningham, Nugent and Slodden 2010; Portelli 1991). This perspective conceptualizes memories not merely as products for consumption, but also as contested interpretations with which people constantly interact. This perspective is less common among memory scholars, so the relationship between institutional memory representations and people's interpretation and incorporation of these elements into their own narratives and identities remains largely uninvestigated (Kansteiner 2002).

Furthermore, there may be memories thriving within the dominant group that contradict or reject "official" history, which cannot be investigated by analyzing cultural products of memory only. Other forms of qualitative analysis, such as interview studies with dominant group members, can investigate how and why collective memories are embraced, rejected, or re-crafted in alternative forms. Griffin and Bollen (2009) suggest more researchers investigate "the 'why' behind the 'what'" by soliciting individuals' reasons for their recollections, in order to gain a better understanding of how memories hold meaning for people and thus how memories are related to contemporary predicaments.

Memory Politics

Different communities maintain competing versions of the past, not all of which are incorporated into official history or commemoration projects (Bodnar 1992; Burke 1989; Loewen 1999; Olick and Robbins 1998). That certain perspectives become enshrined in mainstream, public memory while neglecting other perspectives amounts to memory politics, whereby only the versions of the past approved by the dominant group are offered for mass consumption (Blight 2000; Fine and McDonnell 2007; Kansteiner 2002; Schwartz 2000). Indeed, in the past few decades, the field of oral history has blossomed as the need to supplement and critique official history's bias toward dominant group interests has become evident. And there has been recent movement by historians to document the experiences of "ordinary" members of both marginalized groups and dominant groups.

Memory is closely related to interpretations of the contemporary landscape. According to Feagin (2010b), "How we interpret and experience our racialized present depends substantially on our knowledge of and interpretations of our racialized past. The collective memory of that racist past not only shapes, but legitimates, the established racial structure of today's society" (p. 17). As Feagin (2010b) points out, white elites and historians have largely dictated how history is portrayed, and they operate out of the white racial frame in doing so, which results in a sanitized and white-centric historical record. Ordinary people accept this history, with whites being the most easily misled, and as a result they misunderstand both the racial past and present.

Parallels have often been drawn between American racism (slavery and/or legal segregation) and the European Holocaust. The utility and rationale of these comparisons are heavily debated, but there are some clear similarities between World War II-era ordinary Germans and Jim Crow white southerners. They both have a legacy of brutal white supremacy sanctioned by institutions and condoned and enforced by ordinary citizens (Goldhagen 1997; Feagin 2006; Johnson 1999). They have been traditionally portrayed as passive, even innocent, participants as opposed to the enforcers of white supremacy (Feagin 2006). And they are both sensitive to having lost a war in which they were seen as being on the "immoral" side (Johnson 1999: Olick 2005; Woodward 1971). Because of these similarities, research on ordinary Germans may be compared to ordinary white southerners. But the research on World War II-era Germany is highly contested today.

Ordinary Germans. Competing perspectives can be difficult to reconcile; research that conflicts with traditional, established history and memory may be heavily debated. For example, ordinary (non-Jewish, non-Nazi) Germans have been the subject of much contemporary scholarship. Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1997) challenged the traditional view of ordinary Germans in the Holocaust era. Holocaust scholars and mainstream media had long characterized Jews as helpless, Nazis as evil, and ordinary Germans as unaware or impotent bystanders. Goldhagen (1997) argued that Germany was rife with anti-Semitism and German soldiers and citizens voluntarily participated in the oppression and murder of Jews. Goldhagen's (1997) book erupted a firestorm of praise and condemnation and inspired an edited book published the following year on "the Goldhagen debate," which included multiple scholars taking issue with the assertion that German culture was deeply anti-Semitic, attacking Goldhagen's methodology, and even questioning his competence as a historian (Shandley 1998).

Despite the animated debate, further evidence supports Goldhagen's (1997) portrayal of ordinary Germans. Johnson (1999) used survey and interview data to illustrate that ordinary Germans were not forced to comply with Nazi ideology and regulations and did not live in constant fear of Nazi sanctions. They regularly defied many specific Nazi restrictions, such as listening to banned radio stations, without fear of penalty. But, these rebellious Germans engaged in very little protest or opposition to the anti-Semitic pogrom – and they were well aware of it. However, despite this evidence of their knowledge of and complicity in the Holocaust, the refrain "Wir haben

nichts gewusst!" ("We didn't know anything about it!") was so frequently heard in Germany after the war that some said it seemed like the new national motto (Johnson 1999).

Germans' post-World War II claims of ignorance and innocence contrast other substantiated evidence of their support of Hitler's regime. Olick (2005) finds that this denial was a post-World War II visceral response to being collectively chastised by Allied attempts to cast the whole of German culture as defective and in need of re-education. It is impossible to determine whether Germans would have denied less had they been more gingerly treated by the outside world, but it is clear that, instead of responding with acknowledgment of collective responsibility, ordinary Germans assumed a stance of victimhood, easily recalling how badly they themselves had been treated by the Nazi regime and the devastating war and even going so far as to claim that the post-War smearing of their reputation was a Holocaust-like oppression: "the logic behind diagnoses of German national character was the same as the racial insanity the Nazis had used; the Germans were now being placed in 'concentration camps' just like the Jews" (Olick 2005:327).

The American South. The American South has long been considered a unique region when it comes to memory. Cash (1941) claims that the South is distinctive for its self-indulgent romanticism of the past. And Woodward (1971) argues that white southerners have a unique style of defensiveness, which is rooted in losing the Civil War to the North and feeling under attack for their past fervent support of slavery and their opposition to black freedom struggles. Today white southern identity maintains

defensive ideas of innocence and victimization at the hands of "outsiders" and black civil rights activists (Woodward 1971).

Little research has been conducted by social scientists on the historical memory of the South (Brundage 2000). Most of the existing research has been carried out by historians, with a large proportion dedicated to a broad understanding of the distinctiveness of (white) southernness and its memorialization, beginning with its roots in the antebellum social and economic racial arrangement and moving through its major crescendos of the Civil War and the African American Civil Rights Movement (Brundage 2005; Gerster and Cords 1974; Goldfield 2002; Romano and Raiford 2006; Woodward 1971; Woodward 2002). Historians note the propensity of the South to be very engaged in memorializing its past, whereby whites have long had the power to define what "southernness" was, is, and should be (Brundage 2005). Southern memory and history is still today largely *white* southern history and memory.

White southerners had absolute control over southern history and memory all the way up to the 1960s, when African Americans gained more political power after the Civil Rights Movement (Brundage 2000). The annals of traditional white southern history have not been erased, even though many commemorations and historical interpretations have now become more inclusive. The American South still has no broad cultural memory encompassing the divergent experiences and memories of all southerners, which would include African American, American Indian, Latino/a, Middle Eastern, Asian American, and poor whites (Brundage 2000).

JIM CROW WHITES: LIVING REMEMBERERS

According to Griffin (2004), the next step in collective memory research is "to link the social determination of memory to its consumption and use, unraveling how (if at all) recollections, celebrations, and commemorations of the past frame understandings of the present, galvanize action or legitimate inaction, and condition morality and cognition in time present" (p. 556). Analyzing contemporary memory narratives is a most effective method to determine the ways in which memory is wielded to interpret the present time.

African Americans' experiences with segregation have been documented quite substantially, and often with poignant interviews conducted decades later (Chafe, Gavins, and Korstad 2003; Litwack 1998; Thompson-Miller and Feagin 2008; Wilkerson 2010). On the other hand, researchers have rarely targeted the perspectives of contemporary ordinary white southerners (Sokol 2006). The surviving white generations who were socialized to condone Jim Crow logic, etiquette and practices will literally be gone in a matter of decades, and the opportunity to solicit and analyze their narratives is quietly slipping away.

Recently, historians like Jennifer Ritterhouse (2006) and Jason Sokol (2006), have approached southern whiteness from an everyday, behavioral and psychological angle, using data consisting of historical documents, biographies, and memoirs to explore what life must have been like for the ordinary white southerner during legal segregation and the Civil Rights Movement. Interview research like my study, however, allows one to move beyond "how things were" for Jim Crow whites to exploring the

ways in which white southerners today make sense of their past and how memory informs their views of their current selves in the post-civil rights era.

Brundage (2000) argues that white southerners have little incentive to see their history as an ongoing process. Rather, because of contemporary stigma toward public displays of anti-black racism and white supremacy, white memory prefers to see southern history as disjointed, with slavery and Jim Crow ended long ago and equal opportunity as the current modus operandi. This interpretation of history not only affords whites some distance from their ancestors' complicity in overt white supremacy and their inheritance of a legacy of white privilege, it also facilitates a the mythologizing and romanticization of days past. Given this understanding, we can expect Jim Crow whites to accentuate the passing of time and the benefits brought by integration and civil rights in addition to being nostalgic about the southern past.

When researching people who were involved in since-criticized behaviors or allegiances, one must also address the issue of self-presentation. After the visible restraints of legal segregation were dismantled and the Civil Rights Movement began to be painted in an overall positive light, we can expect that white southerners who experienced these time periods will be invested at varying levels in the notion of themselves as "good people," despite their involvement in a social, economic, and cultural system that afforded whites pronounced privileges. Therefore, I am interested in the ways in which my respondents present themselves today – if, and how, they describe their collusion with white privilege, whether they show emotions, reminisce about the past, or express regret. Some recent research on race in the U.S. and of the Holocaust

provides evidence that my respondents may reminisce about the past as opposed to being critical (Tucker 1988), be selective in their recall for more positive portrayals of self (Blee 1991; Tucker 1988), and, to varying degrees, deny or admit their awareness of and agreement with white supremacy (Blee 1991; Johnson 1999).

Contemporary White Memory: Defensiveness and Denial

Kathleen Blee's (1991) research on members of Indiana's 1920s Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) provides valuable insight into how whites remember their decades-past participation in overt racism, after the re-moralizing of the Civil Rights era. Through in-depth interviews, many of her respondents presented the WKKK as a social collective of concerned women who were committed to preserving community and protecting morality, *not* a hate group. While Blee (1991) identifies the WKKK as being engaged in one of the most vicious campaigns of prejudice in U.S. racial history, the women in her sample recalled their membership almost exclusively as a time of friendship and solidarity. Their selective memory of the "good" contrasted with historical evidence of the maliciousness of their well-organized, racist operations (such as boycotts and gossip campaigns), which supported and complemented the more violent tactics employed by their brother organization, the Ku Klux Klan.

One implication of Blee's (1991) study is, if former members of an active white supremacist group claim nonparticipation in racism, then it is probable that very few ordinary whites will conceptualize themselves as supporters of racist ideas, either in the present or past, much less as proponents of white supremacy. Blee (2006) warns that respondents similar to the people in her study are likely to try to use the interview as a

platform for positive representations of self and community (p. 329). Methodologically, Blee's (1991) study indicates that interviews on whites' memories regarding involvement in what is now considered "bad" behavior cannot be taken at face value, but must be supplemented by historical evidence to gauge the extent to which respondents may be invested in positive portrayals of their pasts (Blee 2006). Her analysis consisted of two parts: contrasting historical documents and evidence with respondent memories of past events, and analyzing the ways in which whites talk about their racial memories and views.

Additionally, anthropologist Susan Tucker's (1988) oral history interviews with Jim Crow-era black female domestic workers and white female employers of domestic laborers, addresses issues of defensiveness and denial. She argues that memories were characterized by selective recall and revision for both groups. However, while her African American respondents used the interview setting to share hurtful memories while retaining dignity, white interviewees tended to omit negative memories altogether and accentuate the positive things from their relationships with black domestic workers. Some even insisted that deep peer friendships had developed, a claim rarely expressed by the black women:

> For white women, the choice to remember the "good" over the "bad" often led to the protest that "whites *did* give a lot to these black women," and other protests that the paternalistic system had worked well. But such protests were rarely without simultaneously voiced feelings of guilt and sorrow and some acknowledgment of the injustices of racial customs in the South. These white women had reinterpreted their memories in light of an awareness of social and political change that had sometimes been accompanied by education and self-analysis. (Tucker 1988:4, italics in original)

Thus, Tucker (1988) finds that, by the 1980s, white southern women were defensive and in denial about the oppressiveness of legal segregation, yet they had also become somewhat critical of Jim Crow-style white supremacy.

Some additional interview data indicates that when white southerners recall the period of legal segregation, they tend to frame race relations and their personal experiences in neutral or positive terms, clinging to a myth of "good race relations" during Jim Crow (Feagin 2006; Lavelle 2004). White southerners, then, may use memory of segregation to assert that racial oppression was not in fact widespread or systemic, even during legal segregation.

(Rare) Racial Conversion Narratives

On the other hand, the act of remembering can be a conscious political undertaking, a gesture of defiance against denial and silence (Blight 2000; Booth 2006). This is the case for white progressives and antiracists, whose accounts of the Jim Crow South have challenged the broader social memory by exposing, from a white perspective, the awareness of how white supremacy operated. According to Fred Hobson (1999), white southern writers have a long, though spasmodic, history of critiquing the racial status quo. In the late-1700s white southern writers regularly expressed guilt over slavery, until northern abolitionists began increasingly criticizing the South in the early-1800s. As Jim Crow laws became entrenched in the late-1800s, public expressions of white racial guilt became extremely rare. Then, after a century of absence, in the 1940s-60s white southern racial conversion narratives reappeared. Hobson (1999) attributes this reemergence to several factors, including a revival of southern literature generally, but

names as the primary factor a post-World War II awareness that overt racism in the

United States—most blatantly in the Jim Crow South—could not last forever. And

another resurgence has occurred in the mid-1980s, "an even greater outpouring of

narratives of white racial awakening than in any previous ten- or fifteen-year period"

(Hobson 1999:122).

According to Hobson (1999), with the exception of these individuals, very few

white southern writers have demonstrated a willingness to deeply explore the

implications of living in an overtly racist society. Even when sharing very poignant and

traumatic racial experiences, most muster little regret. Righteous anger, deep emotional

connection, confession, and repentance are extremely rare. But in the rare antiracist

autobiographies, a dramatic journey of salvation is spun, much like a freedom narrative,

as these white southern writers "escape a kind of bondage, flee from the slavery of a

closed society, of racial prejudice and restriction, into the liberty of free association, free

expression, brotherhood, sisterhood—and freedom from racial guilt" (Hobson 1999:5).

Although these racial conversion narratives may be infused with self-soothing, they

show that whites, even southerners in the midst of Jim Crow, have the capacity to

understand racial inequality and their own privileges and to empathize with people of

color.

RACIAL DISCOURSE

Analyses of memory via narratives must consider the role of racial ideology and

discourse. While there has been a clear continuity of systemic white racism throughout

U.S. history (Feagin 2006), one area in which the racial landscape has changed in recent

decades is in the area of racial discourse. Changes in the racial terrain since the 1960s have occurred mainly on the surface, with practices occurring in more covert, yet routine, ways that are largely invisible to dominant group members (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Large-scale racial discrimination continues in somewhat new forms, but most people, especially whites, fail to acknowledge or comprehend this reality, even if they are actively involved in carrying out institutional racism (Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Pager and Quillen 2005).

Just as racial discrimination has become more covert in the post-civil rights era, public racial discourse has become more sophisticated. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, whites began to craft a new racial language that reflected emerging ideological components, which has been termed color-blind racism (Blauner 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Carr 1997). This new language explains racial inequalities as resulting from nonracial dynamics, naturally-occurring phenomena, or the cultural deficiencies of people of color. Central to its foundation are a denial of systemic and institutional racism and a belief in the reality of equal opportunity. In contrast to "old-fashioned" racist language, which relied upon a staunch belief in whites' biological superiority, color-blind language is more sophisticated, providing multiple justifications for racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

Although contemporary American identity depends on a claim of colorblindness, and many individuals claim to be colorblind, recent research reveals that whites continue to use overtly racist language in private spaces. It appears that whites have become adept at avoiding the public display of racist ideas, but in "safe" (read: white) spaces, "old"

forms of white supremacist ideology and racist language are still prevalent – even among college students born and raised in the post-civil rights era (Picca and Feagin 2007). The continuity of "traditional" white supremacist thought and language is occurring *within* a society professing "colorblindness," so it is important to acknowledge the agency of white adults (many were Jim Crow's children) in this process.

Contemporary research on whites' racial views and racial identities skews toward youth, particularly the academician's easily-accessible population of college students. There is a hole in the race research when it comes to conceptualizing the perspectives of older white Americans – people who grew up in times of more overt racism and have experienced the post-civil rights period as a new era (Sokol 2006). They have adapted, as adults, to a more open society and to the language of colorblindness. My white southern interview participants are the grandparents of today's young adults and the grandparents or great-grandparents of today's schoolchildren. They are the living bridge between Jim Crow segregation and the post-civil rights era. Their narratives have the potential to offer insight into the extent to which older forms of racial talk, based in biological racism, coexist with, mirror, and contrast with contemporary colorblind discourse.

CONCLUSION

This is not a study on what aging white southerners may admit or deny. It is also not a podium for white southerners to establish how things used to be. Rather, this study is concerned with the content and form of white southerners' narratives regarding segregation and the Civil Rights Movement and what this may reveal about the linkages

between race, memory, and identity. Many studies of (white) southern memory have used tangible memory projects such as commemorations and museums as a proxy for collective memory, but these studies do not capture the relationship between memory and identity and do not illuminate how ordinary people interpret memory projects or regard themselves as they recall their lived past (Kansteiner 2002).

In an American society that claims to be colorblind despite evidence of regular racial discrimination, further research needs to continue to expose the fallacies and consequences of ideology and racial discourse. Qualitative research, via in-depth interviews for example, can illuminate how people (attempt to) reconcile the contradictions between ideological beliefs and structural realities, and how dominant group members, from a privileged location in the racial hierarchy, craft their identities. Most of all, this research will increase understanding of the role memory plays in individual and collective identity making, and it will demonstrate the ways in which memory props up the white racial frame and supports the continuation of systemic racism.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

When planning to research ordinary white southerners' memories of the racial past, I

determined that it would be most effective and feasible to conduct in-depth interviews

with lifetime southerners. Creating my own data set of interviews was needed because

few contemporary ordinary white southerners voluntarily record narratives about past

racial eras. I chose to sample individuals who were old enough to have grown up during

legal segregation and would remember that time period, as well as the civil rights era,

from personal experience. I wanted my study to be well contextualized, so I sought out

lifetime residents of just one area – a place that had experienced significant civil rights

activism so that respondents could not claim that, racially, "nothing much happened

here," a barrier I encountered in a previous research project (Lavelle 2004).

Additionally, historian Bill Chafe (1981) argues that Greensboro has long been a prime

place to study the intricacies of race in the South, due to its reputation for

progressiveness, which contradicted whites' dominance in business and local politics,

and the city's long-standing adherence of typical southern-style, anti-black prejudice and

discrimination. Between 2007 and 2009 I collected interviews with 44 lifetime white

residents of Greensboro/Guilford County, North Carolina.

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

Greensboro, North Carolina, the county seat of Guilford County, is a typical

southern city by race in terms of population demographics (majority white with a large

black population and a low percentage of other groups of color and Latinos),

socioeconomics (white-black wealth and income gaps), housing patterns (bounded

"white" and "black" neighborhoods), educational disparities (black outcomes the

lowest), and political and business leadership (predominantly white). Greensboro is also

somewhat distinct from many other southern cities, notably through its regional

reputation for progressiveness, its having five accredited higher education institutions

including two historically black institutions, and a strong history of black (and

interracial) activism. I selected Greensboro as the site of my research for two primary

reasons: 1) to assist racial memory recall, its distinction as a significant Civil Rights

Movement city, and 2) for narrative analysis purposes, its reputation as a progressive

southern city despite a history of white dominance (Chafe 1981).

The township of Greensboro was established in 1808, and the early white

population was composed mostly of the German Lutherans, English Quakers, and

Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who had begun forming settlements in the area in the mid-

1700s (Salsi and Salsi 2002). In the 1770s, the local Quakers (North Carolina Friends)

had abolished slavery among themselves and, by the early 1800s, started forming

manumission societies (Arnett 1955). Although local abolitionists were actively

involved with the Underground Railroad, Greensboro was no haven from slavery; in

1829, of Greensboro's 500 residents, 102 were enslaved people and only 18 were free

blacks (Arnett 1955). Originally, Greensboro's economic base lay in cotton and tobacco,

and its rise to regional prominence was made possible through its selection as a major

stop on the North Carolina railroad in the mid-1850s (Arnett 1955). (Greensboro's status

as a railroad hub gained it the nickname "Gate City.") By World War II, Greensboro had transitioned away from its agricultural roots and had blossomed into a formidable textile manufacturing center; its Cone Mills was the world's largest denim producer, Blue Bell the nation's largest overall manufacturer, and Burlington Mills a world leader in rayon weaving (Arnett 1955).

Greensboro has a strong legacy of higher education, boasting five accredited institutions: University of North Carolina-Greensboro (UNCG, formerly Greensboro Women's College), Greensboro College (Methodist affiliation), Guilford College (created by Quakers), and the historically black institutions of North Carolina A&T State University (NC A&T) and Bennett College for women. Much of Greensboro's recent history of antiracist activism is rooted in these colleges. Four black male students from NC A&T are credited for launching the nationwide lunch counter sit-in movement in 1960, and the local effort was sustained by hundreds of students from NC A&T, Bennett, Women's College, and Dudley High School, the pre-integration black public high school whose student activists had close ties to NC A&T during the civil rights era.

Today, Greensboro is the third largest city in North Carolina. By 2009 U.S. Census estimates, the city population is about 258,000 – 56% white, 37% African American, 3% Asian American, and 4% Hispanic. Race-ethnic diversity has increased in the area in recent decades due largely to the in-migration of Latino, Vietnamese, Korean, and other Asian peoples. Nevertheless, with over 90% of residents being either African American or white, today Greensboro is largely still a black-and-white southern city. Consistent with national trends, white residents experience a socioeconomic advantage

over African American residents. Whites' per capita income (2000) was double that of blacks' – approximately $30,000 versus $15,000.

Additionally, Greensboro neighborhoods and schools are quite segregated today, with the southern and eastern portions of the city populated mostly by people of color and the northern and western areas being primarily white and much more affluent. Greensboro earns a value of 62.3 on the index of dissimilarity (white-black), the fourth highest for North Carolina cities (CensusScope 2000). In addition, despite the sizable black population, and never a lack of black college graduates and community leaders, the city's political and business leaders have been mostly white men for its history. In 2007 Greensboro elected its first African American mayor, Yvonne Johnson, who unexpectedly lost her re-election campaign two years later and was succeeded by a white man.

THE SAMPLE: ORDINARY WHITE SOUTHERNERS

Some may argue that this study is limited because it is not a comparative project with any southerners of color. From my whites-only data set, I cannot compare directly with a sample of African American lifetime residents of Greensboro. However, historians and social scientists have sought ordinary black southerners' narratives for several decades (e.g., Berlin, Favreau and Miller 2000; Litwack 1998); white southerners can stand alone for analysis, just like any other social group. My project sheds light on the ways in which dominant groups remember and explain the past, not on the contrasts with other groups. Additionally, this project was inspired by my own comparative study of whites and African Americans in another southern city, in which it was apparent that

white memory featured glaring factual errors and apparent emotional distance, compared to black memory (Lavelle 2004). With the experience of that project, the research question changed from "How do white and black southerners see things the same or differently?" to "What is going on with white southerners' memories?" and that is how I arrived at this research.

The field of whiteness studies is growing, as scholars increasingly recognize a need to conduct more research on dominant racial groups, and to supplement multitudinous studies analyzing the effects of race on non-whites as if "race happens" to people of color but not to white people. And yet whites are not a monolithic group (Gallagher 2000; Shirley 2010). I target the narratives of white southerners from one metropolitan area of North Carolina; they share the characteristics of race, region and generation but vary on other factors including social class, gender, and educational attainment.

I consider the individuals in my sample "ordinary whites" or, more specifically, "ordinary white southerners." My usage of "ordinary" follows researchers of post-World War II Germany, who sought to understand the role of non-Jewish, non-Nazi Germans during the Holocaust: How much knowledge they had of Nazi actions, how much they participated, and how they viewed themselves after the war's end (i.e., Goldhagen 1997; Johnson 1999). "Ordinary Germans" have been conceptualized as the majority of German citizens – those who were not actively involved in oppressive Nazi actions or working against National Socialism. Similarly, I classify ordinary whites from the Jim Crow era as white citizens who were not actively involved in the institutional

enforcement of Jim Crow policies, or leaders in white supremacist actions, or antiracist or civil rights activists.

My use of the term "ordinary whites" is not intended to equate white southerners with Germans or to debate how much responsibility dominant group members carry for unjust actions of their government. Nevertheless, it is important to state that Jim Crow was a white supremacist system, created and enacted by elite whites for the benefit of all whites and to disadvantage African Americans. Jim Crow white southerners – all of my respondents – were privileged racial citizens, and very few challenged this system that privileged them. And, although it is problematic to read the historical record backwards from contemporary notions of morality, for the duration of U.S. history people of color have challenged racial oppression with the collaboration of some white allies. The status quo of any era provides the prevalent mode of thought and behavior, but there are always alternative perspectives. So, I view ordinary white southerners as both products of their time and as agents of their time. As children they had no choice but to be subjected and socialized to Jim Crow, and as adults they carried on the traditions they had learned, teaching others the sensibilities of southern segregation (Ritterhouse 2006).

In terms of my respondent selection, I had to more clearly define who was an "ordinary" white southerner and who was not ordinary and should be excluded. For example, was the former owner of a segregated lunch counter an ordinary white person or an active agent of segregation? That person held the power to change regulations, but was beholden to the conventions of the day and risked social and economic sanctions from other whites for violating custom. And what about a white server at that segregated

lunch counter who turned away black customers? That person was required to enforce the store's regulation or risk being fired. Holding less institutional power than the boss, perhaps the server is closer to "ordinary." I considered this all carefully and decided to remain flexible when determining interview candidates. I aimed not to interview more than a few people who had been involved more than marginally in either the implementation or protest of white supremacy.

Thus, I specified "ordinary white" not to completely exclude those on the edges of the spectrum – for they are indeed an integral part of the continuum, and we can consider their views as just more extreme versions of mainstream, moderate views (Ezekiel 1996) – but in order to maintain a strong focus on regular people. Specifically, I excluded well-known public figures (like activist organizers) and government officials (like local politicians and police officers). In the end, I got a good sample of people; only a few had worked at segregated businesses, and one person had participated in some sit-in protests in a nearby city. My ultimate goal in gathering narratives from white southerners as "ordinary" as possible was to make a scholarly contribution regarding how members of dominant racial groups remember and their memories are related to their identities and to the maintenance of the racial status quo.

Sampling Process

The 44 participants were located primarily through snowball sampling, whereby I (and four research assistants) relied first on personal contacts and then on referrals from respondents. I began by mentioning the project to people with whom I had become personally acquainted through living in Greensboro and working in nearby Winston-

Salem. Additionally, I ran two advertisements in a monthly publication of the local

Adult Center for Enrichment, which eventually garnered three respondents via two

people contacting me directly.[1] To broaden the scope further, I used a personal contact to

pitch my project at a business meeting of a local church, which garnered several

respondents. When pitching the project to potential respondents I was careful to keep out

jargon as much as possible and speak in familiar language. For example, I did not use

elevated terms like "de jure segregation" or contested terms like "racism." I discovered

early on that potential interviewees seemed to easily comprehend and respond fairly

neutrally to the term "race relations," so I always used it when pitching the project. I

would tell them the interview was about "race relations in your life and from your own

experience here."

In terms of my response rate, the majority of eligible people whom I directly

asked to do the interview – usually over the phone – wound up agreeing to it. A handful

declined by saying that they were not interested in speaking on the topic of past race

relations. But the most common turndown I got was of being "too busy" for it, which I

hardly believed was actually the case, as most of them were retired, but in these brief

and often stilted phone calls I was unable to solicit a more accurate reason. I secured

nearly all of my interviews by using the referrals given to me by other interviewees, and

this was the key element in my response rate being so high. Once I had potential

respondents on the phone, I always quickly told them who gave me their phone number

and that this person had recommended them as someone who might be interested in

[1] Due to cost and an expected low response rate, I chose not to purchase advertisements in more mainstream publications, such as local newspapers.

doing an interview. In my pitch I also stressed that I was a student, intuitively thinking that they would be reluctant to turn down a college student versus someone like a reporter or a professor.

Snowball sampling was a natural choice for a project targeting such a highly specified and hard to pinpoint population, especially because of the "lifetime resident of Greensboro" stipulation. The recruitment method seemed to work very well overall. In a few instances, respondents actively worked to get me more interviews. At the end of interviews I would ask if they could recommend any acquaintances, and many obliged with names and phone numbers. One woman, Carla, grabbed her phone and called a woman who she thought should give an interview. Carla explained the project to her and handed me the phone; I was able to schedule the interview right there, even though the woman was not particularly excited to do it and wound up giving a short and awkward interview. If not for Carla pressuring her, I doubt the woman would have agreed to be interviewed.

All interviews were conducted in person, in Greensboro and the surrounding area, between 2007 and 2009. Between July 2007 and November 2008, I conducted the first 30 of the in-depth interviews with 33 respondents (three were joint interviews with married couples). In the summer of 2009, four research assistants completed an additional 10 interviews with 11 respondents (one joint interview with a married couple). In the cases of the married couples, both individuals met the requirements of lifetime Greensboro residents at least 60 years old. Most of the interviews were conducted in respondents' homes, but a few were done in workplaces, churches, or quiet public

places. The average interview length was about 90 minutes; a few were under an hour, and a few went beyond two hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. (See Appendix B for transcription guide.) I employed research assistants to do local historical research, to transcribe interviews, and to conduct interviews. The four individuals who conducted the 10 final interviews were young white women – three local acquaintances plus one student of mine who did the work as an independent study project.

Demographics

My sample consists of original in-depth interviews with white southerners who were born between the years 1912 and 1954. At the time of the interview, respondents ranged in age from 55 to 97, with an average age of 73 and a median of 74 years old.[2] Respondents were lifetime residents of the Greensboro, North Carolina metropolitan area. Several were not born in Greensboro but had moved to Greensboro as young children, and many had experienced brief gaps in residence due to college attendance or military service. My interviews were confidential; I assigned all respondents a first-name pseudonym.

Of the 44 respondents, 30 were women and 14 were men. And, four of the men were interviewed with their spouses, so there are only 10 one-on-one interviews with men. Throughout the study, it was difficult to locate eligible and willing male respondents. The first factor creating this difficulty was men's shorter life spans. (I

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[2] Three respondents were under 60 years old, but I had planned to interview no one under 60. Midway through data collection I made one exception for a 58-year-old man because I was finding it difficult to locate eligible men for the sample, and a research assistant who forgot the 60-and-over requirement conducted the other two interviews with younger respondents.

interviewed several women with deceased husbands.) Hesitation to speak on my topic also seemed to be a factor with men more so than with women. One female respondent who attempted to recruit a male acquaintance for the study told me that he refused and even questioned her willingness to "get involved with this thing." Plus, there was a male respondent who was very cautious, requiring that he see the interview guide ahead of time and be able to verify the accuracy of his finished transcript (I obliged on both counts, and he gave the interview). I began trying to target men early in data collection, and eventually I attempted to limit new interviews to men only, but nevertheless I found it impossible to oversample – or even to equitably sample – men. What results is an imbalance of women over men in my sample, which has made it more difficult for me to do a gender comparison.

The sample is above average in class status and educational attainment. Understanding that most people tend to identify as middle class when asked to label their social class status, I classified respondents' social class myself. I used a combination of: the condition of the neighborhood/housing facility where they lived, their house and home furnishings (when interviews were conducted inside their homes), their personal attire, educational attainment, and occupations (past and current of both self and spouse). In the end I considered about one-third of the sample to be working class, one-third middle class, and one-third upper-middle class. All respondents had completed high school, and only 11 had pursued no education beyond high school. Twenty-six respondents had earned college degrees, and 5 held advanced degrees. The sample is fairly average in political and religious preferences for this region and cohort. Seventeen

respondents identified as Democrats, 26 as Republican or conservative, and 1 was independent with no leaning. All but 5 were Protestant (including 2 Quakers), and there was a single Catholic, Jewish, nondenominational non-Christian, atheist, and no affiliation respondent.

THE INTERVIEWS

People make sense of their experiences and both construct and communicate meaning through narration (Chase 1995). Narratives are a normal and constant production of life; they are "stories" that have tellers, listeners, and circumstances for telling them (Bauman 1986). I conceive of my in-depth interviews not as a question and answer session but as a set of narratives – people's stories about themselves that they deem significant and interesting. Through the form of narrative, or storytelling, people make sense of experience and construct and communicate meaning (Chase 1995; Portelli 1991). A narrative does not exist within an interviewee; the narrative is an act of self-analysis and self-presentation (Mishler 1986). In-depth interviews enable the respondent to use agency and imagination and thus narratives allow the analysis of identity (Riessman 1993:5).

In order to facilitate the creation of narratives, as the interviewer, I asked respondents to talk about a topic, but they controlled the content, form, and length of their responses. I assisted interviewees in taking some ownership of interview topics; questions were concerned with interviewees' life experiences instead of sociological queries. For example, a sociological research question such as, "What did respondents learn about race and whiteness from their parents?" is formulated for the interview as

"Do you remember your parents discussing race relations when you were a child? What kinds of things did they talk about?" This is no mere rhetorical strategy; it shifts the focus from what I am looking for as a researcher to what the respondent wants to talk about in relation to my topic.

I eased the respondents into the interview by beginning with a few warm-up questions about their family history and their own childhood in the Greensboro area. I aimed to get them comfortable with the interview style before asking any questions pertaining to race. I wanted them to feel that the interview was not grilling them or quizzing them, but was formatted so that they could speak about their experiences on their own terms. I then asked respondents a set of questions relating to their memories of childhood and adolescence growing up in the segregated South. For example, "Can you tell me an early memory you have about something having to do with race, with you being a white child?" and "Were white people and black people treated differently?"

A second set of questions cued recall of specific, mostly local, events from the civil rights era. For example, "Do you remember when the schools integrated here?" and "How did you feel about the lunch counter sit-ins downtown at Woolworth and Kress?" When respondents occasionally asked me to clarify dates or details of events, I obliged. Otherwise, I tended to let them speak uninterrupted and uncorrected, even if there were factual errors in their recall. In the third and final part of the interview, I tried to get respondents to reflect back more deeply and talk about the importance of pondering and sharing their memories of the racial southern past. For example, "Do you see your racial

views as having changed a lot over your lifetime?" and "Do you think it's important to pass on your memories of these things to young people?"

Master interviewer Studs Terkel (2006) recommends an interviewing approach where the interviewer actively cedes power to interviewees:

> The first thing I'd say to any interviewer is . . . 'Listen.' It's the second thing I'd say too, and the third, and the fourth. 'Listen . . . listen . . . listen . . . listen.' And if you do, people will talk. They'll *always* talk. Why? Because no one has ever listened to them before in all their lives. Perhaps they've not ever even listened to themselves. You don't have to agree or disagree with them, all of that's irrelevant. Don't push them, don't rush them, don't chase them or harass them with getting on to the next question. Take your time. Or no, let's put it the right way: let them take *their* time. (P. 124)

My interview style honors Terkel's advice. In the interviews I pursued depth over breadth. Typically I did not ask every question on the interview guide. (See Appendix B for the interview guide.) I wanted to allow the interviewees ample space to develop their narratives, not by giving me answers to questions, but by responding at length to open-ended cues. I wanted them to feel free to tell stories, summon spontaneous associations, and follow tangents when they arose. I relied on constant attentiveness and eye contact, rarely giving verbal feedback or interjecting comments. Through nodding frequently and not rushing to fill silences, I encouraged respondents to follow their narrative threads out as far as they wanted; I rarely interrupted their speech. Many respondents went far off on tangents, and after some time for my own adaptations, my style shifting to being slightly more assertive in order to get respondents back on track when they strayed. Eventually I settled into a style that allowed the respondents to remain the "experts" of their stories and allowed me to ask for the clarification and details that I wanted. The people I interviewed responded amicably to my flexible, open-ended style: generally they told

many stories and seemed to enjoy themselves even if they had been initially wary of the interview.

A Note on Periodization

With this project I query white southerners' memories of two time periods—legal segregation and the Civil Rights Movement—and from the point now where they live in a third time period—the post-civil rights era. I understand that this periodization has been imposed to create a logical chronology of our past and that we must remain aware of the way we construct the continuities and discontinuities across time periods (Olick 2005). Through the act of historicizing, scholars and others have demarcated the "beginning" and "end" of the Jim Crow and Civil Rights periods, often selecting the passing of laws as boundaries. In actuality, there are no clear moments in time that separate one of these eras from the next, and, further, with any of the 20ᵗʰ Century transitions in my study's purview, it can be argued that much more of the racial status quo was preserved than was terminated (Feagin 2006).

Additionally, new events have the power to reactivate and redefine the form and boundaries of a historical event (Bearman, Faris and Moody 1999), so these historical periods are never completely static. Nevertheless, the eras in question – Jim Crow segregation and the Civil Rights Movement era – are understood as fairly bounded, distinct periods by most people and are useful to cite with my respondents. Nevertheless, to address this assumption, I allowed interviewees to give their own interpretations of the past and on how the racial arrangements have changed over time. My questions

rarely imposed dates or time spans, but allowed them to speak from their own memories and perceptions.

Supplements: Fieldnotes and Historical Research

As soon as possible after each interview, I recorded fieldnotes that consisted of 1) recounting noteworthy interactions that occurred either when the audio recorders were turned off or that the recorder could not capture, such as respondent affect and mannerisms and 2) reflecting on what transpired during the interview. Typically, I spent about an hour after each interview thinking through what had happened and typing up the notes. At other times I typed extra entries into the fieldnotes when I needed to get down additional thoughts about the interviews or to record incidents that happened outside the interview setting. I did not intend the fieldnotes to record details so much as to facilitate my analysis. I explored issues that seemed noteworthy when the interview was fresh on my mind (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). This process facilitated my rethinking and revising the interview questions for future interviews, exploring new angles in order to test and deepen my understanding of arising themes (Silverman 2006). I cherished the fieldnotes as my own place to process; they capture my voice, personality, emotions, and intuitive sense in a way that my more careful academic writing does not.

Since my study is situated in Greensboro and I solicited residents' memories of local events, some local historical research was required. I perused all local history books available at the public library to get a sense of the city's general history and the ways it has been documented in writings and photographs. I identified some key events

relevant to Greensboro's racial history that have occurred within the lifetimes of respondents and incorporated them into my interview guide. Additionally, midway through the data collection process, two research assistants scanned microfilm of the two mainstream newspapers from the 1900s, the *Greensboro Daily News* and the *Greensboro Record* around the time periods of selected important events, taking photocopies so that I could determine how events were presented via mainstream media outlets and how residents' reactions were recorded. I use this information to add historical context to the interviewees' narratives.

THE ANALYSIS

In-depth interviews produce some of the richest material for analysis. Interviewees share personal stories and speak from their own points of view, constructing narratives, or "retrospective first-person accounts of individual lives" (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett 2008). Careful transcription captures intimate moments such as heightened tones of voice, awkward silences, confused stuttering, laughter, and tears. And yet, even a very long interview or a series of interviews with an individual provides a tiny snapshot of that person. No research methodology makes it possible to get a complete understanding of a phenomenon. Narrative analysis addresses this limitation by considering the effects of the interview context and the interviewer – under what immediate and cultural conditions each narrative was created. The interview is viewed as an exchange between interviewer and respondent that requires a level of analysis beyond the critique of participant statements, as you explore how both parties negotiate one another and the interview topic.

Narrative analysis is especially useful for this particular research project. I interviewed white southerners who grew up during segregation and accepted and participated in its traditions (with many doing this well into adulthood). These traditions – Jim Crow laws and everyday social etiquette – are now, after civil rights laws and changing social interactions, considered unjust and racist. Asking white southerners in this contemporary context to speak on the racial past is not likely to produce straightforward, raw, uncensored recollections. You are sure to get a good amount of defensiveness and attempts at positive self-presentation (Johnson 1999; Olick 2005). An analysis that uses my interviews to establish "the white southern *experience* during Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement" will miss the mark. My interviews are about memory and are best viewed as contemporary negotiations with ideas about the racial past. Narrative analysis focuses on those negotiations, interrogating *how* people negotiate the interview as much as the content of what they say in the interview.

I also add layers of analysis for historical context and structural understanding. In looking at what people say and how they say it, I utilize literature on racial discourse to assess what the narratives reveal about discursive projects of whiteness (or, white southernness). When looking at respondents' segregation experiences, I bring in black southerners' narratives and historical analyses to assess their awareness of systemic racism and the accuracy of their recall. For theoretical grounding, I conceptualize respondents as operating from the white racial frame (Feagin 2010b), where their thoughts, beliefs, memories, and emotions are aligned with entrenched practices of systemic racism and ideologies of white supremacy.

Concepts

Narrative is storytelling. It is "made up" and yet real; a narrative is "'true to life'—faithful to subjectively meaningful experience—even as it is creatively, spontaneously rendered" (Holstein and Gubrium 1995:28). In the words of Riessman (1993), narratives are "constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive" (p. 5). A narrative is thus an extremely complex creation, but not "untrue" or "unreliable," for it holds meaning and truth for the speaker (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Portelli 1991). My analysis approaches the interview narratives as fabricated, yet authentic, stories that illustrate respondents' meaning making.

Thus, when I look at memory, I do not assume that respondents' memory statements are direct indicators of their actual memories. Indeed, it is most accurate to think about memory as a contempoary action or process – remembering – as opposed to a thing (Olick 2005; Olick and Robbins 1998). Qualitative interviewing has come to be understood as a method that facilitates respondents engaging in storytelling, and, although the stories originate from within the respondent, they are prompted by the interviewer, improvised on the spot, and catered to the interviewer (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Riessman 1993). Therefore I focus on what respondents communicated as memory, including attention to my role as interviewer in providing a framework for the narratives to be constructed.

Respondent memories are not only created within the unique context of the interview setting and affected by the immediate setting; they are also molded by the cultural context. Narratives are both biographical stories and cultural stories, linking

culture and self. In order to tell a coherent story of oneself, a person draws upon facets of cultural life that are available to them (Swidler 2001), from sources both local, such as family and community knowledge, and larger-scale, such as media and political rhetoric. One's subculture can also provide narrative threads that individuals learn, via role modeling and inducement, to adopt as their own (Mason-Schrock 1996).

Method

I began conducting my analysis during the data collection process (Charmaz 2006). This was facilitated by two key methodological choices: continuous transcription and writing fieldnotes. I did most of the transcription myself, bit by bit over the course of data collection. In the cases when research assistants typed transcripts, I went back over them in full, listening again to the audio recording and editing the transcript as needed. In my analysis of the transcripts, I worked to understand how respondents interpreted the structural realities of their world, without reifying their meaning making and losing my own analytical lens in the process (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). I read the transcripts line by line, identified potential themes, conceptualized relationships among themes, and sought negative cases to deepen the analysis (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

The fieldnotes, which I typed as soon as possible following each interview, noted things that the audio recorders did not catch. I was repeatedly and continuously engaged in identifying trends in the narratives and pondering my thoughts and feelings about the interview experience. The fieldnotes, which I had initially considered to be a supplemental component of data collection, became truly vital for my analysis. Since my

interviews were spaced out over a few years and transcripts were not always completed quickly, I returned to my fieldnotes many times to recall individual respondents and how the interviews had gone, and to identify themes to explore in future interviews. There was a reflexive dynamic between the method and data; I often altered the interview format and questions based on my experiences in the interviews (Silverman 2006).

Qualitative researchers have been moving away from merely seeking answers to "what" questions – what is going on, and under what conditions – in favor of also identifying the "hows" – how that is being accomplished, or how people talk about their lives or the issue at hand within the context of the interview (Fontana and Frey 2003; Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 1995). My approach as a qualitative researcher is informed by this progression in the field. In my project the "what" component consists of what the respondents remember and the themes of the stories they tell. The "how" component focuses on how they craft their narratives in the interview. The "how" component also pays attention to the interplay between researcher and subject. The interviewer is an active participant and shapes the milieu in which respondents create narratives (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Portelli 1991). Thus, paid attention to how I interacted with respondents, worded questions, probed for further explanation, gave feedback, and so forth.

Respondent narratives are conceptualized as stories, so the researcher's task is to infer the overarching story lines and underlying meanings (Mishler 1986). Narrative analysis is enhanced by considering the combination of admission and expressive behavior (Goffman 1959), and because a respondent never tells the "whole story,"

inferences must be drawn from limited information (Mishler 1986; Poirier and Ayres 1997). In fact, when dealing with narratives involving past behaviors or beliefs that are now considered unacceptable or immoral, which was frequently the case in my project, "the most precious information may lie in what the informants *hide*, and in the fact that they *do* hide it, rather than in what they *tell*" (Portelli 1991:53, emphasis in original). Whether respondents are deliberately hiding information is difficult to determine; I address this limitation by paying attention to rhetorical inconsistencies and by conceptualizing the stories that are *not* told in addition to those that are.

As Swidler (2001) argues, culture provides a diverse "tool kit" that people utilize in different ways for their thinking and their lines of action: "people are better equipped for life if they have available multiple approaches to situations, if they can shift justifications for their actions, and if they can mobilize different meanings to organize different lines of action" (p. 183). This view of culture as a tool kit offers a lens for analyzing contradictions in narratives with less confusion than might otherwise occur.

Gubrium and Holstein (1997) offer another useful lens for viewing oddities in narratives. They argue that a shift in narrative should not be seen as a problem because everyone has multiple voices, identities, roles, and contexts: "Given the possibility that narrators can assume various perspectives and speak with multiple voices, narrative shifts should be expected as various roles or perspectives are taken or provoked." (p. 152). In their view, narrative shifts are linked to shifts in the respondent's standpoint.

Poirer and Ayres (1997) advocate "overreading," an analytical method that pays attention to inconsistencies, silences, repetitions, and story endings within narratives.

Less tangible than spoken words rendered as text, these are important factors that are often ignored in standard interview analysis, but they hold meaning and can greatly enhance the interpretation. For example, one of Bonilla-Silva's (2010) key findings from interviews with white people on racial issues was that they tended to misspeak and stutter frequently when discussing certain topics. Without careful, word-for-word transcription, these kinds of important nuances of talk would be impossible to analyze (Riessman 1993), so I followed a detailed transcription guide that required transcription of all discernable speech, changes in tone of voice, and errors and pauses in speech. (See Appendix B for transcription guide.)

CHAPTER IV

ONLY LOVE UNDER OUR ROOF: CHILDHOOD IN THE WHITE JIM CROW

HOME

While the system of legal segregation enforced the separation of whites from blacks in many public areas, the white supremacist ideology that undergirded legal segregation (Feagin 2006; Kennedy [1959] 1990) permeated both the public and private realms (Ritterhouse 2006). The white home was a primary site of whites' socialization to Jim Crow (Hale 1999; Ritterhouse 2006). But most historical research on Jim Crow life has focused on the public aspects, such as segregation of public facilities and black protests (Ritterhouse 2006). The result is that we have a limited view of what this time period was – not merely a time when some set of laws dictated the segregation of black Americans and other people of color from whites, but an era where white supremacy was deeply institutionalized and upheld by racist ideology (Feagin 2006). To this day American society lacks a collective memory and awareness of the intricate dynamics of Jim Crow, which were present not only in racially separate accommodations but also in the private realm of the homes, neighborhoods, churches and schools where people spent the majority of their time and learned most of their lessons about whiteness, blackness, and racial etiquette.

Whites especially have a limited understanding of the role that home, family, and neighborhood played in socializing them for a Jim Crow society. Black southerners felt the contrast between their supportive and communal all-black neighborhoods and the

white-dominant outside world; the black community was understood as the only safe haven from racial oppression (Lavelle 2004), although whites could violate this barrier of safety if they chose. Much more than a collection of nuclear families, the Jim Crow black community taught its children how to recognize, interpret, avoid, and cope with white racism; racial lessons were frequent and salient (Feagin 2006; Litwack 1998). Jim Crow whites, on the other hand, not subjected to economic, political and social disenfranchisement, could generally be more self-sufficient at the family level and less reliant on the white community for explicit lessons of survival or racial identity maintenance. Unlike black children, white children did not need to develop a critical consciousness of the racism of their society; instead, the white community served up reinforcements of white dominance, whether subtle or overt, socializing white children to eventually become the enforcers of Jim Crow.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, when asked today to recall their racialized experiences as childhood members of white families and communities, white southerners remember primarily goodness, tolerance, and lessons of equality, not white supremacist ideology or practices. The white home is constructed as a site immune from hatefulness and racism. Proud that parents and religion taught love and brotherhood – teachings that stuck – they excuse, downplay, or rationalize the anti-black racism displayed memorably by some family members. White southerners portray their childhood and adult relationships with black domestic workers as pure, often intimate, and mutually satisfying. They appear to have yet to come to terms with the reality that Jim Crow

racism – its ideology and its clear inequities – operated simultaneously and was intertwined with childhood teachings of equality and love.

In this chapter I argue that, despite most respondents' claims to the contrary, Jim Crow racism had a profound impact on white children and adults. Acknowledging that segregation-era white youth lacked the analytical lenses or role models to help them accurately perceive the white supremacy permeating their world, I identify some examples that illustrate white children may have attempted, unsuccessfully, to deal with the contradictions of anti-black racism and human equality. I conclude that the result of these negotiations was ultimately an acceptance of the normalcy of black oppression and white dominance and a severely diminished ability to empathize with black southerners. This continued acceptance of "the way things were" lingers today in a host of *forgotten alternatives* (Ritterhouse 2006), where white southerners do not imagine or yearn for a childhood full of genuine love and equality untainted by institutionalized white supremacy and black oppression.

THE SANCTITY OF THE WHITE HOME

In her memoir, white antiracist Lillian Smith (1961) poignantly described the blatant contradictions of her childhood in the early 20th Century Jim Crow South and their devastating effects on her. Jim Crow society, which touched everything, taught her white supremacy; family and religion taught her principles of human equality. Somehow the messages were both contradictory and complementary and co-existed harmoniously. In this setting, what was a white child to do? How difficult would it be to grow aware of the insidious contradiction before adulthood, before having one's own children and

subjecting them to the same unquestioned contradiction? Undoubtedly, a few individuals, like Smith, would eventually make the transition. But the vast majority of white southerners would fail to challenge the white supremacist logic, systems, or etiquette of Jim Crow and would eventually become the enforcers of Jim Crow.

In her book *Growing up Jim Crow: How White and Black Southern Children Learned Race*, historian Jennifer Ritterhouse (2006) corroborates Smith's (1961) impression that most white southerners simultaneously taught their children "decency" and white supremacy – and rarely ever antiracist principles. However, in her research of historical documents, Ritterhouse (2006) found virtually no whites admitting to having been raised in racist families. In a time of overt and all-encompassing white supremacy, where were all the racists if they were no one's parents? Ritterhouse (2006) explains this missing link by arguing that some white children did question the contradictions inherent in the southern Jim Crow curriculum they were being taught – good manners and white supremacy – but, by adolescence the rules of segregation had become so strict that white youth were effectively transitioning from being victims of white supremacy to aligning with their parents and becoming Jim Crow enforcers, preparing to socialize the next generation. This socialization to white supremacy was well entrenched by young adulthood, and very few whites retained much critique of the system after childhood.

Overall, in my interviews, the white home was portrayed as a site immune from racism and not in fact subject to contradictory messages. When respondents told stories about the family life of childhood, the overwhelming majority described the family's colorblindness, racial goodwill, and racial progressiveness. Parents were especially

revered; when racism was identified, it was usually personified in neighbors, acquaintances, or older relatives. Those who did share memories of their family members' racism almost always told counter-stories that lightened the racist association or rationalized their loved one's beliefs.

In fact, as I will demonstrate in this section, ordinary white southerners mostly do not critique the contradiction even today, especially as it relates to their warm childhood memories. When speaking of home, they tell of loving, respectful relationships with African American nannies, maids, cooks, yard men and farm workers, free from racial animosities or hatefulness. Jim Crow racial oppression and white supremacy are absent from their childhood memories and silent in their family histories. Segregation laws may have been demeaning to African American bus riders and restaurant patrons, they acknowledge, but only love and interracial respect crossed the threshold into white homes. Fair wages were paid by white employers to black domestic workers, and as for Jim Crow etiquette rules, such as the separate eating of meals or the use of formal personal addresses exclusively for whites, they were comfortable for both parties and mutually enforced.

Mama and Daddy Taught Equality and Love

Virtually all of the white southerners I interviewed said that they learned definite lessons about humanity from their parents: that we are all equal and deserve to be treated with respect. Hatefulness was simply not tolerated in this era of greater morality, obedience to elders, and warm neighborly relations. Respondents conceive of racism as

something hateful that would not have been promoted by their upstanding families. For

example, Arnold, 80s,[3] says his parents were very nice to black people:

> If my parents had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan or some other hate group
> or something, why, that'd be different. But they were *neither* like that. And they
> *never* talked about (6) black people, or did not use the n-word, or did not talk in a
> derogatory way. They treated black people with respect.[4]

All of my interviewees were born and raised for at least one decade in the

segregated South and experienced Jim Crow as children, teenagers, and young adults.

But the oldest interviewees lived more than four decades under Jim Crow and thus

attended college, served in the military, established households, held down careers, and

parented their own children before the dismantling of legal segregation. One of these

people who raised children during segregation was Harmony, 80s, who said, when it

came to race, she taught her children

> that we are *all* equal and we do not discriminate. There are things that we have to
> abide by, that the law has set down for us- you know, that we have no choice on
> some things, but our own personal ideas of things are what we make them. And
> we're supposed to always hope for better things and do the best we can and treat
> everybody alike.

Harmony taught her children to have *feelings* of equality but to be sure to follow all

laws, whether they were just or not. Ava, 60s, went so far as to argue that race was

simply never discussed or alluded to in her childhood home: "Black people or white

people never came up in our house. People were people! We just *never* thought of

people as having a color. (4) If anything was ever mentioned about color as we were

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[3] Respondents ages are given in decades: 60s, 70s, or 80s. For the sake of confidentiality, the few
respondents under 60 are labeled as 60s, and the few over 90 are labeled as 80s.
[4] Italics within interview excerpts are used to indicate a heightened emphasis in the tone of voice.
Numbers in parentheses indicate pauses in speech in the number of seconds; pauses of two seconds or less
have been omitted. Most all interview excerpts have been modified slightly for ease of reading, while
retaining as much as possible of the authentic speech, style, and meaning.

growing up, I don't remember it." According to Ava, her family dynamics and her

parents' teachings had no racial component whatsoever. Amazingly, some white

southerners, like Ava, claim not only to have been unexposed to hateful white racism,

but to have been unexposed to the concept of race itself.

Family lore of racial goodwill. Occasionally respondents recounted family

members' stories, sharing things they had not personally witnessed but which helped

form the family's racial memory. Usually these were stories that demonstrated the racial

kindness or progressiveness of a specific family member and exemplified the legacy of

goodness in the family line. For example, Burt, 80s, told an old family story of his great-

grandparents freeing enslaved laborers before the Civil War:

> My great-grandparents owned a few slaves before the Civil War, set 'em all free
> incidentally, I was told by my great grandmother, whom I can barely remember.
> She said, "When my husband came and told our three house slaves and four
> working 'round the grounds they were free, [they asked], 'What's that mean?'
> 'Well you can go wherever you want.' 'Well where should we go? This is our
> home, we were born on this place here.'" . . . Her husband had to tell these
> blacks, "From now on if your work for me, I've got to pay you money. I can't
> afford to pay you very much, so if you want to . . . leave Greensboro-" "This is
> our home, we got no place to go." And I remember my grandmother talking
> about that.

Similarly, Mack, 80s, offered an old family story about voluntarily freeing enslaved

people before the Civil War. He implied that, in the antebellum South, there were good

white people like his family and "unscrupulous" white people who worked to maintain

slavery:

> M: I know that my *great-great*-grandfather, had, I think it was 16 or 18 slaves,
> and he took them individually *north* . . . in groups of four and five in a wagon,
> and released them up there and gave them their emancipation papers, *long* before
> the Civil War. And the reason he did it, according to family tradition, he *knew*
> that if he released 'em *here* unscrupulous white people would capture them

again, tear up their papers, and put 'em back in slavery. So he took 'em north . . . where that wouldn't happen. Okay?

(I: Mm-hm.)

M: So even though my family served in the war between the states, I remember sitting on my *great*-granddaddy's lap and his tellin' me stories . . . I never heard him justify slavery. I never heard him justify segregation, or try to.

Mack presented his great-grandfather as a good man for choosing to free enslaved workers and as a decent man for not attempting to "justify" white racial oppression. By saying to me pointedly, "Okay?" Mack let me know that he expected me to grasp the significance of his story: his family was not racist and they did their very best to treat black people honorably, even if they lived comfortably during slavery and fought in the Civil War for southern slave states. This theme ran through Mack's entire interview. Carrying on the family tradition, he told many similar family stories of more recent incidents and today believes that his family for generations did everything they could to counteract the hurtfulness of anti-black racism.

Arnold, 80s, proudly told a story of his father's kindness to an illiterate black man, but unlike Mack, he portrayed the act of interracial goodwill as typical for the time period:

> This black man who was a customer of my [dad]. . . . he couldn't write his name. . . . My dad said, "No, John," or whatever his name was, "you ought to be able to write your name." And he said, "I'm gonna write it for you." And my dad wrote it *several* times on a piece of paper, in pretty good sized letters. And then he gave the guy a pencil and some paper and he said, "Now you go home and you copy that. And you just write." Next time he came . . . he wrote his name . . . He was very proud that he was able to write his name. Well, he probably never learned to write anything else- he was an elderly man. But I thought, Well now that's what people oughta do. We all oughta do stuff like that . . . NOWadays, people

wouldn't have time to be bothered, but that was a much slower time, and my dad took the pains to spend time with him.[5]

As I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, white southerners often conflate Jim Crow race relations with a more congenial, neighborly time in American history. Arnold presented this story as if white-to-black interracial kindnesses commonly occurred in a bygone era when people took the time to treat each other well.

Religion's complementary lessons. Lillian Smith (1961) observed that white southern religious teachings during the Jim Crow period were contradictory and reflected and fueled the contradictions taught to white children about black Americans:

> We were taught . . . to love God, to love our white skin, and to believe in the sanctity of both. We learned at the same time to fear God and to think of Him as having complete power over our lives. As we were beginning to feel this power and to see it reflected in our parents, we were learning also to fear a power that was in our body and to fear dark people who were everywhere around us, though the ones who came into our homes we were taught to love. (P. 83)

An astute white critic of southern racism, Smith (1961) was able to see that religious teachings of equality did not elevate the white South above racism. Rather, religion coexisted with and reinforced the anti-black racism that permeated all aspects of the society.

However, the southerners interviewed in this study view things very differently from Smith. They agree that church teachings complemented family teachings, but they disagree that white racism was present in these teachings. In the respondents' recollections, home lessons of goodwill and equality were reinforced by religious

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[5] The use of bracketed words in interview excerpts are my own insertions, either to clarify the intended meaning for the reader or to protect the speaker's identity. All-caps indicate a notable increase in voice volume.

doctrine. For example, Gracie, 80s, credits her progressive racial views to the influence

of her Protestant religion:

> Many people have asked me how did I grow up with the feeling about black
> people that I had, and I said, "Well, I went to a small church, and we were taught
> that we were all God's children, and there was no east and there was no west,"
> and I said that I was so thoroughly indoctrinated by the time I realized it was a
> difference that it stuck with me. (chuckles)[6]

In Gracie's view, the religious messages of equality were the first and most influential

messages she received, able to trump any other values or beliefs in the culture. None of

the people I interviewed mentioned the subtle racial messages they received by attending

all-white churches, or how they may have impacted their racial views or identity. There

was no clear feeling that they had been dealt contradictory lessons of equality and racial

separation.

White Protectionism: Saving the Family from Negative Judgment

According to Ritterhouse (2006), Jim Crow white southerners on the whole did

not conceive of their childhood families as embodying white racism. This was also

apparent in my interviews with aging white southerners, as they portrayed their families

and parental lessons as immune from racism and rooted in positivity. However, several

of my interviewees did speak of particular family members who held anti-black

prejudices or who opposed African Americans' civil rights efforts. Notably, respondents

always mentioned these cases voluntarily; I did not ask pointed questions about racism

in their families, just general queries concerning what they had learned about race as

children. But, when I would ask respondents to elaborate on their explanations of racist

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[6] Notes in parentheses within quotes capture significant nonverbal utterances, such as laughing, sighing, or bodily gestures.

family members, they backtracked or downplayed their original portrayals, rationalizing the racism or claiming it was not in fact racism at all. In these ways, the respondents, invested in *white protectionism*, reoriented their initial statements and rescued their family members from negative judgment.

Mack, 80s, explained the contradiction that white southerners found it easy to respect individual African Americans while still remaining racist towards blacks as a whole:

> I grew up knowing a *lot* of black people individually. And as I *look* at it in those days, white people had individual blacks that they were very close to, but they didn't like black people. Okay? In other words, they didn't like *black* people, but they liked the individual black people. Like, I liked [our housekeeper], I liked [the men who worked for our family].

But a few minutes later in the interview, Mack denied that this general dislike of African Americans applied to his own family:

> (I: So did your parents or grandparents talk about black people as a whole in a way that would make you think they didn't like them?)
>
> M: I was- I was- *No*, don't think so. I was never, *ever* allowed to use the- the n-word. Never. I've *never* heard my father use it, I never heard my grandfather use it.
>
> Wife: It didn't occur to you, I'm sure.
>
> M: It didn't *occur* to me to use it. It was just not *done*.
>
> Wife: They were known to you by way of names?
>
> M: Yeah.
>
> Wife: Instead of anything else, not as a race.

Here, Mack's wife interjected, supporting his claims of nonracism and helped him build

his argument that his friendly regard for individual black people would have superseded

any inclination to view African Americans negatively.

In the following exchange, Bernice, 80s, brought up her grandfather's anti-black

racism. I tried to get her to elaborate and think through the implications of having

equality-minded parents and a racist grandpa:

B: But my grandfather, he wadn't much for the blacks.

(I: Why do you say that?)

B: I don't know, I don't know. He- he- he never would- did voice his opinion much or anything. But he lived with us for a number of years.

(I: Mm-hm. So, how did you know that about him?)

B: Well, he- he'd, uh, like I said, never talked about it much but just (3) little things sometime I would hear or something, you know. . . .

(I: So, if your parents teach you to respect people no matter what their race is or what their color is, and you have an idea maybe that your grandfather who lives in the home with you doesn't like black people-)

B: (deep breath) Well it wadn't, uh, [that] he didn't like 'em,

(I: Okay.)

B: . . . Now, he would never mistreat anybody, but uh, I- I just had that feeling that he just was not too gung-ho with a lot of things that went on.

In the end Bernice downplayed her original statement that her grandfather "wadn't much

for the blacks" by saying she just had a "feeling" about his views and thought he merely

opposed some "things that went on," as opposed to black people themselves.

In the interview with Gertie, 70s, she described her mother as racially "liberal" in

contrast to her father, so I asked her to explain how she had come to realize the

difference between her liberal mother and her less liberal father. But in her response she

downplayed her father's racial views and emphasized what a nice person he was:

> He never voiced it, and he was a very kind sweet person, but I can remember one time, when Martin Luther King was becoming very popular, that my father said very sternly that he thought he was a rabble-rouser. And I argued it with him, you know vehemently, but I realized at that time that that's what he really felt. And, other than that I don't know that I had any other indication, because he was very sweet and kind.

Darla, 70s, was protective of her mother, using careful language to describe her racism,

calling it "concern" and "awareness":

> My mother was a dear, dear person, but mother was a little more aware and concerned with black people. I mean, you know, wasn't her fault, but she was raised in an entirely different *era* from us, and she probably had seen 'em in a different light. I'm sure they had black people workin' for them when she was growin' up. She was *never not nice* to black people, but in the way she talked sometimes I felt like maybe she didn't think they were as good as we were. . . . My daddy was entirely different. He was very, very friendly and nice and had great compassion. I never heard him say anything derogatory about blacks. And mother didn't really either, but she was just aware, you know, that there was a difference.

At the same time as Darla claimed that both her mother and father were kind, nonracist

people, she verified her mother's racism ("she didn't think they were as good as we

were"). Darla seemed to contradict herself a few minutes later in the interview, admitting

that her mother said "derogatory" things about African Americans, but gave only very

benign examples: "The only thing *my mother* ever said that was derogatory was that

she'd say somethin' about, 'Well, she's a black person,' or, 'They have to go into that

bathroom,' or something. I mean, she was just aware of what was goin' on, and she

would make a comment." If these innocuous examples are indicative of the kinds of

racial comments her mother would make, one wonders how Darla could perceive a

marked contrast between her mother's racial views and those of her father, which she deemed "entirely different" in a more progressive way.

Chuck's, 70s, explanation of his family's racism rationalized anti-black prejudice as a phenomenon that gradually lost its potency in each generation:

> (I: It's hard for *me* to understand having close personal relationships with some black people and then at the same time having separate places to sit in public. How do you make sense of that?)

> C: It bothered me as a kid. I just couldn't see why it was. . . . Well, I think the answer to your question is it's a generational thing. My grandmother had one very, very strong attitude about race relations. My dad came along, and you could see the influence of her attitude about that on him, but to a *much* less degree. And then when I came along, I really don't think I had any. I mean, I have to confess that there were jokes sometimes that would make you believe that my generation had the discriminatory attitudes, but we really didn't. It was pretty much gone. And then when our kids came along, it was pretty well gone.

Chuck protected his parents and grandparents from negative judgment in a more subtle way than most other respondents. He presented them as products of their time whose children avoided most of the ill effects of the older generation's racist views.

Gracie's father "just had that old stereotype," Bernice's grandfather "just was not too gung-ho with a lot of things that went on," Darla's mom was "a little more aware and concerned with black people," and Chuck's father "was influenced" by his mother's prejudice. In each of these examples, the respondents first called out their family members' racism, however mildly, and then excused that racism as a product of the time or of individual experiences, or they flat out backtracked and asserted the family member's nonracism.

DOMESTIC WORKERS: UNADULTERATED AFFECTIONS

Interracial closeness and intimacy were in some ways more common in the Jim Crow South than today, especially in the white household. While white Americans are increasingly segregated from people of color and especially black Americans in housing, schools, and social spaces today, during legal segregation the white home was a regular site of interracial interactions (Hale 1998; Kousha 1999; Litwack 1998; Ritterhouse 2006; Tucker 1988). African American domestic workers were employed in a majority of middle- to upper-income white homes and many working class white homes (Hale 1998), as well as well-to-do black homes (Litwack 1998). Often seen by whites in the stereotyped "mammy" image, female domestic workers were integrally involved in many matters of the household, from maintaining the home and grounds and completing daily chores to caring for children and acting as confidantes, and their presence itself provided a symbolic status marker for the white family (Hale 1998; Tucker 1988). "Racial identity within the culture of segregation depended in more ways than one upon the symbolic power of the mammy – being white meant having black help" (Hale 1998:102-3).

Despite the close physical proximity of worker and family member in the white home, the standard etiquette expected of black employees was stringent:

> They would sit at their own table, eat from separate plates, drink out of separate buckets and dippers, use their own toilets, and enter the house only by the back door. They would abide by the same rules of etiquette in how they addressed members of the family, and of course they would not expect such courtesies to be reciprocated. (Litwack 1998:169)

Black women were usually either called by their first names or generic names for their status, like "Mammy" or "Mamie," and black men were called by first names or emasculating terms, such as "Uncle" and "Boy." African Americans were in turn expected to call white adults by titles and last names, such as "Mister and Missus Johnson," and white children often got the privilege of a title, such as "Mister Tommy" and "Miss Ann" (Litwack 1998). These titles were ever-present reminders of blacks' status of inferiority. And, from black employees' perspectives, the domestic work itself could be dehumanizing and exhausting. As a mother who had worked in domestic service for thirty years said in 1912, "I am the slave, body and soul, of this family," and "I am not permitted to rest. It's 'Mammy, do this,' or 'Mammy, do that,' or 'Mammy, do the other,' from my mistress all the time. . . . I live a treadmill life" (as cited in Litwack 1998:169).

While the emotional attachments between workers and family members could be deep and mutually felt (Kousha 1999; Tucker 1998), white employers, unlike black employees, generally perceived the closeness as pure and genuine (Tucker 1988). White employers most often were not aware of this difference in perception, however. Alice Walker (1982) offers an illustrative scene in her novel *The Color Purple* that typifies this lack of white awareness. The main characters in the scene are the white employer, Eleanor Jane, and her black domestic laborer, Sofia, who has been forced to work without pay or vacation for many years as penance for (justifiably, we might note) punching Eleanor Jane's father, the town mayor. In the scene, Eleanor Jane is at Sofia's house and is trying to get Sofia to agree that her baby son, Reynolds Stanley, is "sweet."

Sofia's attempts to silently ignore the repeated requests fail, and finally she explains, "I don't feel nothing about him at all. I don't love him, I don't hate him." Eleanor Jane is flabbergasted by the seemingly callous remark and responds, "I just don't understand. All the other colored women I know love children. The way you feel is something unnatural." Sofia replies, "I love children. But all the colored women that say they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do. But if you so badly raise as to ast 'em, what you expect them to say?"

In this passage it is clear that Eleanor Jane, a white southern daughter of privilege, had developed an inaccurate impression of the regard that black women had for the white children under their care. And it was only in the home of a black woman – a particularly blunt woman at that – that she was confronted with the possible erroneousness of her impression. In the following sections are numerous interview excerpts that also illustrate the overall rosy perspectives of white people whose segregation-era families employed African Americans as domestics or farm laborers.

A Big Happy Family, Helping Each Other

The majority of the people I interviewed had grown up in households where African Americans were employed. During legal segregation basically all but the poorest of white families had enough excess money to enable them to hire black "help," even during the Great Depression. One would imagine that the household members must have had a wide variety of relationships with black employees, for a spectrum of personalities had to be negotiated within the home. However, of the forty-four people interviewed for this research, only one woman recalled having had a strained relationship with a

domestic laborer. (Gertie, 70s, said, "I didn't like 'Lenora,' and it didn't have anything

to do with her color, she just was sort of a grumpy lady and she didn't talk to me much

and I just didn't enjoy her company especially.")

Virtually all other respondents spoke kindly, warmly, or glowingly about the

black people who had come into their homes to perform work and fill additional roles for

the family. White families were portrayed as upholding a strict standard of respect

towards black laborers. For example, Bernice, 80s, mirthfully recalled an incident where

her brother got in big trouble for being mean to the housekeeper:

> Ol' "Corina," this big fat nigra woman over on the hill, she had about over a half-dozen children, and she would come and stay with mother and help her and do ironing and stuff like that that mother wadn't able to do at the time. . . . she was a very loving person, and my oldest brother (chuckles) one time . . . Corina, this big ol' fat black nigra woman she said, "Miss 'Jenny' I can't work for you anymore," and Mama said "Corina, why? Why can't you work?" . . . and she says, "I can't tell you." She said, "Well you gotta tell me, and got to have some reason." And she said, "'Bobby' . . . called me a big black nigger." And my mother just about (laughing) fell out in the floor! And boy you can bet he never said that again! (laughing) 'Cause my parents believed . . . in spanking. They didn't believe in (chuckles) half killing anybody but *you* got it.[7]

Bernice told this story with a jovial spirit and clearly holds this moment as a happy

childhood memory where her brother learned to obey the family's unyielding standard of

fairness. The standard seemed to include a rule that a black domestic worker should

never be called the hostile term "nigger" – at least to their faces – but could be freely

called the patronizing, and only slightly less potent, term "nigra."

Nearly all respondents who had ever lived in a home that employed black

domestic workers portrayed the interracial relationships therein as friendly and warm.

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[7] To protect identities, all names within interview excerpts are pseudonyms and are demarcated as such with quotation marks upon first usage.

Numerous respondents went even further and described their childhood domestic

workers as "like family." For example, Florence, 80s, illustrated her family's intimate

relationships with domestic workers:

> I lived out in the country, but we still had black servants, and they almost felt like they were a member of [our] family, and we felt that way too. And we would invite them to sit at the table with us if they wanted to – that was their choice, to either decide to or not to eat with us. I remember [soon] before my mother died, she wanted to go see "Marla," who was the black lady who had worked with us, and they had the *nicest visit*- it was like sisters talking, you know, they both knew that this was their last time together. But we loved Marla, and the color of her skin did not make any difference to us whatsoever. And then later when our children were little, we had a maid, and she even carried a picture of our son in her wallet. She said he was her baby.

Florence presented her parents' domestic Marla as a woman who was treated as an

equal, being invited to family meals and serving as a long-time confidante. And her own

maid was portrayed as equally invested in the family, toting around a photograph of "her

(white) baby."

Like Florence, other respondents said that their familial connection to black

domestic workers transcended the term of employment and lasted for many years. Sally,

70s, said the family's loving relationship with her mother's employee stood the test of

time:

> We had a woman who helped my mother. . . . To my children, she's just like another grandmother or another aunt. She has been to all of their college graduations. . . . So, she's just been a member of our family for all those years. . . . "Paulette" [and my mother] were *very* close. We would go [inside], and mother and Paulette would be at the table discussing life.

Sally presented her mother's relationship with her employee Paulette as peer-like ("*very*

close"). In fact, from her word choice, it is not clear that Paulette was an employee at all

("a woman who helped my mother"). Similarly, John, 70s, said that his parents'

treatment of live-in black domestics in the 1940s and '50s was as if they were members of the family:

> Quite often Mother and Dad would hire a young black male. We had a room that they lived in . . . rent-free. And they would help some with maybe yard work or serve meals . . . And they were not treated any different than Mother and Dad treated me. They were welcomed, they had the run of the house, they could do whatever they wanted.

John's portrayal of his family hiring live-in workers sounds as if it were a favor done for some lucky few. They were "welcomed" like guests into the home, paid no rent, "had the run of the house" just like their own son, and did a little work from time to time.

In the Jim Crow era, domestic workers were regularly referred to as "the help." I found in my interviews that the theme of "help" extended far beyond its use as an alternative term for "employee." As is evident in Bernice's, Sally's and John's descriptions above, black domestic workers were often described as people whose work consisted of "helping" the family, and Florence's domestic employee worked "with" the family. From the descriptions, one is given the impression that the labor was minimal, collaborative, and easy to complete. And, more significantly, the view of workers as helpers implies that the labor was done voluntarily, gladly, and with a giving spirit.

Several interviewees even claimed that *they* were the ones who helped and assisted their black employees. They gave a good job in a good home to black people, thereby "helping" them by providing employment and wages, their love and affection, and even special favors. As Bernice, 80s, explained, her family's excess clothing and food became gifts to employees:

> My mother *gave* them a whole lot of things- you know things that *we* would outgrow and so forth. 'Course time they passed down through our family there

wasn't much left of 'em. (laughing) But . . . somebody working in our home . . . she'd always send 'em food home 'cause we did have plenty food. We had big gardens and chickens and things.

And Arnold, 80s, said that his father helped a black employee to purchase a home, something the man would not have been able to do otherwise: "[My dad] encouraged this black man to buy a house back when [African Americans] didn't know how to do any of those things. He told him save his money so he'd have some money to pay down, and he walked him through doing all that."

Additionally, Patti, 80s, began her interview by explaining that white people of means felt a "closeness and responsibility" that drove them to look out for less fortunate black people who were connected to the family through a history of labor:

> It was our family, but it wasn't our family in any way, you know, except this feeling of closeness and *responsibility*. When my father died, his estate had a little money that was left to pay for taxes on a piece of property . . . where some of the descendents of my great-grandfather's slaves still lived. And our family paid the taxes every year so they didn't have to do it. And my father was a big family man . . . he would always go and see all the people every time. . . . But I was just raised with this thought that you helped those who are good to you, you return it.

In the end Patti indicated that the "help" given to a family by black laborers should be afforded kind-hearted "help" in return. In these examples of interracial "helping," there are muted or absent acknowledgments of the inherent power dynamic in the relationship of white employers and black employees. Instead, the white southern interviewees often explained these relationships in the style of "good neighbor," as if the two parties were on equal footing.

Blind to power. The language of "help," very common in the narratives of black domestic workers, clouds the core reality that the basis of the relationship between white

families and black employees was an exchange of labor for low wages, set within a

larger racist economic environment in which non-white southerners had extremely

limited opportunities to earn wages anywhere near the "white" rate, even when they had

advanced education and valuable skills. But respondents' portrayals of domestic workers

rarely indicated that there was a power dynamic inherent in the relationship between

employers (and their children) and employees. For example, Mack, 80s, told a story

about how black employees voluntarily protected his family from harm:

> M: [A] tornado . . . tore the roof off my granddaddy's house. . . . When we went
> *over* there . . . there was "Jonny Brand" on the front porch with a shotgun and a
> police dog. And his *son* was on the *back* porch with a shotgun and a police dog.
> And they assured us that my [family was] going to be *very* safe, and there was
> not gonna be anything *stolen* from that house, and [we] weren't gonna be
> bothered. . . .
>
> (I: Why did they do that?)
>
> M: Protection. . . . They were black people who worked for my granddaddy . . .
> and they were close, they were just- they were *family*, but they were black.

According to Mack, these black employees "were family" and therefore invested in

protecting the family assets from harm and ensuring the family's sense of security in the

world.

Similarly, Ellie, 70s, told of an employee of her family's church who took it upon

himself to see that her siblings stayed out of trouble:

> He and our family, because he was there at the church, were just every close. . . .
> He and my dad were very good friends. And they really respected one another
> tremendously. And [the man] always said that he spent his time looking after my
> two brothers. (chuckles) Because [people] would talk about [them being] bad
> boys. And he would always say, "They're not gonna be little bad boys 'cause
> I'm gonna look after them." He just was part of who we were, you know what I
> mean? He was just a wonderful person.

There is a distinct class element to some of the respondent's experiences with black

Americans. Privileged white families could come to expect to feel "protected" and

"looked out for" by black employees and acquaintances. My respondents tended to read

this treatment as kind-hearted favors done by good black people for good white people,

not acknowledging the social class and racial power differentials that incentivized

sometimes ingratiating behaviors on the part of black southerners (Litwack 1998).

When Arnold, 80s, talked about a well-liked black male family employee, he did

hint at the power dynamics of the employer-employee relationship:

> I became very fond of a black man that worked for my dad. . . . I thought [it] was
> a really high day that I'd get to spend the day with him, and I'd ride around in the
> truck with him as he made his deliveries and pickups. . . . He was wonderful to
> me. He treated [me] with- 'course I was his employer's son, I know that, but I
> mean, he was nice and, you know, he was a good man.

Arnold gave a nod to his status as the boss's son, but maintained his assertion that the

employee's kindness toward him was genuine and not driven by the employee-employer

power differential.

Blind to blacks' economic disenfranchisement. In an essay entitled "The Servant in

the House," W. E. B. Du Bois ([1920] 2003) described the demeaning nature of African

Americans' segregation-era domestic labor:

> 700,000 washerwomen and household drudges,—ignorant, unskilled offal of a
> millionaire industrial system. Their pay was the lowest and their hours the longest
> of all workers. The personal degradation of their work is so great that any white
> man of decency would rather cut his daughter's throat than let her grow up to such
> a destiny. (P. 131)

Here, Du Bois ([1920] 2003) implies that whites in the early 1900s would have dreaded

the thought of their own children working as domestics and deemed the labor lowly and

beneath their status. However, as shown by my interviews, the white perspective saw it as acceptable to employ black people to do household labor and reasonable even to expect genuine, loving interracial relationships to develop.

Lacking in the interviewees' portrayals of domestic work was a consideration that the white home was a site of significant economic oppression, an integral beam in the structure of a white racist society. In the following excerpt, Sally, 70s, attempted to make sure I understood correctly that her family's black domestic worker was not given work thought to be "beneath" the family doing; they had more respect for their employees than that:

> We did grow up to be very respectful. Paulette . . . I never did see her like on her knees scrubbing the floor. Do you know what I'm trying to say? It was not demeaning work. Although my mother would do it, and I scrubbed the floors. (laughs) But I'm saying there was nothing that Paulette did that we didn't do. Do you know what I'm trying to say, within the house?

Gertie's, 70s, mother told her that the family, though quite poor, paid the maid double the going rate: "I asked her one time later, I said, 'We didn't have any money, how did you afford a maid?' She came once a week. And she said, 'Well, that's true, but she had even less than we did.' And she said, 'Most people paid 25 cents a day, and I paid her 50 cents a day.'" A married couple had a long-term domestic employee who was college educated. They claimed that this black woman had her pick of good jobs in Greensboro, but that she was not ambitious and preferred the conveniences of domestic labor:

> Wife: "Wanda" went to college- oh, her mother was a domestic servant, [but] Wanda could have done anything.

> Husband: Yeah, she could have gotten a job in any office downtown.

> (I: Mm-hm. Why didn't she?)

> Husband: I've asked her that question many times, I said, "Wanda, you know you could get a job anywhere you want to." And she said, "I'd rather not." And she was very, very close to our kids.

> Wife: And I think she kinda liked the hours - she could be home by 2 o'clock . . . and then she had a lot of time for church. So I think that's really what it was. And again, she was of that generation where (3) she did not take advantage - she just didn't assert herself.

These examples show that whites viewed domestic labor as non-strenuous and the compensation paid to black employees in both wages and love from the family to be quite generous. African Americans willingly chose to work in white homes and gladly accepted the pay, perks, and friendship.

And, according to a few of my respondents, working class white families, who often employed poor or working class black women in the home (Kousha 1999), would sometimes rely on their employees to bail them out of economic difficulties. For example, Verna, 80s, received free household labor when her childhood housekeeper come work for her once a week when she was a young mother and had a low income:

> She was with Mother before I was born. And then when my mother was very ill . . . [she] would come and visit her . . . she promised Mother that she would take care of me. . . . She would come with me when I had my children. And I could not afford to pay her 'cause we didn't have any money.

Delilah, 70s, also did not always pay for the services provided by African American domestic workers:

> When they came other times during the week . . . they didn't charge, they just came. We couldn't afford *that*. (3) And if they saw we were out of [a grocery item] or something, they'd get somebody to stop by the store and get it and bring it the next day. So you could see how family-oriented it was.

Delilah's family frequently received free labor and groceries from domestic workers,

and she viewed this as evidence of family-like interracial relationships, not of economic

exploitation.

Sharon, 60s, claimed that African Americans were glad to come work as

agricultural day laborers for her family because they received pay and good treatment:

> My grandparents were still making a living on the farm. . . . many times they'd
> have blacks to come and work, and (4) you know my family was very good to the
> blacks. And they were thankful for the work, and they paid them and everything.
> But it was like, when there was mealtime . . . the blacks would go their way and
> eat, and the whites would stay together and eat. . . . it was just *understood*, but I
> noticed it as a kid, that like everybody understood their place, and it's so, so
> cliché, but it was the society at that time.

Sharon's keen observations of social segregation indicate that Jim Crow was hegemonic

and relied daily on the acquiescence of all southerners, white and black. However, her

insight is limited by her judgment that black day laborers were "thankful" for the jobs

(How could the bosses' young granddaughter accurately assess this?) and her claim that

her family was "very good" to workers (What does "very good" employer treatment

mean within a system of economic and social degradation?).

Arlene, 70s, was one of the very few respondents to acknowledge the low pay

received by African Americans when working for white families, and yet she mentioned

this as she asserted that black domestic workers were treated well: "We also had

household help who were African American, and they too were there for years and were

treated well. And, I mean, I think the pay was *awful,* but it was . . . what was done at that

time." Even those respondents who demonstrated some level of critical reflection when

it came to Jim Crow etiquette or whites' employment of black Americans by and large

did not extend a critique to their own families. They did not make a connection between systemic anti-black discrimination and any actions taken by their families. Blacks received low pay, but their families paid fair wages and treated their employees with respect. The maid ate her meals in a separate room and was always called by her first name, but she was just more comfortable that way.

Blind to black perspectives. Largely lacking also in the interviewees' portrayals of black domestic laborers was a consideration that their employees' perspectives may have been quite different from their own. It was clear to black domestic laborers that white supremacy shaped the terms of their employment and their treatment on the job (Chafe et al. 2003). Arnold, 80s, however, indicated that the black employee perspective varied from the white employer, but the example he gave indicated that whites like his own family wanted *more* equality in their interracial interactions than blacks did:

> You have to think about it from the black standpoint. We had a black woman who worked for us. . . . She helped raise our children, and she had never married, and she thought they were her children. I mean, she considered them as her children. (chuckles) . . . but she would *not* sit down at our table and eat with us. (3) So, I don't know why. We begged her, and our children just never understood why she wouldn't, but they began to realize that was, like I said, the way things are. She would sit on a stool at the kitchen counter; she would not sit at our table. (3) She would not ride up front when we would take her home. . . . That's just the way she was raised, I reckon.

Here, Arnold equalized the perspectives of Jim Crow white and black southerners; they both were uncomfortable breaking with segregation traditions. He portrayed the obedience to Jim Crow conventions as a matter of people, regardless of race, being set in their ways. And, in this example, blacks held to Jim Crow etiquette even more so than whites like his family who desired to have more peer-like interracial interactions.

According to historian Leon Litwack (1998), in the post-slavery South, the ever-present tension between white employers and African American was most apparent in domestic labor, because "those tensions reached deep into the family circle and involved the closest contact between blacks and whites" (p. 167). However, virtually none of my respondents recalled there being any significant tension in their relationships with domestic workers, and only a few recalled having witnessed a white family member being less than cordial to a black worker in the home. Arlene, 70s, was one of those few interviewees to allude to any strain between the white family and black workers. She stuttered out a description of the treatment given to her family's domestics, treatment that was standard and therefore not great: "'Barbra' worked as a housemaid, and granted, uhh, she was, um (3) um, I ca- cannot in good conscience say treated well, but I mean, she certainly was- was not, uh, treated badly. But she was treated like a servant. And, uh, as was 'Vernon.'"

For Jim Crow African Americans there was a "powerful stream of popular knowledge used to teach young people to be constantly on guard lest they fall prey to the capricious actions of white folks" (Chafe et al. 2003:56). Black Americans most often entered the employ of white homes with advice from other African Americans, for example, on the importance of retaining one's independence by never borrowing money from the family, admonitions to remember that, to whites, blacks are interchangeable and replaceable despite a family's expressions of affection, and, for young women, preparation for the violating sexual advances of white men (Litwack 1998; Tucker 1988). These cautions were survival skills to endure an emotionally, psychologically,

and physically difficult situation of not merely working for, but being subjected to the private whims of, the white southern employer (Litwack 1998). As sociologist Ruth Thompson-Miller's interviews with elderly African American southerners demonstrate, many black Americans today carry the burden of segregation-era traumas through a "segregation stress syndrome" (Thomspon-Miller and Feagin 2008).

Many of the black female domestic workers interviewed by anthropologist Susan Tucker (1988) claimed to have enjoyed their work and to have genuinely cared for the family, especially the young children they helped to nurse and raise, and also when they felt they were treated better than some other black domestics. These positive perspectives were mirrored in my interviews with white southerners. But, Tucker's (1988) African American narratives include added layers of insight on the oppressiveness of Jim Crow domestic labor that are not mutually shared by white southerners. For example, one black woman, Willie Mae Fitzgerald, "saw the whites for whom she worked as stingy people who did not see their own material wealth, particularly relative to her own poverty. They saw her every day, but they never compared her life with theirs" (p. 152). In Willie Mae Fitzgerald's words:

> The last place I worked at twenty-odd years—and they didn't raise my salary. Oh yeah, I thought they was crazy about me. I did. They loved my cooking. They were crazy about my dinners. . . . The salaries had went up then. Most people was getting eight, ten, twelve dollars and all. So one day I say to her . . . "I been working here for a long time." I say, "I'd like a raise." . . . She said, "I've got to talk it over with my husband." And they ain't talked it over now! . . . I stayed with her until I was sixty-seven. She never did raise me! . . . I say them white folks worked the hell out of me, and that's why I'm all sick and crippled up now. . . . My children was small then, and I knew I had to take care of them. I thought of my little children. . . . I stayed. I was quiet. That's how I worked. (Quoted in Tucker 1988:153-4)

This woman's long-lasting bitterness over her low salary, physical degradation, and financial inability to quit the job is palpable.

From my interviews it is impossible to know how my respondents' black employees actually felt about their jobs and employers and how much resentment and bitterness tinges their memories in those white homes. But, as has been made clear by numerous narratives of black domestic employees, it is highly probable that many of them retained criticism of the family and their employment situation, but they had to become adept at hiding their true feelings from whites (Litwack 1998; Tucker 1988).

The white southerners' narratives demonstrate, then, not a flaw of listening to their domestics' points of view, for it was unlikely that employees felt free voicing complaints. Rather, the white southerners' narratives demonstrate a lack of genuine empathy for their beloved house workers, for whites did know, for example, that the wages they paid were very low and that workers often had no choice but to prioritize the needs of the white family over their own family. Not seeing domestic work as rife with sacrifice and hardship is one part of a more generalized blindness to standard racist employment practices that made domestic work a last resort (i.e., an undesirable job) for many black Americans who faced systemic discrimination in jobs. That a great many found some joy in their jobs inside white homes demonstrates resilience and does not necessarily reflect the goodness of the white family who lived there.

NO CONTRADICTION: SYSTEMIC RACISM AND "GOOD" WHITE PEOPLE

In spiritual terms, Lillian Smith (1961) explained the way in which she was socialized by both family and church under segregation to uphold Jim Crow racism and still maintain a sense of herself as a moral, just, and loving person:

> The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their "place." The father who rebuked me for an air of superiority towards schoolmates . . . and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that "all men are brothers," trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male. They who so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my "soul," taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from southern tradition.

My respondents appeared to have trouble reconciling two seemingly contradictory notions: Their families (and they themselves) condoned and helped to enforce the "southern tradition" of exploiting African Americans, and their families were comprised of good, loving people. Because they conceive of racism and anti-black oppression as meanness and hatred, they do not see the need to claim responsibility for the part they and their families played in enforcing Jim Crow racism. My white southern respondents had a difficult time seeing loved ones as both good and racist people. They denied their own family members complexity by portraying them myopically. According to Feagin (2006) the historical reality is that:

> White adults maintained a thoroughly racist system with its harsh reality of separate and alienated social worlds and an elaborate racist etiquette for all. Whites who enforced this devastating and comprehensive segregation were usually "good" or "warm" people, especially to their kin and friends. Racial oppression was, and still is, executed and imposed by otherwise normal human beings. (P. 173)

As Feagin (2006) makes clear, the normality of racism is the critical insight needed to untangle the seeming contradiction of how good people could have been agents of oppression. To fail to make sense of the seeming contradiction are misrecognizing what racism actually was and how it operated. Today, as in the past, racism is not something that happens every now and then as aberrations on the landscape of daily life. It manifests in myriad ways, seen and unseen, not just in the most explosive events. I has long been embedded in the structures, laws, and practices of the society and ingrained in the minds of the American people through white supremacist ideology and the white racial frame (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2010b).

Sharon, 60s, one of the few respondents to speak openly of her parents' racism, comprehended the complexity of love and prejudice well, as she talked about her mother:

> I'm gonna be very, very honest. (4) My parents and grandparents, they thought blacks had a place, (4) and they just didn't think you crossed that line. They thought that the blacks had a purpose, to work, and that was their place. And you know, like I said, they were *good* to them (3) but it stopped at a particular point. But I do want to share one thing from my mother, and she told me this just a few years ago . . . for a while they had a black man that lived on their farm. . . . If my grandparents had to go away . . . they left "Lester" in charge of taking care of my mother and her sister. And my mother was telling me that they would get home on the school bus and that Lester would meet them. And she started *crying*- and of course Lester was black. . . . [My mother] was a very strong, dominating, woman, I mean was not weak *at all*. But she started crying [at] just the thought of Lester, she had such fond memories. And she said, "He was *so good to us*" and . . . "for a black man, he would've never harmed us," and she just *loved* him.

Sharon portrayed her mother and others like her with compassion and understanding. Although no white southerners could have been exempt or immune from Jim Crow anti- black racism, the love that many white southerners felt for some individual African

Americans was indeed genuine. And yet, inasmuch as they condoned and the racial

practices of the era, their participation in systemic racism was also genuine. There need

not be any major contradiction.

People today find it difficult to believe that white southerners had unadulterated,

innocent love in their hearts for their neighbors and that there were many situations

where this love extended naturally to black individuals. Younger, post-civil rights

Americans cannot fully understand their reality in the same ways, and yet elderly white

southerners struggle unsuccessfully to find clarifying words in today's language and

meaning. Without an adequate explanation that works with contemporary logic, they

resort to telling stories that illustrate the racial goodwill shown by their families. For

example, when I asked Sally, 70s, to think about how her parents would have explained

segregated public facilities to her as a child, she responded at length, but did not answer

the question as asked. Instead, she told story after story of her family's generosity

toward, and good relationships with, black southerners:

> (I: How do you think your parents would have explained segregation? So those
> sort of little rules, those regulations? If you had asked about it. . . . back of the
> bus stuff, and those sort of separations?)
>
> S: Uh (sighs) that's a hard question for me to answer, because they were
> southerners, but they did have a lot of compassion. So it would be hard to put
> words into that, because I think that is the difference between the North and the
> South too is that black and white people live together in a way that is hard to
> understand. [My husband's] family . . . had a black man that lived in their house.
> He was the son of a slave, and he was mentally challenged. . . . he *lived* with
> them, had a room and lived with them. And a lot of people in the North don't
> understand those kinds of relationships, but it happened. . . . [My grandfather]
> would make Brunswick stew in a big black kettle over a fire in the backyard, and
> there was a man that he knew really well who would come- a black man- and I
> can *still* see them out in the backyard, you know, smokin' pipes in the chair. . . .
> And they cooked it all night long. . . . And granddaddy gave MONEY for a black

group to build a church not too really far from where they lived. . . . I mean, it was an *intimate* relationship. It's hard to explain to somebody that didn't grow up in that kind of, you know. . . . [My grandfather] had a generator. . . . Well, if somebody got in *trouble* with their pump, they'd come up to granddaddy's to get water or whatever. There was a *community* sense then. And of course, I was too young to be involved with the negative senses, and I'm sure there were . . . negative situations, but that happened between white and white. (laughs) I will tell you the worst thing you could be in North Carolina was white trash. That was the *worst* thing.

Respondents often shared these types of "racial goodwill" stories to attempt to explain the intricacies of Jim Crow life and how the legal segregation period actually rarely dictated physical separation and was not driven day-to-day by overt, venomous hatred. Indeed, this is an important point to grasp if we are to understand how Jim Crow was lived. In our historical renderings, there has been limited focus on Jim Crow southerners' private lives and the substantial permeability of racial "lines" that they often experienced (Ritterhouse 2006). It may be that respondents' insistence on congenial, healthy, even loving, family-esque relations between white southerners and African Americans are in part a resistant response to the portrayal of Jim Crow by Civil Rights Movement history as a matter of problematic segregated public facilities. They resent the broad-brush treatment of racial life under legal segregation as "separate and unequal," "cruel," or as a product of white meanness.

However, these stories of easygoing interracial relations, when devoid of an acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of systemic racism, are self-serving, working to establish the speaker and the whole family as "good," nonracist people. Indeed, in the above excerpt, Sally, ended her litany of family racial goodwill stories by shifting topics away from black-white relations, as she asserted that white classism was more potent

than white racism, a stance that severely trivializes the systemic oppression experienced by Jim Crow African Americans.

In the white southern mind, white supremacy and Jim Crow were two separate things. White supremacy was overt meanness (bad), and Jim Crow was normal, "the way it was" (neutral, or even good). White southerners do not conceive of the informal social aspects of Jim Crow as being part of a system of oppression. Looking back, they can acknowledge that facilities and services for black southerners were substandard – schools, buses, restaurants, hospitals, and so forth. But when it comes to the social relations between whites and blacks, respondents typically remembered their interactions as kind, personal, and mutually satisfying – therefore, not part of, or even touched by, any of the "bad stuff." They do not link the two concepts of white supremacy and Jim Crow etiquette and do not view race relations in the segregation era negatively overall. To this day they preserve the private sphere – their homes – as a nice, happy space where love and goodness prevailed.

So when it comes to the role that white southerners played in enforcing segregation or oppressing their neighbors of color, my respondents portrayed themselves as utterly uninvolved. By and large they argued that they successfully, and effortlessly, were able to sidestep feelings, beliefs, or actions of white supremacy. They usually cited a reason for their enlightenment – their parents were racially tolerant, their churches taught human equality, or it just made sense logically (i.e., "people were people"). They acknowledged the existence of racist sentiment, but typically they individualized it – some people were racist, and society was just normal. What white southerners largely do

not note is that the glue that held whites' logic together under legal segregation was white supremacist ideology (Kennedy [1959] 1990) and that they were deeply emotionally invested in the segregationist status quo (Smith 2006). That elderly white southerners have lived a lifetime under white supremacy is a reality the people I interviewed have not yet confronted with eyes wide open. It is an experience they have been having so long that it may be invisible to them. By and large it has not been incorporated into their memories of childhood and family or their identity as individuals.

THE IMPACT OF JIM CROW ON WHITE CHILDREN

From her own experience, Lillian Smith (1961) claimed that Jim Crow's white children felt deeply the burden of segregation, even if they could not grasp it fully or clearly:

> Even its children knew that the South was in trouble. No one had to tell them; no words said aloud. To them, it was a vague thing weaving in and out of their play, like a ghost haunting an old graveyard or whispers after the household sleeps. . . . The children knew this "trouble" was bigger than they, bigger than their family, bigger than their church, so big that people turned away from its size. . . . They had measured its giant strength and felt weak when they remembered. (P. 25)

In contrast to Smith (1961), most of my respondents claimed they felt no particular burden in childhood through a racial awareness. Indeed, many claimed to have lived a lifetime without a white racial identity and without really noticing racial oppression directed towards African Americans. When I asked interviewees to tell a story that illustrated the experience of being a white kid in the South, most displayed difficulty responding to or even comprehending the question. (For each respondent, most or all of childhood was during legal segregation; the oldest respondents were born in the 1910s, and the youngest in the 1940s and 1950s.) Given the hegemonic nature of Jim Crow

white supremacy, their claims of having had a limited or nonexistent racial awareness as children and teenagers are arguably authentic. However, that so many white southerners today cannot conjure up a recollection regarding the whiteness of their youth is indicative of a contemporary, and perhaps persistent, deficiency in racial consciousness. Many seemed to have extensively pondered racial issues, especially within institutional setting like politics and media, but most appeared to have done little deep reflection on the effects of their own whiteness on the trajectory of their lives or on their minds and hearts.

In this section I argue that, contrary to my respondents' most prominent claims, Jim Crow white southerners *were* affected deeply, and perhaps even traumatized, by white supremacy and segregation's expectations. I share here their reflections on their level of racial awareness in childhood and provide evidence that white children noticed and sometimes questioned adults about the Jim Crow racial arrangement and etiquette.

Undeveloped Racial Identity: No "White Kid" Memories

One of the first questions I asked in the interviews was to recall an early memory of "being a white kid in the South." Nearly all respondents had great difficulty with this question. They could talk for hours about their youth, but they seemed to have never considered their experiences as significantly affected by whiteness. Arlene, 70s, gave a typical response to my solicitation of a memory of growing up white in the South:

> I probably at that point in my life didn't realize that there was any other kind of life out there. Our lives were fairly insular, that we did what we did in our families and in our church and that was *life* and there wadn't a *whole* lot of consideration given to what other kind of lives might have existed at the time. It just wasn't a factor. . . . I don't have a precise *memory* of anything relating to

being white, because that was the only life I knew. Didn't have any other concept to relate to.

Many respondents claimed, like Arlene, that, because of segregation their lives were extremely "white" and therefore they had no awareness of being white. Their racial consciousness was stimulated only by interactions with people of color. For them it seems race, especially in their southern youth, was defined entirely in terms of blackness. And, even those who had long-term relationships with African Americans, usually through employment of domestics, did not have a sense that they had learned anything in particular about whiteness through those relationships.

In another example, Clarence, 60s, resisted the notion that his childhood was racialized by whiteness:

(I: How do you think being white affected your childhood in Greensboro?)

C: It had no effect. (6)

(I: Do you think your life would have been different had you been black in Greensboro?)

C: (3) Oh, I'm sure. 'Cause there was a whole different section of town and (3) way of life that I really didn't have any idea about it.

Clarence argued that his childhood was not marked by whiteness, even though he acknowledged that his life would have been very different as a black person.

As was clear earlier in this chapter, respondents could talk at length about black people they had seen and known and infer how those relationships had affected their views of race and humanity and their own identity. However, they could not see race through the lens of whiteness. This inability to "see" whiteness is very common today among white youth who have been steeped in the public discourse of colorblindness and

who have only personally experienced the post-civil-rights era (Lewis 2004). But, unlike today's youth, my respondents lived during periods of overtly racist public discourse, white collective actions (such as opposition to school desegregation and the integration of public facilities in the 1960s and '70s), and experienced the dismantling of the inherent and blatant white privileges of legal segregation. Nevertheless, their contemporary narratives do not appear to incorporate a critical lens on whiteness.

American race analyst Tim Wise (2008) has written that whites depend on people of color to give their racial identity meaning: whiteness has no inherent meaning until it is contrasted with non-whiteness. Paradoxically, this implies that the more white a person's experiences, the less white, or racialized, a person's experience. This logic may drive my respondents' assertions that growing up white in the segregated South rendered an experience not replete with exposures to one's own whiteness. Despite the reality that, as Hale (1998) points out, "the white home became a central site for the production and reproduction of racial identity precisely because it remained a space of integration within an increasingly segregated world" (p. 94), my respondents seemed to lack an awareness that they have ever developed a white identity, or a white southern identity.

Caught in Their Parents' World

Undoubtedly, white children during segregation were treated as racially superior and would have had many fewer incentives to dispute the white supremacist society than their black peers. But, as Lillian Smith (1961) eloquently stated, "the childhood of southerners, white and colored, has been lived on trembling earth; let us accept this, and the hurt that comes from a realization of what it means to the human spirit, and meant to

me" (p. 22). From Smith's (1961) psycho-spiritual perspective, white southern children are viewed as deeply impressionable beings whose capacity for empathy, i.e., full humanity, was severely restricted by white supremacist ideology and practice.

Hope's, 70s, statements indicated that children were confused by Jim Crow. She saw a contradiction between the equality her parents role modeled for her and segregated public facilities:

> H: That's why I never been prejudiced, you know, Mom and Daddy would bring- they'd come right in and eat at our table . . . That's the way my mom and dad was.
>
> (I: So when you would go downtown, was there more of a separation?)
>
> H: Yeah, uh-huh.
>
> (I: What was that like?)
>
> H: Well it felt eerie, sort of eerie. Why would people want to be like that? And I just don't understand a lot of it but maybe one of these days we all will you know. (chuckles) I hope so.
>
> (I: So it was unclear why it was like that?)
>
> H: . . . . Well my mom and daddy said you just stay clean, keep your nose clean and you'll be alright. They said don't mess around with people that hates other people . . . no matter what color their skin.

For the most part my respondents did not indicate that they had experienced any soul crushing effects of racism. But, a few did have introspective moments where they remembered the difficulties of confronting the reality of racial inequality and mentioned their lack of ability to challenge either the things they saw happening around them or the taken-for-grantedness of racial oppression in the adult world. Sharon, 60s, recalled a

shocking moment in her childhood when she learned of the reality of racial inequality

upon realizing that an African American domestic worker was illiterate:

> I remember being at [a neighbor's] house and [the] daughter told me that the maid . . . couldn't read. . . . I said, "*No!* That can't be!" I could *not* believe that an adult could not read- it didn't matter to me what color they were. . . . So we got this little plot- we got a book . . . and we were gonna ask her a word . . . We went in the kitchen- I think she was washing dishes or something- and so I asked her what was the word, acting like we were reading a book and didn't know the word. And I could tell she was very embarrassed and I could just tell that . . . she did not know how to read. And it bothered me tremendously. I just couldn't believe that an adult couldn't read. It was (3) sort of a wake up to the fact that things weren't equal and I didn't know it. I didn't know it could possibly *be,* but it was.

A very thoughtful respondent, Sharon remembered vividly being confronted with the

fact that the world was not as she had been led to believe, that education was a right

extended equally to all people. Sharon also recalled having had more progressive racial

views than her parents, but she did not feel free to challenge them:

> The way I was raised you just didn't (5) choose conflict with your parents. It was just better to keep your mouth shut and do your thing more or less. But you know, if I had been very vocal, they would have listened. But it wouldn't have changed anything. (4) We just sort of went along with the way they thought. But then, when my sister and I got out on our own, we could think the way we wanted to.

Sharon remembered that she and her sister felt differently from her parents, but she did

not choose to confront their entrenched views. Her statements reveal that there was very

little space for caring, curious white children to challenge white elders or raise serious

concerns about the status quo.

Similarly, Arlene, 70s, felt very uncomfortable with her parents' negative

feelings towards non-Protestant whites, and she was especially distraught because a dear

childhood friend was Jewish. Nevertheless, young Arlene did not feel free to challenge

her parents:

> A: My next-door neighbors were a Jewish family, and their daughter was one of my closest friends . . . but the point was made on a number of occasions that they were not like us. And it always made me mad, and I never could understand it. . . . it made me uncomfortable then, and it makes me uncomfortable now.

> (I: Was this an issue that you could challenge your parents on? Or would you even have done that?)

> A: Um. No, I didn't challenge my parents (laughing) on anything! I probably was very much known as miss goody two-shoes! . . . I had other good friends who were Catholics, but my [sibling] married a Catholic. My parents did not go to the wedding. There was just an aversion there that was something that they were very upset about. As far as black-white relationships, that wadn't even in the mix at that time 'cause it just didn't exist, whereas these other situations did and were not handled in what I consider a very (sighs) good way.

Arlene's continued sense of sadness over her parents' prejudices is palpable. To this day

Arlene seemed still upset over, and yet resigned to accepting, her parents' views. After

all, that was "just the way it was."

Without equating their trauma with African Americans' in any way, I argue that

white children were victims of Jim Crow, of the racial system set up by their forebears

and condoned by their parents and grandparents. And, yet, as these children aged and

were socialized in the ways of their society, they became, just as their white ancestors

before them, the enforcers of racial oppression (Ritterhouse 2006). The legacy of their

collective trauma is evident in small bits of lingering sadness and a lot of racial apathy.

There are a few emotional but as yet inchoate narratives, such as those of Sharon and

Arlene above, that demonstrate a potential for an enlightened critique of Jim Crow

society.

However, overall, in my interviews, there was a marked lack of emotional connection to black southerners' experiences or to their own losses under Jim Crow. For example, Nora, 80s, had a close playmate who was African American, and Nora threw a fit when she learned that she would not be able to attend school with her friend:

> When I was about ready to start school, my mother heard us outside saying how we were gonna save seats for each other, and when I got in the house my mother said, "Y'all won't be ridin' the same school bus." And my daddy said that I just slung a *fit* – why *couldn't* we ride the same school bus! But it was because we couldn't go to the same school . . . And for the life of me, I could not understand that. Because we went to the same grocery stores [and] so I felt like we were friends and neighbors. They didn't bother me.

As a youngster Nora was apparently deeply upset to learn that Jim Crow had predetermined a break in any friendship with black children. But she used the memory today to illustrate that blacks "didn't bother" her. Unlike her childhood self, elderly Nora has no feeling that she and her friend had been victimized by a racist society. In fact, from her description – "my daddy said that I just slung a *fit*" – it appears that she does not actually remember being upset herself.

Undoubtedly there were thousands if not millions of similar incidents that occurred throughout the segregation era, where both white and black children were traumatized by Jim Crow expectations. And, undoubtedly, most of these incidents have been forgotten or repressed, perhaps especially among whites who were taught only the white racial frame and never provided an alternative anti-Jim Crow racial frame that could have helped foster a critical view of segregation.

Diminished Empathy and Social Alexithymia

> We learned the dance that cripples the human spirit, step by step by step, we who were white and we who were colored, day by day, hour by hour, year by year

until the movements were reflexes and made for the rest of our life without thinking. Alas, for many white children, they were movements made for the rest of their lives without feeling. (Smith 1961:96)

Few respondents seemed to have a heightened awareness of Jim Crow racial inequality or a feeling of empathy for what their black neighbors went through, even though, as was apparent in previous sections, many claimed to have loved and respected individual African Americans deeply and for many years. In fact, not one of the people interviewed indicated that they had gained enlightenment to the oppression that black southerners experienced *through* their interactions with a black loved one. This narrative absence helps demonstrate the social distance inherent in those loving interracial relationships. African American employees could not and did not bare all to white family members, especially when it came to their experiences with white racism (Tucker 1988).

During segregation there was zero expectation for whites to understand and empathize with the black experience. It is likely that white children had at least a few moments of empathetic curiosity about the plight of African Americans, most of these moments having been long since forgotten notwithstanding. White children were certainly not encouraged by adults to ruminate on those particular thoughts and feelings. Bernice, 80s, said she wondered about class differences between whites and blacks, but she did not have empathetic feelings, only some sympathy, for poor children:

(I: I know you said you thought about, maybe "I have a nice dress, why doesn't this little black girl have a nice dress?" Did you ever think about what if you were that black girl, like what it would have been like growing up black?)

B: (sigh) I don't think I ever did. I used to feel *sorry* for 'em a lot of times, you know. But no, I never put myself in their place *really*.

Also, Mack, 80s, claimed to have understood the inherent inequality of Jim Crow by

adolescence, but admitted that his empathy for African Americans was lacking. He

laughingly attributed this to being male:

> [Jim Crow] made no sense to me when I was 12, 13, 14, 15 years old. I didn't cry out about it. I didn't join any marches or whatever. But I had never been one to join a union or a pressure group or whatever. I was an independent thinker, an independent person in my entire philosophy and thinking. (5) And I don't know that I ever empathized with people to the point that I should've. That was probably part of my male genes, I don't know. (chuckles)

White southerners have never been expected to empathize with black

southerners' experiences, and this may have had long-lasting effects on whites. Carla,

60s, said she only recently began to "humanize" the treatment black southerners endured

daily under segregation:

> [A black co-worker told me] she could remember when they had to sit in the balcony at the movies. And when they couldn't even go through the drive-thru at McDonald's, that they would get out of the car and her [very light-skinned] brother could drive through the drive-thru at McDonald's and get their food. And then that's when you begin to humanize it. Because I was not really exposed to it from lookin' at it as discrimination. You know what I mean? It was not on my radar. . . . It's like for so long, it didn't really affect me. I didn't think about, I didn't really have much of an opinion about it.

Alexithymia is a term used by psychiatrists to describe an individual who cannot

understand the emotions of others and thus cannot empathize. Sociologists Joe Feagin

and Hernán Vera propose the term *social alexithymia* to conceptualize the emotional

damage done to dominant group members who are socialized to live in a society that

systematically privileges them and mistreats others. As Feagin (2006) states, "essential

to being an oppressor in a racist society is a significantly reduced ability, or an inability,

to understand or relate to the emotions, such as recurring pain, of those targeted by

oppression. Social alexithymia thus seems essential to the creation and maintenance of a racist society" (p. 28). A white supremacist society, then, depends upon whites teaching each other *not* to empathize fully with people of color. This emotional disconnection helps legitimize, and prevent a critique of, white dominance.

Jim Crow white children were trained in social alexithymia from a young age. They were subjected to the inhumane racial ideology of segregation and this experience had a devastating impact on their ability to extend full empathy to their neighbors of color, even to loved ones. However, as favored citizens in a white supremacist society, they did not bear the social assault to self-esteem and identity that black children experienced. Instead, they constantly received messages, mostly subtle, of their goodness and racial superiority. But, white children, unlike black children, had virtually no helpful outlet for confusions or critical questions as they attempted at times to make sense of anti-black oppression, inequality, and their own racial privileges. White elders' explanations were cursory and dismissive, and children quickly learned the futility of probing. And nearly all white children quickly repressed and forgot their curiosity and lost any sense that things could have been different had white southerners made different choices (Ritterhouse 2006).

CONCLUSION: FORGOTTEN ALTERNATIVES

Historian C. Vann Woodward ([1955] 2002) first used the term *forgotten alternatives* to remind southerners that the southern racial arrangement was contested for decades after the Civil War and that segregation laws had not been inevitable. Presented just after the *Brown v. Board* (1954) Supreme Court decision on the unconstitutionality

of segregated schools, his assertion that the South could have been different, and thus could be changed, invigorated anti-segregation activists (Ritterhouse 2006). Historian Jennifer Ritterhouse (2006) reapplies the concept *forgotten alternatives* in her analysis of how Jim Crow children learned the racial ideology and practices of southern society. She states that "adult white southerners tried, consciously and unconsciously, to teach both black and white children to 'forget' any possible alternatives to white supremacy at the same time they energetically *repressed alternatives* that actually arose in both the public and private spheres" (p. 9, italics in original). These efforts on the part of white adults could not have been successful with black children, for the black community was heavily invested in resisting white supremacist ideology; the opposite is true for white children, who could accept the logic of white supremacy more readily – embracing the notion of their own racial superiority – and "forget" any alternatives to Jim Crow (Ritterhouse 2006).

Forgotten alternatives are also present in white southerners' memories of Jim Crow. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, most respondents retain a dismissive "just the way it was" perspective on the segregation era, showing little historical understanding of how white southerners created Jim Crow laws – they just knew the laws and traditions "were" and had been for generations. And they do not seem to imagine how their roles as white individuals could have been different. And, as will be clear in Chapter 6, the respondents demonstrate very little awareness of white antiracism during the civil rights era – a key omission in memory, which enables the false impression that no white southerners had a capacity to believe in and participate in anti-segregation efforts.

Additionally, as I will argue in Chapter 6, instead of conceptualizing themselves as victims of Jim Crow and therefore aligned with those who worked to dismantle segregation, the vast majority of white southerners either stood by passively or fought the impending changes to the racial arrangement. As they looked back today, many of my respondents did portray themselves as victims, but not of Jim Crow white supremacy. Rather, many harbor lingering resentment toward civil rights activists, school desegregation programs, and general changes to American society that seem to them to have weakened morality and incited racial animosities. Essentially, the loss of Jim Crow, with its unchallenged white racial privileges, has been experienced by many white southerners as an assault on a good society instead of a release from a blatantly racist society.

So when it comes to the role they played in enforcing segregation or oppressing their neighbors of color, my white southern interviewees portrayed themselves as utterly uninvolved. By and large they argue that they successfully and effortlessly were able to sidestep feelings, beliefs, or actions of white supremacy. They usually cited a reason for their enlightenment that has roots in the goodness of whites – their parents taught them respect and kindness, their churches taught human universalism, or racial progressivism just made logical sense to them (i.e., "people were people"). They acknowledged the existence of white supremacist sentiment, but typically they individualized it – some people were racist and mean, but mostly whites and blacks "got along fine"; society was just normal and not particularly oppressive. However, the private sphere – their white homes – simply cannot have been a protective bubble, exempt from the systemic

oppression of the segregation era. That many white southerners in fact experienced deep connections of love and respect with black individuals does little to negate the power imbalance that was inherent in white-black interactions and ever-present in the larger white supremacist Jim Crow society.

CHAPTER V

A SAFER, SIMPLER TIME AND "JUST THE WAY IT WAS": SEGREGATION IN

PUBLIC

In this chapter I analyze white southerners' narratives of de jure segregation. Respondents emphasize the morality, safety, and innocence of their childhood lives. A few people go so far in their rosy portrayals to deny the inherent racial inequality of the time period, but most readily acknowledge the unfairness of segregation in public facilities. Nevertheless, past inequality is largely conceived of as an inevitable historical moment that arose and was maintained due to mysterious forces. There is little sense that the racial arrangement could ever have been different in the South, and a tendency to avoid attributing the creation and enforcement of Jim Crow laws to white actors. Overall, white southerners accept that the period of legal segregation included some racial inequalities that black southerners faced, but this acceptance is minimized by the limited ways they conceive of systemic inequalities as well as assertions of their own good interracial memories.

Looking back, white southerners claim they had a very limited awareness of the extent of racial inequality at the time of segregation, explaining that both the cloistered nature of their Jim Crow childhoods and the pleasantness of their interracial interactions prevented a comprehensive understanding of black southerners' experiences with oppression. However, while white southerners acknowledge that they have never understood the black experience, there is also evidence of them projecting onto blacks

their own views in assertions that southerners, both white and black, readily accepted

and followed Jim Crow traditions. In various ways they justify their apparent lack of

racial awareness and unquestioned acceptance of segregation.

In this chapter especially, it will be clear that elderly white southerners continue

to hold a complex and often contradictory set of beliefs regarding the segregation era. A

1956 quarterly report of the Southern Regional Council outlined some of the

contradictory beliefs common in the pre-civil rights period. White southerners

> possessed a conviction that that segregation was "best for both races" and that
> blacks desired it; respected "law and order"; believed in blacks' rights to "an
> equal chance"; supported public education; took pride in the South and hoped
> that "outsiders" would not think it "benighted"; and feared that, if integration
> came, blacks would "take advantage" of whites. (Cited in Sokol 2006:14)

This complex set of beliefs and feelings has not been eradicated in the post-civil rights

era, especially among elderly white southerners who spent their formative years steeped

in it and forging their identities in relation to it. "Few southerners achieved, much less

desired, a clean break from the past" (Sokol 2006:15).

THE STRUCTURE AND SOCIALIZATION OF SEGREGATION

The era of legal segregation was not literally a period of "segregation," where

whites and African Americans were kept separate by law. Only certain public facilities

and white places of business dictated a separation in type of services available to white

and black citizens. And even in segregated spaces, racial groups were often very nearby.

For example, at Greensboro's downtown Carolina Theatre, black patrons used a separate

entrance, concession stand and seating area, but watched the same movie at the same

time as white patrons. Five and dime stores had an integrated customer base and staff,

but only white patrons could eat in the seating area. These common types of integrated segregated spaces facilitated constant cross-racial interactions, even if those interactions were subtle, comprised of seeing and being seen, listening and being heard. And these spaces provided ample reminders of which group was allowed where, had access to services and opportunities, and received better accommodations. Thus, segregation and its underlying logic of white supremacy was not at all a situation of "out of sight, out of mind" for either whites or nonwhites.

Whether in public or private spaces, the distance between white and black southerners during the period of legal segregation from the late-1800s through the 1960s was physical only to a certain extent; black and white people intermingled so much – and often in very intimate ways – that it was actually social and emotional distance that characterized the Jim Crow experience (Ritterhouse 2006). Nevertheless, the segregation era is recognized today to have been mostly concerned with *separating* whites from "colored people" – primarily, black Americans. (Although, depending on regional demographics, "colored" could encompass any group of people considered non-white, including American Indians, Mexican Americans, Asians, and Middle Easterners.) White and black southerners interacted very frequently according to an elaborate racial etiquette, and these interactions were subject to the white racist logic that also undergirded segregation laws (Litwack 1998). However, the contemporary American consciousness and the white racial frame fail to perceive the Jim Crow period as an era of overt white supremacy that touched and affected every facet of southern society and nation. As will be clear in this chapter, even those individuals who lived large portions

of their lives under segregation and experienced first-hand the Civil Rights Movement conceive of southern white racism in the past as episodic - an unfortunate but acceptable component of an otherwise good society.

First published in 1959, Stetson Kennedy's ([1959] 1990) *Jim Crow Guide* offered readers a tongue-in-cheek tour of the segregated South. Kennedy went beyond what was inscribed in laws and explained the racial etiquette that one needed to understand if visiting the South, such as how to make an interracial introduction, how a person of color could challenge whites and get away with it, and when to remove one's hat. His critique laid bare and scrutinized the complicated system of Jim Crow. Many of the regulations sound preposterous to today's reader. Here is just one example, regarding the unspoken rules of partaking of tobacco or alcoholic drink in an interracial setting:

> If you are a male, you are free under the etiquette to drink intoxicating liquors with males of the other race. . . . However, if a white man should offer you a drink, he will hardly expect you to drink from the bottle after the manner of his white fellow workers, but rather to find a receptacle of some kind. On the other hand, should you offer a white man a drink from your bottle, he may drink from it if there is no receptacle at hand. . . . As for smoking, if you are male you may also feel free to indulge with males of the other race. But if you are a female, you are not thus privileged . . . white women would still regard it as highly presumptuous if a nonwhite woman were to drink or smoke in their presence. However, it is permissible to partake of snuff in the presence of white women. (Kennedy [1959] 1990:208-9).

Today, these rules sound thoroughly convoluted. Yet every southern resident and visitor needed to be well-versed in Jim Crow expectations such as these.

As Kennedy ([1959] 1990) points out, "interracial etiquette is . . . a compulsory ritual denoting first- and second-class citizenship" (p. 206). Thus the only way to make sense of the confusing expectations is to understand that the Jim Crow system worked

always to demonstrate that African Americans were inferior and whites were superior. And, although interracial interactions could be congenial oftentimes, according to Feagin (2006), ever-present was a pervasive racist ideology, where whites believed blacks to be lazy, ignorant, dangerous, and threatening, and thus in need of white institutional control and subordination in order to protect white society from those negative influences (p. 157). For whites, following the white supremacist Jim Crow etiquette saved face and maintained an identity of positive self-esteem and superiority. For blacks, on the other hand, following the etiquette was an assault on their humanity. But it was also a matter of survival. It was crucial for people of color to know Jim Crow etiquette; if African Americans challenged Jim Crow convention and were deemed by whites to be getting out of "their place," their physical and economic livelihoods could be compromised.

White supremacy, then, was the guiding principle of de jure (legal) segregation and de facto (informal) segregation, and, by using this guiding principle, the logic of Jim Crow etiquette begins to crystallize. All of the convoluted rules about behavior and how to "stay in one's place" were concerned with subordinating African Americans and safeguarding whites' notions of their own racial superiority. Yet few of my white southern respondents expressed an understanding of this basic principle. Several were mystified trying to identify the origins of segregation laws, and many spoke vaguely about segregation expectations, as if all people had to follow Jim Crow laws because "they" said so. Neither whiteness nor white people, then, were named as the sources of dominance and exclusion in the Jim Crow South. Respondents also abdicated their role as everyday participants in the exclusion of people of color and the preservation of all-

white spaces, situating themselves as virtuous law-abiding citizens who did things the way they were supposed to be done because "that's just the way it was."

It is clear from writings and oral histories that African Americans had to actively deal with the structure of segregation on a daily basis. Ritterhouse (2006) claims that black children were taught Jim Crow expectations, which were clearly rooted in notions of white supremacy, as a "game" they must learn to play, so that they could retain self-respect and develop skills for negotiating white spaces and people. It was a game with rules white children had little incentive to deconstruct, as they were systematically being bestowed favors by Jim Crow (Ritterhouse 2006). White children learned the "rules" of legal segregation occasionally by explicit instruction but mostly via observation and subtle forms of socialization (Quinn 1954; Ritterhouse 2006). Segregation-era white southerner Lillian Smith (1961) agrees that this was the way Jim Crow was taught: "we learned far more from acts than words, more from a raised eyebrow, a joke, a shocked voice, a withdrawing movement of the body, a long silence, than from long sentences" (p. 90). And what was being learned was the Jim Crow white racial frame, not merely a set of "rules," but an entire white supremacist worldview, with racist assumptions, language, images, emotions, and behavioral patterns (Feagin 2006). According to Smith (1961):

> We learned the intricate system of taboos, of renunciations and compensations, of manners, voice modulations, words, feelings, along with our prayers, our toilet habits, and our games. I do not remember how or when, but by the time I had learned that God is love, that Jesus is His Son and came to give us more abundant life, that all men are brothers with a common Father, I also knew that I was better than a Negro, that all black folks have their place and must be kept in it . . . that a terrifying disaster would befall the South if I ever treated a Negro as my social equal. (Pp. 27-8)

During the segregation era, southern whites had a largely unquestioned understanding of Jim Crow, which they deeply socialized into their children (Sokol 2006). As Kennedy ([1959] 1990) argues, "Southerners, whites and Negroes alike, having been steeped for generations in the atmosphere engendered by the interracial etiquette, usually know precisely—almost instinctively—just what is expected of them in all situations" (p. 203). Kennedy's ([1959] 1990) use of the term "instinct" is noteworthy; he argues that Jim Crow etiquette came naturally to people because they were so thoroughly inculcated to segregation expectations by everyone around them. And while black children learned they could – and should – also develop a critique of Jim Crow, white children were rarely if ever encouraged to question segregation (Rittherhouse 2006).

A TIME OF SAFETY AND SECURITY

The most prominent theme in my respondents' narratives of legal segregation within the public realm was an assertion of the safety and security of life as they went about day-to-day living in the community. Parents allowed children to roam the neighborhood streets without fear as they went to and from school or play. Youth could ride the trolley or walk to the downtown area unsupervised to browse shops or see a movie. The reliable "white bubble" of their childhood affords white southerners today a very nostalgic perspective on the Jim Crow past. However, few respondents indicated that they read the bubble of safety as "white." Most spoke about how much safer and simpler life used to be in general, when people learned they could count on mutual

respect, trust, caring, and neighborliness from practically everyone they might encounter, regardless of race or any other characteristics.

When I asked Patti, 80s, to talk about segregation, she explained what it was like in benign terms, with no hint at a racial component: "It was a quieter, gentler time. You never locked the door of your house. You never took the keys out of the car, even when you went shopping downtown. That was a *different time*. People didn't *steal*. . . . Even hungry people didn't steal." Similarly, like many other respondents, Gertie, 70s, thought it unfortunate that children had more carefree freedom in her youth than they do today:

> I had the most wonderful childhood. I mean, I *really* think that it's a shame that people nowadays don't have the freedom that I did. I could go around the corner when I was four years old on my tricycle to see my friend and no one was going to bother me. It was a much more free time, I could be much more independent.

Both Patti and Gertie believed that what left a strong impression on them and shaped day-to-day life during the segregation era was the security of knowing you could trust people and you would not be victimized. It appears that, when they think back, a great many white southerners do not embrace the thought that they were even having a "racial" experience during a period of overt racial segregation and anti-black discrimination.

The more I heard people talk about how pleasant childhood was in these interviews that were designed to be about "race relations," I became curious to know if they merely omitted a racial consideration from their childhood memories, or if they actually correlated *racial* segregation with a *better* society. For Carla, 60s, it was not just correlation, it was causation. She lamented her concern over several current social trends and directly attributed the rise of these "problems" to desegregation:

> There are no role models. The children don't really have parents. And that's what I think about. We talk about, like the welfare society, it perpetuates itself. They were born into welfare, and they LIVE in welfare, you know, they just perpetuate it. Unless somethin' breaks the cycle . . . [Kids] need to find a positive role model. People are saying you can't do it, but if you *want* to do it, you've gotta be the one to say, "This is what I want, and I'm willing to go for it." But where do they get their role models? And that's everybody now, it's not just black society. But why has it come to that? I guess I wanna blame a lot of it on integration, but not because of the blacks, but because somewhere down the line when integration happened society started letting down the guidelines.

When looking back, Carla saw serious social problems arising from racial integration. Society was actually *better* overall during the segregation era.

Other respondents were savvier about recognizing the unfairness toward black southerners under segregation when they reflected on the social "losses" since their youth. For example, Gertie acknowledged that the loveliness of her childhood may have had something to do with her whiteness:

> I feel very, very fortunate, and most of my friends feel pretty fortunate. Maybe this is what everybody does, but we think we grew up in a *wonderful* time and not because it was segregated, but because neighbors knew each other . . . people didn't have a lot of money and no one worried about the lack of it because you were just friends with a lot of different people. And when I think back I'm sure that even though I had a wonderful life, there were a lot of black children that were *not* having that wonderful life. So, it's a two-edged sword. But I've had a blessed life, I really have.

So Gertie conflated the Jim Crow era with a better way of life, but she did not claim that segregation was an unequivocally better time period for the South. She wound up incorporating a layer of racial sensitivity and white racial awareness to her childhood nostalgia.

Racial Harmony

Several respondents not only correlated the segregation period with the happiness and safety of life in general, they went further and claimed that, even on a racial level, some things were better back then, such as easygoing, harmonious interactions between white and black southerners. For example, Harmony, 80s, said that racial issues seem to be more of a problem now than in her youth: "Racial things were not a big item back when I was growin' up. They just came along and we dealt with 'em, and everybody did, and we had a very peaceful and harmonious ha-ha time together." And Arnold, 80s, claimed that, although white southerners may have considered themselves superior to black Americans, blatant racial animosities were rare; people "got along" well: "I never *heard* much black hate talk or anything in my family. . . . There's the black people and they're (4) maybe not on the same level as us, but then over here is all us white folks. And we got along, I think, for the most part."

Mae, 70s, said that deferent black acquaintances were a "joy to be around" and did not "push themselves" on whites:

> The people that we had contact with were of the older black generation, and they knew how things were. I don't really know their feelings, but they would not push themselves on you. And the ones that we knew were a joy to be around, but they always stayed in their place at that time. You know, they didn't push themselves.

To many elderly white southerners, it may *seem* that there are more racial problems now than ever in their memory. And what they mean by racial problems are not systematic discrimination or anti-black stereotyping, but instead are overt interracial animosities, which, from their vantage point, seem to have *increased* with the loss of Jim Crow laws

and etiquette. It appears that much of their perceived "racial harmony" has its origins in oppressive white supremacy, for it was not out of blind respect for the law or for their nice white neighbors that black southerners followed Jim Crow etiquette and "stayed in their place." Black Americans' behavior, which whites might read as compliant obsequiousness, was a strategy of protection from the wrath of white society, the fear of which haunted black southerners daily (Litwack 1998).

Segregation: Mere Separation, Not Inequality

Some respondents even implied that segregated public facilities had little value or meaning attached to them. The separateness was not linked to any judgment of racial superiority or inferiority. There was merely "place" for whites and a "place" for blacks, and everyone, white and black, followed along without much thought or questioning. For example, Ava, 60s, argued that a child might be curious about segregated facilities and ask questions, but would draw no conclusions as to racial superiority or inferiority:

> You did not have the thought that black people were being treated differently to white people. It was (3) *why* do they have to have a colored bathroom and a white bathroom, but as far as feelin' like it was right or wrong, you had no real opinion because you never saw color. It would be just like if they had 'Jewish bathroom' and 'white bathroom.' You just knew as a child that these kinda things went on.

Somehow Ava argued that children noticed and questioned the 'white' and 'colored signs, but did not "see color."

Darla, 70s, joked around and explained that segregated facilities were just separate, not different. But, after some probing, she revealed that segregation *might* have been infused with white supremacist messages:

D: I'm sure there were an awful lot of black people who probably drank of the white water fountain just for spite. (laughs) Ah, I don't know that for a fact, but . . . that to me probably was the most unusual or impressive thing about it as a child, 'cause I can remember exactly where they were and standing there and looking at 'em, and in a way just thinkin', 'Golly, I'm glad I'm white, I don't have to worry about drinkin' out of the black fountain.' But I wouldn't have minded maybe.

(I: Was it different? Was it not as nice?)

D: No, they were the same. . . .

(I: So, why would you not want to drink out of the-)

D: Well, maybe you would have this idea that maybe black people had more germs than white people and (4) I really don't know. Like I say, I guess you felt like black people were not as privileged as we were, and maybe they didn't have the health advantages and that type of thing. And of course I think a lot of people were concerned about their children bein' associated with blacks because of the mixed race situation.

Here, Darla admitted, only tentatively, that Jim Crow whites perceived blacks as dirty and beneath them ("*maybe* you would have this idea that *maybe* black people had more germs"). But, she also speculated that aversion to black Americans was rooted in whites believing blacks' subordinate status to be the result of systemic white privilege and black disadvantage – an understanding that is driven by hindsight and does not reflect the actual Jim Crow white racial frame of black biological inferiority.

In the examples analyzed in this section, it is apparent that white southerners have engaged in varying levels of critical thinking when they reflect back on the period of legal segregation. Some assert that many, and perhaps most, things were better in their youth than they are today. This nostalgia is understandable in a way, for people in general tend to think glowingly on the simplicity and goodness of their childhoods, when the pace of life was slower and adults shielded them from worldly ills. However, when

the nostalgia is asserted in the context of an interview explicitly on "race relations from your lifetime," it operates in a more egregious way, sidestepping or downplaying Jim Crow white southerners' racism, dominance, and privileges.

However, few interviewees outright denied the segregation era's racial inequalities; after all, they have by now become quite obvious. In the following section, I analyze white southerners' acknowledgments and explanations of Jim Crow racism, as they reflected on their levels of awareness of inequalities and the racial lessons they were taught. I identify a tendency to explain segregation dynamics in vague or generalized terms, not naming the white actors who created and worked diligently to maintain segregation laws. I also illustrate that many respondents fail to comprehend segregation as institutionalized white supremacy, sharing their assertions that racial discrimination was not the determining factor in Jim Crow black southerners' limited opportunities for advancement.

"I KNEW EVERYTHING WADN'T ROSES AND LIGHT": EXPLAINING JIM CROW

Virtually all the interview respondents spoke about segregation as a time that included inequality for African Americans in some areas of life. Some said they felt now that segregated public facilities needed to be changed, or should have never been established. Several also acknowledged that Jim Crow white southerners received significant privileges not available to black southerners. However, many people attributed much of this racial awareness to hindsight, claiming that their consciousness

of Jim Crow inequality was undeveloped in childhood and before civil rights activism

made inequalities apparent by challenging them.

Thus, white southerners claim that they developed a more acute awareness of the

racial landscape through experiencing the civil rights and post-civil rights eras, when

they began to comprehend the injustice faced by African Americans. As I argued in

Chapter 4, white southerners demonstrate a lifetime of low level of empathy for black

southerners despite having had close, "family-like" relationships with individual African

Americans. In addition, I argue here that many white southerners have developed a

limited racial awareness of what southern segregation was like, for they have not fully

considered how and why black southerners may have interpreted Jim Crow as a time of

systemic white supremacist ideology and white domination.

For example, one man in his 80s described a "tragic" incident when he realized

there were some black southerners who mistrusted white people:

> There were things that I look back on- (3) the pathos of it, today at my age now is
> a little overwhelming. I'll give you a for instance. I . . . took a job with the
> census. . . . and I walked up to a black home on one hot, summer afternoon, and I
> announced . . . "I'm with the U.S. Census," and there was a black lady sitting on
> the porch, elderly, she said . . . "Lawd have mercy, the white folks have
> everything we had, now they wants our senses." Well, you know, that's tragic . . .
> and she wasn't tryin' to be funny. She really felt that *white* people had
> everything, steal from the blacks anyway, and now they wanted their *senses*.
> That's tragic. I mean, *funny* in a *way*, but . . . not funny haha, funny-sad to me. . .
> . It's worse than ironic. But I had that actual experience, see, so I *knew* that
> everything wasn't roses and light. I mean, but I had seen my family befriend
> black people, I had seen black people befriend my family.

For this man, the tragedy of that door-to-door incident was rooted in the black woman's

unfortunate and faulty perspective, not in a system of white supremacy. Many times in

the interview this respondent freely acknowledged that segregation was an unequal

arrangement, but, with this excerpt, he seemed to believe that black people had little reason to harbor resentment towards whites. He had *experienced* genuine interracial kindnesses and felt the experience should have been mutual for African Americans. To this day, he was "overwhelmed" remembering the black woman with such a bleak outlook on life who forgot about the nice white southern people. This perspective typifies the failure of white southerners to comprehend the fundamental nature of legal segregation as a system of white supremacy in which it would have been understandable and rational for non-whites to harbor deep, broad-reaching resentment and wariness toward white people and white society.

Awareness of Inequality

Most white southerners accepted the system of segregation as a fact of life and were not motivated to reflect on its contours or logic (Sokol 2006). Nearly all of my respondents corroborated this reality, saying that their awareness of the injustices faced by Jim Crow black southerners was very limited during the segregation era. When they spoke of what they were aware of specifically, they most often gave one or two examples of blatant things, such as water fountains and bathrooms, the segregated movie theater and buses, and whites-only restaurants. For example, Gertie, 70s, remembered her curiosity over the segregation of the downtown theater:

> I remember my mother showing me the balcony in the Carolina Theatre where the black children had to sit and I said, "How'd they get up there?" because at that time, there was no way, there was a barrier. And she said, "Well, they have to come in a different door" . . . and I remember thinking that I thought that was pretty bad. You know, I didn't see any reason why that would be.

Gertie "felt pretty bad" when she realized that black Americans were being treated as second-class citizens in the local theater. Many respondents remembered noticing the oddity or unfairness of segregation in certain places, but they claimed having been simply unconscious of the far-reaching nature of segregation.

Some interviewees argued that they did not pay attention to segregation in public facilities much at all, or that there was no real way for them to have seen the extent of segregation in public facilities. For example, John, 70s, claimed to have never noticed that the lunch counter he frequented served whites only:

> I've eaten in . . . the service bar there many a day 'cause [I worked] downtown for [several] years. . . . and I honestly don't *remember* whether there were any blacks sittin' there or not. (chuckling) I mean, I just don't sit down and eyeball everybody in the place and say, "Oh, he's white, he's black, there's a Chinese." (chuckles)

For John, the idea of his recognizing an all-white space as all white was preposterous. He would not have the time, energy, or motivation to do such a thing.

Many people, like Gracie, 80s, said that they were too wrapped up in their own lives to have been able to consider the black experience:

> I think *probably* I became most aware when I realized that black children were havin' to take long bus rides, yet they were within walking distance of a white school, and I mean anybody could know that that was unfair. (chuckles) I think most of us, we're just so engrossed in our own daily livin' that we don't spend a lot of time thinkin' about how other people are managing. (chuckles)

Here, Gracie indicated that the inequalities of segregation were utterly apparent if only one were exposed to information about the black experience, such as the unfairness of black children having to travel long distances, passing white-only schools, in order to reach black schools.

These examples prompt the question of how isolated white southerners actually were

from information about black life under segregation, for there were obvious, publicized

markers of blacks being kept not only separate from whites, but excluded from certain

white spaces and, when included, afforded the least desirable services and

accommodations. My respondents claimed again and again that, somehow, white

southerners were not aware of the extent of injustices under segregation.

There was white privilege. Nevertheless, many white southerners acknowledged

that the Jim Crow period involved some benefits for whites only. Mack, 80s,

acknowledged that whites like him got a head start in life:

> I would say how *fortunate* I had *been* just to have been born white . . . and not
> black. I mean (4) black people who succeeded that were born the year I was born
> - and when I say succeeded, I mean in whatever honorable profession that they
> chose to do - *far* exceeded what I did. 'Cause I hit the ground running with a
> head start. And I know that. I mean, to say that I didn't would be ridiculous.

Mack refused to deny that Jim Crow whites received racial privileges. This claim is

likely based on hindsight, however, for it would be odd indeed for anyone today to claim

that white southerners did not receive more benefits, tangible and symbolic, than black

southerners.

Here Gracie, 80s, said that whites were privileged in higher education, although

she acknowledged that it is something she only realized later:

> I feel that since I *was* white that I probably did have more opportunities than a
> black person growing up at that same time. And I know that I got a scholarship to
> go to college, and the college scholarship was one that was given by the state . . .
> and it was done by competitive examination. Now, I doubt that there was a
> program like that for blacks. I doubt very much. And I *know* that they didn't go
> to [my college], because - see now, I don't know why. You know, you'd think I-
> that a person who was interested in justice would be outraged that they weren't
> allowed to go. But they didn't go to [my college] for a *long* time.

Here, Gracie noted that a justice-oriented person such as herself should have been

appalled by the inequality but somehow it escaped registry in her consciousness until

later in life.

Shocks and epiphanies. Some people said that they gained perspective on

segregation only when they left their hometown. Lynna, 70s, had an epiphany about

southern segregation when traveling out of the South:

> I just think that when we were growing up, the black people that we knew. . . .
> you just saw who you *saw*, and growing up, you sort of accept that- you take it
> for granted. And then, I remember when I was [a teenager] and we took this trip
> out West, and . . . I kept noticing there were no black people. And, then . . . there
> was a sign that said, 'No Indians, No Mexicans,' and it sort of suddenly hit me
> that they were the same position that the black people were here. It was a strange,
> eye-opening experience really.

Patti, 80s, also remembered having an eye-opening and unsettling experience when

traveling. In her case, she was disturbed witnessing her children's nanny not being

allowed to eat with her family in a whites-only hotel restaurant:

> P: I took my children to the beach and wanted "Betty" who worked for me to go .
> . . and she wanted to do it. We had to go to Howard Johnson's and the only way
> they let her eat . . . she had to go to the back door of Howard Johnson's restaurant
> . . . and there was nothing I could do about it. . . . She takes care of my children,
> she's, you know. . . .
>
> (I: How did that make you feel?)
>
> P: Ashamed, angry, a mixture. Mad at Howard Johnson's, ashamed that anyone
> would be treated that way.

As Patti's account illuminates, ordinary white southerners rarely witnessed first-hand the

dehumanizing and restricting elements of Jim Crow regulations in a personal enough

way to elicit a negative emotional response. We can assume that Patti, like virtually all

other white domestic employers, followed Jim Crow etiquette with her employee, which may well have included the standard practice of employees eating in a separate room from the family. But, never aligned *with* her employee and on the "receiving" end of anti-black restrictions until this family trip, Patti was suddenly struck by the injustice of anyone – especially her children's dear caretaker – being sent through the back door because of her race.

While many white southerners acknowledge today that white privilege was inherent in the Jim Crow period, one man and his wife shared back-to-back stories of how some whites thought that Jim Crow regulations could easily be broken if *white* people wanted to break them:

> Man: My mother called me . . . to say that this black man . . . was sick and she wanted . . . for me to come . . . take him to the hospital. And I said, "Mother, you can take him to [the black hospital]. "He's not *going* to [the black hospital]! . . . He is going to [the white hospital]!" I said, "Mother, we can't *do* that." "What do you mean *we* can't do that?" I said, (chuckles) "Just what I'm telling you, [that hospital] is *segregated*." "Not as far as 'Carter' is concerned." I said, "Yes ma'am as far as Carter is concerned. (chuckles) You can't *do* that."

> Wife: Okay, I did the same thing [on a road trip with our son]. . . . And we needed to stop for lunch. . . . I had the lady that worked for him, and I thought, 'Well, we'll just go in this restaurant for lunch,' and, it dawned on me we weren't gonna be able to go into that. I think I must've asked. And I thought, 'Well surely since she's *with me*, she can come in for lunch,' but no, she couldn't. . . . But we had that attitude of, if *I* did this, they'll allow it. I guess we didn't really realize how much segregation there was.

This man's mother and wife assumed that whites could overrule anti-black regulations in individual situations by vouching for African Americans. In the examples shared by this couple and Patti, it is clear that some whites - and perhaps many, especially among the upper classes - actually defined Jim Crow *as* white privilege, where white people could

successfully defy segregation whenever they chose. And this indicates that some white southerners had a fairly accurate view of the basis of segregation after all – a systemic way to allow white Americans access to power and the ability to dictate their own lives as well as the lives of black Americans.

Nevertheless, this understanding of white privilege could be the source of disturbing epiphanies, as some white southerners were unexpectedly confronted with the fact that they did not always get to do just what they wanted. Some were shocked to learn that Jim Crow could constrain even them, the favored citizens, if they worked against segregation to try to get "white" treatment for black southerners. As the wife pointed out, she did not "realize how much segregation there was." Somehow she did not grasp the formal, institutionalized nature of Jim Crow, erroneously assuming that she had the power as a white individual to disregard segregation practices and still manage to retain her own status of respectability in the eyes of other whites.

Learning Anti-black Racism

It was rare in my interviews to hear a person say that they were taught anti-black racism, even though notions of white superiority and black inferiority were *inherent* in the era of racial segregation; they were the legs that Jim Crow stood on. White supremacy was ever-present during segregation, and perhaps this is exactly why white memory of it is so limited today. If they do not remember being taught to be fearful or paternalistic or condescending to blacks, it does not mean that they were not in fact taught those things.

As Arlene, 70s, indicated, she did not recall any negative statements being made about black people because it was a shared understanding. In her memory, the overt, "real bigotry" was direct towards non-Protestant whites:

> I think that there definitely were prejudices then. (3) I think consideration wasn't really *given* so much to *blacks* in that regard. I think that was a given. I think the real bigotry and prejudice was more probably towards other white people, towards Jewish people, towards Catholics. I remember that much more vividly than I ever do any *negative* opinions about blacks.

While Arlene could seem here to be denying that anti-black prejudice was a reality, she did say that anti-black racism "was a given" – it was understood and *accepted* and therefore did not necessarily need to be voiced in overt ways. Arlene's perspective supports the argument that white children learned most of their anti-black opinions and feelings in subtle and consistent ways (Ritterhouse 2006).

However, a few other interviewees did recall being taught overt racist stereotypes, with varying amounts of accompanying critique. When I asked Arnold, 80s, to clarify why it was thought inappropriate for a white woman to sit and drink a beer in her home with a black deliveryman, he both questioned and validated the old racist myth of the black male rapist: "I guess there'd been a lot of stories that black men would take advantage of a white woman in a situation like that. I think that probably a lot of that was just hearsay and conjecture, although there had been some evidence that that was so." This old stereotype of the black male rapist of innocent white women did not become prevalent until after slavery, when it became a powerful mechanism of social control. According to Feagin (2006) it was likely "a way of rationalizing white violence, such as the commonplace lynchings, that targeted black men" (p. 177). It appears Arnold

had been taught that the stereotype was a reality, however; to this day he thinks there

was "some evidence" to support the absurd characterization of black men as voracious

rapists of white women. The historical reality of cross-racial sexual assault, under both

slavery and segregation, was the rape of black women by white men (Feagin 2006;

Litwack 1998; McGuire 2010).

Few respondents were very descriptive when speaking of the anti-black racism

they remember encountering, but Sharon, 60s, shared the kinds of racist statements Jim

Crow whites used regularly and how repetition drove the message home:

> (I: Will you share with me some of the things that you would hear as a kid?)
> S: They're ugly. (laughs) (10) You would hear black people called names, the n-
> word, coons, bur heads. (5) And it was said by people that were not bad people,
> and it was said by people that were not mean. And they were smart people, so it
> was not out of ignorance, it was out of segregation, because we were separate
> and we didn't know each other. And (3) people probably didn't realize how bad
> these things were. I'm sure they didn't. . . . But there was always, growing up as
> a little girl, my mother and other people would say, "Don't go out in the dark – A
> big black man will get you." Um, "Don't go out in the street – A big black man
> will get you." (laughs) It was said so many times, I was *terrified* of *any black
> man, absolutely terrified* if they got close to you. And I know they were trying to
> just protect us from gettin' harmed, but you know, they never said *a man* will get
> you, they would say a big black man will get you. I think that was the hardest
> thing to get used to was black men are fine, you know, because it was just drilled
> in that a big black man will get you.

Sharon shared how difficult it was for her, in adulthood, to dismantle the black male

criminal/rapist stereotype that white adults had repetitively and forcefully socialized her

to fear. But note also how she characterized the people who sent her these heinous, racist

messages: "smart people" who "were not bad people" and who were "just trying to

protect" her and were, unfortunately, "ignorant" of "how bad these things were." This is

yet another example of white protectionism, where even overtly racist behaviors, when

displayed by loved ones, are asserted as unintentional or not that potent after all, even

though Sharon herself was deeply scarred by them.

Mae, 70s, said that she had a vague notion that white children learned to fear

blacks. She could not determine where the idea came from:

> I think back when we were growing up- it's not that you're taught to disassociate
> with them, but it seemed like there was a fear that as a young kid that all of them
> were maybe dangerous to be around, that they might harm you in some way. And
> I don't know where that came from, but it was just sort of a set rule that you
> don't associate with them.

Mae clearly indicated here that she was taught, in subtle ways, to fear and mistrust

blacks.

Later, however, when I asked Mae what the family teachings regarding race had been in

her childhood home, she gave a different account:

> M: Mainly just to respect. Respect blacks, respect whoever, you know.
>
> (I: But you said maybe there was a little fear.)
>
> M: Well, that was just being a kid, you know. . . . But it just seemed like the
> crime then . . . if there was any killings or anything it was like, they were usually
> black. They would list it in the paper. And I didn't really have that awesome fear-
> it just made you wonder . . . if something were going to happen or something like
> that- not with all of them, it was just certain incidences, you know, if they were
> lurking around . . .

Mae wound up changing her story by indicating that her fear of black men was a general

childhood feeling of vulnerability and was rational anyway because it was based on

legitimate crime reports.

White southerners' awareness of the ways they were taught white racism is

extremely limited. As I demonstrated here, even the few interviewees who spoke of

being taught anti-black stereotypes downplayed or rationalized the teachings. It is one

more illustration of white southerners not acknowledging the all-encompassing and systemic nature of Jim Crow racism.

No white bullying or anger. White violence, and the threat of it, was a constant for black Americans throughout the Jim Crow era (Litwack 1998; Thompson-Miller and Feagin 2008). Interestingly, none of my respondents told a story of a time when they had antagonized African Americans. There were a few stories told on *others*, of fairly benign, "mean" things they had witnessed but had not participated in. For example, Chuck, 70s, recalled that

> there was a segment of contemporaries of mine who were pretty violent toward the blacks in the forties. And they used to go over on Summit Avenue where there was sort of a boundary of black-white residences and throw rocks and occasionally shoot air rifles at the black kids. And I was *REALLY* offended by that.

Not only did Chuck not participate in the racist bullying, he remembered being strongly opposed to it.

It is not plausible that, somehow, all of my respondents – as children of Jim Crow – never participated in white supremacist bullying and avoided virtually all the nastiness associated with it. It is clear, especially when we look at black southerners' experiences, that a great many white youth taunted and bullied black children. Furthermore, white racist teasing among children, even preschoolers, continues to be common today (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001). On the other hand, however, several people did claim that white children were the victims of African American bullies, which I will discuss at length in the following chapter on school desegregation.

Of the Jim Crow white kids who eventually wrote racial conversion narratives, many recounted having been involved in territorial-style altercations with black youth. For example, James McBride Dabbs (1958) told how he met a black girl in the street "much larger than I" who looked like she was not going to move out of his way. "I drew back and hit her hard in the stomach." He recalled how "I wasn't ashamed, but I didn't tell Father or Mother" (as cited in Hobson 1999:54).

Although my respondents did not indicate that they ever felt emotionally wedded to traditional segregation conventions, some white southerners have reported feelings of deep disgust when their Jim Crow white supremacist sensibilities were challenged. In his racial memoir of growing up in rural North Carolina, Melton McLaurin (1998) told of a deeply memorable incident on a basketball court when he realized he had licked the needle of an air pump after a black boy, which resulted in him experiencing a rush of intense disgust and seething anger. And in her memoir, Patty Boyle (1962) included a recollection of her visceral, manic reaction when her maid got "out of her place" by growing so comfortable as to call her by her first name.

These kinds of shocking incidents registered forcefully in the gut with these individuals and, when not repressed, were seared into memory. For white southerners like McLaurin (1998) and Boyle (1962), who went on to undergo a transformational racial awakening, these types of memories became vital in their forging of a new, racially-conscious identity. Key to their gaining awareness of how deeply they had been socialized by Jim Crow was to recall how emotionally attached they had been to white supremacy and how uncontrollable this attachment was. They had to remember these

things and take a deep look at them if they ever hoped to begin to dismantle their

allegiance to southern white supremacist ideology. It appears, however, that few of my

own respondents came close to reaching the same conclusion.

MATERIAL ADVANTAGE AND DISADVANTAGE: UNSEEN AND

MISUNDERSTOOD

In the decades of the 1870s through the 1960s, virtually all white Americans

received racial privileges in the economic realm due to the exploitation, marginalization,

and exclusion of African American workers (Feagin 2006). But my interviews were

typified by minimal acknowledgment of systemic discrimination and a virtual lack of

acknowledgment of economic exploitation. Feagin (2006) uses the terms "unjust

enrichment" and "unjust impoverishment" to capture the material privileges afforded to

whites and the systemic disadvantages accrued by people of color over generations. This

material reality lays bare the self-serving nature, or superficiality, of whites' frequent

assertions that the racial arrangement under Jim Crow was pleasant and comfortable:

> At the core of the relations of exploitation under legal segregation was
> continuing unjust enrichment . . . for each new generation of whites and a
> corresponding unjust impoverishment for each new generation of blacks. What
> were portrayed as "good race relations" . . . by whites were usually extremely
> oppressive for blacks. (Feagin 2006:168)

However, not all of my elderly white southern interviewees saw Jim Crow as a

time of significant racial discrimination. Harmony, 80s, was not quite sure if and how

job inequalities occurred:

> (I: Was there different treatment of black people? Like for jobs?)
> H: I think so, yeah. I think, I don't know. I feel like we've come a good *ways*, in
> that area in improving things. And when I was [in] my early years there was a lot
> of discrimination, and I didn't like that. And I didn't *believe* in it and still don't.

While Harmony had a tentative notion that black Americans faced discrimination, Hope, 70s, who grew up working class in the rural outskirts of the city, denied that there was racial discrimination against black Americans during Jim Crow:

> (I: So up through the fifties and sixties, was there mistreatment of black people? Did white people get better treatment?)
>
> H: Well, I guess if they had more money they did. But it was some people, white and black, that didn't have no money, that couldn't do what some of the rich ones did. And we have some pretty well off black people in this United States.

Hope argued that discrimination followed social class lines but not racial lines. And Clarence, 58, believed that black farmers received equitable payment at market: "I remember black farmers coming to the market . . . and them representing their tobacco the same way that say my [family] did, and seemingly they were treated the same way, because they had the same commodity and they were on even footing with us as far as the product goes." Additionally Mack, 80s, vividly remembered that his grandfather paid fairly for labor:

> I heard one of the white men fussin' about him one day and granddaddy turn on him just f- f- furiously. He said, "*You do the work that 'Henry Jones' does and you'll get Henry's pay!*" And happened to have been a white man, and he retorted to my granddaddy, he says, "Well, *you* sayin' I don't do as much work as a- ?!" He said, "Yes I *am*. And he will make more money than you make." Well see, in that day and age that didn't set well with people. But that's the family I grew up in and that's the way they were.

Some respondents did not attribute black southerners' low status in Jim Crow society to racial discrimination. They would cite as causal factors other dynamics, which they viewed as nonracial, such as a lack of advanced education or meager financial

means. Ava, 60s, argued that racial segregation in housing was purely a matter of

financial differences:

> Black people lived in a certain part of town. White people lived in a certain part
> of town. Rich people lived in a certain part of town. (4) It did not have to do with
> race as much as it had to do with economics. If you happened to have parents
> who were educated, or for whatever reason were able to provide you with more,
> then you lived in a different neighborhood to people who were uneducated and
> could not provide their families more. That really was more economics than it
> was race.

Bernice, 80s, claimed that it was a lack of education, not racial discrimination that kept

African Americans (happily) in low-wage jobs: "the . . . ones that came to your home to

work, they were glad to get the work, because that was the only thing that they could do

to make any money. They had no education or anything." Bernice attributed African

Americans' poverty to their lack of educational attainment:

> B: Well, most of the blacks that *we* knew were poor people, and I remember
> thinking, "Well why can't they have what I have?" you know. . . . I remember
> thinking, well, "Why can't she have a dress like mine?" You know, or something
> like that. But, like I said, that's just the way things were. . . .
>
> (I: Why were the black people poor?)
>
> B: Because they didn't have an opportunity to have a good-paying job. They
> didn't have the education. . . . Very few of 'em ever finished high school even,
> much less going to college.
>
> (I: So why do you think that was?)
>
> B: Because (sighs) they may not have been encouraged, or they didn't have the
> money to go. 'Cause I didn't have the money to go to college either, but I
> borrowed it and paid it back. Ten dollars a month. (laughs)

Thus, segregated housing patterns and blacks' clustering in low-wage jobs are conceived

of as stemming from rational, non-racial, unbiased factors like "economics" and

"education." Further, in Bernice's view, blacks' own unwise choices contributed to their

poverty; she implied that they should have encouraged their children in school, and students should have known to take loans for college.

NO (WHITE) POWER

A major theme in my narratives with white southerners was denial or ignorance of white domination and black subordination in *all* areas of social life and institutions. As shown in the previous section, a few respondents, often from working class backgrounds, had a quite critical view of the class structure and saw that privileges came quickly to people with high economic status. However, it was perhaps even more rare for my white southern respondents to take a critical view of the racial structure and perceive that whites received many privileges through being granted access to services and many material advantages through not having to compete with people of color in jobs, politics, or elsewhere.

It is easy to understand how marginalized people, from their vantage point, can create and maintain a critical viewpoint on those things that disadvantage them. We can expect working class and poor whites to "see" systemic social class discrimination more clearly and critically than upper class whites, just as we can expect people of color to "see" racial privileges and disadvantages more accurately than white Americans. Nevertheless, I return to the point that my interviews asked people to focus on race and, in these excerpts, on segregation specifically, a time period that is now, in the American consciousness, understood to have been an era of whites' dominance and exploitation of black southerners. Within the context of the interview, then, the failure to note that there was a power dynamic between white and black southerners, or to go so far as to deny it

outright, is not indicative of a mere lack of awareness. It is a more blatant act of

resistance to acknowledging a fundamental truth of Jim Crow racism.

Ava, 60s, is a case in point. She was adamant that the idea of racism has been

imposed onto the segregation era by today's standards, as has the idea that blacks faced

mistreatment as a group. She argued that most blacks were treated just fine during Jim

Crow:

> It might have been racism, but that's not the way people *thought* then. There was a place for blacks, and there was a place for whites. Yes, I can remember goin' in restaurants where they had colored bathrooms. . . . and I can remember when . . . we'd go into restaurants, and they were given food out the back because they were black, but they were not *mistreated*. Back then, that was a way of life. Like now (3) it's considered all wrong. Nobody ever even thought that they were really doin' anything wrong.

Ava disagreed with the way segregation is viewed today. It may seem wrong now, but it

was not wrong then. And, she went further, arguing that blacks and whites were equally

satisfied with the arrangement:

> (I: Since you've lived through it, do you feel like it's important to tell people . . . what it was like back then? It was a little bit different, right? Different bathrooms, and different schools. Do you feel like it's important to even talk about it today?)
>
> A: It was different (3) as in the way of life was different. . . . you know, to tell them what happened during this time sounds like to *you* who've never lived through it that these people were *really really* mistreated. But that's *not* the way it was at all. That was a way of life at that time, and *this* is the way of life that you see now, and people did not see that as being wrong.
>
> (I: Any people? Or white people, or-?)
>
> A: Black people OR white people never felt like that was wrong. *You* had friends back THEN because they were your friends. You did NOT have friends because of the color of their skin.

Here Ava projected her own perspective onto blacks, claiming that absolutely *no one* had a critical view of Jim Crow. She argued that everyone accepted everything to do with the time period. Ava maintained this argument throughout her interview; she claimed also that civil rights protestors had nothing better to do and were just following self-interested, exploitative leaders.

Ava adamantly denied that whites had any significant power or advantages during Jim Crow. Frances, 70s, used a milder approach, but her conclusion was much the same. She argued that there was not a palpable interracial etiquette under Jim Crow, except as was dictated by deferent blacks:

> (I: Like you say, you didn't like, *see* a difference between white and black but-)
>
> F: Well of course I *saw* a difference.
>
> (I: Okay.)
>
> F: But, as far as *treating* them, or them treating *me*, I don't know. (3) When *I* was comin' along though, the blacks- I don't know whether they were intimidated by whites [but] they were not as open to conversing with whites as they are now. . . . When I was small, I think they liked their groups, because there are still a lot of black churches that don't want- that are not integrated. You know, whites don't go to their church. So (3) I don't know how long it's gonna take to be really fully integrated.

Frances ended here by implying that interracial etiquette and interactions have been rooted in blacks' own exclusivity, or discomfort in the presence of whites. Her statements appear to conceive of racial dynamics, past and present, as determined by black Americans. There is no hint that white southerners were the ones who created and fought hard to maintain segregation and to keep African Americans subordinate and as powerless as possible.

Mysterious Forces: Who Created Jim Crow? I Don't Know

Just as some respondents denied the inherent white domination of the segregation era, many others used unclear descriptions of the enforcers of segregation. Rarely naming people, much less *white* people, as the creators or enforcers of racial segregation, the language used often consisted of vague pronouns like "they," or nebulous wording like "the ones who made the laws." For example, Sharon, 60s, used "they" repeatedly to refer to those who enforced segregation: "It was just what society expected. You know (3) they also looked down on *white* people that went out of *their* place. It wasn't just that they looked down on black people that weren't doing what was expected of them." Sharon spoke of an anonymous group of people who "looked down on" anyone, regardless of race, who broke segregation expectations. Ever the unidentified "they," the enforcers of Jim Crow are presented as powerful and ever-present, but not named as white. And, notably, "they" never seemed to include anyone I interviewed, or any of their family members or loved ones.

When it comes to understandings of Jim Crow laws, respondents displayed a low level of awareness. Harmony, 80s, tried to answer my question about why there was segregation: "I think way on *back* for a while it was kind of a *law* or somethin'. I've never known what kind of a law, but they kept sayin' . . . that restrooms have to be segregated, (3) the water fountains and the restaurants and stuff. But I think we've come a long ways in *that* area." Harmony mused over segregation being "kind of a law or something." Suzanne, 60s, showed even more confusion when contemplating why there were segregation laws and slavery preceding that:

I can remember only whites being served, and I can remember blacks standing in the back and they were ABLE to do a takeout . . . and I think that was totally wrong. . . . They should have been able to take a seat just like I could. Going to the back of the bus, what was that all about? *What* difference did that matter? See I don't understand why *we* acted as a generation the way we did. But you know, why was there ever slavery? (chuckles) I don't understand that.

Mae, 70s, responded to my question: "Do you feel like you had any responsibility for the way things were, like whites sitting in the front or blacks sitting in the back of the bus?":

No. I don't, personally. Because that was just the law then, and I don't [know] where that actually started, the law. And even . . . the beach, it had a sign on the door, 'whites only' . . . and that just came from authorities - ordinances and all - before we were old enough to realize what was going on. I don't know when all this stuff was enacted. . . . Well, I don't know whether there were times we had a say-so and a vote to even integrate the schools or what to do. I think probably that was made by the school board. I don't know, I don't remember.

In Mae's portrayal, regular people, white or black, had no "say-so" about segregation statutes. Mae was correct that ordinary white people of her generation did not enact Jim Crow laws; they were mostly created a couple of generations before her. But they condoned them, *readily* acquiesced, enforced them when in positions of power, and operated from a white supremacist ideology. Notice also how Mae grappled with exactly when segregation came about and how it was dismantled.

These examples demonstrate inaccurate language that avoids naming white elites as the creators and ordinary whites as the condoners of segregation. For Harmony and Sharon it was a nebulous "they" who made sure segregation was followed, for Suzanne it was "a generation" who carried it out, and for Mae, "authorities" and "ordinances" enforced segregation. None stated that white southerners were the ones so heavily invested in maintaining Jim Crow.

Respondents also demonstrated a lack of historical knowledge, as they ruminated over the origins and forms of segregation – unsure of when it was created, by whom, and for what purpose. Some historical information would help, such as learning that segregation laws were enacted by southern Democrats and local elites as a backlash to political and social gains made by blacks and poor whites during the brief Reconstruction period from the mid-1860s to 1877, and that these acts were supported by many white southerners (and practically no black southerners), enforced by the fledgling Ku Klux Klan terrorist cells, and condoned by the federal government (Feagin 2010b; Litwack 1998; Tourgée [1880] 2009).

The only respondent who hinted of cognizant historical insight into the origins of segregation, Kenneth, 80s, argued that it was a response to how badly white southerners were being treated by black Americans during the Reconstruction period:

> (I: Did you have an understanding of *why* things had been made separate in schools and . . . why the different water fountains?)

> K: A lot of it goes back to the Civil War, back to the days of slavery. . . . it started during Reconstruction and we had all these free blacks. They sorta took over and it's just now really comin' out about how poorly the (3) whites were treated during that time of Reconstruction in the South. . . . the victor writes the history books.

White southerners are unlikely to gain a comprehension of the origins and purpose of segregation without a basic acknowledgment that Jim Crow was driven by notions of white supremacy and supported by white racist terrorism.

A Mere Holdover from the Past

Another theme in how interviewees' explained segregation was portraying the Jim Crow period as a mere holdover from an earlier time, before respondents were born.

Arnold, 80s, saw segregation in housing as something that just kind of happened. He found it curious and inexplicable that a small black community was located in the heart of a white neighborhood: "In our neighborhood, maybe two blocks from our house was this little black enclave of families. . . . I don't know how those houses got in the middle of this white section. It just happened (chuckles) before I came along."

Bernice, 80s, attributed white flight to a simple matter of people following old traditions:

> B: I remember when we lived in south Greensboro and . . . a member of our church, he sold his house to a black family, and everybody thought, "Why did you do that?" and 'course once you do it, the whole block follows, 'cause whites didn't wanna live beside the blacks.
>
> (I: Why was that?)
>
> B: (3) I don't know, I guess it's just a carryover from years that you just didn't associate with 'em, you didn't live next door to 'em or anything.

Neither Arnold nor Bernice viewed whites as the primary, *active* agents of segregation and systemic racism. For Arnold, it was a matter of accounting for the presence of a black neighborhood in the midst of a white neighborhood. In contrast to his view that "it just happened," these types of housing patterns were created or sanctioned by whites – in this case, likely because white city dwellers found it convenient to have a supply of black domestic workers living nearby. Bernice attempted to determine the reason for "white flight" when an African American family moved in to a white neighborhood. She portrayed the dynamic as one without full conscious actors ("whites didn't wanna live beside the blacks"; "it's just a carryover").

Joe, 70s, went even further back in time to explain the origins and structure of racial segregation. He reasoned that Jim Crow was rooted to Biblical times *thousands* of years ago:

> J: There's only one race, and that is the human race.
>
> (I: Given that you think that, what is like to look back on how people used to be much more separate along race? Like the neighborhoods, you know what I mean? If there's only one race, why were we separated?)
>
> J: Well, I guess it goes back to in the Bible time, the tower of Babel. That's when they had the different tongues, the different languages, and I think that's the way it came about.

In each of these perspectives, Jim Crow white southerners were off the hook for enforcing segregation. They are seen as following tradition and dealing with a societal structure that "just happened" long before their time. Segregation-era white southerners, then, are conceived of as inactive and uninvested in white exclusivity and racism. This theme of passivity is evident in the following sections as well, in common explanations of segregation having been an inevitable historical moment and "just the way it was."

Segregation as Inevitable

Another form of the whites as passive and rational theme was evident in how some described legal segregation as an inevitable period – a natural and necessary step from a slavery society to an integrated, equal society. Burt, 80s, reasoned over how segregation came to pass; he indicated that whites responded logically to blacks' long-term status of enslavement:

> If black people came to this country in a state of servitude, they were slaves. . . . Most of 'em couldn't read and write, so from [the perspective of] the average white person, a black person . . . was inferior, not as smart, not educated . . . just

the two races were entirely separate and it's taken this long to break down some of that.

I asked Ellie, 70s, to comment on a value judgment of segregation, and she reasoned through how segregation was simply "what happened next" and how "it had to be that way":

> (I: So, was segregation good, bad? Can it be spoken about in those kind of terms? How would you describe it?)
>
> E: Well that's a strange question, Was it bad. My feeling is if I had known of the inequalities in the schools that would really have bothered me. I didn't know it. That someone wasn't getting the same kind of education I was getting, I didn't know that. . . . But I would never say that segregation was good, because that's separating people. But it was historically, I guess you'd say, what happened next. It was what we had to live with. We had to go forward, we had to be shown the way to go forward, which was what integration came about to do. . . . But I think it had to be that way. I mean there was no going back and fixing that part of it.

In these examples there is acceptance of segregation as inevitable and somewhat unfortunate, but a denial that white awareness was high enough for whites to have been bothered by it, affected by it in any big way, able to comprehend it, or equipped to address its injustices. However, there is also some imposing of whites' lack of awareness onto black southerners – denying them a critical consciousness and full awareness of the inequality too, which comes through in Ellie's words, the South "had to be shown the way to go forward, which was what integration came about to do." In saying "integration *came about*," black Americans are not the primary agents of desegregation and not presented as intricately and effectively organized, against an entrenched white power structure. (I expand upon this theme of downplaying the importance of African Americans' civil rights efforts in Chapter 6.)

Additionally, these excerpts demonstrate an absence of a collective memory of the Reconstruction period and reveal a glaring white southern *forgotten alternative* (Woodward [1955] 2002). Segregation did not *have* to be. The progressive changes being made under southern Reconstruction – voting rights for formerly disenfranchised men, the creation of public schools, and the appointment of working class white and black southern men to political office – *could have* continued. The Jim Crow era did not have to begin, and it did not have to last for nearly 100 years. But there is a white dismissiveness that avoids this knowledge, preferring to view periods of past overt white racist oppression as happening long ago for innocuous reasons, irrelevant today, and simply "just the way it was."

"JUST THE WAY IT WAS" JUSTIFICATIONS

The phrase "just the way it was" was uttered innumerable times in my interviews when people referred to the segregation era. Because I did not find the phrase adequately explanatory, I grew curious to understand what exactly it signified for respondents. Was it used in an honest attempt at an explanation that wound up falling short? Or, could it be that its use was tinged with resistance to an explanation? Gertie, 70s, was a thoughtful interviewee with a quite critical racial perspective; when I noticed that she had not used the phrase during the interview, I asked her to explain what she thought it meant: "I don't know what that means either! Maybe they mean they just accept it because that happened and so therefore it was, and they can't change it. I don't know."

Gertie may be on to something. "Just the way it was" implies an acceptance, either with critique ("just the way it was, but it was unjust") or without critique ("just the

way it was, and therefore it wasn't good or bad"). As the following excerpts demonstrate, "just the way it was" appears to have multiple uses, mostly falling in the uncritical range. Some wielded the phrase in order to avoid contemplating more deeply the injustice of segregation, or to shut down our discussion of it. And some used the phrase to deny a link between segregation and today's society. Overall, the use of the phrasing appears to be related to an unwillingness to consider in-depth the inherent inequalities of Jim Crow.

Arnold, 80s, seemed to use "just the way it was" to avoid critically thinking about the racial past. Here, he wondered how segregation laws got started, such as separate waiting rooms at doctors' offices:

> I don't know how that happened. . . . It's just the way things were. I know that's not a very good explanation, (chuckles) but you know, I don't think it's thought about by many people. We were talkin' about hate while ago, I never heard hate preached. (6) But some things get in you, the practices, and then for several generations this way, it just sort of gets accepted. And I don't think that excuses improper behavior, so I'm not trying to say it's not our fault.

Arnold indicated that southerners should not pretend they had no responsibility for following segregation traditions. At the same time, however, he implied that he has no better explanation than "just the way things were" because "it's not thought about by many people," including himself.

Other respondents used "just the way it was" to justify why (white) southerners did not question or challenge what is now understood to have been segregation's blatant inequalities. In this view, it is normal to accept all the norms of one's society and abnormal to question them (i.e., "It was just the way it was - what did you *expect* us to

do?"). John, 70s, said he wondered about segregation rules, but had no target for his questions:

> J: I have to admit, on occasion, I *began* to question in my own mind WHY were they treated the way they were. I mean, why did they have a separate entrance into the movie theater. . . . And to see water fountains and stuff, colored and white, it bothered me a little bit, but as a teenager, what was I gonna do about it? I accepted it. It was just the way of life.
>
> (I: Do you remember talking about that?)
>
> J: No. I mean, who would I have talked to about it? Would I have gone to one of my white friends and say, "Hey look at the colored guys?" Or go on to a colored guy and say, "Why are you drinking that?" It was *just the way of life*. No, it didn't affect me particularly, because I wasn't black. I am sure it affected them, but it didn't particularly affect me.

In the end here, John seemed to negate his original admission that segregation laws "bothered" him by claiming that segregation was "just the way of life" that "didn't particularly affect" him, much less motivate him to ask questions.

And Ellie, 70s, used "just the way it was" to explain her complete lack of awareness of segregation inequality:

> The thing that I found interesting as I got older is that I was not aware - and I've thought a lot about this - at the theater, when we would walk downtown to the theater I was not aware that they were coming in a different door of the theater. I just wasn't aware of that. I probably paid no attention to the fact that a lot of the department stores, there were different water fountains. You just sort of did your thing and you really weren't questioning what they were doing or what we were doing. It was just the way it was. . . . But in my [church] it was, all people wherever they were, were equal in God's eyes, but what was happening was they were not equal in opportunity, and that's what I think is hard to look back and realize that you lived through that and nobody realized that.

Ellie said that "nobody realized" the contradiction between teachings of equality and segregation, which imposes whites' ignorance and acceptance of Jim Crow inequality onto all southerners, white or otherwise.

Patti, 80s, used "just the way it was" to deny a link between the present and the

Jim Crow past:

> (I: So, how do you think growing up during segregation affects you today, if at all?)
>
> P: (3) Well really not at all, because that was then and this is now, and (3) it's just the way it was. (laughs)

Lastly, some respondents wielded the term "just the way it was" to shut down

discussion. Bernice, 80s, said that she was taught to respect African Americans equally

to whites. When I probed her to explain, then, different forms of personal address for

whites and blacks, she seemed to utilize the "just the way it was" explanation to avoid

acknowledging the double standard:

> (I: I've heard that in many places that white people didn't call black people by 'Mister' or 'Miss,' 'Missus'-)
>
> B: Well, we usually called 'em by their first name.
>
> (I: Why was that, do you think that is?)
>
> B: I don't know. I don't know. Now, the big fat one I was telling ya that stayed with mother, she was "Corina." I don't think I ever knew Corina's last name. . . .
>
> (I: Mm-hm. But, would they call your parents mister and missus?)
>
> B: Uh, you mean the blacks call my parents.
>
> (I: Mm-hm.)
>
> B: (3) She used to call [them] by *their* first name but [she] put mister in front of it.
>
> (I: So, was there a different expectation, then, if you're talking to a black person or a white person? Use "Mister" or "Miss," "Missus" with a white person and first name with a black person?)
>
> B: No, like, again I say that's just the way things were back then. ((chuckles))

Here, by responding "no," Bernice either somehow did not understand my question (because I basically summarized what she told me), or she was avoiding acknowledging the double standard when it came to personal addresses under Jim Crow. In the end she fell back on the "just the way it was" mantra, shutting down our discussion.

As Clarence, 60s, revealed, the "just the way it is" explanation has long been used to shut down discussion and criticism:

> (I: So, you remember wondering about the signs in the office building. Do you remember ever asking about them? People talking about them?)
>
> C: Um (3) yes, but as far as a definitive response, it was more just, 'well that's the way it is.' And 'they have their own place, and we have our own place' as far as drinking facilities. But nothing really made of it. Other than just that's the way it is.

Through interactions like this, whites were taught at a young age not to question segregation. When they did question it, "that's just the way it is" was a common way to end the discussion *without* ever getting close to the actual intent or meaning of legal segregation – white dominance, exclusion, and disenfranchisement of people of color.

As is clear in these examples, the "just the way it was" phrasing accompanies an acceptance of segregation's racial status quo and a justification for respondents recalling having had a limited of awareness of inequality. The phrase is still being used to deter criticism of Jim Crow. It fosters an assumption that there simply *is no* effective way to explain or clarify the inequalities of the time period.

MILD CHALLENGES TO HEGEMONIC SEGREGATION

The majority of my respondents justified or explained their lack of action against, or criticism of, the blatant inequalities of segregation. Many did not conceive of there

having been any other possibilities for their own thinking or actions. And they saw it as inevitable that segregation would come into being and then come to pass; they were merely caught in a moment of history. This perspective is not wholly inaccurate. At very young ages, white southerners were socialized through subtle and overt messages to accept that black southerners were "beneath" them and that any criticisms they may have of "the way things are" would fall on deaf ears. As Cash (1941) argued, the white South became increasingly resistant to criticisms of the racial status quo and held to a "savage ideal" that transcended class barriers, a milieu "whereunder dissent and variety are completely suppressed and men become, in all their attitudes, professions, and actions, virtual replicas of one another" (p. 93-4). Jim Crow socialization, then, by suppressing dissent and baiting whites with notions of racial superiority, insured that nearly all whites would come to embrace segregation's expectations and the underlying white supremacist logic.

Chuck, 70s, illustrated this point well. He said that he "felt pretty bad" about separate facilities in the local theater, but Jim Crow expectations were "too ingrained" for him "to want to take it on":

> C: One thing that always BOTHERED me, we had a mezzanine . . . we had a balcony, then we had a *second* balcony. And the blacks sat in the second balcony, *never* anywhere else. And they had a separate entrance, and a separate concession stand very much smaller than the main one. And if they made any noise up there, the usher went up and called them down about it. . . . There was something about that, that even in my youth in those days seemed very, very wrong to me.

> (I: Was it something you could talk about or express?)

> C: No, it really wadn't anything people talked about much. I just felt like it wadn't *fair*. And I gave [an out-of-town friend] a tour of the Carolina Theatre . . .

> and I took him up to the second balcony, and I showed him where the entrance of the blacks was and all that, and how the seats up there were not comfortable . . . and he said, "Well, how did you *feel* about that?" And I said, "I wadn't BOLD enough to fight it. It was too ingrained to want to take it on. But I felt pretty bad about it."

Chuck revealed that he did have some negative feelings associated with comprehending segregated facilities, but he had been socialized thoroughly enough to keep his feelings to himself. Segregation was a *hegemonic* system, then, created by the ruling class to maintain white dominance. It was a system that worked constantly to ensure buy-in from all citizens and was especially successful at doing so with members of the dominant racial group - whites.

Lillian Smith (1961) was one of the most insightful white southern voices offering criticism of Jim Crow society. She argued in her memoir that, despite their in-depth socialization to hegemonic segregation, white southern children were burdened by a deep sense that Jim Crow was immoral. And yet, there was much that remained unquestioned due to the completeness and normality of Jim Crow socialization: "We worried about things close to home but I don't think we noticed the signs. Somehow we seemed always to walk through the right door. People find it hard to question something that has been here since they were born" (Smith 1961:57).

Very few respondents claimed they had done much if anything to challenge Jim Crow segregation, even though several said that some things had "bothered" them. Gertie, 70s, was one. She said that early on she had a sense that segregation was unjust and she tried to challenge it in her own small, and safe, way: "I noticed that they were at the back on the bus . . . and I know that I remember thinking, 'That's not fair,' and

sometimes I went back there and sat sort of at the dividing line." Gertie's challenge of

sitting *near* the back of the bus was very mild indeed, and only apparent to her, in her

own mind. Gertie implied that something about southernness stifled disagreement over

"unpleasant" things:

> Sometimes I've chastised myself for not standing up and speaking out . . . and it
> sort of goes back to that southern upbringing that you don't rock the boat too
> much over something that's unpleasant. But I have spoken up at times for the
> underdog. But to me the underdog can be anybody . . . it's not necessarily just
> colored people- that's what we called 'em, you know, colored people. (chuckles)

A few respondents gave examples of family members' attempts to deal with the

hegemonic nature of segregated white society. In these examples, somewhat progressive

whites are portrayed as trying to carefully navigate the less tolerant majority views of the

other whites around them. For example, Mack, 80s, imagined what bad things would

have happened to his family had they challenged Jim Crow more publicly, and he said

they would have failed miserably and been deemed crazy:

> I think that there were things that as a white person you picked up on pure
> observation, and you knew that things weren't as they *should* be. But I also
> justified my situation in that *my* family were *trying* to change it as they *could*.
> Now, no, they weren't in the courts . . . but it wadn't the time for that anyway.
> That wouldn't have even gotten to first base in the era that I'm talking about it, in
> government. As a matter of fact, they probably would've locked us up and
> declared us mentally incompetent. Nuts.

Not openly (or even quietly) challenging Jim Crow was a rational decision made by

white southerners; they were benefitting in many ways. But, Mack also argued that some

whites were aware of the racial unfairnesses on some level and genuinely desired some

things to be different. White southerners appear to have questioned small elements of

segregation, often as part of their childhood curiosity. However, only a few whites ever

stepped out against expectations, and not solely or even primarily for fear of retaliation by white society. White southern identity was inextricably linked to white supremacist ideology and the Jim Crow laws that supported it; challenges to Jim Crow were assaults on whites' own identities.

CONCLUSION: NOSTALGIA AS RESISTANCE

White southerners looking back on the official segregation they grew up in—and probably participated in as young adults—tend to view themselves as just children who were not directly involved in maintaining segregation and its etiquette. They remember seeing segregated buses, water fountains, theaters and restrooms, but they view these things as having had no effects in their own lives. They do not speak of the severe impact of segregation on African Americans or its symbolic weight for white southern society and identity.

In the white southern mind, the segregation era included some laws that dictated blacks' physical separation from whites – unfortunate but inevitable practices over which they had no control. Mostly, they see segregation as "just the way it was" - largely accepted at the time and not productively subjected to criticism today. As respondents' narratives asserted in the past two chapters, there was plenty of racial goodwill and progressiveness that balanced out or counteracted the more negative aspects of southern society. Looking back, they can acknowledge that facilities and services for black southerners were substandard – schools, buses, restaurants, hospitals, etc. But when it comes to the social relations between whites and blacks, respondents typically remembered their interactions as kind, personal, and mutually satisfying – therefore, not

part of the "bad stuff." Like most whites, they seem to embrace the notion of "good race relations" in the South that white political leaders insisted were characteristic of the region up to the 1960s (Feagin 2006; Feagin 2010b). White southerners have preserved a nostalgic view of childhood that is impervious to considerations of the overwhelming and overt racism of the Jim Crow era.

All of my respondents grew up in an era of overt anti-black discrimination and white privilege. Even if white southerners were not fully aware of this reality of inequality and exclusion during segregation, it became apparent to every American through the campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement, rendering it impossible to ignore or deny. Considering this, it is telling that few white southerners today conceive of Jim Crow as a time of racist belief and action on the part of white society as a whole. As I argue throughout this manuscript, elderly white southerners today are not simply attempting to interpret the past and suffering from a lack of effective analytical tools, they are *invested* in a positive portrayal of themselves and of white society generally, an investment which hinders their gaining a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the southern racial past, their black neighbors, and their own childhood confusion and dissonance. Whites' allegiance to the idea of white virtuousness has for centuries been an integral component of the white racial frame (Feagin 2010b).

However, nostalgia for one's childhood or for a past simpler way of life is not necessarily an indicator of resistance to reality. I encountered an older African American man during my research who, like my respondents, expressed that the past was better than today. The man is a well-known window washer in Greensboro; as he goes about

his work he is usually singing and making grandiose movements like an artist. One day as I sat writing in a coffee shop, he came in singing, bucket in hand, to begin work. Suddenly he stopped mid-song and announced, "I would love to go back to 1958." My ears pricked up, and the other young white people sitting around me seemed to have similar reactions. He launched into an oratory about how people are not safe anymore to leave our cars unlocked, there is too much violence in media, we have no good role models for children, low-wage labor did not preclude a person from maintaining a decent standard of living, etcetera. Life was altogether simpler and better back then. He said, "I always live in the past. I want to remember the good part of life." I was struck by how similar he sounded to many of my white respondents.

But then, the man began speaking about the troublesome racial past, incorporating it into his arguments, saying that vast improvements have been made in the past several decades, including the U.S. having elected an African American president, Barack Obama. Then, finally, he began to talk about how 1958 was better because racism was easier to nail down, that it has gone more subtle and backstage, saying things like, "You used to know your enemy. Now they wear business suits instead of Klan hoods and smile in your face." Ultimately, the African American window washer argued that, because racism has been an ever-present though morphing reality, he need not include it in his assessment about the good ole days. In other words, racism was a constant across his lifetime, so, controlling for that, life overall was patently better in the 1950s. And, if anything, racism was *easier* to manage back then, so

he could in fact include it in his sweeping claim that the Jim Crow era was a better society.

This layer of critical racial analysis was a very rare component in my interviews with white southerners. As Feagin (2010b) points out, "Black southerners mostly did *not*, and still do not, share such dreamy views of oneness, sharing, and beneficent white-black segregation that have long been part of the white segregationists' version of the traditional racial framing of society" (p. 89, emphasis in original). While they acknowledge that the past included some racial inequalities, ordinary white southerners today maintain a nostalgic view of the segregation era that is largely impervious to considerations of systemic racial oppression. As I will continue to demonstrate in the following chapters, white southern memory is a fundamental and powerful component of the white racial frame, enabling the continued belief in white virtuosity and black deficiency and the continued denial of systemic racism.

CHAPTER VI

DISTANCING AND REJECTION: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AT ARM'S

LENGTH

"The burden our fathers had believed to be the 'colored race,' was our own historical past, the weight on our spirits was that of our childhood, the change we felt unable to make was a change in ourselves" (Smith 1961:228).

White southern interview respondents' portrayals of the Civil Rights Movement and the large-scale changes it rendered were complex, a combination of positive and negative, within and across interviews. On the positive side, they presented the civil rights era as important due to its ushering in integration and expanding opportunities, especially educational, for African Americans. And on the negative side, they presented the time period as unfortunate and troublesome through causing upheaval, fear and disadvantages for whites, and enhanced racial animosities. Looking back on the era, then, they readily acknowledge on some level the utility and worth of the organizing and actions carried out by civil rights activists, for, after all, segregation was not the ideal arrangement if one values human equality. However, when reflecting on what it was like to undergo the 1950s and '60s, white southern respondents' portrayals of the period were typified by a white self-centeredness that emphasized whites' feelings of hardship and victimization and de-emphasized the importance of the movement.

As will become evident in this chapter, white southerners' narratives of the civil rights era distort much of contemporary history and common knowledge, in which it is understood that the activism of the Civil Rights Movement ushered in a time of greater

racial equality, that it was largely carried out according to nonviolent principles, and that activists and participants in civil rights actions were subjected to white segregationist hostility and severe institutional resistance. Despite this historical reality, most of the white southerners interviewed for this study retain a self-centered, white victimology perspective on the civil rights era, asserting their status during the black freedom struggle as innocent, even endangered bystanders, demonstrating a lack of empathy for black southerners, and withholding appreciation of civil rights activism for moving the region away from overt racial oppression and toward equality and justice.

I identified four intersecting themes in respondents' portrayal of civil rights activism. First, the white southern interviewees constructed their civil rights-era selves as racially enlightened and equality-minded. Second, they demonstrated a long-term symbolic detachment from the Civil Rights Movement, which emerged through inaccurate recall of major events and misuse of fundamental terminology of the era. Third, they engaged in persistent distancing from the movement through downplaying civil rights organizing efforts, rejecting their city's identity as a key site of civil rights activism, and trivializing movement leaders' contributions. Fourth, the respondents cast whites as potential or actual victims of civil rights protestors, a move that I term *white victimology*. Overall, there was a distancing in white southern memory where most civil rights activism was remembered as having occurred out of sight and out of mind. But when respondents' narratives included white people amidst civil rights protests, their stories most often were concerned with whites' own victimization and fear. In these stories white southerners were portrayed as victims or potential victims directly at the

hands of black people and indirectly by the perceived chaos and social changes outside their control. The white victimology theme was especially pronounced in respondents' narratives of school desegregation, which I analyze in-depth in the next chapter.

The first theme is a major component of the white racial frame and binds the other themes of detachment, distance and white victimology: the construction of whiteness as normal and virtuous. For centuries white Americans had furthered notions of their own goodness and entitlement to the best of life (Feagin 2010b; Takaki [1979] 1990). African Americans and other people of color had been simultaneously constructed as subordinate, deviant, and troublesome (Feagin 2006; Pieterse 1998). White southerners believed not only in immutable differences between whites and blacks, but in their own entitlement to a cordoned off and superior place in society. Jim Crow-era whites, then, viewed their own experience and perspective as the centerpiece of a stable society; challenges or changes to a society created by "virtuous" whites were felt as attacks on whites collectively and personally.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, many respondents claimed that they rarely if ever experienced "problems" with African Americans during segregation. In their view, black and white southerners "got along well." As will be clear in this chapter, "racial problems" and "racial violence" are associated with the onset of the Civil Rights Movement. This perception is illustrated well in the following exchange, in which a couple explained the causes of the "real" racial problems:

> Husband: I remember the "Wilson" family. I was their boy. They were African Americans. [The father] said he raised me. And we thought that way about 'em, played with 'em, didn't have any problems. 'Course we didn't go to church with 'em, didn't go to school with 'em – it was segregated there. But (4) didn't have

any real problems. Rode the bus all the time, and 'course they sat in the back of the bus. I never saw the bus driver ask one to move. You really didn't see much controversy until World War II.

(I: So things seemed to be easygoing between people?)

Husband: Yeah.

Wife: Oh yes! They didn't cause trouble. I mean, we all got along! . . .

Husband: Now it wadn't all roses- every now and then there'd be somebody stir up something. Back in- when was it, in the sixties I guess, when we had most of our race riots here. And most of that, I think, started (4) in the [black] schools and in the universities, A&T-

Wife: And the integration of the city schools too.

In this view, looking back, the segregation era is maintained as a time of easygoing relations between white and black southerners. The onset of racial trouble, then, is conceived of generally as the civil rights era: "controversies" of the post-World War II period, "trouble" "stirred up" by black students, and the desegregation of public schools. This perspective forms the foundation of ordinary white southerners' memory of the racial past as expressed through my interview respondents: segregation was a time of stability and neighborly relations maintained by the good citizens of the South, and the civil rights era was an affront to the kind-hearted people and their southern traditions.

GREENSBORO, THE CIVIL RIGHTS CITY

During the segregation era, North Carolina had the reputation as the most racially progressive southern state (Chafe 1981). And the city of Greensboro in particular had long prided itself for being a particularly unique space of racial enlightenment in the state, seemingly proved by its early settlement by abolitionist Quakers, multiple institutions of higher education including two historically black institutions, and its

embrace of successful Jewish textile entrepreneurs. However, as historian Bill Chafe (1981) argued in his book on Greensboro, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, the city's good reputation contrasted sharply with its history of white dominance and typical southern-style segregation practices. Underneath the guise of the "progressive mystique," Greensboro's white elite monopolized power, subordinated African Americans, and resisted any major changes to the racial arrangement throughout the entire civil rights era (Chafe 1981).

However, despite white Greensboro's sense that its uniqueness lies in its progressiveness, Greensboro, North Carolina, registers in the contemporary American consciousness in one primary way, as the "birthplace" of the student sit-in demonstrations of the early-1960s. Greensboro is one of the most prominent "civil rights cities," along with the likes of Little Rock, Arkansas, and Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. It was college freshmen students from the historically black North Carolina A&T State University – Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr. (later, Jibreel Khazan), and David Richmond, known collectively as the "Greensboro Four" – who planned and initiated the action to sit and asked to be served at the whites-only lunch counter of one of the city's most prominent downtown stores, Woolworth's five and dime.

Greensboro is known today as a site of African Americans' struggle against white supremacy and white-imposed segregation. Although Greensboro was not the first location of sit-in protests by African Americans against segregated facilities (recorded demonstrations occurred as early as the late-1930s), the Greensboro protest inspired,

within a few months, similar peaceful demonstrations in 53 other cities throughout the South (Sokol 2006) and ultimately led to the desegregation of a wide range of public facilities and white-owned businesses. These student sit-in demonstrations sent a loud and revolutionary message to the white South that African Americans were not in fact content with Jim Crow as usual (Sokol 2006).

Dismantling segregated facilities in Greensboro was indeed a struggle. Woolworth's management refused to serve sit-in protestors, citing alliance with "local custom" and opting to close down its store rather than subject itself to the protests. For a time, sit-in protests ceased to engage in negotiations with local elites to reach a mutually agreeable arrangement (Chafe 1981). Not gaining a favorable result, sit-ins resumed and were replicated at other places of business. The white management of the Greensboro Woolworth's finally acquiesced and served its first seated black lunch counter customers – its own employees – nearly six months after the first demonstration, on July 25, 1960.

Indeed, Greensboro's civil rights history extended well before the early-1960 lunch counter demonstrations. The city was notoriously slow to implement school desegregation, and the handful of African American students allowed to transfer to previously white-only city schools in the late-1950s faced significant harassment (Chafe 1981:72). Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Greensboro to preach in 1958 and only at the last minute did a venue – historically black female Bennett College – agree to take him, risking economic reprisal (Chafe 1981:80). By 1959, enrollment in the local chapter of the NAACP soared past the counts of previous years, to 2,300 (Chafe 1981:79). Whites' professed racial progressiveness and their attachment to white supremacy

provided the climate within which African Americans moved toward civil rights

organizing in Greensboro. As Chafe (1981) states, "the sit-in demonstrations represented

a dramatic extension of, rather than a departure from, traditional patterns of black

activism in Greensboro" (p. 98).

Greensboro's civil rights activity continued beyond 1960 as well. According to

Chafe (1981):

> There was almost a pendulum motion in the history of Greensboro's civil rights
> struggles. Blacks wanted to trust in the good faith of whites. Only after frustration
> reached a peak did overt rebellion occur, to be followed again by quiet and
> patience when promises of change were offered. Then the spirit of rebellion would
> rise once more, set in motion by yet another betrayal of promises made in the heat
> of crisis. (P. 110)

In 1962, with a newly established chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE),

hundreds of demonstrators began picketing whites-only cafeterias in downtown

Greensboro on a daily basis (Chafe 1981:112). The following summer saw

unprecedented levels of protests at white businesses, and thousands were arrested, filling

all available jail space (Chafe 1981). But despite the continued demonstrations,

Greensboro's white residents clung to the belief that African Americans in their city

were accepting of segregation and that the protests were instigated by "outsiders" (Chafe

1981:127). In June 1963 Mayor David Schenck stated that the protests had "caused a

serious erosion of the mutual respect and friendship that has existed between the races in

Greensboro. This . . . will cause all our citizens of all races to be the loser, and

Greensboro's progressive spirit to be replaced by animosity and bitterness" (as quoted in

Chafe 1981:138).

Greensboro's "progressiveness" was not a complete façade. Greensboro did have

many white liberals who favored desegregation. As Chafe (1981) points out, even Mayor

Schenck favored integration (p. 138). But, the city's white leaders consistently supported

the "right" of white business owners to maintain segregated facilities and the "right" of

white residents to continue patronizing whites-only businesses. Thus, Greensboro

demonstrated time and again its allegiance to white supremacy and the white racial

frame where whites were viewed as good people who were not responsible for any of

blacks' grievances and who were entitled to carry on with Jim Crow business as usual.

CONSTRUCTING THE ENLIGHTENED WHITE SOUTHERN SELF

As they were asked to think back about their civil rights-era selves, most

respondents portrayed themselves, and often other whites, as racially enlightened people.

They did this through positioning whites as passive bystanders during civil rights

actions, claiming that they had always favored integration over segregation, and

contrasting themselves with white segregationists. This construction of the white self as

racially progressive pairs with the phenomenon I will discuss later of civil rights-era

white victimology, for only good, nonracist people could be construed as victims of the

civil rights movement and its outcomes.

A primary way that respondents constructed the civil rights-era enlightened white

southern self was to portray white southerners as passive bystanders, uninvolved and

uninvested in protecting segregation. By and large whites were cast as people in limbo,

waiting and watching from a distance, and then accepting the changes that came to pass.

From Darla's, 70s, perspective, white people may have had opinions about civil rights

activism, but they "just went on about their business." Whites were thus portrayed as

bystanders, not actively fighting for or against segregation:

> I was not actually affected by it like maybe some people were. I think maybe blacks were probably a lot more affected by it than the whites in the change that was happening, because whites more or less just went on about their business and either they hoped the blacks would stay in their place or they wanted them to have equal rights, and I just don't feel like over my life [I] have been that affected by race relations.

Darla, as well as other respondents, asserted that white southerners were somewhat

opinionated about the movement and reticent about what might happen to the racial

arrangement, but they stayed uninvolved and calm during protests. These portrayals

essentially erase what was severe white southern resistance to the black freedom

struggle.

A second way that respondents portrayed their civil rights-era selves as racially

progressive was to apply contemporary logic and claim to fathom no reason for

segregated facilities through statements like, "it should never have been that way" and

"it needed to change." This reasoning complements the confusion, discussed in Chapter

5, as to where segregation came from, who created it, and why, and when. This

reasoning is divorced from the Jim Crow-era historical reality that whites created and

enforced segregation laws in order to actively subordinate African Americans (Kennedy

[1959] 1990). It should be acknowledged that, even if many white southerners deny

having understood the white supremacist logic undergirding Jim Crow, they willingly

followed segregation laws, traditions, and etiquette, a system that clearly reflected and

maintained white supremacy.

Indeed, as my white southern respondents furthered notions of themselves as racially enlightened, they justified their acquiescence to segregation. T.J., 60s, said that he both disagreed with segregation policies and considered rude the actions of sit-in protestors at Woolworth's lunch counter:

> Here I am from the South and I said, well gosh I think they ought to be served, but I also think some of them ought to get up and let people sit down and eat. That was my feelings. . . . I mean here it didn't make any sense that a black person could work in the kitchen and prepare the food, but yet he couldn't sit down and eat it. [Traveling outside the Deep South], I saw [integrated restaurants] and I came back home and said, god, I can't believe this, you know. But I think I felt angry at first in the respect that they wouldn't let other people sit down and eat.

T.J. credited his travels outside the South for his enlightenment about the potential for desegregation of public spaces. Many other respondents alluded also to the hegemonic nature of Jim Crow, to the seeming reality that there simply were no alternatives to following segregation expectations, i.e., "that's just the way it was." Here Harmony, 80s, attempted to reconcile the assertion of her racially progressive self with her respect for laws:

> H: I didn't see any reason to have all that [sitting in]- well, I did see the reason, because they didn't allow it. Whoever that managed the Woolworth's store down there and the eating area, [I] guess they were bein' told by their bosses what to do and all, and I couldn't go along with that.
>
> (I: What if you had been working there and you had been told to- ?)
>
> H: Oh yeah. That would be a different story, you're right, 'cause I've always felt like you're supposed to obey the *law*, and that in a sense was a law of *management,* and I couldn't do a whole lot to- I mean, I guess you're thinkin', 'Well you could have quit if they said you couldn't serve them.' And knowin' me, I probably would have. *But* I don't know that that would be a general thing to think, you know.

First, Harmony dismissed the need for sit-in protests, and then she quickly admitted that the sit-ins challenged unjust practices. When she claimed that she was the kind of person who would refuse unjust orders, I asked her to consider the concrete scenario of being asked to actively enforce segregation. Her unreconciled contradiction emerged at that point, as she claimed both that she "probably would have" followed her own moral compass *and* that she – a law-abiding citizen – might not have even thought to do so.

This respect-for-law perspective no doubt strengthened a great many whites' resistence to the aims of the Civil Rights Movement. The protest actions carried out by African American activists and their allies directly challenged the "law and order" of a white supremacist society that white southerners regarded as normal and good. Since the founding of the United States, the law had been created by white elites and interpreted and enforced by whites in ways that preferenced whites (Bell 1987). And law continues to be theorized and interpreted in ways that reinscribe white privilege, deny systemic racism, and delegitimize legal challenges brought by people of color (Moore 2008). Thus, law and insistence on the goodness of the law have been and continue to be powerful tools of white supremacy. Through taken-for-granted legal reverence, white Americans have long justified and exacerbated the inequalities imposed upon African Americans and other Americans of color.

A third way that respondents established themselves as racially enlightened during the civil rights era was to tell stories about how they had disagreed with white segregationists. For example, Burt, 80s, said integration did not "bother him," but he knew white people who were upset by it:

(I: What did you think about integration when it started to happen?)

B: (7) It didn't bother me a bit in the world. I was glad to see it 'cause I thought it ought to be, just by a question of right and wrong. . . . I knew a lot of people that thought that it was bad for both races, bad for the blacks to try to be like the whites. Instead of advancing on their own, they was copying white ways.

While Burt presented his former self as passively knowledgable of other whites' displeasure at desegregation, Mack, 80s, told of how he argued often with other white people about the oddity of segregated lunch counters – importantly, not in terms of segregation being unjust, but based on what a most logical segregation policy would be:

Woolworth asked black people to . . . buy every place else in that store but you can't buy anything at lunch counter- that seemed to me to be totally asinine, and I verbalized that to all my white friends. And I said, "Come on. Be real. If you don't want black clientele at all, *fine*. Put a sign up saying, 'no blacks admitted.' That's your store. Okay I'll go with that. At least a black person would know they're not wanted there and their money's no good there . . . but to say, 'Come on in and spend your money at the jewelry counter and at the perfume counter and at the candy counter and all these counters,' but then I can't go . . . sit down and eat lunch?" I said, "That dudn't even make *sense* to me."

Here, Mack presented his civil rights-era self as more enlightened and logical than many of his white contemporaries who could not recognize what a reasonable segregationist policy was.

On the surface, all of these examples illustrate that there was a range of white responses to civil rights activism and desegregation. However, I argue also that these anecdotes operated to establish the speaker as more racially enlightened than some of his or her peers. After all, while a few people did admit that they responded somewhat unfavorably to some civil rights actions, no one told a story of being surrounded by white people who were significantly more racially progressive than oneself. By and

large, the respondents presented themselves as racially progressive observers of the Civil

Rights Movement who were uninvolved in any vitriolic resistance.

SYMBOLIC DETACHMENT FROM THE MOVEMENT

While respondents established themselves as racially progressive at the onset of

the Civil Rights Movement, they overwhelmingly demonstrated a long-term detachment

and persistent distancing from civil rights actions and outcomes. The detachment came

through in respondents' vague and inaccurate memories as well as their misuse of key

terminology of the era. Thereby they revealed a disconnection from the movement and

the people involved – civil rights were a "black" thing and did not resonate with them

enough to be integrated into memory alongside other events of daily life at the time.

Indeed, as I will discuss later in this chapter, respondents' memories of civil rights

seemed to be especially associative with blackness and criminality, where peaceful

protests by black students in the early 1960s were conflated with "riots" and "violence"

perpetrated across the nation by African Americans over the past several decades. The

social detachment that white southerners fostered at the time between themselves and the

events and participants of the Civil Rights Movement appears to have been largely

preserved.

Sixty? Late as That? Faulty Memory as Detachment

One manifestation of white southerners' detachment from the Civil Rights

Movement was their faulty recall of major era events. Several respondents had trouble

determining when the lunch counter sit-ins happened and had to ask me for assistance.

This memory gap is particularly noteworthy because the 1960 lunch counter sit-in

movement by college students is *the* thing that makes Greensboro, North Carolina, a

known city to the rest of the country (although some respondents boasted of other

prominent local events, such as having been the site of numerous "decisive" American

war battles and the boyhood home of news anchor Edward R. Murrow). As the

following examples will demonstrate, much of elderly white Greensboro, at least, has

avoided remembering the sit-ins and has not embraced them as part of their own history.

Through this my respondents reveal their loyalty to the white racial frame; they do not

conceive of the sit-ins as part of their own personal or collective history.

One woman found it surprising that the sit-ins were as late as 1960. "When were

the sit-ins, '51?" she asked. When I told her the correct date, she remained confused;

"Sixty? Late as that?" she mused. Another woman asked for my assistance recalling

which came first, the sit-ins or a deadly shooting in town that occurred nearly two

decades years later, in 1979. Mae, 70s, got two vital facts of the Greensboro sit-ins

wrong – the famed date of the first sit-in (February 1, 1960) and the way in which

Woolworth's lunch counter was segregated (African American customers had to get

take-out and were not served seated):

> They changed the name of the street [downtown] to February Thirteen- that was
> the day they went in . . . Woolworth's had a lunch counter, and I would go in
> there to eat lunch, and blacks would always have to sit at the very back. And so
> this particular day they went in and sat down up at the front. And servers were
> not going to serve them, and they just sat there until they did, and I think [that]
> was the beginning of the integration here in Greensboro.

Even though Mae frequented Woolworth's whites-only lunch counter, she recalled,

erroneously, that African American customers had a separate sit-down eating area.

When respondents noticed inaccuracies in their recall, a typical way they responded was to rationalize the error as a function of how busy their lives had been during that time. For example, after Bernice, 80s, and I discussed the sit-ins at length, I asked her if she had been married at that time:

B: No, I didn't get married 'til 1940, '41.

(I: Um, the sit-ins started in 1960.)

B: Mm-hm. (5) Oh yeah, I was married at the time of the sit-ins, yes. But I was busy raisin' my family and didn't think too much about things like that.

Similarly, Verna, 80s, used the excuse of her busy family life to explain her lack of memory of the sit-ins:

(I: How old were you when the sit-ins started?)

V: I don't even know when it was. When was it?

(I: 1960.)

V: 1960, let me see. (4) I was born in [the 1920s]- and you said 1960?

(I: Mm-hm.)

V: Okay, I was about 30, 40 years old and [had several] children. So you see, I was pretty occupied with my own children.

In yet another similar example, Sally, 70s, rationalized why she could not remember the date of the sit-ins:

(I: So what were you doing during the sit-ins here when it started?)

S: When'd they start? I don't remember the actual date.

(I: Well the one at Woolworth's, the first one-)

S: It was in the fifties, wasn't it?

(I: '60, February '60.)

S: 1960? We were just comin' back to Greensboro [after living away for a few years] . . . I was nursing a baby (laughs loudly) . . . and my husband was just coming back and going to work here. So we were not politically involved and not very aware at that point. We had our own issues. (laughs loudly)

In these three examples, it was only after I helped Bernice, Verna, and Sally place the sit-ins in a particular year that they constructed a reason for their failure to remember even a ballpark date of the sit-ins – they were too busy with motherhood. It appears, then, that the sit-ins were not available in their minds as a temporally orienting event. They could reconstruct their lives based on the prompt of a particular year, but not on the prompt of a nationally-recognized and commemorated civil rights event in their own city.

Many respondents portrayed the city's civil rights protests as things that were happening out of sight and out of mind. They explained that they were wrapped up in their daily lives and did not pay much attention to things that did not affect them. Of course, as will be clear in a later section, part of the reason that some respondents did not personally encounter much civil rights activities personally is because whites believed they were in danger and encouraged each other to avoid the downtown areas during periods of protest.

The fact that many white people did not personally witness the sit-ins or other protests, and did not remember them clearly, cannot entirely be a function of having been too wrapped up in the mundane. Undoubtedly parents and young adults in any era are busy people. But the interviewees' lack of attention and memory owes to their lack of investment in the Civil Rights Movement and its goals. If the sit-ins had resonated

with them, one can surmise that they would have effortlessly mustered the time and mental energy to turn their attention to the movement and to integrate memories of movement activism into the narratives of their lives.

Arlene, 70s, alluded to this alternative explanation for the lapse in memory. She said, like several other respondents, that she could not recall when the sit-ins occurred and reasoned that she must have been too busy at the time to have paid attention. But she also indicated that she was "self-centered" and not in tune with concerns in the black community:

> That would have been my first year of [a new job], and there again (3) I was busy doing something else (4) and if I was aware of it, I don't remember. I don't remember discussing it with my parents or my siblings. (5) Oh my life musta been sort of self-centered! (laughing)

As Arlene indicated, being busy at the time may have been only part of why she did not remember the sit-ins well. She laughingly gave a hint at another factor: a white self-centeredness and social distance from the concerns and wellbeing of African Americans.

This explanation is further evidenced by respondents' excellent memory of other events during the civil rights era. For example, I asked several interviewees to comment on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Jr. in November 1963. Their responses were not at all typified by the vagueness in their recall of events associated with the black freedom struggle. Mostly they remembered exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news of Kennedy's shooting, and they remember how they *felt* about the tragedy as well – devastated, patriotic, and deeply worried. On the other hand, as I will discuss in a later section, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination five years later, in April 1968, was not a particularly resonant event for

most of my respondents. The emotional-empathetic connection, then, is key in memory (Christianson and Safer 1996), and its lack in my respondents' recall of civil rights activism is indicative of the social distance separating segregation-era whites from their black neighbors and their active distancing from the movement. Interracial connection and empathy have not been fostered among white southerners, and widespread social alexithymia and collective forgetting has been the result.

Segregation-Integration: Misuse of Language as Detachment

Another interesting phenomenon in the interviews that demonstrated white southerners' social detachment from civil rights-era black concerns was the misuse of era terminology – particularly confusion around the words segregation and integration. I argue here that, regardless of the similar structure of the two words themselves, the pattern of this particular mistake in language is indicative of whites' long-term social distance, or disconnection, from the deep significance of the segregation and civil rights eras. The frequency with which the two terms were transposed in the interviews demonstrates that many white southerners lack fluency, at least in spoken language, of the racial past from their own lifetimes.

John, 70s, struggled to come up with the word integration: "The only thing I remember basically about it is what I saw about it on the news or the television, the occurrences down in Selma, Alabama and places like this where the National Guard had

to, in a sense, force other- uh, what am I'm trying to- can't even say the word- uh, force integration. My mind went blank."[8]

When speaking, several respondents confused the terms segregation and integration, often without catching the mistake. They did this despite the fact that integration – school desegregation in particular – hit close to home and they had had strong feelings about it and many conversations with other white people about it at the time. Arnold, 80s, flubbed on the terms: "It's hard to think back . . . it's hard to think that we even thought about living in an integrated- in a seg- a segregated society." Also, with some help from me, Trudie, 60s, realized that she had used the wrong term:

> (I: You would have been [in your teens] when the Supreme Court decided the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. And that ruled separate schools unconstitutional-)
>
> T: Oh. Yeah, uh-huh.
>
> (I: So that was, I think, sort of the first news that-)
>
> T: You had to segre-
>
> (I: they were integrating-)
>
> T: INTEGRATE the schools.
>
> (I: Yeah.)
>
> T: I'm using the wrong word, I'm sorry, okay.

Jolene, 80s, had a sense that she used the wrong term and asked me to correct her:

> J: When I was going to school we didn't have black children in our school . . . I don't know how long it's been segregated, or what you call it?

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[8] In these examples I edited the excerpts less heavily in order to reveal the rhetorical incoherence and illustrate respondents' struggling with the language.

(I: Integrated?)

J: Integrated. I don't know how long that's been.

And here is an example of Darla, 70s, getting the terminology right, then wrong twice,

then finally self-correcting:

> It seemed at that time, they were more interested in integration than they were in education (p. 18). . . . the first year he went to a segregated school, the principal there was a black person. . . . 1970 he went to uh, the first segregated school (p. 19). . . . until the schools are, um, segrega- uh, uh integrated and, um, everybody was concentratin' more, and of course I think that integration was a good thing . . . (p. 20).[9]

Often respondents would make these errors at a point in the interview after we had both

correctly used the terms. When I was speaking I always used the right terms, so they

received accurate prompts, but it did not always effect their own accurate use of the

terms. For example, Delilah, 70s, thought I was referring to the integration of her

neighborhood in this exchange:

> D: At night we'd play on the curbs 'til it got dark, games and- (6)
>
> (I: And I guess the neighborhoods were segregated?)
>
> D: Not then.
>
> (I: Not then?)
>
> D: We had no blacks livin' in our neighborhood from the time I was born until (4) mm, 1980.

These respondents know what they mean when they speak about segregation and

integration, but somehow the terms segregation and integration are not well assimilated

into their language. So why do they use the wrong terms? Certainly segregation and

---

[9] Page numbers are from the interview transcript and are included to signify that this is a string of excerpts that occurred over several minutes of the interview.

integration have four syllables each and some phonetic similarity, but there may be a fuller explanation. As semantic opposites, the words are linked conceptually, but they may also be a temporal linkage. It is possible that neither of the words became prominent in white southern consciousness and/or common spoken language until the 1950s and 1960s with *Brown v. Board*, school desegregation, and civil rights protests. If what my respondents say is true, that they conceived of their way of life during Jim Crow as "life" not "segregation" and did not question the racial arrangement much until forced to by the Civil Rights Movement, then these two words – segregation and integration – may have emerged somewhat simultaneously in their conscious awareness.

A comment by Ava, 60s, supports this notion that Jim Crow whites did not perceive of the segregation era as "segregation" while they were in the midst of it. For, when I asked her if it was difficult to remember things having to do with race during segregation, she fired back: "Well you see, I never KNEW segregation AS segregation, so therefore I don't REMEMBER it as segregation!" Ava's explanation is only partly useful for this analysis of the contemporary confusion of the terms segregation and integration, however. After all, one's language is inevitably altered throughout a lifetime of six or eight decades and tracks with changes in social discourse. Respondents' linguistic adaptation to contemporary speech, for example, was evident in the way that many effortlessly used post-civil rights racial terms such as "African Americans." They do have the ability, then, to adapt and maintain fluency in racialized language.

Therefore, I posit that mainstream American consciousness has not adequately incorporated the history of Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement. Elderly white

southerners' segregation-integration lingustic error is indicative both of their social distance from the significance of the civil rights era and of the failure of contemporary mainstream discourse to keep the American people knowledgable and fluent in the historical realities of the Jim Crow segregation and civil rights eras. Indeed, most of today's youth and young adults, who have received little historical context or discourse beyond the standard school textbook treatment, think of the Jim Crow era as far in the past and not particularly relevant or connected to today's society.

My respondents' lingustic error pattern is perhaps also indicative of white southeners' not having sought out historical facts of the segregation era. By and large, aging white southerners have not made a study of the racial past from their own lifetimes and attempted to gain a deeper context or multiple perspectives. (We can imagine how this failure to seek out resources and additional accounts might contrast with their study of other significant things from their lifetimes, such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the lives of U.S. Presidents.) Recall in Chapter 5 how people mused over where Jim Crow laws and traditions came from, who created them, and why. If, in the post-civil rights decades, white southerners have not talked much about segregation and civil rights in an informed manner, then they have not done the work of differentiating the opposite terms "segregation" and "integration" in their minds or in their vocabulary.

PERSISTENT DISTANCING FROM THE MOVEMENT

Respondents' faulty recall and misuse of civil rights-era terminology demonstrated a detachment from the Civil Rights Movement and its participants. The following discussion analyzes the more active ways in which white southerners continue

to put distance between themselves and the movement. Indeed, because of its more

active nature, we could call it social *distancing*, where respondents appeared to be

pushing the movement away from them to this day, refusing to accept it as part of their

own southern identity and downplaying its importance. Even though white southerners

appreciated some of the changes made possible by the Civil Rights Movement, such as

being able to eat at any restaurant with a black friend, they did not extend gratitude to

the organizers or participants of the movement. Instead, they mostly portrayed the

movement as something done by blacks *for* blacks. Their narratives even demonstrated

high levels of trivialization and disdain for Martin Luther King, Jr. Many white

southerners refused to embrace the contemporary celebratory aspects of the Civil Rights

Movement, such as commemorations of key events and activists, wanting to push that

history to the margins of American consciousness, or at least keep it segregated in the

black community.

Downplaying Civil Rights Organizing

Several respondents downplayed or trivialized African Americans' efforts at

organizing and implementing civil rights protests. This was evident in flippant

descriptions of how demonstrators carried out their actions and in lighthearted portrayals

of protestors that belied the serious hazards risked by activists and their dedication to

acting for justice.

One example of a flippant description of demonstrators' actions came from Mae,

70s, who said regarding the lunch counter protestors, "They didn't make any fuss or

anything. They just got together and they just ambled in to Woolworth's and asked to be

served." Mae's description of the sit-ins was dismissive of the effort. She stated that protestors "*just* got together" and "*just ambled in* to Woolworth's," as if the organizination had been spontaneous, the implementation lackadaisical, and the response swift and favorable. In actuality, Greensboro's sit-in movement was intricately planned, lasted months at numerous places of business, and hundreds, then thousands, of students from area colleges and high schools participated. Such organization was necessitated by the resistant response of business owners who did not want to get rid of their segregation policies, especially not under pressure from African American youth. Thus, to downplay the organization required is to tacitly deny the formidable white segregationist resistance that protestors were up against. Respondents rarely indicated that most white business owners fought hard to maintain some form of segregation policy.

Some respondents even presented civil rights protests as something easy to do, something that apparently carried few risks. Florence, 80s, claimed to have been confused as to why African Americans waited so long to protest: "Had I been born black, I would've protested before *they* did. I would have. I have never understood how they had the patience as long as they did." Similarly, John, 70s, thought that he would have disputed segregation forcefully if he were African American:

> I remember Rosa Parks who refused to move to the back of the bus. And bless her heart, more power to her. I mean, I can't imagine being black and having somebody tell me where I had to sit. I'd be just belligerent enough, we woulda had a contest I think. (laughing) I mean, I am no great big and powerful built [man], but I can be mean as hell. (laughing)

John laughed off the idea of his "black" self getting in fights over segregation, not indicating that African Americans and other activists risked enormous short-term and

long-term consequences when they challenged Jim Crow laws. As is clear in each of these examples, when considering black protestors' experiences, the white southern respondents indicated that the activism was fairly easy, without serious risk, and could have been undertaken much earlier. The portrayals implicitly conceive of the (white) southern atmosphere as accepting of protest and fair-minded, so that (black) people were free at any time to stand up and voice their dissatisfaction.

Even those respondents who claimed to have had very favorable views towards civil rights protestors downplayed the anti-oppression goal of movement tactics. Instead, their accounts tended to have congratulatory or patronizing tones. One couple complimented the student sit-in protestors for dressing well and being studious:

Husband: I thought it was *great*-

Wife: They really did flock to be a part of it . . . and the students were all studying-

Husband: As it should have been.

Wife: That's the interesting part. And they came to the counter looking nice.

This couple seemed most impressed with the calm demeanor of the protestors. Notably, they did not allude to the purpose of the sit-ins: to challenge white racist policies. As the wife claimed, she felt "the interesting part" of the sit-ins was the fact that college students staging a peaceful sit-in protest in the middle of the academic year would bring their homework.

These are all subtle ways in which respondents downplayed the key role that civil rights organizers played in furthering American human rights. By crediting protestors for being nonviolent, "looking nice," "just ambling in," and *finally* standing up for

themselves, the white southern interviewees disregarded the fundamental realities that movement participants put their lives and livelihoods on the line to challenge the Jim Crow system of oppression, and that they maintained the movement, against severe white resistance and backlash, by intricate strategizing and steadfastness. Thus, even some of respondents' most positive portrayals of the Civil Rights Movement diminished the value and worth of movement participants.

Disowning Greensboro's Civil Rights Identity

In addition to the subtle ways that respondents downplayed civil rights organizing, there were examples of respondents more actively disowning Greensboro's identity as an important civil rights city. Several respondents said that they had been told that Greensboro was not in fact the site of the *first* sit-ins, illustrating that they needed no concrete evidence to revoke Greensboro's title. Sally, 70s, said she heard it said "many times" that Greensboro did not spearhead the sit-in movement: "Actually they say somebody out in Ohio did it first." Florence, 80s, placed the "real" birthplace elsewhere:

> I thought it really started out in Omaha, Nebraska, is what I heard and that they did not get the publicity Greensboro got. That's what I've *heard*. Now I don't know how true that is. I've tried to look it up on the computer and I hadn't been able to trace . . .

Florence indicated here that, although she unsuccessfully attempted to use the Internet to verify that Greensboro did not spearhead the sit-in movement, she persisted in furthering the notion that the sit-ins likely began elsewhere, far away.

Similarly, a married couple argued that Greensboro's sit-ins were nothing special and should not be regarded as "the model":

Husband: Well it was advertised as being one of a kind, which is far from the truth. There were sit-ins all over the country. People have just recently come to realize that. . . . And I think there were sit-ins that happened before ours did.

Wife: Oh well they had 'em before. There were other sit-ins. Greensboro likes to say that it was the model.

These examples demonstrate a resistance to embracing Greensboro's identity as the birthplace of the sit-in movement. Indeed, there were instances of prior sit-in protests, dating back at least to the late-1930s. However, the "Greensboro Four," Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr. (later, Jibreel Khazan), and David Richmond, are lauded because their act on Februrary 1, 1960, rapidly inspired a wave of hundreds of similar protests and ultimately forced the dismantling of segregation policies at thousands of white-owned businesses. The respondents cited above, however, argued that because Greensboro was not the site of the very first sit-in, their city warranted no acclaim for spearheading a formidable movement.

Patti, 80s, told a story of being flabbergasted by some northerners who came to visit years after the sit-ins and insisted that they go downtown to see the Woolworth building:

When (my friend got married) every Yankee friend of her sweet Yankee husband decided they were gonna come. . . . And the first thing *anybody* wanted to do was go to Woolworth's. And, *"Why do you want to go to Woolworth's?"* "For the sit-ins." Uh, (laughing) "You want to go to *Woolworth's*? It's *closed*! You can't get in there!" "Well, we just want to see it, and we'll all go down there and stand on the street and look at Woolworth's." . . . I haven't gotten over that yet! (laughing) You just gonna go stand on the street and look at the closed-up building?! (laughs) And these were all white people who were doing it, you know.

Patti went on to reason that out-of-towners are naturally more interested in notorious local sites than community members. However, Patti's long-lasting astonishment reflects

something more, that the sit-ins have not been adopted by white Greensboro as a point of

pride and have not been integrated into the city identity.

In the following exchange with a married couple, the wife argued vehemently

against the city identifying with or commemorating the sit-ins:

> Wife: That museum should be on the campus of A&T, where the students came from, not in downtown Greensboro. . . . And I'm not against the museum . . . but it should be down on the campus where the A&T students were and have it as a commemoration to *them*.
>
> Husband: Isn't that statue of the four down on campus?
>
> (I: Mm-hm)
>
> Wife: You see, put the museum down there with that.
>
> (I: Do you have any pride that the sit-ins happened here and that they started sit-ins all over the South?)
>
> Wife: . . . No, I'm not proud of that, no. No, we have other *things* to be proud of. O'Henry was born here, Dolley Madison was born here. Okay? Yes, Edward R. Murrow was born here. We are *very* proud of those citizens, absolutely. I admire these four young men that took the initiative for the sit-in. I admire their courage for it-
>
> Husband: Took a lot of guts.
>
> Wife: but these other people are to be admired more for what they did and the legacy that they have left for us.
>
> (I: Why is that?)
>
> Wife: Well, Dolley Madison was the wife of our fourth President! . . . So Dolley was quite a lady. O'Henry is known for his short stories. They've been translated into many, many, *many* foreign languages . . . Edward R. Murrow, who was the *leading* commentator and correspondent during the Second World War . . . *These* are the people that really accomplished an awful lot. We had other people that accomplished things. We had another black man who did an awful lot for the city of Greensboro, Charles Henry Moore, who is not very well-known, but he was a teacher and professor at the colleges here. He was instrumental in getting Bennett College established in Greensboro. He was instrumental in raising money for the

black hospital, L. Richardson Hospital. He opened the door for a lot of the blacks and unfortunately he is not remembered like these other people, but he contributed a lot to *improve* their way of life.

While this woman and her husband claimed to admire the courage of the sit-in protestors, she could not stomach the fact that sit-in demonstrators had gained notoriety in her city. The sit-ins all occurred at white-run segregated businesses and facilities and led to the permanent desegregation of those spaces, but this woman wanted all acknowledgments of those sit-ins sequestered "where the students were" in the black community. She preferred that the larger Greensboro community recognize other individuals who left a "legacy" "for us." Interestingly, the first individuals she named: O'Henry, Dolley Madison, and Murrow were born in Greensboro, but none of their accomplishments actually occurred in the city. Nevertheless, it would be her preference for the city to proudly identify with those people and *not* with the Greensboro Four. Moore, the one black resident she thought worthy of Greensboro's praise, did not offend the sensibilities of white Greensboro through his life's work of expanding African Americans' access to *segregated* educational and medical facilities; he thereby "contributed a lot" to the black community.

It is clear that underneath this woman's arguments is a denial of the inherent injustice of Jim Crow laws, for she found those who acted to challenge them unimpressive in comparison to a President's wife and an an author of short stories – people who she argued "really accomplished an awful lot." The weight and importance of the Civil Rights Movement is thus discredited. The fundamental reality that sit-in protestors were aligned against white segregationism and therefore against complacent

white society helps motivate whites in Greensboro to dis-identify with their city's

important sit-in movement. To give full credit to the Greensboro Four and the thousands

of other indiviuals who joined in would be to acknowledge that there was deep injustice

built in to white society and that those whites who did not fight it (all but one of my

interviewees, an idealistic college student in the 1960s) condoned it and enforced it.

    In a final example of how my respondents demonstrated white Greensboro's

active distancing from the sit-in demonstrations for which the city is famed, Grant, 80s,

argued that African Americans' protests were a severe affront to the progressive white

leaders who had proven themselves to be a friend to the blacks:

> What troubled me in those days (3) was that Greensboro . . . had been very progressive in trying to help this social dilemma of blacks and whites in the elimination of segregation. . . . People *wanted* to help. Leadership wanted to help. . . . And yet, when that confrontation occurred, there was total disregard for what the community had tried to do. It was almost like a war between the blacks and the whites, supported by the inordinately large population of students. And as an individual student, I suppose I would like to have helped the cause along. As a *community*, and being involved in the community, I found myself saying, Where is the respect for all that's taken place, and can we work this out amicably? And it was that the advancements that had *been* made were not respected, and that troubled me. (4) Did it take an event such as the sit-ins to advance the cause? I suppose it *advanced* it. . . . If you'd asked the blacks, they'd say it's too late. If you ask me, I'd say it was too early. The cultural difference. . . . those who had been denied . . . by politics and laws- were they really ready to accept their position of responsibility within the broader community? Had they advanced their culture, their learning, their practices? And I'm now distinguishing- sounds prejudicial. It *is* prejudicial, because there were differences. The differences were *wrong*, no question about that. Every effort was being made to right it in an orderly and timely basis.

As Grant saw it, the sit-in protests attacked Greensboro's white elites and their good

faith efforts to improve the status of African Americans – at a pace deemed appropriate

by whites. With faulty, and paternalistic, reasoning, Grant constructed segregation-era

white elites as the benefactors of blacks who were not "really ready to accept their position of responsibility within the larger community." Employing a move that Bracey (2011) calls "personification," a strategy of "rescuing whites," Grant explained that African Americans had been denied advancement "by politics and laws," twisting the reality that it was the cohort of white elites he cast as blacks' benefactors who in fact monopolized the institutional power to create and enforce discriminatory segregation laws.

As the interview excerpts here demonstrate, much of white Greensboro has not embraced the city's identity as an important site of the civil rights struggle, for that identity challenges their notion of white Greensboro as having long been a place of racial enlightenment. As Chafe (1981) astutely observed, Greensboro clung to its "progressive mystique," its claim to fame as a place immune from overt racism, throughout the Jim Crow and civil rights eras. To continue grasping this idea of a long-term nonracist Greensboro, whites downplay and disown the sit-in movement.

Dethroning King

A final way that my respondents demonstrated persistent contemporary distancing from the Civil Rights Movement manifested in their commentaries on Martin Luther King, Jr. It happened that few civil rights figures were discussed in the interviews, largely because I was most interested in soliciting autobiographical memories, not in quizzing respondents on historical events and people. However, nearly all respondents were asked about how they remembered Martin Luther King, Jr.: Did they remember him having visited and spoken in Greensboro in 1958? (Virtually no one

did.) How was he regarded in the 1950s and '60s in white social circles? How did interviewees feel when he was assassinated? Through their responses to these kinds of questions, it became clear that respondents were involved in persistent distancing from the movement by trivializing and denigrating Martin Luther King, Jr. Essentially, the narratives denied King status as an American hero.

Overall, the interview participants acknowledged King's leadership skills and appreciated his advocating nonviolence. Nevertheless, the narratives most often reflected a lack of knowledge about King and a lack of a personal connection to him. Even among those who claimed to have always thought highly of King, there was a marked lack of emotion when discussing his assassination (especially compared to their emotional and detailed memories of President John F. Kennedy's assassination). In addition, an alarming number of respondents criticized King for being a lackluster leader, a troublemaker, a self-serving man, and an indecent husband.

Among the respondents who appeared to be the most sympathetic to King's life work and his murder, social distance was evident in their inaccurate, vague memories and their unemotional narrative engagement. Frances, 70s, remembered having had no awareness of King until his murder, and when I asked her how she had felt about him being assassinated, she answered tersely: "Well just like anybody ELSE being killed who was an important person." Frances thus offered no description of her feelings, merely implying that she would have had an appropriate reaction to the death of any person of stature.

Darla, 70s, spoke in detail and at length about how deeply she had been affected by John F. Kennedy's death and what a terrible a moment it had been for the whole country, but she shared a vague and brief description of King's assassination:

> I remember hearin' that on the news. He was on a balcony, I think, when they shot him. Or somebody shot him from a balcony . . . and I was really sorry about that, 'cause I *did* feel like he was (3) tryin' to do the right thing. But I think you're fearful for somebody like that, who is so opinionated and who just idn't afraid to just say what they think and live by what they believe. I mean, you're gonna have a lot of people who are gonna be unhappy with you.

Darla was unsure of the conditions of the assassination, and she also seemed to empathize with King's enemies. Saying merely, "I was really sorry about that," Darla did not focus on the tragedy of his death as she had when discussing the deaths of both John F. and Bobby Kennedy. Instead, she reasoned out why King was hated and ultimately murdered.

It was apparent that Frances, Darla, and several other respondents had no real connection to King's life work or sudden death. Even those who claimed that they highly regarded King typically tempered their praise in some way. For example, Ava, 60s, claimed that, upon King's death, she "sat down and sobbed like I did when the President died." However, she did not agree with everything King stood for:

> My feelings about Martin Luther King was that this was one of the greatest men that I had ever seen, as far as how smart he was and what his thinkin' was. . . . when he said things like 'One of these days we'll all be known as the same' and that kinda thing, to me that's the way it always shoulda been. And I admired him greatly because he thought a whole lot the way that I thought, except for the fact that he felt like that blacks were being mistreated.

Ava admired the idealistic King and rejected the activist King. This appeared to be the case for numerous respondents, whose sympathy for King's assassination extended only

as far as his nuclear family. They expressed that his death was unsettling because a wife

and children were abandoned and bereaved. In this way, respondents disregarded King's

role and importance as a major leader of a large social movement, relegating him to the

individualized status of father and husband. For example, after she talked at length about

how deeply she was affected by the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy,

Trudie, 60s, said she felt sorry for King's family after the assassination:

> I guess bein' a family person, I thought of it more on a personal basis, of his family, what have you done. . . . But I thought, 'Man, he shot a young man with a wife,' and if I'm not mistaken he has four children, and I thought, 'This is such a terrible tragedy, and the man is just tryin' to do what he feels is right and he has a right to speech and whatever he wants to say' . . . but I think I felt more for the family than the movement, 'cause the movement was people I didn't *know*. Martin Luther King you *knew*, and you knew him more or less in your heart, and I really felt sorry for his family.

Interestingly, Trudie implied here that her depoliticization and individualization of King

as a family man reflected her positive regard for him; she preferred not to consider him

the head of an impersonal social movement: "The movement was people I didn't *know*."

This perspective demonstrates Trudie's, and a great many white southerners', social

distance also from the very real people, many in her own community, who supported and

participated in civil rights activities.

There was a marked propensity of respondents to deny King status as a genuine

American hero and to sanitize his message. Here, Florence, 80s, argued that Booker T.

Washington did "so much more" for African Americans than King ever did, but that

King's "dream," which she significantly misinterpreted, was commendable:

> He seemed to be a good leader that *inspired* a lot of people. I felt like if they *really* wanted a *real* hero, they could go back to Booker T. Washington, who did so much more or made a bigger contribution with his work with the peanuts and

all that stuff. But I felt like that he was of a different generation and of a different *time*, and that the time that Martin Luther King lived they needed a leader to look up to. Of course they overlook all of his philandering- I think that the blacks have a way of doing that anyway- I mean, they overlook Jesse Jackson's love child and things like that. But I think his speech that he had a dream, that was a commendable thing and for them to think about that, and for every black child as well as white children to have a *dream*, a *goal*, something to strive for and to try to achieve.

Florence covered a lot of ground in this short excerpt, first acknowledging King's leadership, then arguing against his heroification, then criticizing African Americans for accepting "philandering," and finally misinterpreting and trivializing King's "dream."

Burt, 80s, expressed an even more disparaging perspective on King and the movement, admitting that he was "no great admirer" of King, a man he regarded to this day as a philanderer and an opportunist and a woefully unworthy hero:

B: I learned that Martin Luther King was not the good Christian man- he had a lot of girlfriends 'round here and there. . . . My opinion of Martin Luther King was really they sort of made him a hero. They didn't pick the right person. I could have picked a lot of better heroes for the blacks, but let it be.

(I: I was going to ask you who you would have chosen.)

B: I don't have anybody just- just-

(I: What were your feelings when he died in 1968?)

B: (4) I thought it was a shame that he was shot. It didn't disturb me a great deal. I didn't jump for joy, I didn't say the assassin was a hero, I didn't say we've lost. I said to myself, 'The blacks have lost a leader.' I didn't think that the country had lost anybody great. My own opinion was that he latched on to an ideal and played it for all it was worth and I was no great admirer of him.

(I: When you say he latched on to an ideal, what specifically do you mean?)

B: I mean, he was preaching racial equality, racial acceptance, there should be no segregation at all, and he made a lot of money, in my judgment, being paid for speeches and working on that. If he really believed it, I don't fault him for it. I think he figured he had a good thing going.

Burt painted King as an opportunist who engaged in civil rights activism to make money, not because he believed in the principles for which he was fighting.

Across the narratives it was clear that Martin Luther King, Jr. is, to this day, not embraced as an American hero, at least not on his own terms. White southerners downplay or skew King's activism and his actual messages to make him more palatable, or they reject King outright, giving him over fully to African Americans. Heroification is a political and patriotic act that tends to simplify and water down the actual individuals being praised. Nevertheless, King is the only African American who has been granted this status. Still much more prominent across the South and nation are monuments and commemorations that glorify pro-slavery whites, whites who fought to end Reconstruction, and white racist terrorists (Loewen 1999). And, the way in which King has been memorialized for the American public disregards his firm anti-racist, anti-oppression, and anti-government standpoints (Loewen 1995). Thus, my respondents' rejection of King despite his having already been severely watered down and made palatable to whites is even more noteworthy.

In a final example, Suzanne, 60s, expressed confusion over why King would be worthy of American commemoration more so than other prominent, less controversial individuals, like Elvis Presley:

> I don't feel today it's right because *he* was assassinated- and dedicate all this stuff to him, or highways or buildings- and a holiday! I mean, why wasn't Elvis Presley Day a holiday? (laughs) He never hurt anybody, he stayed out of religion, but yet he brought a lotta enjoyment to millions. We didn't declare his death a holiday. . . . There's just a imbalance in things we go after. What makes that one more important than the other one?

It is clear that Suzanne and most of my other respondents missed, or refused, the point that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a primary leader in an American struggle for human rights to dismantle oppression and to fight for the highest American ideal of "liberty and justice for *all*" – not just for African Americans. The white southern interviewees' trivialization and rejection of King, as well as their downplaying civil rights organizing and disowning Greensboro's sit-in identity, reflect a lack of reverence and appreciation for the Civil Rights Movement and a persistent unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of challenges to white racism.

Five days after King's assassination, two letters to the editor about his death ran in the *Greensboro Record*, one suggesting that if the American flag was to be flown at half mast for King, then it should also be flown for troops "dying for a cause" in Veitnam. The other letter was more blatant in its resentment of King's memorialization: "I'd like to say the flag flying half mast for King is wrong because I don't think he deserved it" (*Greensboro Record* 1968:A14). My narratives demonstrate well the power of memory to resist reinterpretation across time. As my interviews demonstrate, many white southerners who lived through the civil rights period have clung for over four decades now to anti-King sentiment and have not accepted contemporary mainstream commemorations to King and his legacy, despite the fact that portrayals of King have been significantly "whitewashed" – rendered less radical and more palatable to white society (Loewen 1995).

WHITE VICTIMOLOGY: TENSION AND DANGER IN LOCAL CIVIL RIGHTS
ACTIVISM

The final theme apparent in respondents' narratives of the civil rights era was of
self-victimization. This theme goes hand-in-hand with the first theme discussed – the
construction of the perpetual nonracist white self, for the ideal candidate for victim
status is one who is innocent and vulnerable. I have termed this theme *white victimology*
and analyze it more in-depth in the next chapter. Victimology is the possession of an
outlook, arising from real or imagined victimization, that seems to glorify or indulge the
state of being a victim. I see white victimology, then, as a narrative trope by which white
southerners constructed and then fixated on themselves as victims of the Civil Rights
Movement era.

During the lunch counter and related protests at segregated businesses that began
in Greensboro in February 1960, my respondents ranged in age from youths to adults
and parents in their 30s and 40s. In the interviews by and large they portrayed protestors
as nonviolent but with potential for violence, and the milieu as tense and potentially
explosive. The white southern innocent bystander was portrayed as being subjected to
moments of inconvenience, tension, and potential violence due to protest actions. Thus,
they characterized nonviolent protests as actions hostile toward white southerners' sense
of safety and normalcy.

During the various protests in Greensboro, many of my respondents said that
they attempted to steer clear of any civil rights protests. They recalled that white families
avoided the downtown area as much as possible and that downtown (white) business

owners feared vandalism and robbery. Parents kept their children at home, trying to avoid them being "caught up" in anything dangerous. Nevertheless, downtown Greensboro remained a major site of city commerce throughout the civil rights era, and several people I interviewed saw various protests firsthand. In their descriptions, respondents remembered the palpable tension, and often their narratives cast themselves as victims or potential victims. They remember being uncomfortably unsure as to what would happen in the short term – might there be skirmishes between protestors and police, or between protestors and white citizens? Might a spark set off an explosive chain of events? In a typical portrayal, Sharon, 60s, against the wishes of her protective parents, saw the sit-in protest at Woolworth's downtown lunch counter one day and recalled the palpable tension:

> I remember [my dad] asked me not to go over there because it was very tense and people just *didn't* know what would happen. And whites were especially tense. And I *didn't* go inside the Woolworth but I *stepped* into the vestibule area in there and saw it, and (3) I remember that being very big, very tense.

As Sharon's account indicates, there was a sense in the white community that white bystanders were in danger wherever black protestors were present. To this day, white southerners conceive of civil rights demonstrations as a time not only of tension and uncertainty, but also of personal danger.

For example, Kenneth, 80s, talked about having witnessed a protest and his relief at coming out unscathed:

> There was a mob- I don't know how many, but I know the street was full of blacks, and (chuckles) [the owner] was standing in the door of his cafeteria and he said he wouldn't let 'em in. And just as I got outside . . . down to the corner across the street where I'd parked, they rushed him. (chuckling) And here I am

almost in the middle of this crowd of upset people, and I just got out and just kept going.

Kenneth lightheartedly described his lucky escape from the "crowd of upset people." Several respondents used loaded terms like "mob" and "riot" to describe nonviolent protestors – words that dehumanize the people involved and imply disorganization, unruliness, and intent to cause harm. This language situates protestors as attackers, disregards the viability of their complaints, and misrepresents the peacefulness of their tactics and their goal of equal treatment.

In a description of danger and fear more nuanced than many others, Suzanne, 60s, acknowledged that black Americans may have been fearful also during the sit-in protests. However, Suzanne ended with a complaint about today's climate of political correctness, implying that whites are still being made to "fear" backlash if they say anything potentially offensive to African Americans:

> At that time . . . my mother'd take us downtown to shop every weekend, and that was just our highlight of the week to get to go downtown in peanut shops down there and get to go to the luncheon counter, and we felt we were really in the world then. And after that sit-in I can remember my mother sayin', "We aren't going. We can't go anymore." . . . she was fearful of what was going to happen. One of us would get hurt, we would get caught up in something, a fight that would develop, or somebody would lose control and we'd be in their path or something. And we felt fear. And I didn't say *blacks* didn't feel fear. I think maybe they felt like they had to do what they were doin' no matter how they got there. But like I said, it shouldn't have been that way in the first place, but it was, and it did need to change, but I don't think either side should have to fear. But I can remember being very fearful to speak up and say how I felt about something. I think we fear that *today*. . . . You can't say I'm gonna eat more chicken without being in trouble. You can't say I love watermelon without being in trouble. Why?

Suzanne equated the fear she felt as a white person during the sit-ins to the fear she feels today as a white person under the judgment of African Americans for innocent,

nonracial comments she might make. Both scenarios paint whites as the victimized –

black protest may have been justifiable at one time ("it did need to change"), but neither

blacks nor whites "should have to fear." Reflected in Suzanne's comments is the desire

for whites to be unaffected by the expansion of rights to African Americans.

On the other hand, Gracie, 80s, claimed that whites and blacks were both

apprehensive regarding the protests, but, unlike most of the other respondents, she

focused on the danger to black protestors at the hands of white police and white

supremacists (but I do not know why she chuckled about it):

> G: I think some of the black people were apprehensive, because they realized that there was a real danger to them.
>
> (I: Danger of what?)
>
> G: Well, I mean, of being mistreated by the police, or white people goin' after 'em. (chuckles) And 'course the Ku Klux Klan, it hadn't died out. (chuckles)

Overall, the period of civil rights protests in Greensboro was portrayed as a time of

uncertainty and fear, and rarely did respondents indicate that African Americans were

likely to be victimized during times of civil rights protest. White southerners, then, were

portrayed as innocent bystanders and potential victims of the chaos being created all

around them. In this perspective, the segregation era and its complete acceptance are

confirmed as the peaceful norm, a time of predictability and calm. As Trudie's narrative

will demonstrate below, "racial violence" is defined as a phenomenon that largely began

with the civil rights movement and consisted of black Americans creating dangerous

situations for whites.

Trudie: Associating Protests with Violence

It was common for respondents to conflate African Americans' peaceful civil rights protests with danger and violence towards whites. Trudie's, 60s, narrative offers a vivid illustrative case of the implicit association of black protests with violence, danger, and whites' compromised safety. The first time Trudie's fear of civil rights protestors came up in the interview was when I asked if she had been aware of any "racial violence" in her younger years: "I had [an] incident that scared me half to death. It was scarin' me when they would lock the doors of [my downtown workplace] and tell us to go home. I thought, 'You still puttin' us in danger, 'cause they could still be outside.'" Trudie said she was scared "half to death" at being expected to travel in downtown streets where protestors might be present. Notably, my prompt to discuss racial violence produced that account of her fear of black protestors. She constructed "racial violence," then, as her own (white) potential victimization by black perpetrators.

Later in the interview I asked Trudie to clarify her exposure to violence. She elaborated on fearing for her own safety during civil rights protesting and the violence that she assumes was happening and that she was lucky to avoid:

(I: So have you *seen* any violence?)

T: (3) Well I can remember goin' to the *bank* with all the money [from my workplace] to deposit it by myself all the time. But the minute the riots started and everything started bein' stirred up by the colleges and whatever here, then I could not go to the bank alone. I had to have . . . someone to go with me and *that* used to really scare me. . . . and I guess in a way I was a little bit . . . naïve due to the way I was brought up. I was just either kept in my house or at work and so I didn't really see probably a lot of the violence that did go on.

Trudie positioned African American college students as antagonists who "stirred up" "riots" and caused her to fear being robbed as she traveled, even with an escort, the downtown streets. She bolstered the validity of her fear by implying that there was even *more* potential for her victimization than she had been able to realize by living such a cloistered life ("I was a little bit naïve . . . I didn't really see probably a lot of the violence that did go on").

Trudie's use of the term riots sparked my curiosity, for Greensboro's sit-ins are known to have been nonviolent. When I asked Trudie to clarify what she meant by the the term riots, she referenced the peaceful sit-ins and then finally admitted that she never knew of a riot that happened in Greensboro:

(I: So when you talk about riots that happened, what kinds of things were happening?)

T: Well it would be like everybody out of curiosity would naturally go to Woolworth's, see what was goin' on and how many were sittin' at the counter, blah blah blah. Waitresses were so nervous servin' these people because they didn't know what was happenin'. Blacks were happy, the whites you could tell were unhappy. And then I would go back down to Kress's and wouldn't be too long before they'd fill up Kress's lunch counter. But I really couldn't say I saw a riot. The riotin' I did see would have been on TV, but as far as bein' in and around a riot, no. I wasn't allowed to go outside my home. Usually during those times, we pretty much stayed at home, and of course there was church, church, church. (laughs)

So Trudie felt the tension as she witnessed sit-ins and believed there were violent riots in Greensboro set off by the demonstrators' actions. Again she implied that if her life had been less cloistered, she would have seen bona fide riots. It appears likely that Trudie has an association between black protests of any form and of violence perpetrated by black people. Given her explanation that "the riotin' I did see would have been on TV,"

it is likely also that Trudie's association between black protestors and violent riots was formed in connection with mainstream media coverage, such as new of urban riots in the late-1960s, several years after Greensboro's sit-in demonstrations. Thus, Trudie's memory of civil rights activity lacks a chronology and is largely associative: "happy" black protestors, blacks "stirring up" trouble, black riots, "unhappy" and nervous whites, fearful and innocent whites.

Nora: Encounters with Volatile Protests

Of all the people interviewed, Nora, 80s, had perhaps the most first-hand exposure to African Americans' protests in Greensboro. She worked downtown during the 1960s and encountered numerous protest demonstrations as she went about her business during the work week. She described witnessing four significant events: one of the first days of the Woolworth's lunch counter sit-in, a group of African Americans attempting to gain entry to a whites-only cafeteria, picketing on the sidewalks, and a large prayer demonstration in front of City Hall. Primarily, Nora's narratives of these encounters positioned black protestors as dominant and potentially volatile figures, while whites are positioned as innocent bystanders or fair-minded business people trying to avoid conflict.

First, Nora described seeing one of the initial days of the famous Woolworth lunch counter sit-in:

> I've been at the restaurant there at the Woolworth's dime store, talkin' to [the] manager of it when the four black boys walked in and sat down at the counter. I didn't get to stay- my lunch hour ran out. I didn't see anything . . . other than that [the manager] told one of the clerks to go ahead and wait on them, said, "Go ahead and *serve* 'em." The [server] was wantin' to sorta back off. I guess she was afraid to get that close to 'em, but they were nice looking, well-dressed African

American young men. And they never did serve 'em, but [the manager] did ask
them to.

This was Nora's most favorable portrayal of black protestors. As her narrative

progressed, she increasingly described protestors and the situations they created as

potentially violent and anti-white. Next she told of encountering a group of people being

barred from entering a whites-only cafeteria:

> N: And then the *next* day when I was going to lunch, I decided I'd go to the
> cafeteria . . . and when I went by, [the owner] who had been our mayor just a
> coupla years before, he had backed up, put his hands on the doorknobs and was
> standin' there, and some of 'em wanted to come in and he said, "I'm sorry, I just
> can't serve you." He didn't raise his voice at 'em or anything . . . but he didn't
> give in. And I thought, sooner or later somebody's gonna get *hurt* with this,
> because one of 'em go off sorta halfway hit an officer or something . . .
>
> (I: Did you go in to eat that day?)
>
> N: Oh yeah, I went on to eat that day. Shoot yeah, I'm not gon' miss my meals!
> (laughs) No, I'm not gonna let any of 'em cause me to miss my meals.

Nora portrayed the owner as firm but calm and the protestors as the potential creators of

a violent altercation. She also laughingly characterized the protestors as a nuisance who,

thankfully, she was able to circumvent in her quest for lunch as usual.

Again portraying protestors as a nuisance, Nora said that picketers she

encountered demonstrating on the sidewalk were "aggravating":

> It would be aggravating sometimes if you were on your lunch hour and there's a
> dozen going down the street walking three abreast! . . . It could be a big
> hindrance. . . . Sometimes they'd stop with their placards on and naturally you
> weren't gonna say, "ExCUSE me, sir!" and step up in FRONT of 'em. But unless
> it was something like that, I just ignored it. . . . They've got as much right on the
> sidewalk as I have I guess, so I tried to sorta wiggle in and out and not bother
> them.

Although Nora here indicated that she was able to navigate through the demonstrators, she implied that she could have been in trouble had she spoken to the protestors, letting them know that she was being inconvenienced ("naturally you weren't gonna say, 'ExCUSE me, sir!'").

On this same theme of blacks' sensitivity and potentially explosive retaliations against white bystanders, Nora's last story of encountering African American protestors positioned herself as having luckily emerged unscathed from a peaceful prayer demonstration. To this day, she believes she had placed herself in serious danger by cracking a mild joke within earshot of black high school and college students knelt in prayer on the steps of city hall:

> They had a long walk of students . . . I mean, a PARADE of them, and they came to city hall and . . . they were all knelt down and going to have prayer for the American people . . . And I was just having to step around wherever I could to get down between the people and . . . [my coworker] said, "How long are they planning to stay here?" And I said, "They'll leave when the pigeons come to roost." 'Cause I mean (laughing) we had pigeons by the HUNDRED – they'd roost up on the ledge. . . . [and] about six heads (laughing) popped up and . . . it was all I could do not to laugh. But I would not have laughed and given them any reason to have gotten up and hit me or anything like that. And [the man who was with me] got afraid that one of 'em would get angry and would get up and start a fight or something. . . . and when I got home my husband agreed with him! (laughing) . . . He said, "If you have to, walk all the way around the block! But don't make any comments." . . . Now that everybody's telling me about how quick I could've set off a fight or an uprising, I said, "I would not *do* it again!" And I *wouldn't*!

Over forty years later, Nora perceived this moment in which she cracked a joke about peaceful demonstrators being barraged by pigeon droppings as a major misstep of her life, although – notice how often she laughs while telling it – it makes a funny story. To this day she regrets having made the flippant remark *not* because it was disrespectful, or

unkind, or inhumane, but because it could have sparked an "uprising" by angry black youth in which she would have been the primary target of aggression. Long ago others – apparently white men – convinced her that this was how she should interpret the incident.

Furthermore, Nora seemed to have retained a whites-as-innocent-potential-victims, blacks-as-aggressors perspective on this prayer demonstration. When I inquired about the purpose of the students' demonstration, she did not believe that there was one, other than to taunt whites:

> I think that they just wanted to be seen. . . . When they came to the city hall that day and knelt down as if they were in prayer, I felt like that they were just trying to make a . . . statement to us that 'One day I may have your job.' . . . I don't think that *any* of 'em were *prayin'*. I don't think it was a thing about Christianity or anything like that. . . . It did not make any sense . . . to me.

Not only did Nora perceive of African Americans' protests as volatile situations in which whites were prudent to tread lightly, she also read racial aggressiveness in protestors' intent, as she believed that, under the guise of morality or spirituality, they sought to send a hostile message to ordinary whites about blacks' impending dominance. African Americans are presented as antagonists carrying out a vendetta against whites, making it difficult for ordinary (innocent) white citizens like her to go about their business of travel, commerce, and conversation. Overall, Nora's portrayals of her first-hand experiences with civil rights protests deny the reality of Jim Crow's systemic anti-black oppression, as she indicated that their protests had superficial targets or ulterior motives.

CONCLUSION: NOT OUR MOVEMENT

While my respondents recalled that a great many people in the white community were segregationists who resented black activism and protests, very few placed themselves in the same category – they claimed to have been more enlightened or less opinionated than those white peers and acquaintances. Generally, my respondents characterized segregated public facilities as unequal and unjust and their dismantling as necessary. But in describing the time of protests and demonstrations in Greensboro, most of their stories had themes of danger, violence, and white victimology, where whites were characterized as innocent bystanders and potential victims of skirmishes and "rioters." Thus, a time period of progressive, nonviolent action aimed at expanding access for African Americans to mainstream society was construed as a time of chaos and vulnerability for white citizens.

Casting themselves as bystander victims through stories of danger and near-victimization from civil rights protests, respondents also demonstrated disconnectedness from the movement. This symbolic detachment manifested in inaccurate recall of major events with its accompanying explanatory logic ("I must have been too busy to have paid attention") and in misuse of language (transposing the terms "segregation" and "integration"). These phenomena seem to indicate a long-term symbolic detachment from the Civil Rights Movement. Additionally, respondents demonstrated more active ways of downplaying or trivializing the actions and actors of the Civil Rights Movement. Several denied the significance of the lunch counter sit-ins and refused to embrace them as important to the city of Greensboro, despite the reality that the lunch

counter sit-in protests are the one thing that makes the city noteworthy in the contemporary American consciousness. Some respondents also downplayed the elaborate organizing that went in to coordinating protest actions, and most respondents trivialized the significance of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s role as a leader in a movement that, against formidable resistance, brought widespread societal changes of expanded civil rights.

Civil rights activism challenged the accepted way of life found comfortable by whites; to this day white southerners do not consider it a movement for the whole South. The Civil Rights Movement occurred, and changes came about to which everyone had to adjust, but respondents portrayed African Americans – and not whites – as beneficiaries of the movement. Indeed, social distance was what had typified white southerners' relations to black southerners during the segregation era, regardless of their sometimes intimate relationships with black individuals (Kousha 1999; Ritterhouse 2006; Tucker 1988). And, as I have argued in previous chapters, white southerners were taught early on to suppress any empathy for their black neighbors. Inherent in white southerners' detachment and distancing from the Civil Rights Movement is social alexithymia, where understanding and empathy toward African Americans is severely lacking. In the white southern mind, the civil rights era was nothing to embrace or identify with – it was by blacks and for blacks. As white southerners encountered civil rights protests, then, they interpreted them through the segregation-era white racial frame, which was driven by a belief in white supremacy and social distance from the lives and concerns of African Americans.

CHAPTER VII

WHITE VICTIMOLOGY: TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF SCHOOL

DESEGREGATION

The theme of white victimology was especially pronounced in my white southern

respondents' narratives of school desegregation. Through accounts of arbitrary school

assignments, "forced" busing, chaotic classrooms, and African American bullies, they

painted a portrait of school integration that constructed whites as the pawns of

impersonal mandates and the bona fide victims of a harsh and traumatic situation. While

virtually all respondents readily acknowledged that segregated schools had been unequal

for black students, many nevertheless fixated on the myriad ways in which they

perceived that white children and families had been tormented by the process of racially

integrating the school system. Only a few people mentioned the possible hardships faced

by African Americans, and in a terse, dismissive fashion.

I argue in this chapter that white victimology is a key dynamic in the

contemporary white racial frame. By remembering themselves as victims of the civil

rights era and the social changes it brought about, white southerners are able to preserve

their nostalgia for the seemingly "good, peaceful" time that came before – Jim Crow

segregation. Their assertion of whites as racial victims during the black freedom struggle

casts whites as racial innocents, even and especially Jim Crow-era whites. Through this

nostalgic and defensive white innocence-making victimology, then, whiteness is

preserved as inherently good across time, and immutable white goodness is a pillar of the white racial frame.

GREENSBORO'S UNIQUE SCHOOL DESEGREGATION STORY

The history of public education in the United States has been steeped in racial struggle (Weinberg 1977). Enslaved African Americans regularly risked severe penalties to gain even a modest amount of literacy and education, and, in the late-1800s and early-1900s, emancipated African Americans as well as other groups of color, with personal and financial sacrifice, opened their own schools and fought for universal education (Weinberg 1977). Great effort toward creating a quality public education had been made during the brief Reconstruction period in the South in the late-1800s, but, as the white power structure became more entrenched throughout the 20th Century, resources were consistently reallocated away from black schools for other uses (Litwack 1998). As Litwack (1998) summarizes:

> No matter how it was measured—by the quality of the facilities, the length of the school term, financial appropriations, student-teacher ratio, curriculum, teachers' preparation and salaries—the education available to black children in the New South was vastly inferior to that available to white children. At least twice as much was spent on white students as on black students . . . The minimum salary for white teachers was nearly twice as high as the maximum salary paid black teachers. Few books or supplies were available in black schools. . . . No one pretended to take seriously the Supreme Court decision commanding separate but equal schools. (Pp. 108-9)

Despite the glaring inequalities, whites consistently fought to keep their whites-only schools with superior funding and resources, and only under great political pressure did they acquiesce to changes that would bring more racial equity in schooling (Weinberg 1977). After many decades of unequal segregated schooling, the United States Supreme

Court handed down its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* (1954) decision, which asserted the unconstitutionality of racially segregated school systems. The decision sent ripples through the nation, and immediate and severe white backlash ensued (Weinberg 1977). Throughout the South, much of the white resistance to the prospect of school desegregation invoked "states' rights" and fanciful notions that Jim Crow's pleasant race relations would be devastated by integration (Feagin 2010b). However, initially, something different was happening in Greensboro, North Carolina, in the wake of the *Brown* decision.

In fact, Greensboro was the setting of one of the most fascinating sagas of school integration. The night after the Supreme Court ruled on *Brown* (1954), finding segregated schools unconstitutional, the Greensboro school board gathered for their scheduled monthly meeting. The chairman presented a new item of business, a resolution to proactively carry out the Supreme Court's desegregation ruling. After a brief debate, the board (composed of six white males and one black male member) voted six to one in favor of the resolution (Chafe 1981). True to its progressive reputation, Greensboro became the first city in the South to publicly state its willingness and readiness to comply with *Brown* decision (Chafe 1981; Stoesen 1980). "Greensboro's decisive response seemed a good omen to those who perceived the city as a leader of the modern South" (Chafe 1981:13). However, Greensboro wound up being one of the very last school districts in the South to implement integration fully, *17 years later*, in 1971.

According to Chafe (1981), despite their promising resolution in 1954, the Greensboro school board adopted "the most minimal steps toward desegregation, and

then only under pressure" (p. 158). A handful of black students were allowed to enroll in

white schools in the late-1950s, and it was years later, in 1963, that the school board

launched a weak "freedom of choice" integration plan, where African American first

graders could enroll in previously all-white schools. A couple hundred black children

made the transition (Chafe 1981:158). Then, when Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act

mandated that each school district submit a comprehensive desegregation plan,

Greensboro responded by making freedom of choice available for African Americans in

all grades, but only for the first ten days of the 1965 school year (Chafe 1981:158).

Overall, little progress at racial integration of Greensboro schools was made; by

1967 the proportion of African Americans attending desegregated schools in Greensboro

was significantly lower than in other comparable cities in the region (Chafe 1981:158).

Freedom of choice in Greensboro, popular among whites, was a sham; through it the

school board actually facilitated backwards movement in school desegregation:

> When white children lived close to a black school, the board of education
> provided buses so that the children could attend a predominantly white school.
> When black children wished to attend a predominantly white school, however,
> the board offered no transportation unless 50 per cent of the children in the black
> neighborhood wished to transfer. . . . Blacks wishing to attend white high schools
> . . . had to provide their own transportation . . . The school board refused even to
> provide passes for riding on city buses. (Chafe 1981:158-9)

As the only black member of the school board later recalled, "the powers that be . . .

were determined to fight a last ditch stand and to maintain the staus quo as long as they

possibly could" (quoted in Chafe 1981:168).

The Greensboro school board went so far as to take on the federal government. In

1968 the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) declared Greensboro in

noncompliance with desegregation mandates and threatened to revoke more than a million dollars in federal funding; in response the school board threatened to appeal to the Supreme Court to keep their freedom of choice plan in place (Chafe 1981:166-9). According to Chafe (1981) the Greensboro school integration issue was an effective indicator of the attitudes of the city's white elite: "Deeply convinced of the moral virtue of their postion, Greensboro's white leaders . . . had passed—in their own eyes once and for all—the test of moral and legal compliance with desegregation. . . . No matter what others might say or do, they had justice on their side and would win" (p. 170).

Due to their noncompliance the Greensboro school system suffered the loss of federal funds and kept fighting in the courts to keep freedom of choice, which had been in effect at that point for eight years (1963-1971); there were 27 schools essentially still segregated with over 95 percent either white or black students (Chafe 1981:222). Then, a major shift in school board membership occurred, where three staunch freedom of choice proponents were replaced by more moderate members, and a new chairman was named. Quickly in the 1971 summer months, a full desegregation plan with comprehensive school assignment and busing programs was submitted and approved at the federal level and implemented at the start of the 1971-72 academic year (Chafe 1981:222-3).

Despite its school integration foot-dragging debacle, Greensboro held fast to its progressive reputation. This is how school desegregation is described in the book *A Celebration of Guilford County Since 1890*, published in 1980 by the county commissioners:

The completely integrated system began operations without incident. This exemplifies the quality of leadership and the nature of race relations in the Gate City. While places such as Boston, Louisville, and Flint, Michigan, experienced violent resistance to busing, the citizens of Greensboro placed education and community spirit above other considerations. (Stoesen 1980:238)

This glowing portrayal ignores Greensboro's slow pace of integration and highlights how smoothly and cooperatively school desegregation occurred compared to areas outside the Deep South, as if to emphasize that Greensboro's racial progressiveness exceeds that of much of the entire nation. Rather, only a few school districts in the U.S. took longer after *Brown* to implement public school integration than Greensboro did. It is true that the city's integration plan was not met with violent resistance, but white city leadership spent nearly two decades shrewdly avoiding large-scale desegregation efforts (Chafe 1981). White Greensboro's belief in its own progressiveness is a cherished conviction that has thrived for many decades despite copious contradictory evidence.

Opposition Movements

Greensboro residents did not all embrace the comprehensive school integration plan finally mandated in 1971, even in the black community. From the city's Black Power faction, a school integration opposition movement emerged among some young leaders who did not want to suffer the loss of every single majority-black school and who felt that school desegregation was being perceived as the city's cure-all for institutional discrimination (Chafe 1981:229). Cecil Rouson, a local African American, advocated "natural desegregation" via economic development in black communities that would decrease racial inequality, leading to open housing and viable neighborhood schools (*Greensboro Record* 1971). However, most of the high-profile black leaders in

Greensboro had either served as plaintiffs in the original court cases or had long been

advocates for school desegregation; the black opposition movement quickly acquiesced

to the prudence of black unity in supporting school integration (Chafe 1981:230-1).

School desegregation resistance among white citizenry was significant, although

their movement did not last long either. Interest in organizing was high in the beginning.

Americans Concerned about Today (ACT) emerged quickly and organized a boycott

asking parents to try to enroll their kids in the schools they would have attended under

the prior year's freedom of choice plan and to "sympathy boycott" by keeping at home

children whose school assignments had remained unchanged (Lee 1971). Hundreds of

parents attended meetings of ACT in late summer 1971, but whites' interest in

participating in boycotts and legal actions waned.

Some white parents accepted the new form of education, and others chose to flee

quietly rather than fight. Enrollments outside the city public school system soared.

Several new private schools were established in Greensboro and serviced the

approximately 2,000 mostly wealthier and white students abandoning city schools

(Stoesen 1980), and the primarily white county school system gained 500-700 more

students than would normally be expected (Ross 1971). One of the new private schools,

Vandalia Christian Academy, which promised to emphasize discipline and Christian

teachings, enrolled over 300 students for the first day of the 1971 school year and was

"besieged for days by others trying to get in" (*Greensboro Daily News* 1971b). The

Reverend David Oates, pastor of Vandalia's sponsoring church, was quoted in the

newspaper as saying the school was restricted to white students because "Negro children

would cause us problems in that tensions would develop" (*Greensboro Daily News* 1971b). White self-centeredness devoid of overt anti-black racist language (i.e., "Negro children would cause *us* problems") was laced throughout Greensboro whites' public opposition to school integration.

For example, several anti-desegregation letters to the editor appeared in Greensboro's (white) local newspaper at the onset of the 1971 academic year, with most employing rhetoric of "tyranny" and "communism" threatening to destroy "liberty" and "freedom" (e.g., *Greensboro Daily News* 1971a; *Greensboro Daily News* 1971d; *Greensboro Daily News* 1971e; *Greensboro Daily News* 1971f). One passionate letter, written by Greensboro resident Patsy Jarrett, a member of ACT, invoked patriotism, morality, and self-victimization to attack school desegregation:

> What has happened to America? A nation that has always been superior to all nations. A nation the people have always been proud of. A nation of the people, for the people, by the people. A nation where the majority ruled, not the minority. A nation of high morals. A religious nation; a nation that stands for freedom. What is freedom? The right for nine men to tell you that your child is going to be bused across town to another school, for the benefit of a few people, knowing that it is not for the health and welfare of our children, who are so innocent . . . When did our country become so weak that we allow communists to come in and tell us how to live and bring the American people down to their level? . . . Have our forefathers, who have fought with their lives to keep this a free country, died in vain? (*Greensboro Daily News* 1971e)

Jarrett's letter did not even mention race. One letter to the editor did address race and racism explicitly, but to argue that "segregation should by now be a dead issue":

> What in the name of common sense has gone wrong when a child is denied the right to attend the school across the street or down the block and forced to be bused across town in busy traffic to a strange school all in the name of some will-o'-the-wisp ideal of proper racial balance? Have children become political pawns to assuage the guilt of years of de jure segregation? It would appear so. (*Greensboro Daily News* 1971c)

Pitting politics against innocent white people and children, this writer suggested that, by the early 1970s, any action aimed at addressing the legacy of segregation was unnecessary, and grossly unfair to whites.

Making Sense of Opposition

I asked my elderly white southern interview respondents to recall the *Brown v. Board* decision, but most could not. They recognized it as an idea, but it was not part of their recalled experience of school integration. For many, memory of school desegregation began hazily with Greensboro's freedom of choice programs and crystallized at the implementation of busing and school assignment programs. Nevertheless, I asked them to comment on why Greensboro took 17 years to fully integrate, after announcing immediately after *Brown* that they were ready. Bernice, 80s, offered a best guess: "I don't really know. I guess maybe they wanted to see how it worked out in other places, maybe (laughs) before they started doing it around here." Bernice gave no indication that school desegregation had been a polarizing issue - that whites, or any people for that matter, had fought against it.

Darla, 70s, used vague language in her response to the question. After my probing, it became clear that, hidden by her vague language was an understanding that white people were the primary actors fighting school integration:

> D: I guess they just couldn't come to terms with how it was gonna be handled and they couldn't *agree* and-
>
> (I: Who? The school board or the-)
>
> D: Well, I think the *parents* were the ones who were so up in arms over it, and the school board too, to a degree.

(I: Would that be the white parents, or was it black parents too?)

D: Well, I really think the white parents would have been the ones who were most opposed to it. And I don't know that the black people would have been as opposed.

Darla did finally acknowledge that whites were the ones who were fighting school integration. But elsewhere in her interview, she portrayed whites as people who embraced school integration with a positive spirit:

I think that integration was a good thing to the degree that a lot of white parents became more involved and were tryin' to make it work. I know that's the feeling I had among the parents that I knew when we first started that. I mean, you just need to go ahead and make the best of it and just do what you can to make it work and (3) I don't remember there bein' a whole lot of- well, there was a whole lot of unrest, and there were some parents who were just very unhappy about the situation.

In this part of her narrative, Darla chose to stress how amenable – and instrumental – whites were to desegregation efforts. Notice how she corrected herself when she started to claim that whites embraced school integration without "a whole lot of unrest."

On the other hand, Gracie, 80s, was to-the-point when I asked how whites in Greensboro reacted to school desegregation: "Well, they resisted it. (laughs) A lot of people resisted it. I guess there were some people, maybe, who welcomed it." Gracie, a woman who had been actively involved in school integration efforts, recalled clearly that the overwhelming response among whites was one of resistance, not of cooperation. And Trudie, 60s, went even further, adding a social class component and arguing that white elites were the ones who fought school integration the hardest, and won:

Oh, I think some whites *really* resented it. And if they were rich enough, that's why they moved . . . a lot of home schoolin' and sendin' your child to . . . private schools. But the rich ones, to me, really got together and started their own private

schools, and I don't know if they would allow blacks in it, or only the rich blacks, as I call it. So, blacks were sorta left out in the cold I feel. . . . I didn't KNOW this for a fact, but I sometimes wonder if white people kept holdin' back as long as they could hold back because they didn't really want this, and if they were rich enough to hold back, they could hold it back.

Whites like Trudie and Gracie, who did not fight school desegregation, could more easily develop critical insight on the integration opposition movement. But, as will become evident in the following sections, most of my other respondents participated in one way or another in the school desegregation opposition or empathized with other whites who did. Their explanations now of why whites resented and acted against integrated schools are replete with justificiations rooted in whites' own victimization.

I term this dynamic *white victimology*, wherein whites respond to the real or imagined expansion of racial equality to people of color, with its loss of some white privilege, by fixating on what they perceive as their own genuine suffering. As is illustrated throughout this manuscript, white southerners did not demonstrate a complete denial of past racial inequalities faced by African Americans; for example, they typically minced no words in acknowledging that segregated schools were resourced inequitably. Nevertheless, most of their narratives of the white experience during school integration focused almost exclusively on the chaos and confusion caused by desegregation and the injustice, danger, and trauma faced by innocent white children in integrated schools. Primarily, then, in their minds school desegregation was a period of victimization faced by whites, who did not deserve the unfair treatment.

THE ULTIMATE IN VICTIMOLOGY: WHITE CHILDREN SUFFERING

Excepting the handful of very youngest and oldest of my interview respondents, the majority were parents of school children when full school desegregation was implemented in Greensboro schools in fall 1971, and they experienced the transition period first-hand. Portrayals of their initial acceptance of school integration were mixed, with some saying they were committed to compliance because it was "right" and others saying they had been opposed from the beginning. For several people, the resentment still lingers. Respondents illustrated and rationalized their initial opposition to school integration in several ways. Notably, none said that they had been opposed to racially mixed schools on principle. Rather, they said they were displeased with *how* desegregation had been implemented and the unfortunate and unnecessary hardships to which they and their white neighbors were subjected.

In describing what the problems had been with school integration, interviewees almost exclusively told stories of whites being victimized – whether it was children suffering from long bus rides, white teachers struggling in suddenly chaotic classroom environments, or white kids being bullied by black kids. White children, then, were cast as the ultimate victims: the most vulnerable, impressionable, and at risk of terrorism and trauma. In these narratives of school desegregation, only a few respondents expressed empathy toward black children involved in integration, and typically only cursorily. The accounts of white victimology were used to justify whites' decisions to send their children to private schools. And, some respondents, whose children had not undergone any of the turmoil of those first few years of school desegregation, nevertheless

expressed empathy for white families who had. Thus, elderly white southerners' perceptions of school integration are bounded tightly by the white racial frame; they are nearly devoid of empathy for African Americans and are centered on the experiences of whites as they were subjected to "unfair" changes to their way of life and losses of personal freedom.

Darla's, 70s, narrative incorporated several common themes throughout the interviews. In her interview she spoke at length about school desegregation, criticizing how it had been implemented and the problems it had caused. In this excerpt, she used the phrase "thrown with them" multiple times to describe her son's introduction to integrated schools, as if he had been callously hurtled into black schools:

> Our son . . . was the guinea pig of this first busing. He went the first year down to [a formerly white school] . . . The next year he went to [what] had been a black school . . . The next year he went to [another school]. And he was thrown with black children. A lot of- well, not only black children but a lot of the white children and black children responded negatively, I think, to the situation. There was a whole lot of teacher discipline, trying to get things under control. He NEVER came home and said, "There are six black people in my room," or "I don't like this black person or that black person." He really didn't make any big comments about it.

These themes were quite common among respondents: school integration was an unfair, terrible process in multiple ways, but white children responded with an open mind. Note also how, in this excerpt, Darla had to stop herself before she claimed that black students were the ones who did not respond positively to integrated schools ("A lot of- well, not only black children . . . responded negatively"). She presented whites as tolerant and accepting despite the inconvenience and unfairness of desegregation they bore.

Trouble on the Bus

Compulsory busing was a lightning rod in Greensboro's school desegregation process. Many white parents deeply resented their children's long commutes when they otherwise could have walked to school, and they fretted over buses being dangerous and the bus routes confusing. Infantilizing the youngest children, white adults argued that riding a school bus imposed a hardship on innocent, vulnerable children. Only two respondents acknowledged the fact that for decades a great many black children had been riding buses and walking long distances, sometimes passing white schools along the way, in order to reach their segregated schools. The "neighborhood school" system did not work as effectively for many members of African American communities as it did for whites – especially in the middle and upper classes – who had far greater control over their choice of employment and housing (and faced no racial discrimination in either realm) and could often situate themselves in opportune locations near to schools with advanced curricula.

Arnold, 80s, was one such respondent who felt entitled to capitalize on his choice to live near certain schools. He used victim terminology to describe white children's experiences with busing:

> [My children] weren't victims of being forcibly bused, except the one child, my youngest. The others escaped that need and that could have been bad, if they had to be bused someplace. Busing, I thought, was (3) not a good thing. I know what they were trying to do, but I don't think it was a good thing, because all the people all over town, would have been far better for them to go to a local school. In fact, we'd located our home . . . within short walking distance of three schools . . . so our children could walk to school, didn't have to ride a bus. I felt that was the best way it could possibly be. (3) But you would never get integration, you would never get the mixing of the races that way. I understand that. (chuckles) It

just wouldn't happen. (3) It's something had to be forced and that's what happened.

Arnold acknowledged that school integration required a mandate, but he nevertheless viewed the desegregation process as bad ("I know what they were trying to do, but I don't think it was a good thing"). In this view, a desegregation program was necessary but whites should not have been victimized and made to bear any significant inconvenience during the transition.

Similarly, Trudie, 60s, maintained her opposition to busing at the same time as she acknowledged the importance of integration for the sake of cross-cultural exposure and equity:

Bein' bused all the way across just to make it equal, I didn't like that . . . because the children, it's like, oh my word, get 'em up, get 'em on the bus by 7:30 - *some of 'em* were goin' to [ride] for an *hour* - and I thought it was very unfair to the *children*. As far as the integration, that was *good* that they got to see the other culture. . . . I don't like to hear of, well this school doesn't have hardly enough money to run. . . . It was not fair. To me, the black children should have had the same privileges . . .

Hope, 70s, recalled the inconvenience of school assignments and busing, but offered the most positive view of school integration among respondents whose children were bused to faraway schools:

It was hard to see your child bused all the way, and if she'd get sick, I'd have to try to find transportation to go get her . . . [and] we had a school right down the road that she could walk to, and had to bus her all the way across town. . . . But they enjoyed getting on that big ol' yellow bus and riding. . . . My younger children had black teachers and we just loved them. They was good to my kids, and you know, what could I say. I couldn't be mean. I know some people can, but not me. And my kids never complained about it at all. I guess though that's the way me and their dad was. You know if we'd set around and talked ugly stuff about other people, they would pick up that same thing . . . But we never did that.

Hope implied that her and her husband's acceptance of integration helped her children thrive through the difficult process.

In their opposition to busing, many respondents did not indicate an awareness that segregated schools had posed much hardship or inconvenience on black students, even though they acknowledged that resources at black schools had been substandard. Thus, in their view still today, the implementation of full desegregation and busing programs addressed the issue of equity, but *created* many new problems that were unfortunately inflicted upon whites.

A few white southerners like Hope seem to harbor no resentment today and view their children's experiences in integrated schools as very positive. But, many more retained significant resentment towards school integration four decades later. Truly, school integration was difficult for many families, white and black: confusing logistics of busing and school assignments, the loss of many neighborhood schools, animosities between students, stressed-out teachers. But what were the alternatives to a completely racially-segregated school system (except for a few hundred black students enrolled in white schools via "freedom of choice" programs)? Racially-segregated housing patterns created by many decades of white exclusion necessarily meant that neighborhood schools would reflect those patterns. If the goal was to racially integrate the schools, either families had to move or the children had to be transported. Certainly people would have been truly up in arms if integrated neighborhoods had been mandated.

Trouble in the Schools: Black Bullies

Another major problem perceived by multiple interviewees was the bullying of white students by black students in desegregated schools. Notably, only one person told a story of white children bullying an African American student. Taken together, the respondents' portrayals suggest that, somehow, white children's psychological and physical health were at risk of severe damage by the chaos of school integration and often directly at the hands of their new, cruel black schoolmates. This perspective, however, ignores the reality of black children's often extremely traumatic integration experiences as they navigated, without any access to parental protection, a white school system, white teachers, and white classmates who were all heavily influenced by the persisting white supremacist ideology of the era. To construct *white* children, then, as the true victims of school desegregation is to severely warp the structural reality.

Frances, 80s, said her son was victimized and traumatized by African American bullies:

> Our children had a little bit of problem in *school* with the blacks stealing their lunch money. Our son told us that he would not go to the bathroom by himself for fear he would be jumped . . . And he quit takin' his lunch because they would steal his lunch or his lunch money, so he just didn't *eat* while he was in school. He would wait and eat when he got home. That was what *he* encountered.

In a similar story depicting white children's severely compromised mental and physical health, Carla, 60s, said her daughter developed a urinary ailment because of attending a majority-black high school that had been integrated for several years at that point and that "was so bad when my daughter went there . . . that she was afraid to go to the bathroom, to the point that . . . we had to take her to a urologist." And Arnold, 80s, told a

story about how his daughter had been accosted by black males when she attended a primarily-black school: "What a lot of the black guys would do is they would congregate around a girl, especially a white girl, and sorta block her in and sorta intimidate her if they could." And Ellie, 70s, said her son was the victim of bullying by a "big black boy" who targeted whites:

> I just will never forget this. . . . there was a big black boy that sat in front of our son, and when . . . he got to school, this black boy sort of ran supreme in the classroom, and he would have our son get down and lick his shoes and he would say, "Your people have slaved my people, now I'm gonna slave you."

The most extreme example in the interviews of white students' victimization by black children in integrated schools was fabricated as a forewarning to encourage white parents to send their children to private school. Mack, 80s, said that a principal of a white public school privately alerted him that his fair-haired daughter would be maimed if she attended an integrated school:

> [He] told me one day, "Mack, I think if you can afford it you would be smart to send [your daughter] . . . to private school. . . . because she has too much visibility." He said, "I'm afraid that some of the black girls would try to cut her face or mutilate her in the girls' room." And he said, "We've had threats of that, especially with pretty white- *blonde* white girls." He says, "Don't spread that around."

Mack and his wife did decide to enroll their daughter in a private school. A few respondents, using various non-racist rationales, justified their choice to reject integrated public schools and enroll their children in private schools. For Mack, the reasoning included fear of targeted racial violence from black students. For some others, the reason was that sensitive or gifted children thought to require extra attention would fail to thrive amidst the chaos of desegregation. And, for others, the choice of private schooling was a

matter of logistics, where long bus rides were deemed too heavy a burden on children who could otherwise have walked to nearer schools. All the rationales posited white children and families as bona fide victims of a desegregating school system.

Trouble in the Classroom: Good White Teachers, Bad Black Teachers

In my respondents' views, some of the hardship created during desegregation also fell on to white teachers. Thus, their victim-making extended beyond their own families, as they cast fellow whites, but rarely African Americans, as victims of school integration as well. Several people spoke of how difficult it was for white teachers to control disruptive black students in integrated classrooms and to deal with the lower skill sets of black students. It is implied in these accounts that whites-only segregated schools and minimally-integrated white schools in the freedom of choice years were healthy and productive settings for teaching and learning, while fully integrated schools took a severe toll on dedicated white teachers and compromised their ability to teach effectively. Segregated schools, then, are cast as safe and positive spaces, appropriate for (white) children's learning, while integrated schools are cast as horribly damaging to the whites who had to endure them.

The respondents most often portrayed black teachers, on the other hand, as incompetent and ineffective due to their own deficiencies, not to the upheaval of the transition. Arnold, 80s, empathized with the difficulties faced by a novice white teacher:

> Only one of our children got bused during the forced busing to help integrate the schools. Just one year . . . and pretty well lost the year. I mean, the poor teacher. . . . I think it was her first or second year teaching, and she had a whole classroom of kids, and she had two little boys who were learning to read with the headset . . . in the 6th grade, they were learning to read! And they were black of course. . . . And I thought, This poor teacher, she's got a terrible situation here. (chuckling)

> 'cause she doesn't have [but] just a handful of kids that are doin' what she's supposed to be teaching. She's got to bring these others along as best she can.

Here, the hardship was perceived as being on both his child who "lost the year" and the white teacher who had "a terrible situation." Thus, Arnold traced the root of these problems to whites having to deal with deficient African American students. Very few respondents acknowledged that school integration was a difficult, much less traumatic, experience for black students, teachers, or parents, who essentially lost their school system due to the 70-30 white-black ratio that was targeted in school assignments (Chafe 1981:230).

Patti, 80s, told two stories of desegregation-era teachers in Greensboro, one white and one African American. Similar to Arnold, Patti portrayed the white teacher as talented and caring and valiantly struggling in an under-resourced and overcrowded school:

> She was having a tough time. She was one of the few white women there and she's a wonderful, *wonderful* teacher. . . . So I asked her would she mind if I . . . observed in the classroom on one of my holiday days, and my eyeballs fell out. . . . I don't know whether the integration had gone too fast and they weren't prepared- I mean I can't give you causative factors, I can only tell you what I saw. But there were three children in there that I think you would call special needs who were *so out of control* that they were bouncing off the walls and destroying the educational opportunity of everybody else. . . . It was not the teacher's fault. She was doing *more* than any human- she was skilled. But these three children should *not*- I mean, it was criminal!

In Patti's view, those three "so out of control" black children single-handedly ruined the classroom environment. Patti extended full empathy to the white teacher who had to deal with the situation.

On the other hand, in the story she told of a black teacher, Patti demonstrated no empathy. She portrayed the woman as laughingly incompetent and a main reason she removed her son from public school:

> Part of the dilemma was that the English teacher was woefully unprepared. How she was certified to teach English . . . I have no idea. . . . But (chuckles) it was things like, she would read out a spelling list . . . [and] *this* I remember so clearly. Flow! . . . So [my son] had spelled it f-l-o-w. Well he failed his spelling test, and among the many wrong things was flow, because you spelled it f-l-o-o-r. (chuckles) . . . It was just a nightmare for *me* because this was *not* what I considered adequate, but that's what I was stuck with.

According to Patti, a "wonderful" white teacher was incapable of doing her job because of three "out of control" black students, while she and her son were "stuck with" an "inadequate" African American teacher.

Similarly, Ellie, 70s, indicated that she assumed in advance that black teachers were likelier than white teachers to be of low quality and to cause her children to "lose a year." She claimed also that African American teachers unfairly gave special treatment to black students:

> There were times when the children would start school at the beginning of the year and would come home and you'd say, "Who's your teacher?" And you never let your child know it, but when they told you, you just wanted to go in the other room and cry, 'cause you knew what the year was going to be like. You had lost years because they didn't get anything. But you were still trying to make a system work, and some of them were good, some of them were bad. But you probably didn't maybe watch the white teachers closely. I would probably say that's true- or expect there to be a problem, where maybe you might expect there to be otherwise. With the children, it was hard. It was a very difficult time for me, because they'd come home and they'd say, "Well we had to turn in our papers by such-and-such but so-and-so doesn't because they're black." And that was the message the children got. And the teachers did that. . . . So that part of the early bringing together the races to me was not done in the best way. I don't know what I would have done differently, but today I wonder- there's one of ours I would like to have sent to private school, but I couldn't do it and leave the other [children] in the system, so I didn't do it.

Elsewhere in her interview Ellie indicated that her most "gifted" child may have suffered

irreparably from her decision not to send him to private school, where she believes he

would have been challenged academically and would not have been subjected to

problematic racial messages.

A married couple retold what they remembered as their son's two school

integration stories, both of which portray black teachers as a problem - either

incompetent or too racially sensitive:

> Husband: He came home and he told us of two instances. One was a teacher calling the roll, and she called out [his first and last name], and he answered that he was here and he says, "They call me [my middle name]." So she took that and turned it into a racial problem.
>
> Wife: A racist issue.
>
> Husband: A racist issue.
>
> (I: Hm?)
>
> Husband: He couldn't understand it either. But that's one time-
>
> (I: He got in trouble?)
>
> Wife: Well, she kinda reprimanded him because she felt like that he was correcting *her*. . . .
>
> Husband: What was the other one?
>
> Wife: The [foreign language] teacher?
>
> Husband: [Foreign language] teacher.
>
> Wife: Yeah, she was black and she was tryin' to teach them, and she caught him talking and so he had to write, "I shall not talk in class" a hundred times. Well, he thought if she'd had any gumption she would have had him to write in [the foreign language].

In this exchange, as the couple interacted and collaborated in storytelling, it seemed that this woman and her husband together shared these two associative memories. When they recall their son's school desegregation experience, they vividly recall these two quite mundane stories of black teachers mildly reprimanding their son in an inappropriate manner.

It was apparent in many respondent accounts that their memories of school integration are largely limited to things done *to them as whites*, either by African Americans directly or by the desegregation process itself. In these stories, the victimization of school integration is presented as falling solely upon whites. White teachers were victims of black students and the general chaos of integrated classrooms. White students were victims of black teachers and, indirectly, of academically deficient black students. Virtually all empathy my respondents expressed when discussing school integration was directed towards other whites.

Empathy, for Whites Only

Even some people who had no personal experience with busing or school reassignment told empathetic stories about other whites' troubles. Sharon, 60s, retold her neighbor's story about a combative busing experience where white children were harassed by black children:

"Mary Jane" told me . . . that she was on the first . . . *white* bus that was shipped into a black school. And she said, "They were throwing rocks at us." And I said, "So they didn't want you there," and she says, "*No*! They didn't want us there, and we didn't wanna *be* there!"

Sally, 70s, who did experience desegregation, also relayed a story an acquaintance told her about black bullying:

> I heard a woman say not too long ago that . . . she was in a black high school district . . . and her child was in the, like, 30 percent white. And he *was* bullied considerably. And I don't know whether he was bullied because of the color of his skin . . . but she felt like some of it was the color of his skin, and that it was just *the* worst years that she had to live through.

It is unlikely that my respondents - who have for a lifetime had very few interactions with African Americans on a peer level - have had black residents tell them of the experiences and trauma *they* underwent during school desegregation. Because of the "whiteness" of their lives, my interviewees have had little exposure to honest black perspectives, especially those unflattering to whites. It should not be expected that they would recall a great many stories of black students being bullied by white students or of black teachers struggling with troublesome white students. Nevertheless, it was rare for an interviewee to mention even the possibility that African American families experienced hardship during integration or in segregated schools. The picture painted by their narratives is distorted: white students, teachers and parents were constructed as vulnerable and suffering subjects. This overwhelming portrayal leaves the impression that the primary dynamic of school desegregation was the destruction of whites' peaceful and stable educational experiences, and it provides little space for counter-narratives of African Americans.

Even a former schoolteacher in her 70s, whose narrative stood out because she did not use white victimology when discussing school desegregation, gave just a brief nod to the hardships likely faced by African Americans. She was one of the few

respondents to point out the courage of black parents sending their children into

primarily white schools under the initial freedom of choice plan:

> I remember one year we decided that [my grade level] should be integrated . . .
> and I had four in my room and they were delightful, and the children, they all got
> along well. But I think the parents had to be really brave to let their little children
> come to that white [school]. It must've taken a lot of guts. And yet they had a
> grand time.

She acknowledged the bravery mustered by black parents, yet she imposed her own

interpretation of the black students' individual experiences, describing them as

altogether positive ("they all got along well" and "had a grand time"). Similarly,

Bernice, 80s, affirmed African Americans' hesitancy for their children to enter

predominantly white schools, but implied that they never did encounter any real

problems: "The black parents were sort of fearful for their children, which I can

understand, 'cause it'd be like sendin' 'em into a hornet's nest more or less. But I never

did . . . [hear] that any black got mistreated or, you know, mauled or anything like that."

As demonstrated in many of these excerpts, both white people's and black

people's misgivings of school integration are constructed as rational. However, while

white people's negative experiences with school integration were constructed as real,

black people's negative experiences were constructed as absent or imaginary. My

respondents' portrayals of school integration demonstrated a high level of self-

centeredness and a preoccupation with whites' own interests and convenience. Only a

few people expressed some minimal curiosity about or understanding of black families'

often traumatic experiences with school desegregation. Most commonly, the

interviewees would cursorily acknowledge that it may have been difficult for African Americans to enter primarily white schools.

It should not be expected that my respondents would have elaborated on black southerners' integration experiences and interpretations. However, the respondents *did* tell the stories of other people - white people - and, when they did, the stories tended to be centered on whites' difficulties, and they expressed empathy for them. Thus, their interpretations of school integration are not completely self-centered; they are white-centered and they assert white victimology. When describing a transition period that white southern interviewees acknowledged was designed to address decades of unequal schooling for African American students, respondents largely fixated on whites' own (unnecessary) troubles and victimization. Their narratives imply that, in a just world, there should have been a way to desegregate schools and bring equity without whites bearing any significant burdens.

PERSISTENT WHITE VICTIMOLOGY: LINGERING RESENTMENT

When it came to discussing school desegregation, my respondents tended to have complex views. Many respondents acknowledged that segregated schools were unequal, and none indicated that they had ever opposed the *idea* of integrated schools. However, many openly resented desegregation and are still bitter today over *how* it occurred, with the implementation of new school assignments and city-wide busing mandates and the loss of predictability, safety, and overall peace of mind. Their adherence to notions of white victimology justifies both the initial white opposition and their continued resentment toward school integration.

Some of the lingering frustration, certainly, is rooted in the Supreme Court itself, who, in their 1955 decision, pushed implementation decisions onto local school boards and used the vague language of "all deliberate speed" to describe the rate at which segregated school systems should be dismantled. As Feagin (2010b) points out, the Supreme Court avoided affronts to white sensibilities in their rulings: "neither of the two *Brown* decisions explained to the general public the anti-civil-rights reality and immorality of racial segregation, and neither decision mandated clearly the steps necessary to end actual segregation" (p. 87-88). The lack of a firm judicial finding against the unconscionable practice of unequal schooling discouraged ordinary white southerners from understanding African Americans' experiences with segregated schools and emboldened them to feel victimized by mandates created by local authorities.

And the affront to whites' sensibilities was perhaps especially severe in places like Greensboro, whose leadership skirted and counterattacked desegregation for so long that they were finally forced by the federal government to hurriedly design and implement a comprehensive program within the span of a few months. As Sally, 70s, explained: "I don't think any of us were ready for it. It was very abrupt. They didn't do it over a period of time, they just (snaps her fingers) did it. . . . they switched the children all in one year." While black leaders and some whites had dedicated numerous years to working toward school integration, Greensboro's school board refused to desegregate fully. So, when comprehensive integration finally had to happen, the majority of white residents, who had sat passively by for years while African American families did the

work of integrating under the freedom of choice option, suddenly felt put upon and confused: *why* was this all being *forced*, and why so suddenly?

I present the following profiles of two of the individuals who had extended commentaries on school integration. The narratives of Ellie and Carla demonstrate more in-depth the reasoning and feelings undergirding white southerners' lingering resentments towards school integration. Ellie, who presented herself as progressive through attempting to do "the right thing" by embracing public school desegregation, rued what appeared to her as irreparable damage done to her children because of it. On the other hand, Carla today viewed the end of segregation altogether unfavorably, blaming a host of contemporary social ills on racial integration.

Ellie: "We Thought We Were Doing the Right Thing"

Ellie, 70s, provided an interesting narrative on school integration. She and her husband had several children in school during desegregation, and they decided, unlike some of their middle- and upper-middle-class friends, to accept the coming changes and keep their kids in the public school system. She indicated that a rift was created in the white middle classes between those who fled to private schools and those who chose to "do the right thing" by complying with the new school assignment and busing programs:

> My husband and I thought we were doing the right thing to work through this so that it would be better for our children's children. And when we hear some of the things that go on, we question whether we made any impact at all. I mean, we were just one small family, but if everybody had been able to have that feeling that we were trying- . . . but there were a lot of people who just said forget it. And that was hard on us to say, 'Why do you think that you're so much better than we are, that your child is more important than ours that they need to get a better education than ours?' And that's hard to live with and to work through.

Ellie seemed to have felt abandoned by other whites who operated from self-interest and secured a "better education" for their children. She indicated a sense of resentment that those who chose to "do the right thing" would lose out on the educational benefits accruing to those who refused to participate in school desegregation.

Furthermore, Ellie went on to say that her family shouldered an additional major cost from embracing school desegregation, which manifested in her children's racial attitudes. She claimed that her children are racist adults today because of the ordeals they endured during school integration:

> And when were raising our children, we felt we had a responsibility to do what was, quote, 'considered right' in the schools to try to fix things. But because of what our children were experiencing, we have children that are very prejudiced, much more than I would say I ever was, much to my sorrow. And they as adults would say, "Mom you had no idea what it was like." And that's very hard for me, because I thought we were doing it for the right reasons.

Ellie lamented the losses to her children from her choice to do the "right thing" by sending them to integrated schools. She constructed integrated schools as the cause of her children's racist views. Ellie implied that, if her children had not been subjected to integrated public schools, they would not have developed a negative impression of black people and would harbor less racial prejudice today – they would be at least as racially progressive as her, if not more so. To this day she questioned her decision to comply with school desegregation, wording her initial conviction in the past tense: "I *thought* we were doing it for the right reasons" and highlighting the unfortunate and disappointing consequences that befell her children.

Carla: "Whites Were Brought Down"

Carla, 60s, one of the youngest respondents, graduated high school in the mid-1960s and did not experience integration under the freedom of choice plan (it had been primarily implemented only in the younger grades during her school years) or under the comprehensive school desegregation program that began in Greensboro city schools in 1971. By the time her own children were old enough to attend school, desegregation had been in place for several years. Recall her account in the bullying section where her daughter developed a urinary disorder because of the trauma she experienced at her majority-black school. Carla has been appalled that city schools, in her view, worsened rapidly after integration:

> I don't understand- [my children] were in county schools, and they were fine. But I brought them into the same city school *I* went to, but it had deteriorated so much that [my daughter] was afraid to go to the bathroom. . . . That's been [over 20] years ago, so I can't imagine what it's like now. In *my mind*, they need to have a police officer in every classroom I think. (chuckles)

Carla associated the "deterioration" of public schools with the onset of school integration. She admitted that many of those who initially opposed school integration used racist reasoning, but she affirmed their opposition, claiming that their prophecies turned out to be correct:

> When they integrated the schools, I think the *worst* thing that happened in *my* mind- and I'm sure there were racist comments, and yet, I think it's come true- I can remember . . . [a family member] . . . said, "By integrating the schools, they're not gonna bring the blacks *up*, they're gonna bring the whites *down*." And I think that's what happened. . . . To me, when they integrated the schools, it's almost like then *all* the standards lowered. And I think it has come *true* that, by integrating . . . the whole level of society was lowered. . . . To *me*, ALL of the standards have been allowed to come down, to deteriorate. . . . I just don't get it. I don't understand *why* they're supporting the welfare system that they're supporting. You know, it's like everything WENT down HILL. But why did that

> happen? If we were gonna integrate, why didn't we keep the standards? . . . So I blame a lot on integration- not the blacks, but because what happened to the administration of the systems? I KNOW that you can say their level of education had to be brought up, but was it? Or, was ours just brought down? I just don't get it. I can't quite understand what happened.

Carla concluded that whites were the ones who primarily lost out from school integration, both from undergoing traumatic experiences in schools and from diminished educational rigor.

CONCLUSION: PRESERVING WHITE VIRTUOSITY THROUGH WHITE VICTIMOLOGY

While the civil rights era was remembered as a period that ushered in some expansion of racial equality, by and large my respondents portrayed both the black freedom struggle and school desegregation as times of uncertainty, heightened racial animosity, chaos, unfairness, loss, and white victimization. Some, like Carla, above, conceive of this period as the cause or catalyst of new, persistent societal problems. Thus, even though white southerners characterize the most blatant markers of segregation as unequal, they use the tumultuous memories of the civil rights era to sustain a nostalgic view of the Jim Crow era and a victimology view of their own experience of the civil rights era and the post-civil rights era.

My interview narratives demonstrate that aging white southerners "push away" civil rights movement activism, downplaying its importance for the expansion of equity and refusing to identify with or empathize with the black freedom struggle. And, when it came to moments in the civil rights era that that personally experienced, their narratives became self-centered, as they highlighted the ways in which they were put in danger by

civil rights protestors and the upheaval that was school desegregation. School integration

they embraced as their own battle, as they defended against the traumatization done to

their innocent children.

School integration, a most personal memory for many respondents who had been

parents of school children at the time, is still resented to this day for many elderly white

southerners. White victimology in the school desegregation narratives demonstrates a

distancing from the concerns of African Americans, an inability to see things from their

perspective, and a white self-centeredness. Notably, the respondents cast whites as the

victims not only of black Americans, but also of callous, impersonal policies and

programs. Thus, large-scale changes during the civil rights era contrast with

respondents' nostalgic view of the segregation era as a time of friendliness and

neighborliness between all southern people, within and across racialized groups. The

civil rights era seems to them to be the time when things were done *to* whites, without

concern for their feelings and wellbeing.

White victimology, then, is a white response to disruptions of (white

supremacist) white norms, expectations, and comforts. These disruptions are sometimes

blamed on blacks individually or collectively, and other times blamed on social changes.

Many white southerners have nostalgia for a social state of predictability and a feeling of

control over their space, which in their lifetimes was unquestionably the era of

segregation, before all the "problems" seem to have gotten "stirred up." However, the

strong propensity toward white victimology is unreconciled with most respondents'

straightforward acknowledgments of some undeniable unfairnesses imposed on African

Americans in the segregated Jim Crow era. As I will show in the following chapter, this

unreconciled contradiction is held at bay through the construction of a white moral

identity. I argue that, through constant white moral identity-making, whites maintain a

sense of themselves as good, nonracist people and a sense of African Americans (and

other people of color) as justifiably subordinate to whites.

CHAPTER VIII

WHITE MORAL IDENTITY AND WHITE PROTECTIONISM: MICROPOLITICAL

MANEUVERS

When we remember that our forefathers accepted slavery and that our people now accept gross racial discrimination and acute poverty and disease without letting those evils enter the region of "right" and "wrong," it becomes apparent that the morals of the South have been for many only a compulsive cleansing of hands. (Smith 1961:207)

Writing in 1949, white southerner Lillian Smith astutely observed that white southern

morality had long been deficient and hypocritical. It was a "compulsive" production

aimed at denying a history of grotesque inequalities and injustices. As I will demonstrate

in this chapter, white southerners continue to firmly hold to a sense of regional, racial,

and individual morality. By constructing their own superior morality, they ignore or

deny past and contemporary white supremacy and racial inequalities, and they continue

to view African Americans as deficient. In some ways they even deny having a racial

identity, which helps to assert white southerners as nonracialized people whose natural

state is being virtuous, "colorblind," and uninvolved in racism. Furthermore, the sense of

morality furthered by my interview respondents included contrasting notions of black

Americans' less moral color consciousness and harmful propensity to blame whites for

their own formidable shortcomings.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF WHITE MORAL IDENTITY

The term moral identity comes out of the symbolic interactionist tradition and

has been applied to capture the ways in which people interpret their motivations and

behaviors in order to fashion a positive, moral sense of self. By doing so, they contrast

themselves against less moral, or inferior, others (Katz 1975), and they can be blind to their own biases (Deeb-Sossa 2007; Kleinman 1996). Moral identity-making is a process linked to interpretations of behavior, and it is self-reinforcing: behaviors that match one's moral identity bolster one's moral sense of self, and actions not in line with one's moral identity may be dismissed as anomalies, denied, or rationalized. Thus, within moral identity maintenance is a propensity to justify one's actions when they contradict the essence of one's moral sense of self. The maintenance of one's moral identity, then, consists of interpreting a constant stream of experiential evidence and selecting out parts to believe, parts to deny or ignore, and parts with which to identify.

Moral identity-making connects symbolically the deemed "superior" and "inferior." According to Katz (1975) one confers moral identity upon oneself through designating others as inferior. When identifying another's inferior self, a person lays claim to a higher moral status and assesses the other's lack of moral worth (Katz 1975:1375). Thus, moral identity is a relative and dependent status, whereby those who deem themselves superior depend, for their identity and positive sense of self, upon those they deem inferior. Moral identity-making, then, involves interpretations of both self and others. And, if personal relationships and power dynamics are involved – as has long been the case with white and black southerners – vigilance and control of the "inferior" are required, lest the virtuous become contaminated or overwhelmed by their subordinates (Katz 1975:1387). Those with more power who deem themselves moral beings assume a responsibility to control or assist those they deem inferior, which affords them many opportunities to elaborate their virtuous morality. Repeatedly

witnessing oneself being forgiving or philanthropic solidifies moral standing in one's own mind (Deeb-Sossa 2007; Katz 1975).

Moral identity-making can occur on individual and collective levels (Deeb-Sossa 2007), as well as the institutional level (Katz 1975). And, as people go about crafting a moral identity, they interact with and utilize existing cultural stereotypes linked to markers such as race, gender and class (Deeb-Sossa 2007). For example, Deeb-Sossa (2007) found that white and Latina maternity care coordinators had a moral identity rooted in helping that they were heavily invested in because it enabled them to endure stressful work conditions and measly salaries. However, they strongly preferenced "needy" Latina clients, and they justified their lower level of support to black clients by pulling from existing stereotypes and deeming the women undeserving and ungrateful. Ignoring or rationalizing or altogether failing to see one's "less than moral" behaviors are key to maintaining moral identity.

In sum, moral identity-making is a dynamic interpretive process whereby one solidifies a positive sense of self through negotiating cultural stereotypes, interacting with others, and favorably assessing one's behavior and oneself. In this chapter I propose the new term *white moral identity* to represent the ways in which my white southern respondents actively asserted a positive self in the interviews and contrasted themselves with "inferior" others. It can be said that perhaps all people, through various personal and cultural affiliations, maintain moral identities. So what makes what my respondents did assertions of *white* moral identity? I will outline the ways in which the interviewees established themselves as good people through engagement with their whiteness and

with the white racial frame. Despite the fact that they did not claim to embrace a racial

identity in whiteness, they nevertheless operate from notions of themselves and their

daily experiences as white people, which manifested in myriad ways in their narratives.[10]

I see the white southern interview respondents, again, as operating from the

white racial frame, which has been imbued, for centuries, with positive depictions of

whites and negative portrayals of people of color (Feagin 2010b). I also conceive of

white southerners as clinging to what Feagin, Vera, and Batur (2001) term *sincere*

fictions:

> In the process of developing [their] self-definition, whites have created a set of
> "sincere fictions"—personal and group constructions that reproduce societal
> myths at the individual and group level. In these fictions whites portray
> themselves as "not racist," as "good people," even as they think and act in
> racially antagonistic ways as officiants, acolytes, or passive participants. . . . The
> sincere fictions embedded in white personalities and white society are about both
> the black other and the white self. (P. 26)

White Americans hold dear many sincere fictions about themselves and about people of

color, which encourage the acceptance and promotion of racial inequalities. And I

propose the new concept white moral identity to focus on the dynamic ways in which

whites' sense of self is constantly negotiated and asserted. Because it comes from the

symbolic interactionist tradition, white moral identity necessarily acknowledges and

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[10] It is possible that *white southern moral identity* would be a more accurate term for me to use, since I
only interviewed southerners, and the respondents did sometimes reference southernness specifically (and
its inherent goodness) in their moral identity-making. I am open to debate on this, but I would argue that
the American and global constructions of whiteness (with its attendant virtues) have been at least as
influential if not more influential in white southerners' identity formations and sense of self than regional
constructions of southernness. Additionally, what my respondents say they have experienced as pure
southernness has in fact been *white* southernness (recall from Chapters 4 and 5 how respondents portrayed
the Jim Crow South as a nice place to be, where interracial interactions were easygoing and racial
animosities were rare). Furthermore, "southern ways" emerged from a society where whites maintained
extreme racial oppression towards blacks; the South has always been steeped in white racial power
dynamics. And, lastly, I believe my conceptualization of *white moral identity* here is not necessarily
limited to white southerners and can be applicable in whiteness studies generally.

investigates the constant negotiations and interpretations (individual, collective, institutional) involved in maintaining a positive, virtuous view of whiteness. Across centuries in the United States, I posit that this process of white moral identity-making has had a stable but not static existence; as social changes occur it is safeguarded through adaptation and rearticulation.

My analysis of white moral identity-making captures *how* the white southerners in my study crafted an individual and collective sense of goodness and maintained their sincere fictions, despite their having been involved in and witness to blatant racial oppression towards African American southerners in the Jim Crow era. Primarily, in this part of the analysis I focus less on the content of respondents' narratives and more on their narrative story lines, rhetorical patterns, and interactions with the interviewer. I demonstrate the ways in which white southerners assert their moral identity on an individual and family level through claiming their own nonracism and maintaining a paternalistic view of African Americans. I demonstrate also how white southerners articulate white moral identity on the collective level, where they claim a generalized "goodness" and portray blacks as inferior and dangerous through racist stereotypes and white victimology. Each strategy relies on a denial of systemic racism and an individualization of racism, where the logic of the white moral identity implies that white southerners are innocent, good, can easily avoid adopting anti-black racism, and are targets of racial disadvantages due to black Americans' actions and post-civil rights social changes.

I will demonstrate how my elderly white southern respondents engaged in white moral identity-making. But, ultimately, what does the white moral identity do? What purpose does it serve? I argue that white moral identity supports the status quo and systemic racism by excusing nearly all white people and white institutions and organizations from assuming responsibility for racial inequalities in their society. It defends against criticisms of a racist society and the reduction of racial inequalities by 1) asserting whites as nonracist and innocent, 2) casting blacks as beneficiaries of whites' generosities and of expanded opportunities, 3) positioning whites as victims or potential victims of people of color or of changes in society, and 4) constructing black Americans as deficient and to blame for their own subordinate status.

The Perpetual, Nonracist White Self

White moral identity is firmly grounded in whites' views of themselves as nonracist individuals and as a nonracist group. This view relies on an individualization of racism, where racist beliefs and actions are anomalies that can be easily avoided by good people, even those like white southerners, who, through their racial categorization, have been the obvious beneficiaries of privileges. Contemporary whiteness research shows that white young adults (and, to a certain extent, young adults of color) also individualize racism and opt out of it, but, as children of the post-civil rights era, they contrast the enlightenment of their known society against former societies, such as the eras of legal segregation and slavery. They look at black and white photos, read history books, and listen to grandpa talk, and they perceive a stark contrast between the way they live now and the way life was lived in the past, which bolsters their sense of

themselves as uninvolved in or unaffected by white racism. Contemporary white youths' white moral identity-making, then, involves contrasts with the generation of Jim Crow-era whites I interviewed.

Interestingly, however, my respondents, many of whom lived decades under segregation, also asserted having experienced a lifetime of nonracism – certainly individual and, to varying degrees, societal. And some resent charges of their being involved in any way with anti-black racism. Recall the woman discussed in the Introduction, who adamantly claimed that her "generation" had "nothing to do with discrimination." White moral identity-making, then, is a process that varies somewhat across white subgroups, whether demographic, regional, or special-interest. But, the white moral identity-making process is consistent in intent, where the aim is to establish one's white self (both individual and collective) as immune from, and therefore not responsible for, racism.

A few respondents claimed outright to not be or to never have been racist. For example, one man said he disliked the idea of being called a racist because his life proves him non-racist. His wife chimed in to support his claims:

> Man: The thing that I'm not *fearful* of, because at my age I don't really care anymore, but I would be sensitive if someone were to think I were a *racist* or a bigot. Because I think there's enough in my history that I have proven that I'm not.
>
> Wife: Well, and as a Christian you don't look at people that way.
>
> Man: I don't *look* at people in that light.

Most of the respondents, however, did not defend against accusations of racism directly. Nevertheless, they often worked to establish themselves as nonracist people beyond

reproach. For example, one married couple asserted a lifetime of immunity from racism

and racial animosity by arguing that they had never thought ill of black Americans and

had always experienced friendly interracial relations. Early in the interview the woman

went on the offensive and claimed that her "generation" respected African Americans, so

she would not be able to share any negative racial experiences:

> We've always had *very* good relationships with the blacks. My parents did. I did
> not know my grandparents that well, but our generation, the ones that we knew,
> we never had any animosity, and when we referred to them as colored people, or
> Negroes, we never said nigger. It was Negro, but that was a connotation that was
> used, not any disparaging way whatsoever, never. So if you're wanting to talk to
> some people that have had with- with them, you've come to the wrong ones,
> because we never have. No.

A bit later in the interview, she implied that the entire state of North Carolina may have

been immune from anti-black racism in some way. She asked me directly to contrast my

own racial experience with her exclusively positive one: she asked, "I think you all had

more problems in Arkansas than we had in North Carolina with blacks perhaps?"

> (I: Well where I grew up it was all white, so-)

> Woman: So you did not go to school with any blacks? Well, I didn't either. . . .
> And we all just- *we got along!* Yeah, so if you're looking for somebody to talk
> about animosity towards them, you're talkin' to the wrong people, because we
> don't have any answers for that at all.

Because of her repetition of this point and her apparent defensiveness, I felt the need to

clarify my standpoint as interviewer, which I stuttered out to her and her husband:

> (I: No, I'm just- I'm really interested- I was born in 1979, so *reading* about
> segregation, it's hard to understand.)

> Husband: Mm-hm.

> (I: That's why I'm tryin' to hear about what it was like at the time for people.)

Husband: Well, I noticed you haven't led us at all in this discussion.

(I: (laughs) Yeah, I like to just let people talk. I do have some questions, but usually people talk about the things that I was gonna ask about anyway. (chuckles))

Woman: (chuckles)

In some interviews such as this one, it became clear that integral to my gaining

respondents' trust was to assure them that I was not seeking to challenge their white

moral identity, that I would not try to make them admit that they had treated blacks

badly. These individuals were firm in the claim that anti-black racism had never touched

their lives, and it seemed to be very important that I allowed them to claim it without any

direct challenge. As indicated above, the husband had been observing my behavior as

interviewer and approved of my not "leading" him and his wife into saying or admitting

anything in particular.

Some respondents denied that Jim Crow white society, or their "generation" had

been typified by anti-black racism. Others freely noted how commonplace white

racist/segregationist views had been, and some admitted that their own racial views had

changed and become more enlightened over their lives. But, even these people avoided

taking full ownership of the reality that they had once held anti-black views: anti-black

sentiment had once been common among white southerners, but primarily it was

something that *other* whites believed. For example, Darla, 70s, indicated that she was

once opposed to living in an integrated neighborhood, but then she explained resistance

to integration as if it belonged to other whites' reasoning and not her own:

D: If a black couple were to move into this neighborhood now, it wouldn't bother me, but it would have probably years ago, to think that a black person had moved

> into a neighborhood where I was livin'. I may have thought, well, we sure don't want that to happen. . . . But I *do* remember when it first started happenin' that it was a real concern for people. They didn't wanna *buy* where there was gonna be a mixed group in the neighborhood.
>
> (I: Why is that? Is it because of children?)
>
> D: Well, it coulda been because of children, and maybe they had preconceived notions of how black people were . . . maybe they felt like they didn't keep up their yards like white people do. I- I don't know, it's- all of this is a *pre*conceived idea that people have. . . .

Darla brought up this issue of integrated neighborhoods on her own and admitted to her opposition, though in a noncommittal way ("I *may* have thought…"). But then, she quickly shifted from "I" language to "they" language as she described how anti-integration sentiment was a matter of what other white people believed about black deficiencies. I then asked a question that I thought could invite Darla to articulate how she had at one time held less enlightened racial views but had since embraced a more equality-minded perspective. I asked her, "So, do you see your thoughts around race as having changed a lot over your life?" There was a long pause, and then she gave a mixed response:

> I n- I ca- no, I can't ever think that it's changed a whole lot. I mean, I *do feel* differently about black people, and I think perhaps what's made me feel differently is the black people that I have known and have come in contact with and have seen what nice people, what smart people they are, and they're no different from what *we* hope to be. But I can't say it's changed drastically because I was never real against black people in the first place.

While she could admit that her views of black Americans had grown more favorable in the post-segregation era, Darla rejected the characterization of her racial views as having changed significantly. Darla was insistent on the notion of her white moral constancy:

yes, she had witnessed a slight transformation in her racial views, but ultimately she had never been "real against black people in the first place."

Portraying oneself and one's white peers/generation as never racist is a major component of white moral identity-making. It lays a foundation where whites are off the hook for any disadvantages or mistreatment that befell their neighbors of color. Additionally, downplaying the overt white racism of Jim Crow society provides elderly white southerners a logical assertion of their nonracist past selves. If the surrounding white society had been largely nonracist, then it would make sense that white individuals could have avoided embodying racism, especially if they had a steady moral grounding. Indeed, as was evident in Chapter 4, respondents situate the origins of their nonracist goodness *within* white society, in their homes, communities, and churches, where they say they were drilled in mutual respect, generosity, and good manners. A further dynamic of this moral identity-making through assertions of nonracism is that the insistence on a "good" Jim Crow white society prevents African Americans from *ever* being able to assert moral superiority.

Proof: Generosity to blacks. One of the primary ways in which a person solidifies her moral identity is to fixate on generosities done for others whom she considers as moral inferiors (Deeb-Sossa 2007; Katz 1975). One common way in which respondents demonstrated their white moral identity was to provide examples of kindnesses and favors done for black southerners. Their stories were on both individual and collective levels, varying from accounts of self to accounts of family members to accounts of other white members of the community. There is a paternalistic class

component of this particular dynamic, where those white southerners who lived in the middle and upper-middle classes had the means to readily assist poor African Americans and often had some knowledge of their black employees' needs, such as clothing for children, food, and home heating.

According to Feagin (2006), most white Americans use a "plantation mentality," whereby they see people of color as "necessarily dependent beings, even as 'children' who should follow the lead of their white 'elders'" (p. 30). Through this perspective, African Americans are denied peer status as full adults and are expected to defer to the wisdom of well-meaning whites. Indeed, white southerners often expected Jim Crow black southerners to celebrate the generosities bestowed upon them by their generous white neighbors. For example, as Florence, 80s, explained, African Americans in Greensboro benefited from whites' voluntary generosity, kindnesses that blacks recognized and deeply appreciated:

> Lunsford Richardson was president and CEO and founder of Vick Chemical Company here in Greensboro. And he . . . would go down to the black area on Sunday morning and teach their Sunday School class, which is commendable for a big tycoon to do that. And so after they raised the money for the black hospital, they decided to honor him by naming it for *him* rather than for anybody else because of his kindness to them. So you see, the people here in Greensboro have been *kind* to the blacks! They really have . . .

Note the way in which Florence others African Americans in saying that Greensboro's "people" treated blacks well, language that implicitly defines the city as white and pushes black residents to the margins. Also, the "moral" of her story (whites have been kind to blacks) relied not on the fact that Richardson taught a class in a black church, but on a white-centric interpretation of the grateful black response to his generosity. Whites

received layers of positive feedback from their paternalistic orientation towards African Americans, both through witnessing their own generous behavior and through their uncritical interpretations of the gratitude they received.

Florence portrayed whites' generosity towards African Americans as something that typified the entire city; she asserted a large collective white moral identity. Mack, 80s, on the other hand, presented his family's generosities as rather unique during Jim Crow. He told of how his parents contributed to black employees' college expenses secretly so that white acquaintances would not shun them, and he recounted a vivid memory of how his grandfather openly defied the standard racist wage gap where whites could expect to earn more that blacks doing the same work:

> I heard one of the white men fuss about him one day and granddaddy turn on him just f- f- furiously. He said, "*You do the work that 'Joe Johnson' does and you'll get Joe's pay!*" . . . and he retorted to my granddaddy, he says, "Well *you* sayin' I don't do as much work as a-?!" He said, "Yes I *am*. And he will make more money than you make." Well see, in that day and age that didn't set well with people. But that's the family I grew up in and that's the way they were.

Both Florence and Mack asserted an individual white moral identity by constructing a collective white generosity. Mack noted the disapproval that people like his nonracist family received from their white contemporaries, and Florence stated that whites *in Greensboro* were good to African Americans, implying that whites elsewhere were not as kind. Unlike Florence, who asserted a large regional white virtuosity, Mack affiliated with a collective white moral identity on the family level only. Mack portrayed his family line, both parents and grandparents, as more racially enlightened than the surrounding white southern society.

Thus, as white southerners look back on their lives under segregation, their white moral identity-making necessitates both the othering of African Americans and the othering of racist whites. While younger post-civil rights white Americans can establish their nonracism by distancing themselves from the segregation era, elderly white southerners who lived through Jim Crow do not divorce their white moral identity from the time period or from their past selves (especially because, as was clear in Chapters 4 and 5, they carry some nostalgia for the segregation era). Instead, they fashion themselves as separate and immune from the most racist aspects of segregation society, which means they must indict some, but not all, of Jim Crow white southerners.

Proof: Racist whites, those other people. A second related way in which respondents asserted their nonracism was to contrast themselves with racist or segregationist whites, engaging in a type of intra-racial boundary work. Intra-racial boundary work among whites ultimately upholds hegemonic whiteness, wherein "lesser whites" are marginalized to a white ideal type (Shirley 2010). And, for my respondents, "othering" racist whites helped to establish their white moral identity. However, it seemed in my interviews that demonization of other white southerners could only go so far; portrayals of racism had to be individualized because of the need to avoid implicating white society at large, which could then begin to implicate them.

Although deeming Jim Crow white southerners as a whole as racist was not evident among my interviewees, some instead asserted a generational contrast within the segregation era. For example, Arnold, 80s, claimed that he avoided the prejudice that had been common in earlier generations:

> I don't think I have the prejudice that maybe a generation behind me did. But (2) uh, I can't say that I- I'm not sayin' that was (2) um tooting my horn; I just don't *feel* like I- I had any reason to (2) have any hate or (2) dislike of- (2) of black people.

Arnold went further and contrasted himself with some of his white contemporaries who were not as open to desegregation as he had been: "when it finally came to pass, then it was difficult for some to accept. We didn't have any trouble accepting that." Arnold asserted his nonracism by setting himself apart from many, but not all, segregation-era white southerners.

Sharon, 60s, was proud that her family and friends did not participate in the white supremacy of their day: "I don't look back at family or friends or anything (3) to be ashamed of- now, there were plenty of people that *did* do things they should have been ashamed of, but I wasn't, nor my family wasn't a part of it." Although Sharon discussed elsewhere in the interview that her parents held white supremacist views, as indicated here, she felt that she had not been closely tied to any overt anti-black racists.

The construction of white moral identity through distancing from white racists occurred also on the contemporary level. For example, Frances, 70s, contrasted herself with white acquaintances who subscribe to blatant anti-black racism:

> I know people right now who think that the blacks are an inferior race, but I just think that's terrible to feel that way, because I don't think *anybody* is born inferior. . . . I just don't understand the thoughts of some people, the way they feel, and I don't like to hear any disparaging remarks about any race.

By contrasting themselves with the "real" white racists, the respondents not only established their moral identity, they made racism an individual matter. Furthermore, as a following section will demonstrate, respondents often rationalized and excused even

the overt racism of other white people, especially family members. It seemed important

to a great many of my white southern interviewees to construct not only themselves as

nonracist, but their entire family as well.

Proof: These kids of mine. A third way that my interviewees offered evidence of

a lifetime of immunity from racism was to tell anecdotes of other close family members

whose nonracism reflected their own, especially children. Some presented children's and

grandchildren's friendships with African Americans as proof that they must have

parented virtuous colorblindness (not attributing it to the fact that their kids' lives, within

a civil rights and post-civil rights era, were more integrated than their own lives had

been). They figure that racially progressive children must result from racially

progressive parenting. One married couple stated outright that their daughter being able

to thrive in a predominantly black workplace must be linked to their good role modeling:

> Husband: But as I said, we must not have prejudiced [our daughter] too much, because at [her workplace]-
>
> Wife: That's right, they love her.
>
> Husband: . . . So apparently we didn't teach racial hatred. If you've got to be taught, we didn't teach it.

Trudie, 60s, asserted her nonracism through the proof of her children as well, but

in a more subtle way. She immediately followed up a claim of her own nonracism by

telling a story of her daughter's colorblindness:

> I was never taught prejudice, and I can recall one incident that I thought was real cute. My mom . . . she'd keep my daughter when I went and got my hair done- A&T College, which is black, had a parade, and my mom comes back and she says, "Trudie, I can tell you don't teach your children prejudice." I said, "What do you mean by that?" She said, "A&T band was just a'strikin' it up, and [your daughter] was just a'goin' to town with 'em." So that's the way it was.

Trudie's anecdote implied a familial nonracism that spanned three generations, from her parents to her daughter. This story about her daughter's nonracist behavior supported her claim that she herself had never been "taught prejudice." Notably, this story was of a small incident that happened decades earlier and that Trudie had not personally witnessed. Nevertheless, Trudie had kept this story alive (perhaps with reinforcement from other family members) and held it ready to employ as evidence of her own white moral identity.

Othering Blacks and White Victimology

Respondents' assertions of themselves as immune from racist thought and behavior were multifaceted and helped to build their white moral identity. The other primary way in which respondents solidified their white moral identity consisted of othering blacks and asserting themselves as victims. While these two dynamics, criticizing blacks and white victimology, may seem on the surface as distinct from one another, they were closely intertwined in the narratives. Defiling blackness and establishing its power as an insidious force on the broader society operated to establish the virtuosity as well as the vulnerability of whiteness. It opened space for whites to be cast as victims or potential victims of black Americans or of post-civil rights societal changes.

Criticizing black culture. Othering blacks often occurred through an almost omniscient kind of lens, where some respondents freely outlined the deficiencies of black culture that they believed led to blacks' own demise or to declines within the broader society. Importantly, the vast majority if these criticisms were directed

exclusively toward contemporary and civil rights era African Americans, which helps to

strengthen the white-centric view, discussed in Chapters 4 through 6, of the segregation

era as fundamentally good and of the civil rights era marking the onset of "racial

problems."

Most often criticisms of black culture had a paternalistic element, where the

respondents believed to know what changes blacks needed to make in order to better

their lives. Arnold, 80s, cited Bill Cosby as a positive role model who wisely

admonishes black Americans to take full responsibility for all problems they face. The

excerpt I provide here is long, but demonstrates well Arnold's elaborate perspective on

what is wrong with African Americans, particularly irresponsible black men. He took

ample time to outline their deficiencies, but then his reasoning led him to an

acknowledgment that could have negated his entire argument had he not laughed it off:

> A: I really wish that there were more spokesmen . . . Bill Cosby . . . [talks] about them pulling themselves by their bootstraps and the opportunity's there and you just have to avail yourself of the opportunity. I wish there were more (2) spokesmen like that, more (2) living examples. . . . And (2) they got a lot of other problems there, with so many of the (2) black families have no father figure- single parent or grandparents raising grandchildren or great-grandchildren. That's just (2) so sad to me that they don't have much of a chance to be better. (3) I wish that there was (2) somethin' could be done about that. I don't think there's anybody that's thought of a good answer to that, except maybe inspiring (2) black males to (3) step up to their responsibilities and become a parent- I mean, in [the] true name of a parent, help raise their kids, (4) give 'em some (3) inspiration to (2) become educated, (3) cultured. (5) Well, I guess that's arrogant of me, but (3) I guess there are probably, maybe a large number of white kids in the same (2) boat. (2) I don't know, but I suppose there are. There certainly are, when the divorce rate is 50 percent.
>
> (I: (chuckles))
>
> A: (chuckling) I guess that's pretty obvious that (4) it goes across the races and that's no respecter of (2) the race.

Through his own reasoning, Arnold led himself to an acknowledgment that the cultural

problem he had laid at the feet of African Americans and blamed for their lack of social

progress – namely, absentee fathers – was not exclusively black at all, but a mainstream

contemporary trend. Nevertheless, Arnold did not revise his original argument, instead

laughing off his discovery of a fundamental flaw in his black-blaming monologue.

Mae, 70s, made a similar move. She used the same contradictory reasoning in the

reverse order: she first said irresponsibility cuts across race, and then she went on to

criticize blacks exclusively and at length:

> Now it's not only that the blacks aren't taking responsibility 'cause there's a lot
> of whites that don't take- but we had a incident in our family [where a family
> member] had got pregnant by a black guy and that was it. He has nothing to do
> with raising the child. And so many times it's situations like that and she's left as
> a single mother raising this biracial child. Nobody knows where he is. A lot of
> them just do things like that and don't take the responsibility for it, and I don't
> know whether you saw Bill Cosby was saying that the black people are not being
> responsible, and boy he got some flack on that too, so. It's a situation that we just
> have to deal with and you can't control it. And I think the government has a lot to
> do with it, with all these free programs and people lose their self-esteem and they
> think, well why work if [the government] said they'll give it to them.

Through examples like these two, it is apparent that the motivation to criticize black

Americans is impervious to contradictory evidence, even when that evidence is openly

acknowledged. And, it is important to note that the time Arnold and Mae spent

acknowledging contradictory evidence was minute compared to the time they spent

detailing what they believe is wrong with blacks today.

In the next excerpt Harold, 70s, made a move of white collectivism toward me,

as he described how black Americans erroneously blame their situation on white people

like him and me:

> It's much easier, the black race, to blame you and me – whites or upper class or whatever – on the fact that the blacks are at the bottom than it is to say, "We're the one at fault, we want our kids to go to school, we want 'em to behave . . . and *move* ourselves *up*."

Inviting me to share in his us-versus-them construction, Harold portrayed African Americans as lacking a value in education, good behavior, and an ethic of personal responsibility. He argued that, not only were blacks to blame for their diminished outcomes, they unfairly and erroneously blamed innocent whites for their plight. Harold cast blacks as irresponsible, lazy, wrong, and rude.

These strategies employed by respondents to criticize African Americans serve ultimately to protect whites from criticism generally and from racial criticisms specifically, so that whiteness goes unquestioned and unchallenged. In the meantime, blacks are targeted relentlessly for criticisms. This black-as-bad infatuation upholds white moral identity by focusing nearly all negative racialized attention on blacks. As the reasoning goes, if blacks are the epitome of bad culture, then whites are necessarily less bad and, importantly, *not* to blame for blacks' subordinate status. Thus, by a constant focused criticism on blacks and by refusing to criticize whites similarly, whites are constructed implicitly in contrast as racially innocent. The reality of systemic racism itself is denied, for racial power dynamics have been nullified.

Racial violence=Blacks assaulting white peace and harmony. Another way that respondents engaged in othering and criticizing blacks came through subtly, in the way that they interpreted the concept of "racial violence." Respondents sometimes brought up violence on their own, but I also included a question on it in my interview guide. Importantly, the wording I used was open-ended, usually asked during the discussion of

the segregation era like this: "Did you ever hear of violence between whites and blacks?" Interviewees had freedom, then, with their interpretations of the question, and one might imagine that some tales of the Ku Klux Klan would have been shared, or perhaps stories of white bullying. Yet, almost exclusively, interviewees' descriptions of "racial violence," whether prompted by the interview question or brought up on their own, were tales of black southerners' problematic behavior, with whites cast as bystanders affronted with the fallout of such behavior or cast explicitly as victims. Recall the preponderance of white victim-black perpetrator accounts in Chapters 6 and 7 as respondents recalled the civil rights era.

Notably, very few people even mentioned any racial violence carried out by whites against people of color and their allies, which contrasts starkly with the white supremacist, bloody reality of the history of the USA and of the South up through the 1950s and '60s (Feagin 2006; Feagin 2010a). Furthermore, many examples respondents gave of "racial violence" were not violent at all, but were merely stories of mild disruption by blacks in white spaces. This skewed construction of "racial violence" as things that blacks do to inconvenience whites ignores the overwhelming historical reality of white supremacist terrorism and upgrades blacks' disruptive but nonviolent actions in white spaces as exemplary of racial violence.

For one example, when I asked Clarence, 60s, if he recalled any racial violence, he had difficulty coming up with anything, but then recalled two instances:

> Um (4) I remember (5) blacks trying to force their way into eating establishments, or (2) defying what white people had set up as- *OH*! I've got a good one. I remember the black section of the theater and . . . an incident where

> some noise [was] being made up there and one of the theater patrols going up and having to calm people down and asking some people to leave.

Both of Clarence's examples involve black people causing either justifiable (lunch counter protests) or insignificant (noisy at the movies) disruptions. Both involve African Americans disrupting Jim Crow white spaces, defying white-defined order, but neither is violent in any way. In this way the symbolic violence that segregation imposed daily, for decades, upon African Americans goes unrecognized as violence and is therefore nullified in these accounts, where instead blacks are portrayed as enacting violent aggression against the assumed peaceful spaces that white segregationists had established.

Mae, 70s, shared her interpretation of a moment when she felt seriously threatened, as a white woman, by African Americans. She described this incident with her black co-workers in the wake of the 1995 O.J. Simpson verdict: "The only time I really felt threatened was during the O.J. Simpson case . . . we were in the break room when they passed the verdict, and it was wild." Seeking clarification on what this "wild" behavior consisted of, I asked her, "How did they act?" and she responded, "Well, it was just wild the way that the black people were acting because they found him not guilty. And there we were, a few whites mixed in there. That's the only time I've ever been in anything that racial." Still not understanding how her black co-workers had behaved and why she felt threatened by them, I asked her to clarify, "So they were excited, or-?" and she said, "They were excited, and the way were acting then, it made me wonder what it would have been like- I think probably there might have been a riot if they had found him guilty." Mae never fully clarified the behavior that she witnessed, but we can

assume that the "wild" African Americans she recalled were actually buoyant, and for a short period of time (considering that they were retail store employees on break time). But this setting of elation made Mae feel threatened and vulnerable: "there we were, a few whites mixed in there"; "the only time I've been in anything that racial." To this day she associated this moment with the fear of being a white person unwittingly caught up in the midst of angry black rioters.

Like Mae, Frances, 80s, demonstrated the associative nature of memory (Portelli 1997; Riessman 1993), where whites were consistently remembered as victims of black aggressors. Here, Frances began by talking about her children's troubles in school due to victimization at the hands of black students, a story she immediately followed with an account of her son and his white peers being terrorized by a black boy with a knife:

> Our children had a little bit of problem in *school* with the blacks stealing their lunch money. Or, our son told us that he would not go to the bathroom by himself for fear he would be jumped or [hit] upon or something like that. And he quit takin' his lunch because they would steal his lunch or his lunch money, so he just didn't *eat* while he was in school. He would wait and eat when he got home. That was what *he* encountered. And another time he went to camp and he had a black roommate, and the little boy was from the inner city, and he brought . . . a knife, and he was throwing that around and scaring all the other little white boys to death to the point that they couldn't wait to get home, because that had never happened in camp before. . . . The fact of the little boy throwing a knife at him- that turned him off completely from [camping].

In Frances's narrative is an associative clustering of incidents where her innocent children were terrorized and traumatized by black bullies. In her view African American *children* were key perpetrators of racial problems, scarring white children and families indefinitely.

In the above accounts, white moral identity is bolstered by interpreting African Americans' behaviors as targeting whites and as violent, even if no harm was done. The real threat of white violence that a great many black southerners lived under during Jim Crow and the civil rights era and beyond (Feagin 2006; Litwack 1998; Thompson-Miller and Feagin 2008) is thus nullified. In a major skewing of the American racial landscape, whites are painted as innocent victims of black aggressors.

Several respondents felt accosted simply by African American history and memorialization – yet another way that they perceived blacks unfairly violating innocent whites. Ellie, 70s, thought that white southerners during the civil rights era were made to "pay the price" for past wrongs they had nothing to do with, and they continued to suffer by being reminded of the racial past and relentlessly blamed for historical white racism and blacks' oppression:

> It was confusing to me to realize that . . . we have to constantly go back to those early beginnings. They happened. They were a part of history. And for me, they stay as part of history. But I don't understand why we always have to say, but look what happened back then, look what you did to me back then.

Although Ellie seemed to push blacks' oppression far back into history, perhaps even before her lifetime ("those early beginnings"), she did recognize that African Americans had been oppressed. Nevertheless, Ellie was "confused" as to why the troubling racial past should have any bearing on today; it should "stay as a part of history." Specifically, Ellie blamed black Americans for their constant, unreasonable reminders: "I don't understand why we always have to say . . . look what you (read: whites) did to me (read: blacks) back then." In this portrayal, blacks *are* acknowledged as racial victims – in the

past – who should now therefore be silenced. And, the failure to silence them results in the unfair contemporary victimization of whites.

In all of the ways here analyzed, blacks are presented as illegitimate racial victims, while whites are freely bestowed victim status. This completes the reinforcing circular logic undergirding white moral identity-making, where whites are established as racial innocents, which constructs them as vulnerable subjects in a climate of racial animosities. And, vulnerable whites cannot be responsible for blacks' status, for they are not racial aggressors, they are aggressed *upon* and easily subject to victimization by black Americans. As the logic goes, whatever claim black southerners may have once had to victim status was nullified long ago. Now, black Americans unfairly blame whites for their plight when blacks are the architects of their own situation with their pathological culture and unhealthy infatuation with their ancestors' oppression. And, the perceived resentment African Americans harbor towards white society not only prevents blacks' advancement via personal responsibility, it also unfairly victimizes innocent whites.

This logic of white moral identity-making is replete with sincere fictions about "good" whites and "bad" blacks and with paternalistic assessments of black Americans' behaviors and assumed deficiencies. Through unrelenting criticism of black Americans, notions of white virtuosity are solidified, strengthening the white racial frame

WHITE PROTECTIONISM: RHETORICAL MOVES THAT RESCUE WHITENESS

Recall in Chapter 4 the propensity of respondents, when discussing family within the Jim Crow era, to rationalize or downplay their family members' beliefs in

segregation, white supremacy, and black inferiority. In this section I extend that analysis of white protectionism to the additional ways in which respondents engaged in "rescuing whites" (Bracey 2011), where they sheltered whites (both themselves and others) from accusations of or responsibility for anti-black racism and thereby preserved white virtuousness. I focus here especially on the micro processes at play within the narratives, specifically the rhetorical strategies employed by respondents to avoid an acknowledgment of white racism, or in some cases to avoid acknowledging the reality of whiteness itself. Ultimately these mostly subtle defensive moves of white protectionism work to silence and prevent criticisms of whiteness. Within the interview setting specifically, these moves were self-protective for the white southern respondents, whereby they quickly averted the discussion away from potential criticisms of whiteness and of themselves.

Notably, I refer to these rhetorical moves as strategies, but I do not impose any particular level of awareness on the speakers. As will be evident in the provided excerpts, most people appeared to employ these self-protective rhetorical moves as in-the-moment responses without premeditation. Nevertheless, there is a definite pattern of white protectionism within them. Indeed, this pattern emerged early on but subtly in my own researcher consciousness. The analysis provided here is the culmination of my attempt to make sense of confusion regarding odd moments I encountered with people and why it seemed that the discussion would often shift abruptly and take off in a different direction. (Did he misinterpret my question? Why are we off-topic again? Am I somehow being unclear? Did she just not want to talk about what I asked? etc.)

It appears that what respondents were most often doing in these moments was consistently reframing the discussion in ways that helped to ensure that they would be interpreted as nonracist, good people. The interview setting undoubtedly encouraged these strategies of positive self-presentation, but they were not complete fabrications created on the spot for the audio recorder; narratives are deeply linked to people's genuinely held notions of themselves (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). However, a few respondents did make me wonder just how much mental preparation they had done between agreeing to give the interview and sitting for the interview (typically a few days later), especially those who started the interview themselves without waiting for me to ask a first question and those who talked nonstop, rarely pausing to allow me to ask questions.

Respondents used three primary rhetorical strategies of white protectionism: 1) rejection, where they refused to answer a potentially white-critical question, or challenged its premise directly, 2) diversion, where they quickly avoided implicating white society by drawing attention onto a more white-flattering aspect, and 3) rationalization, where the racism of whites (usually others) was legitimized through seemingly logical argument. These strategies are part and parcel of white moral identity-making, as not only do they work to prevent extended considerations of whiteness, white racism, and anti-black discrimination, they also further notions of white virtuousness and black deficiency.

Rejection

Rejection occurred on one level outside of the interviews, as some individuals

declined to sit for an interview on race in the first place. Although my response rate was

very good, I did get a few indications that some of the people who turned me down did it

because the topic was on the racial past. For example, one respondent told me that a man

she was voluntarily trying to recruit for my study warned her not to get involved with

me; I never got an interview with him. Additionally, a prospective interviewee I called

responded to my standard pitch ("I'm interviewing people on how they remember race

relations from their lifetimes") by saying that she would "rather not mess with anxious

things" and promptly hung up on me. Rejection also manifested as a rhetorical strategy

within the interviews, as sometimes respondents would reject the premise of a question

and decline to give a direct answer. Whether rejection occurred over the phone with

prospective respondents or within the interviews, these moments were, for me, some of

the most uncomfortable, as they reminded me that something I said could unwittingly

strike a nerve at any time.

By far the most uncomfortable instance of rejection happened to one of my

research assistants midway through her first interview, with a man in his 80s. When she

asked him to comment on ex-Senator Jesse Helms's segregationist views, he threatened

to stop the interview:

> (She: Jesse Helms opposed racial integration programs when he was the CEO of
> the CBS Raleigh affiliate. What was your opinion of Jesse Helms in the sixties
> and seventies?)
>
> He: (3) I don't understand ma'am. I'm about to turn this off.

(She: Okay- (tentatively))

He: It looks to me like this entire thing- I didn't know whether you were coming over to talk about North Carolina history or- which these questions have obviously been written by some very strong anti-southern, poor Negro person. All these questions- had I known that I you were gonna come over here and make a racial discussion out of this, I would have said you picked the wrong one.

(She: I'm sorry, these questions were written by a sociology professor. Her plan is to interview 30 to 60 lifelong Greensboro residents just to find out how they recall racial memories. It's part of her PhD dissertation.)

He: In other words, this whole interview was agenda'd by somebody who's got an axe to grind and try to show that prejudice was a terrible thing. And it seems to me that all these questions have been trying to point out that the average person in Greensboro is just a terrible person.

(She: No, I don't think so at all. I think she-)

He: Well go ahead and proceed. I've expressed my opinion.

(She: Okay. Um, just, what was your opinion of Jesse Helms and has it changed over time?)

He: I thought Jesse Helms was a very fine American. I admired him.

Undoubtedly, the wording of the question as it was spoken was leading, especially from the perspective of a Helms fan.[11] However, the offending question was able to facilitate the respondent's uncensored appraisal of the interview questions as a whole up to that point: "all these questions have been trying to point out that the average person in Greensboro is just a terrible person," which revealed the man's sensitivity to any questions about race. Nearly all the questions were worded in a rather innocuous way

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[11] The Helms question was not a crucial one for the project, and I rarely asked it, and never using the language that the research assistant used in this instance. (I would usually say something like, "Were you very familiar with Jesse Helms? What did you think of him?") The background on Helms's racial views written on the interview guide was more of a note to self than part of the question to be asked aloud. And, although I instructed research assistant interviewers not to read questions verbatim and to use simple wording that was natural for them, I felt in this instance that the wording selected facilitated his vehement rejection.

while still retaining some specificity. (See Appendix B for the unabridged interview guide.) Furthermore, my research assistant said that, contrary to the man's claim of being blindsided by a "racial discussion," not only had he signed the informed consent form which clearly divulged the topic of race, she also felt she had personally made it abundantly clear to him multiple times that the interview would be on race. It seemed that to ask some white southerners to comment on their simply *being* white could cue rejection.

A common form of rejection within the interviews was when respondents were unable or unwilling to entertain questions explicitly about their experiences as white people. Fundamental to white protectionism, then, is a general resistance to entertaining notions of whiteness, white culture, or white identity. Perhaps this is the most protective (and well-practiced) of white protectionist strategies, for what is not acknowledged in the first place cannot be critiqued. On the other hand, the vast majority of respondents readily embraced a notion of themselves as southerners, and I encouraged them to elaborate on their sense of what was unique about the American South. In fact, I always began interviews this way as part of the "warmup" stage, easing us both into conversation. Nearly all of the interviewees expressed southern pride in some way and spoke of commonly-held positive notions of the South, like friendliness and an easygoing pace of life. Then I followed up that question with one about respondents' racial identity, such as, "What does being a white southerner mean to you?" To a person, this question was much more difficult to answer than the prior one about a general

274

southernness, and some people rejected it outright, seeming to find it perturbing and

irrelevant.

Most respondents were similar to Frances, 70s, who talked at length about being

a proud southerner, but, when asked about being a white person, confusion emerged:

(I: What do you think about being white?)

F: Excuse me, for being what?

(I: A white southerner. Growing up in the South being white.)

F: Well, it's the only thing I've ever been, so there's not really much to think about. And people who are born black can't change their race. People who are oriental can't change, and I would hope that they would be proud of what they *are*. 'Cause, you know, if you're born [to] white parents, then you're gon' be *white*. So I really feel like that being a white southerner is what God maybe wanted me to be. (chuckles)

(I: So, could you tell me a story . . . about growing up, as a kid being white in *Greensboro*? Like what it was like for you-)

F: Not really. Uh, I really can't, because as I said, I've never known anything *else*.

While many, like Frances, claimed they had nothing to say about the "white experience,"

a few respondents expressed more confrontational exasperation, even though they had

been carefully informed that the interview was intended to be specifically on their

personal experiences with the racial past.

For example, John, 70s, grew increasingly frustrated with questions that asked

him to reflect on his whiteness. First, he spoke at length of the deep meaning of being a

southerner, but then he refused to confirm that being a white southerner had any

meaning. A bit later in the interview, he was irked by my question about his childhood

as a white boy:

(I: So, do you think growing up white here affected you? Do you think it was-)

J: (sighs)

(I: I know, these are-)

J: Uh, uh, no, you're right, that's a *strange* question. No, I didn't- growing up *white*, as opposed to what? Growing up black? I- I- I don- How do I- how do I *transpose myself* into the black community? I don't- uh, eh, being as I grew up white- (2) (sighs) you know, in the [military], I know some of the finest men I've ever known in my life that are just as black as the ace of spades- they are *FINE damn good men.* I mean *good* men.

From here John spoke at length about his positive regard for African Americans he had known in the armed forces, showing no interest in me clarifying my "strange" question. John first rejected my question and then immediately used another white protectionist strategy, diversion, presenting himself as racially enlightened through his nonracist regard for some "fine damn good" black men.

I empathized somewhat with respondents who were obviously not practiced in speaking directly about being white (and it is clear that I sought to affirm John's perturbation: "I know, these are- "). Nevertheless I deemed direct questions on one's own whiteness as essential to the research project. On their own terms, some respondents would have preferred all their "racial" comments to be of experiences with African Americans and opinions of African Americans. In other words, they considered black southerners, but not themselves, as racialized subjects. An integral facet of my research design was to make whiteness visible, to help respondents craft a narrative about *their* racial experiences *as* white southerners; "white" had to be spoken.

Note also how John and Frances both implied above that they would need to have experienced life both as a black person and as a white person in order to gain

awareness of whiteness ("I've never known anything else"; "How do I transpose myself into the black community?). No respondents made the same argument regarding southern identity, claiming that they would have had to live outside the South in order to know what southernness was. Thus, they used flawed logic to assert their reason for having no conscious racial identity.

And, to contextualize the flabbergasted and confused reactions of respondents like John and Frances, contemporary white American youth have never been encouraged on a large scale to view themselves as "raced" individuals with white group interests (Lewis 2004), but my respondents' cohort of white southerners witnessed and participated in explicitly-white mobilization and rhetoric, particularly during anti-integration backlash of the 1960s. Furthermore, most of my respondents lived decades under Jim Crow segregation and invariably operated from the white racial frame of the time that clearly positioned whites as fundamentally different from and superior to blacks, ideas which were reinforced both blatantly and subtly in all areas of their southern lives, including language and discourse, etiquette, segregated public spaces, mainstream (read: white) media, and everyday interactions (Feagin 2006; Feagin 2010b).

Thus, although whiteness often goes unnamed in contemporary society and we can expect that a great many white Americans have no clear notion of their own racial identities, my respondents are in the demographic of white people who are likeliest to have, or once have had, a clear sense of a white racial identity. Therefore, I posit that my respondents' rejection of questions about their own whiteness has less to do with their having lived a lifetime without a racial identity and instead is a contemporary strategy to

deny that they ever had a connection to or investment in whiteness. Rejection was employed to avoid considering the weight of whiteness and their own role within a white racist society.

Diversion

A second major white protectionist strategy used by respondents that rescued whiteness was diversion. In a rhetorical move of diversion, the speaker avoided the implications of a potentially white-critical question by shifting attention to a more comfortable or more flattering notion of themselves or of white society. For a few respondents, diversion was used repeatedly to move away from considerations of racial history and focus instead on the current racial landscape, which provided unlimited fodder for those who were critical of black culture, post-civil rights black activists, and perceived recent societal degradations and a climate of "reverse discrimination" against whites. For many others, diversion was employed in a more individualized fashion to avoid the implication of a question by asserting immediately one's own nonracism.

Ava, 60s, responded to my question about childhood playmates by focusing attention instead on a black friend of her dad's and her own black friend today:

> (I: Did you ever have any playmates or friends that weren't white when you were growing up?)
>
> A: Well (2) we never did know there was a difference. Uh, we never did see color. Uh one of my daddy's best friends was a little black boy, and they used to play together all the time. And the fact that somebody was (2) black (2) we never *knew* about slavery and that kind of stuff and felt like that somebody black, um (3) was any lower class than we were. . . . you know, one of my best friends right now is a black lady, and she's a lady that *used* to come and clean my house and . . . we still go out to eat and (2) we've made plans right now to [get together].

Instead of answering my question – one assumes by saying that indeed she had only white friends as a child – Ava provided evidence that she, and by implication her whole family, was and is "colorblind." Ava thus avoided acknowledging the racialization of her childhood by diverting attention to anecdotes that work to assert her racially progressive moral identity.

Diversion was often preceded by a limited acknowledgment of past racial discrimination. But then attention was quickly diverted to a more flattering narrative element. For example, Arnold, 80s, stammered out the importance of acknowledging the blatant discrimination of the past, and then immediately moved into a lengthy account of his "integrated," or color-blind, childhood:

> As time went on, we do have to realize that there is a difference and that those, uh, who were (2) mo- mostly African Americans are, uh, (2) treated- have been in the past treated differently. However, I have to say that when I was growing up . . . there was a vacant field near our- near where I lived . . . we went there and played tag football and stuff in this vacant field. And the adjoining properties, oddly enough, right in the middle of an older white section of town were black families. . . . And these kids that lived in these houses, when they saw us out there playin' they came up and they joined in. We'd choose sides and (chuckles) choose them too. Oh (chuckles) I guess we didn't know what the word integration meant. We were integrated (chuckles) at least in that way.

Arnold's brief affirmation of past anti-black discrimination was quickly overshadowed by his vivid memory of playing nondiscriminately with black children. Like Ava above, he employed diversion as part of white moral identity-making to assert the perpetual nonracist self.

John, 70s, employed diversion in a complementary fashion, using it to assert white moral identity by engaging in white victimology:

> I don't know if you wanted to get into this or not, but . . . slavery was probably one of the most dastardly, *horrid* things man has ever done to man, but stop and think today: where would be prominent black people today in this country right now- let's just say Oprah Winfrey or go back to George Washington Carver or Martin Luther King, or . . . Tiger Woods . . . where would *they* be today? They would've probably never been born if it *hadn't* been for slavery bringing their ancestors to this country. So people like Jesse Jackson . . . and Al Sharpton . . . they're the biggest racists in the world. They ten times more racist then I've ever thought of being. And that GALLS me to tell you the truth, because they won't let the past LIE- they keep on bringin' it up, blamin' the white man.

In a very short span of narrative time, John went from condemning slavery to condemning "racist" African American activists for concerning themselves with the legacy of white racism.

Like John, T.J., 60s, employed a temporal diversion that shifted attention away from his acknowledgment of past anti-black discrimination and toward African Americans' contemporary unwarranted complaints:

> I worked side by side with black people. . . . But yet they had their own (chuckles) bathroom . . . but everybody got along. . . . But I guess a lot of people, just through the years of the- the- I guess the mistreatment, it was horrible. And I- I certainly agree on that. But I guess I feel like this- this- I'm gonna bring you up to modern times. I feel like this now. . . . I don't understand that- either you're American or you're not. . . . if they want to separate the African American, that's fine, but I- I think people should just look people for what they are. And I guess the thing that bothers me . . . some of the young black people, not knowing situations, "you owe us." Now, my ancestors, true. Probably did. But I've worked hard all my life and I- and uh, I've been kind to people and good to people, black and white. I'm sorry my ancestors might owe you, but I don't owe you.

T.J. quickly diverted to a focus on "modern times," which he indicated were typified by African Americans wrongly blaming whites like him for the past.

In a quite lengthy exchange, Bernice, 80s, demonstrated how diversion could be deployed repeatedly to avoid reaching the logical conclusion that whites systematically

discriminated against African Americans. She began with a statement that implicated

white racism somewhat, but, as I attempted to help her develop her reasoning, she

avoided giving any responsibility to whites for blacks' subordinate status:

> B: There's still some people that, in my opinion they still look down upon the black people. And maybe as years and years go by, that will grow less and less, I don't know. . . . And I think that as time has gone on and more blacks have become educated, there's a lot more respect for the black population.
>
> (I: So, (3) white people's lack of respect in the past- do you feel like that stems from blacks not being as educated as whites?)
>
> B: I think part of it is because they didn't have an opportunity. . . . 'cause if they didn't have the opportunity to learn they couldn't get a job that paid anything much, so therefore they were more or less kept in this lower earning level where they just didn't have the *means* to do anything else.
>
> (I: So why the lack of opportunity for black people?)
>
> B: Well they didn't have any money, and as a rule the families were large, and they did well just to feed the family.
>
> (I: (4) So black families that had a little more money, were they treated equally, or was it just financially that- ?)
>
> B: No, they weren't treated equally, but as well as I remember the blacks that got a little more money . . . the only thing they were interested in is pulling themselves up. They didn't try to help their own people do very much.
>
> (I: Those are people in Greensboro that you knew of?)
>
> B: Well, just in general, uh, (3) but um, uh, and I think statistics show that the successful black, they don't want to associate with the lower class of nigras.

Bernice developed a contorted reasoning that avoided acknowledging that white racism

was a driving force of racial inequality: African Americans lacked educational

opportunity because they had little money and large families; if educated blacks did not

abandon less educated blacks, African Americans would be more educated and eventually earn the respect of whites.

Taken together, these examples of diversion demonstrate that rhetorical strategies are integrally involved in the assertion of white racial identity, as respondents shifted attention to elaborated illustrations of their own racial innocence and situated African Americans as the cause of contemporary racial problems.

Diversion was self-protective on two levels. Through it respondents avoided their own focused consideration of the history and legacy of white racism and their role within a racist society. Through their verbalization of story lines that make them seem to be good, nonracist people, they were able to witness themselves asserting their uninvolvement in anti-black racism. On another level, diversion was self-protective for respondents in the way it controlled the interview in a subtle but powerful way. Less confrontational than rejection, diversion was nevertheless a way for respondents to engage in self-presentation and to dictate the interviewer's impressions and interpretations of them. It was a savvy move – again, not necessarily premeditated – that reinforced white moral identity.

Rationalization

The third major rhetorical strategy of white protectionism I identified in my narratives was rationalization, when respondents excused, or rescued, white acquaintances and loved ones from potential accusations of racism through a seemingly logical line of reasoning. Rarely did any interviewees present themselves as aligned with racist ideology. But, often respondents spoke of less enlightened white people, thereby

through contrast asserting themselves as racially progressive. But, they frequently went on to legitimize those others' white supremacy. Thus, this strategy of rationalization both established the speaker's nonracist moral identity and justified other white people's unfortunate but understandable racism. This same dynamic was highlighted in Chapter 4, where respondents demonstrated a tendency to downplay and explain away their family members' Jim Crow-era white supremacist beliefs. The additional examples provided below further reveal the collective nature of white protectionism and how it upholds white moral identity by portraying whites as nonracist, or, if racist in individual cases, then for good reason.

Most moves of rationalization occurred at the family level, where parents', grandparents', and spouses' racism was pardoned or explained away. Gracie, 80s, spoke openly in the interview of her parents' white supremacist views when she was growing up. Of her father, she said, "He just had that old stereotype that blacks were inferior." But then, minutes later, she claimed her parents were too busy and tired to vocalize racial statements:

> (I: So can you remember any kinds of things they would say?)
>
> G: (4) No, I really don't, 'cause I don't think- it just wasn't discussed at all . . . 'cause they had a pretty tough time of it making ends meet, because those were during the Depression years . . . and they worked hard, so they were tired. They didn't have the energy to. (laughs)

Gracie rendered mute her parents' anti-black racial commentaries and provided them an alibi that portrayed them as hard-working people who expended no valuable energy espousing racism.

Several respondents rationalized the racism of their loved ones, using varying measures of logic. Bernice's, 80s, grandfather employed an African American maid in the home, but she nevertheless claimed that his *lack* of close contact with blacks led to his racist views. Similarly, Darla, 70s, cited her numerous relations with African Americans as the reason she was not racist. But, she applied a different logic to her husband, whom she thought continued to be racist because he had *more* exposure to African Americans: "I know my husband has an entirely different attitude about black people than *I* do. But he's been out in the world a lot more than I have." In Darla's view, each individual has cross-racial experiences and, based on those, either is or is not racist. So racism derives from real-world experiences; those who happen to have good interracial interactions can have immunity from racism, and those who are racist have rational and personal reasons for it. This individualized conception of racism denies systemic racism and the reality of white collective interests by claiming that each person's life either will or will not lead down the path of racism. As the individualistic logic goes, one's personal experiences will dictate whether whites ally with white supremacist ideology. This is logic that validates racism through excusing overt racism as rational.

The next exchange with a married couple is a fascinating illustration of how white protectionist strategies work on the interactional level. The wife presented her and her husband both as racial progressives, but her husband repeatedly alluded to his more conservative and anti-integration views. This disconnect resulted in her realigning towards him and explaining why opposition to integration would have been natural (and

nonracist). First, when we were discussing interracial marriage, I asked the couple if any changes to society had been difficult for them. The wife responded first, speaking for them both: "Well, not as far as we're concerned. It just hurts to see the morality decline." Her husband piped in: "I have a problem as far as the white and the black, when the black and white marry. Not that I hate them, I don't do that. But I think white ought to marry white, black ought to marry black." Then, a few minutes later in the interview, he stated also that the desegregation of public facilities had been very difficult, which garnered the support of his wife:

> Husband: We just had the white, and then when the black came in, it was sort of hard to accept.

> Wife: We were not taught to hate. . . . But it was just there.

> Husband: We didn't like the change.

> Wife: Well, nobody likes change, usually.

The wife stepped in to rescue her husband's less than progressive racial comments, to lighten their effect. This dynamic occurred again later in the interview when the wife said she had welcomed school integration:

> Wife: I think it was strained at first, but I was just glad to see it myself.

> Husband: Well I can say I didn't like it, but I accepted it. (chuckles)

> Wife: Well.

> Husband: I mean, 'course I been used to when I was in school it was all white.

> Wife: It wasn't that I disliked it, it was just a change, and any time you make a change you just have to wait and see how it works through.

Again, the husband asserted a less racially progressive standpoint, and his wife moved to

align herself with him in a way that eased the impact of his segregationist sentiment.

To envision a contrast to the rationalization strategy, consider Sally, 70s, who

provided one of the most extended and insightful considerations of the racist views of

respondents' parents. She explained in a rather nuanced way how Jim Crow-era parents

simultaneously embraced white supremacist ideology and taught their children to respect

all people:

> My own parents, of course, if I had gone to the level of dating or whatever, they
> would have been horrified, and I know that, you know. There was a *respect*
> though that my parents instilled in us that I *do* appreciate, even though I *know*
> they were segregationists, as far as social intertwining. They *did* highly respect
> the people who worked with them, and it was required of us. We were not
> allowed at *ALL* to be disrespectful, and we were told that repeatedly. So that was
> just the way we were brought up, to regard everyone as a human being. . . .
> people had stereotyped situations in their minds then and I think that continues,
> *still* that kind of thing . . . but we still are working at that (chuckles) as human
> beings.

Sally's portrayal balanced her parents' racism with their policy of respect for all, which

provides a contrast to many respondents' rationalization moves, where, instead of

acknowledging contradictions, they dismissed or logically explained away the parts

unflattering to whiteness.

CONCLUSION

White moral identity-making, as analyzed here on the micropolitical level within

my interviews, is a reflection of larger contemporary dynamics of white racial identity-

making. As Lacy (2010) argues, "white innocence myths" proliferated in the 1970s and

'80s as post-civil rights white public discourse made the ideological shift from overt

white supremacy to white innocence and victimhood. This shift "occurred as a strategic,

organic, and immediate response to the *perceived* or *promissory* loss of White privilege"

(Lacy 2010:34, emphasis in original). Whites cast contemporary society as far removed

from past forms of discrimination, and they cast themselves as innocent and vulnerable

racial subjects who suffered from any and all efforts to address racial inequalities, such

as busing programs and affirmative action policies. Ideological and institutional white

supremacy did not go away, however, with the rise of new forms of public discourse

(Feagin 2010b; Picca and Feagin 2007; Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001). Integral to the

new discourse of equal opportunity and white innocence and victimhood was a

reinvigoration of anti-black caricatures and stereotypes that served to delegitimize civil

rights efforts, rationalize maintaining white advantages, and justify white violence

against blacks (Lacy 2010:35).

Thus, my respondents lived decades in the pre-civil rights era, with its clear

ideology of biological white supremacy. Their ideology was challenged somewhat

during the black freedom struggle and the subsequent dismantling of legal segregation.

But then, quickly, a slightly different discourse emerged that aided whites' swift

recapturing of their moral grounding. White southerners like my interview participants

were able to effortlessly employ these modified yet familiar ideological explanations for

the racial landscape: whites had been and continued to be good, nonracist people, while

African Americans' lingering troubles were rooted in their own shortcomings and

deficiencies. Thus, through the emergent public discourse of the 1970s and '80s, whites

were emboldened to perceive any action that might compromise their current, proper

(still-dominant) place in society as an unwarranted attack. Whites bogarted from African

Americans the status of victimhood, seeing themselves as the only legitimate vulnerable subjects of the civil rights and post-civil rights eras, as they suffered under harsh institutional civil rights policies, blacks' unfair accusations, and the declines accompanying a desegregated society.

I perceive white moral identity, then, as a long-lasting component of the white racial frame (Feagin 2010b). It is whites' view of themselves as both virtuous and vulnerable racial subjects. Across time, some of the language and ideological explanations have altered, but the major assertion remains constant – in its simplest form: whites good, blacks bad. The process of white moral identity-making is a constant and dynamic racial project that occurs simultaneously on the macro and micro levels. And, despite a perhaps minimal level of conscious awareness, whites are heavily invested, psychologically and emotionally, in their white moral identity, as its interpretations bolster their individual and collective positive sense of self and rationalize contemporary systemic white dominance and racial inequalities.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION: EYES WIDE SHUT: MEMORY MANAGEMENT AND THE

WHITE RACIAL FRAME

The forty-four people interviewed for this study, ordinary white lifetime southerners,

aged mid-50s to late-90s, offered a fresh lens on the intricacies of how the racial past is

remembered. As individuals who lived through periods of both overt white supremacy

under legal segregation and racial freedom struggles under the civil rights era, my

respondents' narratives revealed some of the ways in which members of dominant

groups interpret past oppressions and portray their own roles within those periods, as

well as how their memories are linked to current identities. As my analysis interrogated

the narrative process of memory – focusing on how remembering happens more so than

what specifically is remembered – my study links conceptually to contemporary

constructions of racial identities and to current racial projects. Memory is not static and

is not located in the past, after all; memory a perpetual process of selecting and

interpreting the past (Brundage 2000; Schwartz 2000).

How a society goes about memorializing its past speaks to its current desire to

have a clear collective identity and ready explanations to make sense of the status quo.

When it comes to racial memory in a still-white racist society, then, white memory

operates in service of contemporary racist ideology and structures. As Feagin (2010b)

explains, "How we interpret and experience our racialized present depends substantially

on our knowledge of and interpretations of our racialized past. The collective memory of

that racist past not only shapes, but legitimates, the established racial structure of today's society" (p. 17). Thus, memory is an essential component of the white racial frame, servicing the continued articulation of whites' deserved dominance in society.

Throughout my analysis I identified myriad ways in which the memory narratives of ordinary white southerners upheld the white racial frame. When discussing the segregation era, the interview participants expressed nostalgia for the calmer and safer world of their childhoods, recalled easygoing cross-racial interactions, and described loving and respectful relationships with black individuals, usually domestic employees. They acknowledged racial inequalities of the Jim Crow era, but typically on a limited and superficial level. In other words, when considering the segregation era, they focused most of their attention on what they perceived to be the positive aspects of the racial past and much less attention on aspects that would indict white society or white southerners for the oppression of African Americans. The respondents were close to silent on the racist traumas and severe discrimination that African Americans faced on a daily basis. Thus, overall, they portrayed the segregation era as complex but redeemable. Furthermore, respondents portrayed their segregation-era selves as virtually immune from overt racism, and they often pardoned or rationalized the racism that they situated within other white individuals.

Beyond what the narrative portrayals of the Jim Crow era illustrated about the white racial frame, they also demonstrated that oppression can become a rote, everyday normality that is largely unquestioned, especially by those not bearing the brunt of the oppression. As my white southern respondents claimed time and again, somehow they

had not been aware of, or felt, the depth of racial inequality during segregation. The truth

of this claim is impossible to determine. Nevertheless, it is the case that white

southerners were trained not only in the Jim Crow rules and etiquette from birth

(Ritterhouse 2006), they were also discouraged from developing empathy for African

Americans, even those individuals for whom many would come to hold dear feelings. It

is difficult to "see" the suffering of those with whom you do not fully empathize,

especially if you happen to be involved in some way in the maintenance of that

suffering. Segregation-era white southerners learned, some with ease and some with

hesitation, to accept and participate in the white supremacist ideology and practices of

their society (Smith 1961).

When it came to discussing the civil rights era, interview respondents claimed to

have been racially enlightened from the onset and to have favored the logic of equal

access to facilities and services. Nevertheless, they demonstrated a perhaps lifelong

detachment from the Civil Rights Movement through their inaccurate and vague recall of

noteworthy people and events. Furthermore, they displayed forms of persistent

distancing from the movement, downplaying both the efforts put forth by activists and

the white resistance to those actions. Ultimately, the respondents portrayed the Civil

Rights Movement as that which threatened the serenity and predictability of their society

and which was not necessarily worthy of mainstream contemporary commemorations. It

is conceived as a movement by blacks for blacks.

Additionally, the civil rights era marked the temporal point at which respondents

began constructing themselves as racial victims, a dynamic I call *white victimology*, a

sort of infatuation with whites' imagined or potential mistreatment at the hands of African Americans directly or from the whims of impersonal social forces. Through tales of near-victimization during civil rights protests and especially through accounts of the traumas of school desegregation, the interviewees recounted the troubles they believe were heaped upon them by black Americans and by a changed society. Through their racial memories and everyday rhetoric, the white southern respondents were engaged in the maintenance of what I have termed *white moral identity*, a concept that reflects the macro- and micro-processes at play when whites assert their preferred identity as good people who are innocent of any racial oppression. When constructing white moral identity, the white self is asserted as virtuous and generous, while blackness is seen as "other," disparaged, and marginalized. This us-versus-them construction allows for whites to be seen as vulnerable subjects who may suffer readily from racial oppression and blacks to be seen as the architects of their own subordination.

Ultimately, white southerners' memories uphold the white racial frame through how the racial past is interpreted to prop up the goodness of whiteness and reinforce notions of black inferiority. Underlying these dynamics is a denial of the historical reality and legacy of white racism. This denial was demonstrated time and again in my interviewees' narratives, through such things as individualized notions of racism (i.e., "opting out" of racism and identifying racist individuals), expressed obliviousness regarding the origins of white racist segregation statutes, and assertions of African Americans' contemporary dominance of society. This denial is a key element facilitating

whites' backlash against any further movement toward a society with more racial

equality. Thus, a white culture of denial works in service of continued white dominance.

"YOU CAN'T LIVE IN THE STEW": RESISTANCE TO MEMORY THROUGH THE

CASE OF THE GREENSBORO TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

My respondents illustrated forcefully whites' capacity to wage war against

affronts to their racial memory sensibilities. Recall the woman I profiled in the

Introduction, who lashed out vitriolically to a stranger on the telephone at the mere

suggestion to talk about the "racial past." Among the typically more amenable interview

respondents themselves, that level of anger was rare. However, bitter frustration and

anger did manifest often near the end of the interviews, usually when the topic of truth

and reconciliation efforts was breached, as the overwhelming majority of respondents

rejected the notion of investigating and thereby keeping alive the more troubling aspects

of the racialized past (i.e., that which involved whites' oppression of blacks).

Greensboro, North Carolina, was the site of the first independent truth and

reconciliation commission in the United States, and my respondents showed little

appreciation and much resentment that this trailblazing effort toward expanding

historical understanding and fostering community-wide communication occurred in their

city. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) was formed in

2003 with the aim to address lingering community divisions and mistrust stemming from

a 1979 deadly incident. In November 1979 a multi-racial group of union organizers who

had recently affiliated with the Communist Workers Party (CWP) scheduled a "Death to

the Klan" march to confront the role of white supremacy in weakening the local union

movement. A collection of Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis organized a caravan to attend the march, with an arsenal of firearms in tow. When the caravan approached the march site, shooting ensued, and five labor activists were left dead – four white men and one African American woman. News crews were present that day for the publicized march, and their video cameras captured the incident; chilling footage shows the male white supremacists retrieving rifles and handguns from the trunks of their cars and leisurely firing on the scattering crowd of adults and children. One shooter even gingerly gripped a cigarette in his mouth while calmly firing his weapon repeatedly. Although a police car had been trailing the caravan of armed white supremacists, law enforcement officers arrived slowly on the scene and arrested some KKK and Nazi men. At trial, a white jury acquitted all of the white supremacists.

Over concern that the incident increased racial animosities, the North Carolina Advisory Committee (NCAC) to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights investigated the case in 1980. That process was sanctioned by the local political base, and few CWP voices were given a forum (Cunningham, Nugent, and Slodden 2010). Seven volunteer commissioners were elected by the community in 2004 to head the GTRC, and with a small staff they worked for two years from a grant- and donation-based budget of less than one-half million dollars, gathering accounts from witnesses and community members, conducting historical research, and holding public town meetings. The commission sought to include marginalized voices that had not adequately been heard – notably former CWP members and residents of the predominantly black neighborhood, Morningside Homes, where the shootings took place. Nevertheless, buy-in by local elite

was not secured, as the process was seen as a left-wing effort. Mayor Keith Holliday, a white man, publicly criticized the process, arguing that "harm can come from an inaccurate truth leading to inaccurate accountability, non-forgiveness and especially non-reconciliation" (Green 2005). And the Greensboro city council voted along racial lines, with all white members officially opposing the GTRC process (Green 2005).

The GTRC final report (2006) was published and distributed around the city in mid-2006. Its well-documented content strongly indicted the municipal police force who had advance knowledge of a potential violent ambush by the white supremacist groups, yet provided no law enforcement presence that day. Also implicated by the final report was the local mainstream newspaper, the *Greensboro News & Record*, which systematically portrayed the incident as the inevitable result of two equally violent groups of outsiders – fringe white racists and indefensible communists – coming to blows, only incidentally, on Greensboro soil.

Few of my respondents seemed to have a clear understanding of the purpose and process of the GTRC, which reflected the lack of buy-in for the process from the broader community. Nevertheless, nearly all of the people I interviewed were very opinionated about the commission, and in a negative way. This was true even among those who responded very positively to my own inquiry into the racial past and enjoyed the interview we did together. For example, Verna, 80s, began the interview with warm tears over the sweet memories of her beloved African American childhood nanny, but she ended the interview griping about the GTRC, and only on the idea of it, for she had not even heard of it before I briefly explained it to her. She, like many other respondents,

argued that bringing up certain past events is necessarily counterproductive and does

much more harm than good:

> To go back over those things . . . and *scratch* it, it's like you fell down and hurt your knee, and you keep *scratching* at it, and it's never gonna get well. And I think going OVER and OVER and OVER and OVER doesn't solve a John Brown thing. It just festers things. Alright, you found that the Klu Klux, they did this and the other did that, and the newspaper did this, or they gave permission to do this and . . . they want those facts down and that's it, to *shut the door*! Or, if you wanna go find out about it, read about it, read about it, read about it. But as far as just going through digging it up, digging it up . . . You can't live in the stew. You can't always control what happens *to* you, but you can control what you do with it as the result. And, as far as stirrin' things up and bringing back the ugliness and the dispicable things that we've done, move on to make things *better* not just stay in the *stew* of somebody did this and somebody did that and got to change this and got to get more money for that. Get over with it! *Move* on. And I guess the older you get, you get disgusted at the picky-picky-picky type of things, and you look back and find that they don't work, you know.

Verna's disgust was palpable and was mirrored in the majority of my interviews. Many

people exploded with frustration and resentment toward the idea of truth-telling when

they believed it had to do with the tumultuous racial past. In actuality, the "Greensboro

Massacre" involved a group of white supremacists (all-white) and a group of labor

organizers (multi-racial); it was not a typical black-white conflict, but many of my

respondents described it that way, and much of their resistance focused on what they

believed, erroneously, to be a black-white racial dynamic of the historical event and a

black-led GTRC effort. One married couple, who were also incensed by the GTRC,

revealed this perception:

> (I: Have you heard about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?)

> Wife: YES. I think they are a pathetic group of people looking for a cause. That is my opinion of 'em. The people that are on that committee want recognition. You know, it's like beating a dead *horse*! This issue about the Klan and the blacks fighting it out and they're trying to reconcile what happened- *it's a dead*

issue! Get *over* it and let's move on! I don't see there's any need of their existence. Find a new issue. Do something productive. Okay?

Husband: I agree with her on that. I think the thing was taken through the courts. Hadn't it been through the courts? . . . my understanding . . . it was settled in the courts.

Wife: And let's just move on.

Husband: It's beatin' a dead horse.

(I: So in general do you think it's important to talk about bad things that have happened in the past?)

Husband: I think you should. But- but-

Wife: And build on the mistakes that were made, but don't blame me for slavery. I had nothin' to do with it, my parents had nothing to do with it. It was the *times* . . . but let's build on the past and let's move on and let's remember that we are Americans and *pull together*. Make this country a better place for our children and grandchildren. . . . Regardless of what color you are, or what your race or your religion is, we are *Americans*, and let's be proud of the fact that we are.

Husband: You won't get an argument with me about that.

This couple's commentary revealed the nature of much white resistance to reconciliation efforts: whites resent the potential of allowing African Americans a forum to criticize the legacy of white domination. Note how I did not bring up racial history, but the discussion moved from the GTRC straight into a "don't blame me for slavery" accusation and culminated in an assertion of American patriotism.

It is evident that a great many whites continue to mistrust African Americans and reject any movement toward blacks' truth-tellling. This prompts the reassertion of the collective white moral identity, where it is implied that racial animosities would disappear if African Americans would only allow the past to be forgotten.

Hope, 70s, had an interesting perspective on talking about race and the current barriers to a better society. On the one hand, she believed that talking about the racial past was counterproductive. On the other hand, she wished sincerely that people could come together in compassion and goodwill:

> (I: So if there are any problems today that have to do with race, what do you think they are?)
>
> H: I think it's people that's not gonna ever forgive and they just gonna keep stirring and stirring. The more you stir on something that stings it gets worse and worse, you know. . . .
> (I: What do you think we can do to make it better?)
>
> H: I think more people should go to programs that would lift the hatred out of people's heart. . . . I really don't know if they just need to get black and white together and try, but I know that's gonna be hard to do. But maybe one of these days, I hope and pray that it will- that black would care about white and white would care about black. I really do.

Hope offered one of the most hopeful views of the racial future, genuinely desiring to move toward a new time of racial harmony. But her reasoning de-politicized the racial past and the current racial reality, denying structure altogether and suggesting that what is needed is to "lift the hatred out of people's heart." In her view, those who focus on past racial hurts are the ones who prevent progress toward her ideal racially loving society. Even those whites, like Hope, who yearn for racial reconciliation, believe that reconciliation can and should occur without talking about the white supremacist past.

THE WHITE SOUTHERN CULTURE OF DENIAL

"It is often said that history is written by the victors. It might also be said that history is forgotten by the victors. They can afford to forget, while the losers are unable to accept what happened and are condemned to brood over it, relive it, and reflect how different it might have been" (Burke 1989:106).

After World War II, ordinary Germans claimed, despite clear contrary evidence, that they had not been aware of the Nazi pogroms (Johnson 1999), and they argued that they were unfairly being cast as villains, which they felt was a heinous assault on par with being ordered to concentration camps (Olick 2005). And former members of the 1920s Women of the Ku Klux Klan claimed that their organization had engaged exclusively in acts of friendship and solidarity, even though they had worked actively in concert with their KKK male counterparts (Blee 1991). Self-defensive denial and a preference for a rewritten history, then, are not the obsessions solely of those with fresh blood on their hands. Those who are privileged by an oppressive regime and who participate on varying levels in the maintenance of that regime are also invested in self-protective strategies that recast themselves as so completely innocent that mere claims to the contrary are perceived as vicious attacks. Members of dominant groups seem to have an uncanny ability to shut out or ignore the injustice and suffering around them, not from coercion but from cultural habit (Cohen 2001:5).

White denial has been a hallmark of American racial history (Wise 2008:38). For decades it has been argued by scholars of the American South that post-civil rights white southerners maintain defensive ideas of innocence and victimization at the hands of "outsiders" and black activists (Woodward 1971). This study explored the shape of white southern defensiveness and conceptualized it as part of a larger-scale white racial innocence project (Lacy 2010), where white Americans continue to deny the legacy of the racist past and their own contemporary racial privileges. I demonstrated that this – what we might call a white, or white southern, culture of denial – is sustained in a

primary way through memory. According to Feagin (2006), the perpetuation of systemic racism in a society requires a "sustained collective forgetting of society's harsh realities" and "selective remembering, most of which abandons white responsibilities for past oppression or glorifies white achievements" (p. 44). Through memories, whites' creation and support of white racist systems is overshadowed by constructions of whites as good citizens, leaders, and racial neighbors to people of color.

I see my older white southern respondents as being constantly engaged and invested in a culture of denial. Notably, denial need not imply premeditation or intentionality. And, indeed, at my level of analysis, I cannot comment on the shape of the gap between interview respondents' narratives and their actual knowledge. Additionally, as Cohen (2001) explains, the state of not knowing can be much more complex than simply an act of turning a blind eye: "We are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading. We know, but at the same time we don't know" (p. 5). Thus, I argue that the white southern culture of denial as revealed through my interviews is typified by the collective discouragement to understand racial oppression and the collective encouragement to engage in diversionary, self-protective strategies of white moral identity-making.

CHALLENGING THE CULTURE OF DENIAL

"There used to be an official called the 'Remembrancer.' The title was actually a euphemism for debt-collector; the official's job was to remind people of what they would have liked to forget" (Burke 1995:110).

Feagin (2006) argues that individuals and their society are damaged when they refuse to remember or to accept responsibility for past racial oppression, for "no society

can forever live a profound social lie" (p. 44). While my respondents' narratives were genuine and true for them (Gubrium and Holstein 1997), I agree with Feagin (2006) and assert that the white culture of denial is damaging on a number of levels and may ultimately prove unsustainable. Although the white racial frame has been a mainstay of American life and has demonstrated extraordinary flexibility and imperviousness to challenges across time, it is perpetually unreconciled with America's highest ideals of "liberty and justice for all" and with the counter-frames of people of color on the domestic and global landscapes (Feagin 2010b).

The white culture of denial should be challenged by critical analyses of the white racial frame and by exposing the white supremacist logic that undergirds the contemporary white moral identity. The white culture of denial should be challenged by memory that fully acknowledges the reality and legacy of past racial oppression and admits to the current manifestations of white dominance. As W. E. B. Du Bois ([1920] 2003) wrote nearly 100 years ago in an essay on the "Souls of White Folk":

> A true and worthy ideal frees and uplifts a people; a false ideal imprisons and lowers. Say to men, earnestly and repeatedly: "Honesty is best, knowledge is power; do unto others as you would be done by." Say this and act it and the nation must move toward it, if not to it. (P. 59)

Only with an honest accounting of our racial past will we move collectively toward a truly free society where the contributions, perspectives, and insights of people of color are honored and incorporated into the American story. White Americans' fervent white-centric nostalgia and defensive self-protection have barred the possibility of this occurring up to now. As my respondents demonstrated time and again, investment in the white racial frame essentially shuts out alternative, more liberatory worldviews. Their

adherence to narratives of white victimology works to trump all assertions that we still

maintain a white racist society. It is this grasp that must be loosed, one way or another.

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APPENDIX A

RESEARCHING RACE: NEGOTIATIONS IN THE FIELD

Mostly the white southerners interviewed for this project seemed to enjoy the interview.

But some indicated that they thought my type of project had little value, i.e., the more

we talk about "those things" (read: black oppression) from the past, the worse off we are.

Even some lovers of history prefer if certain bits of history get forgotten. Others were

genuinely interested in my research, but attempted to relieve Jim Crow's negative

reputation. Here is an excerpt from my fieldnotes following Sally's interview:

> You know what really stood out about this interview was that it almost seemed
> like she didn't really want to talk about race, at least not in the way I was looking
> for. Or, that she expected I was looking to find out about the "negative" things
> and she wanted to tell me that she hadn't experienced it that way. Rather, she had
> known the good things. Even though before the interview she said she was very
> interested in my topic . . . Isn't this odd? To express interest in "my topic" and
> then answer my actual questions sort of sideways.

Several respondents pushed narratives about how wonderful things were back in the day,

how well everyone got along, and even how racial problems were few and far between.

These were the positive parts that they felt had been left out of history, and they used

their voices to correct this misstep.

Some respondents seemed unaccustomed or uncomfortable speaking at length

about race and explaining their perspectives; others shared story after story about their

racialized experiences and memories. In terms of forthrightness, respondents fell all

along a spectrum, from those who freely blurted out their narratives to those who seemed

to be engaged in careful self-monitoring (such as those with frequent pauses or self-corrections in their speech).

For me, data collection was an exhausting process, and for several reasons: I did not relish cold-calling aging white people to see if they'd talk to me about race, was often troubled by things respondents said, irritated when they seemed to sorely lack self-reflection and depth of thought, irked by preachy interviewees, and sapped by long interviews where I sat mostly in silence, smiling and nodding. My emotions have at times been strong during the project. I often whined about the research, lamenting the fact that I chose a research project in which many of my respondents were not inherently invested. And yet, I have no doubt that my research is meaningful, and I often reminded myself that other researchers have chosen tougher work than me, like Raphael Ezekiel (1996), a Jewish researcher who did ethnographic work with white supremacist groups. A few of my respondents hugged me warmly after the interview, and at different points I was sent home with a bag of local peaches, fresh-cut herbs, and a half pint of homemade jalapeno jelly; I bet this never happened for Ezekiel.

With a few exceptions, my research topic did not offend potential respondents, and many seemed happy to have done the interview. I believe my amiable, fairly hands-off interviewing style put many people at ease. And I also believe that who I am – a young white southern woman – served as a major asset. I had some intentional self-presentation going on too: I was quiet, polite, agreeable, and as sweet as I could genuinely be (but I did not go so far as to turn on my Arkansan drawl). For those individuals who would have wanted me to portray them straightforwardly, positively,

and on their own terms, any wariness they may have had of the interview was warranted. I knew all along that I would be conducting a critical analysis of the interviews, and I knew that meant that the respondents would not appear as innocent or "good" as they may portray themselves to be.

Many respondents told me they would be interested to see the finished project and, when I offered, most said they would appreciate me sending them a brief report or summary of my findings. For a long while I warily anticipated their negative responses to my critical analysis, and I found initial relief in knowing that it would be several years before I had anything substantial written. But I eventually realized that I would honor my discipline, myself, and my respondents by doing the best analysis I could do. I expect to hear back from some of my respondents after I send them the report. Whether their reactions are positive or negative, any communication I can have with them is further dialogue and may even enhance my analysis.

MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT RESPONDENTS

It is important for interviewers to be aware of and keep track of how we feel about respondents (Yow 2006). Often the difficulties I encountered in the field were intensified by the fact that I liked the respondents. Kleinman and Copp (1993) caution against forcing oneself to like the research subjects, and I am not sure to what extent I did this. I found nearly all of the respondents likeable, but in the cases when I did not, my one-shot interview format meant I only had to get through a couple hours and then expect to never see them again. In most cases, however, I found respondents nice, funny, and unique. Some even felt like the grandparents I would like to have had.

Many respondents who shared statements or views that I found troubling also showed me great kindness and generosity. For example, I was bothered when Darla laughingly told me her husband uses the n-word frequently. But she voluntarily helped me recruit several more participants. And there was another woman, who generously offered to make lunch for me and two accompanying research assistants. From my fieldnotes:

> Bernice was just such a nice woman. . . . she really would have made those sandwiches for us and hosted us at her kitchen table. I don't know what to do with my feelings. Like of course I know she is a complex person, as we all are, but it is not easy for me to reconcile the seemingly far-fetched or altogether problematic memories and views of these people with what "nice" people they are…

Darla and the other woman were two of my first interviewees, and this difficulty I had reconciling the complexities of these new acquaintances lasted the duration of data collection.

TO CHALLENGE OR NOT TO CHALLENGE

I am a white southerner like the people I interviewed, but in some ways my life story is a world away from my respondents. Being an Arkansan, I am southern but not from a Deep South region. I lived in an all-white rural area until I went to college and had no meaningful contact with any people of color until my teens; my respondents grew up in close proximity to African Americans. I grew up in the post-civil rights era (the 1980s and '90s), a couple generations removed from most of my respondents. I have had intimate friendships and relationships with people of color, always on a peer level, and many of my respondents' close relationships with people of color were forged in deep power dynamics, like that of employer-employee.

And, perhaps what separated me most from respondents was that during my graduate studies I developed a critical lens on race and racial discourse, a reality that I did not divulge to them. When conducting the interviews, I did not emphasize my differences from respondents. I wanted to take them on their own terms, so I played down my own critical race perspective in favor of paying full attention to their perspectives. I accepted their narratives as they emerged, and I tried to help them create a rich racial narrative, asking clarifying questions and soliciting more details. I felt this approach best, but I experienced some inner conflict over it.

Personally I have no trouble appearing composed, but there were many interviews in which I was actively struggling with how to negotiate my role as interviewer. I often bristled when people made statements that were, to my ears, ill-informed, condescending, or racist. I had to make careful decisions about when and how to challenge respondents or to ask them to clarify something they had said. Ava, 65, was one of the most didactic respondents, and she did not always have her facts straight. I tired of her diatribes and tried a few times to interrupt her commentary, but she deflected me. Here is an illustrative exchange:

> A: If you wanna get prejudice, look at the difference between the salaries of men and women. But we don't have Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton sayin' women should make a bigger salary . . . all they know how to say is black and white.
>
> (I: Mm-hm. The- the same, um, there's the same difference between whites and blacks. Whites get paid more than blacks do for jobs.)
>
> A: (4) I don't know.
>
> (I: It's just something we learn in sociology, that's-)

A: Oh. I do know from personal experience, um, uh (2) that women get paid less than men do.

(I: Yeah. That's also true.)

A: Um, I worked . . . for a company years ago. And they decided to move the office . . . [and my boss] said, "I would rather have you than any 5 people I've got workin' for me." He said, "But they will *not* transfer you because you're a woman." . . . Uh, if you wanna call it prejudice, the American male has been brought up to believe that he is superior.
(I: Do you think whites have been brought up that way too? To believe that whites are superior?) A: (3) *I* don't think so.

I did not force Ava to deal with direct challenges. Instead I first offered a fact about the racial wage gap to see how she would incorporate it into her statements. I then affirmed her argument about the gender wage gap. In the end, Ava ignored and rejected my suggestions about the reality of contemporary racial inequality. I gently provided an alternative perspective, but still gave her the floor and let her assert her own conclusions.

Within the first few minutes of the interview with John, 74, he began pushing questions back on me, essentially asking, and expecting, me to agree with him. The first time this happened was when he voluntarily brought up slavery and launched into an argument about how much better off African Americans are now because slavery allowed them to even be born and made them privileged Americans; contemporary black activists are just ungrateful and racist, he argued. He asked me: "I mean, where would they be today if it hadn't been for slavery? As horrible as it is, that's behind us, let's get on with today. I mean, do you agree with me at all? Stop and think about it." My response makes clear that I subsumed my own opinion and deferred to him, who was almost 50 years older than me, thus avoiding disagreement. I said, "Certainly a lot of things have changed. I haven't seen a lot of change in my life, but it's been short," and I

laughed to cut the tension. I offered John no agreement, but my deference seemed to satisfy John; he replied, "Well you haven't, but I have seen an enormous amount of change in *my* life."

As these examples show, I allowed each respondent to be the authority in the room, and I elected not to assert my perspective as a race scholar. I knew that I had an active role as interviewer (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), but I ceded the floor to the respondents. In doing so, I maintained a non-combative environment, protected myself from potential resentment, and protected the interviewees from feeling assaulted. The very practical reason not to challenge respondents strongly was that I relied on them regarding the experience positively so that they would give me referrals and speak well of me to others. At over a quarter-million residents, Greensboro is a fairly large city, but my target population was fairly small, and many individuals were connected in tight social networks. I did not want to press my luck by alienating anyone if I could help it. Ultimately I felt the need to protect my research project.

Gallagher (2000) argues for researching whiteness as an antiracist project, because, if a researcher allows whites to monologue using faulty assumptions without challenging them, she gives them no chance to consider more accurate information and modify their positions: "Do we ask questions which challenge our respondents to think about race as a political category, or do we reproduce, normalize, and continue to make whiteness invisible by uncritically validating the version of whiteness we expect to hear?" (p. 86). Gallagher's (2000) point is well taken. However, I deemed direct challenges of my interview participants to be a risk to the completion of my project

itself, for the demographic I was targeting was so narrow. It is a different matter indeed if one recruits interview subjects from the oft-used college student population. I relied heavily on personal referrals and did not want respondents to feel attacked by the interview. I did offer challenges frequently, but usually in mild or suggestive ways. One could argue that it was my own form of white protectionism that I have thus rationalized.

ORDINARY WHITE SOUTHERNERS

As I show in the Introduction, there was some suspicion of my project among my target population of ordinary white southerners, although the majority of potential respondents I contacted readily agreed to give the interview. Among those who turned me down, I could rarely determine their real reasons from what they told me (often, "I don't have the time"). But I got a few indications that some respondents declined the interview because of the research topic. One woman responded to my standard telephone pitch with "I'd rather not mess with anxious things" and promptly hung up the phone. (And I thought her reaction could have been related to the fact that I called just days after Barack Obama won the 2008 Presidential election.) During our interview, one interviewee told me that a man she had been attempting to recruit for me (I had told her I was having trouble finding men) even tried to dissuade her from getting *her* name associated with "this thing." By sharing this with me, Nora offered a glimpse into the backstage of white southerners, where suspicion of my project and reticence to participate may have been more prevalent than I could observe myself.

During the research, some respondents questioned my choice to only interview ordinary whites. Several respondents suggested that I interview prominent white

community members (in one case, a state legislator), thinking they would be better than them, more practiced and skillful, at talking about racial issues. I always reassured them that their interview would help me develop my analysis and that I really did want to talk to just regular people. Some people also asked me if and when I would be interviewing black southerners, thinking they would have more useful information to share with me. Frances, 79, suggested that I talk to her granddaughter who had a lot of black friends. Even, Patti, 81, who spun a rich racial narrative, doubted that anything she had said, as an elderly white woman, was useful. Near the end of the interview she apologized:

> P: I think I've been big disappointment to you, I'm so sorry.
>
> (I: No you haven't! No you haven't. No.)
>
> P: Because I'm really too *old*- since I was born in [the 1920s], you know, I just haven't *had* a lot of integration experiences.

Eighty-one year-old Patti deemed herself too young to contribute much to my project. Like Patti, many respondents were uncertain about their worthiness to talk about race. Truly, when was the last time they were asked to do so, if ever? When are white people ever asked to think deeply about race, their own whiteness, and to share their racial perspectives? This reality of the white experience was reflected in my respondents' reaction to my research project. Overall, many did not deem themselves to be the most appropriate or knowledgeable candidates for my interviews. They rarely acknowledged the integral role they played to maintain Jim Crow. Indeed, some bestowed upon themselves racial immunity, denying that race had ever affected them in any way, much less that they had been any kind of active racial agents.

Nevertheless, most of the people I asked to do the interview were willing to do it, displaying less wariness than I expected, actually. They may not have understood exactly what I was trying to get at with my research, or why I believed it was important to talk to them specifically, but they did find plenty to say and were willing to contribute to my project. Some people were very gracious, such as Ellie, 71, who complimented me for doing this project and deemed it a positive endeavor.

A few respondents, however, seemed to enter the interview warily and were uncomfortable talking about race. For example, Jolene, 82, appeared uncomfortable throughout the interview and claimed that race was not something she had paid much attention to in her life. Twice during her brief 40-minute interview, she said that she didn't think she was helping me. Similarly, I had a short interview with Clarence – just under an hour – even though he and I got along famously, lounging in lawn chairs in his sunny yard and sipping hot tea. Clarence's responded tersely to my questions and yet he wanted to answer my questions more fully than he had. At the end, he apologized: "I feel like I'm not giving you as much information as you'd like to get. . . . I want to be as honest as possible. And I guess *my* situation- I was so full of questions about who I was and not so much in relation to racial issues because they didn't really seem to come up so much."

Clarence was one of the under-60 interviewees, and as an adolescent in the 1960s, he had only briefly lived the pre-civil rights era, so he found little to discuss regarding race. But then, so did several much older respondents, such as Jolene, who was twenty years his senior. And Patti, who was in her 80s, deemed herself "too old" to

be able to speak about race. Clearly, even though the white southerners I spoke with have lived through major racial events and have witnessed significant transformations in the racial arrangement, many have a limited racial consciousness.

Nevertheless, most people who agreed to the interview seemed happy enough to be participating and to genuinely want to help me complete my project. In fact, a great many interview participants used "helping" language to refer to their participation in my project. Through this they indicated that they were doing me a favor by giving the interview. By framing it in this way, they revealed perhaps some lack of connection to their own racial autobiographies. They told their stories, but out of generosity, not because they felt an acute awareness of and connection to their racial narrative and a need to share it. Indeed, no one asked for a copy of the transcript to keep, except for one man who just wanted to verify its accuracy before allowing me to quote from it.

WHITE ON WHITE INTERVIEWING

Interviewees are always studying the interviewer (Portelli 1991). Whether consciously or unconsciously, my respondents determined my whiteness, possibly on the phone when I solicited the interview, or when I arrived on the doorstep. Because I am white (and because my four assistant interviewers were also white), all the interviews for this project were race-matched. And the interviewees, in different ways, acknowledged our shared whiteness. I believe that, because the topic was race, this similarity was both comforting to them and enabled them to speak fairly openly with a stranger and interviewer.

For example, one interviewee explained to me that he uses the n-word frequently according to its "proper" definition – a person who acts a particular negative way, not a blanket term for all black people. A woman shared that she was bitterly disappointed that her own child had "ruined the bloodline" by marrying and having kids with an African American. (Nevertheless, she loved her grandchildren and also appreciated how pale their skin had turned out: "And the children are beautiful. They're white as I am, and cute as buttons.") It is unlikely that this woman would have shared this in such a matter-of-fact way had I been black instead of white.

Also, there was Harold, 79, who pretty immediately connected with my whiteness and used "we/us" language. For example, he asked me if I had ever been to a black funeral, and explained that "they're sorta different from our kind of funeral, which is okay. And a lot of emotion you know and all that." Later in the interview, Harold used my whiteness to pull me in to his standpoint, taking it for granted that I would understand where he was coming from because I was white like him:

> H: *I think* nowadays the blacks are at the bottom, the Asians are all moving up, the Mexicans are movin' up. Overall the blacks *aren't* moving up. But *I think* their problem is not you and meolding them down. I think it's them holding *themselves* down by chaotic family structure . . . and parents who are not interested in the kid.

And then later:

> H: It's much easier, the black race, to blame you and me – whites, or upper class, or whatever – on the fact that the blacks are at the bottom than it is to say, "We're the one at fault, we want our kids to go to school, we want 'em to behave . . . and *move* ourselves *up*."

Harold never looked to me for agreement, seeming comfortable with his views and the assumption that there was nothing he was saying with which I would take issue. I was

white and therefore I must have empathized, if not agreed, with his criticisms of black

culture.

This was similar to Mack, 81, who thought that a fellow white southerner like me would

understand what negotiating segregation was like:

> M: I think in some *strange* way we felt like [segregation] was wrong. We tried
> in *our* way to make that less painful, maybe, for both of us- our black friends and
> us. And none of this makes sense 'cause it's convoluted. Inasmuch as you were
> born and reared in Arkansas, you understand some of it, I'm sure.
>
> (I: Mm-hm, yeah.)

Mack assumed me to be a white southern "insider" to whom he did not need to explain

everything, and I failed to challenge his assumption. My acquiescent response here was

not in fact an indication of my understanding; I agreed readily because I don't think I

adjusted effectively to Mack being a dominant interviewee.

> Then there was John, who tried to get me to admit that, like him and like most all

white people, I would prefer it if my family members married white people:

> J: And you don't have to answer the question if one of your siblings came in,
> "Oh look mom, we just got married." I'm *sure* that it would- well you- uh, uh,
> uhh, I am saying you would probably rise above it and accept him wonderfully,
> but I'm not sure how excited you would be. But if one of my children married a
> *wonderful* black person, and it made them happy as the dickens, so what? I'd
> rather them marry a white person. (4) You don't have to speak. (chuckles)
>
> I: (laughs) Okay. (both chuckle)

After this evasion I quickly changed the subject. If John had only known: I did not tell

him that my boyfriend at the time was African American or that my brother was married

to a South American woman and they were raising her brown-skinned daughter in a

bilingual home.

John, a very patriotic man, also espoused the greatness of the United States, and tried to

align me with his arguments about how black Americans are better off not living in

terrible Africa:

> J: Half those people would have never been born if it hadn't been for slavery, 'cause they would have *died* of pestilence or *disease* or whatever in Africa. Or genocide. *What* country in Africa right now would any American black wanna go back to? (3) ((chuckling) Damn if I know.) Can you think of one? And I'm not being racist, I'm just stating a fact. (3) Can you answer that question?
>
> (I: I hear some people are going to South Africa.)
>
> J: Well, maybe so. But uh, people are not trying to get out of the United States! They're tryin' to get *in*! Uhh ((chuckles and sighs)) that's the way I feel. I love our country. I don't think everything's *right* about it. I wish there were a lot of things I could help change. (3) Uhh, I wish we could do away with racists. (2) But we can't.

These examples demonstrate some ways in which my interviews were shaped by my

whiteness. I had insider status with respondents. Recently race scholars have challenged

the social science convention of race-matching interviewer to respondent, arguing that

race similarity is not necessarily sufficient to gain trust and that any approach can

produce valuable data (Gallagher 2000; Twine 2000). I cannot be sure exactly how my

interviews would have differed had I not been white, but it is clear that in some

noticeable ways the narratives I collected were catered to a white audience.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPTION GUIDES

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Final version (2009)

Introduction/Warmup
1. What's your family's history in this area?
    a. Did you grow up in the city, or out in the country?
    b. What kind of work did your parents do?
    c. How many siblings did you have?

2. What does being a southerner mean to you?
    a. What makes the South different, or unique?
    b. How do you feel about being a southerner?

3. What does being a white southerner mean to you?

Childhood and Adolescence

Now I'd like to hear you talk about your childhood here in the South.

4. I'd like for you to tell me a story of your life as a white child growing up here in the [decade], an early memory of something that had to do with you being a white person?

5. Did you have black workers in your home? (Or sharecroppers, etc.)
    a. Tell me about a specific memory you have of them.

6. Growing up, were all your playmates and friends white?
    a. What kinds of things did you do together?

7. Did you ever hear adults talking about violence between white and black people? What kinds of things?
    a. Did you hear about lynchings of blacks?
    b. How did you feel about the violence?

8. Did your parents talk about black people when you were a kid? What particular things did they discuss?
    a. Did they sort of teach you how to interact with blacks?
    b. [If nothing] What did other people say about how whites should interact with black people – like things you should or shouldn't do?

9. Did your parents talk about white people? What kinds of things did they say?
    a. Did people talk about "white trash?" What did they say?

10. Were white and black people treated differently? In what ways?

11. In your teenage years, did people talk about dating and marriage between whites and blacks?
    a. How did you feel about interracial dating?

12. How did being white affect your childhood?

13. [Optional] Did you think segregation was a good arrangement at the time?
    a. Have your views changed?

People and Events Recall

Now I'd like to move on to specific things that happened in the 1950s, '60s and '70s and hear how you remember each event.

14. When the U.S. Supreme Court decided that segregated schools were unconstitutional, Greensboro's Board of Education was the first in the South to announce it was willing integrate its schools. Do you remember hearing about this announcement? (1954)
    a. Do you remember when the schools integrated? (1st 5 black students- 1957, freedom of choice plan- 1965, full integration- 1971)
    b. How did you feel about whites and blacks going to school together?
    c. How did others around you feel? What were people saying?
    d. Do you remember whites starting to send their kids to private schools?
    e. Why do you think it took Greensboro so many years to fully integrate its schools?

15. Jesse Helms - What was your opinion of him in the '60s and '70s? (He opposed racial integration programs as CEO of CBS-Raleigh via editorials 1960-72 & sat on U.S. Senate 1973-2003.)

16. Rosa Parks and the bus boycott in Montgomery, AL. (1955-56)
    a. What kinds of things were you hearing? Thinking? Feeling?

17. Sit-ins by college students in downtown Greensboro at Woolworth & Kress lunch counters (February 1960)
    a. How were people around you reacting to it?
    b. How did you feel about the sit-ins?

18. More sit-ins at various segregated businesses (including McDonald's on Summit Ave). Hundreds of black college students arrested, including A&T student body president Jesse Jackson (May-June 1963)
    a. It seems there was a lot of protest by African Americans here throughout the '60s – what did you think about all that at the time?

19. JFK assassination (Dallas, November 23, 1963)

20. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at Bennett College (1958)
    a. What was your opinion of him during the '50s and '60s? Other people's opinions?
    b. MLK assassination, and marching in Greensboro with riot police response (Memphis, April 4, 1968)

21. Bobby Kennedy killed (Los Angeles, June 5, 1968)

22. Malcolm X killed (Manhattan, February 21, 1965)
    a. What did you think of him?

23. The mayor called in National Guard troops and riot police to deal with protesting A&T and Dudley High students, leaving one black male student dead. (1969)

24. The confrontation between KKK/Nazis and Communist Workers Party organizers in Greensboro, leaving 5 organizers dead. (November 3, 1979)

Looking Back

Lastly, I want to talk about things today and reflect back on your life.

25. You grew up during segregation – how do you think that affects your life today?

26. When you think about segregation today, what are your feelings?

27. Do you see yourself as having changed a lot in your racial views over the years?

28. What do you think has changed with race in the past 40 years? What hasn't changed so much?
    a. Do you see Greensboro as having changed a lot?

29. A lot of times when people talk about the past, like segregation, they say, "That's just the way it was." What does that statement mean to you?

30. If you were asked to talk to a group of schoolchildren for one hour about what segregation was like from your own experience, what would you tell them?

31. What do you think the future of race in the U.S. looks like? (Say, in 50 years or so)

32. What did you think/feel about Barack Obama, an African American, being elected President?

33. Do you think it is important to pass on your memories of this southern past to younger people who didn't experience it firsthand like you did?
    a. Do you tell your children/grandchildren about these things?
    b. What can young people learn from people like you who lived back then?

34. How do you feel about the Truth & Reconciliation process that has been going on in Greensboro for a few years now?
    a. Do you think talking about such things from the past is necessary, or good?

TRANSCRIPTION GUIDE

Everything on the recording should be typed word-for-word, and, when possible, non-textual context should be included. In particular, keep track of these things:

Use the speaker's vernacular
To attempt to retain respondents' voices, type what is said verbatim. Use their own words as much as possible and do not impose a "proper" translation. For example, do not type the words "going to" if the speaker clearly said, "gonna." Example: I wadn't about to let 'em get me hot 'n bothered.

Note pauses in speech
Disregarding pauses in speech of one second or less, denote within parentheses when and for how long respondents or interviewer pause while speaking. Example: Well hm (3) I'm not sure…

Note changes in tone
Use italics to indicate when a person significantly changes his or her tone of voice in a heightened manner. Example: And she should just get *over* it and try to *move on*…

Note volume changes
For amplified speech, wherein a person speaks loudly, use all-caps. Note: This can be combined with italics. Example: I've got ENOUGH worries right now, without even considering what *he* thinks…

Note stuttering and misspeaking
Use a simple hyphen after a word, or word fragment, to indicate when a person stutters, or corrects her speech. Example: I think they really- well, I can't say for cer- for certain, but- and I never did hear what actually happened…

Note nonverbal utterances or gestures
Whenever possible, use double parentheses to insert nonverbal details that enhance the context of the spoken content. Examples: ((excitedly)) It was a *fabulous* time! But, 'course, in no time, ((snaps fingers)) it was all over. I never will forget it, though ((chuckles lightly))…

This guide has been modified from Silverman (2006).

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