

# Laughing White Men

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NOVELIST AND ESSAYIST RALPH ELLISON thought that at the heart of white racial identity is a joke. A wretched one. The joke is that white Americans—in their break from Europe and its high culture, in their pursuit of the ideal of equality rather than hierarchy—end up fearing that they are inferior. This fear leads to scapegoating rituals and stereotypes, in which white Americans project their fear onto people of color, imagine them to be inferior, and reassert social hierarchy.

Ellison scrutinized various scapegoating rites, from ones where the scapegoat was literally sacrificed, as in lynching, to ones where the victim was sacrificed, symbolically, with stereotypes, as in blackface minstrelsy and racist humor. Ellison believed that white people desperately needed stereotypes, needed them continuously. Why? Ellison (1953/1995) thought that these stereotypes were much more than “simple racial clichés introduced into society by a ruling class to control political and economic realities” (p. 28). He thought that these clichés were certainly manipulated to that end, but that their significance went deeper. For Ellison,

Whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not . . . Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man. (pp. 28, 41)

In other words, as white people, we need stereotypes of people of color to give us relief from the strain of participating in and benefiting from a society that at every moment disregards a founding principle—that all people are created equal. Stated differently, racial stereotypes enable white people to continue believing in democracy even as they betray it. Thus, for Ellison, at the core of white racial identities is a dilemma, a conflict, ambivalence—a belief in, a desire for, equality in America, poised against the evidence, all around us, of massive inequality.

The complex social production of white racial identity is the focus of my article. *The joke*—the large American version articulated by Ellison, as well as its small, everyday manifestations in

the lives of white people—provides the occasion for exploring some of the conflicts and complexities of white racial identity.

Drawing from a larger ethnographic interview study conducted in a small, rural, white community in the Midwest of the United States, I examine how Frank, a high school teacher, experienced being white. I pay particular attention to Frank's descriptions of two white spaces or cultures in which he said he participated: one that he called a "basement culture" or "subculture," characterized by laughter and racist and sexist humor, and another that he described as more formal and "politically-correct." Despite significant differences between these two spaces, for Frank, neither provided a place for the honest expression and exploration of what white people thought and felt about race.

If, as a growing number of scholars and activists argue (Conklin, 2008; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Lowenstein, 2009; Thandeka, 2001; Trainor, 2002; Winans, 2005), our previous conceptions of white identity have too often hurt rather than helped in our critical and anti-racist pedagogies with white people, then my work contributes to a more nuanced and helpful portrait of whiteness and white racial identity that we might draw on in our social justice efforts. My purpose in this article, then, is to describe and theorize white identity in ways that avoid essentializing it, but that at the same time never lose sight of white privilege and a larger white supremacist context.

### Methodological and Theoretical Background

Frank was part of a larger ethnographic interview study of race and whiteness in a rural community in Wisconsin (see Lensmire, 2010a; 2010b). The study involved open-ended, in-depth interviews with participants who ranged in age from 18 to 83 years of age and included people pursuing (and retired from) a range of occupations, including farmer, factory and office worker, nurse, student, and educator. In the larger study, data analysis in relation to Frank focused on how being white for Frank was very much intertwined with ways of thinking and feeling that he had learned growing up in rural Wisconsin.

I interviewed Frank twice, for a total of more than four hours. My interviews with Frank and other participants began with questions about experiences with (or stories that they had heard about) early conflicts between the German and Polish immigrants who first settled this community (informed by Matthew Jacobson's [1998] historical account of the hierarchies and struggles among different white ethnic groups, well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as to who were the *good* white people and who were not). Then, inspired by Thandeka's (2001) work, I asked participants to try to remember the first time that they noticed they were white, or that being white somehow mattered or was important. From there, we moved on to explorations of how they and their community had interacted with or responded to people of color in various situations and across different historical events, including 1) hiring recent Hmong and Mexican immigrants to work on local farms and 2) the controversy surrounding Ojibwe efforts in the 1970s to claim their fishing rights, guaranteed by 19<sup>th</sup> century treaties with the US government, on nearby lakes and rivers (Loew, 2001).

Challenging large-scale surveys that indicate that white people's attitudes toward people of color have changed, for the better, since the civil rights era, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000) argues, instead, that a rather racist and recalcitrant ideology still characterizes white people's thinking and feeling. What has changed, according to Bonilla-Silva

(2003), is white discourse about race. White people have taken on a new style of talk, a “language of color blindness” which “avoids racist terminology and preserves its mythological nonracialism through semantic moves such as ‘I am not racist, but,’ ‘Some of my best friends are . . .,’ ‘I am not black, but,’ ‘Yes and no,’ or ‘Anything but race’” (p. 70).

I am persuaded by Bonilla-Silva’s argument that a colorblind racism is the current racial ideology that sustains racial inequality in the United States. I also believe that Bonilla-Silva’s interview studies (along with the work of Ruth Frankenberg [1993]) are among the most important empirical research we have for making sense of whiteness and race in the United States. However, I do want to mark a difference in perspective, in assumptions, between my and Bonilla-Silva’s works.

Bonilla-Silva (2003) interprets “incoherent talk,” long pauses, contradictions, digressions, as evidence of an underlying racism. Such an interpretation seems, at times, quite reasonable. At other times, it seems that his interviews may have tapped into a deeper ambivalence that needs to be theorized and understood. In other words, I argue that surface contradictions and ambiguity might be less a weak cover for an underlying, straightforward racism in need of hiding, and more the expression of a *deeply conflicted, ambivalent white racial self* (Lensmire, 2008; Lensmire & Snaza, 2010).

My theoretical framework is grounded in critical whiteness studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Du Bois, 1935/1992; Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 1995; Lott, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Roediger, 1991; Rogin, 1992). Robyn Wiegman (1999) identifies three “schools” that represent different “trajectories of inquiry” within critical whiteness studies: the race traitor school, the white trash school, and the class solidarity school. My own work has been most influenced by the writings of labor historians and cultural critics in Wiegman’s last school, which she reads as attempting to rethink the “history of working-class struggle as the preamble to forging new cross-racial alliances” (p. 121). For me, the significance of this work lies in its ability to help us understand the historical changeability and contingencies of whiteness, even as it keeps a steady eye on racial power relations and hierarchies (Jacobson, 1998).

My work is motivated by the demands of pedagogy and politics, by the press of the question of what is to be done to work more effectively with white people in anti-racist and social justice efforts. US society remains white-supremacist in its structures and practices, notwithstanding the election of our first black president. Individual white racism flourishes, whatever the new, color-blind racetalk that grew up in response to the civil rights movement (and that Bonilla-Silva so ably documents). My attention to complexity and ambivalence at the core of white racial selves is not meant to distract from these realities.

However, my worry is that, within anti-racist pedagogies and research, white people have too often been positioned, have been addressed—in Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (1997) sense of ‘Who does this pedagogy think you are?’—as nothing but the smooth embodiment of racism and white privilege. And that this positioning, this address, in turn, leads to more resistance by white people to our anti-racist efforts.

I am not alone in this worry. Hilary Conklin (2008) and Karen Lowenstein (2009), for example, have raised concerns about how research on white future teachers tends to essentialize whiteness and white racial identity. Thandeka (2001) and Amy Winans (2005) have noted how the angry and resistant white person has become, in Jennifer Trainor’s (2002) words, a “familiar figure” in anti-racist and critical pedagogy literatures—a figure that, for Trainor, implies a “troubling disdain for students that is anathema to critical pedagogical goals and to the respect for students that has been a core tenet” of critical teachers (p. 632).

Maurice Berger (1999) suggests that the temptation to essentialize white racial identities is not just a problem in research and writing on race in education, but an ever-present danger in the larger field of whiteness studies. For Berger, the challenge is “how to advocate the idea of whiteness as a useful classification for examining white power and prestige without ignoring its limitation in defining and describing its subjects” (p. 206).

Cameron McCarthy (2003) sums up my worries about past work and my hopes for my own. He notes that educational research has represented whiteness as a sort of “deposit, a stable cultural and biological sediment that separates whites from blacks and other minorities” (p. 131). And he has called on educational theorists and researchers to conceptualize whiteness and race as historically and socially variable:

You cannot understand the social, cultural, or political behavior of any group by looking at their putative racial location to the exclusion of a more complex examination of their social biographies and the complex and constantly changing social context of the modern world in which we live. (p. 132)

I turn, now, to Frank and the social contexts within which he grew up, learned, lived, worked, and struggled; within which he created (and had created for him) his white racial identity.

### White People are Racist, Down Deep

#### Two White Spaces

Much of Frank’s talk about white people and white selves was organized in terms of *up and down*. For Frank, white people seemed to talk and move in two primary realms or spaces: a high space in which you needed to be “politically-correct” and a low space in which, as Frank put it, things took on “a whole different tone.” The relationship of these two spaces, for Frank, was such that things not allowed in the high space got pushed down into the low one.

As Frank discussed the protests against proposed immigration laws that occurred across the US on May 1, 2006, as well as conversations about these protests within his high school, he characterized the high space this way:

You have to be politically-correct about everything. My goodness, if I say the wrong thing or have a thought out loud . . . you’re not allowed to, out loud, question, have a conversation because everyone—‘My God, I might get sued, I might lose my job.’ You would think that people in a break room would be able to have a comfortable conversation about—‘This is why I really feel that they’re actual, illegal aliens. I feel good calling them illegal aliens because they are breaking the law and there should be a consequence. I don’t get to break the law’—but you can’t have that conversation if you’re a white person because people might think I’m a racist. You can see these guys on TV. They’re being so cautious about the way they talk because one slip is going to be used against them forever. Everything will come tumbling down so that—the person may not actually be racist. They may just be trying to work through their thoughts but they are not allowed to do that in public.

For Frank, the high space restricts honest exchange. It precludes him from having conversations in which different positions would be expressed and sorted through. The threat of being labeled a racist stifles not just racist talk, but other talk that might not be racist, but could be labeled that way.

It's important to note that Frank is talking about (except in the example of the person on TV) all-white spaces. That is, when he anticipates someone else labeling him or others a racist, he is imagining this being done by a white person. (I return to this below.)

In consequence of the restrictedness of the high space, certain kinds of talk and ideas and feelings get pushed down into what Frank calls a "subculture" or, with reference to his weekly poker games with friends, a "basement culture." Immediately following the above quote, Frank discussed some of the qualities of this low space:

I get a lot more leeway to be extreme on different things, no matter what the issue. So, if you push a legitimate conversation that maybe should be more public into that subculture, whether it's on sex or race or whatever, I think people, men especially, but people tend to be a little freer and nastier. Maybe I'm not a racist but in that subculture, I'll go way out on a limb and say some pretty horrible things because I'm being rewarded by other people that are functioning in a subculture mentality.

At first glance, the dominant quality of Frank's subculture seemed to be freedom, license. But there is also the sense, here, of group norms that press for being "extreme on different things." On the one hand, Frank spoke of "leeway" and the possibility of being "a little freer and nastier." On the other, he spoke of rewards for saying "horrible things" that may or may not be sincere expressions of what a given speaker thought or felt.

I asked Frank if there were regular topics or themes taken up in the basement culture of the weekly poker games. I wasn't necessarily surprised by the themes he mentioned. I was surprised by a rule that had arisen in the group to avoid serious conflict:

Well, you're going to have sex. . . . I'd say in a much more inappropriate, conquest type, that's definitely a topic. Work type things that you wouldn't normally tell somebody. Race is in there almost all the time. If somebody's having a marital problem. . . . Things that are in the news like this Duke thing or even that other thing [protests against proposed immigration laws]. That is going to be right there. 'Sons of bitches, if you don't like the country, get the hell out' and then it gets raunchier and worse . . . Political things get talked about. Actually, in my group, you get penalized for talking about politics because that political conversation draws people to damn near fight. So, at a card game, you're penalized. If you make any political statement or take a political side, you have to put up a certain amount of more money into the pot . . . because it polarizes people to where they don't want to talk to you ever again.

Sex, work, marriage, and race, along with current topics in the news—for Frank, these were dominant themes taken up in this subculture. I asked Frank for clarification of what he meant by "political conversation" and he pointed to disagreements across conservative and liberal lines. This group of men had learned, over time, that conversations that tapped into such conflicts might get of hand and they had instituted a rule against them. If you violated the rule, you threw money into the pot.

These men disagreed on more than politics, but a rule did not seem necessary for handling these conflicts. Instead, according to Frank, you were supposed to “be quiet” and “just go along.” In what follows, Frank once again highlighted how this subculture rewarded talk or performances that “othered” those not white, not male, not heterosexual—in this case, a story about a “lesbian Thanksgiving.” And toward the end of this part of the transcript, Frank named what was a key characteristic or norm of this subculture, one not found in the “politically-correct” high space and that enabled the sort of talk and laughter found here—*no shaming*:

What’s interesting about that subculture is even if you have a different opinion, you’re not going to, you’re just going to go along. You’re not going to talk about the lesbian Thanksgiving that I went to and the fact that she’s not a freak. She’s a decent lady, but she’s got three kids. But I’m going to tell you how she got the kids because that’s a curiously interesting story and it gives me permission to find a way to bash them in a way that you’re going to reward me and make me feel good. Same thing goes on with race. . . . And I think it goes back to, political issues, people are much more willing to stand up for their political views than they ever would be towards a sexuality issue or a race issue. ‘Say what you’re going to say, I’m just going to be quiet about it.’ Because if I were to challenge you on that, it’s either going to erupt into something terrible, lose a friendship over it or I’m going to make a person feel so horrible. Because of the way it’s looked upon, and it’s almost like you’d be taking the rules from this politically-correct environment and pushing them down into that subculture where, ‘Gee, now I’m going to shame this guy into complete—’, like ‘How dare you talk like that?’

At least two things deserve extended comment, here, which are developed in the following sections. First, I explore how Frank worried about how the basement culture’s humor and scapegoating were influencing participants, including himself (and especially given his experiences as a young boy with his uncle Norman and his father). Then, I take up the significance, to Frank, of not shaming others in the basement culture, and the trouble this created for Frank as he tried to imagine, if not anti-racist action, then at least what he called a “non-racist” way of living.

### Humor and Scapegoating

Frank thought that the woman he knew who is a lesbian and has three kids is a “decent lady” and “not a freak.” But he did not tell his friends that or that he and his family spent Thanksgiving with her. He would not be rewarded for sharing such information. Instead, he told what he called a “curiously interesting story,” a humorous story, about what I assume to be how she became pregnant. It is this performance that results in the subculture rewarding Frank and making him feel good.

Humorous performances that “bash them,” that scapegoat others, were valued in this basement culture. Indeed, when I looked back in the interview transcripts for when Frank first talked about this subculture, his description mentioned humor and laughter immediately:

One guy does this great, humorous imitation of what he thinks Hmong people must sound like and he can go on and on while people are drinking and playing cards, just a hoot. But you wonder how many times do you have to hear before you might just actually start to believe it? I know he doesn’t have any experiences with them. So, if you were ever to

carry on a more ‘out of basement’ type of conversation with him, I would put money on that you would start to hear some things that would trickle into the more adult or more formal conversation that you’d be having. The same kind of perceptions he has of the Hmong culture. ‘All of them are on welfare, and why do they come here? And all the gangs are from them.’

Frank thought that these performances had potential effects on what people believed. He thought that aspects of basement performances might “trickle” into “out of basement” talk, and he wondered how many times you had to participate in such events before you “actually start to believe” what these performances were teaching about scapegoated others. In other words, Frank worried that the language and humor of the basement culture were not just expressions of already-existing racist thoughts and feelings, but that they could produce them. As Frank put it:

I think even a good person who’s probably not racist, but if that’s all they have in their tool box, and you have to take part in those [basement] conversations, eventually, they may, over time, become a functioning racist. That does happen. The things you think become the things you say, and the things you say become your habits, and your habits become your character and there’s no way around it.

Frank was not just worried about others; he was worried about himself. He was worried about what was in his own “tool box,” given his experiences as a young boy growing up in rural Wisconsin, given the lessons he learned with his father and his uncle Norman.

Frank’s first description of his uncle Norman was not very positive, and later ones would do little to alter this first impression. Frank said that his uncle is “very alcoholic, hates black people, not sure he likes Catholics too much either.” Throughout the interviews, Frank tried to distinguish his father from Norman: “I would see my uncle Norman that would really be hard on some people, and yet my father never modeled that behavior.”

In the following, Frank characterized Norman’s response to local Ojibwe efforts to claim their fishing rights on nearby lakes and rivers. These rights included taking fish in traditional ways, including spear fishing. Frank described his uncle’s (and his father’s) illegal deer-hunting and fishing practices, and engaged in what seems to be an imagined dialogue between Norman and himself. Frank is obviously producing this dialogue now, as an adult, but I got the sense that he might have wanted to say this to the adults in his life when he was young, as he heard their talk and witnessed their actions:

Frank: They were just really, ‘Awww, the Indians are stealing. They’re drunks. All they’re doing is going drunken spear fishing, not doing anything sporting. And it’s a bunch of shit—their culture, they’re not the same ones that were here 200 years ago. They should do what we have to do.’ ‘OK, well, what do you have to do?’ . . . ‘Well, I have to buy a license and follow all the rules.’ ‘Well, no you don’t. I’ve been with you when you’ve broken all those rules.’ ‘But they’re not forced to live the life I am.’ But if he described his life, it wasn’t the one he was living. But it’s that same attitude. ‘Everyone should have to be in my hell. They shouldn’t get anything better.’

Timothy: But you saw this as a kid already.

F: Well, yeah, they were just so obvious. It sounds like I'm kidding, but you'd show up and it'd still be dark and they'd be gutting and boning deer out and there'd be several of them lying there and I'd say 'The last one was kind of small.' They'd say, 'You should see the one we threw in the swamp. It wasn't even worth taking out.' My dad was kind of quiet. He didn't want to agree with any of the things, he was just quiet.

T: Now, what about Norman's fishing practices? How did they compare—

F: It's the same thing, 'You can put as many lines in the water as you want.' Even my father, he'd take as many fish—'there's gotta be so many fish in the lake.' He'd say 'there's plenty of fish.' We'd be fishing walleye and my dad would catch way over the limit. . . . 'Well, some of the fish was Mom's.' 'Well, she wasn't actually here catching them.' 'Aw, don't worry about it. We'll say she went home early.' So they'd find ways to always justify the wrong that they're doing. And I don't think my dad's way of wrong was quite the level of Norman's level, but then again, I'm trying to justify my father better than my crazy, alcoholic uncle. I know I'm doing that because I wonder at times, when those two guys are out, who knows what evil—you know, I don't know what he was doing or shooting and maybe he just left it at Norman's.

I experience some sadness rereading this excerpt of the transcript. Like Frank, I want Frank's father to be different than Norman. Even as a boy, Frank saw through the lies, the hypocrisy, of Norman, and wanted to think of his father differently. I think of my oldest son, John, and how, when he was in 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, rules were so important to him—all of morality, justice, seemed bound up in rules for him. He could be reduced to tears by someone cheating at a game. It is hard for me not to think of Frank this way, as a young boy—he saw his uncle, and his father, breaking rules; he heard them attempt to explain away their behavior; and he heard them, in the same breath, accuse others (in this case, Ojibwe fishermen and their communities) of being morally bankrupt for not following the rules.

Frank wished for a bigger, more expansive world for himself, his friends, his family. Frank hoped that his own children would act differently, be "braver." He hoped that his own children would not stay silent in the face of explicitly racist talk and jokes, as he and his father often did. He didn't imagine anti-racist action, exactly, but he thought that it was possible to register dissent, to not participate, to not just go along:

The whole goal in raising the children is to try to get them to be a little more comfortable, to be able to talk about the things in the public setting and take that heat, and be a little bit braver when you're out there. Because if you are a little bit braver when you're in the subculture, you're also going to be a little bit braver to say, 'You know what, I'm not going to challenge you on it but I'm not going to take part in it.' There's a difference between listening to a guy blow off steam or say a bunch of racial jokes than jumping right in there and doing it. There's a difference. 'I'm not here to judge you but I don't have to'—the reality is if you say it and think it, eventually it's going to have an impact on how you feel.

Frank imagines his children confronting the same high and low spaces that he does. He thinks that participating differently in the low space—being "a little bit braver"—might help you be



able to talk about race in the high space and “take that heat.” He wants to preserve a space for “blowing off steam” but he thinks it should be possible to be present without “jumping right in there and doing it.” Frank is trying to work out a way to follow the norm of not judging or shaming others in the basement culture, while also registering disagreement. In the next section, I examine how shaming worked in Frank’s community and why white people hid what they thought and felt about race from one another.

### Shaming and Hiding

My initial interpretation of the rule against talking about politics was that somehow politics inspired more emotion than other topics. But Frank contradicted this—he said that someone could truly have “that same passion” for race “as they do the political stuff. You can just see it in them. They’re passionately racist about it.”

In relation to politics, the group instituted a rule meant to prevent “something terrible” from erupting. In relation to other potentially divisive topics, it seems that the group was supposed to exhibit self-control. Frank narrates this self-control as “Say what you’re going to say, I’m just going to be quiet about it.” This silence allows the group to avoid rupture. It also prevents you from making “a person feel so horrible” by shaming them. For Frank, shaming others is an aspect of the high, “politically-correct environment,” not an aspect of the basement culture.

The possibility of being shamed, being accused of being a racist, weighed heavily on Frank—and the accuser might very well be quite racist him/herself. The image Frank created was of a community with quite a bit of racism that may be expressed in the basement culture, but not in the politically-correct one. Furthermore, in the politically-correct culture, anyone, including people Frank himself considered quite racist, might accuse another of being racist, shame them, and diminish their position and worth in the community. In what follows, I was trying to make sense of this situation with Frank. I wondered why racism couldn’t be more openly expressed if it was shared by many in this all-white community.

F: I’m thinking I can’t even take a chance on looking like I’m racist. . . . You don’t want to be the person who gets alienated out.

T: Well, it’s interesting because, we’re talking about it, simultaneously, that there might actually be a lot of unexamined racism in a community like this, which seems to be like, then, that you could act with impunity, right? If there’s all this sort of—

F: Yeah but people are going to want to, publicly, want to adapt. They’re going to shame you. They wouldn’t want to be around you.

I confess that, for a long time, I have tended (from my own long-lived, left-leaning way of being) to dismiss comments about “political correctness” as little more than a repetition, a parroting, of conservative media figures such as Rush Limbaugh. That is, I interpreted political correctness as a site of struggle between Right and Left (see, for example, Fairclough, 2003), and complaints about political correctness as evidence that conservatives did not want to give any credence to the claims of marginalized groups and liberals that something important might be going on in patterned ways of doing language and culture—so they charged such claims with political correctness and deemed them inappropriate and even anti-democratic.

Frank's comments about political correctness and shaming suggest that something else, or something more, is at stake here. For me, Frank is pointing to the potential for any talk about race to be used in a struggle, *among white people*, over who is and who is not considered a "good" white person. Thandeka (2001) and Jacobson (1998), among others, have argued that, even as it has always been an advantage to be white in this country, there have also been consequential struggles among different white ethnic groups and social classes over who are deemed worthy and less worthy white people. Political correctness, then, might be more than just an argument between prominent members of the Right and Left (distributed through various media). It seems that this argument provides words (tools? weapons?) that have become part of the struggle, among everyday white people, to determine pecking orders of moral worth.

Alternatively, we could interpret Frank's comments against the backdrop of the consequences of the civil rights movement. For Bonilla-Silva (2001), the civil rights movement succeeded in persuading white people they needed to talk differently about race, even as attitudes and beliefs might remain largely unchanged—which is what Frank might have been suggesting when he said that "people are going to want to, publicly, want to adapt." One consequence of this that we see with Frank is that the willingness or ability to perform this talk is used as a way for white people to sort themselves out in relation to each other. This happens on the local scene. Local struggles for acceptance and authority are played out around and through talk about race. It is important to note that this struggle is not limited to one between local conservatives and liberals. For Frank, political correctness is a resource that can be used by anyone, to the point that an extremely racist person might use it against a non-racist or less-racist person to put them in their place.

The potential for shaming and loss of standing in the politically-correct space encourages white people to hide what they really think about race. For Frank, this seemed to produce a sense of sadness, in part because of the lost opportunity to work his thoughts and feelings through with others. I had asked Frank how he thought his ideas about race had changed over time:

This is probably what most people would say: I want to consider myself to be more tolerant, more open-minded, educated, more compassionate. But I think what most people won't tell you is I still worry that if I don't put thought into that I, myself, probably have some of those same, underlying ideas. Would I laugh at something I probably shouldn't? Am I uncomfortable if I'm in Minneapolis and I see some guys on the street, when I'm driving at night to get something and I drive through a part of town, suddenly, all the signs are Chinese and then there's a lot of people on the streets? Why am I terrified when there's thousands of cars, nothing's happening? So I could tell you a whole lot of great stuff how I feel about myself. Then, still at times I wonder where I am in the world.

Hiding, here, for Frank, seems related to working to maintain an image of himself for others as non-racist, even as he worries that he might have racist "underlying ideas" and he is confused about where he is "in the world." He wants others to think well of him, even if he is not so sure about how he thinks of himself. Of course, hiding can take on a more sinister aspect, as when Frank described the hiding engaged in by another man in the community:

I can tell you about a guy that's extremely racist and you wouldn't hear it in his public talk. I would say you could probably see it in his public action. I would almost guarantee

that you would see it, in the position of management, in who he hires, who he doesn't hire. Nothing you could pin point but you know it.

For me, this suggests that Bonilla-Silva (2001) is both right and wrong in his characterization of the new white talk. He's right that white people are hiding. But I think he tends to interpret this hiding *only* in terms of the protection and maintenance of white privilege and supremacy. That is, as white people, we talk in obfuscating ways about race so that everything can just go on as it is, with us in places of privilege, but also so we sound moral and upright—good people.

Frank agrees that polite white talk can hide racism. But he also suggests that white hiding is related to struggles among white people, at the local level, for moral worth and standing. Rather than being about (or only about) maintaining white privilege, hiding is often about maintaining status in relation to other white people.

If white people are hiding what they actually think and feel about race in the “politically-correct” space, then Frank's characterization of the basement culture suggests that it is also not, in the end, a space to honestly express and work through race. The basement culture rewards extremes, especially ones expressed in humorous performances. After Frank told me about the man he considered “extremely racist,” I asked if the basement culture was a place this person could express how he felt. Frank said yes, but was more interested in the problem the basement culture created for someone who doesn't think that way:

F: But then you have another person who doesn't think that way who will just go along with it because it's in the subculture and there's not an appropriate place to have that dialogue . . . And then up here [in polite space], this is actually how I am. I'm just not able to talk about what I want to have a conversation about.

T: So, for them, neither place is a place for them to have the conversation, because the subculture isn't the place to talk about it either.

F: No, they don't have it there.

Frank described basement and politically-correct spaces in which he could not engage in frank talk about what he thought and felt about race. This produced the need to, at times, hide his ideas, either through silence or through talk that distorted his sincere beliefs but was acceptable in a given space. Frank thought that his thinking about race was stuck, because he couldn't sort through conflicting positions with others on important questions and issues.

There is disagreement among white people in relation to race and this disagreement plays itself out not just between white people, but also within them. White people are conflicted, ambivalent, about race—even Frank's uncle, Norman, was.

A striking example of this was provided by Frank when he was discussing Norman's struggles with alcoholism and depression. Frank thought that Norman's time in Vietnam, and the death of his brother there, contributed to Norman's difficulties:

I think he spent seven years in Vietnam. He decided to come back and then another brother went over. His name was Eric and he got killed and then Norman went into the psychiatric hospital, spent a year there and now, to this day, he drinks heavily. But when he's drinking—I've experienced this—he's broken down and cried, 'I think I might have

been the guy that assassinated Martin Luther King. I'm not sure.' He'll have moments, but then he'll be this giant, generous guy. He'll pick up a guitar and just play very—kind of renaissance in those areas.

Obviously, much could (and should) be made of Norman's worry, when he was drunk, that he may have assassinated Martin Luther King. Many interpretations, from many disciplines and perspectives, could be generated. The one I want to develop, here, goes like this.

In his *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984) was interested in exploring the laughter and feasting of the folk because he saw in it lessons for how to oppose the official social order and ideology. Bakhtin thought that official truth was held in place by fear. Thus, he was interested in how that fear might be lifted or countered. He thought that sitting with friends, eating, drinking, laughing, might provide moments of fearlessness, and, with this fearlessness, counter-truths might be expressed.

There is an inverted feasting here, with Norman, one with drinking and tears. However, these tears and drinking appear to enable moments of truth-telling, and the truth Norman glimpses at these moments is that his identity, in some profound way, is dependent on killing black people. His fear that he has killed Martin Luther King seems, for me, an uncanny recognition of his own scapegoating of black people—that his white identity is dependent on killing people of color.

There is no reason to limit this to Norman. Indeed, Ellison (1953/1995) thought that the very capacity of white Americans to live as white and to be human was dependent on violence (including economic exploitation, institutionalized racism, symbolic forms) against black Americans. Ellison (1953/1995) proposed that we

View the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and scene upon which and within which the action unfolds. If we examine the beginning of the Colonies, the application of this view is not, in its economic connotation at least, too far-fetched or too difficult to see. For then the Negro's body was exploited as amorally as the soil and climate. It was later, when men drew up a plan for a democratic way of life, that the Negro began to exert an influence upon America's moral consciousness. Gradually he was recognized as the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan, a human natural resource who, so that the white man could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization. (pp. 28, 29)

### Conclusion

As researchers, educators, and activists, we need to re-examine our conceptions of who we think white people are as racial beings and begin to re-interpret white talk. My theoretical and empirical work in this article makes three primary contributions, as well as raises important questions for us to consider as part of our future anti-racist research and action.

First, my work complicates our understanding of why white people take up a color-blind discourse when talking about race (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; McIntyre, 1997). The traditional way of interpreting this discourse is as enabling white people to hide or disguise an underlying racism, so they can avoid being implicated in it. No doubt this is an important and fruitful reading of color-blind racetalk. However, Frank's account of what he

called a “basement culture” suggests that, even though white people may take up a color-blind discourse in certain situations and spaces, they also participate in other sorts of racetalk that may be quite different. Furthermore, Frank’s characterization of “politically-correct” spaces suggests that color-blind discourse may, in part, be a response to the fact that talk about race is a site of local struggles among white people for worth and standing, with accusations of racism and shaming as weapons in these struggles. This discourse may also function to minimize or manage conflict among white people. Do white people talk in obscure, subtle, and abstract ways about race not only to hide their racism and to preserve their standing, but also in order to avoid serious ruptures with white friends, family, colleagues, and other members of their communities?

Perhaps this should be obvious, but white people do not agree about race. Furthermore, white people know that they do not agree about race. Unfortunately, the only conflict among white people that is represented in anti-racist literatures tends to be conflict between, on the one hand, the enlightened, anti-racist, researcher/authority figure/teacher and, on the other, the ignorant, racist, subject/subordinate/student (Jupp & Slattery, 2010). We need more research and writing that acknowledges divides within white communities, that studies the effects of these divides on the talk and thinking and feeling of white people, and that explores the challenges (as well as possibilities) that these conflicts among white people create for anti-racist pedagogies.

The second primary contribution of my work has to do with the significance of people of color to the ongoing social production of white racial identities. Frank’s uncle, Norman, assured himself of his own superiority by scapegoating Native peoples, as his young nephew looked on and lost his innocence. People of color are central to the drama of white lives.

We tend to ignore this fact in our anti-racist teaching and research. We mistakenly assume that, since white people lead segregated lives, people of color are not central to, not present in, those lives. I do not mean this as a criticism of courses and programs that aim to put white people in meaningful contact with people of color. However, an important finding of my research is that white people are always already in relationship to people of color and always already “know” them. How would our pedagogies shift if we assumed relationship and knowledge?

These relationships and knowledge are often rooted in projection and stereotypes, and the final contribution of my work has to do with the emotional costs of scapegoating for white people. These costs were perhaps most evident in relation to Frank’s uncle, but he also passed this misery on to Frank, as Frank had to not only confront the hypocrisy of his uncle, but also that his own father might not be much different. This is not meant to ignore, in any way, the oppression, misery, and death that scapegoating and stereotypes produce for people of color. But what would happen if we began imagining our anti-racist pedagogies as offering to white people some understanding of the sort of emotional distress that Norman and Frank experienced?

I often hear from fellow anti-racist educators and researchers the (despairing, exasperated) question: Why would white people ever want to give up their privilege? My research suggests that there are costs associated with what Ellison (1953/1995) saw as white people’s rather desperate and continual need for reassurance of their own superiority. The exhaustion and emotional costs of playing the role of white American may create openings to critical work on race with white people (Logue, 2005).

My work suggests that researchers and educators need to begin to read the words and actions of white people differently. Perhaps Toni Morrison (1992) provides the best demonstration of this different sort of reading in her William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization, later published as *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. If we are to understand and influence white people, understand and influence their dreams and future

actions, we must orient ourselves toward them as Morrison oriented herself toward the white authors of the American literary canon:

As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. (p. 17)

White people are racist, down deep. But the deep down is not monologic or finished. We ignore this complexity and conflict at our own risk—at the risk of failing to see openings to concrete work that we can do as individuals and groups to combat racism; at the risk of slowing rather than accelerating educational and political efforts for social justice.

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