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Racists versus Antiracists?

White antiracists? Misguided folks, but I get them, I mean, [long pause] they want to have equality and multiculturalism, and so do we . . . In many ways, we are not all that different. In fact, I consider myself one of them [laughing]. I don't use your language, but yeah, I'm a white antiracist!

—**Robert, National Equality for All**

The white nationalist movement today, they are using our rhetoric, our ideas . . . because they feel threatened. I guess on some level they want to be respected as individual human beings, just like we want all people to be respected as human beings. That's similar . . . in a strange sort of way.

—**Philip, Whites for Racial Justice**

A LARGE OAK TABLE WITH PAPERS, books, and several coffee cups strewn about occupies the middle of the room. Numerous people sit in bulky, inflexible chairs. Some type on laptops, several busy themselves with reading, and others jot down notes on yellow legal pads. A few people scurry about the room, dive in and out of file cabinets, briefly speak with colleagues, and wait for a turn at one of the few computers to send an email or look up needed information. The phone has been ringing incessantly for the past hour. Call after call is fielded, schedules double-checked, and appointments made. People are a bit on edge. Still, most manage to smile and remain courteous to one another. In less than a week, it will be the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday—a U.S. federal holiday since 1986. People are readying their commemoration of the day by preparing press packets about the life and legacy of Dr. King to disseminate to radio, tv, and blogs. Derek, a thirty-four-year-old advertising and marketing agent, sits down beside me. Seemingly exhausted, he slumps into the chair with a deep sigh. He removes his glasses with his left hand, holding them unfolded in his outstretched arm. With his right hand he loosens his tie and undoes the top button of his shirt. For more than a few moments he slowly rubs his forehead as if trying to massage away a deadening headache. After some time he slowly replaces his glasses, looks down at the floor, and says in a low tone: "It's hard to fight all the disinformation out there . . ." his voice trailing off as he speaks. "But!" he asserts emphatically as he turns to look at me, placing his hand on my shoulder. "We've got to get the truth out there to people. This is one of the few times each year when people will really listen." Derek smiles and rises from his seat to greet a colleague who has entered the room. "I think the big selling point we have," says Derek, looking back at me as his colleague walks up to greet him with a handshake, "is that King was against affirmative action, we're not saying anything different. . . . We as white people must protect our racial heritage and separate. That is the key to our self-determination." This is "The Office," the unofficial moniker for the national headquarters of "National Equality for All," a white nationalist organization located in a metropolitan area on the East Coast of the United States.

"Whites for Racial Justice" is also located on the outskirts of a city on the East Coast of the United States. It is the headquarters of a nationwide white antiracist organization and is no more than a few hours' drive from the headquarters of National Equality for All. The group meets in the basement of a member's house, but it is not the stereotypical dark and dimly lit space. A few years ago, the members pitched in and finished it with drywall, wall-to-wall carpeting, and modern wood furnishings. Bookshelves are everywhere in the room. Many volumes end up in large piles several feet tall, stacked next to the walls. There are history books on the civil rights era, the speeches of Frederick Douglass, John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*, and the heavily used and dog-eared pages of *Whites Confront Racism* by sociologist Eileen O'Brien. On this day, like many others before it, members slowly trickle in for the biweekly gathering. The theme for today's meeting is "Everyday Insurrections," or what white people can do on a daily basis to fight racism. Malcolm, one of the official "coordinators" of the organization, enters the room, greeting every person individually. After enjoining everyone to take his or her seat and begin, Malcolm introduces a supplement to the day's agenda: "I think what we need to do, as conscious, thinking, aware human beings who have decided to take a stand against racism, is what we can, or rather, *need* [emphasizing the word] to do to stop racism in our own lives as well as take a stand against it structurally, is . . . well . . . to constantly ask ourselves, 'How can I become less "white"?'" His fingers make the motion of air quotes around the word *white* as he speaks. Smiling nods and looks of sincere appreciation greet his commentary. This is a typical meeting of Whites for Racial Justice.

For a little over one year—from May 2006 through June 2007—I spent at least one day a week with members of the white nationalist organization National Equality for All (NEA) and the white antiracist organization Whites for Racial Justice (WRJ). I attended their meetings, analyzed their literature, interviewed their members, and informally spent time with those members in a variety of settings: from long stays in organizations' offices and members' homes to quick trips to the post office and supermarket. I hung out with their friends and listened to their life stories. I shared meals with them in their homes. I met the elder members of their families, and I played with many of their children.

I came to NEA and WRJ with the interest of comparing how these two groups make meaning of white racial identity. In many ways, these two organizations are everything one would expect. They act, talk, and look quite different. They are near-perfect examples of how white racial identity can be marshaled toward antagonistic political projects. While they may seem strange and radical to many observers, they both appeal to fairly normative and logical arguments to shield their activism. They both spend a great deal of time defending who they are and what they do from outsiders. They detest jokes about their activism, they work very hard to be taken seriously, and they both worry about the future of race relations and white people in the United States, if not across the globe.

Like many whites today, both white nationalists and white antiracists see themselves as autonomous individuals making independent choices that reflect their authentic desires and true selves. Yet these choices, desires, and selves are anchored to racial categories and meanings that structure how they negotiate the world. It is important to recognize, then, that these actors do not engage in their activism in isolation. Both the white nationalists and white antiracists craft their understandings of the world, and who they are as white people in that world, out of available meanings and shared expectations. The members of both organizations use the dominant understandings of race today to continually re-create and re-form both their individual and collective white racial identities. They then use those identities as potent resources and rationales for how they should marshal their activism toward the world's problems.

I neither defend nor demonize either group or its members in this book. Rather, I present a comparative examination of how the members of both groups make meaning of race, particularly whiteness, in social situations of meaningful interaction. In coming to address this focus, I found something quite unexpected. Located just a short distance from one another on the East Coast of the United States, the members of these two groups inhabit incredibly different social worlds. Yet they rely on similar racial and cultural meanings to interpret and navigate those worlds. And while I document many of the differences between these two groups in the pages that follow, I concentrate on how they make meaning of whiteness in strikingly similar ways. This is a book about the racialized ideals that are held in common between white nationalists and white antiracists—and how such commonality relates to the reproduction of both racism and white racial identity. Several dimensions of this white ideal—what I call "hegemonic whiteness"—will be discussed in the chapters that follow. But before we embark on that journey, it is necessary to lay a foundation.

The Project of White Racial Identity

Making the argument that important and crucial similarities exist between white nationalists and white antiracists is rife with the potential to agitate. My point is not to provoke but rather to draw attention to how whites come to construct their own identities in ways that are simultaneously distinct *and* surprisingly similar. Whereas a great deal of scholarship views the vast landscape of different white racial identities as the result of antagonistic political ideologies and stratified material resources, I focus instead on how actors negotiate, contest, and reform the dominant *meanings* of white racial identity in everyday social relations. My goal is not to refute the standard arguments about the power of political ideals and material resources. This line of inquiry and reasoning has led to important insights. My concern centers on the ways that racialized meanings propel whites' interpersonal social relations and how white racial identity is enacted through these social relations. By social relations, I mean situations in which actors create or rely on a sense of who they think they are (here, white racial identity) in relation to real and/or imagined others in the situation or expected situations.[1]

Racial identity—as categories arranged in relational hierarchy—serves as a convenient and "commonsense" system for organizing social action and order across an array of social contexts. The meanings associated with race do not evaporate with the passing of one social relation to the next but structure our activities and identities across time and space. I will show how the dominant meanings of race organize our social relations and how this social order works to reproduce racist schema and racial inequality through the mundane activities of everyday life. To examine white racial identity, we must examine it as an ongoing process, as a meaningful accomplishment, and as a kind of "project." Omi and Winant argue that racial projects "connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning."[2] I follow suit to examine whiteness neither as a biological fact nor as an illusion but as a real social classification that supplies a meaningful worldview and set of strategies to those who embody that category. To empirically access these meanings and strategies, I focus on the symbolic boundaries and shared narratives that make up white social relations.

"Symbolic boundaries" are the conceptual divisions that people make between objects, between themselves and other people, and between practices. These meaningful distinctions operate as a "system of rules that guide interaction by affecting who comes together to engage in what social act."[3] Applied to race, these boundaries then constitute, and often justify or naturalize, a system of classification that defines hierarchy and moral worth between and within racial groups. Such "boundary work" involves the construction of a collective white identity by drawing on supposedly common traits, experiences, and a shared sense of belonging.[4] Regarding "shared narratives," the key idea is that people interpret their lives as a set of recognizable stories that contain causally linked sequences of events. Shared narratives are central to how we construct racial identities because they link the social world together; stories provide accounts of how individuals view themselves in relation to others. Narratives affect behavior because people often choose actions that are consistent with the meaningful expectations of their racial identities. Together, symbolic boundaries illuminate the meanings and cultural basis of racial categories, and narratives order the links between categories in a recognizable story. Only when these categories and stories are "widely agreed upon can they take on a constraining character and pattern social interaction in important ways . . . [as] identifiable patterns of social exclusion."[5]

People are bound to meaningful categories and stories to establish group membership, to cope with their lives, and to provide strategies for resisting and reproducing aspects of society they find troubling and pleasing. For the white activists covered in this book, the already established meanings of race were used to construct stable, knowable, and respected white racial identities. In thinking about white racial identities as strategic and usable things, I certainly do not imply that the white nationalists and white antiracists studied herein always made rational and conscious decisions through a sort of "cost/benefit" approach to life. Rather, these white racial activists employed the cultural resources of symbolic boundaries and shared narratives in intelligent, creative, savvy, and emotional ways. And at the same time, these strategies held unconscious, unforeseen, and unintended results; sometimes the actors even reproduced the very dilemmas they sought to displace. And while I consider white racial identity to be an ongoing act of accomplishment that gains significance in social interaction, I note the importance that these activists place on portraying coherent and firm identities that seem anything but in flux.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that these white racial activists are fastened to the dominant expectations of white racial identity and are in search of idealized forms of that identity; thus the double entendre of *White Bound* as a sense of *attachment and trajectory*. Each chapter demonstrates how the shared meanings of race and whiteness—and the strategies derived from those meanings—affect NEA's and WRJ's antithetical goals in strikingly similar ways. On the whole, this book throws theoretical speculation about the supposed bifurcation of white racial identity into relief against the realities of two groups never before directly compared. In a recent study of white identity, sociologist Paul Croll wrote, "There is a significant relationship between boundary maintenance and claiming a strong white racial identity . . . By and large, scholars have either focused their research on racist organizations or on anti-racism activities, rarely have they looked at both."[6] By examining seemingly antithetical white groups, we can begin to see not just a plurality of white racial identities but also the strategies that recreate the dominant ways of being white.

Rethinking Racial Dichotomies

We love things that come in pairs. Whether male/female, nature/nurture, fact/opinion, mind/body, reason/emotion, winners/losers, or good/bad, binaries are a cornerstone of social structure and a road map for our navigation of everyday life. The lumping and splitting of our culture into distinct and polarized categories is a meaningful enterprise.[7] After all, particular descriptions of reality are quite arbitrary, and categorization does not merely sort our experiences but helps to infuse everyday life with specific meanings. And when the controversial topics of racism and racial identity are introduced, binaries become extremely useful frameworks for making agreed-on meaning out of racial chaos, controversy, and conflict.

Consequently, North Americans generally discuss racism along the lines of "racists and antiracists." This is not a new phenomenon. The categories "racist" and "antiracist" are deeply historical. The historian Herbert Apthecker documented white racist and white antiracist activism from the 1600s to the 1860s. He effectively challenged the notion that whites universally accepted racism until the outbreak of the Civil War, bringing to light a neglected, but vibrant, white antiracist history.[8] Yet, as amateur historians, we tend to examine such tales through a bifurcated lens. Driven by this paradigm, "white racists" become the originators and protectors of slavery, the cause of Jim Crow segregation, the supporters of eugenics, and the keepers of hidden prejudices toward immigrants. Conversely, the "white antiracists" are the enlightened; a group that somehow escaped the disgrace of supporting "Manifest Destiny" against Native Americans, decried the internment camps for the Japanese during World War II, and traversed the U.S. South on "Freedom Rides" in the 1960s. While some of this story is certainly true, such a view is dangerously reductive and violently oversimplified for understanding the link between racism and white racial identity.[9]

One could argue that the continued reverence for this bifurcated understanding of whiteness enables an articulation of two static versions of whiteness. One account is a tale of heroic whites untainted by the ugly spectacles of bigotry, violence, and hypocrisy, while another narrative describes whites that were simply the "bad apples" that fell prey to hate. To put it bluntly, a simple and sanitary tale of innocence and guilt is seductive. Such seductions are what sociologists Joe Feagin and Hernán Vera call "sincere fictions":

> Usually unfeigned and genuine, the negative beliefs about and images of African Americans provide the make-believe foundation for white dominance and supremacy. Yet the sincere fictions of whites encompass more than negative images of the out-group; they also involve images of one's self and one's group. *The key to understanding white racism is to be found not only in what whites think of people of color but also in what whites think of themselves* [my emphasis].[10]

In examining what "whites think of people of color . . . [and] what whites think of themselves," it is tempting to assume that essential distinctions exist between these two "types" of white identity formations (racists and antiracists) and then proceed to study how the differences in their identity manifest in their understanding of the world.

For example, consider the tracking of hate groups undertaken by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a group on which the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), and other government agencies rely for information. After documenting the unprecedented rise in (predominantly white) hate groups—an increase of 300 to 1,002 between the years 1992 and 2010—the SPLC also began recording a rise in "people of goodwill." Presented in the form of a color-coded map, the United States is portrayed as a nation growing in racial polarization; blood-red dots signify hate groups while calming patches of chartreuse denote people "standing strong against hate."[11]

Such a view paints a polarized picture of mainstream white America. This picture implicitly enables our navigation of racial tempests. When we encounter an overtly racial action or statement, we can invoke the preset narrative. Consider the 2008–2010 Birther and Tea Party depictions of Barack Obama as a primate living in a watermelon-infested White House, the June 2009 Holocaust Museum shooter James von Brunn, or evolutionary psychologist Satoshi Kanazawa's May 2011 evaluation that black women are physically less attractive than women of other races.[12] We quickly frame such events as atypical and fringe "racism," labor to throw the racist rascal(s) out, and dispatch a few white antiracist warriors to guard against racism's return. Problem solved.

Or is it? Understandings of white racism and white antiracism as distinct polarities allow us to construct sanitary tales of political conflict. But what if the relationship between white racial identity and racism transcends politics and the singling out of the "bad apple" racists?[13] Can we understand white racial identity as something more than a reflection of abstract political disputes? How do we explain not only rampant racial segregation in housing, education, religion, and employment but also prejudicial and narrow beliefs amid *both* "racist" and "antiracist" white populations? What do we make of the continued legacy of white racial privilege that protects white "racists" and "antiracists" alike? How do we explain the vast heterogeneity of whiteness that exceeds, if not explodes, a politically bifurcated spectrum? And, most importantly, how do the white actors intimately engaged in these debates interpret and manage their lives? Do they frame their involvement in this struggle as an absolute battle between good and evil, as mundane decisions, or as something altogether different? The answers to these questions lie in a closer examination of peoples' lives within these polarized groups.

The Contemporary Meanings of Whiteness

The study of whiteness is far from new. White racial identity had been scrutinized by an array of intellectuals long before mainstream sociologists were interested in the topic. An explicit yet embryonic interest in whiteness stretches back, at the least, to William J. Wilson's 1860 essay "What Shall We Do with the White People?"[14] Since that time, there have been an array of influential studies, from W. E. B. Du Bois's classic essay "The Souls of White Folk" in *Darkwater*, to Langston Hughes's *The Ways of White Folks*, to James Baldwin's simplistic, but no less astute, observation that "there are no white people, only people who think they are white."[15] Given that whiteness has long been studied, it has traversed several stages of inquiry.

A large part of the early scholarship on whiteness explored the observation that whites generally have a lower degree of self-awareness about race and their own racial identity than do members of other racial groups.[16] In interviews with white respondents, various scholars found that when asked about the meaning of whiteness, most replied along the lines of "I've never really thought that much about it."[17] Such data bolstered scholars' assertions that the power of whiteness stemmed from its mundane normality. As Richard Dyer wrote in key essay on whiteness: "White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular."[18]

While the invisibility and normality of whiteness is an important insight, it is crucial not to overemphasize white racial unconsciousness. In a study of white college students, Charles Gallagher found that whites exhibit a high degree of racial consciousness when they are the racial minority or if they perceive themselves as a threatened group.[19] Other scholars demonstrate how challenges to the status quo can result in a defensive white racial consciousness that takes the form of white nationalist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, White Citizen's Councils, neo-Nazis, anti-immigration forces like the Minutemen, or factions of the newly made Tea Party.[20] Accordingly, such a trend led Frankenberg to reject her earlier understanding of whiteness as simply an invisible normality.[21]

While the invisibility factor in whiteness studies is a lesser trope of late, the associations of whiteness with privilege are far more immune to challenges. Much of the recent work on whiteness bears on the methods by which whites minimize or feel guilty about their privileged status.[22] This denial of white privilege is the foundation of "color-blind racism." Sociologist Eduardo

Bonilla-Silva argues that many people—especially whites—now assert that the post–civil rights era in which we now live is racially egalitarian.[23] Under this logic, many whites argue we should be "color-blind." Any focus on race in terms of redressing the effects of past racism or current racial discrimination and racial inequality is reframed as an antiwhite form of "reverse racism."

Another approach to the study of whiteness centers on the white "backlash" against the advances born from the civil rights movement. From the passage of Proposition 209 in 1996, the Supreme Court *Bollinger* decisions in 2003, the passage of the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI) in 2006, to the change in precedent set by *Brown v. Board* (1954) in the 2007 Supreme Court ruling of *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, many argue that white backlashes against recent human rights legislation are increasing.[24] Accordingly, "many whites see themselves as victims of the multicultural, pc, feminist onslaught . . . [and this] would be laughable if it were not for the sense of mental crisis and the reactionary backlash that underpin these beliefs."[25] The white (and often male, middle-class, and heterosexual) identities once taken for granted as secure, stable, and in charge are now changing due to challenges from younger generations, the "browning of America," the civil rights movement, and fundamental crises in the neoliberal economy. Abby Ferber wrote, "Central to this backlash is a sense of confusion over the meanings of both masculinity and whiteness, triggered by the perceived loss of white, male privilege."[26] Whiteness becomes an overt topic of political discussion; most tend to frame whites, especially white men, as orchestrating a backlash against recent progress in gender and racial politics.

Despite the aforementioned organized and legal responses of the white backlash, I believe that the concept of "backlash" oversimplifies and obscures contemporary white struggles with the meanings of race. Today, whites are not just rebelling against civil rights gains or other "progressive" social programs; many are fighting to protect them. What whites should do and what it means to be white are highly contested questions. Accordingly, Howard Winant demonstrates how a neoconservative "backlash" does not solely characterize white identity but that white identity resembles a bifurcated political spectrum. Winant writes:

> Existing racial projects can be classified along a political spectrum, according to explicit criteria drawn from the meaning each project attaches to "white-

> ness." . . . Focusing on five key racial projects, which I term, far right, new right, neoconservative, neoliberal, and new abolitionist.[27]

Winant maps a theory of white identity formation onto this bifurcated politics of progressive and conservative movements. Labeling this phenomenon "racial dualism as politics," Winant writes, "Today, the politics of white identity is undergoing a profound political *crisis* [my emphasis] . . . This volatility provides ongoing evidence of racial dualism among whites."[28] Under this rubric, whiteness is understood as a series of white racial reactions that resemble a political spectrum. Chief among these varied white formations are the white racist and the white antiracist movements. Winant writes that these two movements indicate "a *new politicization of whiteness* . . . that has taken shape particularly in the post-civil rights era . . . the significance of white identity was reinterpreted and repoliticized."[29]

Evidence that whiteness is politically polarizing is surely available in widely divergent registers, from the recent proliferation of "whiteness studies" of a particular leftist and antiracist stance to popular newsmagazine and television coverage of the anti-immigration Minutemen that constructs a picture of white America and white people as under attack from the brown masses of Central and South America. Whiteness appears to shift in response to changes in the social, political, and cultural terrain. Responses are often multiple and sometimes contradictory. This is especially true when considering a population as economically, religiously, and politically diverse as the white population in the United States.

The Changing Sameness of White Racial Identity

Given the heterogeneity of whiteness, there is great debate over who the white racists and white antiracists are in our society. Yet there is little disagreement that "racism and antiracism" exist as two, stable, divergent, and opposing sides. Alastair Bonnett writes that the story of racism and antiracism "is staged with melodrama, the characters presented as heroes and villains: pure anti-racists versus pure racists, good against evil."[30] So, also, sociologist Jack Niemonen remarks that we often "paint a picture of social reality in which battle lines are drawn, the enemy identified, and the victims sympathetically portrayed. . . . [distinguishing] between 'good' whites and 'bad' whites."[31] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva even makes the point that scholars interested in studying race can unintentionally impose a dichotomous framework on their data:

"Hunting for 'racists' is the sport of choice of those who practice the 'clinical approach' to race relations—the careful separation of good and bad, tolerant and intolerant Americans."[32] After the 2008 election of Barack Obama, racial dualism proved prevalent among many as they celebrated a white antiracist triumph over racism in the political mainstream. Journalist Tim Wise wrote: "While it may be tempting . . . to seek to create a dichotomy whereby the 'bad whites' are the ones who voted against the black guy, while the 'good whites' are the ones who voted for him, such a dualism is more than a little simplistic."[33]

In creating distance from this dichotomous framework, it is important to avoid either reducing whiteness to an aggregate of disconnected actors or painting whiteness as a one-dimensional category of uniform power and privilege. We can accomplish this task if we examine white nationalist and white antiracist identity as less of a thing and more of an ongoing process. Race is not a static event but a process of patterned events that demonstrate a larger cultural system that continually reracializes certain objects, habits, rituals, words, and people. Because white racial identity formation is a part of this process, the meaning of whiteness varies spatially (by location), temporally (by historical eras and within the individual life span), contextually (by the relative culture), differentially (by power), and intersectionally (by combination with class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on). Yet, at the same time, these varied forms of white identities are bound together as a singular dominant and racially privileged group. Sociologist Troy Duster writes that whiteness:

> can be *simultaneously* Janus-faced and multifac(et)ed—and also produce a singularly dominant social hierarchy. Indeed, if we make the fundamental mistake of reifying any one of those states as more real than another, we will lose basic insights into the nature and character of racial stratification in America.[34]

Hence, it is imperative to examine the cultural strategies that simultaneously splinter and bind the white formation process. If we approach white identity in this way, we can avoid reproducing the Manichean conflation of unquestionably different *political stances* as essentially different *racial identities*.

Ideal ("Hegemonic") Whiteness

Writing about racial interactions in his landmark book *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver observed, "The ideal white man was one who knew how to use his head, who knew how to manage and control things and get things done. Those whites who were not in a position to perform these functions nevertheless aspired to them."[35] Cleaver's observation was an important one. While there is no question about the political differences and individual heterogeneity of white actors in an array of settings, it is important to recognize that certain forms of whiteness can become dominant and pursued as an ideal.

In any given setting or context an ideal of whiteness emerges alongside many other ways of "being white" that are complicit, subordinate, or marginalized in relation to that ideal. What may be an ideal in one context may not be at all ideal in other. For example, how a white male student in a majority black and urban high school is expected to perform his racial identity in ways that bring him status and respect from other whites—as described in Edward Morris's *An Unexpected Minority*—is much different from how white girls in middle-class suburbs are expected to behave if they too wish to gain admiration and standing from their peer groups—as portrayed in Lorraine Kenny's *Daughters of Suburbia*.[36]

However, people do not live in isolated vacuums. Different contexts and locales are not completely disconnected from one another. The racial expectations and assumptions in one area may overlap or envelop another. In so doing, a supraideal of whiteness may share the expectations from many different, even supposedly opposite, areas. Sociologist Amanda Lewis unpacks this nuance:

> Whiteness works in distinct ways for and is embodied quite differently by homeless white men, golf-club-membership-owning executives, suburban soccer moms, urban hillbillies, antiracist skinheads, and/or union-card-carrying factory workers . . . In any particular historical moment, however, certain forms of whiteness become dominant.[37]

For example, in both NEA and WRJ I found striking similarities in relation to how they understood white racial identity. In both groups, I recognized comparable taken-for-granted meanings, rules, and expectations that guided the interactions of members and their interpretations of whiteness. Members of both groups held a common understanding of what white racial identity *is*, and more importantly, what it *should be*.

These meanings were particularly dominant. They took on the status of "common sense." Throughout my research, members of WRJ and NEA often said to me: "Matthew, of course that's so, isn't it?" I argue that those "of course" statements were indicative of important moments in which systems of meaning were at work. Members were the least aware that they were using particular boundaries and narratives. Because these common interpretations were taken for granted, they became "hegemonic." Hegemony structures the activities of actors, both constraining and enabling attitudes, actions, and identities. However, hegemony is always contested and never complete.[38] It is always in process.

I found that both organizations hold similar commonsense ideals of what white identity should be. That ideal—what I call "hegemonic whiteness"—was found to extend beyond the overt political goals and racial agendas of both groups. Members of both groups valorized certain performances of whiteness that they strove to attain but of which many fell short. This resulted in a great deal of variation in white racial identities, but it was a variation cohesively bound by their shared understandings and expectations.

One-Dimensional Activists?

I do not paint these actors as one-dimensional activists.[39] Member of the antiracist Whites for Racial Justice and the nationalist National Equality for All are far from "cultural dupes" who robotically pursue the white ideal because ideologies of white supremacy have implanted themselves in their minds.[40] If this were true, people would be active agents only as instruments of social structures and dominant ideology. Conversely, people are in complete control of neither the social world nor themselves. This "voluntarist" position would frame actors as romanticized "rational actors" completely unfettered by socially structured resources and relations.[41] This frame is antisociological and wholly abandons the social base of human action and order as if choices are objective realities outside of history and culture.[42]

Rather, I emphasize that the members of WRJ and NEA make choices that are not always intentional, conscious, and individual. Rather, they interpret, shun, and embrace choice through interactional activities that occur within a durable, patterned, and systemic culture that simultaneously enables and constrains those choices.[43] As actors sharing a culture, their behaviors are governed, but not overdetermined, by the culture that they share and remake together. These actors make meaning of race, and the pursuit of an ideal form of whiteness, within a white supremacist culture in which they live and with a white supremacist logic often thought normal, natural, and mundane. Their decisions are not predestined or foreordained but often reproduce the dominant meanings of race and expected racial interactions. Hence, the agency to act should not be romanticized or conflated with social change or counterhegemony. Most agency is reproductive of culture and social structures. So, too, just because actors reproduce the social world, they should not be looked on as one-dimensional actors incapable of active meaning making. The following chapters show how these actors draw on the vast reservoir of racialized meanings and expectations and actively negotiate these meanings within unequal systems of social relations and consequences. While they do not always pursue the hegemonic ideal of whiteness, they do pursue this ideal with durable, layered, and patterned regularity.

Making the Familiar Strange

White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists, and the Shared Meanings of Race takes an empirically grounded sociological approach to the similarities, differences, and ideals of whiteness that have, for too long, been left in the hands of journalists, activists, and political theorists. In head-on fashion, this book explores the contemporary meaning of whiteness and its relationship to racism by comparing two movements assumed mirror opposites. I approached this topic from the point of view that I should not attack or defend either movement. My role as a researcher was to take the familiar dichotomy that grounds the recognizable polarities of whiteness and, simply, make it strange. I attempted to accomplish this approach to whiteness as a disinterested, yet attentive and immersed, observer. I think this an efficacious method for encouraging distance from binary conceptions in order to contemplate the differences and similarities of whiteness anew. Doing so is a slippery task. Yet it is a necessary one if we are to understand the import of whiteness and white identity movements for those who organize their lives around them and for those who are affected by the actions of these people. It is not my intention to marginalize the very real differences between these two movements. Instead I wish to examine certain key assumptions and logics they share, especially in their understanding and performance of white identity and its connection to racism.

Design of the Study

From May 2006 through June 2007 I spent at least one day a week, often much more, with members of the white nationalist organization NEA and the white antiracist organization WRJ. The research was composed of: (1) ethnographic fieldwork, (2) semistructured in-depth interviews, and (3) content analysis inclusive of newsletter issues and textual information such as emails and office memos. While this account aims for accuracy, I maintain the anonymity of participants by changing names and potentially identifying information. I offer no blatant or hidden clues as to actual names and places referenced herein to protect my research subjects and the ethical soundness of the study (more information is available in Appendices A, B, and C).

The Cases in this Book

NEA is a nationwide "white nationalist" organization founded in the early 1980s. The headquarters is located in a mid-Atlantic city I call "Riverside." They report around twenty NEA chapters throughout the United States, and they boast a roll of over 500 dues-paying members. Their national newspaper—billed as a "manifesto of white rights"—supposedly circulates over 1,000 copies of each issue and is printed approximately four to six times a year. Their headquarters is composed of twenty-four regular, but part-time, volunteers. NEA members proudly identify as white and explicitly advocate a racial definition (or redefinition) of the nation-state; they desire official racial segregation in terms of social institutions and wish for limited interracial interactions. As one NEA member told me, "We believe that for a nation to be a nation, and not just an incoherent group of people, it must consist of people that share the same culture, language, history and aspirations . . . it must be people of the same race." Members do not believe that successful racial integration is intelligent or even possible. They argue that predisposed genetic and cultural differences among racial groups only serve as a catalyst for racial antagonism. Hence, other ideologies, policies, or arguments to the contrary (from multiculturalism to assimilation) are propaganda or misguided worldviews that only obfuscate the essential differences among racial groups. Separation, they believe, will be better for all races.

The headquarters for WRJ is located just a couple hours' drive from Riverside in another metropolitan area I call "Fairview." Founded in the 1970s, WRJ has developed into a nationwide organization of around thirty chapters with an approximate membership of 800. All twenty-one members of the headquarters chapter consider themselves white. The individual chapters are organized around teaching whites how they can end "racial oppression." On both the national and local levels, WRJ generates publications, gives workshops, and promotes media events about what white people can do to eliminate racism both from their daily lives and from the social structures that surround them (for example: education, religion, family, and work). WRJ supports a variety of political and social agendas: from theoretical indictments of the white supremacist underpinnings of capitalism, to the more active disruption of white nationalist events, to the more mainstream activities such as counseling and "diversity training." By making their organization all white, they believe they are making a "safe space" for whites to engage in the identification and isolation of racism in their own lives. Such an environment fosters, as many members told me, active consultation, emotional release regarding their frustrations and setbacks in trying to live an "antiracist life," and strategy building on how to live as "allies" of people of color.

Overview of the Book

I move carefully through the following chapters to consider the differential nuance of both NEA and WRJ while paying attention to important similarities. In both groups, the pursuit of an ideal whiteness is paramount, and while different strategies are used, these strategies often result from or draw on similar understandings of race. These actors' white racial identities are bound to the pursuit of the white ideal and the ideal itself; means and ends blur in their everyday lives.

In the next two chapters I afford the reader a detailed account of NEA and WRJ. These chapters stand together as my ethnographic "thick description." I attempt to paint a detailed picture of the everyday activities and patterned social dynamics in both settings—all with the aim that the reader should have a sense of being there and of how different these two groups are. I wish the reader to gain an appreciation for how NEA rationalizes and legitimates its use of "color-blind" logic (legitimating racial difference and inequality through appeals to nonracial dynamics such as the nature, biology, God, market dynamics, belief systems, work ethic, and the like), while WRJ uses a different "color-conscious" framework (racial distinctions and inequality are interpreted as the result of the racist intentions, ignorance, fear, and hate). This distinction is important because, as with any dialectic, there exists a unifying thread.

This accord is explored in Chapters 4 through 8. I detail how both groups share in five key understandings of white racial identity. I investigate these similarities as the five dimensions of "hegemonic whiteness"—the idealized form of whiteness created and conditioned when whites make hard-and-fast distinctions between themselves and (1) people of color and (2) other whites thought inferior or lacking. My aim is to demonstrate how the shared meanings of white racial identity structure and guide members' actions just as much, if not more, than their overt political leanings.

I conclude in Chapter 9 by bringing the findings from previous chapters to bear on what may be the most important question relevant to whiteness: How do we conceptualize an understanding of white identity that accounts for the long-term staying power of white privilege and supremacy amid the varied and even oppositional forms of whiteness active today? The answer includes a theory centered on the relationship between meaning and identity. The similarities between the groups are not the product of simply bad or "racist" political views or by practicing antiracism "incorrectly."[44] Such similarities cannot simply be fixed through reeducating people or somehow magically "changing culture." I show that the dominant racial meanings from which both these groups draw—and on which their racial identity is based—are appealing, seductive, and normalized because those cultural forms are themselves structural and connected to material conditions of inequality.