

THESIS

CRISIS IN WHITENESS:

WHITE WORKINGMEN'S NARRATIVES AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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ABSTRACT

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This project examines the ways in which white working class men make sense of their own socioeconomic positioning in the contemporary U.S. economy. This is accomplished through the exploring of white workingmen's narratives of the American Dream, and how these narratives are informed by the race, class and gendered identities of the white working class men expressing them. Specifically, this project is a case study of five self-identified white working class men living in Upstate New York's Chemung, Onondaga, Tioga, and Tompkins Counties. Through this project's findings the researcher hopes to chart a new course for the field of Whiteness Studies into the twenty-first century.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This project is an exploratory qualitative study of interviews taken from self-identified white working class men living in Upstate New York. Specifically, it is interested in how these men's narratives on the current state of the American Dream connect to their class, racial and gender identities. Narratives from five white working class men are presented in this study. These men, whose real identities shall remain hidden, are identified throughout this project as Don, Frank, Jeff, Luke and Matt. Within these men's narratives this project discovered an internal crisis with the American Dream. Through this process this project charts a new course for Whiteness Studies into the twenty-first century.

This venture will advance the claim that the crux of American white working class men's crisis lies within the paradox of: 1) adhering to a narrative of the American Dream that provides white men with racial and gender inclusion and entitlement, while 2) simultaneously experiencing alienation from the American Dream due to class oppression. In other words, the narratives of the American Dream, embraced by white workingmen, are not reflected in lived experience, and this contradiction between ideology and reality results in a state of crisis. Furthermore, this crisis is currently being reconciled by poor white men by falling back on the dominant narratives' raced and gendered based message that white men are more entitled to the American Dream than people of color and/or women. The overarching result of this process is that narratives of racial and gender inequality are reproduced by these white working class men, which in turn justifies and rationalizes the continuation of racist policies, movements and ideologies at the state level.

The gap between a racialized and gendered view of the American Dream and the contradicting lived experience of these white working class men centers ultimately on their adherence to white supremacist ideology. They are told that as white men they are special—that they are entitled to the American Dream. However, as my grandfather tells me:

It doesn't make sense anymore Joseph, I don't know what happened but it's over. Things have changed, and they've changed for the worst. It used to be a guy like you or me could live a great life here in this country, but no more. Nope, the American Dream it's over.

My grandfather's words reflect more than just the assertion that the American Dream no longer exists in the United States. His idea that things have "changed for the worst" and guys like him and me no longer being able to "live a great life" in the United States is a raced and gendered coded message, which indicates a break from the historically dominant racial and gender social hierarchy of the United States. His words reveal a story of powerlessness, which is often followed by scapegoating communities of color, and it is almost always gendered through masculinity. It is a white workingman's story of victimization and powerlessness that challenges white supremacy's dominant narrative and ideology—white men are not supposed to feel powerlessness and alienation from the American Dream. This contradiction is found within Don, Frank, Jeff, Luke and Matt's narratives presented in this project. It captures the crisis within these white working class men, and demonstrates how white supremacy is both reproduced and questioned by these men. This project only hopes to present this crisis of whiteness within these white working class men's narratives, and demonstrate how they maintain and challenge white supremacy. Through this work opportunities and strategies for rearticulating these men's narratives can begin to be imagined, and furthered through future

research projects. For the time being, this project only seeks to unpack the complexities of American white workingmen and their crises through listening to their narratives on the American Dream.

In unpacking the crisis of these white working class men this project is broken up into four primary chapters: (1) Literature Review; (2) Methods Chapter; (3) Findings Chapter; and (4) Discussion Chapter. Following this introductory chapter, this project shall move to reviewing the relevant literature. This second chapter chronologically presents scholarly discourse on whiteness in the United States from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. This scholarly mapping of whiteness is divided into three main schools of thought: (1) early twentieth century African-American scholarship; (2) Whiteness Studies in the 1980s-1990s; and (3) whiteness scholarship in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. These three sections ends with the claim that Whiteness Studies in the 1980s-1990s, while providing strong historical analysis of the social construction and evolution of whiteness in the United States, ultimately falls short in its promotion of solutions for whiteness—its violence and participation in racism. Acknowledging these limitations this chapter moves to discussions of more contemporary whiteness scholarship that critique the field of Whiteness Studies. The chapter ends by positioning this project as hoping to chart a new course of for Whiteness Studies into the twenty-first century.

Chapter Three focuses on: (1) presenting scholarship that has guided the methodological approach of this project; (2) historically examining the regional political-economy of Upstate NY; and (3) demonstrating the methodological framework and strategy implemented in this project's work with participants. This project is a qualitative ethnography,

based in unstructured interviews and guided by a number of important ethnographers.

Chapter Four will present participant narratives. The fourth chapter will be broken up into four major sub-sections. The first will focus on participant's definitions and framings of the American Dream. The second, third and fourth sections shall draw from bloc narratives of participant interviews, presented after the first section of the chapter. The second section will examine the manifestations of class antagonism within participant narratives. The third examines racial antagonisms within participant narratives, and the fourth section incorporates a gender analysis of participant narratives. The chapter will conclude by summarizing the narratives into a collective story that expresses these white working class male's perceptions of a raced, classed and gendered American Dream that represents the U.S. white workingman's story that I described earlier in this chapter.

This white workingman's story of the American Dream will then be complicated and further unpacked in Chapter Five. Chapter Five complicates and expands Whiteness Studies through analysis of the narratives presented in Chapter Four, and presents these white working class men as being caught within a Cycle of White Crisis. Thus, the primary function of Chapter Five is to describe the crisis that these white working class men are experiencing and frame in a new theoretical model—the Cycle of White Crisis. This enables for a clear understanding of how and why these white working class men simultaneously reproduce and challenge white supremacy through their narratives and within their crisis. It concludes with a brief discussion of the state of the U.S. white working class man and how this project offers an opportunity—not a solution—to rearticulating these men's narratives and worldviews to bring them into a space in which they can actively combat and challenge white supremacy. Taken together, the

chapters aim to provide opportunities to renegotiate and rearticulate the narratives of these white working class men that enables them to both come to grips with their participation in racially and sexually oppressive violence, as well as become part of the solution to combating white supremacy throughout the United States.

However, this project ends with no concrete solution. Only the image of the American white workingman caught at a fork in the road. At the fork there are a lot of questions this man has. To the right the path is clear. He has traveled it before. It is the path paved with white supremacist ideology. Its toll is participation in racially and sexually oppressive language, actions and behavior, which is exchanged for safe travels and a secure socioeconomic positioning. The problem is, when he takes this path he simply ends up back at the fork. He recognizes this and it frustrates him. He continues down the same path over and over again, reproducing and participating in racialized and gendered violence, yet he never ends up where he wants to get to—the American Dream. Recognizing this, he begins to eye the left path. He has never ventured far upon it, because it is rough and difficult to travel on. On this path the toll is recognizing his participation in violence and the pain he has caused. The American white workingman will have to come to grips with the ugly truth that he has historically and contemporarily helped to fuel and maintain white supremacy in the United States. However, as he eyes this left path, he continues to race on to the right path, further participating in white supremacy and getting nowhere.

This best describes the narratives presented within this project. It also describes myself and my past participation in racial and sexual violence. Important to note is that these white working men are only “eyeing” the alternative path, and that this path does not lead to a

transcendence of an absolving of one's participation in violence. In fact, to travel on this alternative path means to openly recognize one's participation in white supremacy and carry that throughout the journey. In presenting the crisis that these white working class men express within their narratives this project offers no solutions. It only offers the opportunity to move beyond the fork in the road and towards a direction in which American white workingmen can become part of the solution rather than part of the problem to racism within the United States. These opportunities can only be imagined and capitalized upon by first unpacking the complex ways in which American white working class men perceived themselves in a raced, classed and gendered world, and how these self-perceptions effect the ways in which they view others in society. From understanding this, the crisis of these men becomes clearer, as well as the ways in which it can be dealt with. This is the pursuit of this project.

Chapter Two: History of Whiteness Studies

Back beyond the world and swept by these wild white faces of the awful dead, why will this Soul of the White Folk, this modern Prometheus, hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a labor of the past? I hear his mighty cry reverberating through the world, "I am white!" (Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices Beyond the Veil*, 1920)

Introduction and Overview:

This chapter shall examine the scholarship on whiteness and white crisis chronologically from twentieth century African-American writings on whiteness to work produced in the early twenty-first century. As the literature on the subject is massive, this chapter will highlight contributions made by scholars that embody different periods and schools of thought on whiteness. In addition, the concepts of white supremacist ideology and its informing of the U.S. white working class shall be given specific attention, as this project centers on discussions with self-identified white working class men.

Structurally this chapter shall begin with W.E.B. Du Bois and his description of the crisis that affects whites in the United States along with his assertion of the psychological wage of whiteness. Following Du Bois, an acknowledgement of the emergence of the field of Whiteness Studies will guide the chapter in discussing the work of David Roediger, as well as two other schools of thought on whiteness. Within this section the psychological wage will be further unpacked and complicated within the Whiteness Studies' schools, as well as the discussion of white crisis. Finally, the chronological tale of whiteness scholarship will be completed with a synopsis of Whiteness Studies in the 1980s through the 2000s that will provide an overall critique and assessment of the field.

This assessment of Whiteness Studies will be followed with a suggestion of where the field should turn. Specifically, this chapter argues for a change in the methodological and theoretical approach for understanding whiteness as it exists within the twenty-first century. Models of scholarship that have inspired the approach of this project will be provided as well.

W.E.B. Du Bois on Whiteness:

Emblematic of African-American scholarly discussion of whiteness in the United States is the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois' *Darkwater* and essay *The Souls of White Folks* can be found within Whiteness Studies' syllabi throughout higher education institutions. Important to note about Du Bois' scholarship on whiteness is his contributions to understand the crisis of whites and his contribution of the psychological wage of whiteness. The crisis of whiteness is informed ultimately by colonialism and the production of U.S. racism.

In an essay entitled *The Souls of White Folks* Du Bois first asks the question "But what on earth is whiteness, that one should so desire it (Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices Beyond the Veil*, 1920)?" He answers by indicating that whites, as well as blacks, are caught within the bindings of colonialism and racism in the United States. These bindings are rooted within the production and proliferation of white supremacist ideology, which all whites not only benefit from but are introduced to on a day to day basis.¹ Whites learn to desire the racial identity of whiteness, because of how the ideology of white supremacy indoctrinates them with a racially "inverted epistemology."² Du Bois continues, describing whites as "both mentally and morally...suffering from [an] attempt to transmute a physical accident into a moral deed—to draw unreal

¹The idea of white supremacy as a bind that controls/manipulates whites is taken from Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*

²This racially inverted epistemology is also taken from Mills *The Racial Contract*. Additionally, the reading of Du Bois' questions as whiteness being desired via learning or an indoctrination of white supremacist ideology can be attributed to the collective work of Lisa Tessman and Bat-Ami Bar On—*The Other Colors of Whiteness*.

distinctions among human souls (Weinberg, 1970, p. 303).” The conversion of a “physical accident into a moral deed” can be read as a fundamental tenant of white supremacist ideology. White supremacy dictates an ideology that informs the world it encompasses that whiteness is superior, and as such should dominate the world. This diagnosis of whiteness reflects an internal conflict amongst whites: whites, in professing white supremacy, have bound themselves to an ideology that requires constant reproduction of a lie at the expense of both non-whites and whites themselves.

Du Bois specifically discusses an aspect of white supremacy that affects U.S. working class whites. This white working class manifestation of white supremacy is the psychological wage. The psychological wage is first described by Du Bois, when he writes:

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. (Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, 1935, p. 700).

Du Bois argues that the psychological wage provided to poor whites during the Reconstruction process provided a plethora of structural privileges, including: (1) being “admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools; (2) inclusion within law enforcement, the courts, and judicial systems; (3) through voting practices; (4) education system (Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, 1935, p. 701). All of this structural privileging was provided to working class whites by the elite, and was reinforced through the psychological wage of simply being white. Du Bois is the first scholar to

join the structural privileging of white supremacy with its ideology and epistemology in an analysis of U.S. working class whites.

This psychological wage, given to white laborers and provided by the white elite, strategically serves to divide previously established solidarity between the poor indentured whites and African slaves during the late seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. The concept of the psychological wage is instrumental to scholars examining the intersection of race and class within poor whites in the United States. Without an understanding of the psychological wage and its historic effects on U.S. race relations one cannot hope to understand how the contemporary U.S. white working class perceives itself and the racial *Other*. Du Bois' initial framing of the psychological wage enables this project to attempt to unpack it in the narratives of white working class men adhering to its racialized creed in the twenty-first century. The psychological wage remains present in the psyche of the U.S. white working class, and specifically emerges within the narratives presented in Chapter Four of this project.

Du Bois embodies the scholarship of twentieth century African-Americans discussing whiteness in the United States. While other African-American scholars have contributed much to contemporary understandings of whiteness (both historically in the United States and in the present), Du Bois provides the most significant analysis of whiteness for this project—the psychological wage.³ Moreover, his discussion of white identity and its crisis of trying to force white supremacist identity into reality by constantly proclaiming “I am white” provides the foundational analysis of white crisis for whiteness scholarship into the twenty-first century.

³ For further reading on African-American scholars focusing on whiteness during the twentieth century read: George S. Schuyler *Our White Folks* (1927), Zora Neale Hurston's *Blacks, Whites and Work* (1935), Amiri Baraka's *White Wages* (1978), Langston Hughes *White Man* (1936), Toni Morrison's *From Playing in the Dark* (1992), James Baldwin *On Being "White"...and Other Lies* (1984), *White Man's Guilt* (1965), and *Going to Meet the Man* (1965).

Referencing back to Du Bois' words heading this chapter, the bindings and tethering holding the souls of white folks bound is clarified for scholars of whiteness in the present through Du Bois. Without Du Bois and other African-American scholars in the twentieth century the work that this project engages with in the present could not have been imagined.

Emerging Studies on Whiteness:

For instance, the works of Winthrop Jordan and Theodore Allen helped to demonstrate how historically whiteness came to be conceived of as superior both popularly amongst whites and structurally through the development of a Racial State. Winthrop Jordan's, *White over Black* (1968), details how white attitudes towards people of African descent directly influenced their racist attitudes towards other communities of color (Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, 1968) (Jordan, *The White Man's Burden*, 1974) and in essence represents the roots of U.S. racism. Jordan provides a psycho-historical analysis of English (and later Anglo-American) perceptions of West Africans from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. His most notable contribution lies in his insight on how Anglo-Americans and the English came to regard and identify themselves through identifying the meaning of "blackness" in the African body (Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, 1968). By identifying whiteness as constructed through a racial mirror, Jordan provided future scholarship on whiteness a location/vantage point from which to deconstruct the roots of whiteness.

Moreover, his focus on "American,"—white—attitudes towards Africans is noted as a means to understanding broader "American [white] responses to other racial minorities (Jordan, *The White Man's Burden*, 1974, p. viii)" and racism roots in the United States in

general. Put another way, Jordan begins to establish a field of scholarship that focuses on the psychological underpinnings of white racism in the United States, which informs other whiteness scholars during the late 1960s and into the 1990s. His analysis of the cultural roots of white perceptions of non-white bodies is picked up by Whiteness Studies scholars interested in understanding the historic ideological underpinnings of the U.S. white working poor—most notably David Roediger.

Building on Jordan's work, Theodore Allen's two volume series —*The Invention of the White Race* (1994)—situates class within the construction of white supremacy, noting that the social construction of race, and specifically whiteness, developed historically through manipulation of the dominant class of the white elite to ensure the oppression of the white working class and racially marginalized populations (Allen, 1994). Allen traces back the origins of whiteness and identifies the “invention of the white race” as a political act that established “an all-class association of European-Americans held together by ‘racial’ privileges” to perpetuate the dominance of elite Europeans (Allen, 1994, p. 26). Framing the construction of whiteness as a political act tied to class conflict demonstrates the overall pursuits of white studies during the late twentieth century. Specifically, this line of thinking would help to inform Marxist perspectives on working class whiteness, as well as historical analysis of the development of whiteness in the United States. Both Jordan and Allen are emblematic of an emerging whiteness studies that builds off the scholarship of Du Bois. Their work can be seen as the pre-Whiteness Studies cannon, and the foundation from which the field built off of during the late twentieth century.

Whiteness Studies:

By the 1980s and 1990s analyses of whiteness were being complicated by interdisciplinary and intersectional works that situated whiteness in relation to other socially constructed identities such as class, sexuality and gender. This body of literature coincided with the formation of the field of Whiteness Studies. The field focused on answering the question of how the social construction of whiteness has shaped U.S. history (Fishkin, 1995). A surge of literature on whiteness typified the 1980s and 1990s with intellectuals seeking to define and unpack the meaning and ideological underpinnings of whiteness both historically and contemporarily. For the purposes of this project I intend on covering this emergence of whiteness within academia as it relates to the furtherance of understanding the field of Whiteness Studies as a whole, the psychological wage, and the white crisis created by white supremacy. Whiteness Studies can be divided into three main schools of thought: class-solidarity, race-traitor, and white trash studies. Each school has its own specific works that embody them, yet collectively these schools make up the field of Whiteness Studies and its pursuit of producing anti-racist white bodies.

Roediger and Class-Solidarity:

Roediger embodies not only the class-solidarity school within Whiteness Studies, but the field as a whole. In many ways his *Wages of Whiteness* serves as a manifesto to Whiteness Studies scholars. In his now classic *The Wages of Whiteness* Roediger sets the stage in the early 1990s for how to discuss the racial and class intersections within working class whites. Framing his historical work from the “pre-history” of U.S. working class whiteness till the mid-1800s, Roediger situates the white working poor in a social position between the elite whites and

marginalized racial groups (African slaves and natives). This middle positioning is important to note for the purposes of this project, because it reemerges in the white working class male narratives presented in Chapter Four. In many ways the middle position of the U.S. white working class is the crux of its internal white crisis. Thus, for Roediger whiteness can be seen as “the product of specific classes’ attempts to come to terms with their class—never simply economic—problems by projecting their longings on to a despised race (Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 1991, p. 14).” In other words, the U.S. white working class participates in white supremacy in order to secure its own socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, Roediger complicates the racial identity of U.S. white workers during the United States’ early formation by the inclusion of a fear within working class whites that if they did not distance themselves from African slaves they could be pulled downward towards a state of further marginalization. This fear was exacerbated by the fact that, as the U.S. white working class was beginning to take shape in the early 1800s, poor whites in the United States were only a few generations removed from indentured servitude; the memories of a much more direct and restricting form of economic oppression lay heavy on the minds of working class whites during the early nineteenth century. Thus, Roediger’s work did much to complicate and explain the history behind the roots of white working class America’s racial antagonism towards African slaves during the early to mid-1800s.

Also important to note from *The Wages of Whiteness* is its building off of Du Bois’ psychological wage. Roediger’s Marxist analysis of the U.S. white working class centers on unpacking the historical construction and use of the psychological, or white wage, in securing

U.S. white workers' socioeconomic standing. The white wage became a cultural tool of the U.S. white working class that maintained black slaves and free blacks below the poor white laborer, while advancing the U.S. white laborers' political and economic agency against the elite (Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 1991, pp. 43-65).⁴ This analysis of the white wage and its operation within the middle position of the U.S. white working class between the elite and the racially oppressed serves as a foundational contribution to Whiteness Studies, and helped to inspire "solutions" to white working class racism in the United States from within the school of class-solidarity.

After completing *The Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger moved further in his analysis of whiteness in the United States, by shifting his focus from historically deconstructing whiteness to imagining solutions for moving whites in the U.S. past it. In *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* Roediger has compiled a series of essays on the politics and narratives surrounding race and working class studies, geared towards deconstructing the ways in which whiteness was provided a "psychological wage," to use Du Bois's terminology, or "white wage" as Roediger defines it, by the elite, as well as analyzing the agency amongst working class whites that was utilized to further reinforce the structural racism that created within the United States (Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices Beyond the Veil*, 1920) (Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race*

⁴ T.H. Breen contributes to the understanding of the psychological wages' historical evolution and roots within the United States in his article *Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia*. He notes that the indentured servants, who signed contracts in England to come and work in Virginia for the gentry class, often experienced realities in Virginia that "never matched the dreams" of free land and prosperity that were promised to them. This gap between promised dreams and reality led to instances of agitation and alliance with the "giddy multitude," or collective exploited classes of Virginia, that led to riots and rebellions in the seventeenth century. This agitated giddy multitude generated a need for the elite to create a wedge between poor indentured whites and poor and enslaved Africans. This wedge became the psychological wage, which provided structural and material benefits to the poor whites to buy their subordination and end their affiliation with the giddy multitude (Breen, 1973, pp. 5-8).

and the Making of the American Working Class, 1991).⁵ Following this historical analysis of whiteness Roediger offers his solution to white working class racism and white supremacy as a whole in the United States. This solution, according Roediger, is the movement to abolish or transcend whiteness.

Reminding his audience that “the idea of race is given meaning through the agency of human beings in concrete historical and social contexts, and is not a biological or natural category” and that this concept that race is a manufactured social construction bent on consolidating power for the most privileged, Roediger advances the idea that, regarding whiteness, scholars should be engaged in the process of moving towards a transcendence of whiteness (Roediger D. , *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, 1994). While recognizing white supremacy as a powerful racial ideology, he contends that whiteness must be “attacked” and regarded “as a destructive ideology” rather than simply engaging in abstract discourse surrounding how race generally is a social construction (Roediger D. , *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, 1994). Thus, for Roediger, attacking whiteness serves as the central target for moving past white supremacy and its all-encompassing oppression of people of color and impoverished whites.

⁵ Pem Buck too contributes to the discussion of the psychological wage. Buck builds off of Breen and Roediger by noting that the material benefits provided during the seventeenth century (Breen) begin to fade and disappear during the 1830s-1850s. Poor whites once again begin to question whether “they were much freer than slaves (Buck, 2001, p. 35).” In addressing this reemergence of poor white questioning of their class position the elite decided that they were unwilling to provide additional capital to the white working poor. Instead, they recognized the popular belief in white superiority—provided to whites in the seventeenth century—and sought to solidify it through a psychological wage in working class white minds. This, according to Buck, is accomplished through political campaigns, speeches, and the media (newspapers, plays, etc.), norming whiteness socially as a “benefit, despite its lack of material advantage (Buck, 2001, p. 35).” Buck’s assertion is that through this process whiteness became seen almost “like being employee of the month” for these poor whites in the nineteenth century (Ibid).

This strategy, since first being unveiled in 1994, has been dubbed the “new abolition” movement amongst many anti-racist white circles. Its premise that whiteness can be transcended via looking back through history and educating whites on the ways in which the racial and class positioning of working class peoples in the United States have been orchestrated and manipulated by the elite, while interesting and groundbreaking in many accounts, remains a problematic solution in the minds of many whiteness studies scholars. I will discuss some of the problems that I personally take issue with regarding this “new abolition” movement at the end of this chapter, but it must be said that David Roediger and his work examining the historical evolution of working class whiteness served as a basis from which scholars during the 1990s and early 2000s built upon.

Ignatiev and Race Traitors:

Noel Ignatiev historically unpacks the Irish immigrants’ gradual ascension from a racialized ethnic group to members and beneficiaries of the white race in his book *How the Irish Became White*.⁶ This process, while requiring the original whites—WASPs—to allow the Irish to join the ranks of whiteness, also mandated a buy-in to whiteness and white supremacist ideology by Irish immigrants. This buy-in cost the Irish their ethnicity in exchange for the benefits of white supremacy’s racial privileging.⁷ This exchange was agreed upon—in part—

⁶ The Irish were not initially perceived as white by nativists through the late-nineteenth and into the mid-twentieth century. Instead they were viewed as a racialized European ethnic group, along with other European immigrants (Italian, Jewish, Polish, and Eastern and Southern Europeans generally). See the following works for a more detailed understanding of how European ethnic groups were racialized during the 1880s-1950s: Richard Brookhiser’s *The Way of the WASP and Others, and the WASP World They Aspired To*, Calvin Trillin’s *Doing the White male Kvetch*, Reginald Horsman’s *Race and Manifest Destiny*, Martha R. Mahoney’s *The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Joe R. Feagin’s *Old Poison in New Bottles*, David Roediger’s *The First Word of Whiteness*, Karen Brodtkin Sacks *How Did the Jews Become White Folks?*, James R. Barrett and D. Roediger’s *How White People Became White*.

⁷ Charles Gallagher describes this loss of ethnic identity as the “white ethnic vacuum” in his *White Formation: Into the Twenty-First Century*.

because of the psychological wage and ideology of white supremacy, which collectively convinced the Irish, along with other racial European groups in the United States, that to be included into whiteness was more valuable than their ethnic identity; being white meant being perceived by both society and the self as superior.⁸

This buy-in to whiteness informs Ignatiev's understanding of how white racism can be challenged and dismantled within his race-traitor work. A race traitor, according to Ignatiev, "is someone who is nominally classified as white, but who defies the rules of whiteness so flagrantly as to jeopardize his or her ability to draw upon the privileges of the white skin (Ignatiev, 1997, p. 607)." For the race traitor school a "new abolition" movement needs to occur in which whiteness is transcended (Ignatiev, 1997, p. 609).⁹ Race traitors believe "that so long as the white race exists, all movements against what is called 'racism' will fail. Therefore, [the school's aim] is to abolish the white race (Ignatiev, 1997, p. 608)." In rejecting one's whiteness the race-traitor school believes that the structures of white supremacy can be dismantled internally by whites.

White Trash Studies:

Some of the best scholars on working class whiteness in the United States can be found in the anthology *White Trash* (1997), edited by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz. The anthology compiles a series of articles on "white trash" studies that: (1) recognize "the ways whiteness serves as an invisible norm, the unraced center of a racialized world; (2) analyzes the racially classed identity of white trash as one that complicates whiteness through its more socially

⁸ For more details on the rationale of this buy-in for European ethnic groups read Matthew F. Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

⁹ For further reading on this transcendence of whiteness via race-betraying see Mab Segrest's *The Souls of White Folk* (on a personal note, Segrest's discussion on being a race-traitor is less problematic in that it is complicated via an intersectional understanding of being a race-traitor as a white queer woman).

visible nature (Wray & Newitz, 1997). White trash identity calls attention to whiteness in a more visible way because the existence of poor whites inherently challenges the ideology of white supremacy. Far from representing virtue, superiority, cleanliness, and other positive traits upon which white supremacy rests structurally, those deemed as white trash get represented popularly as immoral, dirty, uncivilized, ignorant and, yet, still they are white.

It is within this ideological contradiction that white trash studies grounds its research.¹⁰ Bérubé demonstrates how the racial identity of poor whites is often challenged by middle and upper-class whites, and how poor whites are constantly forced to try and prove their “full whiteness” by behaving “respectably” (Berube, 1997). Newitz in—*White Savagery and Humiliation, or a New Racial Consciousness in the Media*—delves into the ways that the white trash forces elite whites to confront the inherent instability and ideological flaws of white supremacy. The presence of the white trash creates a rupture in white supremacist ideology, where elite whites must de-whiten and dehumanize the U.S. white working poor. Within this struggle to maintain white superiority Newitz defines whiteness “as a social construction characterized most forcefully by an awareness of its own internal contradictions (Newitz, 1997, p. 133).” “These contradictions,” she continues, “are manifested in white-on-white class conflicts, fears about the unattainability of total ‘white power,’ and a crippling sense of guilt caused by an (and often repressed) acknowledgement of white racism (Newitz, 1997, p. 134).”

Newitz provides deep insight on the ways in which the intersections between class and race for America’s white working class destabilizes and complicates notions of whiteness.

¹⁰ For more details regarding this ideological contradiction, as discussed by white trash scholarship, see the works of John Hartigan, Jr. *Name Calling*, Roxanne A. Dunbar *Bloody Footprints*, Laura Kipnis *White Trash Girl* and Mike Hill *Can Whiteness Speak*.

Perhaps most importantly for this project, she points to an internal crisis within whiteness that leaves working class whites feeling insecure and alienated from the status of “full whiteness.” Their class position forces them to continuously prove their whiteness through the performance of a “civilized” white ideal. In order to communicate this white insecurity Newitz borrows from Henry Giroux’s concept of “white nihilism,” as “a sense of failure which is separate from, but dialectically related to, white efforts to reign supreme over non-whites and themselves (Newitz, 1997, p. 145).” In essence, the crisis of whiteness that Newitz describes rests on the inability to make the ideology of white supremacy a reality. This failure lies in the fact that “white supremacy is a kind of unattainable ideal, against which all individual whites can measure themselves and find themselves wanting (Newitz, 1997, p. 145).”

Taken as a whole, white trash studies is deeply connected to work in this project. Newitz’s work demonstrating the conflict that the U.S. white working class experiences in simultaneously perceiving itself as white, and yet, not white enough is clearly operating within the narratives of white working class men presented in Chapter Four. In one sense they see themselves through white supremacy and its psychological wage, which is provided by the elite, as whites. This informs their racialized narratives entitling them to the American Dreams. However, at the same time their class identity leaves them with a very real sense that they are poor. This conflict between the promises of white supremacy (namely via the psychological wage) and their class reality as wage slaves produces narratives that express the white nihilism of Grioux. As well as the overall assessments on the U.S. white working poor provided by Newitz.

In concluding this section both the contributions and the limitations of Whiteness Studies must be briefly addressed, for, while this project attempts to build off the field, there are clear ways in which it deviates from Whiteness Studies that need to be explained. Much of this later part will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. Thus, let this section conclude by acknowledging the contributions of Whiteness Studies to this project.

Most of Whiteness Studies' contributions to this current work can be found in the class-solidarity and white trash schools. Roediger's complication of the psychological wage as a means of understanding the historic conflict of the U.S. white working class, as well as his centering of it as a point of challenging poor whites to move past white racism must be recognized as inspiring much of the discussion found in Chapter Five of this project. His viewing of the psychological wage as a potential crux to a deconstruction project for white working class racism is a groundbreaking contribution within discussions of the roots of white working class racial violence. In addition, the perceived positioning of U.S. white workers has guided this project in its analysis of how participant narratives presented in this work perceive themselves as whites in relation to communities of color and the political and economic elite. Additionally, Newitz's framing of the internal conflict of whiteness for the U.S. white working class is clearly replicated and reinforced in the findings of this project. The clear difference being that the ideological conflict within white supremacy, as expressed by Newitz, is an internal one within whiteness. In other words, Newitz describes a white-on-white conflict between the white elite and the white poor.

Thus, this project owes much to the scholarship coming out of the late 1980s and early 1990s, specifically in regards to its furtherance of academic discourse on the psychological

wage and conflicting positionality of U.S. working class whites. However, this project deviates from Whiteness Studies methodologically and within its imaginings of solutions for combating white racism amongst white working class men. Much of this shall be detailed in the following section.

However, it must also be recognized that this project and Whiteness Studies as a field is indebted to the work of Du Bois and other African-American scholars of the early to mid-twentieth century. Without Du Bois' accurate depictions of the U.S. white working class and his assertion of the psychological wage scholars like Roediger, Ignatiev, Newitz and myself would have nothing to build on. This is often lost within the field of Whiteness Studies, which frequently positions itself as the original source of scholarly analysis of whiteness—forgetting the fact that Du Bois, Emerson, Baldwin, Morrison, Hughes and Hurtson wrote before and often about whiteness and its racism. Furthermore, they analyzed whiteness out of necessity and as victims and/or witnesses to its violent crises. Ignoring the past scholarship of Du Bois represents a shortcoming of Whiteness Studies, yet it is not its only flaw.

Whiteness Studies: Critiques and Suggestions

Upon reflection of the work that Whiteness Studies produced throughout the 1980s and 1990s I am left with more questions than answers. The vast majority of these questions center on the proposed “solutions” of the field, which remain in use in the twenty-first century. The “new abolition movement” expressed by the race-traitor school, the strategy of class motivated transcendence of whiteness as proposed by class-solidarity scholars, and the tunnel vision that white trash studies employs in its focus on poor whites' disenfranchisement begs the question

of what Whiteness Studies is attempting to accomplish. Or rather, what does Whiteness Studies produce through its work?

The pursuit of a transcendence of whiteness or a breaking away from it builds off of and reproduces white supremacy. The idea that a white person is capable of betraying his/her whiteness is extremely problematic in its real world applicability.¹¹ In becoming loyal to humanity race traitors ignore the question of what they, as “former” whites, become. Are they human? This leads whites down the path of colorblind racism as discussed by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.¹² If not human, do white race traitors become something else? As Whiteness Studies operates in a black-white dichotomy, this usually lends to the appropriation of black identity.¹³ This transcendence of whiteness, which is found throughout Whiteness Studies, is the root of the field’s failures. This critique is validated by Robyn Weigman, who ultimately problematizes Whiteness Studies’ overarching objectives.

Its objective—to produce anti-racist white subjects—is situated in what Weigman calls “the hegemony of liberal whiteness (Weigman, 1999, p. 121). Liberal whiteness is defined as:

A color-blind moral sameness whose reinvestment in ‘America’ rehabilitates the national narrative of democratic progress in the aftermath of social dissent and crisis (Weigman, 1999, p. 121).

Weigman accurately implicates each school of Whiteness Studies in this hegemonic white liberalism. The class-solidarity school becomes a rearticulation of class struggle as an anti-racist project, which provides “a historical account of white racial formation” in order to “imagine

¹¹ This is referencing specifically Ignatiev and the race-traitor school.

¹² Bonilla-Silva’s work shall be unpacked in furthering the critique of Whiteness Studies.

¹³ Ignatiev notes that, while whiteness means “to seek a comfortable place within the system of race privilege,” “blackness means total, implacable, and relentless opposition to that system (Ignatiev, 1997, p. 609).” Thus, whites in separating themselves from white supremacy become connected or a part of blackness through their rejecting and attacking of white supremacy.

contemporary white people as a political (as opposed to biological or cultural) identity beyond the conflation of power and privilege with white skin (Weigman, 1999, p. 123). The race-traitor school provides an out for whites to deal with their racial identity and its privileges by enabling for a transcendence of whiteness via loyalty to humanity or defection to blackness.¹⁴ In addition, race-traitors position themselves as conscious or liberal whites, who become the principal actors in dismantling white supremacy. In essence, they become white saviors within the battle against structural racism. The white trash school, while not as focused on by Weigman, is implicated in liberal whiteness in its shift of focus solely to the plight of poor whites and their “victimization” from the elite. This entire critique can be summed up by Weigman, who states:

The field [Whiteness Studies] generates a range of contradictory and sometimes startling effects. The most critically important include: (1) the use of class as the transfer point between looking white and believing you are white; (2) a focus on economically disempowered whites, both working class and poor, as minoritized white subjects; and (3) the production of a particularized and minoritized white subject as a vehicle for contemporary critical acts of transference and transcendence... (Weigman, 1999, pp. 136-137).

In addition to unwittingly reproducing white liberal racist projects, Whiteness Studies often ignores the important scholarly discourse on whiteness that is occurring amongst scholars of color. Like W.E.B. Du Bois, scholars such as Charles Mills, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, bell hooks and Andrea Smith are unpacking whiteness and its violence in their works out of the necessity of survival. By not engaging with scholars of color that are unpacking and discussing whiteness,

¹⁴ In betraying whiteness, Ignatiev states that whites lose their racial privilege, and thus, their claim to whiteness. In this “solution”, then, what do whites become? Human? This allows for a colorblind rhetoric to be produced in which whites do not acknowledge their whiteness and instead become simply loyal subjects to humanity—a feat that is only possible through whiteness. The other option, as Ignatiev operates in a white-black dichotomy, is the appropriation of blackness, as whites defect from whiteness to join blackness in its fight against white supremacy. Very problematic.

Whiteness Studies is left only talking to itself rather than attempting to gain insight on to how best to cope with the violence that is coming from white communities in the present. While Mills, Bonilla-Silva, Smith and hooks do not represent a consolidated field within academia, it is important to recognize their work as scholarship that Whiteness Studies should attempt to engage with to broaden and polish their own studies.

Andrea Smith complicates white supremacy by outlining its three main pillars: Slavery/Capitalism, Genocide/Colonialism, and Orientalism/War. These three pillars interrelate to maintain collective white dominance over a variety of racially oppressed groups throughout the globe (Smith, 1996, pp. 67-69).¹⁵ Smith's work complicates the black-white binary often depicted within scholarly discussions of white supremacy within Whiteness Studies, as well as demonstrating its structural components (capitalism, ideology/colonial logics, and war). Moreover, Smith complicates the work of Whiteness Studies by stating that the pillars are not relics of an ideology from the past, but serve contemporary whites in the continued oppression of communities of color across the globe. Furthermore, Smith's intent lies in empowering communities of color rather than presenting victimized white subjects (i.e. white trash school).

¹⁵ The first pillar—Slavery/Capitalism—has served white supremacy in justifying and rationalizing the enslavement of African peoples in order to work the land and cash crops of European Empire. The slave is required within white supremacy in order to expand its unending pursuit of profits/luxuries. The second pillar—Genocide—is discussed by Smith to focus on indigenous peoples, whose land whites required to cultivate the cash crops and capitalist projects of the first pillar. This pursuit of land leads to the rationalizing—via colonial logics—of white participation in genocide. By killing off the Native body, the Native land becomes “freed” and open for colonial projects. The third pillar—Orientalism/War—is required within white supremacy in order to always have an enemy to further the first two pillars. Without the perpetual enemy—the Orient—then white supremacy may have to recognize its participation in the other two pillars. Taken together, Smith argues the three pillars make up the collective oppression of communities of color throughout the globe. These pillars are what white supremacy requires to continue to operate.

The ideology of white supremacy is further explained in Charles W. Mills' *The Racial Contract*, which speaks to the existence of a false sense of viewing the world that provides whites within racial states:

an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world that they themselves have made (Mills, 1997, p. 18).

Combining this with Du Bois' psychological wage and Smith's three pillars of white supremacy, it becomes clear the ideological bind that white working class men are caught within. The psychological wage, provided by the elite and informed by white supremacist ideology, dictates to these white workingmen that—as whites—they are superior and more entitled to the benefits of society than people of color. This produces a false racial epistemology of the world for these white workingmen that normalize white supremacy as fact. However, as the findings presented in Chapter Four will demonstrate, the white working class men participating in this study are experiencing a conflict with the psychological wage and its ideological foundations within white supremacy's false racial epistemology.

Another influential scholar of color, who contributes to understandings of whiteness is bell hooks. In *Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination* hooks speaks on “the rhetoric of white supremacy [that] supplies a fantasy of whiteness (hooks, 1998, p. 54).” By this hook is referring to the ideology and structure of white supremacy enabling whites to control the “black gaze” on whiteness. For whites the racial “Other” is rendered invisible, leaving any discourse of communities of color on whiteness to also remain invisible to white consciousness. Thus, whites are left only with a racial consciousness—if one can call it that—provided through

white supremacy, resulting in whiteness as being represented as good, civilized, pure, etc. and blackness its antithesis. White supremacy silences non-white imaginings of whiteness, leaving whites unconsciously operating as race-less beings, the universal, and human. This normalized white fantasy is informed, again, by the interlocking workings of the psychological wage and white supremacy's inverted racial epistemology.

Finally, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva captures the white supremacist ideology and its inverted racial epistemology within the present in his work *Racism Without Racists*. He argues that “whites’ sincere fictions” of a post-Civil Rights United States, where race no longer plays a significant role in one’s ability to succeed in the United States today, made up a new twenty-first century racial discourse—colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, Lecture: The Strange Enigma of Racism in Contemporary America, 2001, p. 1). Bonilla-Silva explains how colorblind racism developed from the 1960s and solidified in its present form in the twenty-first century, allowing whites to “explain the contradiction between their professed colorblindness and America’s color coded inequality (Bonilla-Silva, Lecture: The Strange Enigma of Racism in Contemporary America, 2001, p. 2).” This new racial discourse is possible through colorblind racism’s four main frameworks: (1) abstract liberalism; (2) naturalization; (3) cultural racism/biologization of culture; (4) minimalization of racism.¹⁶ This “new” racism is important in that it captures white

¹⁶ Abstract liberalism uses principles of liberalism and humanism (grounded within the Western Enlightenment) to situate themselves as only wanting what is “fair,” for everybody. This allows for whites to form anti-affirmative action stances that rely on abstract rhetorical stances without having to acknowledge the reality of higher education’s racial inequalities. Naturalization occurs when whites normalize racial disparities in the United States with dismissive rhetoric explaining simply that “that’s just the way it is.” Cultural racism modernizes biological racism through race rhetoric that states that group’s culture serves as the *rationale* for explaining racial inequality. Finally, minimalization acknowledges racism, yet disputes its salience in contemporary U.S. society. These four frame works are utilized interchangeably with one another in order to produce a racialized rhetoric that does not require overtly racialized language (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 2003, pp. 34-45).

racial violence and rhetoric in the contemporary, whereas Whiteness Studies tends to remain caught within the past and/or detached pop culture analysis.

Thus, scholars of color are continuing to contribute to the scholarly discourse on whiteness studies. Their discussions and the discussion of whiteness coming from Whiteness Studies are separated insular dialogues. Whiteness Studies needs to break out from itself and open into dialogue with scholars of color discussing similar concepts and ideas surrounding the contemporary state of whiteness in the United States and across the globe. This project seeks to try and bridge the dialogue of Whiteness Studies with that of scholars of color—particularly Charles Mills and his inverted racial epistemology. This work seeks to capture the inverted racial epistemology within the narratives of the white workingmen participating in this study. Moreover, as Chapter Five shall further outline, this project seeks to demonstrate how the psychological wage is caught within a crisis of white supremacy's inverted epistemology.

For the moment it is only important to understand the critique being raised against Whiteness Studies, as well as this project's attempt to avoid reproducing Whiteness Studies' pitfalls. The strategy implemented within this project to attempt to avoid such failures stems from further critique of Whiteness Studies reliance on historical methodologies of engaging with whiteness and white supremacy. Simply put, Whiteness Studies primarily uses archival, as well as non-ethnographic, methodological practices to leap from examinations of whiteness and white supremacist ideology in the past to solutions for transcending whiteness and racism in the present. What are missed are the nuances existing in white communities in the contemporary. In addition, this methodological approach engages in discussion on whiteness and white supremacy without involving actual white voices in trying to work out the

complicated issues of white crisis and its violent affects in the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Solutions from the Ivory Tower cannot hope to be applied to white communities outside of academia, especially white working class communities. Rather, any strategies for attempting to cope, not solve but cope, with white racism need to come from the mouths of whites themselves, and not archives or popular culture analyses.

Concluding Remarks:

This project then turns to the task of attempting to engage white working class men through ethnography and open discourse, while balancing a need to interpret these narratives that acknowledges the complexities of their racial, class and—to a lesser extent—gender identities in order to explain and paint a picture of the internal crises that are affecting them in the twenty-first century. This type of work needs to be done not to focus solely on the class oppression of these white working class men; or to imagine ways of securing their class interests via an ingenuous participation in “anti-racist” work; or even to attempt to work beyond their white crisis through politically rejecting white privilege. No, this work needs to be done because the self-afflicting crises operating within these men, as expressed within their narratives on the American Dream, are leading to violent narratives and behavior against communities of color both within the United States and abroad.

Thus, this project seeks to engage white supremacy and its manifestations within working class white male narratives in order to gain a better understanding of how to better cope and mitigate the white violence produced through participation in white supremacy and not dealing with white crises. It attempts this task, consciously aware of Weigman’s critique of

¹⁷ Notable exceptions are Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism Without Racists* and Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters*.

Whiteness Studies, and the hopes of providing a new path for a field, rooted in dealing with the issues of whiteness in the twenty-first century with productive analyses that maintains a level of accountability for whites in the United States. By no means, will the analyses of this project be perfect, yet, at the very least, it hopes to chart a new course for Whiteness Studies that deviates from its past participation in liberal colorblind white rhetoric. The following chapter will present the methodological basis for this chapter, and how and why it engaged with self-identified working class white men.

Chapter Three: Methods of Analysis

Yeah, I have a question for you. Why are you talking to a guy like me?
—A white male worker at Wal-Mart.

Introduction and Overview

This qualitative study examines the narratives of self-identified working class white men living in Upstate New York’s Chemung, Onondaga, Tioga and Tompkins counties. Specifically, the conversations documented in this study revolve around the participants’ perception of the American Dream, and the role that race, class and gender play in one being able to achieve the American Dream in the United States today. These narratives were collected using ethnography—specifically unstructured interviews. By utilizing an ethnographic approach, this project seeks to provide a means for understanding the ways in which working class white men experience and conceptualize their own racial, gender and class identities, as well as how they perceive the racial, class and gender of others in the United States. The American Dream was chosen as the primary topic from which participant narratives engaged with, primarily because of previous observations of the ways this popular U.S. concept is raced, gendered, and classed in contemporary U.S. culture/narratives.¹⁸

The goal of this study is primarily explanatory. It hopes to provide a deeper understanding of how white working class men “feel” and experience race, class and gender by examining their narratives on the American Dream. Ultimately, it hopes to demonstrate the complex ways in which working class white men reproduce and challenge white-male

¹⁸ As a product of white working class communities, I have experiential knowledge pertaining to the ways in which white working men conceptualize and view the American Dream along raced, classed and gendered lines. This project was very much inspired by past experiences in talking with white working class men about the American Dream.

supremacy. Furthermore, it is hoped that this project shall serve as a model for White Studies scholars as to how to conduct research that actively incorporates white communities by searching for solutions to white patriarchy within the communities themselves. The answers to deconstructing white identity, consciousness, and racism do not lay within history alone; rather, they exist and are being pursued within white communities. This project seeks to challenge scholarship on whiteness by demonstrating how a select group of whites are facing both obstacles and points of clarity in their understanding of the intersections that racism, classism and sexism play within and structure their lives.

Throughout working on this project I have struggled with the presentation and analysis of the complex intersecting identities of the white working class men participating in this study. Much of this struggle is situated between Weigman's critique (presented in Chapter Two) and the ethical obligation that I have, as a researcher, to the voices of the men presented in this work. In other words, in unpacking the narratives of these white workingmen I need to consciously be walking a line that rests between avoiding the creation of a white liberal racist project, and staying true to the ways in which participants' experience, view and/or feel race, class and gender within their lives. The walking of this line has informed the methodology and presentation of this project from the formation of research questions to the writing of this sentence. It is a continuous process. This chapter begins its discussion of how I navigate this struggle in the formulating of a methodological approach, and then follows with an explanation of the structural methodology from which data was formulated, gathered, interpreted and presented. These two sections—the methodological approach and structuring of this project—will comprise this chapter.

Methods of Approach:

My approach to this project is fluid and admittedly intuitive. It is fluid in that I constantly have to come back to the reasons why I am engaging within this project and community, and is intuitive in that my own identities, as well as my rawness as a qualitative researcher, very much impact the methodological process of this project. The fluidity and intuitiveness of my methodological approach has made for an ever-changing and dynamic examination of white working class male's narratives and raced, classed and gendered perceptions of the American Dream. I constantly reexamine the narratives, reflect on the manner in which they were collected, and reconsider the purposes and presentation of this project. Informing this fluid process are a number of scholars that need to be acknowledged, as they have deeply grounded and influenced the methods, analyses, and presentation of this work. These scholars guided me as a young and ambitious qualitative researcher, and must be acknowledged for their contributions to this project.

These scholars—Robyn Weigman, Doreen Martinez, Charles Mills, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and Ruth Frankenberg—have informed this project's approach and structural methodology. In addition, they have all done so in different ways. Weigman and Martinez clarified the conflict between the pitfalls of Whiteness Studies and my responsibilities as a researcher to the community that I am engaged with. Mills provided me with a theoretical site from which to build my research questions and move past the limitations and problems within Whiteness Studies literature. Frankenberg provided a case study for how to do proper qualitative research as a whiteness scholar, and Bonilla-Silva provided me with tools for

interpreting and engaging with the white working male narratives that this project revolves around.

Weigman's assertions that Whiteness Studies often situates white working populations in problematic ways, which obscures and/or dominates intersectional discussions of race, class, and gender at the expense of marginalized racial communities and women, put my work on notice in terms of what message it will ultimately produce. Weigman's critique forces me to constantly ask the questions: (1) what is this project saying it is attempting accomplish; (2) what is it actually accomplishing? The answers to these two questions cannot be different. Otherwise, this project's goal of complicating the understandings of the intersecting identities of white working males in order to imagine opportunities of producing future capacity of solidarity will be supplanted by the production of a white liberal racist project.

Complicating this discussion is a lecture given by Dr. Doreen Martinez at Colorado State on April 4, 2013. Dr. Martinez's lecture, entitled "The Peoples Voices of Social Justice: the methodology of intersectionality and cultural stewardship," helped to validate much of what I was intuitively doing in the research of this project, as well as complicating it through its focus on qualitative ethnographer's responsibility to the communities in which they work with. Martinez's discussion of individual and group identities as fluid and constantly renegotiate by the ways in which the "do race, class, gender and sexuality" forced me to reexamine the narratives of the white working class men presented within this project (Martinez, 2013). Martinez ultimately helped to balance out my need to present the voices of the participants in my study ethically, and the need to ensure that this project does not reproduce racism. The result of this balancing was a clarification of the line that this project is attempting to walk on.

On one side of the line is Weigman's cautioning, and on the other side lays Martinez and her instruction on how to be a responsible qualitative researcher. These two scholars clear the path for this project and inform the type of questions and objectives that it needs to pursue.

The reason why Whiteness Studies has fallen into participating in white liberal racism is its involvement in methodologies that typically do not engage white communities in the present. Historical and pop-culture analyses predominate the scholarship in the field, which creates a disconnect between Whiteness Studies' scholars and the ways in which whiteness is enacted, felt and participated in the contemporary. This in and of itself is not the reason as to why Whiteness Studies turns to partaking in white liberal racism, rather it is the disengaged analyses of whiteness in the informing of "solutions" that marks the field's failures. Whiteness becomes "solved" or transcended without looking at the ways it exists in the contemporary. Given Weigman and Martinez's contributions to this project, it becomes clear that any progressive strategies and opportunities for bringing white working class men into discussions of combating racism and sexism, or at least mitigating their participation in them, must come from an understanding of how race, class and gender are experienced in the *now* of white working class males.

With this in mind it becomes clear that Whiteness Studies is in need of new theoretical and methodological tools outside of its traditional implementations. Such tools can be found in Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract* and Critical Social Contract Theory in general. Mills' assertion of the existence of an inverted racial epistemology that misinforms white perceptions of the material reality that surrounds them, provides this project with a new means of approaching

whiteness in the contemporary.¹⁹ Mills' inverted racial epistemology became the theoretical focus of the methodology of this work in that I have sought to demonstrate its existence within the narratives of the white working class men I talked with during this project. Mills himself validates this pursuit when he states that "the Racial Contract," in stark contrast to mainstream Social Contract Theory, "has the best claim to being an actual historical fact" in that it "is clearly historically locatable in the series of events marking the creation of the modern world by European colonialism (Mills, 20)." He further his claim that the Racial Contract is an actuality of the present, lending support for this project's exploration of the ways in which its inverted epistemology is present within contemporary white working class male narratives. With this in mind, this project seeks to examine whiteness, its identity and crises through the use of Mills' inverted epistemology, and in order to avoid the pitfalls that Whiteness Studies has traditionally fallen in to.

This is not to say that all Whiteness Studies' scholars participate in reproducing white liberal racism. Ruth Frankenberg provides a helpful case study to work off of and mirror in her *White Women, Race Matters*. Frankenberg analyzes the social construction of whiteness in three "linked dimensions": (1) whiteness as a location of structural advantage, race privilege; (2) whiteness as "standpoint" or a place in which whites see themselves and others; (3) whiteness as cultural practices that are consciously and unconsciously marked (Frankenberg,1). This theoretical structuring of whiteness is then pursued through ethnography in which Frankenberg does an exceptional job of exploring the intersections between race and gender—structured positionality, raced and gendered perceptions, and participation in white practices—

¹⁹ See Chapter Two, pg.6, for a more detailed explanation of this inverted epistemology.

within the lives of self-identified white women via ethnography. My work seeks to demonstrate the emergence and complexities of Mill's inverted epistemology through intersectional analysis of white working class male narratives in ways that mirror Frankenberg's work. Thus, Frankenberg serves as an example of how to engage in Whiteness Studies scholarship methodologically.

Finally, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and his ethnographic work *Racism Without Racists* has deeply informed the interviewing, coding and analysis processes of this work. His explaining and deciphering of the ways in which coded and colorblind language is implemented in the post-Civil Rights United States heightened my awareness during interviews and in examining participant narratives to look for racially and sexually coded terms and signifiers. The use of colorblind rhetoric is demonstrated by Bonilla-Silva to provide whites with the ability to express racialized ideas without having to utilize overtly racialized language. The four frameworks of colorblind racism—abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism and minimization—serve whites by providing interchangeable tools for participating in racialized language subtlety. In addition, this subtle racism even complicates the abilities for whites to decipher their own participation in racialized epistemology and ideology, as colorblind racism is proliferated institutionally via mass media, cultural norms, and the mechanisms of white supremacy (CITE). Recognizing this dominant racial rhetoric and its existence with the language within the United States, I was consciously aware of potentially coded terms during my interviews, prompting clarifying follow-up questions, and during the coding and analysis process of this project.

Thus, taken together, Weigman, Martinez, Mills, Frankenberg, and Bonilla-Silva, have informed this project's approach to qualitative inquiry and its hope of producing a level of

academic activism that stays true to the complexities within the voices of the men participating in this study (Martinez), while holding their privileged identities accountable in order to avoid the reproduction of white liberal racism (Weigman). They have served to guide the focus of research questions in positioning this project's inquiry on the present manifestations and complexities within white working class male's identities, as informed by *White Heterosexual Patriarchy*, (Mills), and have provided models for presenting and collecting data (Frankenberg and Bonilla-Silva). Without these scholars constantly challenging me and guiding my work this project's endeavor would have been impossible and quite possibly problematic. There is a clarity and balance within the research aims that could not exist without the collective guidance of these scholars and their works. It is hoped that this methodological approach is replicated by future scholars engaging in Whiteness Studies' scholarship.

Situating Myself:

Additional influencing of this project's methodological approach is my own identity as a white heterosexual male with lived working class experience. At various points in my life I have lived in public housing, been sustained by welfare and food stamps, and experience high levels of class oppression. This class identity is complicated in that, although my mother and entire fathers' side of my family were very much working class whites, my grandparents on my mother's side are upper-middle class. This meant that even when I lived in public housing I knew that I would never go hungry and was provided a safety net that many families in the communities I lived in did not have.

In regards to my identities and how they relate to the men participating in this study, there exist many commonalities and shared experiences. For one, we both come from and are

familiar with the same local areas—Central New York and the Southern Tier. Moreover, we experience race, class and gender in similar ways. As white working class men we live race, class and gender in our day to day lives similarly and participate in popular narratives that are informed by our common raced, classed and gendered lives. Looking back to my experiences growing up in Upstate New York, and connecting them with the literature surrounding the ways in which white supremacy is framed for U.S. white working class, it is clear that in many ways we viewed and experienced the world through a similar white working class male lens. While this assumption is simplistic in many ways, it is confirmed through my own life experiences and conversations with other white working class men prior to this study, and, consequently, has informed my approach to engaging in interviews with white working class men back home.

Of course these commonalities are complicated by the fact that I am also an outsider. I have left home for graduate school. The community that I came back to engage with in my research has changed. In addition, the ways in which white working class men experience race, class and gender, and their narratives around these identities has changed. My status as a graduate student most likely altered the ways in which the participants in this study relayed their narratives. Some wanted to reeducate me on the “real world,” which I have lost touch with since leaving for graduate school. Others admitted to being a little “intimidated” about the process of interviewing. All of these instances of outsider and insider identity influenced my work and need to be acknowledged as I begin discussions on the structural methodological practices in which this project is framed.

Qualitative Methodology and Theoretical Paradigm:

At its basic level this project is a qualitative study. Qualitative research is an inductive approach that enables for researchers to gain deeper understandings of individual and/or group experience (Wertz, Charmaz and McMullen). Its holistic approach to understanding social phenomenon and the variety of methodological strategies it provides for conceptualizing and collecting data marks it as an ideal methodological framework for this study.

Under the umbrella of qualitative analysis this study operates within the critical perspective from which its methodological approach, data collection , and analysis were conceptualized. Critical perspective researchers—as documented by Kincheloe and McLaren—maintain that the purpose of research should be “discovery and remediation of societal problems (Kincheloe and McLaren 280).” In addition, as the researcher, I operate under the assumption that U.S. society structurally, ideologically and culturally functions within a white-hetero-patriarchal worldview. Thus, my politics is supported by critical perspective theory, which interprets social reality as being predicated upon uneven structures of dominance, and optimally fits with its allowance of my subjective stance in conducting qualitative research (Rubin and Rubin). Critical perspective theory also serves the overall purpose and hopes of this project—the complicating of white working class male’s perceptions of race, class and gender in order to help imagine opportunities to generate discussion that could potentially combat and dismantle white patriarchy within white working class male consciousness (Rubin and Rubin).

Complicating this study’s use of critical perspective theory is the complexity of participant identities, which are simultaneously dominant (white and male) and subordinate (class). Traditional critical theory perspectives are concerned with “empowering human beings

to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class and gender (Fay 23).” However, due to the fact that the participants in this study possess both dominant and subordinate identities, critical theory perspective shall be adapted and implemented with the hope of describing the ways in which these working class white men participate in racialized, sexualized and classed discourses that both limit and express opportunity for future engagement in anti-racist and class-based activism. In addition, it hopes to gain a more complicated understanding of white masculinity, its fluidity within the narratives, and the effects of that identity’s fluidity to understandings of whiteness and white masculinity in these men’s lives. The agenda then, is to gain deeper insight into the ways in these white workingmen “do” and see race, class and gender in their lives and narratives. Critical perspective theory, as a critical and subjective methodological paradigm, allows for a reading of working class white male’s racial, gender and class narratives of the American Dream that both implicates and complicates these narratives’ participation in white supremacy.

Methodological Strategy: Ethnography

Ethnography is a qualitative research strategy used while exploring cultural and societal phenomenon (Riessman 68). “An ethnography focuses on an entire-cultural-sharing group” and “interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs and language of [that] entire culture-sharing group (Creswell 90).” Historically, ethnography was first developed within anthropology and utilized by mostly white male ethnographers to study geographically distant locations among socially marginalized groups (Murchison 5). These early ethnographers participated in problematic work in which their studies often reproduced racialized, sexualized and ethnocentric depictions of the communities that they studied.

These ethnocentric uses of ethnography, while still in existence within uncritical research projects, have been combated, starting with the Chicago School and its decision to shift ethnographic analysis from the global to the local. During the 1920 and 1930s the Chicago school produced a number of critical ethnographic works, focusing upon the city of Chicago and its various cultural, gender and racial social groups (Murchison 9). Works like Nels Anderson's *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923) and Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk* (1999) refocused ethnography's scope to communities that the researcher may be more familiar with, which limited possibilities for scholars participating in unethical practices during the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Of course ethical issues regarding researchers' positionality within studies remains a constant issue for the ethnographic researcher to consider. The works of Frankenberg and Bonilla-Silva have already been discussed as strong examples of how ethnography can complicate and further scholarly understandings of race, class and gender.²⁰ Now a brief acknowledgement of ethnographers that have informed the structuring and presentation of this work's participant narratives will be provided.

Allen Feldman in particular in tracing "the cultural construction of violence, body and history in urban Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1986" relies on oral history and the experience of shared stories and narratives of both Protestant and Catholic residents of Belfast (Feldman 10). This data is presented as narrative blocs, composed of events, agency and narration, that serve as "cultural tool kit[s], an empowering apparatus" that mediate and influence participant perceptions of the use of violence within the spaces and environment

²⁰ See also Fauldi and Nelson.

they operate within (Feldman 15). Feldman's use of narratives inspired the analysis of this project's data, as well as his presentational formatting of the narratives within his work.

Feldman, as well as Liisa Malkii, have inspired the formatting and presentation of participant narratives in Chapter Four of this project. Feldman's bloc quotes and Malkki's presentations of participant panels are useful examples for how to present participant narratives, in which the presentation of large bodies of data, enable for readers to visibly see the complexities that exist within participants narratives. Specifically for this project, is presented in bloc narratives and supplemented with additional evidence from the interviews in order to demonstrate the deeply complex intersections between participant's perceptions of race, class and gender in U.S. society. The bloc narratives presented in Chapter Four are then broken up analytically within categorized sections that focus specifically on raced, classed or gendered undertones within participant narratives. These sub-sections, when coupled with the overall narrative blocs, allow for a viewing of the data that is focused (subsections) and yet collective (bloc narratives), allowing for truly intersectional analysis to occur. Collectively Bonilla-Silva, Feldman, Frankenberg, and Malkki's use and rationale of ethnography grounded this project's methodological strategy. As scholars attempting to tease out and muddle interlocking identities and issues, ethnography serves as a helpful methodological tool.

Method of Collection

The method of data collection is qualitative interviewing. Interviewing was chosen as the primary means of data collection because of the goals of this project—namely analyzing the ways in which white working class men participate in complex intersecting racial, gender and class narratives in their conversations surrounding the American Dream. As the focus of this

project is on white working male narratives, interviews became the obvious data collection tool to implement. While there are a number of specific interviewing strategies utilized within qualitative ethnographic, this project chose unstructured interviews.

Unstructured interviews, while potentially problematic in its lack of focus on a specific topic (semi-structured interviewing) or set questions (traditional structured interviewing) begins with a general topic of conversation (Rubin and Rubin 31). For this project that general topic was the American Dream. The researcher chose this topic to ground participant conversations based upon prior knowledge and experiences living in the area that generated assumptions on what might be discussed during the interviewing process. The general topic of the American Dream was introduced to participants along with the project's overarching aim of discussing the ways in which participants believe race, class and gender played a role in one being able to achieve the American Dream in twenty-first century United States. With this general topic in mind, participants delved into conversation. In keeping with the tenants of unstructured interviewing specific questions were introduced periodically throughout the interview to help guide the conversations back towards the general topic and goal of the project, as a means of clarifying participant's comments and narratives, and at times to alleviate lapses of silence and/or perceived discomfort.

The latter use of specific questions was heavily relied upon, when coded language arose in participant narratives.²¹ As these instances of colorblind or gender-neutral language occurred they were either documented or verbally acknowledged through a question. Moreover,

²¹ See discussion on Bonilla-Silva and colorblind racism.

unstructured interviews served to allow for informal conversations and dialogue that helped to break down barriers between researcher and participant.

Ultimately, unstructured interviewing was implemented in this project in order to allow for flexibility and options for the participants of the study. Moreover, as their narratives were guided only by a broad idea—the role that race, class and gender play in being able to achieve the American Dream—the discovery of shared experiences and patterns amongst participants during the coding and analysis of the data points to the fact that dominant racialized, sexualized and classed ideologies and epistemologies are presently operating within these white working class male dialogues. This discovery, which will be further fleshed out and complicated in both the coding subsection of this chapter as well as within Chapter Four, supports the research approach guiding this project. The patterns documented within this study point to the fact that the white working class male narrative presented in this study are simultaneously reproducing and challenging White Male Supremacy in the United States.

Site and Sample:

Site:

The geographic locations of where the participants of this study live and work are popularly referred to as Central New York and the Southern Tier. Central New York includes nine counties, two of which research was conducted within (Onondaga and Tompkins). Immediately south of Central New York is the area known as the Southern Tier of New York. The Southern Tier consists of seven counties, including the other two counties in which this research was conducted—Chemung and Tioga. The vast majority of the participants in this study work and/or live within the four counties of Chemung, Onondaga, Tioga and Tompkins

counties. Many of the participants lived within smaller more rural towns that surround the smaller cities that dot Upstate New York. In regards to the racial and class demographics of these counties, they are predominantly white and working class (especially the rural towns in which participants lived in).

Chemung is documented as being 88.9% white, Onondaga is 81.8% white, Tioga is 97% white, and Tompkins is 82% white. In regards to those living below the poverty line, 16.5% of Chemung's population lives below the poverty line with over 11,000 of this number being whites. 13% of Onondaga's population lives below the poverty line with 35,000 whites being within that statistic. For Tompkins, the numbers of 20% below the poverty line with roughly 12,000 whites making up that number. The lowest percentage of people living below the poverty line lies in Tioga with 10% (United States Census Bureau). In addition, the average annual income of households in each county are as follows: Chemung--\$45,000, Onondaga--\$52,709, Tioga--\$53,630, and Tompkins--\$49,789 (United States Census Bureau).

These statistics can be complicated by examining the same stats for the specific municipalities in which participants work and live around. In Chemung, most of the men worked in Elmira and lived in the rural towns and villages of Lowman, Horseheads and Arin. This area's collective annual income is significantly lower than the county's, resting at around \$29,488. The city of Syracuse and the small rural towns of Tully and Watertown the average annual income is \$31,689. Again in Tioga, participants lived in very rural areas (Spencer, Candor, Van Etten) with an average household income of \$39,867. Moreover, no participants lived within Tompkins County, yet many worked within the city of Ithaca. Those that worked in Tompkins, lived primarily in small towns of Newfield, Cortland, and Trumansburg, which

collectively have an average annual income of \$37,950 (United States Census Bureau). Given these statistics, these counties can be seen as predominantly white and working class. In addition, the white working class men living and working within Central New York and the Southern Tier all identified as working class, and can be viewed specifically as members of the blue collar working class.²² They own car and some own small homes and trailers. They need to work to maintain their standard of living, and they work in a variety of occupations (custodians, service employees, machinists, foremen, machine operators, etc.). Also important to note is the fact that the class identity of these white men is predicated off of their perceptions of their own socioeconomic status.

These counties were chosen primarily because of my own familiarity with the small towns and cities that inhabit these counties. I have lived or have family that live within them. I know the community, the businesses, culture and history.

History of Central New York and the Southern Tier:

Chemung was created in 1836 and is centered around the small city of Elmira. Elmira rests on land initially belonging to the Cayuga tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy. It served as a transportation hub for traders throughout the 1800s, connecting the major cities of Rochester and Buffalo to the rest of the Southern Tier through the canal system and later railroads. Through the Chemung Canal²³ coal was brought up from the mines of Pennsylvania and throughout Upstate New York through the intricate canal system that connected smaller canals (Chemung and Susquehanna) to the larger trading routes in the northern cities (Stevens). From

²² For scholarly work defining blue collar identity see: A. Lubrano's *Blue-Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams*; Pem Bucks' *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power and Privilege in Kentucky*; and Michael Dorris' *Working Men: Stories*.

²³ Often forgotten and dwarfed by the larger and more famous Erie Canal.

the mid-1800s all the way up to the 1940s Chemung County thrived off of trading and small manufacturing centers in Elmira (Stevans) (Flick 51-65) (Ellis, Frost and Syrett 470-534).

By the 1950s the counties historic trading economy was depleted, yet the area was bolstered via manufacturing work such as Anchor Glass Corporation, CAF-USA, Inc (manufactured trains and railway cars), and Hardinge, Inc supplemented the Chemung County economy with good paying manufacturing jobs (Ellis, Frost and Syrett 534-550). This manufacturing core of the local economy, however, has disappeared from the area with deindustrialization. It is now predominantly a service based economy, although Anchor Glass still remains.²⁴

Onondaga County, centered around the mid-sized city of Syracuse, historically belonged to the Onondaga Nation, yet was stripped away from them during the Revolutionary War. It was then repopulated by Revolutionary War veterans through the Military Tract Act, which set aside roughly two million acres of land for the development and future ownership of veterans of the war (Howe). Much of this land provided to Revolutionary War veterans displaced indigenous populations throughout Central New York, as during the late 1780s thousands of veterans and their families moved north to acquire the land provided them through the Military Tract Act (Howe 56). Agriculture served as the areas primary form of economic growth up until the early 1890s, when the swampy marshland of Syracuse was transformed into a bustling city that mined and exported salt (Stevans 134). The discovery of salt mines and the subsequent trade along the Erie Canal allowed for Syracuse to develop the largest city in Central New York. Railroads and small manufacturing supplemented the income throughout the early 1900s and

²⁴ The general economic trends of the Southern Tier found in the reading were reinforced by conversations over the phone with local labor historian/archivist Rachel Dworkin at the Chemung Valley History Museum.

into the 1950s, when deindustrialization gradually began and took hold in the late 1970s.²⁵ This gradual process of deindustrialization has left Syracuse with few manufacturing jobs, leaving the city and surrounding area bare. Much of the area today is service or agricultural based.

Tioga County's political-economic history is much less diverse and dynamic as the first two counties. Its county center is the small town of Owego, NY. Throughout the vast majority of its history Tioga has been predominantly an agricultural based economy. Many of the participants in this study live in Tioga and commute to cities outside the county in Elmira, Ithaca, Horseheads, and Cortland. The small numbers of farmers that continue to work the land sell their products to local businesses in Tompkins, Tioga and Chemung counties.²⁶ It is much more rural than the other counties, as it has no central cities only small agricultural towns. Tompkins County was a part of the region given to veterans through the Military Tract Act (Howe 45).

Initially in the 1820s and 30s Ithaca had high hopes of becoming a major city in Upstate New York that would rival Syracuse, Buffalo and Rochester. This hope rested in the early development of a small railway line, called the Ithaca and Owego Rail Line, which connected Ithaca and parts of the more rural Tioga County to the Erie Canal (Stevens 120). These hopes were later dashed in the 1850s with the construction of the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad, which bypassed the Ithaca Line (Ibid). Ithaca and Tompkins County replaced their desire to become a manufacturing and economic juggernaut in Upstate New York with hopes of becoming a cultural and academic center. In this regard the area was more successful,

²⁵ Again, I gained this general knowledge of the local political economy by contacting local historians. Specifically contacted for Onondaga County was Sara Kozman—the principal historical aide at the Onondaga Historical Association.

²⁶ I contacted by phone the executive director of Tioga County Historical Society—Kevin Lentz—to discuss the political-economy history of the area.

as Cornell University was established in 1865 (Smith 23) (Colman 35). The establishment and growth of Cornell altered the counties political economy forever, as the university came to gradually dominate the local economy. There were, however, a number of manufacturing centers that opened up during the early twentieth century, most notably Ithaca Guns Company. Later in the mid-1950s Borg Warner Automotive Company set up shop on South Hill of Ithaca, which provided good paying jobs to many rural communities throughout the area.²⁷ Today, only Borg Warner remains as a viable manufacturing center in the area, and employs people from Chemung to Cortland Counties.

In sum, the areas of Central New York and the Southern Tier, where participants in this study either work and/or live, were founded economically around trade and agriculture. Trade often gave way to small manufacturing centers (some of which still exist today) throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. However, the process of deindustrialization²⁸ has left the area primarily as a service based economy. Most of the men that I interviewed still work in what is left of the manufacturing jobs, yet they recognize the scarcity of good paying jobs. Those that do not possess jobs in manufacturing, work in service industries (Subway, Wal-Mart, etc.). A popular way to describe the region is an area of “skeleton cities.” By this, I mean if you drive through any of the cities in these counties (Elmira, Syracuse, Ithaca, Owego, Horseheads, etc.) you will see abandoned buildings where factories once existed. Moreover, the town centers and downtown areas have little economic activity, and there exists a depressed culture. For

²⁷ I discussed the overall political-economic history of Ithaca and Tompkins County with Donna Eschenbrenner—the director of Tompkins County History Center.

²⁸ For a general understanding of the process of deindustrialization in the United States that can be applied to Central New York and the Southern Tier see: Bluestone and Harrison’s *The Deindustrialization of America*; Rodwin and Sazanami’s *Deindustrialization and Regional Economic Transformation*; and Cowie and Heathcott’s *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Deindustrialization*.

instance, my grandfather refuses to drive through certain cities, because of the fact that it pains him to see the communities that he grew up in destroyed by deindustrialization. The area is a dying manufacturing and trading region that is now only left with the skeleton and bones of its once prosperous past.²⁹

In terms of the specific worksites that I contacted in order to recruit participants into my study, there was no conscious effort to choose specific sites based off the form of work that they participated in. They were chosen because of my familiarity with the business and a few of their employees. The worksites that I drew recruits from—an automotive plant (Ithaca, Tompkins), a Subway (Spencer, Tioga), a glass factory (Elmira, Chemung), a Wal-Mart (Syracuse, Onondaga), and a production plant (Horseheads, Chemung)—were contacted and selected because I knew someone that I could hand out a flyer calling for volunteers to. The flyers, coupled with calls for volunteers by the initial contacts, called for “self-identified white working class men” to discuss the current state of the American Dream and the role that race, class and gender played in being able to achieve the American Dream today.³⁰ This process of recruiting draws from a strategy known as a “snowballing method” of recruiting participants within qualitative methodology (Creswell 59).

Sample:

The men who contacted me from the flyer were then scheduled to meet with me at locations and times that best served their needs and schedule. Upon meeting, I discussed

²⁹ The term “skeleton city,” while found in popular local descriptions of the area, is reminiscent of Mike Davis’s *Dead Cities* in terms of the cultural and societal effects of deindustrialization in the former rust-belt of the United States.

³⁰ It is important to note the fact that the men participating in this study contacted from a flyer that specifically calls for “white working class men.” This points to their perception of themselves as racially white, gendered as men, and classed as members of the working class.

openly this study's research aim and questions, asked for their consent to participate in the study, and then proceeded to ask them broad questions that required them to (a) define the American Dream and (b) identify the role that race, class and gender played in being able to achieve the American Dream in U.S. society today. Each interview was audio recorded using an iPhone app, entitled iTalk, and lasted between fifty-five minutes to an hour and half.

In total there were twelve participants who agreed to be interviewed, yet only five participant narratives will be presented within this MA project. The reason for choosing only five narratives to work with lies in two facts. The first is related to my own limitations as a young qualitative researcher. Many of the early attempts to guide the unstructured interviews were negatively affected by my rawness as a qualitative researcher. This personal limitation was corrected during the second half of my interviewing process, as I gained experience and confidence within the interview process. Regardless of my limitations as a researcher, the primary reason as to why only five of the twelve participant narratives will be presented in Chapter Four lies in the fact that there was a consistent pattern within all twelve narratives that I felt did not need to be reiterated using twelve interviews. The five participants selected—Don (a former glass worker living and working in Chemung County), Frank (a foreman at the auto-plant in Tompkins), Jeff (a machinist living in Tioga and working in Tompkins), Luke (a custodian at a Wal-Mart in Syracuse) and Matt (an employee at a Subway in Tioga)—reflect the general themes and concepts within their narratives of all participants within this study.

Coding:

Following the interviews, each participant's narrative were transcribed using Microsoft Word Processor. These transcripts were then prepped for coding. The coding process was

conducted in three phases using tenants of grounded theory (Creswell).³¹ Line by line each participant narrative was read and coded electronically using a single verb to describe the line. Words such as “losing” and “fearing” were utilized to describe lines that touched on the outsourcing of U.S. jobs overseas. This first phase of coding was electronically accomplished via highlighting line-by-line and color-coding. A separate document was used as a key to keep track of each code word’s color. For example, “losing” was represented by the highlighted color green.

The second phase of coding entailed printing out the color-coded transcripts, cutting out each line individually, and then pasting them on to five by eight index cards. On the back of each index card the initial code was inscribed, and then later joined with an adjective code word to describe the subject of the lines. Many of these secondary code words were emotion based and attempted to specifically capture feeling within the narrations. A final phase of coding was then carried out, where I subjectively underlined words and phrases that I perceived as being racially and/or sexually coded language.³² Notes were then inscribed on the back of the index card to document the coded language. In the end, each index card had three codes (verb, adjective and coded language).

Following this line-by-line coding, the data was then physically reproduced, using staples and paperclips, back into bloc narrative format. This was done in order to allow me to physically see the ways in which each code intersected and related to one another. Moreover, it allowed for the organizing of the narratives into categories, and the ability to perceive collective themes

³¹ Grounded theory can be defined as a qualitative research method in which theory is produced from data, rather than the other way around. This makes the process an inductive one, meaning that it moves from the specific to the more abstract.

³² Consider Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States* (See Chapter Two).

within the narratives. This process ultimately led to my ability to frame the narratives of the white men participating in my study into clear interrelated categories, which informed the development of themes, and enabled for the construction of a theory for understanding whiteness in the twenty-first century United States.

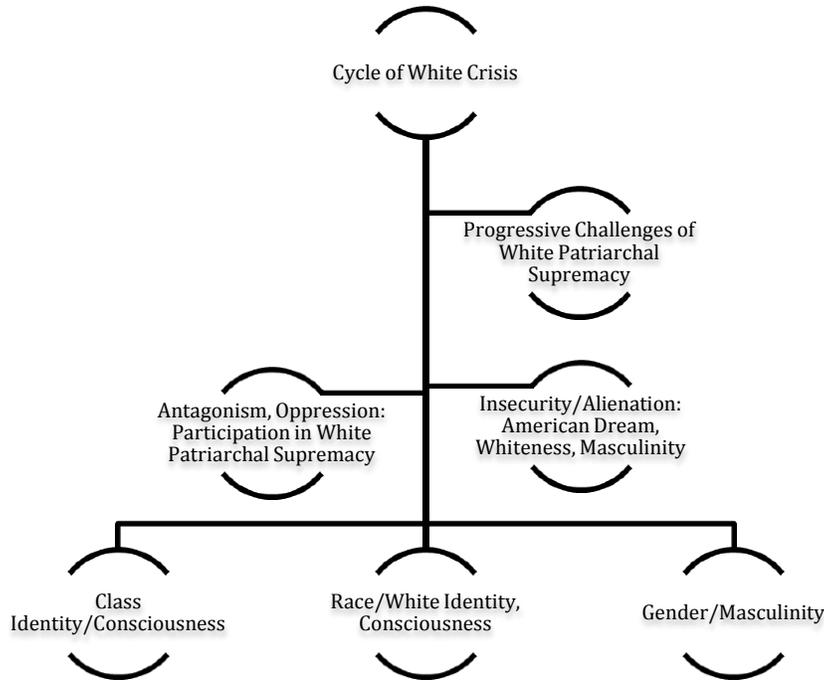


Figure 1: Coding—Categories, Themes and Theory

The figure above depicts the categories, themes and theory generated from the coding process hierarchically. At the bottom level exists three categories that the coded transcripts were organized within. This categorization occurred using the index cards prior to being reconstructed into bloc narratives. The three major categories that developed from the coded transcripts were: (1) Class Identity/Consciousness; (2) Race/White Identity, Consciousness; (3) Gender/Masculinity. Within each categories existed both narratives dealing with the class, race,

and gender of the participants themselves and narratives expressing issues and thoughts dealing with the class, race and gender of others. This divide within the categories led to the development of three themes. The most prevalent themes were expressions of insecurity and antagonism—whether rooted in class, race, and gender conceptions of the self or the other. The third theme—progressive challenges to white supremacy—had less data within it, yet should be recognized as extremely significant for understanding ways in which white working class men challenge White Patriarchy through their narratives. What is most important is that the two major themes—antagonism and insecurity—had a clear relationship with one another, when examining the narrative blocs. Expressions of insecurity—whether in alienation from the American Dream, whiteness, and/or masculinity—were surrounded and encased within narratives of antagonism directed at the elite, communities of color, and/or women.

It is this relationship within the narratives, discovered through the coding process, that informs the theory of this project—the Cycle of White Crisis. The Cycle, as it shall be referred to within this project, shall be discussed in terms of its broad implications to Whiteness Studies and popular conceptions of whiteness in the United states within Chapter Five. Important to note at the present is the Cycle’s role in understanding the white identity, consciousness and crisis within the minds of the white working men participating in this study. Quickly referring back to the figure documenting the coding process, it is important to note that, as the narratives move towards the theory of the Cycle of White Crisis, the analysis becomes more and more abstract. This keeps with the tenants of grounded theory and points to this works’ ability to speak towards the whiteness of white working class men specifically—as it is effected

by class and masculinity—and broader theoretical implications for understanding whiteness as a whole in the United States.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, the findings presented in Chapter Four and discussion of what the findings enable theoretically for our understanding of whiteness found in Chapter Five could not have been accomplished without a qualitative ethnographic methodology. By engaging in unstructured discussions with white working class men living in Upstate New York, this project is able to present findings on the ways in which whiteness is viewed and expressed within this group in ways that other scholarship on whiteness cannot. Moreover, its intersectional nature of combing race, class and gender within its methodological approach allows for the voices of these white working class men to speak for themselves about complex issues that affect their lives and perceptions of others in U.S. society and across the globe. This knowledge and these voices need to be heard by Whiteness Studies scholars. While historical accounts, theory and applied to “solutions” from the Ivory Tower can help to supplement the understanding racism, classism and sexism within white working class men, they cannot by themselves inform white working class men, or whites generally, on how to better conduct themselves within a raced, classed and gendered world; nor should theory and historical accounts coming from academia attempt to dictate to these men how to do so. Instead, Whiteness Studies should focus on listening to the stories and feelings of those they claim to be studying, and realize that any solution to breaking down racism within white communities—especially white working class communities—must come from the communities themselves. The following chapter will attempt to capture the voices of white working class men, and express the complexities that

they currently face in regards to how they feel and experience race, class and gender affecting their day to day lives. These complexities will then be framed within the fifth chapter of this project and complicated by evidence suggesting that in fact the “solutions” for combating white patriarchy amongst white men are already being imagined from within.

CHAPTER FOUR: White Workingmen's Narratives

Introduction and Overview:

This chapter shall present the narratives of five self-identified working class white men who participated in this study. These narratives focus on these men's perceptions of the current state of the American Dream, and the role that race, class and gender play in being able to achieve it in the twenty-first century United States. Moreover, as discussed within Chapter Two and Three, which documented past contributions of Whiteness Studies—its offerings and limitations—this chapter seeks to deviate from the fields dominant methodologies and analyses by approaching these white working class male narratives in order to: (1) stay true to the voices of participants; (2) account for the ways in which their intersectional discussions of the American Dream simultaneously challenge and implicate them in white supremacy. This process then hopes to offer a more complicated explanation of the narratives that walks the line between not reproducing white liberal racism, while staying true to the lived experiences of these men as expressed by their narratives. This chapter, then, ultimately hopes to capture the internal crisis that exists within these working class white men, and express it a way that offers insight into how they view and feel race, class and gender within their lived experience.

To accomplish this task this chapter will be structured into four main sections. The first will demonstrate how the American Dream is seen as a contractual agreement that is exclusive to “hardworking regular Americans,” which is coded language that translates to white men. Most important within this section is the presenting of narratives that express white male feelings of alienation from the American Dream. Following this section bloc narratives from the interviews will be provided in order to frame sections two, three and four. These bloc narratives

will be reinforced with supplemental stories in each of the following sections. The second section will demonstrate class antagonism within the narratives, which indicate that the contract of the American Dream is not being fulfilled by the U.S. elite for white workingmen in the United States. This class antagonism will then bleed into the third section of this chapter, which shall present racially antagonistic narratives that implicate communities of color as the primary reason why they, as white working class men, are experiencing alienation from the American Dream. The fourth section will then briefly touch upon masculinity and its possible informing of this sense of white working male alienation and insecurity from the American Dream.

From these four sections a common story will emerge that explains that these white workingmen feel betrayed by the U.S. elite and threatened by communities of color (in the U.S. and abroad) in their capacity to achieve and live the American Dream. The intersecting narratives of these men's class realities, racialized perceptions, and possible masculine insecurities provides a complex understanding of how these men view the world around them. This world, looking through these men's eyes, is one with little allies, many difficulties, and a constant feeling that, as Matt puts it, "something is just wrong." This feeling exists, because the story of the American Dream that these men heard growing up and still partially believe in today does not add up. This feeling produces frustration, questioning and anger, which translates in complex narratives that explain the current ways in which U.S. white workingmen are victimized in the United States. These narratives are important and valuable, as they serve to further understandings of how these men are caught in a conflict between the ideology of white supremacy, and the recognition of its inherent flaws.

Section One: The American Dream

When analyzing the narratives of these men and how they define the American Dream, Mills and Critical Social Contract Theory come quickly to mind. These men see the American Dream as a contract. Moreover, this contract is encased within a racial epistemology that initially is expressed with racially coded language. The American Dream is a standard of living that, while empirically immeasurable, is something that can be experienced and achieved through hard work. This exchange of labor for the American Dream is presented in the narratives contractually, and is perceived as one exclusive to “regular” Americans; in other words, it is a contract for white men. This American Dream Contract has been described as simple as “growing up the American Dream was a home, family and car. You had your basic necessities taken care of and a little extra on the side.” However, to experience this and live the American Dream one has to be capable of and willing to work for it. This working definition summarizes participant’s common understanding and explanation of the American Dream.

Frank—a foreman at a local auto-plant in Ithaca, NY—describes the American Dream as:

Growing up the American Dream was a home, family and car. You had your basic necessities taken care of and a little extra on the side. That’s what I was taught the American Dream was and should be, and I agree with that to this day. It’s not free. You have to work for it, and work hard. Some people might not want to hear that and they might complain and gripe, but that’s what the American Dream is. You have to have the drive and ambition to go after it and take it. If you don’t have those ideals and motivations...well then you don’t deserve it, because you’re not living the American lifestyle. I mean that’s part of the American Dream...it’s fair. If you sit around, complain and bitch then you won’t get a chance to live it, and you really don’t deserve it. If you work hard and capitalize on the opportunities given to you then you’re going to get it. It’s as simple as that.

In defining the American Dream, Frank points to a need to adhere to an “American lifestyle” that values ambition and the willingness to work hard. This lifestyle is necessary for one to be

capable of achieving the American Dream, which is defined materially by Frank. Later, Frank's narratives racialize this American lifestyle as a white lifestyle, leading to an understanding of the American Dream as an agreement only capable of being fulfilled by whites—and specifically white men. For the time being, however, it is clear that the American Dream is provided to those that are ambitious and work hard.

Luke—an employee at Wal-Mart in Syracuse, NY—paints a similar picture of the American Dream, when he explains how he learned what the American Dream was and how one achieves it in the United States:

Well it was kind of different for me, because growing up I spent a lot of time with my father who worked construction. He had a lot of side jobs and trades too throughout the years so he was always working. I learned from him that you had to work...always. Work is how you earn your keep in life. You can't just skate by and not do nothing, or just take handouts or something. You got to earn what you got, and you'll get what you earn. That's what I was taught and that's what I believe. Nothing is going to come to you ever in this life. I guess that's my mindset on the American Dream, and it's one that I've had my entire life even before high school. I'm doing alright now, because I live a life where I work hard for what I got. That's how the American Dream is done. Yep, you get the American Dream by being a good American and working your tail off.

Again, the American Dream, while not as fully explained in terms of what it specifically is, is achieved “by being a good American and working your tail off.,” that is to say, by adhering to an “American”/ white lifestyle and through constant labor. This is what Luke was taught, and what he still believes.

Don, who recently has become unemployed, feels the same was as Frank and Luke. In addition, he attributes his own financial successes to his adherence to the tenants of the American Dream contract.

Unlike a lot of other people around here I do have what I've always dreamed of—I have my own home and I'm comfortable financially. I do have that, but I've worked my ass off throughout my life for it. A lot of people don't seem motivated to put that amount of

time into their work anymore. Part of that is just laziness, but there are other things affecting regular Americans, like myself, from being able to reach their own dreams. A lot of that has to do with the fact that companies have shipped American jobs overseas.

In his description of the American Dream Don begins to delve into its current state in U.S.

society and the reasons why it is becoming less attainable for “regular” Americans. At the end of the day, however, the American Dream for Frank, Luke and Don is achieved via hard work and adhering to what Frank describes as “the American lifestyle³³,” which places labor as the principal motivator for U.S. citizens.

Matt and Jeff, two workers out of Tioga and Tompkins Counties, both share similar definitions of the American Dream Contract, yet each of them offer a critique to the understanding of the American Dream as defined by the other participants. As Matt points out:

I mean at home I was taught that the American Dream was just to be happy and ok with where your life ends up. At school though, and I hear it at work too, the American Dream is all about making money. I mean really it’s just about getting a good job, buying a house, and having a family. If you work hard you’ll get all that good stuff and then be happy right (Laughs)? I don’t know about all that, but it makes sense to a degree. Hell, I’d like a house to live in instead of the dump I live at now.

Matt’s overall description of the American Dream in ways that mirrors Frank, Luke and Dons’ narratives, yet he offers a critique of the American Dream that the others do not. He momentarily questions whether or not pursuing the American Dream is worth it, or whether he would be any happier if he adhered to the American Dream guidelines. Of course, he contradicts his initial statements by acknowledging that he would prefer to have a better living environment. Jeff—a machinist out of Ithaca—further the critique of the American Dream, stating:

³³ Again, this “American lifestyle” is racially coded as a white lifestyle. Tied to this white lifestyle is masculinity. This coded language will be further discussed and engaged with in sections two, three and four of this chapter.

What's the American Dream? It's the idea that you can do anything you want if you work hard—(laughs)—and that's what it should be, but it's not today. It no longer exists. Right now the U.S. is basically homogenized—it's on big corporation. They're running the entire ball game, and I mean everything. We don't have choices in this country anymore. You go to school, you hopefully get a job, you work and then you die. I don't mean to be all doom and gloom here, but that's the nature of the economy that we're living in today.

Jeff's critique on the American Dream contains all of the criteria outlined in the previous four participants, yet he moves the conversation into a new line of questioning—that being whether or not the American Dream still exists today. Jeff is not alone in his questioning. After initially defining the American Dream and how one obtains it, the men participating in this study begin to express how, currently, it is becoming less accessible to “regular” U.S. citizens. These perceptions that “regular” Americans are becoming alienated from the American Dream are complicated by intersectional undercurrents of raced, classed and gendered narratives, which demonstrate the ways in which these men see themselves in relation to other groups in the United States—namely the elite and communities of color. This complex intersectional positioning within the narratives of these men shall be further explained in Chapter Five. For the time being, it is important to only focus on the narratives themselves, and how the present white workingmen as being alienated from the American Dream today. Some of the participants pointed to the American Dream as clearly still in existence in the United States, yet many were highly critical, stating that it was either completely nonexistent or at the very least more difficult to achieve.

Frank represents the small group of participants that still wholeheartedly believe that the American Dream still exists and functions as previously defined. Responding to the question of whether or not the American Dream exists presently in the United States, Frank states:

I don't really have an answer for that, because I don't agree with that type of question. I gave you the honest truth and quite frankly that's it...it is nothing truth. You work hard and you succeed in this country. If you complain, bitch and are lazy then you fail and, again, you deserve to. I don't mean to be hard, but if you're lenient with people then they don't work hard. If you just let anyone come to the U.S. and just let them complain about being here—in the world's greatest country—well then you're stuck with a bunch of lazy workers. That just hurts us *real* Americans from being able to work towards our own American—and I stress American—Dream. There is no such thing as an Asian dream....

Frank vehemently defends the American Dream and the principals upon which one achieves it.

He later, knowingly or unknowingly, concedes a reason for why some may argue that it is not readily available today when he delves into how “real Americans” are being undermined by “lazy workers” coming into the United States. Overall, however, Frank contends boldly that the American Dream exists in the present context of the United States.

Others, such as Luke and Matt, still believe that the American Dream exists in the United States, but acknowledge that it is difficult to achieve it presently. For instance, Matt states candidly that:

I mean I think the American Dream is still possible...but it takes a hell of a lot of luck nowadays. It's still achievable though, I'm sure. There are still success stories that you hear about, but those folks got lucky. So yeah, if you work hard and have a lot of luck then the American Dream is still possible. People are still getting decent jobs that they went out and got. It's just harder to do that now. For me though I'm happy because I got everything I want. I just hate my job (laughs). I mean I want a better job and house than what I got, but I'm still happy. If I have kids though they'll have it worse off than me, especially if this country keeps getting greedier. So yea, maybe the American Dream exists, but it's dying out or something...I don't know.

Matt acknowledges that although the American Dream is “still possible” there exists a lot of luck in being able to achieve it currently. Matt adds luck within the criteria of the American Dream Contract, and points to a future U.S., where the American Dream might die out. For Luke, his personal situation provides him with a critical analysis of the American Dream.

I'm just paying my bills right now and trying to survive like everybody else. It's tough out there. So, no, I'm not able to say that I'm living the American Dream. I'm just trying to survive like I said, but at least I'm not a welfare person or whatever. At least I'm staying afloat. That's how a lot of us are forced to live—one step in front of welfare. I don't know...I still believe in the American Dream. I have to. I mean, it's always came through for guys like me.

Luke's words—like Matt's—also acknowledge a sense of faith in the American Dream. However, this faith is tested by the socioeconomic reality that Matt's job (which he is not fond of) is not allowing for him to live in a decent home, and Luke feeling like he is only “one step in front of welfare.” For men like Matt and Luke, something is wrong with how the American Dream currently functions. They are working hard, but are not experiencing a standard of living that enables them to feel as though they have reached the American Dream.

Ironically, the two men of this group of five participants that believe they are living the American Dream are the two that believe it does not exist. Expressed earlier in his narrative above, Don feels as though he has what he always dreamed about—a home and financial stability. However, Don adamantly expressed his opinion that the American Dream no longer exists, stating:

The American Dream is no more, or at least not for hardworking Americans like myself. The rich people can live it, but guys like me—we got no shot. So they're [rich] living it, but that's about it. I mean there are ways to live a form of the American Dream today, but it's not really *the* American Dream. I see folks on welfare living the good life every day. They come into the grocery store and they buy all sorts of fancy and expensive things. They are scamming us and they don't even have to work. So yep, the rich CEO and the welfare folks—they are living the American Dream, but not us. That's not how things worked back in the day, and they aren't the way things are supposed to be working in America today. It should be that if you work hard and are loyal to the flag then you get the American Dream. Now all you have to do is have a rich daddy or head down and pick up your welfare check. It really pisses me off.

Don's comments begin to demonstrate the complexities and intersections between race, class and gender that exists within the white working class male narratives. The American Dream is "no more," but only for "hardworking Americans" like Don. The rich and "folks on welfare" are experiencing the American Dream. They are "scamming" hardworking U.S. citizens—"guys like me"—as Don puts it. Class, race and gender are interesting and flowing together right underneath the surface of this narrative. The elite and welfare folks are classed (elite) and raced (welfare folks)³⁴ *Others*, who together, are unraveling the American Dream as it should function, and at the expense of U.S. hardworking guys (gender) like Don. Essentially, the de-coded narrative that Don presents reads: the elite and communities of color are cheating the U.S. white workingman out of his American Dream. Thus, the chance to achieve the American Dream no longer exists for white workingmen in the United States.

Jeff too claims that the American Dream does not exist, yet his analysis is more systemic in nature and rooted within class antagonism.

No one realizes what is actually going on around here, because they're too caught up in all the propaganda that the media is spreading. They think I'm crazy. I'm crazy? Yeah right, I'm not the one that owns three cars on a \$40,000 annual salary. People here in the U.S. have bought into the idea that you need material things to live a happy life, and so they buy a lot of shit. And while they do that nothing in their life is changing except for the size of their T.V. They still don't feel satisfied. That's the beauty of the American Dream...there's not actual cut off point or way of knowing if you have achieved it. As a result, you just keep buying stuff thinking one day you'll look around and say "I made it." It's a dream Joe. It doesn't exist in the real world.

Thus, for Jeff the American Dream is a farce. It only exists to perpetuate consumerism and maintain the status quo in U.S. society. Jeff, having previously expressed that he feels as though

³⁴ This will be further explained in section three of this chapter.

he's "happy" with his life and financial situation, sees the American Dream as an unattainable idea created by the "media and corporate America."

While Jeff and Don's narratives on the American Dream vary from one another and are different from that of Luke, Matt, and clearly Frank, there is a consensus—to a degree—that the American Dream is not functioning in the ideal manner in which it should. The question that needs answering still is why? The answer becomes clearer as participant narrative are more fully presented and examined. Through gaining more insight and clarity the emerging stories of these men become less coded and clearer in terms of their implications of the ways in which race, class and gender are playing out within these white working class men's minds. These men feel that they are losing out of the American Dream, because they are stuck between the exploitive elite and a threatening racial *Other*.

These classed and racialized stories are intertwined and positioned in relationship to participants' racial, class, and gender conceptions of themselves. They, as white working class men, feel alienated from more than just the American Dream. They feel alienated from their whiteness and their manhood through their class positioning as wage slaves. All of this shall be demonstrated within the following narrative blocs, which will be analyzed in sections two and three.

Bloc Narratives:

For sections two and three, which focus on participant narratives class and racial antagonism, bloc narratives from each of the participants shall be relied upon. Intersectional analyses of racialized and classed language shall be applied to each bloc narrative, and reinforced with supplemental evidence from participant narratives. In the end, it will be clear

that these white working class men recognize a level of dependency and oppression from the elite (government and affluent class), yet transmit their frustration surrounding class oppression into racially violent narratives against communities of color both within the United States and abroad. It is within this intersectional analysis that the crisis of white working class men in the United States begins to emerge. Below are each participant's bloc narratives.

Bloc Narratives

It's all about greed and laziness. People at the top and bottom are taking advantage of us hardworking guys in the middle. The companies ship our jobs overseas, the Chinese take our jobs, and the lazy foreigners come here and go on welfare. You tell me Joe, how is a guy like me supposed to even get a shot at the American Dream today with the way things are going? I'm just glad I'm not a young man like you in this economy, because, you sir, are screwed...

Don:

I mean all this might get avoided if the government started to help us guys out. Then maybe we'd have a shot, but the way things are now—like I said—we got no shot at the American Dream. If you don't believe me look at our trading with China. All the agreements favor the Chinese. They get the goods and we're stuck buying they're cheap products that are produced by giving away our damn jobs. It's too lopsided. How did we get here? I mean, how did we get to the point where hardworking folks like you and me have no options...no chances to live a decent life in our own country? I'm not really sure what the answer is except that I do think the government is going to have start listening to us and ignoring the CEOs. If they don't start listening to us soon then let me tell you...we're going to get to a point where we aren't going to take it no more. I for one am almost at that point.

Frank:

The American Dream still exists, but I will admit that Americans are losing out on the American Dream because we're forced to pay for the expenses of foreigners, and I mean foreigners here in the United States and outside our borders. I mean you see it with the outsourcing to China and Asia. The companies are trying to make money and I understand that, but it gets a little tricky when they are sending so many jobs overseas. Sometimes I get frustrated and I feel like saying something. Like if you're going to sell us out to the Chinese then why don't you go over there and live. So, maybe at times I feel like some of our companies are selling us out. It'll work out in the end...

They'll realize soon that it's Americans like us that make this country what it is. The Chinese can compete with numbers, but we got quality hardworking men here. I still see a bright future for the U.S., because we've always come out on top. I have a good life and enjoy my job, because I lived my life according to the American way. Some folks just don't have what it takes to do that. They don't want to assimilate, or would rather just not work. Usually, I'd say fine by me waste your life away, but now it's beginning to be a bit of a problem. If we can't make sure things here and abroad are going to be done the proper way then well...I don't know...American's are going to suffer. Fortunately, we haven't gotten too far away from our ideals so I think we'll all be okay.

Jeff:

Now society's come for every man for himself. All this type of thinking started with the recession in the seventies when a lot of union workers got laid off. A lot of shops closed and people went to non-union shops and gradually—this happened over a long period of time—you had a new generation being born that hasn't really seen unions work. Now all people see unions in a bad light. That's really hurt us working guys a lot. It's a process too. It didn't just happen overnight. I know this because I read and I listen to the older folks who did see these things...

Most people around here just listen to Fox news and get sound bites to regurgitate. The republicans and the corporations have turned worker against worker. That's a common strategy they've used since the beginning of time. I mean it's crazy how well it works. You've got people struggling day by day just to scrape by. Part of it is poor financial planning on their part, but you can't blame them. They don't know. Most of it can get blamed on the folks running the show—the politicians and the corporations. They've gotten us into a mess with these wars and with the Chinese. They shipped our jobs overseas to Asia, and now they are starting to come back, but it's not because the economy is getting better over here. It's just getting cheaper to manufacture in the U.S. We're falling down to a third world country. Now, no one will admit it, but that's because they're afraid to admit that the American worker is becoming as bad as the Chinese worker. He's just as exploitable. I wish we could better organize here.

It's just too tough in the U.S. We're just too diverse. Sometimes I think it's been orchestrated over the years by the corporate mentality as a way to keep us all in check. I mean diversity isn't necessarily a bad thing, but when it comes to getting us working Americans in check it can really divide us. There are just too many different types of people here in the country. The American working class can't unite in this environment.

Luke:

The majority of people I know are struggling just to pay bills, because there are no jobs around here. It's especially difficult for folks with families. The bills are just adding up to more than what most people can chew, you know. Regular Americans have to give up so much because of this economy and the world we live in that they don't have anything to look forward to. I'd like to go out and buy a Camaro just like anybody else would, but it's just impossible now. It's too much. Just look at how much things cost nowadays.

Like gas, look at the gas prices out there. A lot of it has to do with those ragheads and the war, and don't get me wrong I know we have to bring them to justice and all, but come on we need help. The government has to help us out and stop listening to the corporations' oil needs. There's got to be a way to fix this mess. I just don't think the politicians are really trying to, you know. I don't think they, or any of the higher up folks in the companies, want to fix it. They think about themselves more than anything else and they do all this while regular Americans are struggling to survive. They'd rather go off to war and get oil or give a Chinese guy a job than an American. It's depressing to think about what we've become.

I just hope it's possible to fix all of our problems. I mean I understand it's a tough world out there with China buying up all our debt and the terrorists and whatever, but come on...look who's paying for it the most. It's me. It's American citizens who were born here, who work hard and pay taxes. It all just irks me...it really does.

Matt:

Things have been changing around here that's for sure. They will probably keep changing and changing for the worst. I mean I feel like everything here in the U.S. has changed so much from when I was a kid. The government in general is—I don't know—run different. Like I can't think of anything specific off the top of my head, but it just doesn't seem to be working you know. Like, it doesn't really care about regular Americans that much anymore. I just feel like everything is different.

Nothing helps out us Americans anymore. I think it's greed. Yeah, greed for sure. People with money in this country only care about themselves and couldn't give two shits about the rest of us. Sorry, I know I'm getting a little frustrated right now. It's just, I don't know what we're supposed to do. There's no way a guy like me can ever be rich like them, but they won't help me out. So, what am I, or any other working guy, supposed to do? It'll never change either. I mean you've got the rich telling the government exactly what to do more or less, and then you got people on welfare draining out the rest of our pockets. What's the average working American supposed to do? What am I supposed to do? I think we're fucked.

Section #2: Class Matters

In reading the bloc narratives it is clear that there exists a level of antagonism directed at corporate America and the U.S. government. Participants recognize that part of the blame for the economic plight of “hardworking guys in the middle (Don)” needs to be placed upon the political and economic elite in the United States. This section will examine participant narratives’ focus on how the elite are contributing to the socio-economic disadvantaging of the U.S. white working class men.

Even Frank, who has been adamant that the American Dream is properly functioning, is aware that “Americans are losing out on the American Dream” due to U.S. companies selling “us” out to the Chinese. The “us,” who is being betrayed by U.S. companies, are white working class men,³⁵ and Frank expresses “frustration” surrounding the U.S. corporate outsourcing of U.S. manufacturing jobs. This frustration is expressed collectively by other participant narratives. Explaining how “regular Americans have” been forced to “give up so much in this economy,” Luke points to the U.S. government and demands that it “has to help *us* out and stop listening to the corporations’ oil needs.” He acknowledges a fear that the politicians do not genuinely want to help out “regular Americans,” lamenting:

I don’t think they [politicians] or any of the higher up folks in the companies want to fix it [economy]. They think about themselves more than anything else, and they do all this while regular Americans are struggling to survive. They’d rather go off to war and get oil or give a Chinese guy a job than an American.

³⁵ Frank’s use of “us” throughout his narratives is being interpreted as a racially coded word that is represented in post-Civil Rights U.S. racial discourse as colorblind racist language. For more information on colorblind racism see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. This use of colorblind racist language exists throughout participant narratives and shall be further unpacked in section three of this chapter.

Matt uses similar language, referring to how the U.S. government has changed for the worse, causing “regular Americans” to suffer by losing out on the American Dream’s material comforts:

People with money in this country only care about themselves and couldn’t give two shits about the rest of us. Sorry, I know I’m getting a little frustrated right now. It’s just, I don’t know what we’re supposed to do. There’s no way a guy like me can ever be rich like them, but they won’t help me out. So, what am I, or any other working guy, supposed to do? It’ll never change either. I mean you’ve got the rich telling the government exactly what to do more or less, and then you got people on welfare draining out the rest of the money in our pockets. What’s the average working American supposed to do? What am I supposed to do? I think we’re fucked.

Matt’s commentary on the intertwined relationship between U.S. corporate interests and the interests of the U.S. governments, and its effects on “regular Americans” expresses further frustrations coming from these white working men. Matt complicates the socio-economic plight of “regular”/white Americans by introducing “people on welfare” as contributing to “draining out the rest of the money in *our* [emphasis mine] pockets.”

It is this positioning of “regular”/white American workers between the elite and “people on welfare”/people of color that frames these white working class males’ racialized class perceptions; it places whites in the United States in the economic bind that they are currently in, making them incapable of achieving the American Dream. This middle positioning of white workingmen can be summarized as: the participants feel caught between the elite and the racial *Other*, who collectively reduce the agency of U.S. white working class men to pursue and achieve the American Dream, or even secure an acceptable standard of living.

Don validates this reading of Frank, Luke and Matt’s narratives, stating:

People at the top and bottom are taking advantage of us hardworking guys in the middle. The companies ship our jobs overseas, the Chinese take our jobs, and the lazy foreigners come here and go on welfare. You tell me Joe, how is a guy like me supposed to even get a shot at the American Dream today with the way things are going? I’m just glad I’m not a young man like you in this economy, because you sir are screwed. I mean

all this might get avoided if the government started to help us guys out. Then maybe we'd have a shot, but the way things are now—like I said—we got no shot at the American Dream.

He continues the trend of implicating the elite in his, and “hardworking guys” like him, struggle to achieve the American Dream by questioning:

How did we get here? I mean, how did we get to the point where hardworking folks like you and me have no options...no chances to live a decent life in our own country? I'm not really sure what the answer is except that I do think the government is going to have start listening to us and ignoring the CEOs. If they don't start listening to us soon then let me tell you...we're going to get to a point where we aren't going to take it no more. I for one am almost at that point.

Don's questions end with a threat to the U.S. government in which he states that if they do not listen to “us soon...we're going to get to a point where we aren't going to take it no more (Don, 2013).” This threat from Don reflects the real and growing frustration that exists within the participants narratives, and can point to a growing crisis amongst white workingmen in the United States collectively.

Overall, it is clear that the white men recognize the political and economic elite as powerful forces in causing some of the economic struggles inhibiting them from achieving the elusive American Dream. Jeff discusses how the conservative elite have been pitting the U.S. working class against itself since the 1970s. During this period workers' unions were undermined, lending to the current state in which “republicans and the corporations have turned worker against worker.” Although Jeff acknowledges individual “poor financial planning” as a piece of the problem affecting working class Americans, he states clearly that:

Most of it can get blamed on the folks running the show—the politicians and the corporations. They've gotten us into a mess with these wars and with the Chinese. They shipped our jobs overseas to Asia, and now they are starting to come back, but it's not because the economy is getting better over here. It's just getting cheaper to manufacture in the U.S. We're falling down to a third world country. Now, no one will

admit it, but that's because they're afraid to admit that the American worker is becoming as bad as the Chinese worker. He's just as exploitable. I wish we could better organize here.

It's just too tough in the U.S. We're just too diverse. Sometimes I think it's been orchestrated over the years by the corporate mentality as a way to keep us all in check. I mean diversity isn't necessarily a bad thing, but when it comes to getting us working Americans in check it can really divide us. There are just too many different types of folks here in the country. The American working class can't unite in this environment.

Overall, part of the question of why these white working class men believe "regular Americans" cannot achieve the American Dream is answered within this section. It is an issue of class—the political and economic elite are not serving the "American worker's" interests, because they are more interested in serving their own. Moreover, there is a recognition that the interests of U.S. corporations and government have melded deeply together, resulting in a loss of the American workers' financial security. Financial insecurity is expressed in outright frustration by the men participating in this study. They feel alienated from the American Dream, because of the actions and betrayal of corporate America and the U.S. government.

However, the class antagonism is muddled within the bloc narratives with clear racialized language.³⁶ Much of the racialized language is coded. Utilization of terms such as "us" and "regular Americans" can be interpreted as simply meaning white Americans, specifically white male Americans. This coded language becomes clearly recognizable as racialized language, as the bloc narratives are clarified and reinforced by supplemental stories that are more overtly racial. Analysis of this racialized language is more clearly presented in section three of this chapter, where it becomes clear that, as white men, participants feel threatened by people of color, who are taking white male jobs (overseas) and draining the U.S. economy as

³⁶ For instance, Jeff points to diversity as undermining "American"/white workers' ability to unite, while also expressing a fear of the American worker becoming as bad as the Chinese worker. This demonstrates a different framing of the middle positioning of white workingmen in the United States.

welfare recipients/dependents. This perception of a racial threat serves as the root of white male racial feelings of alienation from the American Dream.

Section 3: Race Matters

The bloc narratives provide clear intersectional narratives that demonstrate how these white workingmen see their racial and class positioning within the global and U.S. domestic economies. The role of the elite has already been well documented as having betrayed the “American” worker by pursuing its own economic interests via outsourcing selling out the American/white worker. Complicating these narratives are communities of color living in the United States and abroad, which are contributing to the undermining of “regular”/white Americans capacity to achieve the American Dream. The domestic racial threat is exacerbated by the threat of communities of color abroad, who receive “white” jobs from U.S. corporations/government. It is this broadly defined racial threat that serves as the perceived root of white male alienation from the American Dream, and ultimately underpins the crisis of these white male narratives. This section seeks to unpack the racial undertones that exist in the narrative blocs of these white men, and reinforce them with supplemental racial stories that highlight racial antagonism within participants’ words and thoughts.

Each man participating in this study identified—either overtly or through racially coded language—a racial threat to “regular”/white working Americans. After clarifying questions on how one can tell if someone is a “regular American” it became clear that terms such as “regular,” “average,” “hardworking,” and “American” were coded by participants to mean white U.S. citizens. Moreover, each participant responded to the overarching question of the role race played in being able to achieve the American Dream by claiming that whites were

victims in contemporary U.S. society and, as whites, they were unfairly alienated from the American Dream. These points are demonstrated broadly within the narrative blocs, and shall be further unpacked within this third section of Chapter Four.

Don and Matt highlight the middle position that white workers inhabit between the elite and people of color. For instance, Don points to “lazy foreigners” on welfare and the Chinese “that steal *our*”/white jobs. Matt targets the same racial threats that have him asking questions such as, “what’s the average working American supposed to do?” In the end when asked to clarify who, racially, the “welfare people” are, both Don and Matt signify African-Americans as being “welfare people.” As Matt puts it “well...I guess they’re black people.” Thus, the former racially-neutral “welfare people” become expressed as “black people.” Once this point is openly clarified during the interviews the coded language displayed in the bloc narratives gives way to overt racialized language and narratives. Additionally, it became clear that these white men perceived themselves and other whites as victims of a world, where the corporate elite—out of pure greed—were handing the United States over to communities of color at the expense of U.S. white workers. Expressions of this phenomenon generated a great deal of anxiety, frustration and anger within participants that translated into overly racist narratives.

Frank, who remained calm and even toned throughout his discussion of the American Dream, erupted when asked whether, presently, race played a role in being able to achieve the American Dream.

No! If you’re willing to work for it [American Dream] it’s there. I really don’t like that type of question. Don’t take it personal or nothing it’s just I hear it all over the news and from the Nig—I mean blacks—that work here. If anything whites are becoming the minority here in America, and everything protects the other races. It used to be that for a minority you had to work hard like everybody else to get the American Dream. It’s

reversed now. If you're black then you're going to be able to slack and walk into it [American Dream].

Frank's near use of a racial slur points to his heightened frustration. His overtly racial language, coupled with his expression of white victimization, emphasize his deep concern surrounding how he perceives whiteness's ability to survive financially in the United States. There exists a deep sense of insecurity and fear within Frank's words.

This white fear is expressed by Don, who shares a story about picking up a check at the bank. Don prefaces his story by informing me that "we [whites] are the minority now, and not the blacks."

I had an experience that I want to share with you, because I know what I've said might seem politically incorrect so I want to support it. Anyways, I had to go pick up a check at the bank a little while ago. So, I'm standing there in line. I'd been there for like ten minutes, and before I go on...I just think for the most part....most of them [African-Americans] are rude and inconsiderate. So like I said, I'm standing in line at the bank and this black woman comes with head phones on, listening to her rap music, and I'm standing there waiting for my turn to go to the teller's desk, and she—like I didn't even exist—cuts right in front of me. Now, I can't ever remember treating anybody like that. I don't care what they were. I can never remember being that rude to anybody. Why they feel they have the right to do that is beyond me. Yeah, I do think that they are more prejudiced and racist than we are. I really believe that. Add all of the that to the fact that they get special treatment, and well...now you understand why white men like me are at a disadvantage in this country.

Of course no one believes that. Everybody says that blacks are a disadvantaged, but I don't believe that for one minute. I don't believe that they were ever that way, and do you know why? Because, they for years sit on their butts and did absolutely nothing and the white man supported them. Have they ever returned the favor for us? Will they ever? No, they won't. I know they won't. They'll sit on their ass and collect welfare like they always do and always have done.

Don expresses clear violence and racial animosity towards the African-American woman in his story and African-Americans collectively in the United States. His story is informed by the false racial epistemology discussed in Mills' *The Racial Contract*. In addition, reading between the lines it is clear that Don's story represents white masculine insecurity. The black female body

steps in front of him—the white male—as if he was invisible, replacing him in line and having her financial needs met before him; read alongside the narratives presented previously throughout this chapter and a clear analogy forms. The teller represents the elites within the United States that service communities of color needs before that of the white man. This experience generates clear racial antagonism along with white male insecurity, as Don follows his story with a racist narrative meant to reassert white male dominance: the white man has always supported “them.” This white violence and white insecurity will be further unpacked in Chapter Five.

It is within these overtly racialized stories that the insecurities surrounding white working class men begin to unfold. Luke teeters back and forth between reverse racist dialogue and assertions that he is not a racist in his expressions of white insecurity.

I guess I feel like it sucks that we still have to talk about race here in America, because we already dealt with this you know. I mean if anything I think white people are the ones being attacked. White people are becoming the poorest in the U.S. I could have seen this coming years ago. You can't talk about it, because then you'd be politically incorrect or racist, but the fact is how can we [whites] be successful with affirmative action policies and the fear of being called racists. We can't do anything. America is supposed to be a country based off equality and freedom. Hard work is supposed to be how you achieve the American Dream, but now it just seems like we give everybody but whites special treatment, because they're colored. And then, the companies ship the jobs that are left over to China. I mean, if I say this to anyone else then I'm a racist, but I mean come on it's true.

Don't get me wrong I'm not a racist. A human being is a human being. I just don't want to see anyone get special treatment, whites included. The best worker should get the job. Sure it irks me when I see a black guy working, because I think “affirmative action.” I wouldn't think that if it didn't exist. In fact, now that I think of it maybe if they do away with affirmative action and I saw a black guy working I'd gain more respect for them. I mean if they got a job without special treatment that would mean that they were actually working hard and not on welfare. I wouldn't maybe have all these thoughts or...I guess assumptions about black people on welfare. I'd see him and say “he's working hard just like me.” There, I solved race in American (laughs). I just want a fair shake like everybody else.

Luke expresses the American Dream as it should be in his eyes, and then identifies it as it exists presently through his white male eyes. As a white man, Luke feels lost as to what to do and how to pursue the American Dream that he outlined so confidently before. Hard work is no longer enough for him—as a white man—to be able to achieve the American Dream today, and it is because people of color (African-Americans specifically) in the United States and abroad (Chinese) are receiving special treatment. For these white working class men the American Dream is not functioning.

Jeff, in his comments in the bloc narratives, points to how race may function to undermine the American working class. His idea that diversity in the United States may have been orchestrated by the elite to divide the United States working class, while demonstrating a strong class awareness, becomes problematic when he establishes diversity as a problem. The fact that there exists “too many different types of people here in the country,” that create an environment where “the American working class can’t unite” demonstrates a limited scope of class solidarity in Jeff’s mind. Moreover, while Jeff refrained from overtly racialized language, he clearly reflects a racially charged fear regarding the Chinese. His fear is that, because of the process of outsourcing and deindustrialization, the “American,”/white worker is becoming “as bad as the Chinese worker.” The imagery of the white U.S. worker falling down to the level of the Chinese links Jeff’s narratives with the collective fears of the white men presented in this chapter.

Collectively, the narratives in this section establish the existence of clear racial antagonism within these white working class male narratives. Much of it was coded initially, however, the narratives became overtly racial as Don, Frank, Jeff, Luke and Matt began to

further delve into the ways in which the experience race and class in their day to day lives. These raced and classed perceptions of lived experience generated narratives about the American Dream that express U.S. white working class men as victims caught in between an exploitative elite class and a threatening and parasitic racial *Other*. This positioning leaves them with questions of what to do, and a sense of lack of agency. It is here that a gender analysis can be introduced to the narratives presented in this chapter.

Masculinity: Gender Matters

Before delving too deeply into this sections' presentation of the narratives, it needs to be acknowledged that gender, while in existence within these narratives, was not as directly expressed or discussed within the participant's narratives. Part of this can be attributed to myself as the research. Looking back there were a number of instances in which I could have asked better follow up/clarification questions to help guide participants towards discussing their gender identity more. Nevertheless, gender—specifically masculinity—clearly informs these white workingmen's narratives.

For one, there are clear examples throughout the narratives of gendered language. The majority of the men interviewed within this study utilized gender exclusive language such as "guys" to describe their workplaces. This gendered language erases women from the workplace and plays into widespread patriarchal beliefs that men are the primary laborers in the United States. Jeff erases women in his discussions about class in the United States, stating that "society's come for every man for himself." In addition to gendered language that obscures women's role within the economy, there exists sexually violent language that associated the female gender with complaining and/or being incapable of achieving the American Dream.

Frank in particular, utilized words such as “bitching” to describe those that could not adhere to the “American lifestyle” that enabled one to achieve the American Dream. Under this line of thinking then, one could interpret Frank’s language to indicate that women are incapable of achieving the American Dream, as well as emasculating workers of color who were participating in “bitching.” Future work focused on unpacking sexually violent language could help solidify these claims.

The roots of this white male sexist language, as well as the racist language presented previously, could be tied to masculinity to further complicate understandings of gender’s role in constructing U.S. white workingmen’s racial, class and gender perceptions of the American Dream. Masculinity can be implicated as informing the narratives of this project specifically in the presentation of questions by Don, Frank, Jeff, Luke and Matt. Throughout the narratives a number of the men ask me directly what they are supposed to do. Don asks me by name “you tell me Joe, how is a guy like me supposed to even get a shot at the American Dream today with the way things are going?” Matt too asks a question after stating that “there’s no way a guy like me can ever be rich like them [the elite], but they won’t help me out. So, what am I, or any other working guy, supposed to do (Matt, 2013)?” He answers his own question by claiming “I think we’re fucked.” Luke sees the world in the same light as the rest of the men, explaining how it is guys like him that are “paying for it the most” in the current economy.

The questions raised by Luke, Matt and Jeff, coupled with the collective perception that it is “guys like me” that are bearing the brunt of the weight in the current economy, demonstrate the existence of a masculine crisis. They ask these questions because they do not have answers. These men feel vulnerable, afraid, and insecure. This fear, insecurity and

vulnerability lend itself to a level of analysis in regards to their conceptions of themselves as men. Hegemonic masculinity dictates that these men should not be asking questions; rather they should act like “men” and represent themselves as tough, aggressive, in control, and independent. The very act of questioning what one should demonstrates a level of insecurity.³⁷

Most important, however, to understanding the crisis affecting these white working class men is the proximity of these questions to racial and class based antagonistic language. Right before asking how a guy is “supposed to even get a shot at the American Dream” Don is explaining how “people at the top [elite] and bottom [people of color] are taking advantage of *us* hardworking guys in the middle.” Following this question, towards the end of his bloc narrative, Don warns these two groups that they had better “start listening to *us* soon” otherwise “we’re going to get to a point where we aren’t going to take it no more.” The question lies in the middle of racially classed antagonistic language, which points to how masculine insecurity can turn quickly into masculine aggression and threats. Reading this narrative flow through a masculinity lens, the perceived dual-threat of the elite and communities of color creates an instance of masculine insecurity that is then covered through a reassertion of masculinity via an ominous threat.

Emotion—a phenomenon that can be read as an antithesis of hegemonic masculinity³⁸—encases instances of masculine insecurity as well. Luke becomes “irked” when identifying himself as the one paying for the government’s wars and suffering from outsourcing.

³⁷ For definition of hegemonic masculinity see: R.W. Connell’s *Masculinities*, *The Social Organization of Masculinity*, and *The History of Masculinity*; Other reading to consider for a general understanding of masculinity is: Richard Dyer’s *The White Man’s Muscles*; Arthur Brittan’s *Masculinities and Masculinism*; and John MacInnes’ *The Crisis of Masculinity and the Politics of Identity*. (Connell, 2001) (Brittan, 2001) (MacInnes, 2001) (Connell, *Masculinities*, 1995) (Connell, *The History of Masculinity*, 2002) (Dyer, 2002)

³⁸ Read Connell’s *The History of Masculinity* and *Masculinities* for a better understanding of emotion and hegemonic masculinities.

Matt, when questioning what to do, summarizes his perceived position by claiming that guys like him are “fucked.” Frank becomes frustrated when asked to talk about the role that race plays within one being able to achieve the American Dream. Overall, throughout the interviews emotion erupts at points in which these white men feel victimized or express doubt in the current state American Dream. These outbursts of emotion speak to the potential existence of a masculine insecurity within these white working class male narratives. Again, further research needs to be done to further this project’s understanding of the role that masculinity plays in the minds and perceptions of white workingmen in the United States.

Conclusion:

While this chapter is not without its limitations, it expresses the voices of a group of white working class men as they were told to me. What these men’s narratives help explain is a collective story. As a white man with similar experiences, I, too, know this story. This white male workers’ story unfolds throughout the sections of this chapter.

The first section tells about how things should be, or how they used to be in the United States. The American Dream was readily available to and experienced by white workingmen. These men tell us that to get the American Dream you have to earn it through hard work and adherence to an American lifestyle. As this part of the story began to unfold it became clear that the American Dream was one for white men. However, the story shifted towards the end of the section to express a white male fear that the American Dream may not be functioning as it should in the United States and for them—the “real” Americans.

Sections two and three explain the American Dream as it exists today. It is no longer available for “real”/white American working men. This is because of the actions of the elite and

people of color. In this telling of the story U.S. white male workers are victims, trapped between two threatening groups. This victimized state explains why they are not experiencing the American Dream and rationalizes their class position as wage slaves. The story becomes further complicated in section four, which imagines masculinity's role in informing this story. They are supposed to feel like white men, meaning they are not supposed to be asking questions like "what can I do?" Instead they are supposed to feel in control, yet they cannot, because they are stuck between the elite and people of color.

Taken together, the story that these white workingmen tell in this chapter is one in which they are the victims of a traitorous elite and a threatening racial *Other*. This story is simple in its presentation; however, there exists complexity behind its telling. The complexity lies in the intersections of the white working men's identities, which are informed and embattled within the dominant epistemologies and narratives of white supremacy.

Chapter Five: Cycle of White Crisis

The previous chapter presented the voices of the white working class men that this research project engages with and listens to. Their intersecting racial, class and gender narratives combine to produce a story of victimization, where U.S. white working class men are left wondering how they could ever hope to achieve the American Dream under the current conditions in the United States today. On the surface this story is a simple one. This chapter seeks to complicate this story by looking beyond its presentation in Chapter Four to the ways in which the participant narratives are caught within an ideological crisis with white supremacy. Specifically, this chapter will demonstrate how the racially inverted epistemology of white supremacy is simultaneously challenged and reproduced within the narratives of these white working class men through the paradoxical reality that they are concurrently professing truth and white supremacist ideology in their positioning of themselves as victims caught between the elite and communities of color.³⁹ What results from this paradox should produce both trepidation and hope for those engaged in social justice work. We should be wary of the fact that this internal crisis of white working class men serves as the crux from which white supremacy and its violence is reproduced through their narratives. However, within this same crisis lies opportunity to engage with white working class men and rearticulate their racialized frustrations by reconciling their internal crises, grounded within their complex social positioning, in ways that does not enact white male violence.

³⁹ The rationale of this point is collectively informed by David Roediger's middle positioning of the U.S. white working class, Charles Mills's inverted racial epistemology, and the psychological wage as presented originally by W.E.B. Du Bois and furthered through the work of D. Roediger, Pem Buck and T.H. Breen. Together these scholars help to aid an analysis of the victimized middle positioning (Roediger) in which the inverted epistemology of white supremacy exists (Mills) and is challenged through the questioning of the psychological wage (Du Bois). The ways in which these scholars specifically contribution to the discussion within this chapter shall be demonstrated throughout this chapter's analysis.

Aware of the fragile place in which these white men find themselves, this chapter begins the difficult work of unpacking the crises within the narratives presented in Chapter Four. It starts with a complicating of the story presented in Chapter Four through reframing it using concepts presented earlier—namely Mills’ racial epistemology and the psychological wage. In addition, a discussion of the ways in which their masculine identities may exacerbate this crisis follows the larger discussion of the ways in which participant’s racial and class identities are caught within a Cycle of White Crisis. Following this, the chapter will present a theoretical lens for understanding the crisis within the story as it is currently informing the narratives of these white workingmen. This second section will discuss how the white workingmen participating in this study are caught within a Cycle of White Crisis in which their conflict with the ideology of white supremacy actually perpetuates their participation in white supremacist thoughts, narratives, and behavior. Finally, this chapter will close by explaining how the Cycle might be broken. During this final section narratives that challenge white supremacist ideology shall be presented to offer a message of hope.

Despite much of the ugliness found in the narratives presented in Chapter Four there is reason to hope. Don, Frank, Jeff, Luke and Matt all recognize that something is not adding up with the dominant narrative of white supremacy. They are beginning to question its promises to them. These questions have answers and, while this project has no concrete solutions, it does have something to offer them. It can validate their feeling of alienation from the American Dream, because of their class positioning. It can nod in agreement that indeed the corporate elite are exploiting them. However, it must critically engage and challenge the racial and gendered violence in which they are participating in, while recognizing that the power to

become part of the solution to combating racism, sexism and classism in the United States lies ultimately within them and not academia. With this in mind, the complicated discussion and unpacking of the crisis of these white working class male narratives can begin.

Situating the Narratives Within Whiteness Studies:

This section specifically examines the meaning behind the narratives' positioning of white working class men as victims caught in between the elite and communities of color, as well as how this middle positioning of white working class men relates and complicates concepts presented in Chapter Two. First and foremost, the middle positioning is reminiscent of Roediger's historical analysis in *The Wages of Whiteness*.⁴⁰ For this project this middle positioning expressed in the narratives of Don, Frank, Jeff, Luke and Matt serves as the space in which white supremacy is reproduced and challenged. While Roediger does an excellent job in expressing the fears of the U.S. white working class in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this project can map out contemporary expressions of white working class male fears of being caught in this middle positioning between the elite and communities of color. This allows for a discussion of the ways in which white supremacy exists currently in the lives of white working class men, as well as for the opportunity to suggest how these men may be able to break its hold on their thoughts, narratives, and behavior.

⁴⁰ Within *The Wages of Whiteness* Roediger notes as a subtheme the dual fear that the U.S. white working class feels towards the landed elite and African slaves. Having only been a generation or so removed from indentured servitude, the poor white working class in the United States during the 1780-1850s had an intimate memory of a class status within minimal autonomy and maximum oppression. This past experience, according to Roediger, created a dual animosity against the gentry elite and African slaves that often produced a strategies of securing their own socioeconomic standing via participating in racially exclusive and oppressive politics. This middle positioning, presented by Roediger, is expressed in the narratives of this project and has helped to frame the narratives and their complex intersections with race and class, as well as masculinity. For further reading on how this historical self-positioning of the U.S. white working class developed see: P. Buck's *Worked to the Bone: Race, Class, Power and Privilege in Kentucky* and T.H. Breen's *A Changing Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia 1660-1710*. Also, see Chapter Two, pg. 11 for further clarification in this MA Thesis.

The collective narrative presented at the end of Chapter Four, describing this middle positioning of U.S. white working class men, is caught in a crisis with white supremacy. This crisis is entrenched in the fact that the middle positioning, expressed by the men in Chapter Four, is simultaneously grounded in truth (class oppression as wage slaves) and the lies of white supremacy. In other words, Mills' inverted epistemology continues to inform these white workingmen's views of the American Dream, while their class positioning as wages slaves contests its validity.⁴¹ The supposed promises of white supremacy are not being experience by these white working class men, who are beginning to realize through their middle positioning between the elite and the racially oppressed that they, as wage slaves, were never entitled to the full racial privileges of white supremacy.

This burgeoning awareness expresses the white nihilism of Giroux.⁴² Their middle positioning creates white insecurity within these men, which manifests through contradictions within their narratives that point out the inherent flaws of white supremacy as they continue to adhere to its ideological doctrine. Through this contradiction the narratives presented in Chapter Four challenge and maintain the racially inverted epistemology of white supremacy. Unfortunately, even in their challenging of white supremacy the narratives participate in

⁴¹ As a reminder, Mill's inverted epistemology can be described as "an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localizing and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), providing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world that they themselves have made (Mills, 1997, p. 18)." Relating this definition to this project, the narratives of victimization are encased within the inverted epistemology of white supremacy, which allows for a reversed worldview to manifest through the narratives. This reversed worldview presents white working class men as alienated from the American Dream and it's material rewards, when in reality they are overwhelmingly privileged as white men through the structuring and ideology of white supremacy. See also pg. 6 in Chapter Two of this MA Thesis.

⁴² Also complicating the Mills' inverted epistemology and its functioning of allowing white men to feel racially and sexually disenfranchised, is Giroux's white nihilism. The endless pursuit of white perfection, presented by white supremacy, causes a constant "wanting" within whites, as they can never live up to the expectations of whiteness as expressed by white supremacist ideology. Thus, the men in this project are embedded with a false racial epistemology, while pursuing an unattainable feeling of white superiority, which leads to a white insecurity that fuels white violence. See Chapter Two, pg. 17.

violence against communities of color, as well as women. The racial and sexual violence existing within the narratives are participated in, because these men are caught in a Cycle of White Crisis. In attempting to explain why they are alienated from the American Dream and feel powerless, these white working class men are still claiming racial entitlement as whites, which only fuel their crisis. However, while the majority of the narratives perpetuate white supremacy through racially antagonism, the self-positioning of these narratives as caught within a middle space between the elite provides opportunity for these men to begin challenging white supremacy by breaking the Cycle of White Crisis.

Doubting the Psychological Wage:

The participant narratives' conflict within their self-positioning between the elite and communities of color ultimately centers on the psychological wage.⁴³ The psychological wage continues to exist and frames the narratives' participation in white supremacy. By this it is meant that the narratives still clearly express the idea that these men feel racially entitled to a standard of living in which they can claim to be living the American Dream. Don expresses this racial claim to the American Dream by stating that white men created it, and therefore should be privileged to the American Dream's rewards.

We made the American Dream what it is. Hell, we made this country what it is today.
So, why is it that white men like me can't seem to get a chance to live it? I'm just asking

⁴³ The psychological wage is defined by Du Bois as a type of "public or psychological wage" provided to poor whites that enabled them more freedoms to operate within the structure and "flattered" them in ways that placed them above and clearly separate from African slaves (Du Bois, 1935, pp. 700-701). Roediger, in discussing the "white wage" provides a Marxist interpretation of the psychological wage, stating that it was developed by the emerging bourgeois/landed elite in the United States in order to wedge apart the "giddy multitude"—namely poor whites and African slaves (Roediger, 1991, p. 23; 59) T.H. Breen defines the "giddy multitude" as "an amalgam of indentured servants and slaves, poor whites and blacks, of landless freeman and debtors" his historical analysis of Bacon's Rebellion (Breen, 1973, p. 3;18). Pem Buck builds on this history in *Worked to the Bone*, arguing that to cover the "fading" material benefits of whiteness for poor whites the elite constructed the psychological wage to keep poor whites from realizing their class oppression and again joining with poor blacks and African slaves (Buck, 2001, p. 35).

for what's fair, okay. We sweat each and every day, and for what? So some CEO can ship our fucking job over to the Chinese?

Jeff, in less overtly racial language, expresses similar sentiments, when he states that “the American worker built this country from the ground up. Moreover, *he* did it without much help, and now it's time that *he* collects what's due.” Luke personalizes this white workingman's claim to the American Dream, stating:

I don't know, I just work so hard. I feel like I'm not living the American Dream, and it sucks because, I don't know, I deserve it you know. I go in to work. I never complain. I do my job, and I do it well. So why do I still feel like I'm stuck? Where's my American Dream?

Frank reminds me that “like I said before, it's an American Dream. So, Americans—people who were born here and who belong here—should be living it.” Matt concludes his interview with a narrative akin to the others, when explaining:

Things have definitely changed in this country. I mean after talking about all this stuff with you I just feel like yeah, it's hard out there for us—for the average American. I hear on the news all the time about people in African or even people in the cities, and how they have it so bad or whatever. I mean my heart goes out to them, but when I really think about it, it seems to me like we've got it just as bad maybe worse. I mean growing up I always thought “I'm American!” Well I don't know what that means anymore. I used to think a guy like me had it pretty good. The more I think about it though...we really don't have shit. So, does the American Dream exist? No, I guess not. I don't think it does anymore. That sucks, because what do I have to work for anymore? My shitty car? My apartment? Shit, I don't know what to do. I just want what's supposed to be mine.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Important to note in both Matt and Jeff's narratives is again the coded and colorblind language. As discussed by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, colorblind language and racism “serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era. And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, pp. 4-5).” Thus, a colorblind reading of these narratives changes the racially ambiguous terms such as “people in the city” to mean not American, and therefore non-white. Thus, through colorblind racist rhetoric the racial encoding and subtle racially violent language (and gender-neutral language) becomes clear.

The narratives presented above demonstrate the psychological wage informing these men's views. White men "made the American Dream" and the United States (Don). The American worker, gendered as male, built the United States independently and has sole claim to the American Dream (Jeff), and why should the U.S. white male worker not be able to get his American Dream when he has worked so hard and been so loyal (Luke). These justifying claims of white workingmen are deeply informed by the psychological wage, which informs these white men---through white supremacist ideology and epistemology---that, as white men, they are racially and sexually entitled to the American Dream. The psychological wage provides the powerful message that "you might be poor, but at least you're white," and, more importantly, as whites they can secure a more capital and have a chance to move up the socioeconomic ladder.⁴⁵

However, despite the U.S. white workingman's imagined creation, entitlement and dedication to the American Dream contract, *he* is not experiencing it. He is powerless to pursue it. Matt's comments presented above, coupled with similar questions of what white workingmen should do presented in Chapter Four, points to a questioning of the psychological wage. Whiteness seems incapable of securing or advancing their socioeconomic status. It can no longer be relied upon. This doubting of the psychological wage informs their belief that they are victims caught between an exploitative elite and a menacing racial *Other*.

⁴⁵ This white hope of socioeconomic progress via the psychological wage is expressed by Breen and Buck (Breen, 1973, p. 17) (Buck, 2001, p. 40).

Incorporating Masculinity:

Further complicating this discussion of the psychological wage is the role that masculinity may play in directing these white workingmen's feelings of victimization. The narratives presented in Chapter Four and those depicted previously in this chapter exhibit a feeling of powerlessness, which can be seen as the antithesis of hegemonic masculine identity.

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as:

The configuration of gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell, *The Social Organization of Masculinity*, 2001, p. 77).

This dominant form of masculinity originates from the Enlightenment, European colonization, and the expansion of capitalist markets during the 18th century (Connell, 2002, p. 247). While the practices and popular images of hegemonic masculinity have changed throughout history, in its fluidity, hegemonic masculinity maintains and norms dominant masculine beings as the epitome of rationality, self-control, and dominance.⁴⁶ Hegemonic men, meaning white men, become viewed through this lens by the mechanisms of patriarchy.

The white workingmen in this study do not feel like men in the hegemonic sense. They are not in control of their lives, they express frustrations and emotion, and perceived themselves as victimized dependents caught between the elite and the racially marginalized. In the end, the narratives of these men represent the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, how does this

⁴⁶ For further reading of this masculine norming process, one should read the work of Joan Acker, who focuses on masculinity's role with Corporate America (Acker, *Class Questions, Feminist Answers*, 2006, pp. 141-144). Acker's work is known throughout Organizational Studies within Sociology, as contributing to the foundational bridging of feminist perspectives within the field. For further reading on her arguments focused on how masculinity becomes "naturalized" within organizations (especially corporate models) see her article *Gender and Organizations* (Acker, *Gender and Organizations*, 1999, p. 184). Also helpful for understanding the relationship between masculine identity and patriarchy is Arthur Brittan's *Masculinities and Masculinism*, which defines masculinism as the ideology of patriarchy from which men attempt to perform a dominant masculine identity (Brittan, 2001, p. 54).

reading of the masculine identity of these white working class men complicate the discussion of the weakening of the psychological wage within their narratives? It indicates that these white working class men are not only doubting their whiteness's ability to ensure their capturing of the American Dream, but also indicates a doubting of themselves as men. Their victimized self-positioning points to a white masculine insecurity, which exacerbates the Cycle of White Crisis. The powerlessness expressed in their narratives implicates masculinity within this project's discussion—a discussion that needs to be advanced through future research projects.

To conclude this section, the white working class men participating in this study express an internal conflict with white supremacy's ideology, specifically its inverted racial epistemology. This conflict can be seen in their positioning of themselves as victims caught between the elite and communities of color, and it rests within their simultaneous challenging and adherence to the psychological wage. This conflict, while challenging white supremacy in some ways, ultimately perpetuates white supremacy through racially antagonistic language as expressed in the narratives presented in Chapter Four. This reproduction of white supremacy occurs, because these men are caught within a Cycle of White Crisis. This Cycle will be broadly drawn out in the following section in order to help facilitate a greater understanding of why these white working class men are trapped in reproducing an ideology that implicates them within its violence as they simultaneously inflict violence on themselves.

Cycle of White Crisis:

The Cycle of White Crisis operates within instances in which the dominant ideology of white supremacy intersects with experiences that undermine and challenge its tenants. That is to say, it is fueled through white ideological conflicts within white supremacy. A white

“wanting” that is framed within white supremacy, and expressed by Giroux’s white nihilism, best represents this conflict.⁴⁷ These white workingmen recognize the gaps between white supremacist ideology and their lived experiences as wage slaves, but they still ultimately view the principles of white supremacy as how the world should function. They believe in white supremacy’s inverted racial epistemology and strive towards trying to become elite whites in their pursuit of the American Dream. In doing so, white supremacy remains unchallenged and perpetuated as it is never fully rejected, but only limitedly critiqued.

In actuality, the dominant ideology of white supremacy is still viewed as ideal in the participants of this study’s eyes. They simply want to be further included within its promises, which cannot be accomplished given their current framing of themselves as caught between the elite and communities of color. Thus, white supremacy’s provisions of racial privilege and entitlement, while questioned by these white working class men, still remains truth for these men, because they answer their white questions and doubts through violent racialized language, which situates people of color as the primary targets of their white male frustrations. They still seek the promises of their whiteness, and manliness, through participating in white supremacy. However, this method of coping with their white male crises and insecurity leads them further from the truth, which is that, as members of the U.S. working class, they are never meant to ascend to the stature of the white elite. They will always find themselves “wanting” of the full promises of white supremacy.⁴⁸ They will always be chasing the American Dream, and

⁴⁷ For a definition of Giroux’s white nihilism one can turn to Annalee Newitz’ *White Savagery and Humiliation*, who defines white nihilism as “sense of failure which is separate from, but dialectically related to, white efforts to reign supreme over themselves and non-whites (Newitz, 1997, p. 145).” This is drawn from Giroux’s white nihilism in his work *Insurgent Multiculturalism and the Promise of Pedagogy* (Giroux, 1994, p. 328).

⁴⁸ Again, this idea of “wanting” stems from Giroux’s white nihilism and its discussion in Newitz’s work on white-on-white violence between upper-class whites and poor white trash (Ibid).

unable to grasp it because, while they are white, they are not rich. This endless pursuit of the American Dream utilizing white supremacist narratives represents the Cycle of White Crisis for these U.S. working class white men.

The Cycle of White Crisis is, again, fueled by these men's ideological conflict with white supremacy. This conflict produces two primary responses that are directly dependent upon one another and enable for the continuation of the Cycle. The first response is a feeling of alienation from whiteness and its promises. The second is a need to recapture whiteness by participation in white supremacist thought, behavior and actions, which rationalizes and reinscribes white claims of racial privilege and entitlement. This reclaiming of whiteness remarks the self as white (i.e. as entitled and privileged).⁴⁹ The white working class men participating in this study enact this cycle within their narratives. Their class positioning informs their narrations of white insecurity. Specifically, this white insecurity is signified through the questions and expressions of white victimhood presented in Chapter Four, which is covered through participating in racially exclusive and oppressive language. Thus, alienation from whiteness creates a need to reestablish one's whiteness via participation in white supremacy. This process is visually mapped out in the figure below.

⁴⁹ Important to note is whiteness's fluidity within the Cycle of White Crisis, as it sequences around the sub-consciousness of whites caught within it. This fluidity is noted in historical works of Whiteness Studies—most notably Matthew F. Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Jacobson, 1998, pp. 120-150), and Charles Gallagher's *White Racial Formation: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Gallagher, 1997, pp. 7-8). However, the white fluidity presented within these works is discussed as a gradual dialectical process of whiteness coming to mean different things through changing socioeconomic, political and cultural contexts. The Cycle of White Crisis is discussing whiteness's fluidity in the present and how it becomes lost, remarked, and reasserted in the minds, language and actions of whites in the now, and within individual and groups of whites.

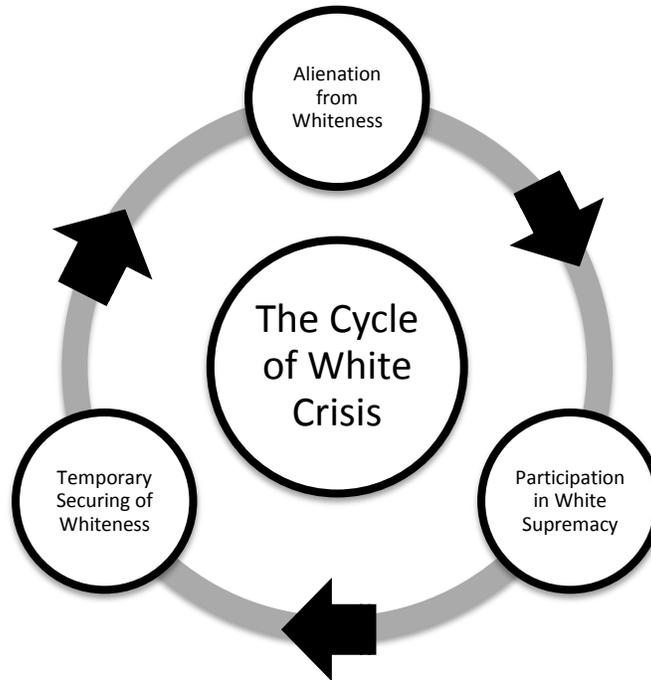


Figure 2: Cycle of White Crisis

This theoretical concept can be applied generally to all whites, and provides a unique way of perceiving whiteness. It enables for a fluid understanding of white identity, as, whites trapped within the Cycle of White Crisis, feel less white in moments of white insecurity and whiter through their reclaiming of it via participating in white supremacy. Again, this Cycle is experienced differently for all whites. The triggers leading to feelings of white insecurity vary depending upon one's class, gender, sexual and other social identities. However, regardless of the triggers or manifestations of white insecurities, the result is the same: the reconciliation of one's whiteness through the participation in white supremacist thought, language and/or actions.

This Cycle remains unbroken for many whites in the United States. It remains unbroken because of white supremacy's pervasive structuring of U.S. society, its institutions, culture and dominant ideology and epistemology. The pervasiveness of white supremacy provides a racial

story of how the world should operate, which becomes complicated through lived experiences of white individuals and groups. These complications of white supremacy offer opportunities for breaking the Cycle, as heightened awareness of the flaws and dominant narrative are created through these breaks between white supremacist ideology and reality. Heightened awareness is the means to fully coming to grips with one's conflict within white supremacy and choosing to actively disrupt it. While such awareness does not exist collectively within the narratives presented in this project, the men participating in this study offer moments of consciousness that can serve as opportunities of engagement. These opportunities could help to facilitate a breakdown of the Cycle of White Crisis. Such hope is expressed briefly within the following section, and rests ultimately with the questioning of the psychological wage of whiteness.

Breaking the Cycle of White Crisis:

As mentioned within the previous section, opportunities for breaking the Cycle of White Crisis lie in increasing the awareness of whites' positioning within white supremacist ideology and structure. For white working class men in the United States this means greater class awareness and an understanding of themselves as being racially and sexually privileged as white men. While this level of awareness is mostly absent within the narratives presented in this project, there still exists opportunity for cultivating greater awareness within the men participating in this project. This opportunity lies within the questioning of the psychological wage, which falls into doubt within these participants' narratives through their victimized middle positioning and their questions, which express a powerlessness that should not exist under white supremacist ideology. The feelings of victimization and powerlessness expressed

by Don, Frank, Jeff, Luke and Matt, while often dealt with through racialized and sexualized violence, demonstrate a questioning of whiteness and its capacity to provide them with the American Dream.

Much of this questioning and doubt translates to greater class awareness that could help to break the Cycle of White Crisis for these men. Throughout section two of Chapter Four the men participating in this study clearly demonstrate that they are a part of a class group separate from the elite. Moreover, they identify the elite as having separate interests from “regular Americans” like themselves.⁵⁰ Luke does not think that the elite or “any of the higher folks in the companies want to fix” the economy or help any “regular Americans” that “are struggling to survive.”⁵¹ Matt states that “people with money in this country only care about themselves and couldn’t give two shits about the rest of us.”⁵² Jeff blames politicians and corporations for getting “us into a mess” through wars against Iraq and Afghanistan and their financial dealings with the Chinese government.⁵³ Even Frank is aware that “Americans are losing out on the American Dream” because the elite are selling out U.S. workers to the Chinese.⁵⁴

Don, however, best demonstrates how this burgeoning class consciousness becomes limited through the Cycle of White Crisis, when he states that the:

⁵⁰ Definition of class consciousness can be expressed using E.P. Thompson, who states that class consciousness “happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs (Thompson, 1964, p. 4).” This class consciousness is of course encased within Mills’ racially inverted epistemology, as informed by the psychological wage and white supremacist ideology.

⁵¹ See pg. 15 of Chapter Four

⁵² See pg. 15 of Chapter Four

⁵³ See pg. 17 of Chapter Four

⁵⁴ See pg. 14 of Chapter Four

People at the top and bottom are taking advantage of us hardworking guys in the middle. The companies ship *our* jobs overseas, the Chinese take our jobs, and the lazy foreigners come here and go on welfare. You tell me Joe, how is a guy like me supposed to even get a shot at the American Dream today with the way things are going?⁵⁵

Thus, while the elite are still seen serving their own interests and contributing towards “regular”/white Americans socioeconomic struggles, these men remain caught within the Cycle of White Crisis.

The elite are wrong only in that they are giving away white male jobs to the Chinese and allowing people of color in the United States to remain on welfare.⁵⁶ If they just did not do that, then, according to the narratives of these white working class men, things would go back to the way things should be. It is within this shift of class-based blame to race-based blame that the psychological wage goes from being questioned to being reasserted.⁵⁷ It is at this point that the burgeoning class awareness becomes lost within these men’s claims that there is something special about being white and being a man—it is here that they become trapped within the Cycle of White Crisis.

Nevertheless, the brief emergence of a class consciousness should incite hope and feelings of opportunity. Moreover, the fact that these men are still questioning what they can do, or where they can turn in their middle positioning as victimized white men demonstrates a

⁵⁵ See pg. 16 of Chapter Four

⁵⁶ Helpful here may be Edna Bonacich’s split labor market theory, and how the wedging of racial/ethnic groups by the elite creates what Bonacich calls “ethnic antagonism (Bonacich, 1972, pp. 549-551).” Important to note is how this study complicates split labor market theory, which is grounded in Marxist theory, by focusing not solely on material reward or capital as the driving force behind the psychological wage and the narratives of these white working class men. Rather, this study grounds its focus on the racial epistemology and white conflict within the ideology of white supremacy more so than simply material reality.

⁵⁷ Here the psychological wage and Mills’ racial epistemology are combined in a powerful way that generates a false worldview for these men, which leads them to utilize a rhetoric of the psychological wage that actively goes against their interests. Thus producing the Cycle of White Crisis and explaining why the class-based solidarity school does not offer enough in terms of solutions. The class interests must be unpacked by first dealing with the racial crisis within these men.

questioning of the psychological wage. Together, the emergence of class consciousness and the existence of victimized narratives points to the fact that they remain unsatisfied with white supremacy and the psychological wages' provided dominant story. Despite participating in racialized violence and continuing to adhere to the psychological wage, they still feel like victims. The story still does not add up. They still feel powerless. The continued doubting of the psychological wage and its ability to secure their socioeconomic status via racialized violence is important in that it produces moments of clarity.

These moments of clarity exist within the narratives of the white working class men in this study, and it is within them that the Cycle of White Crisis is momentarily broken. The majority of these moments of clarity emerge towards the end of the interviews, hinting at the fact that these men may have been critically reflecting on their narratives as a whole. In these concluding remarks a number of participants deviate from their racialized narratives presented in Chapter Four. Moreover, these contrasting narratives, which briefly separate them from the Cycle of White Crisis and their adherence to white supremacist ideology, seems almost disembodied or disjointed from the men speaking them. Put another way, it seems as if in telling these divergent racial narratives an epiphany is being realized. Even the tone of the participants change, as they became less aggressive and assertive, and more distant and reflective.

For instance, Jeff, who arguably provides the highest level of class analysis within his narratives, discusses a "story" that "we are all fed," and concedes that it may in fact affect whites in a specific way. He states:

We are all fed a story. It comes from Fox news and all mainstream media really, and it provides a different type of tale for the American worker nowadays. One based on so-

called “truth.” Really it’s just a lie to get people to fear and hold tight to their country. The result of that is a lot of the people here, and I guess a lot of whites if you want to bring in race, talk in sound bites and cliché lines they hear on the news by some spin master. They constantly use it and that’s how a story is made. (Sighs) it’s really kind of sad, because if that’s the type of tale that gets told then, well, good luck America.

While the specifics on how whites are influenced by this story are not clear, the fact that he acknowledges whiteness within the dissemination of a dominant “story” is important to note, especially in that this story incites fear within the “American” worker.⁵⁸

Amazingly Don, whose interview arguably represents one of the more overtly racist narratives, also arrives at a point of clarity at the end of his narration, stating:

I guess it isn’t all the foreigners fault...I mean the rules to having success in this country...they’re made by the rich. They’re [elite] not about what’s best for America and they don’t care for nobody but themselves. Sure they earned some of what they got, but come on they can’t give none of it back for the rest of us. Yeah, so I guess they’re [the elite] to blame too. Hell, you might be able to blame them a little more than the Chinese and blacks. I mean, what can they [African-Americans and the Chinese] do? They’re getting just as screwed over as me or any other white person in this country. I don’t know I get confused about all this shit when I start thinking about these things. I just know things aren’t working like I was told they would.

Jeff and Don both challenge the dominant narrative that guides the American Dream Contract as framed within white supremacist ideology.⁵⁹ Don knows that “thing’s aren’t working like [he] was told they would,” referencing his conflict with white supremacist ideology as it informs his white masculine identity. This questioning of white supremacy’s dominant narrative is touched on by Jeff, who identifies the dominant story that informs U.S. workers and is in turn

⁵⁸ Jeff’s “bring(ing) in race” to his discussion of the story that “we are all fed” demonstrates a challenging of white supremacy’s racially inverted epistemology. He starts to concede that maybe there is something about being white that affects the story. It indicates a concession to the fact that whites are targeted in the story in different ways, and serves as an opportunity for Jeff to begin to see that “all whites are beneficiaries” of the story, or Racial Contract as Mills puts it (Mills, 1997, p. 11).

⁵⁹ Again, not the challenging of the inverted racial epistemology of white supremacy and the Racial Contract.

reproduced by them through sound bites and clichés. Moreover, in specifically mentioning white workers in his narrative, Jeff complicates his explanation of the lie that is fed to and controls U.S. workers by allowing for the possibility of a racial component with this lie. All of this coming from a guy who earlier indicated that race, plays no role in one's ability to achieve the American Dream. Don further contributes to the challenging of white supremacy by situating the elite as the principal force behind the disenfranchisement of white workers. He even states that the Chinese and African-Americans are "getting screwed over" as bad as him and "any other white person in the country." These points of clarity, while rare, fundamentally challenge white supremacy and create an opportunity to engage with these men on how to cope with the internal crises working within them.

They serve as instances in which the crises expressed by these white workingmen become framed partially outside of white supremacy. The real enemy—the elite—is identified and communities of color are situated as victims alongside white working class men. This project's scope does not allow for it to speak to the roots of these particular narratives in terms of where they derive from or why they were expressed. It can make inferences and imaginings, such as: perhaps these narratives challenging white supremacy are related to the weakening of the psychological wage in these men's consciousness. Regardless of their origins, the narratives presented above point to an opportunity to intervene and attack the roots of white working class male crisis in the United States. They serve as points in which solutions can be imagined from within white communities themselves.⁶⁰ The fact of the matter is, despite the clear

⁶⁰ As opposed to academia and Whiteness Studies scholars, who often situate "solutions" to white racism (especially working class white racism) within the Ivory Tower. See Weigman's critique of Whiteness Studies'

violence and racism that exists currently within the minds of white working class men, there is hope too.

Summary:

Recognizing both violence and hope within these white working class male narratives, claiming that these men have broken out of the Cycle of White Crisis is a premature assessment. Thus, the previous section can really only offer glimpses of hope and opportunity—not concrete solutions—for engaging with these men’s narratives and attempting to renegotiate them. Acknowledging this, this project cannot offer up solutions or a way out of the Cycle of White Crisis. It can only stay true to the voices of these men and note that they remain in crisis. They are struggling to make sense of the raced, classed and gendered world they live in, and in trying to make sense of this world in ways that both reproduce and challenge white supremacy.

The question that remains is then, where do we go from here? Recognizing the Cycle of White Crisis as the source of these white working class men’s crisis, it is unethical to attempt to propose solutions. For one, as a white man I too am caught within the Cycle of White Crisis, and cannot claim to have found a way outside it. While the Cycle may function differently for me based off my position within academia and my distance from my home, yet it remains within me. I know that I have no solutions for my own culpability within the Cycle, thus, I cannot pretend there exists an easy answer for the white working class men participating in this study.

participating in white liberal racism in her *Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity* (Weigman, 1999, pp. 136-137).

Furthermore, to propose a solution for breaking the Cycle of White Crisis runs the risk of falling into the same pitfalls that Whiteness Studies has been struggling to climb out of since the turn of the twenty-first century. To propose a solution means to produce another white liberal racist project. Whites in the United States are not ready for a transcendence of white privilege or white identity. The narratives of these white workingmen, as well as my own testimonies, can attest to this. Whiteness must learn from its past, unpack its present crisis, and learn to work through this crisis into the future. The hope of someday breaking the Cycle of White Crisis can only rest on building a foundation for healing and coping with white crises and violence in the present. This is the work that needs to be pursued within Whiteness Studies in the twenty-first century.

When attempting to image what this revamped Whiteness Studies work might look like, my mind races to a family member's experience in Alcoholics Anonymous. This family member described to me his experience in A.A. meetings, telling me that they helped him to recognize the ways in which his abuse of alcohol caused great pain and suffering for his family members and community. He had to come to grips with himself as a violent person, struggling with an illness of alcoholism. Equally important is his claim that "I'll always be an alcoholic. If I ever have another drop of liquor I'll fall right back into my old messed up ways." Likening this to the Cycle of White Crisis and how whites can begin to disrupt the Cycle, we whites need to begin to unpack how and why we have participated in white supremacy. Whiteness must be seen as a cultural illness that is treatable, but not curable. Framing whiteness in this way allows for proposing a continual treatment of white crises and violence that does not produce a false

white liberal utopia, where whiteness can be said to be transcended or abolished. Such false imaginings only maintain and reproduce white supremacy.

While the treatment of white crises remains underdeveloped, this project's positioning of the Cycle of White Crisis and whiteness as a cultural illness provides genuine opportunity for whites in the United States to begin to work towards healing and participating in the fight against white supremacy. Moreover, this framing of whiteness, its crisis, and violence both holds the men participating in this study accountable for their actions and violence, while offering hope that there exists opportunities for them to rearticulate their narratives into ones that actively challenge white supremacy. Also important to note is that this opportunity does not come from me—an academic—or the Ivory Tower, but from the men themselves. They are the ones that are beginning to question the psychological wage and the racially inverted epistemology of white supremacy, and it is within them that hope exists.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Epilogue: Implicating Myself Within White Supremacy:

Before I conclude this project I would end by implicating myself within the same violence that these white working class male narratives participate in. I decided to engage with these men on these difficult issues, because I understand them as a white man who lived and experienced race, class and gender in similar ways. It was not that long ago that I was sitting in my room—a make-shift room built by adding a thin slab of drywall, dividing the living room in two—anxious about my own family’s economic future. My dad, who works at the same auto-plant as Frank, had heard that the plant might get shipped to Mexico. I was sixteen years old, had lived most of my life on welfare and in public housing. I was just getting used to living in a house, when I heard the news. I was angry. I was scared. So, I turned to finishing up a paper for my U.S. government class, and buried my emotions within its pages.

I recently found the first page of my paper over the summer of 2012. It was entitled “A Strategy for Reclaiming America.” As I read the page, again—at the conclusion of this long arduous research project—I hear in my paper a familiar story. This story is captured in a note written to myself in the margins of the page. It reads: “Dad’s job taken by Mexicans → end American worker’s struggles by kicking out Mexicans.” Much like the men participating in this project, my solution is a simple one. It is informed by my adherence to white supremacist ideology, specifically the psychological wage. It is also coated in white supremacy’s racially inverted epistemology. My dad and my family are the victims of Mexicans, who are threatening his job. This Mexican threat is then broadened to a racial threat against the collective “American”/white job. While the racism informing this solution is clear, shameful and must be

acknowledged, there is more going on here than just a racist sixteen year old's bigoted ranting. I am grappling with trying to make sense of the story that informs me that, as a white man, my father is the backbone of the U.S. economy. He is who made this country what it is today, and is entitled therefore to its material rewards; yet, my family has never experienced anything like the American Dream before. My father and mother have been forced to work two or more jobs. We are poor. Within this contradiction of white supremacy's ideological framing of the American Dream and my family's lived experience as members of the working class, I produce a paper that participated in white racist violence. I tried to force the inverted racial epistemology to make sense by scapegoating brown bodies. Moreover, I did so out of internalized pain that was dealt with through racialized violence. This instance captures my participation within the Cycle of White Crisis. What is more, I am implicated in it to this day.

The recognition of my past and present self as being caught within the Cycle of White Crisis, is why I decided to engage with other white working class men and their internal crises with whiteness through this project. I attempt to engage with these men's feelings of the complex intersections of race, class and gender in the pursuit of the American Dream in a way that stayed true to the voices of these men, while holding them accountable for their participation in racially oppressive language and narratives. In concluding this project I acknowledge my personal participation within white supremacist ideology and violence. Moreover, in concluding this project I plan to delve into this projects' : (1) current limitations; (2) present accomplishments; (3) future enablings.

Concluding Remarks:

Limitations:

This project is limited in three major ways. The first has to do with myself as the researcher. This project reflects my first attempt at ethnographic work, and consequently, there are numerous regrets that I have in regards to the interviewing and coding processes. While I am sure every ethnographer and researcher wishes she/he could go back and ask different questions or analyze particular research subjects differently, I feel as though my rawness as a researcher affected my capacity to uncover key issues specifically related to gender and masculinity. This, coupled with the fact that my methodological approach was more intuitive than grounded within a specific methodological school, has left my project with a number of methodological limitations that will be bolstered in future research.

Furthermore as mentioned previously, gender is only slightly touched upon within my analysis and findings. Part of this, again, has to do with the type of questions that I asked. However, I am confident that a crisis in masculinity exists within these white working men's conceptions of their raced and classed worldviews. I was not able to adequately address issues of gender and masculinity due to the data that I had to work with. Likewise, none of my research questions touched upon sexuality's affect upon the raced, classed and gendered worldview of these white workingmen. These limitations cannot be allowed to remain unacknowledged, as continued ignorance of gender and sexuality's framing of white working class male minds will result in the reproduction of heteronormative patriarchy within my work.

Current Contributions:

While some may see this project's exploratory nature as a limitation, I see it as a strength. This MA Thesis project does not provide analytical or concrete solutions, however, that has been the pitfall of Whiteness Studies scholarship since the 1980s. This work, again, is not in the business of producing solutions. Rather, it hopes to provide a deeper more complicated picture of the present, or the way in which whiteness is inhabited in the present. Presently, this project complicates the simply story presented by U.S. white working class men on the American Dream by demonstrating how these men concurrently reproduce and challenge white supremacy through their narratives. This claim, or rather observations and interpretations, rests upon the idea that no solutions can currently be achieved for the crises existing within these men. Instead only healing through reframing and renegotiating these men's narratives can occur. This reframing process can attempt to provide opportunities to move these men from participating in white supremacy towards becoming part of the effort of social justice activism and solidarity projects.

Furthermore, this work's methodological approach of speaking directly with white working class men avoids the dangerous limitations of Whiteness Studies in that it captures white perspectives and participations in white violence in the contemporary. This allows for analysis and discussion of whiteness that is grounded in the now, disabling any production of utopic white liberal "solutions," as the white working male voices demonstrate that they are not ready for a *transcendence of whiteness*. At the same time, it is within the voices of these men that hope spring forth, as their narratives provide instances of clarity that enable for a renegotiation of white supremacist epistemology and ideology. Thus, this project concurrently

forces the academic gaze away from solutions of the Ivory Tower towards white communities in the present and the ways in which they are actively attempting to break from white supremacy's hold on their consciousness. This is the strength of this project.

Future Implications:

However, this project's strength leaves more questions than answers. As a white man, heading towards a career in academia, I feel myself being turned farther and farther away from my home community. The fact that these men volunteered to speak with me for an hour leaves me humbled and very grateful. Their taking the time to talk to a graduate student out of their busy day represents a real sacrifice. This sacrifice is noted and cannot be called upon in future work out of the sole need to further Whiteness Studies' agenda. Thus, the question that needs to be raised presently is: recognizing white workingmen's crisis, as expressed in this project, how can future work building off this project ethically engage with these men in ways the seek to reorient their narratives towards social justice activism? Focus groups upon reflection are too exploitative on the part of the researcher, and one-on-one interviews can only provide evidence that a crisis in whiteness does exist for these men. Thus, recognizing the Cycle of White Crisis within these men, how can contemporary Whiteness Studies scholars engage with white working class communities in mutually beneficial ways that help to foster coping strategies for their crises and bring them into social justice activism in ways that benefit all marginalized groups in the United States—including white working class men? This is the question that needs to be explored in future work, and it needs to be reflected on in terms of holding white workingmen accountable for their privileges, while concurrently imagining ways to bring them into the fold and a part of the struggle against white supremacy in the United

States today. Recognizing this workable problem, Whiteness Studies has plenty to think about in the coming decades.

This project ends with these questions, offering only a snapshot of how a group of white working class men experience and perceive the raced, classed and gendered world they live in. White workingmen are caught at a fork in the road. To the right lies a path more traveled. It is the path that poor whites have historically traveled on in moments of crisis. This path seeks to secure poor whites' socioeconomic interests through participation and reproduction of white supremacy. This path always ends back at the fork in the road. Their needs remain unmet and their questions and frustrations continue to burn inside of them. It is a path that reproduces and fuels white supremacist ideology, structure and violence.

To the left, however, lies a different path. This path is less traveled and it will be more difficult to transverse, yet it leads to an end in which both white working class men and Whiteness Studies can become active combatants against white supremacy. This is the path that I hope this work advocates for. To travel this path whites must carry with their whiteness within them constantly. The Cycle of White Crisis can never be abandoned or forgotten on this path, and no one knows where the path may end, or if it has an end. However, this path will not lead us back to the fork in the road—back to a state of extreme crisis. The left path leads instead to healing and reconciling the violence and crisis of whiteness. It is a path that this project seeks to prepare whites for, and in which future work seeks to navigate and chart.

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