

Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance

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ABSTRACT

Many analysts argue colorblindness as the reigning ideological buttress of a historically distinct form of structural white supremacy, color-blind racism. In contrast to slavery and legal segregation, color-blind racism is theorized as covert and highly institutionalized. As such, analyses of contemporary racial reproduction often emphasize the structure of colorblindness, particularly the habitual routines and discursive patterns of everyday white actors. Though invaluable, this work may conceal whites' innovation in reproducing, revising, and at times resisting white supremacy and corresponding logics. As opposed to focusing on the structural elements of colorblindness, I elevate colorblindness as a culturally recursive accomplishment grounded in an epistemology of ignorance—that is a *process of knowing designed to produce not knowing* surrounding white privilege and structural white supremacy. Qualitatively analyzing 105 family wealth analyses produced by white college undergraduates researching racial inequality and the wealth gap, I identify four epistemic maneuvers by which students creatively repaired a breach in normative colorblindness. Demonstrating innovative means by which ordinary whites bypass and mystify racial learning highlights their vested commitment to maintaining and creatively defending the ideologies that buttress racial domination and white supremacy. As such, this research additionally advises updating strategies for challenging whites' colorblindness in efforts to advance racial justice.

KEYWORDS: color-blind racism; racial ideology; whiteness; epistemology of ignorance; critical race theory.

People in the United States live amidst a running paradox—nearly 50 years since the major civil rights victories of the twentieth century, glaring racial inequalities abound, documented in the details of achievement gaps, segregation indices, wealth disparities, and incarceration rates; and yet, white supremacy appears “the American non-dilemma” (DiTomaso 2013). This seeming illogicality has led scholars, politicians, pundits, and the lay public alike to a related question: how is so much ongoing inequality produced by such an absence of racists?

Scholars examining contemporary racial reproduction have utilized the lens of color-blind racism to address this puzzle (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2014; Carr 1997; Doane 2006; Forman 2004; Gallagher

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2008). A central assumption of color-blind racism theory is that strong institutionalization propels reproduction of white power and privilege today in ways that are largely covert (Bonilla-Silva 2014). As a result, analyses of everyday actors tend to emphasize “the structure of colorblindness” (Doane 2014:17), examining the habitual and ostensibly unintentional routines of ordinary whites who reproduce racial inequality through “business as usual,” with the patterned support of color-blind discourse. While insights of this work are substantial, the heavy structural focus may conceal whites’ creativity in reproducing, revising, and at times resisting white supremacy. Demarcating colorblindness as historically distinct may also obscure important continuities over time, such as the common rootedness of racial ideology in processes of ignorance (Mills 1997, 2007; Moore 2014).

Despite reinforcing racial reproduction, there is scant research on the processes that produce, maintain, and penetrate white ignorance.¹ Indeed, many imagine ignorance “as the passive obverse of knowledge, the darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment;” in contrast, whites’ racial illiteracy can appear unyielding, at times even “militant,” like “an ignorance that resists . . . [and] fights back” (Mills 2007:13). I argue from this position: more vexing than structurally induced habit, whites’ persistent colorblindness is sustained by a vested commitment to defending the ideological buffer of ignorance. My investigation illuminates colorblindness as a culturally recursive accomplishment grounded in an epistemology of ignorance (Mills 1997, 2007)—that is a *process of knowing designed to produce not knowing* surrounding white privilege, culpability, and structural white supremacy.

Here, I elevate the cultural elements of colorblindness by analyzing how whites respond to a breach in the “life as usual” character of color-blind racism. Specifically, I evaluate how white students process racial logic under conditions that make ignorance difficult, using a learning context and research assignment that violated the “background expectancies” of colorblindness (Garfinkel [1967] 1991:37). I identify four epistemic maneuvers that allowed students to bypass racial awareness, re-establish ignorance, and justify ongoing domination. My examination indicates that everyday whites can develop innovative color-blind logics that foreclose or otherwise distort the outcomes of racially conscious learning. Demonstrating creative means by which everyday whites can bypass and mystify racial awareness marks their role in maintaining and, when necessary, refashioning the ideologies that buttress racial domination and white supremacy. As such, this analysis additionally advises updating strategies for challenging whites’ colorblindness in efforts to advance racial justice.

COLOR-BLIND RACISM AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF IGNORANCE

Scholars have deployed a range of concepts to distinguish contemporary racism from the ostensibly more “mean-spirited” racism characterizing slavery and legal segregation, including laissez-faire racism (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1996), aversive racism (Dovidio 2001; Gaertner and Dovidio 2005), and symbolic racism (Sears and Henry 2008). In the race critical tradition, however, the concept of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Carr 1997; Doane 2006; Gallagher 2003) holds prominence. Many regard colorblindness the reigning ideological buttress of a corresponding and distinct form of structural white supremacy. In the fourth edition of *Racism without Racists* (2014), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes:

Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-civil rights era, color-blind 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 (pp. 3-4).

1 I utilize “white” to qualify constructs as related to structural *white supremacy*, not to indicate phenomena as confined to *white people* (see, also, Mills 2007; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

Color-blind discourse represents the companion text and speech by which whites (and some non-whites²) communicate color-blind logics. Research documents how whites draw on color-blind frames to make seemingly non-racial claims about what are indeed racial disparities³ (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Doane 2006; Gallagher 2003). In his foundational work, Bonilla-Silva (2014) established four frames commonly used by whites to offer color-blind explanations: abstract liberalism (explanations that draw on political and economic liberalism abstractly); naturalization (explanations that suggest racial phenomena occur naturally); cultural racism (explanations that use culturally based rationales to explain racial group standing); and minimization of racism (explanations that suggest racialized privileges and discrimination no longer centrally affect life chances). Despite variations, color-blind frames are centered functionally toward ignoring the social structural dynamics of white supremacy (Doane 2014; Moore 2014).

Colorblindness resolves the tension of endorsing racial equality in a social structure still designed to preserve white advantage, and is thus central to the persistence of white supremacy in the post-civil rights era (Carr 1997; Doane 2006; Forman and Lewis 2006; Gallagher 2008; Obasogie 2013). Colorblindness rationalizes white supremacy in everyday thought and discourse (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; McKinney 2005), supporting whites' ability to ignore the significance of racial discrimination and white privilege (Doane 2006), as well as engage in (or remain passive or apathetic bystanders to) everyday racism (DiTomaso 2013; Forman 2004; Forman and Lewis 2006), even when they are well-meaning and intend to be non-racist (Burke 2012; Trepagnier 2010). Adherents argue these everyday means reproduce racial disparities in an alleged era of formal equality, as the structurally recursive by-product of whites' deeply internalized racial framing and *white habitus* (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006; Feagin 2013).

A significant achievement in colorblindness scholarship has been debunking the idea that racial reproduction rests on intentional, malevolent, or politically conservative white actors. For example, Nancy DiTomaso (2013) locates ways contemporary racial inequality is driven "without racism;" specifically by whites' unquestioned in-group favoritism (e.g., passing jobs through racially homogeneous networks) rather than calculated out-group discrimination. Alternately, Imani Perry (2011) develops the concept of "post-intentionality" to accent the primacy of whites' unconscious reliance on normatively racist cultural practices. Barbara Trepagnier (2010) hones in on "well-meaning" liberal and progressive whites, arguing most remain apathetic in practice despite "good intentions," because they "are neither well informed about the historical and cultural impact of racism . . . nor clear about what is racist" (p. 44). Similarly, Meghan Burke (2012) finds whites in diverse communities with "pro-diversity" views often "unintentional[ly]" recreate a "white habitus" because of pervasive colorblindness (p. 61).

As the above examples suggest, analyses that link whites' ideological understandings to everyday racial reproduction often foreground what Ashley Doane (2014) refers to as "the structure of colorblindness" (p. 17). Such work highlights the habitual work of everyday whites who, as a matter of routine, carry out various forms of institutionally supported "business as usual" while leaning on a *a priori* color-blind frames. Despite invaluable insights, the singular structural focus may eclipse how whites use creative agency to reproduce, revise, and occasionally challenge white supremacy. Furthermore, these examples indirectly highlight an acknowledged but underexplored dimension of colorblindness; namely, rootedness in ignorance (for notable exceptions see Forman 2004; Forman and Lewis 2006; Steyn 2012). To successfully defend dominance, hegemonic ideologies must paradoxically hide the fact of dominance (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2001). Racial ideologies are thus grounded in socio-cognitive processes that distort and suppress whites' capacity for

2 Patterns of ideological hegemony ensure people of color will internalize and circulate at least some ideological understandings (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Mills 2007).

3 As opposed to reifying inequalities as differences produced by *race*, I regard disparities as products of socio-historical processes of racialization and white supremacy (Powell 1997; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

“knowing” about matters of racism and white supremacy—what critical race philosopher Charles Mills (1997, 2007) refers to as epistemologies of ignorance. Mills argues learning to abide by an epistemology of ignorance is common to most whites’ socialization, enabling a more comfortable complicity with white supremacy.

Framing ignorance as an ongoing epistemological accomplishment surfaces ideological continuities across time. Indeed, Mills (1997, 2007) suggests slavery and legal segregation required an epistemology that led to seeing “mythical race” as real—that is, explicit race consciousness supported explicitly disparate treatment. The structure of white supremacy today requires not seeing race, however—or at least not seeing it in the same way. Though disparate treatment continues to produce inequalities through the work of institutions and individuals alike, explanations now filter through ideological frames that better correspond to the post-civil rights normative climate. Today, race is regarded as “a characteristic of *individuals*” in a world where racism plays no meaningful role in resource distribution (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Doane 2014:17). While ideological “products” appear different one era to the next, they nonetheless share grounding in socio-cognitive processes of white ignorance.

In contrast to private, asocial paths to knowing, epistemologies of ignorance are social epistemologies, structured into the rhythms of institutions and everyday practices that propel racial reproduction (Mills 2007). Social scientists have done much to document how epistemologies of ignorance shape the routine operations of institutions; for example, in law (Moore 2014; Obasogie 2013), politics and the state (Jungkunz and White 2013; Pettit 2012), education (Malewski and Jaramillo 2011), media (Mueller and Issa 2016), science (Gould 1996), and the sociological academy (Steinberg 2007; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Though deeply revealing, in centering institutional mechanisms this body of research may again eclipse ordinary whites’ participation and creativity in evolving cultural processes of ignorance.

Researchers have increasingly moved toward such analyses, examining *how* whites reproduce, and sometimes resist color-blind logics (see, e.g., Burke 2012; Hagerman 2014; Johnson 2014; Maly and Dalmage 2015). This shift marks an important transition—from analyzing discrete frames, unique contexts, and varied groups where colorblindness appears, toward explicating causal mechanisms that produce, maintain, and occasionally transform racial ideologies and discourse. These efforts, which I join here, eschew overly simplified portraits of whiteness and a singular focus on the denial of racism, to develop more nuanced theories that recognize the fluid, evolving, and often contradictory claims of colorblindness (Doane 2014; Gallagher 2008; Lewis 2004). An epistemology of ignorance framing is particularly useful because it is informed but not cemented by the structure of colorblindness, highlighting racial ideology as an ongoing, structurally recursive accomplishment instead; one that “adapts and changes” over time (Doane 2014:17; Moore 2014).

However promising, identifying creative ideological mechanisms among whites poses a unique empirical challenge (Gallagher 2008; Lewis 2004): How does one tap into processes that are not only internal, but also facilitated by paths of least resistance that *are* often covert and institutionalized? Moreover, how does one capture the *absence* of racial knowledge empirically, let alone motives driving that gap? Analyses that highlight contextual differences in behavior offer practical insights. For example, studies of contemporary whites suggest many behave in openly racist ways when social conditions allow for it; such as in the presumed safety of racially homogenous, “backstage” spaces (Picca and Feagin 2007), or during ritualized events like Halloween, where freedom from social correctness is assumed (Mueller, Dirks, and Picca 2007). Relatedly, experimental researchers have manipulated conditions under which whites process racial information, establishing the influence of self-image and identity (Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013). Such researchers find white college students more likely to discriminate and express racial hostility under conditions where they can avoid personal accountability (Dovidio 2001; Hodson, Dovidio, and Gaertner 2002). Others have examined racial ignorance specifically, documenting whites more often deny the contemporary significance

of historical racism under conditions of high identity concern, and more easily acknowledge racism when identity is not threatened (Adams, Tormala, and O'Brien 2006; Unzueta and Lowery 2008).

These adaptive patterns suggest whites' investment in an epistemology that balances otherwise irreconcilable interests: a moral, "idealized white racial self" on the one hand (Feagin 2013; Hughey and Byrd 2013:974; Lavelle 2014), and the structure, ideology, and privileges of racial domination on the other (Bell 1992; Bracey 2015; Feagin 2014; Lipsitz 2006). Following the examples above, I worked to exploit this tension by manipulating conditions of racial knowing. If white ignorance is "an ignorance that is militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated;" if it is "active, dynamic, [and] refuses to go quietly," then designing conditions where whites must either "fight back" to defend ignorance logics or retreat from colorblindness should be empirically illuminating (Mills 2007:13; see also Gallagher 2008). I attempted just that, using an undergraduate research assignment on racial inequality and the wealth gap. Analyzing students' written discourse I explored the following questions: How do whites process racial logic under conditions that make ignorance difficult? What, if any, epistemic strategies enable whites to sustain colorblindness under these conditions? And, if and when whites abandon typical color-blind frames, what follows? Do they concede racism as reality, and if so, what is the substance of their racially conscious understandings?

METHODS

This study analyzes 105 papers produced between 2008 and 2011 by white undergraduates at a large, public university in a southern U.S. region. Students completed papers by virtue of enrollment in selected sections of Social Problems or Racial and Ethnic Relations. Papers were collected under specifications approved by the Institutional Review Board to ensure students' freedom from coercion. Among other protocols, (1) students completed work prior to being invited to consensually share papers for analysis; (2) neither paper nor final grades were contingent on participation; and (3) all potentially identifying information was altered and names replaced with pseudonyms. Drawn from a larger sample that included papers from students of color, those analyzed here were submitted by participants who self-identified as "white/Caucasian" on a demographic form administered during consent procedures. This purposive sample⁴ reflected a typically college-aged population: most paper writers were between 19 and 21, with a total age range of 18 to 37. Consistent with sociology enrollment patterns, the sample disproportionately identified as female (75 percent).

As a course assignment, students were directed to collect family data on intergenerational wealth transmission and produce a written analysis relating data to course material. Prior to their research, class time was focused on exploring social reproduction of racial inequality and the racial wealth gap. Framed by the concepts *unjust impoverishment* and *enrichment* (Feagin 2014), the class studied: (1) the racial wealth gap and intergenerational transmission of wealth (e.g., Conley 2009; Shapiro 2005); (2) historically discriminatory asset-building policies (e.g., Katznelson 2005; Massey and Denton 2003; Shanks 2005); and (3) intersections and disparities across types of capital—material, cultural, social, symbolic (e.g., Bourdieu 1986; DiTomaso 2013; Royster 2003). Following several weeks of lectures, readings, and discussions, students gathered data from family interviews and personal and public histories. They were instructed to explore family connections to slavery; property, money, or business inheritances; home down payment or college assistance; utilization of state or other asset-based programs (e.g., Homestead Act, GI Bill); social network assistance (e.g., for jobs, loans, starting businesses); and relatives' beliefs about whether race figured into these matters. Students were directed to use course material to analyze racial dynamics that may have shaped family wealth/capital

4 Following much color-blindness scholarship (see, e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2014; Burke 2012; Doane 2006; Forman and Lewis 2006; Hagerman 2014), I focused analysis on white students' papers. Unlike people of color, whites hold unique investments in mystifying logics. Moreover, whites (and whiteness) have greater power to shape and disseminate ideologies institutionally. Finally, because everyday whites are often regarded as unwitting, habitual actors in colorblindness research, centering their creative capacities in sustaining color-blind logics is empirically and theoretically significant.

acquisition and transfer. They were also encouraged to consider related issues addressed in class; for example, capital conversion (e.g., using money to secure better educational opportunities), “white flight” or segregation experiences, and interviewees’ use of ideological rationales (e.g., colorblindness). Finally, students were asked to personally reflect on what they took away from the project, a direction emphasized in class (Mueller 2013b elaborates using the family project in teaching).

While my priorities designing the project were wholly pedagogical, the conditions under which students completed their work are useful to examining the questions animating this study. Here, I draw on the methodological insights of ethnomethodology and the strategy of “breaching” (Garfinkel [1967] 1991), as well as the extended case method (Burawoy 1991, 1998). Ethnomethodology aims to surface strategies people use to symbolically construct reality, for example, though interactional norms. Because of their “taken-for-grantedness,” Garfinkel ([1967] 1991) argues analysts must “make” everyday practices and logics “analyzeable . . . ‘from within’ actual settings, as ongoing accomplishments of those settings” (p. vii). Breaching experiments—where “background expectancies” that facilitate social interaction are violated—expose the logics embedded in everyday praxis, making them “visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes” (pp vii, 37).

In this case students were engaged in a learning context that, for all intents and purposes, violated the “background expectancies” of colorblindness. They were exposed to propositional knowledge⁵ that was race critical and focused on the systemic and material dynamics of white supremacy. They explored these topics through active investigation, using guidelines designed to surface evidence of covert racial reproduction in their own families. Finally, writing instructions stipulated they articulate racial logics. In short, students were required to confront and explain the “life as usual” character of color-blind racism, “or become estranged” from it. Moreover, they did so under the conditions of “special motive” most people need to willingly make everyday worlds “problematic” (Garfinkel [1967] 1991:37): classrooms and professors are vetted with epistemic authority; as such, students would be motivated to complete the assignment and develop interpretive explanations. Desire for high grades is likely to motivate many further, toward the “best” work and most propositionally correct logic, in this case racially conscious.

I qualitatively analyzed white students’ papers following injunctions of the extended case method (ECM) (Burawoy 1991, 1998). While grounded theory relies on an inductive, interpretive process of theory building, researchers using ECM begin with theory to target aspects of interest in the data field, particularly those that support “critical tests” of existing theory” (Emerson 2001:283). Here, I utilized theory to orient my discursive analysis, coding for evidence of color-blind racial frames (Bonilla-Silva 2014), as well as anomalous logics deployed to explain family data. I searched for any “localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)” that might foster racially ideological interpretations (Mills 1997:18; emphasis in original). And, while I remained sensitive to places where students seemed to resist or “fight back” against race consciousness, I also searched for logics that appeared antiracist or otherwise racially aware. Through iterative coding, I eventually reached saturation around patterns, revising and reconstructing theoretical assumptions in light of themes. Together, the breaching methodology and theory-driven analysis laid bare epistemic maneuvers by which white students arrived at colorblindness and other racial logics.

MECHANISMS OF WHITE IGNORANCE

Prior analysis of these data, alongside 51 papers submitted by students of color, revealed extensive disparities and racialized dynamics in family mobility trajectories (Mueller 2013a). A majority traced back three or more generations, occasionally to ancestors alive during legalized slavery. In terms of wealth and capital acquisition and transfer, the full pool of papers documents over six times as many transfers of monetary assets across generations within white families than families of color.

5 Perry and Shotwell (2009) define “propositional knowledge” as “knowledge that can be expressed and received by words and evaluated by conceptual reason. It attends to verifiable claims about the world and appeals to individuals as rational beings” (p. 34).

Intergenerational land, home, and business inheritances were similarly disproportionate. As recorded, many assets passed across white students' nuclear and extended families were originally acquired from state-supported benefits that whites had near-exclusive access to during the long eras of slavery and legal segregation. White families reported nearly six times as many instances of such state-derived assets, including formal land grants and GI Bill or other state-related educational benefits and mortgage backing. In short, white students documented plentiful evidence of privileged access to the forms of intergenerational wealth and capital addressed in course material.

Discursive themes reinforced that prior to completing this assignment white students assumed no possessive stake in racial oppression—a finding consistent with other research (see e.g., Gallagher 2003; MTV Bias Survey Summary 2014). Students gave frequent testimony to initial skepticism or opposition to course material and the assignment (e.g., “As soon as I got this paper assignment I thought to myself, ‘None of these things will have applied to my family’”; “I honestly doubted . . . [and] got frustrated with some of [the] arguments and did not fully agree.”). Even those not opposed to *general* premises concerning systemic privilege claimed initial trust “the racialized system had done [them] no favors” *personally*. Most did not expect to find corroborating evidence in their data; contrasted beliefs “before” the research with those following; and described being “shocked” or “surprised” they “fit the model” of concepts. These kinds of comments were exceptionally common, suggesting the project succeeded in breaching commonplace colorblindness about everyday racial reproduction for most.

Though not universal, completing the family project usually disrupted common color-blind frames. Nonetheless, white students often developed creative racial logics that foreclosed or otherwise distorted racially conscious learning. Specifically, I identified four *white epistemic maneuvers*—one offensive, three defensive—that white students used to bypass racial awareness and justify ongoing domination. Table 1 outlines key dimensions of each maneuver: (1) evading; (2) willfully reasoning colorblindness; (3) tautologically reasoning ignorance; and (4) mystifying practical solutions. The analysis that follows reveals whites can readily fashion novel logics that protect white supremacy (and their own racist praxis) even after communicating and appearing to embrace critical racial consciousness.

Evasion

White students engaged in one epistemic maneuver that invariably produced racial ignorance—*evasion*. This strategy surfaced in evidence suggesting white students had avoided race-based project

Table 1. Dimensions of White Epistemic Maneuvers

<i>Maneuver</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Invokes Established Color-blind Frames?</i>
Evade	Offensive	Maneuvers that preclude producing race-based understandings	No
Willfully reason colorblindness	Defensive	Maneuvers that introduce alternate factors to neutralize evidence of white privilege and facilitate ongoing use of color-blind frames	Yes
Tautologically reason ignorance	Defensive	Maneuvers that produce racially conscious logic, but embed morally laden assumptions of whites' sincere, passive ignorance	No
Mystify practical solutions	Defensive	Maneuvers that produce racially conscious logic, but embed doubt and mystery about logically related solutions	No

directives. Students performed evasiveness in different ways, yet all precluded developing race-based explanations.

Sometimes students directly avoided racial investigation with explicit acknowledgement. For instance, Josh indicated he chose not to ask family members “if they thought race had played a role in their success,” despite it being an explicit guideline. He attributed evasion to his “very non-confrontational” nature. Surely, for some the assignment generates tension between wanting to perform well and needing to initiate uncomfortable conversations to do so. Given such pressures, it is entirely possible some students dodged racial topics, even subconsciously, with no “confession.” As Josh’s example suggests, it is also reasonable to suspect the manifest aims of evasion differ from latent consequences (i.e., producing racial ignorance). Another student, Joe, recalled his aunt told him the topic was “a lot of gobbly gook from a kooky leftist prof.” Allison reported her dad was “taken aback and . . . offended” when she simply referred to their family as “white.” Anticipating and avoiding such exchanges might have seemed preferable, even as doing so facilitates racial ignorance.

Sometimes evasive maneuvering was implicit; Nina’s example is striking. Nina completed a sensible class-based analysis of her data, but avoided all terms related to race, racism, or racial inequality. The single exception was a text cited while relaying information about her grandfather’s first home:

[My grandfather] bought the house with a Federal Housing Association (FHA) Loan for veterans . . . [The] author of *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* states that the FHA, along with the Veterans Administration, and the GI Bill “have been instrumental in guaranteeing long-term, low-interest mortgages, which put the American dream of homeownership within reach of most families” (p. 107). My grandmother’s parents also helped by co-signing for the house and also helped with the down payment . . . My grandfather [also] attended [college] . . . with the GI Bill.

Nina presents three discrete pieces of evidence—an FHA backed loan, GI Bill educational access, and parental down payment assistance. Each overlaps *directly* with content in the book she cites (titled to specify racial significance *explicitly*), in the context of an assignment that is *unambiguous* in requiring a racial analysis, following a course unit focused *definitively* on racial dimensions of social reproduction; yet, she evades any meaningful identification of race in her paper. She concluded simply: “above anything else,” her research revealed “the true power of transformative assets.” Nina was not the only student to implicitly evade in this remarkable way; another failed to use a single word or phrase tied to race. In the context of breaching, these omissions challenge the idea such oversights are simply habitual or accidental.

While I do not evaluate white relatives’ logic here (principally because they did not experience the full breaching conditions), it is worth noting how frequently students reported evasiveness from interviewees. For example, finding her parents reluctant to answer questions, Carla puzzled over why they weren’t helping her to “succeed”—a signal she had breached with them. She hoped her dad hadn’t brushed her off “after hearing that the paper was for my class about *race* in society and this paper would be connected to the larger issue of systemic *racial inequality*” (student’s emphasis). Still, “a part” of her suspected it did rub him the wrong way, causing him “to close up even tighter.” That students reported these kinds of exchanges so regularly reinforces evasiveness as a common epistemic maneuver. Finding examples among students, however, is uniquely clarifying: unlike relatives, white students crafted logics under conditions that firmly challenged racial ignorance as undesirable. As such, their sustained ignorance appears more willful than passive or unintentional.⁶

Though examples were rare, it is impossible to know how many students actually engaged in evasion; infrequency is likely a by-product of competing social pressures aroused by the method, at least

6 Though outside the purview of these data, as an instructor I have encountered at least one student who refused to do the family project—remarkable given the power dynamics surrounding professor-student relationships.

in part. For reasons already named, some may have evaded in practice leaving no “incriminatory” evidence in papers. Others may have been compelled to *not* evade as a result of the special motives cultivated by the assignment. Nevertheless, as a maneuver that protects whiteness, evasion supports Mills’s (2007) position that management of memory—a vital component of cognition—is a central feature of the epistemology of ignorance (see also Cohen 2001; Lavelle 2014; Maly and Dalmage 2015). In practice, evasiveness capitalizes on common wisdom, that “the best defense is a good offense.” And, while evasiveness inevitably produces racial ignorance, it is worth noting this maneuver does not rely on invoking established color-blind frames. Indeed, ideological rationales and “forgetting” are unnecessary when there are no inconvenient social facts to explain (Mills 2007).

Willful Colorblindness

Despite how commonly white students reported being newly able to “see” everyday mechanics of racial reproduction, some—about a third—utilized traditional color-blind frames in their analyses. Of these, nearly three-quarters (about a quarter of the total sample) exhibited what could be described as *willful colorblindness*. I coded willful colorblindness when students shared data implying white privilege (usually those covered in course material), but then introduced alternate factors to facilitate mis-analysing, ignoring, and/or rejecting the racial dynamics of those examples. Students used this epistemic maneuver defensively and sometimes artfully to retreat to color-blind explanations for disconcerting findings.

Felicia discovered her grandfather used a veteran’s loan to purchase his first home. She acknowledged this allowed her grandparents to move into a “primarily white neighborhood with new schools;” in turn, they “kick started” her parent’s wealth accumulation with a home down payment. Unlike Nina above (who evaded race altogether), Felicia well utilized course material to highlight racial dynamics in her family history. Felicia retreated to colorblindness, however, when contemplating the influence of racial privilege on her family’s success:

The transfer of wealth is more than just giving your kids money and assets. I believe it’s living in decent neighborhoods with good schools and having the opportunity to attend college. I don’t feel that the color of my skin or of my ancestors necessarily made it easier on them than other immigrant families. My grandfather came to the U.S. not knowing a word of English and owning only the clothes on his back. Primarily through hard work and our own merit my family has been able to accumulate a little wealth and . . . pass some of that on to the next generation.

Each matter she notes—access to transferable wealth, decent neighborhoods, quality schools and college, immigration and assimilation—is contoured by white privilege. These topics were detailed with evidence in lectures and readings, which Felicia correctly used to contextualize her data. Despite appropriately drawing on that material, Felicia ultimately rejected racialized arguments by introducing alternate information and contexts (e.g., immigration status, language acquisition). Introducing these factors to invoke common frames—abstract liberalism, implicit cultural racism, and minimization—Felicia closed her paper on a comfortable, color-blind note.

At times students had to be exceedingly creative in navigating troublesome facts with colorblindness. Carmen began suggesting how “very difficult” it was “to tie any of the course readings” to her data because her family had no “large ties to slavery or oppression.” Immediately following this preemptive testimony, however, she revealed her family *had* “dabbled in slavery until 1864.” Given the focus on unjust enrichment, Carmen promptly defended the legitimacy of her family’s wealth, declaring, “ownership of these slaves was not a key.” As evidence she drew on data from her grandfather’s interview. He told her one ancestor “carried his slave with him to the Civil War to cook . . . and tend to the horses. After the war, his slave stayed with him because he had nowhere else to go.” Carmen reasoned:

This proves that in the later days of slavery, my family's slaves were allowed to leave, but chose not to. Since the slave man was given the opportunity to leave, it is shown that slavery was an expendable part of my family's wealth.

Carmen is not simply regurgitating dominant narratives here—indeed, Carmen is disqualified from the otherwise common “we didn't own slaves” storyline (see [Bonilla-Silva 2014:127](#)). She combines, instead, an old, racist stereotype with a *uniquely reasoned* color-blind argument to neutralize an inconvenient fact and reject course premises. Here, Carmen introduces the factor of “choice” to feed the frames of minimization and abstract liberalism.

Some students, like Carmen, never retreated from defending colorblindness; indeed, these papers read like a “framing war.” At another point in her paper, Carmen reinterpreted [Bonilla-Silva's \(2014\)](#) arguments regarding naturalization to rescue her grandfather's positions on segregation, which she recognized could be interpreted as color-blind racism. In the example Carmen correctly defined Bonilla-Silva's position; however, rather than use this lens to explore the colorblindness of his position (as some in the sample did), she again introduced the factor of “choice” to deliberately double down on colorblindness.

More common than this kind of uninterrupted defense, however, students who willfully reasoned colorblindness often appeared compelled by race-critical arguments for their data initially. Derrick's case is instructive. Derrick opened his paper “admit[ting]” he originally disagreed with course premises. He acknowledged, though, after reading and thinking about his family history, it “wasn't hard to find the truth” of arguments. Derrick's history included many relevant examples: nineteenth century land grant acquisition; mid-twentieth century GI Bill benefits; *in vivo* inheritance from grandparents to parents for a home down payment. In the face of these examples and more, Derrick conceded he could not “whole-heartedly attribute *everything* to merit” (student's emphasis). At one point, Derrick recalled his mother shared that despite attending desegregated schools, “all of the neighborhoods around her school were white.” According to Derrick, his brain “immediately leapt to a passage from [Shapiro's \(2005\)](#) book.” Though “[b]efore . . . [he] never really understood how school districts received funding,” now links between residential and educational segregation and inequality were “brought to light.”

Despite evidence of burgeoning race consciousness throughout, Derrick made a dramatic retreat to colorblindness:

[T]o me a racial inequality is an inequality that comes about with one's race as the primary factor . . . All of these inequalities are more accurately defined, (to me), as wealth inequalities . . . Granted, in the past, people of color were not allowed the same opportunities as whites and those previous generations were not allowed to build assets based on the color of *their* skin and *that* is a racial inequality, but I do not feel that this translates into a racial inequality today (student's emphasis).

Here, Derrick not only opts for a class-trumps-race argument; he fundamentally rejects his own data and analysis demonstrating how race and class intersect. He introduces “time” as the key factor, and reinstates the very logic shrouding covert mechanisms of structural racism today—namely, rejecting the relationship of past inequality to contemporary patterns, along with the possibility that contemporary racial discrimination can exist without formal racial codification. Derrick understands the logic of racially conscious arguments *and* his own supporting evidence. His initial skepticism appeared to be fading in favor of race consciousness. Nonetheless, he, too, concludes by doubling down with a logically inconsistent position:

I don't believe merit and merit alone equal success, but if you don't run the race then you're never going to finish. If my lane has hurdles and the person to my left doesn't, then I guess I

better run faster. I do strongly agree with Shapiro in this defense though, there is nothing wrong with improving your family, “except when improving your children’s opportunities means disadvantaging others” (Shapiro 2005:204).

Derrick cannot defend this ego-preserving position with his data; his colorblindness thus appears more willfully reasoned choice than misunderstanding.

The above examples illuminate how logical maneuvering is often geared toward rescuing white virtue, as most whites require some degree of psychic ignorance to perform and enjoy the spoils of domination (Mills 1997; see also Bracey 2017; Maly and Dalmage 2015). Nonetheless, some students were content to patently reject race-critical logic and simply assert colorblindness without the fanfare of imaginative reasoning. Sam detailed many patterns common to racialized transmission, including expectations of future inheritance. Recognizing his “fortunate” circumstances, Sam concluded emphatically:

I still do not agree that I am unconsciously adding to the inequality of race. Hopefully when I start a family I want to have the advantages of being able to place my children in a top school system. Maybe I am just being greedy, but I feel that this assignment has shown me that I must start making a future for my children. My children will be my priority over other children.

Unlike Derrick, Sam circumvents concerns about the relationship between his future family’s unjust access and other’s disadvantage. Notably, his response highlights an undercurrent in the data—killing empathy for people of color (past and present) and amplifying empathy for whites (close kin, but also “whites” as a corporate group) is a persistent, if more subtle theme in whites’ ignorance maneuvers. Indeed, white supremacy “depends on whites socializing each other *not* to empathize fully with people of color. This emotional disconnect helps legitimize, and prevent a critique of, the racial status quo” (Lavelle 2014:48; Maly and Dalmage 2015). Thus, white epistemology often supports what analysts have referred to as *social alexithymia*—the inability to understand or relate to the painful experiences of those targeted by oppression (Feagin 2013; Feagin, Vera, and Batur 2001). Sam’s example—conveying resource access as a zero-sum game—also emphasizes the significant material benefits that hang in the balance of all white logic. So focused on these, Sam feels no shame about his “greedy” behavior.

To some, the “cognitive dysfunctions” embedded in willfully reasoning colorblindness look like processing errors, where race-critical pedagogy meets, but fails to alter color-blind framing. From an epistemology of ignorance standpoint, however, these maneuvers are actually processing *successes*. That is, despite encountering and even embracing the veracity of race-critical propositional knowledge (at least initially), some whites will continue to discursively—and creatively—reproduce color-blind ideology. Moreover, under the breaching conditions, it would be hard to argue white students’ resorted to available color-blind frames passively. Students here deployed very willful reasoning to fashion color-blind ignorance from exposing truths. These various examples lay bare the tenacity of colorblindness, as well as whites’ capacity to creatively defend traditional color-blind frames when challenged.

Tautological Ignorance

Evasion notwithstanding, the family project appeared successful in breaching students’ colorblindness, even among those who ultimately retreated to color-blind logics. Among the remaining students—nearly three-quarters of the sample—contextualizing family research with course material seemed to inspire a less fleeting racial consciousness. Many highlighted family members’—and their own—racially reproducing actions. And yet, the majority folded in additional assumptions that neutralized critical elements of racial understanding, patterns captured by the final two themes.

In the first—*tautologically reasoning ignorance*—students incorporated tautological assumptions about ignorance to establish their own and others' racial obliviousness and innocence. About a third of the sample engaged in tautologically reasoning ignorance; Chelsea was exemplary. Discovering and accepting the veracity of ugly racial facts in personal family histories was unsettling for Chelsea, as for many students. She wrote the project had “brought an eerie light to the matter of ‘who is racist,’ because now the racists have faces and names, and they are my kin.” So fraught, it appeared Chelsea could only accept this racially conscious conclusion under one condition: “For me to consider my family racially prejudiced, I must accept racism as an unconscious act, because these are not people who would willingly cause harm to others.” Chelsea calls on ignorance to resolve a triggering dissonance between recognizing her family had benefitted from and helped reproduce patterns of racial oppression, despite being morally opposed to racism in principle.

There is an important hegemonic core of whiteness captured in Chelsea's position—she holds an *a priori* assumption about the morality of her kin, and from this position deductively reasons passive and sincere ignorance. To be sure, if white students sometimes used willful colorblindness to preserve morality, those engaged in tautologically reasoning ignorance often built directly from this basis of presumed white virtue. Specifically, many students followed a clear, patterned logic that suggested “*if whites knew about systemic racism and white privilege we would act differently; that we don't act differently makes it obvious we don't know*”—a position that tacitly assumes virtuousness. Analyzing race scholars' white privileging discourse Glenn Bracey (2017) advances the concept of “rescuing whites” to describe discursive strategies that stifle direct critique of whites, as racialized actors responsible for white supremacy and racism. Here we see everyday whites using a socio-cognitive maneuver that achieves similar currency, with examples that clarify the psychic dissonance sitting in most racial-logical deliberations.

At times students grappled with moral incongruities in palpable ways. For example, Steven appeared highly anxious about diminishing his family's accomplishments, sharing, “Even though I understand this idea of white privilege, I feel like some hard work is taken away from my family and other families simply for being white.” Note here, Steven's concern is not just damage to *his* family's reputation, but also a broader *corporate white family*. So beset, Steven wrestled with this dissonance over two full pages in a paper that was only five—40 percent of the paper. In another passage he worried “these ideas” could “take away a person's appreciation for . . . past generations,” and reaffirmed trust that his family *had* worked hard to get where they were today; still, he *could* “see how [they] may have been advantaged due to white privilege.” He lamented colorblindness again and again, asserting many people (implicitly white) “don't see the disadvantage given to blacks,” and mistakenly “feel like blacks have the same opportunities as whites,” an “ignorance” he “hate[d] to see.” Though he resisted the safety of colorblindness, it appeared Steven, too, could only acquiesce to race consciousness with the buffering logic of sincere white ignorance. With that psychic dilemma resolved, Steven named his takeaway as realizing “how I can be proud of my family and at the same time understand my privilege.”

Students used tautologically reasoned ignorance to repair moral breaches, trumping the immorality implied by unjust enrichment. Indeed, these data suggest some students' racial consciousness was only made possible by the soothing, parallel logic of *sincere, passive white ignorance*. Analysis of this maneuver also strongly backs arguments that “pursuit of an idealized white self” is fundamental to recursive processes of racial reproduction (Feagin 2013; Hughey and Byrd 2013:974; Lavelle 2014). While the psychic desire to “rescue” is understandable, tautologically reasoning ignorance “obscures the social relations at the heart of racial oppression,” thereby restricting “the scope of race critiques.” Thus, it too “generates contradictory explanations of racism” (Bracey 2017:1). Developing tautological explanations specifically emboldened students to reify structure as solely responsible for reproducing white supremacy, while whites appeared mostly unwitting and involuntary participators—a move that preserves white virtue while minimizing agency and motive.

Moreover, in confusing causes this maneuver led many students to imagine white consciousness raising an automatic corrective for white supremacy. For example, Olivia wrote, “[a]lthough it makes me uncomfortable to analyze my white families’ wealth and the transmission of it, and how it was accumulated through an advantage over minorities, . . . it is necessary in order to recognize the reasons for racial inequality today.” The tautologically patterned reasoning here appears: “Whites need to know about systemic racism, otherwise we won’t know.” Olivia suggested no further related praxis in her paper, and indeed only a tiny percentage of the sample communicated anything resembling future antiracist praxis as a project takeaway. Like Olivia and Steven, many correctly identified white ignorance as a central obstacle, but conceived increasing the ranks of “knowing” whites would inevitably advance racial justice—a running theme across the data. This tacit trust connects back to core beliefs about white morality, with a tautological logic that now appears fully formed: “Whites need to know about racism, or we won’t know. When we don’t know about racism, we accidentally participate in it through no fault of our own. If we can just know about racism, we won’t do it anymore because we are good people.” For her part, Cynthia felt sure “Americans” (implicitly white) were not “racist people;” they just lacked “certain knowledge” about what was “going on around them every day.” In her mind it was thus “extremely valuable to know and understand” cyclical wealth inequality. She had faith that “the move toward total equality” was “on its way;” nonetheless “until people are educated . . . [they] will not know that there is a problem.” Ultimately, this maneuver does more than provide psychic respite; it enshrines the entire ideological apparatus that makes whites’ material domination possible.

Mystified Solutions

Chelsea, who reclaimed her family’s morality by reasoning sincere ignorance, closed by questioning whether it was possible to “change a mindset . . . so unconsciously ingrained” in so many people’s lives. Despite experiencing her own racial awakening, Chelsea was dubious, concluding her “one” takeaway was that “unfortunately . . . racism is very, very far from finished.” Chelsea’s position anticipates the final theme—*mystifying practical solutions*. Students who engaged in this maneuver developed racially conscious analyses and expressed concern about injustices they discovered, but generated doubt and mystery surrounding related, practical solutions—even antiracist praxes their research and experience would logically advise.

About 15 percent of the sample offered evidence of mystifying practical solutions—they embraced the veracity of racism and conceded their family’s intergenerational participation, but followed with statements indicating broad and sometimes personal confusion and doubt about what could be done to alter such patterns. Most students avoided such questions altogether, perhaps because identifying practical solutions was not explicitly prompted; but for some the subject loomed. Abby shared how difficult writing her paper had been, having to “admit” how her family “contributed to racism in our world,” realizing even “‘good’ people” were involved and that she herself “added to this problem.” She felt certain her family “would have made different decisions” if they knew “they were putting a group of people at a disadvantage;” yet, she granted her eyes were “opened” to racial privileges that built her family’s wealth. For all her new insight, Abby was unclear what came next:

Many people, equally if not more worthy of all my family has, have never had opportunities to advance their family’s capital. I am left not knowing what to do with that. Should I feel guilty or blessed, do I fight the system or are we too far embedded in this ideology to get ourselves out?

Abby was not the only student with lingering questions. Laura trusted “we can all agree that much of the impoverishment and enrichment seen in our society today *is* unjust.” She knew that knowledge was “only the first step.” However, the rest was “blurry”:

It is easy for me to state all the privileges I have been given throughout my life based on race . . . [I]t leaves me with a daunting question: How can I help the “larger issue of systemic racial

inequality?” Is it my responsibility to change this? Should I feel guilty about what I have? Will I be the only person of my race fighting for a never ending cause? . . . As a race we are not able to see how the color of our skin plays into our wealth, and then once we do recognize this, we do not know what to do to help the situation. From my vantage point it seems like a battle that cannot be won alone. Until white people stop rationalizing racial oppression and start realizing their own role in racial oppression, systemic racism will continue to flourish.

Abby and Laura lay out familiar testimonies: whites are honestly unable to see racial inequality for what it is; if made aware, whites will decisively recognize injustice. In mystifying practical solutions, however, they erect another ideological defense: whites who do manage to learn about systemic racism simply do not know how to make things better. Abby and Laura’s “hedging bets” is revealing—are we “too far embedded;” “is it my responsibility;” will I be the only one fighting a “never-ending cause?” Abby’s equivocation is strikingly inconsistent—the faith her family would have behaved differently if only they had known their complicity is betrayed by her own confusion surrounding not just what to feel (“guilty or blessed”), but whether she should do anything at all. Laura’s statement casts further doubt, implying whites are foolish to imagine they can do anything meaningfully antiracist on their own.

One could understandably read students’ mystification empathically, as a response to feeling overwhelmed by the depth of the problem as well as the psychic weight of contemplating one’s responsibility. Still, it is worth clarifying how extremely rare it was for students to advocate concrete interventions, public or personal, following often very coherent and impassioned analyses of everyday racial reproduction (which, Laura testified she could now identify with “ease”). Numerous possibilities are implicit in the assignment and findings; some were made explicit in readings and classroom discussions—from investing in the public educational infrastructure over hoarding opportunities; supporting inheritance taxes, asset or reparations policies; choosing to live in integrated neighborhoods and/or send children to integrated schools; even engaging in consciousness raising with other whites. Only one student in the sample, Janice, suggested a definitive *public* intervention:

[M]y family has assisted in widening the gap of racial inequality . . . [I]t is clear that the issue will not resolve itself. Therefore, I think it is time that the government got involved, and Shapiro’s (2005) conclusion outlines several asset policies that seem quite promising.

Only three in the sample indicated unambiguous *personal* “obligation” to do something; and of these *only one* shared specific ideas—Liz, who was uniquely “infuriated” to learn of her involvement in racial reproduction. These anomalous takeaways make clear antiracist interventions, though rare, were not inconceivable. The broader dearth and mystification of practical solutions appear empirically meaningful by contrast.

Mystifying practical solutions suggests “knowing whites,” even those who are morally concerned, may very well maintain racist praxes. Some straddled consciousness, ignorance, and racist praxis even more transparently. Emily shared hopes for which she had little faith:

Although I would like to break the cycle . . . I admit that when looking for a home with my husband after college, I will consider the schools that are present as well as the ethnic background because I would like my children to have the best education possible. This is creating racism . . . in a circular pattern where even I . . . will unknowingly be racist . . . I feel so guilty as I write this paper because I think of all the people that have so much less than me.

If it were possible to extend the benefit of doubt to Laura and Abby, Emily’s desire to “break the cycle” appears entirely hollow. The testimony of ignorance is in fact so convenient, Emily marks

future conditions where she will “unknowingly be racist,” preemptively neutralizing her implicit immorality. She offers psychic contrition instead—guilt—in lieu of more substantial antiracism.

Paradoxically, others forecast future colorblindness as well. For example, Katrina wrote how “disappointing” it was to find out she was “connected to racial inequality.” She continued:

It’s a disappointment because I know that unconsciously I am likely to follow in the steps of keeping racial segregation alive . . . I would like to think that my generation could be the generation to close the wealth gap and racial segregation, if only it were that easy.

These data beg an important question: how do whites *unconsciously* reproduce patterns of which they are *conscious*? The projection of future “unconscious” racism seems the strongest evidence that racial ignorance is a habit of mind to which whites are possessively committed. To be sure, Katrina’s statement is more than a prediction of future colorblindness; it is a reassertion of her morality. She expresses regret while implying she would not engage in racism *if ever she were aware of it*, doubling down on white virtue while nullifying what she learned from her research. Katrina’s displeasure illuminates how very enticing racial ignorance is for most whites. In a world looming with “racial” information, producing ignorance resolves the challenge of preserving “sincere fictions of the white self” alongside unjust, racially derived privileges (Feagin et al. 2001:186). Read this way, Katrina’s disappointment appears less driven by injustice than the “extra” work now required to hide the ugliness of domination. Katrina offered gratitude as a resolution—another consistent pattern—sharing that “[k]nowing that not every race can be so lucky” made her “want to succeed and not take for granted the . . . wealth and capital that my family has been able to accumulate over time.” In other words, Katrina wanted to better appreciate and not squander the spoils of whiteness.

CONCLUSION

In *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992), critical race theory pioneer, Derrick Bell uses an allegory to contemplate white ignorance. Bell imagines fictional weather disturbances—“Racial Data Storms”—initiated by black scientists, raining down data onto every U.S. citizen: the number of Africans captured and enslaved; black disparities in employment, income, and education; infant death rates; life expectancies; prison terms for the same crime; death sentences. Beyond data, all experienced the feelings that accompany oppression—exasperation, rage, horror, despair. Debating over the parable’s meaning, Bell’s fictional antagonist inquires whether “such brilliant manipulation of meteorology, statistics, and psychology” could make sweeping reform possible. Bell replies with pained doubt:

I am far less certain . . . our long-held belief in education is the key to the race problem . . . [I]t’s hard for me to admit, but we fool ourselves when we argue that whites do not know what racial subordination does to its victims. Oh, they may not know the details of the harm, or its scope, but they *know* (p. 151; emphasis in original).

I believe this analysis emboldens Bell’s provocative claim. That the field of white social life often makes sustaining colorblindness easy does not mean color-blind frames are always (or simply) tools whites draw from ready-made kits (Swidler 1986). In a world looming with racial disparities, resistance, and counter-framed critiques from people of color, racial reproduction rests on whites’ ability to sustain and when necessary creatively defend hegemonic logics (Bracey et al. Forthcoming; Feagin 2013). In many respects the breaching methodology described here approximates a more severe “racial data storm” than most whites encounter in everyday life; one students appeared capable of weathering. Extending the meteorological analogy, some managed to avoid the rains; others steadied well-worn umbrellas to prevent a fully penetrating soak; while many who were waterlogged rigged new means to endure troubling weather until skies cleared. Reading these maneuvers—evasion,

willfully reasoning colorblindness, tautologically reasoning ignorance, and mystifying practical solutions—as progressive obstacles illuminates just how tenacious whites’ commitment to ignorance and racial domination can be.

Indeed, my analysis urges color-blind scholars develop further analyses that better clarify the “profoundly cultural” nature of structure (Giddens 1984; Sewell 2009:151). Most work appears to assume whites’ are only creatively agentic when they resist white supremacy. While resisting one’s possessive investment in whiteness is certainly the path of greater resistance, we should not discount how agency and innovation influence more conservative reproduction as well. Nor should we assume whites’ racial consciousness is inevitably antiracist and will embolden countervailing praxis. Examining colorblindness as an everyday, recursive accomplishment brings these nuances into relief. White students’ creative and often strident efforts to avoid, repair, or otherwise metabolize a breach in colorblindness betray an epistemology of ignorance that I believe better grounds models of racial ideology. This socio-psychological focus on process more clearly marks everyday whites’ role in *maintaining* the cultural tools of colorblindness and, further, reveals means by which whites *refashion new tools* when necessary to mystify domination and make racial reproduction manageable; this focus also elevates the psychic, specifically moral investments that accompany whites’ racial reproduction.

The lens of racial ideology as process also clarifies important continuities across eras usually marked as dissimilar. Contemporary colorblindness is not about *not* seeing race any more than inventing mythological race was about seeing “real” racial difference (Mills 1997). Rather, colorblindness is about culturally sustaining an ignorance useful for cloaking and reproducing the contemporary structural mechanics of a white supremacy that is now centuries old (Moore 2014). In this sense, contemporary whites are not so different from everyday whites in former eras. As previous generations who performed everyday racism while maintaining their personal and corporate morality, whites today utilize ways of knowing that mystify the racial mechanisms of their era, in a society perpetually organized around preserving white power and privilege. Indeed, this instability and evolution in everyday practices and discourse at the surface level stabilizes the deep structures of historical white supremacy (Sewell 2009).

Beyond empirical and theoretical insights, my findings generate a practical question as well—how should those concerned with the project of racial justice confront an ignorance that “fights back”? To be sure, education and white consciousness raising remain favored solutions for addressing colorblind racism. Scholars often submit penetrating white colorblindness as a practical conclusion of their data (e.g., Brunσμα, Brown, and Placier 2012; McKinney 2005; Trepagnier 2010). Further, raising awareness is a core feature of nearly every institutionalized diversity program (see, e.g., Gaertner and Dovidio 2005; Hurtado 2005). With goals like reflecting on and reducing privilege and facilitating people’s ability to “work across difference,” dominant groups often appear the implicitly centered subjects of many multiculturalism-based solutions (Embrick 2011; Perry and Shotwell 2009; Smith 2013).

Colorblindness is certainly “not indefeasible;” nonetheless, my data advise we not underestimate whites’ psychic commitment to accomplishing racial ignorance (Mills 2007:23) nor newly presenting challenges. U.S. society is now replete with mainstream institutions incorporating the “happy talk” of diversity and inclusion (Bell and Hartmann 2007:906; Berrey 2015; Embbrick 2011). This normative climate will increasingly animate whites’ incentives to know (at least some things) about racism and white privilege. Guided by insights gathered here urges we not only anticipate continued defense of established color-blind frames but also new forms of “racially conscious” ignorance stirring. Analyzing a large, nationally representative sample, Douglas Hartmann, Joseph Gerteis, and Paul Croll (2009) found it was not uncommon that whites today could identify ways they are structurally advantaged by race while still embracing color-blind beliefs. Similarly, Burke (2012) found liberal and “pro-diversity” white families often still engaged in color-blind discourse and maintained racially insular lives by design. Themes developed here, of “racially conscious” students tautologically reasoning ignorance and mystifying practical solutions, present similarly. Critical teacher-scholars must therefore be exceptionally creative and “racially realistic” in developing pedagogical strategies (Bell 1992).

This research recommends a subtle but meaningful shift in goals, particularly when addressing white students at historically white colleges and universities—from “generating awareness” to “making ignorance more difficult.” Here I refer most specifically to ignorance about structural mechanisms that reproduce the materiality of “race” and, even more particularly, those in which white students likely participate. Such approaches need not supplant addressing the oppressive microaggressions of everyday interaction that sustain racially hostile campus climates (see, e.g., Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2007; Yosso et al. 2009). Nonetheless, countervailing white supremacy necessitates an even more “insurgent praxis,” one that disrupts the material patterns of unjust impoverishment and unjust enrichment on which racial reproduction rests (Dello Buono 2013:799; Mueller 2013b).

Critical educators are thus wise to capitalize on pedagogical breaching methods like the one described here, interrupting the “life as usual” conditions that allow students to sustain ignorance about often covert and highly institutionalized mechanisms of material reproduction. Most vitally, strategies should involve *personally centered, active investigation*. This approach makes it harder for white students to avoid a relational understanding about how their *personal whiteness* attaches to real material power and greater access to resources of all kinds in the world, including the ability to reproduce personal and corporate white privileges (Mueller and Feagin 2014; Perry and Shotwell 2009). We can breach the ideological undergird as well. Many instructors already use texts like *Racism without Racists* (Bonilla-Silva 2014) to great effect; the analysis provided here can serve as a valuable supplement, encouraging students to identify discursive patterns and white epistemic maneuvers in their social worlds, and indeed, their own thinking. My analysis also urges we incorporate clear examples of socially just public interventions and antiracist praxes, increasing the psychic work required to ignore, mystify, or retreat from concrete solutions and activism. Finally, we should highlight the “extraordinary costs and burdens” people of color bear under white supremacy throughout, making the work of racial apathy harder as well (Feagin 2014:22; Forman 2004; Forman and Lewis 2006).

Perhaps most important, elevating the goal of “making ignorance hard” does not sacrifice the learning of students of color or use them as mediums to facilitate whites’ consciousness-raising, as occurs with some race-pedagogical approaches (Perry and Shotwell 2009; Smith 2013). Unsurprisingly, students of color are quick to learn and internalize critical lessons about the structural and ideological mechanics of white supremacy through breaching exercises. Moreover, such lessons have the added effect of challenging hegemonic notions that people of color are victims of a rootless racial ideology or “simply ‘objects’ of white contempt”—indeed, many are powerfully validated to learn how their experiences are fundamentally grounded in a system of material exploitation (Mueller 2013b:180). If we accept that “militant human praxis is the sole source of emancipatory social change,” then such strategies stand a much better chance of cultivating insurgent antiracism among those most likely to defy the structural regime “with a strategic and decidedly emancipatory agenda” (Dello Buono 2013:796, 799).

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