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“I Can’t Be Racist, I’m Gay”: Exploring Queer White Men’s Views on Race and Racism

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In society and on college campuses, whiteness has staked a claim as the default race for queerness. This has manifested in queer and trans people of color feeling like outsiders who must resist hegemonic whiteness at personal and institutional levels. This qualitative study explores how queer white men negotiate their relationship to race and racism on and off their campuses. These men oscillate between normalizing whiteness, working through whiteness, and working with their whiteness. Implications for improving campus climate and the experiences of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) students, staff, and faculty are discussed.

The current gay rights movement in the United States looks dramatically different depending on who a person is and how they identify. Masculine or heterosexual presenting cisgender white gay men, for instance, operate from drastically different levels of concern, immune from potential harm that their more visible queer and trans peers, particularly queer and trans people of color, are not. Not subject to hate crimes, nor subject to racism, misogyny, transmisogyny (Krell, 2017), or misogynoir (Bailey & Trudy, 2018), some cis white gays have abandoned responsibility and fealty to the movement, leaving the most vulnerable members of the queer community to fight for themselves without the potential help of queer white allies who might not even see the need for continued protest (Conrad, 2014; Spade, 2015).

The Supreme Court’s 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling is an excellent example of this divergence of concern and lapse in perceived responsibility (Liptak, 2015). With same-sex marriage equality won, many cis gay white men and women bowed out and

complained that continued protests were a step too far (Arana, 2017). In Seattle, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., protestors at pride parades opposed police violence (Grinberg, 2017), violence against transgender women of color, mass deportations, corporate sponsorship of pride (Rosendall, 2017), and the “whitewashing of the LGBTQ community,” (p. 1) embodying just what white LGBTQ community members considered excessive and highlighting a clear split within the larger queer community (Arana, 2017). Arguing for more parade and less protest, cis white gays called the protests “hypocritical, obnoxious, unreasonable, absurd, and intimidation tactics”, with one man at Seattle’s Capital Pride shouting “Fuck you for ruining a nice parade!” at No Justice No Pride protesters (Arana, 2017, p. 1; Rosendall, 2017).

Critical queer activists and activists of color responded by echoing the criticisms of their predecessors – that movements should originate at the margins and work to decenter hegemonic identities or risk continuing to harm the most marginalized (Crenshaw, 1991; Moore & Stephens, 2016; Spade, 2015). Meanwhile, white critics have lambasted calls for activism steeped in anti-racist, feminist, queer of color, and anti-colonial thought (or more broadly, intersectional activism; Crenshaw, 1991), functionally criticizing anti-racist work as anti-white. These critics labeled activism as language policing reminiscent of Puritanism (Sullivan, 2017), an academic fad, and a radical leftist machination designed to force political capitulation in the interest of those who shout the loudest (Kirchick, 2016). Kirchick further asserted that “white gay man” has become an “epithet” (Arana, 2017, p. 1).

These confrontations have emphasized an ideological disconnect between some “gay white cisgender men who feel like they can celebrate post-marriage equality” and

others “who fear for their lives under a Trump administration” (Arana, 2017, p. 1). This disconnect, between “intersectionalists and non-intersectionalists” (Arana, 2017, p. 1), is mirrored on college campuses, particularly in predominantly white and often racist queer campus organizations, and more commonly in interpersonal interactions, such as friendships, classroom interactions, or sexual relationships. In these spaces, the myth of reverse racism and discrimination against white people, and men in particular, prevails (Byrd, 2017; Cabrera, 2018a; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011).

As the social dynamics of larger society play out in the microcosm of higher education, students on the margins are abandoning politeness and respectability politics and prioritizing forceful and critical student activism and organizing (Chakrabarty, 2018; Horowitz, 2017; Hunt, 2017). White students generally underestimate, or are generally unconscious of, the severity of racial campus climate and recent work on white students’ perceptions of racism on campus (Cabrera, 2014, 2018a) has uncovered huge disparities between reality and sincere fiction (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003). For LGBTQ students of color mobilizing and organizing on campus around their identities, knowing that straight white men on campus feel that “race doesn’t matter that much” (Cabrera, 2018a, p. 19) and that “the only racism left is against white men” (p. 39) is probably not that shocking. These students are already likely encountering racism from both queer white peers and, if at a historically white school, their institutions (Duran, 2019a, 2019b). Further, work on personal and romantic interactions between students has identified sharp racial lines in the academy (Byrd, 2017), suggesting the need for an understanding and interpretation of campus interactions that incorporates both racial and sexual identities.

This work, however, has not explicitly leveraged sexual orientation as an analytical factor, but noted that it may be an area for exploration. As cis white gays have always centered themselves in queer activism, advocacy, and protest – to the detriment and erasure of the work of queer and trans people of color (Conrad, 2014; Spade, 2015) – it is imperative that future work on queer collegians identify how the action, or more realistically the inaction, of queer whites is affecting campus climate and the experiences of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC). Many QTPOC already feel like “outsiders in a niche group” given the whitewashing of queer spaces (Duran, 2019a, p. 6) and, within their larger campus communities, may be struggling to resist hegemonic whiteness at both personal and institutional levels (Duran, 2019b). This study seeks to extend the analysis of “white guys on campus” (Cabrera, 2018a, p. 1) to queer white men and to better understand how queer white men negotiate their relationship to race and racism on college campuses. It is focused on improving the experience for queer and trans people of color on these campuses, rejecting sincere fictions like reverse racism (Cabrera, 2018a; Feagin & O’Brien, 2003), and identifying ways to move queer white men out of what Cabrera et al. call racial arrested development (Cabrera et al., 2016) and towards more productive racial allyship. This racial allyship must reflect the agency central to how white people engage with whiteness, specifically that we can choose to reject social parameters that benefit us to the detriment of others. The study is organized around the following questions: (1) How do queer white men in college explain issues of race and racism on their college campuses? (2) How do queer white men in college explain issues of race and racism in friendships, personal, romantic, and sexual relationships? And (3) how do queer white

men in college engage in discursive practices and rhetorical self-positioning to race and racism and how does this reinforce and/or challenge white supremacy?

Literature Review

On college campuses, straight, cisgender white men rest comfortably at the top of the campus (and societal) social pyramid, immune to the oppression marginalized groups face by virtue of their race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, and gender identity (Cabrera, 2017, 2018a). Free from the constraints of racism and mostly free from the constraints of sexism, barring how heterosexist conceptualizations of sex and gender inherently marginalize queer people, queer white men are just slightly below their straight counterparts on this pyramid, shielded by both patriarchy and whiteness. Whiteness has staked itself as the default and normal racial way of being, this is also true for LGBTQ populations. Where straight people of color are categorized by virtue of difference, LGBTQ populations are similarly assumed white until proven and noted otherwise (QTPOC; Brockenbrough, 2015; Conrad, 2012; Spade, 2015). This positioning of white as default deracializes queerness in a way that reinforces whiteness to the injury of queer people of color. That hegemonic whiteness pervades queer spaces is directly harmful to QTPOC, who not only face the deracialization of spaces that they have largely cultivated but who also endure racism within both personal interactions and at the institutional level (Duran, 2019a, 2019b).

By virtue of possessing a marginalized identity (sexual orientation), queer white men may be more empathetic to the social and political plights of their queer of color peers, a theory which racial allyship and social justice allyship research seemingly supports (Bailey, 1998; Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Reason et al., 2005).

Consistent centering of queer whites in queer social movements, however, has indicated that, once gains are made for queer, cisgender whites (same-sex marriage, for example), most of this population immediately divests responsibility for continued advocacy and allyship. White queers even criticize populations of color for continuing to push for equality (Kirchick, 2016). Because white queer people do not have to consider race as a factor of their marginalization, their refusal to engage in continued advocacy or simple ignorance of the issues of QTPOC often works to the detriment of queer populations of color (Conrad, 2012, 2014; Spade, 2015). This lack of positive action may also be simultaneously paired with negative action in the form of racist behavior and the perpetuation of harmful racial stereotypes within queer spaces (Duran, 2019a). Exploring how queer white men understand and describe race and racism on college campuses is thus crucial 1) to identify how queerness is being employed in defense of whiteness, and 2) to imagine ways to leverage whiteness in both the dismantling of whiteness and the liberatory interest of queer populations of color.

White Men in College

White men on college campuses benefit from a variety of systems designed specifically for them: the American system of higher education, patriarchy, and white supremacy (Cabrera, 2018a). Though the intersection of their identities has afforded these men tremendous privilege and immunity (Cabrera, 2017, 2018a) from harm that women and people of color do not benefit from, recent work investigating the racial experiences and ideologies of white men on college campuses has revealed a concerning investment in believing in the fictional concept of reverse racism. This issue also proliferates off campus (Cabrera, 2018a; Conrad, 2012).

In his study of white guys on campus, Cabrera (2018a) found that many of the white men he interviewed felt that “the only discrimination left is that against white men” (p. 40). Through processes of white insulation (in-group homophily, racial siloing), willful racial ignorance and the framing of whiteness as neutral, and white agility – avoidance of racial conversations and the centering of whiteness in conversations of race—these white men often chose to reject reality in favor of racial, social, and political comfort. Here, Cabrera (2018a) refers to a belief in reverse racism as a sincere fiction, (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003) that white men hold onto to maintain their positive self-image. Cabrera (2018a) identifies this rhetorical move as an act of “white narcissism” (p. 41).

Byrd (2017), though he did not expressly articulate his findings using the language of critical whiteness studies, similarly found consistent employment of these white rhetorical strategies among students at elite institutions. He noted that these students often rationalized inequality or by contrast, their own immense privilege, by rooting their opportunity and success in conversations of meritocracy. Like the men Cabrera (2018a) interviewed, the students on Byrd’s elite campuses (2017) emphasized a bootstrap mentality that is largely imagined and inaccessible for those not shielded by white immunity.

For queer white men, who benefit from both patriarchy and white supremacy but are subject to homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality¹, and hegemonic masculinity², identification with one marginalized or disadvantaged group may obscure or suppress

¹ The hegemonic positioning of heterosexuality as the only option and the subsequent labeling of other embodied sexual orientations as abnormal or deviant (Butler, 2006; Rich, 1980).

² A one-size-fits-all approach to embodying masculinity that emphasizes and mandates heterosexuality, sexual dominance and activity, and marginalizes femininity (Connell, 2010; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Willer et al., 2013).

the very real privilege and immunity afforded by whiteness. In conforming and reacting to campus and societal homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity, queer white guys on campus may view their queer identity as the most salient, relegating their whiteness to a personal margin. This unconscious or perhaps strategic suppression of whiteness is exacerbated by the default conceptualization and identification of most forms of queerness as white (Brockenbrough, 2015; Conrad, 2012; Spade, 2015).

Whiteness as the Default Queerness

As white queerness has been made default as a racial project³ of whiteness (Omi & Winant, 1994) and the explicit and intentional centering of white voices, narratives, and experiences within queer histories (Conrad, 2012, 2014; Spade, 2015), a critical interrogation of queer identities – and the resistance to homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality, and hegemonic masculinity that accompanies them—is necessary for understanding how queerness may be being leveraged in a way that tacitly enforces and reproduces whiteness. The possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz, 2006), and the overt minimization of the power of white supremacy endemic to the United States' racial climate, has been central to the realization of the hypervisibility of whiteness in queer spaces. By positioning white as the default category (Byrd, 2017; Cabrera, 2018a) and subsequently associating the power and immunity from harm associated with white supremacy with meritocratic notions of effort, hard work, and at times luck, whiteness has carved out a difficult-to-interrogate social and political space for itself.

³ A way in which race is routinized and standardized through institutional and organizational action to effectively signify either that race is not salient (whiteness) or is (blackness).

Challenging it often means challenging a concept that many whites refuse to believe even exists (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera, 2018a; Omi & Winant, 1994).

In queer spaces, positioning white as the default racial category that queer people exist within has provided rhetorical and discursive ammunition through which white populations can maintain control of queer populations of color through a consistent labeling of queer of color activism, advocacy, and critique as excessive, unnecessary, and inappropriate (Brockenbrough, 2015; Conrad, 2012; Spade, 2015). By effectively deracializing queer politics to the exclusive benefit of whites, whiteness as default queerness has allowed queer whites to engage in limited participation in liberatory practices while maintaining the illusion of racial allyship and queer solidarity (Brockenbrough, 2015; Conrad, 2012; Spade, 2015). This manifests as institutional violence to communities of color but not to white communities (the police, for example) being welcomed by white organizers at pride parades only to be protested by organizers of color. In spaces like these, whiteness allows the white organizers to frame the organizers of color as disruptors while maintaining a façade of queer solidarity even in the face of well-documented and readily apparent violence. Similarly, queer white Republicans, like Twinks for Trump, reveal how race and class solidarity are often consolidated in the interest of whiteness. The right loves to claim that they have a diverse, “big tent” coalition of supporters that include members of the LGBTQ community, but only if those members are only nominally. By refusing to actively engage in practices that would be liberatory for all people and instead focusing on lowest-common-denominator activism, some queer whites maintain an illusion of queer

solidarity while upholding structural racism, white supremacy, and institutionalized homophobia/transphobia/etc.

Racial Ally Development and Working Through Whiteness

Much of the racial allyship literature has focused on the importance of identifying, being cognizant of, and working through privileges while acknowledging marginalized identities (Bailey, 1998; Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Reason et al., 2005). Research specifically focused on white men has indicated that some white men on college campuses are stuck in a “racial arrested development” (Cabrera et al., 2016, p.1) while others are “working through whiteness” and actively attempting to challenge and interrogate whiteness at an individual level (Cabrera, 2012, p. 8). Cabrera’s research has indicated that shaking white people out of this racial arrested development is necessary but noted that it is difficult to convince white people of both the existence of their white privilege and the ways that it, through intentional avoidance of racial conversations and the positioning of whiteness as neutral in the interest of “white narcissism” (Cabrera, 2018a, p. 41), harms people of color.

For queer white men, queerness may be helpful in identifying and being cognizant of white privilege and immunity, though a cursory analysis of queer social movements suggests that it is often used as a shield against interrogating whiteness (Brockenbrough, 2015; Conrad, 2012; Spade, 2015). Further exploring how queer white men on college campuses understand their own whiteness and how it influences their mobility and position within the campus racial climate is crucial to understanding how white racial allyship⁴ (Reason et al., 2005) or social justice allyship manifests (Broido,

⁴ Leveraging white immunity and privilege to make positive change for people of color. For example, intervening when the police racially profile a person of color on campus or speaking up in class to

2000; Broido & Reason, 2005)⁵. This is particularly important as queer, white allyship might be both limited and performative to the detriment of people of color (Evans et al., 2010).

Understanding how queer white guys understand and describe issues of race and racism on their campuses and position themselves within the racial superstructure of the United States is crucial for two reasons: 1) to identify where whiteness is being employed to deracialize queerness, queer activism, and queer advocacy in the interest and maintenance of whiteness, and 2) to imagine pathways forward that leverage whiteness as an asset for queer communities. As an asset, whiteness should be utilized specifically to call out white supremacist structures and practices and to work towards liberation for queer populations of color who do not benefit from the privilege or immunity afforded by whiteness. Without adequately considering the ways queerness reinforces and protects whiteness, allyship may continue to be performative and the racist behavior of queer white men may continue to be minimized by virtue of their queerness.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this study is hegemonic whiteness, or the systemic and cultural means by which whiteness is continually reproduced through cultural and discursive practices (Cabrera, 2018a, 2018b). The general Gramscian theory of hegemony (Cabrera, 2009; Gramsci, 2009) emphasizes its use in uncovering

accurately attribute an idea, comment, or contribution made by a person of color but claimed by a louder white person.

⁵ Leveraging dominant identities in the support of all marginalized identities. For example, using one's position as a man to advocate the benefits of feminism to other men. Or using one's position as a straight person to amplify another student's claims of homophobia within a class, dormitory, or department, which might go unbelieved otherwise.

power structures, identifying manifestations of asymmetry, moving towards and resisting liberation, and enacting or contesting liberatory praxis. Identifying hegemonic structures is thus crucial for moving towards liberation – hegemonic whiteness is a key structure of contemporary white queerness.

With specific regard to queer whiteness, the employment of hegemonic whiteness and the adaptability of its structure is one way to both blur privilege and minimize white immunity (Cabrera, 2018a, 2014). Specifically, opposition or challenges to whiteness can be positioned as homophobia while the defaultness of whiteness (Lewis, 2004) provides a shield against critique, allowing queer whites to engage minimally in liberatory practices, consolidate their power and reinforce whiteness, and project the illusion of racial allyship.

Rhetorical Devices of Hegemonic Whiteness

Whiteness manifests and defends itself through many rhetorical and discursive practices (Leonardo, 2002). Whiteness should not be separated from the agency with which white people wield it, as participation in whiteness is both inherent and intentional. White privilege is perhaps the most commonly known term, but its successor, white immunity, more carefully describes the ways in which whiteness defends itself at individual, institutional, and systemic levels (Cabrera, 2018b). While white privilege was originally articulated as an invisible knapsack containing unearned benefits offered by whiteness (McIntosh, 1998), white immunity evades some of the conceptual pitfalls encountered by white privilege. Specifically, white immunity identifies that white people are eager to displace and disrupt privileges through narratives

acknowledging nonracialized struggle. The term white immunity also acknowledges its protective rather than provisional impact (Cabrera, 2018b).

A secondary device of whiteness is ontological expansiveness, articulated by Sullivan (2006) as general white entitlement to space and ability to move within spaces, groups, and identities with ease not afforded people of color. This is particularly relevant on college campuses, where whites often conflate spaces coded as nonwhite, such as a Black Student Union, as intentionally exclusive and racist. Ontological expansiveness is one way to focus on communities of color while distancing whites from responsibility (Cabrera, 2018a; Lewis, 2004). Ontological expansiveness can also play out in digital spaces, as queer white people assume domain over digital spaces like Grindr and other dating apps without fear of being racialized or experiencing racism. Another way to distance whites from responsibility for race and racism is “racing for innocence” or white racial innocence (Pierce, 2012, p. 4), the practice of distancing themselves from past and current racism and white supremacy. The employment of and belief in sincere fictions (Feagin & O’Brien, 2003), such as reverse racism, allow whites to engage in white narcissism (Cabrera, 2018a), effectively insulating themselves from responsibility for bias. A product of hegemonic whiteness, sincere fictions facilitate queer white men to distance themselves from racism while centering themselves in conversations around oppression.

These individual components of whiteness all combine and are practiced by whites engaging in white agility (Cabrera, 2018b). This white proclivity to deracinate conversations and shift discussion towards conceptualizations of merit, class, and ideological marginality allows white people to prioritize positive self-image and

emphasize their underprivileged or marginalized-ness. While these components – white immunity, white innocence, sincere fictions, and ontological expansiveness – are not all required for an individual to engage in white agility, they overlap and support each other to maintain whiteness. For example, an individual may consider themselves actively anti-racist and reject white innocence, acknowledging their privilege and the interlocking systems of oppression that QTPOC experience while simultaneously feeling marginalized due to their inability to exist in a QTPOC group. Though not necessarily additive, it is crucial to consider all these components as factors of white agility and indicators of white agility. Part of racial development is learning the terms associated and, while some students may be aware of the concept of white privilege, a racial education can also result in the cooptation and appropriation of racially progressive terms in the defense of whiteness (Cabrera, 2018a). Without adequately considering how these factors contribute to understanding hegemonic whiteness, the employment of the rhetorical devices of whiteness may appear, at their surface, to be in the service of dismantling whiteness while serving to defend whiteness.

Understanding hegemonic whiteness as a foundation of contemporary white queerness, then, is crucial to identifying and contesting the ways in which queerness is leveraged as both a tool or rhetorical device and shield of whiteness. This study seeks to contribute to the research focused on explicitly naming white supremacy, specifically how it is defended through whiteness, in higher education, particularly in queer spaces that are otherwise coded as progressive, liberal, diverse, open, and inclusive. By interrogating the racial ideologies of white queer men, I hope to provide empirical

support for what is already known anecdotally—white queer men can be just as racist as their straight peers.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected through in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews of 2 hours guided by narrative inquiry. My primary focus was on understanding how queer white men understood race and racism through their own experiences, so approaching the study through narrative inquiry was logical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Each participant was asked to describe their relationship to race and racism prior to college, during college, and if that relationship had changed.

Site Description

Participants were recruited on and around a large, public university on the west coast (Western University, a pseudonym). This site was chosen due to its comparably high racial and ethnic diversity, location in an extremely racially and ethnically diverse state and city, and history and subsequent discontinuation of affirmative action. Like many colleges and universities, Western University is no stranger to political protests, demonstrations, and student demands centered on issues of race and racism and has been a location of high-profile student activism for decades. Western University is a comparably selective 4-year public research university with a population comprised of 27% white students, 28% Asian students, 22% Hispanic students, 3% Black students, 12% international students, less than 1% Native and less than 1% Pacific Islander students, and 6% students identifying as more than one race.

Participant Recruitment

I solicited participants through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling (Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2015) that included targeted recruitment of students through advertisements sent to campus email listservs associated with student groups and organizations and posted in the queer community and resource center on campus.

As my target recruitment population is queer, following IRB approval, I also created dating app profiles that explicitly identified me as a researcher and solicited participants identifying on their profiles as white, men, and students. On queer apps like Grindr, Scruff, and heterosexually-focused but queer-friendly apps like Tinder and Hinge, young queer people can find community, friends, dates, sex partners and information about sexual health, relationships, housing, and engagement with queer communities (Woo, 2015). These apps allow LGBTQ people to create profiles and interact with other users based on proximity, mutual (Tinder, Hinge) and not necessarily mutual (Grindr, Scruff) interest. The platforms allow users to share messages, photos, videos, voice messages, locations, and personal information and are used for everything from locating casual sex to finding a partner for a serious monogamous relationship. Some queer students may not be able to be out at home or on campus and social media and dating apps can offer a layered physical and virtual space in which visibility and self-presentation is mediated by the user. Online, context is collapsed and partners are more easily identified, other users on the apps are presumably LGBTQ and users can filter for which genders they want to see, while maintaining anonymity becomes as easy as choosing to not disclose any personal information. Acts that might be awkward in person, such as discussing preferred sexual activities, fetishes, sexual

health statuses, can be done with the push of a button and erased with the push of another (Blackwell et al., 2015). For potential participants who either cannot inhabit or are not comfortable in explicitly queer spaces like gay bars, pride centers, or queer campus centers, these apps can act as “a gay bar in [my] pocket” (Blackwell et al., 2015, p. 1127; Brubaker et al., 2016; White Hughto et al., 2017). Given the proximity-based nature of many of these apps, using apps as recruitment sites can serve as a way to access participants who otherwise might not occupy the same physical space that other participant recruitment methods take place in. Specifically, by offering the same degree of disclosure possible on the apps (meeting on or offline), I was able to recruit students who might not otherwise identify themselves as queer in public spaces.

All participants were recruited via app; no participants responded to emails or flyers though two participants were the direct result of their friends’ participation in the study. I interviewed a total of 6 participants, though one asked to retract his statements following member-checking and exited the study. The remaining 5 participants all identified as male, white, spanned 20-32 years of age, and were middle to upper middle class. Following recruitment, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire.

Demographic Questionnaire

The brief questionnaire focused primarily on demographic information and included questions about support for and frequency of interracial interactions. Upon completing this questionnaire, participants were assessed for eligibility for the interview portion of the study. Eligibility factors included identifying as white, as men, as queer, and as college students. Participant responses were used to tailor the interview protocol, particularly focusing on campus interactions for students who lived off-campus.

No descriptive statistics are reported, as the sample is rather small (n=5). Upon completing the questionnaire, participants were contacted for participation in a 90-minute, semi-structured interview. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and assigned pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality.

Researcher Positionality

As the participants in this study come from a vulnerable population within a privileged population, I carefully considered my own positionality and identification within this group. As a queer white cisgender man, I am inextricably linked to the theory – hegemonic whiteness – that guides this, as I am a prime beneficiary. In approaching both the framing of the study and its execution, I carefully considered my own privilege, and the varying systems and acts of oppression I am immune to, in constructing the study materials (questionnaire, interview protocol) and carried this into the data analysis. By virtue of my own experiences, privileges, and immunities, I was aware of the potential rhetorical moves participants could engage in and structured my questions to avoid facilitating the minimization of participants' privileges and immunities. In terms of data analysis and the presentation of this study's findings, I carefully considered how this research is largely a way for me to be accountable to populations that might be harmed by queer white men. It is also a way to follow Cabrera's (2018a) advice to whites attempting to be antiracists: to stay in our lane and come and get our people.

Analysis of Data

Following the interviews, transcripts were read and reread multiple times (both immediately following the interviews and in relation to proceeding interviews) and contact summary sheets were created for each interview to describe the major points of

discussion, any specific insights, and things to remember for future analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Transcripts were initially reviewed for preliminary codes (interesting personal experiences, notable quotes, detailed racialized experiences), which were distilled down into larger, more thematic codes mirroring the aforementioned rhetorical devices of whiteness (Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Saldaña, 2015). I engaged first in open or preliminary coding, reviewing the transcripts for topics that jumped out to me or were consistent across transcripts. During my preliminary coding phase, I reviewed the transcripts with several *a priori* codes in mind, particularly focusing on Cabrera's (2014) concepts of working through whiteness and normalizing whiteness and applying them to dating profile commonalities I thought I might see: "it's just a preference" or "I just prefer white men." I followed this with axial or grouped coding, wherein transcripts and preliminary codes were reviewed for similarities and grouped into categories. Finally, I employed selective coding for refinement of analysis, development of themes, and validation or confirmation of theory (rhetorical devices of whiteness) by going back and rereading transcripts for specific themes (Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Saldaña, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

I also employed a constant comparative technique throughout this analysis (Glaser, 1965). Constant comparative analysis compares incidents to available categories, integrates categories and their properties, and delimits the theory associated by providing within case and across case analysis of themes. Like Kezar (1996) and Cabrera (2009), I do not approach this study with the presumption of a clean theoretical slate and instead inform my data production and analysis by understanding whiteness as both an historical and contemporary racial project (Omi & Winant, 1994)

and through interrogation and awareness of my own racial position as a white man and my insider knowledge of queer dating apps. This constant comparative analysis was done until transcripts were adequately reviewed, compared, and data saturation was reached (Ravitch & Carl, 2015; Maxwell, 2012).

Rigor

Throughout data collection and analysis, I engaged in reflexive researcher memoing, writing about my personal experiences recruiting participants, conducting the interviews, interpreting participant responses, and identifying similarities between participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). In addition to memoing, I engaged participants in member-checking, offering them access to their transcripts and the opportunity to clarify, contest, or question their responses, my interpretations, and my final analyses of the data we co-constructed in the interviews (Maxwell, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Finally, cross-case analysis served as a way to interrogate and verify both interpretive validity and consistency across participants.

Findings

In conversations with queer white men about their experiences with race and racism on their college campuses and race and racism on social media and dating apps, the participants occupied three discursive positions: 1) fully normalizing whiteness and leveraging queerness as a defense of whiteness (Cabrera, 2014), 2) both normalizing and working through whiteness while using queerness as a rationale for their rhetorical moves, or 3) fully working through and with their whiteness and using their queerness to challenge whiteness in other contexts. Most participants moved across these discursive positions throughout our interviews.

While the participants had the added social contour of identifying as queer, I found that greater exposure to marginalized groups led to two distinct moves within these discursive positions: using the language of social justice to continue to normalize whiteness (“I know I shouldn’t think this”), or actively working through and with their whiteness to confront their own racial biases or that of their friends. With the exception of one participant, Christian, who at no point worked to normalize whiteness or defensively hedge his responses and who I classify as actively working with his whiteness, the queer white men I interviewed oscillated between working through whiteness on some topics, in describing structural or institutional racism, and normalizing whiteness on others-- describing how whiteness affords white people huge structural advantages but minimizing or flat-out rejecting this idea when it came to their personal experience.

While some of the participants have a lot more ground to cover when it comes to their racial development, I found that their experiences as queer men facilitated empathetic reflection and an openness to being educated further on racial justice topics. I present portions of each participants’ interviews below, organized and discussed as these responses aligned with the three discursive positions I described earlier in this section.

Normalizing Whiteness

The first of these discursive positions follows Cabrera’s definition of normalizing whiteness (Cabrera, 2012) and is best exemplified by Adam, who leveraged his own queer identity to downplay the structural benefits afforded to him by whiteness, and to a lesser degree Sam. Adam, a senior at Western University shared he would “like to think

that he's not that racist," also noted that he "doesn't really keep up with race stuff" and just "assume[d] things are racially harmonious on campus." This obliviousness, or wanton ignorance, of campus racial climate persisted throughout the entirety of our interview. When asked about his assumptions of racial harmony, Adam explained that he knows that "there are probably groups who don't feel the same way," but that he sincerely feels America needs to "fucking relax when it comes to race." In distancing himself from the problem, Adam quickly raced for innocence and removed himself from the equation.

For Adam, whiteness afforded him enough white immunity to avoid ever really thinking about race or the very real repercussions of race that other participants described, and he eagerly normalized whiteness throughout our interview. He also made a point to discuss the difficulties of being a gay man on Western's campus, particularly within the heteronormative spaces he occupied, including a fraternity and student athletics. When asked about his interactions with students of other races, Adam shared that he thinks groups of color often participate in "Victim Olympics" and go out of their way to exclude white people, specifically noting that he has experienced exclusion on account of his race when he attempted to attend an LGBTQ Center event on Western's campus. Sam similarly centered himself, and his whiteness, when recounting a comparable experience with one of Western's queer clubs. He told me that while some spaces felt "cool but very judgmental," his experiences in other spaces made him feel so uncomfortable when talking about race that he actively removed himself from the group and reduced his "work as an ally" for fear of "being cancelled."

This fear of “being cancelled” is consistent with the maintenance of white comfort endemic to white agility. Sam and Adam spent more time thinking about how being a minority in a brief encounter negatively impacted them rather than understanding that that reality was a daily occurrence for the students of color on the other end of the interaction. This maintenance of white comfort also extended to our discussions about affirmative action on campus.

Adam was the only participant who contested the idea that white privilege exists, and instead offered his perspective that it is often harder nowadays for white people, particularly men, to get ahead in life. One of Adam’s examples was that “it is significantly easier to get into more selective colleges as an Asian or Black applicant”. Adam did not cite any evidence to support this claim. Before I described to him the history of affirmative action, starting with Alan Bakke and getting up to the Abigail Fisher cases, he told me that affirmative action was essentially a “points-based system that afforded minorities spots that would otherwise have been available for white people.” I described to him, and several of the other participants, that this was not in fact how affirmative action worked. Adam, however, doubled down on his position and argued that affirmative action was a “Victims’ Olympics where you’re trying to be the most oppressed to get the most points” and that he did not think it was fair. Adam said: “I didn’t get any points for being gay.” Adam was also explicit in framing white privilege as a choice, not a given, describing his own hard work: “college is a meritocracy, and it’s more about how you use your privilege to succeed.” With the exception of Christian, a nontraditional student who was more familiar with the court cases and decisions surrounding affirmative action in higher education, the rest of the participants shared

similar misunderstandings of the concept. The participants' overall lack of understanding of the topic of affirmative action speaks to how unnecessary it is for them to know about it conceptually outside of a rejection and, for most participants, how they may understand it as inherently anti-white.

Adam also seemingly understood the online and digital spaces he navigated when he used dating apps as a meritocracy. He described defaulting to racial homophily in the pursuit of sex, relationships, and friendship and specifically emphasized his interest in "white, muscular men over six feet." Adam stated that he thinks this is common on dating apps like Grindr and that he regularly sees profiles with text that reads things like "no rice, no spice, no chocolate" –indicating a preference against Asian, Latin, and Black men –which he thinks "is pretty racist" but categorizes as a preference. Adam also made his distaste for this overt exclusion clear, "you're free to write something on your profile. But that also means that you're putting it out there and people will judge you for it and maybe decide to not talk to you. Which I think is fine." Adam also mentioned that "you can't control what you're into" and that he's "not going to strike up a conversation with someone I'm not into just so I can checkmark that I've talked to a minority this week," positioning his own sexual preferences as anti-fetishizing or tokenizing while simultaneously failing to unpack or critically interrogate why he is only attracted to a physical description roughly mirroring himself.

When Adam was pressed on the reality that he was functionally engaging in a sexual selection process that centered on an unspoken "whites only" rule, he explained that his sex and dating practice is rooted in what he describes as a "sexual meritocracy" in which the most attractive people rightfully get the most attention and where he is not

obligated to respond to messages from men he does not find sexually attractive. This discussion of meritocracy was consistent with his other comments, which largely centered his own hard work, attractiveness, and merit without a critical interrogation of why he can position himself as “objectively hot” in a markedly Eurocentric and white-focused sexual environment, which Christian later commented on. Even his articulation of explicitly stating preferences as racist was couched in the maintenance of his positive self-image and distancing himself from the “bad gays” who are explicitly racist, as he effectively did what he described as racist without identifying it as such. Sam was largely in agreement with Adam’s argument, telling me that he “thinks it’s fucked up, but we all have preferences,” again refusing to interrogate how and why those preferences arise and how they might indicate racial bias.

While Adam and Sam most regularly normalized whiteness, their queer identities afforded them the space and willingness to be pushed on their beliefs. For Adam, who was confident in not being racist while operating from a colorblind and privileged position, the discussion about how affirmative action really worked opened him to the possibility that existing admissions structures unfairly privilege white people. Similar to Adam, Sam’s position shifted slightly because he did not know much about affirmative action and he had only heard about it from white friends. Other participants were more racially developed.

Working Through Whiteness While Queer

Warren and Sam were more cognizant of race on campus and the ways they benefit from and live with the immunity afforded by whiteness. Warren, a junior political science student and campus political organizer, described the same campus that Adam

considered “racially harmonious” as a perpetual racism machine with the campus’s police department at its core. Similar to Warren, Sam, who identifies as ethnically Jewish and white, shared that there is an overall higher standard for people of color on campus and that he has seen “people of color fuck up and white people fuck up and only the people of color are arrested.” He continued, “If I have an encounter with the police, my Jewishness doesn’t impact the outcome, but my whiteness does.” While representing the bare minimum of racial allyship, the mere acknowledgement of racist campus structures set Warren and Sam apart as having a more nuanced understanding of race, racism, and whiteness.

When asked about racial campus climate and student interactions, Warren explained that “everyone self-segregates” and “it’s more about excluding people unconsciously, which is a part of white privilege.” Sam offered a similar position and stated that “you get to construct your identity from scratch when you’re white” and can find space and community in a variety of clubs and groups that might also happen to be extremely white. Both Sam and Warren talked about the importance of “affinity spaces” as places for people of color to “recharge their batteries,” which is consistent with Park’s (2018) analysis of student of color groups. Warren and Sam demonstrated a clear understanding of the ways that their whiteness affords them protections that their peers of color do not have, but this awareness and understanding of white immunity did not extend to other aspects of their lives.

When asked how queer spaces can often be coopted by white students and may result in harm to queer and trans students of color (Duran 2019a), Warren unknowingly referenced Sam’s experience leaving one of Western’s queer groups. He asked me if

there is “room among the woke for the still waking?” while describing his own experiences with the queer coalition and the queer-themed residence hall floor he lived on. Sam stated:

Ultimately, it should be the responsibility of white people to get other white people to a racially liberal place. It shouldn't fall on communities of color, because they didn't start this shit in the first place. And you kind of need to be coming from that place of privilege and using it to really reach people who have that same privilege, like how when women talk about feminism and most guys are like “whatever” but when a guy talks about feminism it's like, oh, this is a guy talking about feminism. White people need to talk to other white people about white privilege and educate them on these issues and how to unlearn the implicit biases that are so heavily ingrained in all of us.

Warren's comfort describing his responsibility and intention to get other white people to a racially liberal place extended to his understanding and description of affirmative action. Working through his whiteness, Warren described affirmative action in similar terms to friends who fell more into Adam's camp. Warren put affirmative action in the context of other racial politics, argued for color cognizance, and articulated the concept of white immunity in explaining:

It's an advantage not in the sense that white people have things they shouldn't, it's an advantage in the sense that they have things that everyone should have but don't. Like the ability to safely walk down the street and not be afraid of the people. Or the ability to walk around a store and not get followed or vote and not wait six hours in line. You know, the ability to apply for a job and not be denied it just because of your name.

I think it is an important part of really looking at a whole person and seeing like, did this person actually have the ability and resources based on the community they were in to take advanced courses or get the SAT prep, or get all this stuff that is associated with class and white privilege? Because if we only go based on these historical metrics of coming from a college educated family, and, you know, having done all the fancy SAT prep that private schools like mine would offer, you know, schools that are overwhelmingly white, it would just be an all-white college system.

This more racially progressive stance on systemic discrimination and affirmative action did not apply to Warren's rationalization of his own success. Warren stated: "It's the fact that I took those opportunities that got me here and not the fact that I'm white." In getting to this rationalization, Warren leveraged his identity as queer, specifically that it was hard for him to come out in high school and that that made him want to work harder to get into a good college where he could be himself, to discuss how other white people should be making a difference towards racial harmony. He did not reflect on how this might influence or have impacted his own life, in effect racing for innocence and distancing himself from the systemic and institutional racism he described as existing but did not acknowledge his complicity in. For students like Warren, the opportunity to learn there was a term for what he felt white privilege did not encompass, white immunity, and to learn more about the critical whiteness studies literature in order to continue to "grow as a person and as an ally," there is hope yet.

Working with Whiteness for Queer Racial Allyship

Unlike his peers, Christian did not hedge any of his responses or exemplify conditional allyship throughout the course of our interview. One of Christian's earliest examples of how white privilege benefits him and other white people to the detriment of people of color exemplified his willingness to use his whiteness to disrupt other manifestations of whiteness and push peers towards racial development. Echoing Warren's earlier stance that white people need to get other white people to a racially liberal place, Christian described an interaction with a friend in which the friend was hired for a job in his field after being expelled from a certification program for cheating. Christian said, "They didn't even call to ask him why he had 'left the program', they just

hired him, that's white privilege." Christian also described another encounter with the same friend, in which he confronted him about his usage of the n-word:

I got in a fight with my friend last week about that because he works on oil pipelines and is like super masculine and all about machismo and he says the n-word and he said he's allowed to say it and he said it in front of me and I got really pissed. I pushed back and he was just like "I'm allowed to use whatever word I want," which is true, you are. But it doesn't absolve you from being told that you're an asshole. Like if you don't know the gravity of that word or experience the harm it can cause you aren't qualified to have an opinion on it. Like you've had no racialized experiences and that word means nothing to you. Like I can call him a faggot and it doesn't matter because he doesn't understand what it means to feel that, but if you call me that it would hurt because that word has history.

While he did not necessarily have to confront his friend in this situation, Christian chose to confront him because he understood, and explained to me, that he is responsible for disrupting negative and harmful manifestations of whiteness where he can.

Christian also was cognizant of his whiteness when discussing affirmative action and collegiate admissions, describing his own experience as a nontraditional student who traveled the world volunteering and working odd jobs as uniquely available to him because of his whiteness. Christian shared that racial disparity is "an empirical fact" and argued that affirmative action forces white people "to look back and see that race matters, because generally white people don't see or consider race, they have the luxury of being considered normal." Sam echoed that white people get mad about affirmative action because they "think they worked hard and that someone that worked less hard is getting something solely because of their race." This cognizance and acknowledgement of the benefits and protections of whiteness, extended to online interactions, particularly on dating apps.

Where Adam and Sam were willing to overlook racist preferences on dating apps, Christian and Warren were not. Christian shared that preferences on dating apps are racist:

You can have anything as a preference, but it's racist. You don't know that person, you're just making a racial judgment call. Grindr is a place where I see my racism. Like everyone's racist, right, and it's just like how you see it in yourself and deal with it because everyone has ideas of what's valuable and what's not. And you can be aware of it or not, and that doesn't mean it's good. On Grindr and Scruff, it's super easy to like, swipe left or right and match until you see someone that's an idealized form of sexuality and in our culture that's a white guy.

Warren agreed:

I always want to assume a good intent. But a lot of times, especially from white people, when they're looking for only other white people it feels racist. It seems like they are only open to experiencing people literally just based on the color of their skin. And there's not a complicated cultural aspect there, it's literally just racism.

Both Warren and Christian described in detail conversations they have had with their friends regarding racial preferences and, though neither advocated tokenization or fetishization of racial minorities, encouraged their queer white peers to “stop swiping right just because he's tall and white.” For Christian, our conversation was simply a space to discuss racial topics he was aware of but did not feel confident defending on his own.

Implications and Future Directions

The potential implications of this study are multiple and exist at thought, practice, and future research levels. All participants were in varying stages of working through their whiteness with some, like Adam, leaning more towards consistently normalizing whiteness. It was clear that all required more information and education surrounding whiteness. While some of the participants had more concerning views on race and

racism, particularly with respect to sexual politics, their identities as queer white men afforded them the space and proximity to other marginalized groups that facilitated a more open and honest reflection than may have been possible otherwise. This access and potential greater empathy for the experiences of others was reflected in the reality that all the participants were, on some topic, working through or with their whiteness. This is not to say that their racial ally development is complete or near completion – as Cabrera (2018a) notes, allyship is an ongoing venture. It is also unclear whether their behavior is being actively resisted by QTPOC on their campuses and in their lives (Duran, 2019a). There is, however, an opening to challenge queer white men and straight white men on their whiteness.

This study will contribute to the critical whiteness studies literature in its attempt to 1) identify where whiteness is being employed to deracialize queerness, queer activism, and queer advocacy in the interest and maintenance of whiteness, and 2) to imagine pathways forward that leverage whiteness as an asset for queer communities in the interest of liberation and the deconstruction of whiteness in general. Specifically, queer white racial allies should see this work, and the conversations I had with the participants, as a jumping off point for conversations with their family members, partners, friends, students, and peers that may be initially difficult. I also hope it inspires self-identified queer white racial allies to continue to pursue their own development as allies – understanding the terms is not enough. Similarly, future educational programming emphasizes pushing white students a bit further – stopping at white privilege might only reinforce class-based deflection and limit racial ally development. Within the current national racial context, this means refusing to let white racial allies

perform allyship fatigue or call it a day after they have read one book on antiracism. Superficial engagement is simply not enough and our QTPOC students, staff, and faculty deserve better.

At a practice level, the findings from this study provide evidence, material, and support for existing campus conversations, programming, and discourse that can move white students away from sincere fictions (Feagin & O'Brien, 2003) like reverse racism and towards generative and productive conversations around whiteness, white supremacy, and institutional and systemic racism. That being said, LGBTQ center staff should consider reflecting on their own positionalities and how they may be maintaining or enabling white supremacist violence in their own spaces and minimizing the experiences and voices of QTPOC. LGBTQ center staff should take the initiative to have conversations with white students and staff about interrogating their own whiteness or proactively develop programming and trainings for staff and students. This programming could explicitly emphasize whiteness as an organizing principle and something to be aware of when engaging in advocacy work or participation in the campus's queer community.

Future research should consider how queer white men can function as advocates for QTPOC and how other minoritized identities (gender, immigrant status, ability) might influence white racial ally development. This research should be reproduced across different institutional contexts, as students vary tremendously in both life experience and demographics, which may impact their racialization and socialization toward race. This work should also be extended to consider unprompted discourse, such as social media

posts, that may unveil what students believe and express when they are not speaking to a researcher.

Conclusion

Queer white men are not perfect racial allies, but the participants offer a glimpse into the available opportunities for greater racial ally development that can be realized through intentional and explicit programming around whiteness. Future research and practice work should leverage this openness to racial education and more detailed conversations on race and racism. While some may clam up, affording white people space to be pushed and educated by white peers may have positive results for their racial ally development and campus racial climate in general. There is room to grow.

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