JCSCORE
Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity
The Journal of the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education

THE WHITENESS PROTECTION PROGRAM: A TYPOLOGY OF AGENTIC WHITE DEFENSE

Uma Mazyck Jayakumar
University of California, Riverside

Sara E. Grummert
Institute for Mixed Methods Research

Annie S. Adamian
California State University, Chico

Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity
Volume 10, Issue 2 | 2024

Copyright and Open Access

© 2024 Uma Mazyck Jayakumar, Sara E. Grummert & Annie S. Adamian

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Permission of the authors is required for distribution and for all derivative works, including compilations and translations. Quoting small sections of text is allowed as long as there is appropriate attribution and the article is used for non-commercial purposes.

The *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* (ISSN 2642-2387) is published by the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE), a production of the University of Oklahoma, in partnership with the University of Oklahoma Libraries.

Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity Volume 10, Issue 2 | 2024

The Whiteness Protection Program: A Typology of Agentic White Defense

Uma Mazyck Jayakumar
University of California, Riverside

Sara E. Grummert
Institute for Mixed Methods Research

Annie S. Adamian
California State University, Chico

White defensiveness in response to racial justice education has increasingly been understood through the "white fragility" framework. This study puts forth a new framework that instead identifies a typology of white defensive moves that actively work to uphold and fortify the white racial contract. Inspired by Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal's (2001) framework for understanding students of color resistance to racism as active (even when it might look passive, on the surface), our theoretical model illustrates four distinct categories of white racial defense that actively protect whiteness. Because white defensiveness has been primarily examined in the context of Traditionally White Institutions, where white students have been presumed to be "ignorant" or "lacking stamina" for encounters in which whiteness is challenged, we provide examples from an instrumental case analysis (Stake, 1995) of 15 in-depth interviews with white students attending three different Historically Black Universities, where their whiteness has become hypervisible and salient. We identify a typology of four agentic forms of defense: The "Innocent Defense," The "Liberal Defense," The "Antiracist Defense," and The "Persecuted Defense." We refer to these defenses together as "the whiteness protection program" to connote a collective agreement (part of the racial contract), which calls for rethinking the individualized and passive notion of white fragility. In the end, we argue that understanding these modes of resistance as agentic, rather than fragile results of lack of exposure and knowledge, is essential to disrupting white supremacy and fostering students of color well-being.

Antiracist educators routinely meet resistance from white students when they center race and racism in the classroom (DiAngelo, 2006; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Matias, 2014; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). In educational spaces and beyond, this resistance has increasingly been filed under Robin DiAngelo's theory of "white fragility" (2006). Even small amounts of stress caused by confronting racial tension, DiAngelo argues, can prompt defensive measures such as anger, withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cognitive dissonance, to which the antidote is

increasing "racial stamina" (2006). She argues that these manifestations of fragility—moments of white breakdown and emotion—are caused by racial segregation, and white peoples' resulting ignorance and lack of experience with people of color. Though white fragility has been useful for starting conversations about white resistance to antiracist education, the concept has been taken up in ways that position white people as passive subjects rather than active participants in white supremacy (Applebaum, 2017; Brown, 2020; Tevis et al., 2023).

Scholars who study white supremacy, such as Sara Ahmed, Cheryl Harris, Zeus Leonardo, Cheryl Matias, Charles Mills, Dylan Rodriguez, and David Roediger, among others, have advanced a different approach to understanding how white students weaponize whiteness—as perpetrators of harm, and active representatives of structures of racial domination. For example, Rodríguez (2020) defines white supremacy and whiteness as a violent *aspirational* project and logic of social organization that requires constant upkeep and adaptation.[1] Among these theorists there is an understanding that white supremacy requires active investment and ongoing discursive transformation and codification to be sustained (i.e., through speech acts, everyday performances, legislation, pedagogy, formal and informal teaching and learning, postracialist policies, liberal reformism, etc.). Within this alternative framing, we are able to see how structures of whiteness are actively remade or reinforced in everyday individual behaviors and moments, especially as white normativity gets contested in racially diverse spaces or with movement toward racial justice (Hale, 1995; Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017; Mohajeri, 2022; Rodríguez, 2020; Tevis et al., 2023).

Historical analysis of Jim Crow train cars as a contested space where whiteness was actively "made" by middle-class white passengers in the absence of the more clear demarcations of segregated life provides an illustrative example. When middle-class Black people entered the semi-public spaces of railroads, they placed their better attire and manners in direct juxtaposition with whites' own class signifiers. This motivated white individuals to take things into their own hands. When Black passengers, like Ida B. Wells, refused to give up their paid for seats, it wasn't only the train staff that kicked them off but white passengers who physically engaged with ensuring their departure, while other white passengers stood on seats to watch and cheer (Hale, 1995). As Hale (1995) explains, "more was at stake than comfortable plushy cushions and clean-carpeted aisles. Whiteness itself was being defined in late nineteenth-century first-class train cars" (p. 128). Seeing wealthy Black travelers or observing Black community and joy disrupted white middle-class passengers' sense of superiority, leading them to more strictly enforce racial segregation in new ways.

The current study follows this line of inquiry by examining how whiteness is constructed in contested spaces today, specifically focusing on how white students reinforce racial boundaries at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Most research on white students in higher education focuses on predominantly white institutions (PWIs), with few studies exploring how whiteness is challenged in more

[1] In *White Reconstruction*, Rodríguez defines white supremacy as "a violence of aspiration and logic of social organization that invents, reproduces, revises, and transforms changing modalities of social domination and systemic, targeted physiological and ecological violence" (2020, p. 7). Here it is understood that racial colonial violence and antiblackness are the pre-conditions for the aspirational project of white supremacy.

diverse settings like HBCUs. Research on white students at HBCUs often centers on their identity and experiences, sometimes framing them as "minorities" and thereby reflecting assumptions of a white fragility framework (e.g., Mobley et al., 2022; Peterson & Hamrick, 2009). It demonstrates that despite exposure to a predominantly and culturally Black environment and more race-conscious education, white students protect their privilege and avoid confronting structural racism (Peterson & Hamrick, 2009) or appropriate experiences of structural racism as happening to them, resulting in the protection of whiteness in more overt and complex ways (Jayakumar et al., 2021; Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017; Tevis et al., 2023). Thus, looking at the HBCU context is of particular value for revealing modes of resistance that research in PWIs generally, and especially work reflecting assumptions of a “white fragility” framework, exclude and conceal.

This study presents a typology of agentic white defensiveness drawing from both prior findings from the same dataset analyzed in Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) and Jayakumar et al. (2021), as well as extant literature on racial ideology and whiteness. For white students in this study, the HBCU environment—like the trains in Jim Crow South—was a space where whiteness was experienced as being contested, and therefore had to be protected and remade. Participants we encountered in the predominantly Black HBCU space, seemed to be experiencing an existential threat to their whiteness, that led to a salient white identity perceived to be under attack and even oppressed (by Black existence and consciousness). In this study, we analyzed white students’ reflections and narrations of their experiences attending an HBCU to locate the ways they actively maintained discourses of whiteness. Our data begins to illustrate how students’ affective attachments to whiteness and their understandings of race and racism were used in more insidious ways to defend and further ideologies of white supremacy.

As such, the purpose of the study is threefold: a) to offer a framework that challenges the notion of white fragility as a passive response and instead reposition affective attachments to whiteness on a larger spectrum of counterinsurgent behavior to conserve white supremacy: a whiteness protection program, b) examine evidence that increased exposure to racial diversity and race-conscious spaces does not necessarily serve as a “cure” but can inspire new defenses, and c) outline the pedagogical implications for higher education and teacher education praxis, particularly in light of a growing co-optation of social and racial justice teachings and discourse, as well as ongoing legislative attacks on curriculum and books.

Because we are interested in the ways that we might, as educators, misread acts of aggression as passive expressions of frailty, we adapted Solórzano and Bernal’s (2001) resistance framework to delineate our findings into four categories of white racial defense— Innocent, Liberal, Antiracist, and Persecuted. Solórzano and Bernal’s (2001) groundbreaking framework challenged prevailing deficit-oriented notions of students of color as passive participants in oppressive schooling environments, demonstrating that when we understand individual agency in relation to structures, we invite possibilities for transformation and change. Our adaptation demonstrates how white individuals *too* are active agents negotiating structures of domination, rather than merely passive participants. This approach is necessary not only for naming white students’ defensiveness as agentic and connected to structure, but also because doing so names

the power white students have to become accomplices *against* racial-colonial violence and white supremacy. In the next section we review extant literature that conceptualizes forms of white defensiveness and resistance to social justice that informed our analysis and conceptualization of a typology of agentic white defense.

Strategies of White Defense: Demystifying White Fragility

The rise of postracialism has been documented as a key way whiteness adapts to changing sociopolitical contexts. As discursive and ideological forms of violence, narratives around a "post-racial" era calcify current structures of racial domination. As Mills (1997, 2007, 2015), and others (e.g., Sullivan & Tuana, 2007) have argued, just as people of color have grown up learning to be racially conscious, white people develop epistemologies of ignorance that are operationalized in various ways. Bonilla-Silva (2014) identified classic tropes white people adhering to an idealized "post-racial" world employed; he found that when white people would articulate their views on race or racism, they would claim a "colorblind" worldview and yet do one of the following: 1) minimize racism and assert that it is a thing of the past, 2) deny structural racism and instead attribute racial inequities to natural occurrences or personal choices, 3) justify racism through stereotypes or deficit-thinking, and/or 4) agree with equality in abstract terms without taking action to change inequality. More recent literature has documented discursive shifts in how white people maintain "colorblind", also called race-evasive or racism-evasive[2], ideology through incorporating rhetoric about valuing diversity or multiculturalism or by asserting an awareness of racism (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015 2017; Jayakumar et al., 2021). For example, white students in environments where white normativity and epistemologies of ignorance are more likely to be challenged—such as hip-hop culture (Rodriquez, 2006) and HBCUs (Jayakumar et al., 2021; Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017)—have been found to adapt rhetoric associated with critical consciousness to shield themselves from accountability or distance themselves from whiteness completely.

Likewise, research on postracialism and race-evasive ideology documents how white people cause harm and prevent change when whiteness is made salient through their emotional responses and outbursts. Studies have shown when white people's race-evasive views are questioned, they often have emotive defensive responses—including anger, crying, or (more subtly) silence, guilt, withdrawal, and cognitive dissonance (DiAngelo, 2011, 2016). White defensive responses are often intended to reify their own innocence, police emotions of people of color (Accapadi, 2007; Ozias, 2023; Tevis et al., 2023), victimize themselves (Matias & Zembylas, 2014), ambivalently detach themselves from issues of race and racism (Forman, 2004; Spanierman & Cabrera, 2014), and/or distance themselves from being perceived as racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Matias et al., 2016). Even small amounts of stress caused by confronting racial tension, DiAngelo (2006) argues, can prompt defensive measures. In her many talks and interviews, DiAngelo often attempts to disarm white viewers' defensiveness about fragility by describing these moments as normal reactions; she asserts fragility is not something white people should feel guilt or shame about, because their lack of experience means they have "an *inability* to think about Whiteness as an identity or as a

[2] We build on the groundbreaking work of Bonilla-Silva on "colorblind" ideology, while acknowledging the critique of the terminology as ableist by critical disability scholars (see Annamma et al., 2007) who suggest "race-evasive" or "racism-evasive" instead.

"state" of being that would or could have an impact on one's life" (2016, p. 216, emphasis added).

Here white people are the threatened object, ignorant of what they're doing, rather than the acting subject; their agency is evacuated. But as other critical race theorists and critical whiteness scholars have argued, white people actively invest within systems of dominance and white supremacy (Applebaum, 2017; Cabrera, 2012; Cabrera, 2014; Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2004; Lipsitz, 2006; Tevis et al., 2023). Zeus Leonardo's (2004) critique of "white privilege" provides a helpful parallel:

> [T]here is the cost here of downplaying the active role of whites who take resources from people of color all over the word, appropriate their labor, and construct policies that deny minorities' full participation in society… It conjures up images of domination happening behind the backs of whites, rather than on the backs of people of color. The study of white privilege begins to take on an image of domination without agents. (p. 138)

Similarly, the pedagogy of white fragility obfuscates how white people interact with structure in agentic ways. The concept of white fragility paints a picture of violence without perpetrators—and therefore without the possibility for accountability. Several scholars have argued that white fragility is more instructive for antiracist education when understood as a performance of invulnerability (rather than vulnerability), tied to a larger project that is responsive to a curriculum of norms, rules, and structures that are core to maintaining white supremacy (Applebaum, 2017; Brown, 2020; Hextrum, 2019).

The affective attachment to white supremacy is not reducible to white fragility or singular emotions, but rather speaks to a much larger ontological tie to whiteness that is embodied, as evidenced by white people's continued material and psychic investment in white supremacist structures and policy (Ahmed, 2004a; Corces-Zimmerman et al., 2021; Hale, 1995; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Mills, 2007, 2015; Ozias, 2023; Roediger, 1991, 2017; Sullivan, 2006;). White student defense is also an affective response to whiteness being threatened (Ahmed, 2004b, 2007; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Ozias, 2023). As Ahmed (2007) explains:

> The affect of such placement could be described as a form of comfort. To be orientated, or to be at home in the world, is also to feel a certain comfort: we might only notice comfort as an affect when we lose it, when we become uncomfortable. (p. 158)

In other words, there is an orienting to whiteness as "home" that white people and institutions are driven to return to when any disruption or distance is traveled away from the security of whiteness (Ahmed, 2007). This notion of whiteness as home is reinforced through policies and state sanctioned violence. For example, the Castle doctrine enforced in 45 states, affords a person the right to use necessary or deadly force and claim self-defense if there is an intruder in their home, and they feel threatened. The systemic protection of white bodies as "home" justifies and acquits white people when engaging in defensive moves utilizing language, violence, and/or behavior in the name of self-defense. In the classroom, when whiteness is confronted, white people do not feel at "home"—yet all of our participants assumed they should have the right to.

Categorizing defensive, protective moves under the umbrella of fragility obscures the underlying affective attachment to whiteness (and white comfort) by merely locating its excess (i.e., only naming white people's investment in whiteness when it spills over

into a legible emotion). Thus, this distracts from what strategies are being used to adapt ideologies of whiteness in moments and eras of insurgent social justice efforts (Hale, 1995; Rodríguez, 2020). For this reason, we use “white defensiveness” instead. We define “white defensiveness” as a range of agentic emotive responses that serve as a means for affirming white supremacist structures, White defensiveness is a performance of invulnerability (Applebaum, 2017)—not a fragile act of vulnerability—which ultimately supports white victimization and policing of BIPOC emotions (Accapadi, 2007), performances of false empathy and care (Matias & Zembylas, 2014), and/or justification for white apathy toward racism.

As such, in our analysis we paid attention to how white students rationalized their affective attachments to whiteness and how their behaviors and strategies of navigating college, maintained discourses of whiteness in material and ideological ways. To conceptualize white defensiveness in relation to agency and interaction with systems of oppression, we turn to the groundbreaking work of Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001).

Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal’s Resistance Framework

Research has shown students’ complex and nuanced strategies for resisting oppressive systems and schooling (Bernal, 1998; Brayboy, 2005; Giroux, 2001; Solórzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Most notably, Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal’s (2001) resistance framework illuminates student actions that might be interpreted as apolitical or passive (like dropping out, or withdrawing from a conversation). When Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal viewed their actions in relation to the power structures around them, and students’ level of unconscious or conscious critique of those structures, they saw that such behaviors were agentic and in the case of students of color, forms of resistance. Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal name four categories of resistance students of color engage in. In *reactionary resistance*, a social justice orientation is absent and there is little to no critique of oppressive conditions (e.g., challenging authority figures). Students demonstrate *self-defeating resistance* when they critique oppressive conditions but do not have a social justice orientation. Conversely, students who lack a critique of oppressive conditions but associate themselves with social justice engage in *conformist resistance* and often focus on the symptoms of structural issues rather than the larger oppressive system. Lastly, *transformational resistance* pairs a social justice orientation with a critique of oppressive conditions, possibly effecting larger social change that addresses individual *and* structural inequities.

Indeed, interaction between individuals and structure is constantly taking place to either combat or reinforce whiteness (Leonardo, 2004). Just as people of color resist oppressive structures in unconscious and conscious ways, white people combat threats to white privilege and supremacy in unconscious and conscious ways. The latter is a participation in the making of whiteness (Hale, 1995, Rodríguez, 2020). Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal’s framework inspired us to conceptualize white student defensive resistance as always agentic, and in four quadrants representing how levels of consciousness and modes of defending white power intersect. We offer our framework based on critical race and whiteness literature (see Appendix A for coding details) as an alternative to the white fragility framework, to support pedagogical interventions that can create the conditions for a liberatory education.

Methods

The data presented in this study was part of a larger qualitative project exploring white student experiences at HBCUs. This instrumental case study investigates the ways in which white students reified and/or contested whiteness in the HBCU context. The purpose of the instrumental case study is to focus on the phenomenon at play—in this case, the making of whiteness — as opposed to the individual experiences in and of themselves (Stake, 1995). The sample included 15 white participants—12 women; three men—who were undergraduates (*n*=13) and master's students (*n*=2) at three HBCUs in the mid-Atlantic and northeastern United States. The majority of participants came from segregated white precollege neighborhoods. Across the three campuses, the proportion of Black students ranged from 80 to 90 percent, and full-time enrollment was approximately 2,000 to 6,700 students. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to explore white students' college choice processes and experiences at their HBCUs. Questions focused on how race impacted their college experiences, feelings of belongingness, co-curricular activities, intellectual and social growth. All participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012). Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted by a white man who was a HBCU faculty member. The interviewer's race facilitated a safe environment for participants to share views and experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and all participants were assigned pseudonyms (see Jayakumar et al. 2021 for more on methodological procedures).

We analyzed the data through critical lenses of race-evasive ideology and racialized emotions to understand how white students' racialized frames and understandings shift in a racially diverse HBCU context. Two questions guided our analysis:

R1: How, if at all, do white students defend and adapt ideologies of whiteness while attending an HBCU?

R2: How, if at all, were affective attachments to whiteness narrated and enacted by white students while attending an HBCU?

Acknowledging researcher reflexivity (Malterud, 2001), it is important to note that data were analyzed by (the authors of this study) two women faculty members of color and one white woman who was a doctoral student at the time. We were guided by a critical race praxis for educational research (CRP-Ed) lens, which is rooted in critical race theory and posits the centrality of critically conscious advocacy and reflection as crucial throughout the research process (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015; Yamamoto, 1997). Based on prior analysis of the dataset, we were prepared to analyze racist discourse and tactics that re-centered whiteness; nevertheless, examining students' co-optation of student-of-color resistance discourses was taxing, and we often had to step away from these triggering, emotionally exhausting narratives. The CRP-Ed lens helped us remain committed to the process, keeping us focused on naming and challenging racial injustice with a vision toward transformation and possibility.

Data Analysis

Through an iterative coding process detailed below (Miles et al., 2014), we categorized white students' narratives, defensive strategies, and rationalizations that served to maintain their own race-evasive views and contributed to the reinforcement of whiteness more broadly. All three authors engaged in an initial collaborative coding

phase to familiarize ourselves with the data and define deductive and inductive codes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Deductive codes were derived from extant literature and theory (e.g., various frames of race-evasiveness and strategies of white defensiveness) and guided the first stage of open coding. Subsequent stages of analysis utilized the constant comparative method to examine similarities and differences between and across coded excerpts to develop inductive codes and ultimately examine new meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The final codebook included 50 codes that fell into three primary categories: governing racial frames and perceptions, white emotionality, and defensive strategies. Throughout the findings, we use italics to identify specific codes being discussed.

During open coding, each researcher read and coded the same five selected transcripts to compare our code applications and discuss our interpretations. This process was essential toward maintaining consistency in coding across researchers (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). The remaining transcripts were assigned equally among the team and each researcher wrote a reflective memo detailing prominent themes or unique insights from each interview to present to the team. This iterative process helped ensure consistency in coding, as each transcript was audited by another researcher to identify any disagreements, and also led to generative discussions regarding code co-occurrences and connection to theory that deepened our analysis (Grummert & Haslerig, 2024; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, we engaged in a peer debriefing exercise with the interviewer to discuss general notes related to the analysis and how the context of the interviews may have informed participants' views and perspectives (Bailey, 2017). The team met throughout the study to map various codes onto the resistance framework model (illustrated in the findings section) and solidified a typology of agentic white defense.

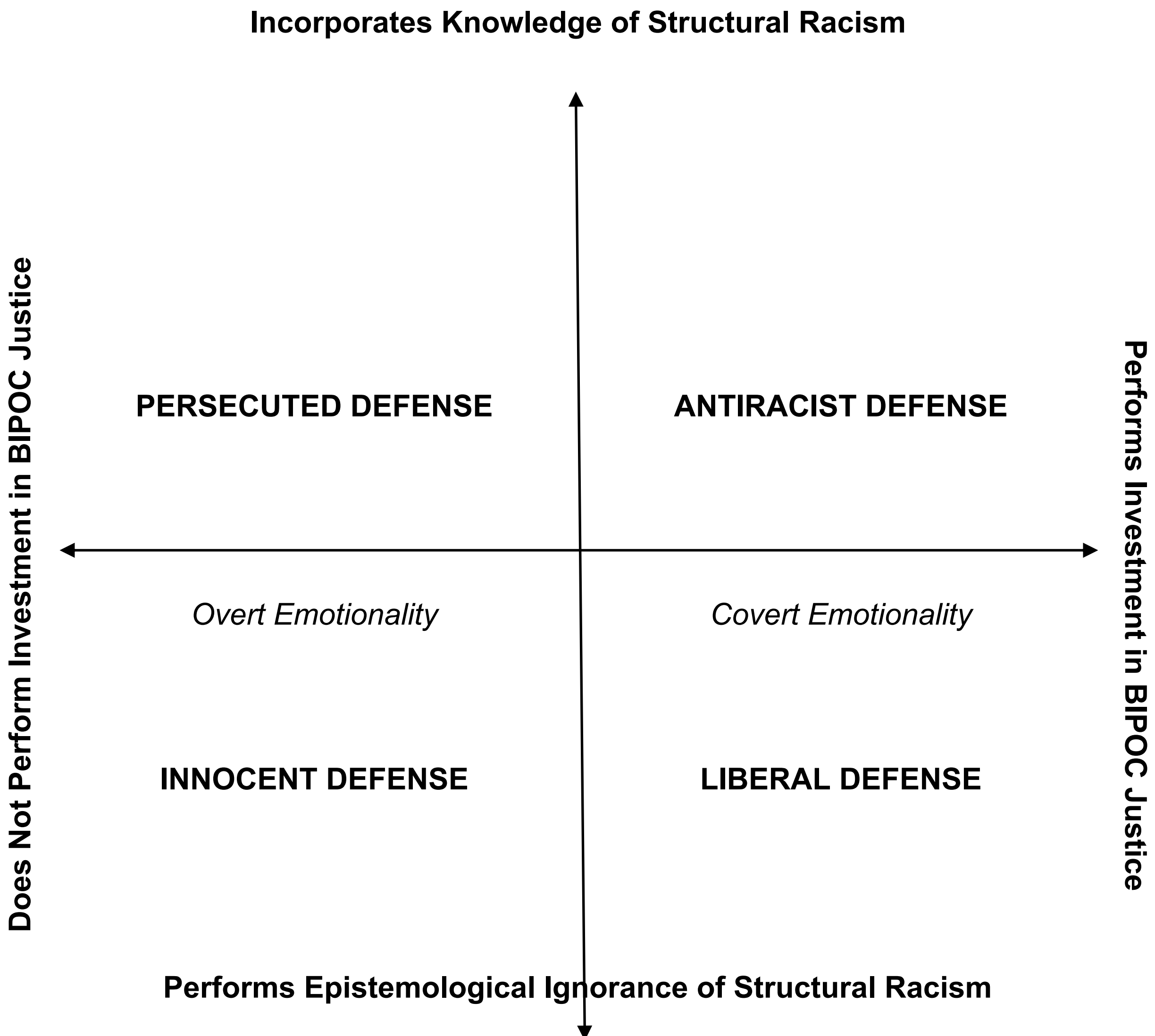
Findings

In the face of racial salience and challenges to whiteness inherent in the HBCU context, white students exhibited various defenses. As agentic beings, their actions and rationalizations either reinforced or challenged white supremacist structures. We categorized these into our typology depicted as four quadrants reflecting the extent to which participants either denied or co-opted theories of structural racism/white supremacy, as well as their level of investment in performing a social justice identity. Although participants placed in each category had outlier characteristics, they overwhelmingly displayed the same cognitive and affective tactics that maintained and conserved ideologies of whiteness. Each quadrant had several distinct strategies, governing frames, and perceptions illustrated in Appendix A. In this paper, we present the defining characteristics of white defensiveness that would have remained underexamined and/or invisible if using the theory of white fragility.

Figure 1 illustrates a typology depicted here as four quadrants of white defensiveness. Those in the lower quadrants of the typology— Innocent and Liberal—demonstrated a denial of structural racism or white supremacy and utilized tactics that often get categorized/defined as white fragility (e.g., silence, retreating to white spaces). In the upper quadrants—Antiracist and Persecuted—students found more nuanced maneuvers to adapt ideologies of whiteness, while actively incorporating theories of structural racism to fortify instead of challenge white supremacy. In the Antiracist and Liberal quadrants (the right side), students performed an investment in Black

Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) justice. We use BIPOC justice instead of racial justice given that students in the Persecuted quadrant inverted arguments about racial justice to make white students the subject/focus. In the Innocent and Persecuted quadrants (the left side), students seemingly had no investment in BIPOC justice.

Figure 1. *Typology of Agentic White Defense*



Innocent Defense

Four students in our study shed light on the Innocent Defense quadrant. These students had no (expressed) awareness of structural racism and described being very uncomfortable when being racialized or in proximity to critical race conversations. These students did not express any interest or investment in a nonracist or social justice identity. As our analysis shows, they were instead invested in protecting their "white

innocence" to remain inoculated in whiteness and race-evasive ideologies (Gotanda, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2006). Participants in this quadrant consistently viewed the world through two race-evasive or racism-evasive frames: *cultural racism* and *minimization of racism,* that seemingly fed into their discomfort and fear about attending an HBCU. Each student made culturally racist remarks when they described their perceptions of HBCUs and/or their Black peers as dangerous, deviant, or inferior. For example, Judy shared her family's response to her enrolling in an HBCU and explained:

> Well, of course, you know, my grandmother was, "Oh, are you going to be okay?" and like concerned for my safety. Um, and then yeah, my brother bought me pepper spray. And then frequently when I would like voice opinions or like frustrations that would happen, people, instead of saying, "Oh, you know, it's because of grad school, this will pass" it was, "Well, what do you expect? You're at the Black school." I got that a few times from people.

While on the surface Judy was reporting the racist views of other people, leaving her innocent of racism, she also assumed those views were naturally true, and assured her family that she would be safe because her classes were "during the day." Notably, no participant in this category described disrupting others' racist views. Rather, they positioned themselves as brave or at times affirmed their families' concerns. But why does she need to be brave? It's her performance of innocence based on the imagined danger or Black people's presence that requires bravery of her. Not only were participants' racist views left intact, but they now framed themselves as having first-hand knowledge to confirm their culturally racist assumptions and justifications for their defensive moves. The racist perception that their safety would be at risk by attending an HBCU appeared to fuel the sense that they were being victimized on campus, as we discuss further in the next section. By investing in a defense of innocence, white students justified a return "home" to whiteness (Ahmed, 2004a) as a protective response to being in proximity to Blackness, due to false/racist perceptions of Blackness and/or Black people as physical threats.

Minimizing Racism and Feigning Victim Status. All participants in the Innocent category used language that portrayed themselves as victims and expressed being uncomfortable on campus and in class. In their interviews, these narratives most often occurred when they reflected on their classroom experiences and race and racism being salient, thus challenging their race-evasive worldview. For instance, when Tracy's Black professor shared that racism still affected her and other Black people, this posed a direct challenge to Tracy's denial of present-day racism, claiming:

> When she was teaching and talking about slavery days, she would refer to, like, "Well, we went through that." And I understand that she was talking about the race, but she was putting more feeling in it, like when she went through it. And I know she went through it when she was younger, but the statements like, "I'm not white" and, you know, "the white man." There were other statements like, "The white man has claims to do everything." And that threw me off. So that kind of turned me off to other things that she was saying or respect level for her.

Relatedly, When Barbara was asked about how whiteness impacts her life, she declared that:

> I think assumptions are made that we benefit more from things than others, but I feel like we actually are more disadvantaged sometimes because we don't have

> the minority scholarships. We don't have the NAACP and things like that because we were white.

Fueled by a false perception of “reverse discrimination,” Barbara went further to explain more instances on campus in which she was made uncomfortable: that campus activities, such as plays featuring strong Black women, made her uncomfortable, as they did not cater to self-proclaimed “minority” students like herself. She explained:

> I think the biggest thing would be trying to offer Friday night plays or excursions or anything that they get together to try to gear it more towards a neutral ethnicity. I mean there's plenty of plays and things that can probably be performed and everything that don't focus on race. I think a lot is focused on race, so when you’re the minority you do feel kind of uncomfortable in certain things. I would not go see the play about the black women bonding just because it's not relevant to me.
>
> I probably wouldn't understand a lot of it. I think just trying to get together and give the different ethnicities a chance to intermingle and make everybody feel comfort and that it's not so much about race, that it's more about we're all college students and we're all pursuing this and that and instead of this is an historically black college, so we're going to do everything has to be about being black. It kind of restricted me and what I participated in.

Any centering of Blackness in campus programming led Barbara to construct a victim narrative in which she was being discriminated against. In explaining that HBCUs should have a colorblind “neutral” approach to student programming in order to make “everybody feel comfort,” Barbara also exemplified how logics of whiteness frame whose comfort should be prioritized.

Race-Evasive Comfort Zones*.* Students in this quadrant described seeking protection and comfort in retreating to a white racial habitus when experiencing discomfort. For example, Tracy discussed her intention to leave class one day when her whiteness was made salient. She explained:

> They were talking about the black churches and everything and then they compared them to white churches and one black student asked “well what do you think in a white church”, and she just threw her hands down and she said, “do I look white”, and I had six other classmates that just looked at me and I was like “I don't know”. It kind of happened throughout the semester. I couldn't wait to get out of that class.

Here, Tracy is explicit in her desire to flee class when race was being discussed in relation to religion. The desire to leave spaces when race and/or racism are discussed is most often associated with traditional understandings of “white fragility.” However, given the predominantly Black environment and thus no clear white habitus to retreat to, Tracy had to enact other defensive measures to maintain her ignorance and allegiance to whiteness.

Barbara spoke about several strategies she used to avoid discomfort during her classes. She mentioned avoiding certain classes, and ultimately enrolled in all online courses after her first semester, citing the advantages of an environment she described as “raceless:”

> I liked the fact of that faceless communication to see just neutral reaction to things. That I didn’t get, “Oh, that’s your opinion because you’re white, because

> you don't understand being Black, or you don't understand the struggles being an African American."

This was very similar to Carly, who only took online classes and expressed that she was an "outsider." She explained:

> To be honest I was an outsider. I did not fit into any of my classes. I have been told more than once during my undergraduate pursuits to "tone down" my work. It appears my writings and inquires with fellow classmates came across to some as being intimidating.

Carly positioned herself as intellectually superior to her classmates and perpetuated a narrative in which she was a victim rather than someone who was harming her Black classmates

Students in the Innocent quadrant were defined by their desire to seek protection (physically and emotionally) by retreating to the comforts of "home" afforded by whiteness (Ahmed, 2004a). They actively avoided reflecting on race/racism or being in spaces where critical race conversations occurred and retreated to race-evasive frames to rationalize their experiences. Their defenses were rooted in the perception of whiteness as innocent, and any threat to that innocence resulted in defensive reactions and the desire to return to a white racial habitus (Accapadi, 2007; Ozias, 2023; Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Seen through the lens of white fragility, these students' retreats could be described as coming from a lack of "racial stamina" (DiAngelo, 2006). However, their behaviors are more appropriately identified as active investments in maintaining power, spurred by whiteness being decentered and/or challenged.

Liberal Defense

Like the Innocent Defense, the Liberal Defense does not articulate an awareness of structural racism and white supremacy. But the Liberal Defense is invested in portraying nonracism. The perceptions and actions of the three students we placed in this quadrant were predominantly guided by the *minimization of racism* and *abstract liberalism*. They demonstrated this by espousing the importance of diversity and multiculturism and aligning themselves with abstract notions of equality. Importantly, this was in contradiction to their advocacy for a race-evasive worldview and their denial that race has an impact on society.

Throughout their interviews both Sandra and Maggie distanced themselves from language that acknowledged race or structural racism, opting for terms like "color" or "culture" instead. These students conformed to a post-racial ideology and often traced this to their families' moral codes in which colorblindness was held up as a virtue. Sandra, for instance, shared that, "I just felt so comfortable at the school and um the whole color thing was not even something that I really thought about. Um I was raised in a household where it didn't matter." Later in the interview Sandra again invoked her household's race-evasive worldview and upbringing when she was asked how she saw her race and ethnicity impacting her life:

> As far as my race, yes I'm white. Does it really matter to me? It's a color. Umm I'm not you know I'm not like other than on the you know government fact sheet, I'm really not predispis-predisp- like I don't have a predisposition to my color or what I should do because I'm white or anything like that. So I just hold, you know, tight to my upbringing and what I was taught as far as ethics and my morals and my values.

Similarly, when Maggie was asked if she thinks white people are afforded more privileges in society she shared:

> I was always raised in a household where black or white isn't an issue, which I believe it's abnormal here in the south. So I think I was raised to overlook things like that, which I may be a little naïve, but like I said, I don't know the other side of it so I don't know what a black man or woman would say to that.
> I think I would have to be approached by somebody who said, "You got this because you're white and I didn't because I'm black." I think somebody could take it as a color difference or somebody could say, "Well, you have all the qualifications and this person doesn't." That's such a hard question. I don't think whites are more privileged than Blacks. I think that's the question that's kind of being asked, but I don't know.

The investment in race-evasiveness as morally right allowed participants to espouse abstract notions of equality while simultaneously denying race and racism's impact on structuring society.

Students in the Liberal quadrant used their superficial understandings of racial discrimination combined with their espoused passion for equality to position themselves as knowledgeable about race and racism. Lauren illustrated this when she offered additional information at the end of the interview when she was asked if there was anything else she felt was important to communicate:

> Only that I would say is that the racism thing is cookie cutter when it comes to whites being racist, but I feel like black people say things that would be considered racist had a white person said them, but they don't see that, from my experience. For example, throughout my years at [institution] I was always called "snowbunny" from black guys. It was in the type of way when a guy is trying to talk to you. But had a white guy said something like that to a black girl it would be inappropriate. I was also referred by a lot of black guys from the school as "Christina Aguilera," "Jessica Simpson," "Paris [Hilton]," they would pick any famous white girl with blonde hair and call me by her name to get my attention. Same as snowbunny, if a white guy called out a black girl and was like hey Halle Berry come here, it would be considered racist. That was something that use to irritate me a lot from the guys at school.

While continuing to present herself as a neutral observer simply concerned about double standards rather, Lauren actively invested in discourses of whiteness by performing a passive reframing of herself as a victim of reverse racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Being perceived as nonracist and justice-oriented is important to individuals using the liberal defense. In another example, Sandra spoke about how proud she was to represent "diversity" on her campus and in the athletic program. She explained:

> I, like, housed a lot of the recruits and I was really, they called me the face of diversity, especially among the athletes. So I was the key element to bringing in a lot of people from all over, all different colors, because I was a role model. Um so over the years um it really expanded um and when I looked down the line on the soccer field and on the softball field on the softball line up, I was the, I was not the only white female.

Sandra's explanation shows how students in the Liberal quadrant operationalized the abstract liberalism frame to advocate for more white representation on campus, thus expanding whiteness's reach in both discursive and tangible ways. These students used their distorted colorblind understandings to assert that racism can go both ways, revealing their investment in framing racism as an individual level perception rather than structural violence/harm. Their actions reinforced whiteness by denying structural racism and instead asserting a racism-evasive worldview, and that diversity solves all issues.

Defensive Racial Priming. Adhering to race-evasive scripts, students using a Liberal Defense consistently claimed they did not think about race before enrolling in an HBCU. However, it became clear each was keenly aware of the environment and had prepared for racial discomfort beforehand—a strategy we named *defensive racial priming*. Sandra described this process:

> I knew that I had to expect certain things going to an HBCU. That…I had to take an African Americans class. There was papers I had to write…just talking about the African American race, so I knew that there was certain things that I had to do that would maybe put me outside of my comfort zone but never offending me.

When asked if her perceptions of her race changed over time, Sandra responded:

> I know some people can lose themselves if they're put into an environment where it's so different, and they kind of mold and change to fit in. But I wasn't one of those people. I knew what I stood for and I was not afraid to say, "Oh I don't agree with that," you know?

Unlike students using the Innocent defense, who were unprepared for their discomfort when race was made salient, Sandra anticipated her discomfort and primed herself to endure it without "losing" herself.

Maggie was also proud that her perceptions of race had not changed. She said the way she was raised "defines the ways that I look at Blacks and whites.…[T]here's more Blacks than whites, yes, but I don't see that it changed anything that I didn't already think." She provided what she felt was a valuable critic for the curriculum she engaged with, stating:

> I think they focused a lot on black history, and I'm not sure if that's because it's an HBCU. I would think that's the reason. But I think it's because there's more ethnic groups attending, maybe they would want to expand to many different cultures instead of just a few different cultures and a lot of African studies.

By priming themselves, students in this quadrant avoided overt defensive behavior that may have occurred in a predominantly white environment that would have been identified as "white fragility." Instead, these students continued to cultivate and adapt ideologies of whiteness to reinforce race-evasive narratives of how race and racism operate in society.

Antiracist Defense

The six students in the Antiracist quadrant had an articulated awareness of structural racism and white supremacy and a deep investment in a nonracist or social justice identity. They often had exposure to critical race conversations and were exposed to racially diverse environments precollege and tended to welcome discussions related to race. However, they strategically used superficial articulations of structural racism to distance themselves from whiteness while simultaneously using

their whiteness to access spaces for their material gain. Instead of being overtly defensive when their privilege was challenged, they often deflected defensive feelings and instead co-opted diversity and inclusion rhetoric to infiltrate spaces intended for Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

Disconnected Power Analysis Frame. Participants tended to speak about increased awareness of structural racism but conveniently disconnected themselves from their "critical" analysis – signifying the deployment of the disconnected power analysis frame. Overall, there were 22 instances of the disconnected power analysis frame being used across these six students. For instance, Karen centered structural racism when explaining the need for HBCUs, and critiqued Eurocentric administrative polices that may still influence more racially diverse institutions. However, when asked about her own racialized positionality, she stated:

> I don't think anything about being White. I wasn't – I was raised – my best friends were of multi colors…I do find that when others talk about color, I find myself sometimes anxious and apprehensive because I don't see people that way. I think we all kind of started in the same spot and just ended up with different skin colors. So I don't think of myself as being White in that term. Just the color my skin turned out to be.

Later on, when asked about how racial identity impacts her life, she denied any impact of whiteness on her life:

> Interviewer: Do you see your whiteness influencing your life at all today, in your daily life?
> Karen: No. No, not at all.
> *(several questions later)*
> Interviewer: …Were there any ways that you can think of that your being white influenced your experience at your HBCU?
> Karen: No. No. Not being white, no.

In addition to denying one's own material benefits from whiteness influencing their lives, the deployment of this frame was also exemplified when students would talk about other racist white people and denounce racism, while simultaneously denying any personal accountability or reflection on their own actions or behaviors. These instances of using *white alibis* and showcasing their *race cachet.*[3] These can be read as strategic defensive moves to locate racism as external to themselves. For example, Paula emphasized that she grew up in a racially diverse environment and identified strongly with Black people:

> My own mother told me that she wonders if I am white on the outside and Black on the inside. And when I was at [the university], I got along better with the Black roommates I had then I did the white ones.

Both students used proximity to Blackness—and, in Paula's case, appropriation of Blackness—to bolster their race cachet and thus avoid accountability for their actions.

These students also compared themselves to overtly racist white people—or to their former racist selves—to avoid further reflection or examination of how whiteness

[3] Race cachet is a disposition wherein a white person seeks legitimacy about their understandings of race/racism based on association, proximity, and/or exposure to Black people and/or Afrocentric curriculum (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017).

still privileges them in society. For example, Karen's *white alibi* was to differentiate herself from other white people. Karen said she "deviates toward Black people" and goes out of her way to smile at them on the street, but intentionally ignores white people: "They [white people] do so much of it to Black people, and so I feel like it's my duty to be more kind to Black people." She distanced herself from whiteness and systemic racism, in part by referring to white people as "they." By implying that *other* white people are responsible for racism, Karen's solution to racial injustice is devoid of personal reflection, indicating a disconnected power analysis frame.

Similarly, Nancy used her white alibi to deny she had any privilege based on her whiteness:

> I'm Albanian, and just as much you want me to respect where you're from or what African country you're from, you need to understand that I have— 'Cause, you know, one main issue was kind of, in a sense, this, like, white guilt. Like, "Oh, white people should feel guilty." And I was like, "Oh, and they can, honey. But not this one."

Here, Nancy engaged in *whitesplaining*—explaining to people of color the distorted "intricacies" of diversity, race, and/or racism through race-evasiveness and privilege—to further deflect responsibility for perpetuating white supremacy (Johnson, 2016).

***Exception to the Rule: Opportunity Hoarders*.** Antiracist students adopted a tactic we labeled *opportunity hoarding*. Our use of this term is informed by literature that names white practices of taking advantage of structural racism to advance oneself—for instance, white parents leveraging wealth and cultural capital to access select schools or internships (Hamilton et al., 2018; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Students in this quadrant consciously took resources intended for students of color (e.g., scholarships, research opportunities).

Opportunity hoarding took many forms across the six participants but was most egregious with Nancy and Rachel, who both ran for student government positions. Both explained that their level of expertise and compassion made them the best candidate for the job. Before and throughout their candidacies, peers, faculty, friends, and family questioned their decisions, citing problematic racial dynamics—concerns that Nancy and Rachel both dismissed. Nancy captured this best:

> Hell, my mom was just like, "Leave these Black people alone! They've been through enough!" Like, those were her words. And especially when I told them I ran for president, she had a panic attack….She asked my little brother, and she was like, "This is ridiculous. You're overstepping boundaries. This is not what you're allowed to do. Umm, Black people should lead themselves. You have no right to be involved in this issue." And my father was just like, "Where the hell do you get these ideas?" Like, my dad was just like, "Why do you want to do these things?" So then I told him I was like, "Dad, I don't know. It was an opportunity that came up." I said it as a joke. One of my friends was like, "You should do it." And then my father was like, "If you win, then do it."

Instead of accepting her family and peers' critiques, Rachel detached the situation from racism, asserting that the "real" issue was that she did not live on campus or understand on-campus housing issues. By disconnecting themselves from their analysis before being implicated, both Nancy and Rachel made themselves the exception to the rule to gain more access and material advantages.

Beyond hoarding opportunities, an investment in being perceived and feeling identified with social justice, led to another layer of defense at the expense of Black peers. Both Rachel and Nancy extracted emotional labor from Black women in order to correct their racist opinions and protect themselves from critiques about their student government candidacies. Paula and Johnny also relied on emotional labor from Black peers, expecting them to create inclusive spaces that met their "comfort" level. Moreover, by agreeing with the claim that she is "Black on the inside," Paula continued to appropriate Black culture to bolster her critical persona.

Students operationalizing an Antiracist defense are perhaps the most covert and insidious amongst the four quadrants, as their actions and narrations would suggest they had a high level of "racial stamina" (per white fragility framework logic) that would preclude them from white defensive responses. However, a more nuanced analysis demonstrated that they used superficial articulations of structural racism and their physical proximity to Blackness to deflect further reflection on race and racism and instead continued to reinforce discourses of whiteness and obtaining the material benefits thereof.

Persecuted Defense

Two students were categorized into the Persecuted Defense quadrant; their rationalizations and actions were connected to an undergirding belief that they were being persecuted as white people. Each had an awareness of structural racism and white supremacy but no investment in a social justice identity. They believed they were being persecuted as white people and experiencing violence, and therefore had to defend themselves from harm. This is reminiscent of police violence where white officers claim that they feared for their life in the presence of a Black person or child and therefore rationalize the violent (and often murderous) outcome as warranted (Rodríguez, 2023). In other words, the U.S. legal system protects white supremacy and consequently white people who claim imagined harm and/or discomfort. When race and racism were discussed, they had more overt, concrete responses seemingly sparked by a belief that the imposition of a race-conscious society has wronged them. They utilized state logics and references to the law to further their claims of persecution.

Phantom Persecution Frame. The Persecuted Defense is rationalized by the race-evasive ideologies that minimize and naturalize racism, but especially relies on the phantom persecution frame. Jayakumar et al. (2021), describe this frame as the belief that "anti-white racism is rampant in both interpersonal relations and structural systems", which users of the frame believe is hindering their progress due to supposedly "unjust antiracist policies and practices that threaten to uplift BIPOC by dispossessing whites' accumulation of wealth earned through their hard work, not racism" (p. 15). Their fraudulent and invented persecution enables the "appropriation and distortion of the meaning of racism, wherein whites utilize theoretical understandings of how historical and current societal structures oppress people of color, toward an inverted reality where white people are the true victims of structural racism" (p. 15). This shift in ideology is significant, as it denotes a shift in race-evasiveness where strategies of invisibilizing whiteness (through claims of "colorblindness" or white normativity) are replaced by an explicit naming of white identity politics intended to protect whiteness (Jayakumar et al. 2021; Leonardo, 2020).

Importantly, rather than retreating to their own race-evasive comfort zones, both men reframed systemic racism as something that exclusively harms white people and drew upon their HBCU experience to defend their rationalizations. This, combined with feeling victimized and physically in danger, are defining characteristics of this quadrant.

For example, Rambo and Mitch both spoke about being singled out and victimized for their whiteness in the classroom. Mitch found it "very frustrating" that he was excluded from Black women's study groups and felt one professor, in particular, was "out to get him." Further, both told a story of being intellectually under attack due to what they called the professors' "racial agendas." When asked what he thought the "racial agenda" was, Rambo responded:

> Honestly, I felt like the biggest thing was that Black people cannot be racist and only White people can. It was very much a misunderstanding of what the word means. Like racist means you don't like another race regardless. For them it was "I'm a victim regardless of whether or not I've actually expressed anything negative because of my skin color," but White people can be racist, and Black people can't.

Rambo continued to comment on students' dispositions:

> I would say freshman and sophomores, they went to pulling people from, I think, really towns and high schools where it was all but Black community. They came in and those people were hoping not to see White people. They did not like them or whatever. So the first two years, if you interacted with them, you would hear racial slurs and stuff like from the students.

Feelings of being victimized in the classroom fed into Mitch and Rambo's belief that they were physically in danger. Rambo said he was advised to leave campus after the 2008 election results came out: "One of the guys pulled all of the white students in and told us 'Hey, if he [Obama] wins, leave campus. Do not be here because you will be killed.' That was legitimate." Mitch, on the other hand, did not overtly state that people were going to kill him, but did share the perception that select professors wanted to attack him. He stated, "Some [faculty] were just bad people…. There were a few that were really actually openly hostile at my race and actually told other students they were going to get me." Mitch and Rambo's affective and ideological attachment to white supremacy spurred them to falsely perceive immediate danger and defend themselves from being physically harmed (Ahmed, 2004a; Hale, 1995; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Mills, 2007, 2015; Roediger, 1991).

The Persecuted Defense strategy was primarily focused on surviving the predominantly Black environment and using perceptions of white persecution (defined as targeted hostility or ill-treatment on the basis on an identity status such as race/ethnicity), to corroborate a collective oppressed white identity. For example, Rambo and Mitch traced the logic that talking about racism perpetuates racism to the "myth" of white privilege. Each wanted to combat the assertion that, as white men, they have full access to a society that privileges them while systemically excluding people of color. Rambo explained: "I would say probably more than anything, it's a misunderstanding of white empowerment, I think. You don't know where I'm from, I don't know where you're from, but because we have white skin, that makes us privileged or whatever it is." He went on to explain he is a hard worker and came from a working-class community. Mitch similarly emphasized that he worked hard for

everything he has: "It's never once occurred to me to say, 'Gosh, I don't have to try hard. I'll get this with my whiteness.'" Like others users of the Innocent Defense, Mitch and Rambo distanced themselves from white privilege, but they went further, using their personal experiences to theorize on global truths.

As Harris (1993) explains, within the U.S. legal system, whiteness functions as a form of property protected by law. The concept of whiteness as property was enacted not only when Rambo and Mitch felt physically uncomfortable and in danger, but when they invoked legal language to assert that they were being oppressed in some manner and/or that white privilege does not exist (defending their property right to whiteness). For example, Mitch felt that the notion of racism prevented people of color from understanding the negative impact the "false" concept of white privilege has on white people. He stated:

> … people think well maybe they're [white students] just here because of affirmative action they don't know if it's merit or not…and it's just an assumption that's made. Um, and I got a lot that people are like, 'Well, you're here because of the white people scholarship.'

Mitch went on to discuss how HBCUs discriminate against white students, invoking the language of Title IX when he stated that his institution "does not reciprocate Title IX," insinuating that the law unfairly privileges Black women. Additionally, as a bald white male who is over six feet tall, Mitch feigned that his identities marked him as oppressed— co-opted analysis stemming from intersectionality:

> I, I'm still waiting for that payday for being White. If there's some great advantage that the color of my skin gives me…Then by God, let it happen. You know, I, I haven't seen it. You know, everything, everything I've gotten to this point, I've gotten through hard work. I wish I could say there was some, something I could just point to and identify like, "Man, that was the color of my skin…that was a give me." You know what? I would take a give me…So, I, I mean, would I change to anything else? No. I was born this way.

Lastly, both students believed that returning to race-evasiveness could lead to a more just society. Rambo believed HBCUs were standing in the way of this process, stating:

> They bring [Black students] in and say, 'Okay, stay focusing on the fact that you're Black,' as opposed to, 'Hey, come in here. That's great, you're Black, that's good. That's cool. Here is how to succeed in the rest of the world without your race being a driving factor.

Students using a Persecuted Defense relied on narratives that reinforced individual level perceptions of racism, while contradictorily using language associated with the law to justify that white people were being racially oppressed. In other words, they operationalized individual perceptions to generalize systemic truths in support of white supremacist ideologies. Rather than merely denying that white privilege exists and returning to a white racial habitus as has been reported at PWIs, Mitch and Rambo both actively advanced the narrative that white people—particularly those in racially diverse environments—are subject to conditions that unfairly discriminate against them, in order to justify actions in service of white supremacy. Both students crafted narratives of reverse racism, victimization, and threats to support their theory of white oppression and

persecution. They maintained that race-evasiveness is the morally right stance—and subsequently rationalized that race-consciousness perpetuates racism.

Discussion

Informed by scholars who have documented various forms of white student resistance (Bonilla-Silva, 2020; DiAngelo, 2006; Matias, 2016; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Matias et al., 2016; Spanierman & Cabrera, 2015), our analysis and resulting typology of agentic white defense, challenges the notion of white students as passive participants in a white supremacist system. By tethering white individuals' resistance to an effective (and indeed ontological) attachment to whiteness, the typology helps identify the range of ways in which white defensive moves can contribute toward the adaptation and reification of white supremacy. Other studies on white student experiences at HBCUs (e.g., Peterson & Hamrick, 2009; Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017), illustrate that despite being exposed to a predominantly Black environment or race-conscious spaces, white students often reinforce antiblack stereotypes and avoid confronting their own privilege. Instead of responding to challenges to whiteness with antiracist commitments, students in this study developed nuanced, insidious ways to keep whiteness unchallenged—in some cases, with a re-invigorated investment in white supremacy.

In our adaption of the Solórzano and Bernal's (2001) *quadrants* of students of color resistance, we intentionally pivot to describing our framework of white agentic defense as *typology* to leave open the possibility of additional types that oppose the current function of protecting white supremacist structures. It leaves open the possibility of documenting white students who see their liberation as tied to BIPOC and embody resistance to white supremacy in their everyday interactions with structure. Understanding their actions and behaviors in the larger context of white supremacist structures, rather than individual fragility or frailty, makes room for a more expansive possibility of challenging and disrupting whiteness in both the classroom and beyond. For instance, an instructor that recognizes white student behavior as white defensiveness instead of fragility, might accurately name what's happening and engage the class in a restorative discussion.

In contrast, when white resistance toward racial justice and/or racial consciousness is misidentified as fragility, students of color may be left to internally debate: Do I orient around their fragility in my response or reveal the lie and get treated as the aggressor? This is a type of subtle violence that students of color often experience in racial dialogues that include white peers (Leonardo, 2010). While a white fragility frame lends itself to interpreting white student resistance to racial awareness as an emotional response that needs to be avoided and/or coddled, the typology of agentic white defense offers an interpretation that highlights white people's affective attachments to domination and the active strategies they use to either defend or divest from whiteness. Importantly, the typology brings more complex and insidious forms of reinforcing whiteness to the fore—such as with the Antiracist and Persecution Defense quadrants, which might otherwise be celebrated or left unexamined, respectively, given the absence of an overt external emotional response.

Exposing white peoples' resistance as agentic acknowledges how whiteness is actively reinforced and is morphed within various political and racial contexts. The theory of white fragility masks these affective responses as performances of

vulnerability, instead of framing them as a symptom and result of ideologies of whiteness. Rather than individual acts of fragility, the range of defensive maneuvers they deployed can be seen as part of a whiteness protection program that would be better described as white (counterinsurgent) being (Rodríguez, 2020). Importantly, the ideologies and narrative-arcs shared among participants are emblematic of the larger discourse of postraciality and "multiculturalist white supremacy" that have proliferated the past decade (Rodríguez, 2011, p. 40). This is of heightened importance as PWIs continue to enroll racially minoritized students and as white students gain greater access to critical race curricula.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper calls for moving away from a reliance on white fragility, which has problematically become the dominant framework for analyzing white students' responses to antiracist pedagogy. As other scholars and activists have noted (Applebaum, 2017; Brown, 2020), white fragility is counterproductive to supporting educators in challenging white supremacy in and beyond classroom dynamics. Our alternative framework—the typology of agentic white defense—facilitates understanding white defensive behaviors, performances, and affect in relation to how they can either advance or challenge the creation of conditions for justice and liberation. This alternative frame locates agentic responses demonstrating the making of whiteness in educational contexts, which allows for more effective interventions and justice possibilities.

Participants in this study seemed to be experiencing an existential threat to their whiteness, which led to perceptions of a white collective identity under attack and even oppressed (by Black existence and consciousness) (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017; Leonardo, 2020; Leonardo & Dixon-Román, 2020). Many of the experiences they relayed were accounts of policing Black people in moments of such perceived threat. For Black, Indigenous, and people of color, the consequences of this both affective and tangible defense of whiteness can result in educational, emotional, physical, and/or social harm, and even death.

We must also acknowledge the Black faculty, students, and staff interwoven in participant narratives. Ultimately, the people we intend to serve with this analysis are Black, Indigenous, and people of color who navigate the constant onslaught of white supremacy. Though not the focus of this analysis, it cannot be ignored that antiblackness was undoubtedly a catalyst that exacerbated white students' need to adapt new strategies to protect whiteness, shield themselves from perceived harm, and/or to counter perceived racial progress (Jung & Vargas, 2021; Vargas, 2018).

This making of whiteness, especially when it includes the policing of everyday moments by whites, is important because it contributes to an unhealthy racial climate on campuses, and to the everyday violence students, faculty, and staff of color experience as a result. It is connected to the macro-structure or legal system that protects white interests (Harris, 1993). As our analysis underscores, white people actively defend whiteness through affective economies as well (Ahmed, 2004b; Tevis et al., 2023).

Intentionally centering antiracist curriculum and practices in classroom spaces will cause whites to act in self-defense, given broader state-sanctioned whiteness protection programs that normalize white comfort. In other words, white students expect to enter educational institutions that affirm their safety and feelings of being home in

whiteness. When instructional practices disrupt this, they actively engage in defensive moves to protect a system of domination that they understand benefits them. Naming and challenging the logics of white defensiveness that undergird the assault on racial justice (e.g., anti-CRT legislation, reinvigorated support for Trump's re-election, increased support for the Zionist agenda of Palestinian genocide) can help us challenge morphing racial ideologies and strategies of whiteness, in which white people are organizing around a collective white identity that they claim is systematically under attack (Jayakumar, 2022; Jayakumar et al., 2021; Leonardo, 2020).

Providing white students the necessary tools to deepen understandings of how we are all agentically entangled with racialized structures can prompt reflecting on their defensive reactions when whiteness is questioned. This, at the same time, facilitates pedagogies that address racial violence and support Black, Indigenous, and students of color to resist accommodating white "fragility" in classroom environments. These understandings create new possibilities for reimagining how educators can engage students in ways that carve out the conditions to collectively work toward the liberation of oppressed peoples.

References

Accapadi, M. M. (2007). When white women cry: How white women's tears oppress women of color. *College Student Affairs Journal*, *26*(2), 208-215.

Ahmed, S. (2004a). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.

Ahmed, S. (2004b). Affective economies. *Social Text, 22*(2), 117-139.

Ahmed, S. (2007). A phenomenology of whiteness. *Feminist Theory, 8*(2), 149-168.

Annamma, S. A., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race ethnicity and education*, *16*(1), 1-31.

Applebaum, B. (2017). Comforting discomfort as complicity: White fragility and the pursuit of invulnerability. *Hypatia, 32*(4), 862-875.

Bailey, C. A. (2017). *A guide to qualitative field research*. Sage Publications.

Bernal, D. D. (1998). Using a Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, *68*(4), 555-583.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014). *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (3rd ed). Rowman & Littlefield.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2020). Foreward. In C. D. Lippard, J. S. Carter & D. G. Embrick (Eds.), *Protecting whiteness: Whitelash and the rejection of racial equality*. University of Washington Press.

Brayboy, B. M. J. (2005). Toward a tribal critical race theory in education. *The Urban Review*, *37*(5), 425-446.

Brown, S. (2020, January 23). *White fragility? Naw, it's white hostility*. Medium. https://medium.com/@shelaghbrown/white-fragility-naw-its-white-hostility-8dbe8b08b5c8

Cabrera, N. L. (2012). Working through whiteness: White, male college students challenging racism. *The Review of Higher Education*, *35*(3), 375-401.

Cabrera, N. L. (2014). "But I'm oppressed too": White male college students framing racial emotions as facts and recreating racism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *27*(6), 768-784.

Cabrera, N. L. (2018). *White guys on campus: Racism, white immunity, and the myth of" post-racial" higher education*. Rutgers University Press.

Case, K. A., & Hemmings, A. (2005). Distancing strategies: White women preservice teachers and antiracist curriculum. *Urban education*, *40*(6), 606-626.

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative sociology*, *13*(1), 3-21.

Corces-Zimmerman, C., Thomas, D., Collins, E. A., Cabrera, N. L., & Supremacy, W. (2021). Ontological expansiveness. *Encyclopedia of critical Whiteness studies in education*, 432-438.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating qualitative and quantitative research* (4th ed). Pearson Education.

DiAngelo, R. J. (2006). White Fragility in Racial Dialogues. *Inclusion in urban educational environments: Addressing issues of diversity, equity, and social justice*, *2*(1), 213.

DiAngelo, R. J. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *3*(3), 54-70.

DiAngelo, R. J. (2016). A note on white silence. *Counterpoints*, *497*, 283-297.

Evans-Winters, V. E., & Hines, D. E. (2020). Unmasking white fragility: How whiteness and white student resistance impacts anti-racist education. *Whiteness and education*, *5*(1), 1-16.

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2019). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Sage.

Forman, T. A. (2004). Color-blind racism and racial indifference: The role of racial apathy in facilitating enduring inequalities. In M. Krysan & A. Lewis (Eds.), *The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity*, (pp. 43-66). Russell Sage Foundation.

Gallagher, C. (2003). Color-blind privilege: The social and political functions of erasing the color line in post-race America. *Race, Gender & Class, 10*(4), 22-37.

Giroux, H. (2001). *Theory and resistance in education*. Bergin & Garvey.

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine.

Gotanda, N. (2004). Reflections on Korematsu, Brown and white innocence. *Temple Political and Civil Rights Law Review 13*, 663.

Grummert, S. E., & Haslerig, S. J. (2024). Media priming and racialized production decisions in college football broadcasts: Extrapolating strategies for analyzing video data. In A. Humble & M. E. Radina (Eds.), *How qualitative data analysis happens* (pp. 179-198). Routledge.

Gutiérrez, K. (2006). White Innocence: A framework and methodology for rethinking educational discourse and inquiry. *International Journal of Learning*, *12*(10), 1-11.

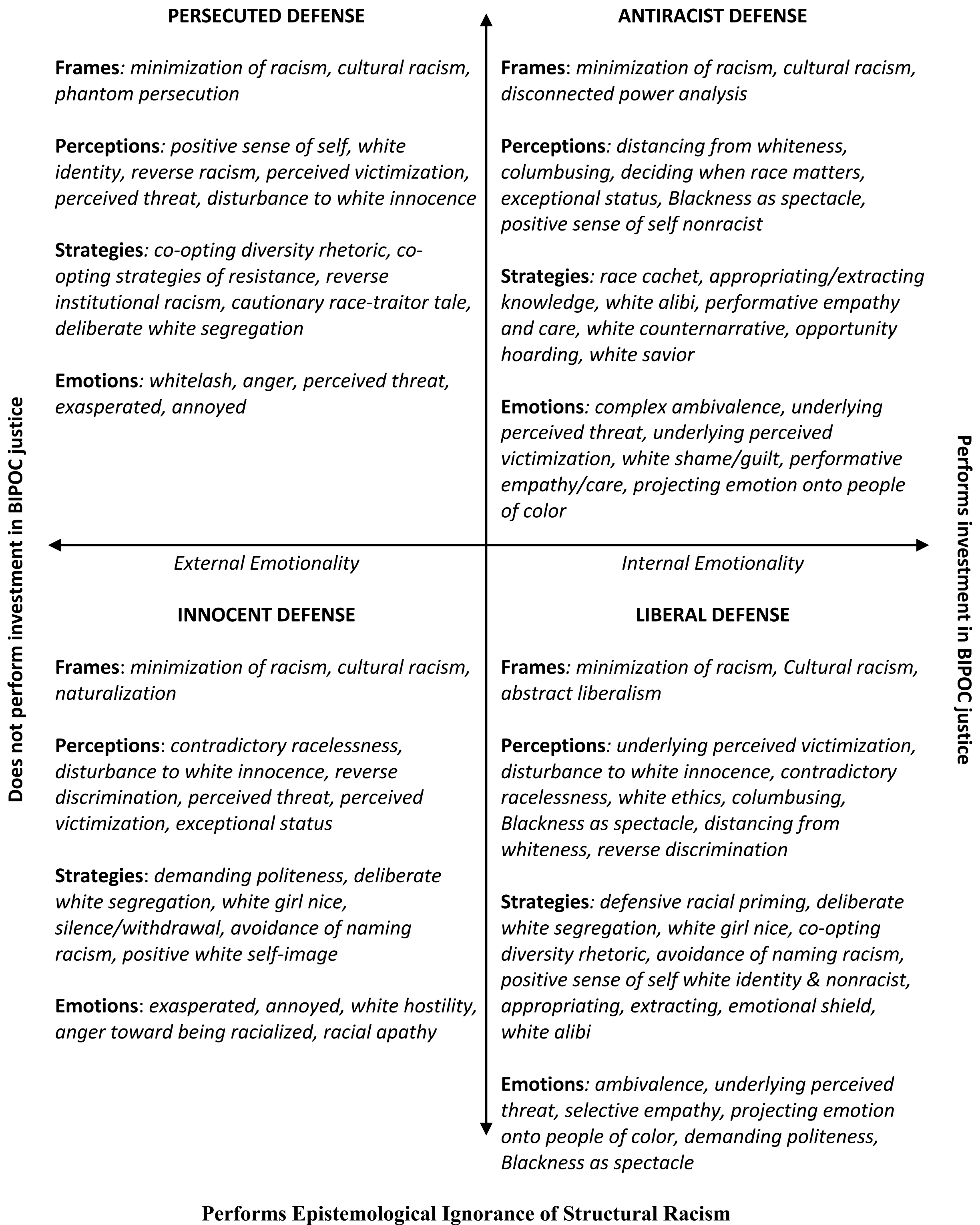
Hale, G. E. (1995). *Making whiteness: The culture of segregation in the South, 1890-1940.* Vintage Books.

Hamilton, L., Roksa, J., & Nielsen, K. (2018). Providing a ‘‘leg up’’: Parental involvement and opportunity hoarding in college. *Sociology of Education*, *91*(2), 111-131.
Harris, C. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review, 106*, 1707-1791.
Hextrum, K. (2019). Segregation, innocence, and protection: The institutional conditions that maintain whiteness in college sports. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000140
Ignatiev, N. (1997). The point is not to interpret whiteness but to abolish it.PM Press.
James, S. (2022). Protecting Whiteness: Whitelash and the rejection of racial equality: edited by Cameron D. Lippard, J. Scott Carter, and David G. Embrick, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2020, XIII+ 296 pp., £ 27.92 (paperback), ISBN 978-029-5747996.
Jayakumar, U. M. (2022). CRT in Higher Education: Confronting the “boogeyman” bans, censorship, and attacks on racial justice. *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education*, *4*(3), 1-12.
Jayakumar, U. M., Adamian, A. S., Grummert, S. E., Schmidt-Temple, C. T., & Arroyo, A. T. (2021). Why are all the white kids sitting together in the cafeteria?: Toward challenging constructions of a persecuted white collective. *Education Sciences, 11*(11), 679.
Jayakumar, U. M., & Adamian, A. S. (2015). Toward a critical race praxis for educational research. *JCSCORE*, *1*(1), 21-58.
Jayakumar, U. M., & Adamian, A. S. (2017). The fifth frame of colorblind ideology: Maintaining the comforts of colorblindness in the context of white fragility. *Sociological Perspectives*, *60*(5), 912-936.
Johnson, K. (2016, February). 6 ways well-intentioned people whitesplain racism (and why they need to stop)**.** *Everyday Feminism.* https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/how-people-whitesplain-racism/
Jung, M. K., & Vargas, J. H. C. (Eds.). (2021). *Antiblackness*. Duke University Press.
Lipsitz, G. (2006). *The possessive investment in whiteness: How white people profit from identity politics*. Temple University Press.
Leonardo, Z. (2004). The color of supremacy: Beyond the discourse of “white privilege.” *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 36*(2), 137-152.
Leonardo, Z. (2020). The Trump presidency, post-colorblindness, and the reconstruction of public race speech. In O. Obasogie (Ed)., *Trumpism and its discontents*, (pp.18-37).
Leonardo, Z., & Dixon-Román, E. (2020). Post-colorblindness; Or, racialized speech after symbolic racism. In M. Peters, M. Tesar, L. Jackson, & T. Besley (Eds.), *What comes after postmodernism in educational theory?* (pp. 90-91). Routledge.
Leonardo, Z., & Porter, R. K. (2010). Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of ‘safety’in race dialogue. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *13*(2), 139-157.
Leonardo, Z., & Zembylas, M. (2013). Whiteness as technology of affect: Implications for educational praxis. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *46*(1), 150-165.
Lewis, A. E., & Diamond, J. B. (2015). *Despite the best intentions: How racial inequality thrives in good schools*. Oxford University Press.
Malterud, K. (2001). Qualitative research: standards, challenges, and guidelines. *The Lancet*, *358*(9280), 483-488.

Matias, C. E. (2014). And our feelings just don't feel it anymore": Re-feeling whiteness, resistance, and emotionality. *Understanding and dismantling privilege*, *4*(2), 134-153.
Matias, C. E. (2016). *Feeling white: Whiteness, emotionality, and education*. Brill Sense.
Matias, C. E. (2016). *Feeling white: Whiteness, emotionality, and education*. Springer.
Matias, C. E., & Zembylas, M. (2014). 'When saying you care is not really caring': Emotions of disgust, whiteness ideology, and teacher education. *Critical Studies in Education*, *55*(3), 319-337.
Matias, C. E., Montoya, R., & Nishi, N. W. (2016). Blocking CRT: How the emotionality of whiteness blocks CRT in urban teacher education. *Educational Studies*, *52*(1), 1-19.
Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Sage.
Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook. Sage.
Mills, C. W. (1997). *The Racial Contract*. Cornell University Press.
Mills, C. W. (2007). White Ignorance. Race and epistemologies of ignorance, *247*, 26-31.
Mills, C. W. (2015). The Racial Contract revisited: Still unbroken after all these years. *Politics, Groups, and Identities, 3*(3), 541-557.
Mobley Jr, S. D., Johnson, J. M., & Drezner, N. D. (2022). "Why aren't all the white kids sitting together in the cafeteria?": An exploration of white student experiences at a public HBCU. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *15*(3), 300.
Mohajeri, O. (2022). Contested whiteness: Useful heuristic or reinscribing dominance? *JCSCORE*, *8*(2), 1-39.
Ozias, M. L. (2023). White women's affect: Niceness, comfort, and neutrality as cover for racial harm. *Journal of College Student Development, 64***(**1), 31-47.
Peterson, R. D., & Hamrick, F. A. (2009). White, male, and "minority": Racial consciousness among White male undergraduates attending a historically Black university. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *80*(1), 34-58.
Pierce, J. (2012). *Racing for innocence: Whiteness, gender, and the backlash against affirmative action*. Stanford University Press.
Roediger, D. R. (1991). The Wages of Whiteness. *Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, 11-13.
Roediger, D. R. (2017). The wages of whiteness: Race and the making of the American working class. *Class: The Anthology*, 41-55.
Rodriquez, J. (2006). Color-blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-hop. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 35*, 645–68.
Rodríguez, D. (2011). Multiculturalist white supremacy and the substructure of the body. In M.J. Casper & P. Currah (Eds.), *Corpus: An interdisciplinary reader on bodies and knowledge* (pp. 39-60). Palgrave Macmillan US.
Rodríguez, D. (2020). *White Reconstruction: Domestic warfare and the logics of genocide*. Fordham University Press.
Rodríguez, D. (2023). The obsolescence of 'police brutality'. In C. Cunneed, A. Deckert, A. Porter, J. Tauri, & R. Webb (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook on Decolonizing Justice* (pp. 124 – 135). Routledge.

Ross, T. (1990). The rhetorical tapestry of race: White innocence and black abstraction. *William & Mary Law Review, 32*(1),1–40.
Solórzano, D. G., & Bernal, D. D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and LatCrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Urban education*, *36*(3), 308-342.
Solórzano, D. G., & Villalpando, O. (1998). Critical race theory, marginality, and the experience of students of color in higher education. *Sociology of Education: Emerging Perspectives*, *21*, 211-222.
Spanierman, L. B., & Cabrera, N. L. (2015). The emotions of White racism and anti-racism.
In V. Watson, D. Howard-Wagner, & L. B. Spanierman (Eds.), *Unveiling Whiteness in the 21st century: Global manifestations, transdisciplinary interventions* (pp. 9–28). Lanham, MD:
Lexington BooksStake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. SAGE
Sullivan, S. (2006). Revealing Whiteness: The unconscious habits of racial privilege. Indiana University Press
Sullivan, S., & Tuana, N. (Eds.). (2007). *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*. Suny Press.
Tevis, T. L., Nishi, N. W., & Grayson, M. L. (2023). Rituals of white women in social justice education. In T. Tevis, N. Nishi, & M. Grayson (Eds.), *The gendered transaction of whiteness: White women in educational spaces* (pp. 49-72). Springer International Publishing.
Vargas, J. H. C. (2018). *The denial of antiblackness: Multiracial redemption and black suffering*. U of Minnesota Press.
Vaught, S. E., & Castagno, A. E. (2008). “I don't think I'm a racist”: Critical race theory, teacher attitudes, and structural racism. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *11*(2), 95-113.
Yamamoto, E. K. (1997). Critical race praxis: Race theory and political lawyering practice in post-civil rights America. *Michigan Law Review, 95*, 821–900.

Appendix A: *Typology of Agentic white Defense with Analytical Codes**



***Literature informing our codes:**

Frames:
Minimization of racism, cultural racism, naturalization, abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014)
Disconnected power analysis (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017)
Phantom persecution frame (Jayakumar et al, 2021)

Perceptions:
Positive sense of white identity (Cabrera, 2014)
Reverse racism, perceived victimization (Bonilla Silva, 2014, Cabrera, 2018)
White innocence (Accapadi, 2007; Ozias, 2023; Pierce, 2012, Gotanda, 2004; Gutiérrez, 2006)
Columbusing, Blackness as spectacle, deciding when race matters (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017)
Distancing from whiteness (Case & Hemmings, 2005)

Strategies:
Co-opting diversity rhetoric, co-opting strategies of resistance (Warikoo, 2016; Jayakumar et al., 2021)
Cautionary race traitor (Ignatiev, 1997)
white alibi (Leonardo, 2004)
Race cache (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017)

Emotions:
apathy (Foreman, 2004)
whitelash (James, 2022)
anger (Anderson, 2016; Cabrera, 2014; Matias, 2016)
perceived threat
white girl nice, projecting emotions (Matias, 2016)
Anger toward being racialized, white hostility (Applebaum, 2017; Brown, 2020; DiAngelo, 2011)
Defensive racial priming (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017)