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### Recommended Citation

Ropers-Huilman, R., Winters, K. T., & Enke, K. A. E. (2013). Discourses of whiteness: White students at Catholic women's colleges (dis)engaging race. *Journal of Higher Education*, 84(1), 28-55.

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## Discourses of Whiteness: White Students at Catholic Women's Colleges (Dis)engaging Race

*To better understand how White college women understand and are influenced by whiteness, we discursively analyzed data from interviews and focus groups with 25 White seniors at two Catholic women's colleges. Findings suggest that participants understood whiteness through discourses of insignificance, nominal difference, responsibility, and transformation and that these understandings affected students' college experiences and envisioned futures.*

*Attention to the construction of white 'experience' is important, both to transforming the meaning of whiteness and to transforming the relations of race in general (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 242).*

*The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its ignorance (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. 385).*

Many higher education institutions in the United States articulate diversity and equity as explicit values. Their commitment can be seen in mission statements, the investment of resources in offices of diversity and equity, student affairs programming, and the incorporation of diversity courses in liberal education requirements. Yet, in most settings, "diversity" refers to non-White people and other subordinate groups, and

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*The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (January/February)  
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the resources gathered around the diversity banner seek to challenge the discrimination those groups face rather than acknowledge the privilege that dominant groups experience. This pattern of focusing only on those who are directly harmed by policies and practices obscures the problem, acknowledging the harmful effects of racism while leaving unexamined those who directly benefit from—and likely have a stake in maintaining—the systems of privilege and oppression. Further, the failure to incorporate analyses of White people’s racialized experiences in higher education practice, research, and policy makes unintelligible the ways in which those who are White simultaneously benefit from, are complicit in, and are harmed by racism.

In this article, we discuss how White women who were seniors at two Catholic women’s colleges thought about their own racial identities given their experiences with their institutions’ systematized emphasis (through required coursework, study abroad, campus programming, etc.) on racial or cultural understanding. We present our analysis of interviews and focus groups with students and point out the many complexities associated with White students’ understandings of their own whiteness in these contexts. Specifically, we consider the various discourses that participants use to construct their own identities, choices, and visions for the future. We conclude that extant educational efforts likely are not sufficient in helping White women students develop a racially self-conscious identity, and we offer recommendations for how predominantly White institutions could continue to foster racial understanding with their White students.

### **Constructions of Whiteness**

Whiteness, as it takes shape in the United States and has implications for nations across the globe, is a constructed category that was developed historically in accordance with the socioeconomic, cultural, and political desires of those who had the power to make such categorizations (Omi & Winant, 1994; California Newsreel, 2003; Takaki, 1994). Whiteness became a construct through which those identifying with it could gain and maintain socioeconomic power. Through the history of the United States, various groups were first rejected from and then assimilated into whiteness (Irish, German, Polish, etc.), while other groups’ claims to the social and material benefits of whiteness have shifted dramatically over history. In each case, individual and group experiences were influenced by other identities as well (class, gender, etc.).



In contemporary U.S. society, whiteness remains a salient facet of nearly all social institutions. For example, of Fortune 100 board members, 85% identify as White (Alliance for Board Diversity, 2008). Of federal judges, 85% are White (Biographical Directory of Federal Judges, 2009). Of college and university presidents, 86% are White (American Council on Education, 2007). Further, a persistent gap exists between the rates of immediate college attendance for White high school graduates and Black graduates (69% versus 55%) and between White and Hispanic/Latino graduates (69% versus 58%) (NCES, 2009). These experiences are situated within a national context that in 2008 was estimated as 80% White, 13% African American, 5% Asian American, 1% Native American, less than 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 2% two or more races, and 16% Hispanic/Latino (members of whom can be of any race) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Yet, individual states within the United States vary widely in their racial composition. For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), Californians identify as 61% White, 6% African American, 12% Asian American, 1% Native American, less than 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 3% two or more races, and 36% Hispanic/Latino; in contrast, residents of Vermont identify as 96% White. These national data underscore the ambiguity of race as it is understood in the United States. While these categorizations are meaningful in some ways, it is important to recognize that within each of those socially constructed racial categories are vast differences in terms of experience, nationality, and myriad other socio-cultural indicators. Our use of these categories, then, both creates and obscures meaning.

The obfuscation of meaning is particularly strong around the topics of White privilege and White supremacy. White privilege is hard for White people to see, a factor that makes it difficult to form interracial alliances toward dismantling racial privilege. Indeed, as McKinney (2005) posited in her study on White college students, “A primary characteristic of modern racism is the denial that it still exists. . . . This line of reasoning assumes that because whiteness is not important to whites, blackness is not, or *should not* be important to blacks, Latino-ness to Latinos, and so on” (pp. 13–14). Grillo and Wildman (1997) further showed that this systematic ignoring of the effects of whiteness by White people impedes their abilities to have meaningful relationships with people of color:

Many whites think that people of color are obsessed with race and find it hard to understand the emotional and intellectual energy that people of color devote to the subject. But whites are privileged in that they do not have to think about race, even though they have one. White supremacy privileges

whiteness as the normative model. Being the norm allows whites to ignore race, except when they perceive race (usually someone else's) as intruding on their lives. (pp. 48–49)

Many scholars have engaged with the concept of whiteness, although its implications for higher education have yet to be fully explored. While McKinney's work is a step toward understanding how White students rely on discourses of whiteness to frame their identities, it is not clear how higher education institutions can promote students' understandings of how whiteness influences their choices, experiences, and futures. Our article contributes to knowledge in this area.

### **Developing Whiteness**

If one agrees with the premise that race is constructed, it is important to examine how White people develop understandings of their own White identities. In other words, if people develop into White people, how does that process happen? And, perhaps more importantly, since whiteness is not experienced in only one way, how do people choose from among the discourses available to them how they will engage with—or ignore—their own whiteness?

Many scholars with different racial identities and experiences have examined how White privilege is learned through interactions with family members, colleagues, friends, and media sources (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Fine, 1996; Kendall, 2007; McIntosh, 1988; Roediger, 1998; Ropers-Huilman, 2008; Thandeka, 1999; Trepagnier, 2006). In this section, we focus on the work of three scholars whose inquiries have been instrumental in understanding how White people develop their understandings of whiteness. We first consider Helms' (1990) White racial identity development model, as it was one of the first to de-normalize whiteness by proposing that whiteness (like blackness) is an identity shaped by external and internal situations that prompt movement through stages. Then, we discuss Frankenberg's (1993) study on White women because of its explicit attention to the ways in which White women construct their own whiteness and, in many cases, their commitments to social justice through their racialized lenses. Finally, we turn to Leonardo's (2009) scholarship that posits how constructions of whiteness are multifarious and that there is an urgent need to address such constructions in educational settings.

The groundbreaking work of Helms (1990) posits that racism is damaging to the identities of White people as well as to people of color, albeit in different ways. Helms asserted that, similar to other racial iden-

tity models, White people move through various stages on their way to a positive White identity. These stages, which include contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion/emersion, and autonomy, represent development from a lack of racial awareness to anti-racist action and understanding of intersectional identities.

Helms' important contributions relate to her underlying assumptions that White people engage with their whiteness in different ways and that external and internal events and reflections shape their conceptions of their own whiteness and, subsequently, their abilities to interact with racially similar and racially different others. Taken a step further, we suggest that rather than relying on a stage model of development, we can consider the ways in which people rely on various racialized discourses that are chosen for multiple purposes in various contexts.

Frankenberg's (1993) scholarly attention to whiteness also furthered understandings of discourses associated with whiteness, specifically as they shape women's experiences. In her work, which focused on how race matters in the lives of White women, she articulated that "whiteness refers to a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and, moreover, are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination" (p. 6). She explained further, "To speak of whiteness is, I think, to assign *everyone* a place in the relations of racism. It is to emphasize that dealing with racism is not merely an option for white people—that, rather, racism shapes white people's lives and identities in a way that is inseparable from other facets of daily life" (p. 6). Arguing that whiteness represents structural advantage through race privilege, cultural practices, and a standpoint that shapes how White people look at the world, Frankenberg (2000) then focused her attention on the multiple ways in which White women make sense of their whiteness given their diverse experiences and suggested that both analyzing women's sense-making processes and facilitating introspection are essential for dismantling racism in our society today.

At the end of her research with thirty White women who had a broad range of experiences and intersecting identities, Frankenberg (1993) reflected that "analysis of the place of whiteness in the racial order can and should be . . . only one part of a much broader process of social change leveled both at the material relations of race and at discursive repertoires" (p. 243). Frankenberg insisted that whiteness is shaped in relation to people of other races and to racism and that the examination of whiteness is a necessary but not sufficient part of challenging racism. These two tenets ground and inform our study of the lives of White women in college.

Leonardo's (2009) scholarship is also instrumental to our understanding of whiteness, as it takes shape in higher education discourse. He wrote that "'whiteness' is a racial discourse, whereas the category 'white people' represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color" (p. 169). This articulation of the differences between White people and whiteness is useful for us as we consider how White students (who identify, and are identified by others, as White) participate in taking up whiteness in different ways.

Leonardo's work is also useful in helping us to remember how, in contemporary times, globalization has intersected with whiteness in such a way as to create a "global color line" that is fueled by capitalism, postcolonialism, and geopolitical systems that have enforced the boundaries between "haves and have-nots." As higher education institutions emphasize the need to educate citizens of a global society, it is important to consider how whiteness is brought to bear in the experiences of students.

### **Discourses of Whiteness in Higher Education**

Whiteness has sociopolitical and material effects on people's lives, and higher education institutions, programs, and systems are implicated by discourses of whiteness. Whiteness is embedded within higher education, yet its ubiquity is engaged differently by different people. In higher education, many efforts have been developed to promote racial and cultural understandings—in essence to shape, define, and change the discourses that are recognizable for students, faculty, administrators, and community members. These discourses, which can be defined as "a coordinated pattern of words, deeds, values, beliefs, symbols, tools, objects, times, and places and in the here-and-now as a performance" (Gee, 2005, p. 28), represent ways of thinking about and organizing human history and values.

Higher education is a social institution and, as such, has been part of both maintaining and challenging various discourses of whiteness. Yet, while efforts to enhance students' awareness of their identities have the potential to facilitate powerful experiences for students, what discourses of whiteness do they foster? And if students of different racial backgrounds experience "disequilibrium" associated with diverse experiences differently, as Barajas (2009) found in her recent study, how can educators be aware of those differences and ensure that White students' reflections on whiteness are facilitated in meaningful ways?

Diversity course requirements, interracial dialogues, and efforts to promote socially responsible leadership all promote particular ways



of engaging concepts of race and, sometimes, whiteness. Additionally, efforts to recruit more students and faculty of color as well as create culturally responsive classrooms also hold potential to promote transformative thinking. Yet, it is important to ask: In what ways do these structures enhance students' (and faculty and staff members') abilities to take action toward dismantling the racist structures that have yielded unequal opportunities and outcomes in our society?

How are different discourses associated with whiteness prompted by what is currently offered in higher education? In what ways are multiple discourses associated with whiteness made accessible to students as they are being prepared for "global leadership"? As Leonardo (2009) posited, understanding and deconstructing whiteness is a necessary precursor to moving toward equity in educational settings. It is with this belief that we pursued our inquiry.

## **Methods**

The data informing this research were gathered from interviews conducted with 26 seniors at two Catholic women's colleges. Additionally, two focus groups of these participants convened to engage in a process of member-checking. All interactions occurred during the spring semester of 2008. While students were engaged in multiple majors, had many different career and life plans, and identified with many religious or spiritual orientations, 25 of the 26 shared a self-described White identity. The analysis for this article focuses on those 25 students.

Participants were selected in collaboration with institutional research representatives. Institutional research staff at each institution distributed an initial e-mail request for participation to a random sample of students who had indicated in a first-year survey that they were planning to attend graduate school. Because we were initially interested in work-life choices of educated women, we used this as a selection criterion to find those students who had, at least upon college entry, decided to pursue advanced professional training. Those students interested in participating were asked to contact one of the researchers to arrange a time to meet. Interviews were conducted using a protocol that focused on the overarching research question: How do students at Catholic women's colleges construct their identities?

As noted above, the entire protocol did not focus explicitly on race. Yet, certain questions prompted students to reflect with us on their racial identities. These included: 1) Tell me about who you are. Can you comment on how your gender, race, economic class, and/or religion play a part in your identity? 2) How have your in-class experiences shaped



your aspirations and intentions around work and family? How have your out-of-class experiences shaped your aspirations and intentions around work and family? If you studied abroad, in what ways was that a significant experience for you? 3) Project 50 years into the future. What do you want people to say about the life you lived? How do you want to make a difference in the world? Given the semi-structured nature of our interviews, race was interwoven throughout the conversations with those participants who thought it salient in the various spheres of their lives.

### *Analytic Approaches*

This research project was primarily about how women college students envision their futures and how their college experiences affect those intentions. Guided by an intersectional framework, however, we became curious about the ways in which race was a significant characteristic in our participants' understandings of their experiences, opportunities, and intentions. An intersectional approach suggests that people can never be understood as unidimensional beings whose essence is fixed by any given identity. Instead, people are complex, with fluid identities, and their multiple identities shape each other differently in different contexts (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1993; McCall, 2005; Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2010). As such, people can live lives in which they simultaneously experience privilege and oppression (Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves, 2007). In this study, intersectional thinking prompted us to look beyond seeing these White college women as defined by their womanhood. Instead, given the salience of race in our nation, we wanted to understand how these women who chose to attend a higher education institution presumably based on gender were informed both by gender and race in mutually constitutive ways.

In order to best address our research questions and understand the contexts of interest, we used critical discourse analysis as a framework for understanding the relationships among social structures, identity construction, power, and language in use. The view of discourse that we take in this article is rooted in a Foucauldian perspective that focuses not on the linguistic features of language but rather on discourse as a system of representation that is organized through rules and practices that create and regulate meaning (Hall, 2001). This view of discourse as a system of representation is particularly well suited to our interest in understanding how whiteness operates as a feature of both personal identity and as a part of a specific meaning-making system. A Foucauldian perspective on discourse also requires a close understanding of context. The concept of "communities of practice," as posited by

Lave and Wenger (1991), is useful in our understanding of the way in which meanings are situated, learned, and indeed appropriated within a specific educational context. Our contexts of interest, two Catholic women's colleges, have attempted to mitigate, through particular course offerings and ethical commitments, how students learn about the social construct of race and, in turn, negotiate their own racialized identities. In sum, they have established the contexts for communities of practice within which students come to understand who they are and what is possible in their lives.

Fairclough (2003/2009, 1992/2000) observed that while discourse analysis is often informed by Foucault's theories, as a specific method, discourse analysis tends to be more interested in using Foucault's perspective to inform operationalized, systematic methods than in entertaining the kind of abstractions embraced in social theory. We have "put Foucault to work" by connecting our research questions to some of the analytical "thinking tools" proposed by Gee (2005). One of Gee's central premises is that language is used as a tool for building a social world; therefore, individuals use language to enact specific social identities through discourse. Focusing on whiteness, we ask: "How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?" (Gee, 2005, p. 11).

The tools of discourse analysis have challenged us, as researchers, to consider how the complexities of power and language have operated in our own lives. In particular, we wanted to understand what language we would use and discourses we would draw on to describe our memories of ourselves as undergraduates. We each created a short narrative detailing how and in what ways we recalled discourses of success being present in our previous educational experiences. This method, autoethnography, was a way for us to situate ourselves and our memories into the research endeavor (cf. Ellis, 2004). Our autoethnographic texts revealed ways in which we believed that our visions of success were connected to our social identities as middle-class women who had grown up in rural areas of the upper Midwest. Gender, class, and rurality figured prominently in how we chose to tell stories of our undergraduate selves. Whiteness, as a term specific to a particular social identity, was not an explicit part of our autoethnographic texts, even though we also each claim it as a part of our identity.

In order to consider how discourses of whiteness have been significant in our lives as research collaborators, we engaged in some of the thinking tools offered through the reflexive practice of collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006). In this method, a group of researchers

works to move beyond “the clichés and usual explanations to a point where the written memories come as close as they can make them to an embodied sense of what happened” (p. 3). In working through our texts, we were not seeking a definitive truth but rather a way to think about the kinds of subjectivities, truths, thoughts, and practices that were produced through the process of (re)membering a particular time and place. These memories highlighted attachments to particular discourses of whiteness that were interwoven and deeply embedded in our sense of ourselves as rural, middle-class women. While we may not have explicitly written on whiteness, it was clear, upon analysis, that whiteness was implicated along with other aspects of ourselves. In other words, whiteness mattered a great deal even if it was not explicitly acknowledged.

With the focus on college students’ constructions of whiteness in mind, and cognizant of how whiteness was present and absent in our own histories, we developed a two-pronged approach to coding. As stated earlier, the explicit focus of our interviews was on how students constructed their futures, especially in terms of complexities associated with personal and professional intentions. While race was not the primary focus, we wanted to know how various identities affected students’ development of their life plans as well as their experiences in college; therefore, we asked at least one specific question about race in each interview. Since only one of our standard protocol questions asked explicitly about the meanings of race or ethnicity in participants’ lives, we considered all responses to that question in our analysis. We also included all data throughout the transcript that focused on race in response to other questions, most often related to classes or study abroad. These data were then analyzed with attention to the ways in which students made sense of how whiteness was meaningful in the life stories they chose to share with us. Our iterative analysis led us to group data into four categories that encompassed the multiple meanings participants offered in our conversations. Since discourse analysis requires a fine-tuned attention to detail, our close reading of a small number of interview transcripts provided insights that might have been impossible to achieve in a larger sample.

### *Institutional Contexts*

Two Catholic women’s colleges in the Midwestern United States served as the contexts for our interviews. Each of these institutions was founded by a women’s religious order in the early twentieth century and retains ties with their monastic community. The mission statements of the two institutions reflect their continued commitment to women’s lib-

eral arts education in the Catholic tradition while emphasizing the importance of leadership and service.

While the missions of these two Catholic women's colleges are similar in many ways, the institutions differ in important respects. Aurora College<sup>1</sup> is located in a rural community a few miles from a mid-sized city. It enrolls more than 2,000 women in traditional full-time day programs. Aurora does not offer associate or graduate degrees. Regina College is a comprehensive master's degree institution, serving more than 5,200 students on two campuses in a large metropolitan area. About 2,000 of those students are enrolled in a women-only bachelor's degree program with classes offered through a traditional weekday format. In addition, Regina also offers many of its undergraduate majors through a weekend college that is for non-traditional aged women. Finally, Regina has various professional degrees and certificates available to men and women at the associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degree levels.

Neither college mentions racial and ethnic diversity in their mission statement. Aurora College's website, however, has an institutional commitment to diversity and a presidential statement of commitment to diversity. These statements are grounded in Catholic Catechism related to the dignity of each person. One of Aurora's academic learning goals is that, in order to improve the human condition, graduates will grow in their understandings of gender and cultural differences. To that end, Aurora requires that students select and complete at least one course that explicitly considers gender perspectives and one course that explicitly considers intercultural perspectives. Students must also demonstrate proficiency in speaking or reading another language. Regina College, too, has an active commitment to social justice, articulated in its mission and in the comments of many of its students during interviews and focus groups. Regina College requires that all undergraduate students take two interdisciplinary, writing-intensive core courses. The first course, which has thematic emphases on identity development, social justice, Catholic Social Teaching, and understanding issues of oppression and privilege, is taken during a student's first semester. The second course, usually taken during a student's junior or senior year, focuses on topical issues related to social justice and social change.

Most women attending these two Catholic women's colleges are white, traditional-aged students from the Midwest (NCES, 2009). In fall 2006, Regina College's undergraduate student body (including day students, weekend students, and associate-level students) with known race/ethnicity was 77% white, 21% American students of color, and 2% non-resident alien (NCES, 2009). Aurora College's student body was even

less racially and ethnically diverse than Regina's. In fall 2006, Aurora College's undergraduate student body with known race/ethnicity was 90% white, 5% American students of color, and 5% non-resident alien (NCES, 2009).

Given the institutions' missions and student demographics, we wanted to explore how whiteness was understood on these campuses. How do White women college students who were at the end of their college careers at Regina and Aurora colleges understand their own racial identities? In what ways have their experiences at these Catholic women's colleges fostered their racial understandings? It was clear in our interviews that while students defined the identity of "woman" differently, their gender identity nevertheless informed their visions for themselves. Yet, participants were less explicit about how their racial identities shaped their understandings of their current experiences and future aspirations. While both gendered and racialized discourses affected participants' visions of themselves and their institutions, we focus here on the racialized discourses White women students use to explain their experiences and envision their futures.

### **Discourses of Whiteness at Aurora and Regina**

At both Aurora and Regina, faculty and staff had been explicit about their emphasis on diversity in their curricular offerings, offices, and campus programs. Through coursework and events, students had multiple opportunities to engage in discussions related to broadly understood conceptions of diversity. Yet, most students observed that their college and home environments were predominantly White. With a few exceptions, they articulated that they had not thought much about their whiteness prior to coming to college. All students had been introduced to concepts related to race in their coursework at Regina and Aurora, even if nowhere else. Given the sum of their experiences and the variations in prioritization of race as an interrogated social category, the students drew on quite different discourses of whiteness as they approached graduation.

In this section, we offer an analysis of how White students made sense of their whiteness in terms of how it affected their lives, college experiences, and future intentions. We considered how White women college students develop their White identities through institutional experiences meant to teach women how to become leaders in their communities and consciously integrate intercultural understandings.

The characterizations below represent discourses associated with various ways of understanding and identifying with whiteness. The cat-

egories that we propose are not meant to imply stages of development. Instead, they are examples of how students rely on certain discourses of whiteness to explain their racialized selves. Some students drew on multiple discourses to explain their understandings and experiences in various contexts, while other students' understandings seemed rooted in one discourse. We organize our data here to focus on the predominant discourses that students relied upon to frame their experiences. These discourses include: discourses of insignificance, discourses of nominal difference, discourses of responsibility, and discourses of transformation.

### *Discourses of Insignificance*

Many participants seemed to express a lack of awareness of how their race may have affected their identities or lives prior to college or, for some, throughout their college experiences. There were at least two ways that students engaged discourses of insignificance. The first includes those who claimed an ignorance of the ways that whiteness might have affected their lives. The second includes those who knew that their whiteness must have affected them in some way but were unable to articulate how that is the case.

Some students drew on discourses of insignificance in the first way. In reflecting on her life prior to college, Riya indicated that her race did not affect her at all. Rachel noted that she “can’t think if it played a role or not” in her identity, and Kristine explained that “because I’ve gone to private school my whole life, I haven’t had that much diversity in my life. . . . I guess I just haven’t felt like it’s played that big of a role.” Christina noted that race is the part of her identity that she thinks about the least. As she described:

Every day, I don’t think, “Oh, I’m Caucasian.” Every day I know I’m a girl, and I know I’m Catholic, if you pray every day and that sort of thing, but I don’t really think about [race] at all. . . . I’m not forced to notice because I am in the majority. If I was in a place where I was a minority, I think I would notice it a lot more; it would be a bigger issue.

In our conversation, Stephanie chose to focus on the ways in which people of every racial and gender identification have many opportunities presented to them and that they should take advantage of those opportunities rather than focusing on how discrimination causes a lack of opportunities.

In response to the question of how these students viewed whiteness as significant in their lives, those who drew on discourses of insignificance asserted that whiteness simply was not meaningful to them. They

were not cognizant of the ways in which their whiteness affected their lives and did not express a sense that they were missing something or that their whiteness was a key part of their identity. Their whiteness was insignificant to them.

We also saw a second way of engaging discourses of insignificance. Many students who did not articulate how their whiteness affected them expressed a sense that they were aware that there was a set of experiences that they could not see or understand. Several participants noted that their knowledge and awareness related to gender was much more developed than their knowledge about race. For example, Jealousy told us that although gender “definitely” influenced her identity,

growing up, I never really even considered the fact that I am white. Then when I came here [to Regina] . . . there’s not very much diversity here either. . . . So I feel a little naive once in a while like there is something that I’m missing because my life has been very, very white.

Jealousy, Sophia, and others noted that in their communities, which were predominantly white, it was easy not to notice that they were White because that was the norm.

Other students seemed to believe that they should indicate that race has affected their experiences, but they were not sure how to do so. They focused on the lack of diversity on the campus and their presumed privilege in larger communities. For example, Deb responded:

Being White definitely [has affected me], and I’ve learned this through my studies here, too. There’s lots of privileges that I have that I don’t even realize. I take for granted things, I don’t even think about it. This school’s definitely a White atmosphere, but I like the little diversity that we do have, but I think there can always be more. I guess maybe it’s just been easier for me to do things every day. I guess I haven’t really truly thought a lot about that.

Tessa noted that while she thinks that all people in the Aurora community are equally respected, she is not certain how people with different racial identities experience their time there. Several students told us that they could not make sense of how race, or racial privilege, played a part in their lives. Despite having engaged in courses and campus programs that specifically introduced them to diverse ideas, these students had not yet considered how their whiteness affected them. While there was a sense among students that people who were not White likely were affected by their racial identities, several had not yet considered how their own racial identity might affect them as well.



### *Discourses of Nominal Difference*

For many students in our study, whiteness was something more fully understood through experiences they had with diverse others or in unusual situations. As McKinney (2005) has pointed out, whiteness is often a prompted identity—something that is noticed or thought about only when it is asked about or prompted by unique circumstances. We observed two ways in which discourses of nominal difference were engaged. The first was through a multiculturalism that “flattened difference” (Leonardo, 2009) by acknowledging differences but ignoring the power dimensions of those differences. The second acknowledged differences as well as the power differentials involved but did not necessarily affect students’ day-to-day conceptions of self once they returned to their home environments. Their whiteness was only relevant in relation to others’ experiences, and it lost meaning outside of that immediate context.

In our study, several students called on discourses that recognized racialized differences in a given situation but did not examine the ways in which those differences had implications for the lives of those involved. For example, when asked how the diversity of the student body at Aurora affected her college experience, Amber responded:

I’ve gotten to know culturally diverse people and other students who study abroad here for four years. It’s so fun to get to know them and their culture. My sophomore year we lived by a woman who was from Japan and she was studying here. Living with people from different countries was really good, and it was so fun to get to know her and learn about her culture.

Mary emphasized that she hadn’t “been exposed to a variety of cultures” with the exception of her study abroad experience. When reflecting on the lack of diversity at Aurora, she commented:

There’s still not as much diversity as there could be, and I think that leads to a little more ignorance. . . . It’s not like I don’t want to get to know people. I don’t really care what you look like or anything like that.

In her comments, Mary emphasized that while she would like to get to know people from other cultures, she did not have the opportunity to do so on a regular basis. Through her final comment, she also suggested that racial difference is primarily descriptive and reducible to appearance.

Several students framed their whiteness in relation to non-White persons they encountered on- and off-campus. They seemed to do so, how-

ever, without an awareness of the power relations associated with those different identities. Others expressed a realization that whiteness was deeply embedded in racialized power relations but did not choose to discuss how they were implicated or drawn to action by their whiteness. Nor did they articulate how they were affected on a regular basis as they lived in and through racialized systems. The most common situation in which students told us they began to become aware of their whiteness was in study abroad experiences. Those experiences often translated into either a desire to do something for others (as discussed in the next section) or simply an awareness of difference without an articulated understanding of privilege that required action in any way.

Students articulated their initial awareness as simply an awareness of how different other people's lives were from their own. As one Regina student told us:

Despite the statistics about racial and ethnic diversity or economic diversity, everyone at Regina College is kind of the same. We're all going to school; we're all privileged enough to be going to school. So I think study abroad is really powerful because it shows you how atypical our experience is. Because when we're at Regina College it's like our whole world and everyone is doing the same thing so it's really easy to just take it for granted. . . . [Study abroad] shows you that it's not at all the way the world is.

Several students seemed to collapse their understandings of whiteness and privilege into understandings of homogeneity at Regina and Aurora, and they noted that when studying abroad or through readings and discussions in specific classes, they were able to see that privilege with more clarity. However, for the students who expressed their understandings of race through this lens, they generally expressed either a sense that they are privileged as "White Americans" or that there was discomfort in being in a place where they were a minority. Kyra expressed that racism is "sad" but just a "reality." Mal noted that she has noticed discrimination mostly in terms of jobs and friends. And Marvel discussed how she's never had someone "judge her by her color" to restrict opportunities. Jennifer even went so far as to say, "[My whiteness] defines me. But, I don't feel as much like it defines me as a person. But, it does put a lot of parameters on how I am treated in society and kind of the benefits I get just from casual interactions." These students seemed conflicted as they attempted to make meaning of their racial identities and could not seem to articulate how they were affected by or thought about their privilege in terms of their interactions in the communities of which they were a part.

### *Discourses of Responsibility*

Several students in our study tapped into discourses about whiteness that acknowledged White privilege and the responsibility that such privilege brings with it. For example, Suzanne drew on discourses of responsibility to explain why she was cognizant of different cultural identities in high school and why she worked to bring awareness to her peers about how race was present in the lives of students in their predominantly White school. As she explained:

I was the co-chair of our Pride in Diversity group [in] which we just learned about different cultures and different races and whatnot. And, it was really funny because 90% of us were white, but looking at the school, 90% of the students were white. My co-chair was actually African-American, and we worked really well together. [We tried to] . . . discuss things that she would feel going to a predominately White school and then we'd kind of bring those issues to the surface and try to open the eyes of the students more.

Within this experience, Suzanne described her inclination to be culturally aware and to serve as a leader among her peers. However, she does not articulate whether or not she and her group considered whiteness as a cultural identity.

Other students noted how many of their experiences, oftentimes in study abroad, provided opportunities that they believed would motivate them to action at some point in the future. For example, Amber told us the following:

I feel like I'm so easy-going and I can just travel anywhere and it's no big deal. [My college] experiences helped me do this. . . . [My study abroad trip] was eye-opening because I'd never been to a third-world country and I've noticed that I've changed little things about my life, but nothing significant yet. I really want to change and make a difference specifically for those people . . . where we visited. I sent this huge, long, typed-out letter to family and friends telling them what's up and that if you can, you need to go to a third-world country and see it for yourself because it's amazing. I want to do more to help people like that; I just have to figure out what I want to significantly do and how to do it. I'm kind of unsure right now.

Amber's story of her travels has many components. Her time at Aurora has prepared her to be comfortable traveling the world. She experienced her trip to a South American country as visiting a "third-world country," and while she's not made any significant changes in her own life, she articulated her desire to make a difference in the lives of the people she met there. She has contacted her friends and family in an attempt to get

them to visit similar countries to have similar “amazing” experiences. While she noted differences in access to power and resources between herself and the people she met abroad, she did not offer an articulation of how similar systems of power and privilege may play out in her community or in the larger U.S. context and how she might intervene in those contexts.

Finally, Jennifer drew on her knowledge of racial and gender inequities in science education and described her sense of responsibility to intervene in that process. She told us of her intentions to earn a doctorate and work in a research university in order “to try to encourage women and students of color into the sciences because physical chemistry is especially male dominated, very white. I think it helps a lot to see someone who is not a White male teaching you, because it makes it more attainable for you.” In each of the cases where students drew on discourses of responsibility, they articulated a sense of their own privilege. They wanted to use that privilege to help others in some way, whether by drawing attention to them (either in their own communities or in another country) or, in Jennifer’s case, by preparing to create opportunities for women and people of color in science.

### *Discourses of Transformation*

A few students in our study drew on discourses of transformation to articulate their beliefs around whiteness and privilege. These students considered their racial experiences and concomitant privilege alongside other salient factors when deliberating about their futures.

In one example, Marie explained to us that only recently, prompted by a class and a study abroad experience, did she begin to see herself as having a race. When she was in another country, she recognized that her minority status (as a White person) was not the same as a Latina in the United States. She was both minority (in terms of numerical representation) and majority (in terms of privilege and power). Upon returning from that trip, she participated in a group that made her question further the complexities of her identity as a person with White privilege:

This last semester I had an internship where I helped start a Latina spiritual companion group. It was led by another White woman, so it was the two of us and we were ministering to Latina women. . . . That was the biggest eye opener for me. I found it really difficult to lead them because I was a student [and] I was White. And I was like “Who am I to be the one here? What are they thinking of me as being the one who is leading the group?” . . . It definitely entered my mind because I didn’t want to be the overpowering White woman. . . . [Participants] were always very open and very eager to do every-

thing and very willing to participate, [but I've put] a lot of thought and emotion [into considering]: "What role does race play? And what messages am I sending just because I'm in this room, because I'm White and they're not?"

While Marie told us that her questioning about her race happened fairly recently, she actively questioned experiences that she had both in her study abroad experience and in her interactions upon returning to Aurora. Marie came to see her whiteness as significant in contexts in which she interacts with those who identify as racially different from her, and her new understandings transformed the ways in which she understood those relationships. What was not clear from our conversation is whether Marie also critically questioned situations in which she was interacting with her White peers, or predominantly White social systems, to interrogate how racial privilege affects those experiences. Is this another case in which awareness of whiteness is invisible until "prompted"?

Another student also articulated how an awareness of racial or cultural difference has had a transformative effect in her life. Marvel described the profound experiences she had when studying abroad in an African country and how those experiences prompted reflection for what kind of life she wanted to live.

I think I kind of re-approached who I was now, but at the same time [those experiences] gave me such an eye-opening to cultural and racial differences and identities. . . . Before this trip, I never felt that I judged people by their cover, I think that it's made me realize [that I do.] . . . And [I want to] really break down those barriers within myself and reach out to people who may look different than me or act different than me or have different values or separate personalities, whatever. [Studying abroad] also made me realize that I definitely want to keep myself exposed to all those really different, unique things that the world has to offer. . . . I always joke with my friends that I'm not going to move back to [my home state]. It's not because of my family, but I don't get fed with enough difference there. . . . So I think that's part of it, too; realizing how special that was and how I need that in my future.

In this passage, Marvel described how she believes she needs cultural differences in her life in order to live the life she envisions. In the context of the larger conversation, it became clear that she felt her study abroad experiences transformed her life intentions such that she will not choose to live in a homogenous area again that is not able to nourish her with cultural difference.

Jane's is the final story we wish to share of a student whose understandings of whiteness were transformative in her life. Her story is

unique from most of the others in that she was introduced to ideas of difference on multiple levels prior to attending Regina. Her family volunteered internationally, hosted university students from multiple countries, and, as she framed it, “I think I grew up embedded in multiculturalism and diversity.” She was able to articulate her own racial development over time and consider where she was in her thinking at various stages in her life. Whiteness was significant in every aspect of her life, and she was committed to working against racism in whatever context she found herself. As she described:

No doubt race has affected where I’ve gone and how I have gotten there. . . . if anything, because of all the skin privilege I have, it’s probably strengthened my commitment to diversity. I think White privilege has been a crap deal for everybody. It’s a crap deal for those who don’t receive the skin privilege and it’s a crap deal for those of us that do. . . . Everybody wants to be valued more for what they do and who they are than what they look like. No doubt it’s much worse for people who do not have White Caucasian skin. At the same time it’s not something that I want, so it’s something that I try to work against.

In thinking about how she will work toward social justice, and against unearned privileges, she pointed to several people whose efforts she wants to emulate and how those models are helping her come to her own vision of her future. While she is certain that she wants to “work toward social justice somehow,” her own path into the future is not clear.

## Discussion

*“Whiteness is less of an essence and more of a choice” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 174).*

The 25 White women in our study regularly made choices about how to engage different discourses of whiteness, and those choices mattered for their college experiences and their futures. Many scholars have focused on how race and gender intersect in ways that affect educational experiences for women in higher education (e.g., Glazer-Raymo, 2008; Montoya, 2003; Neumann & Peterson, 1997; Patton, 2009; Ropers-Huilman, 2008; Wing, 2003). In this article, we foregrounded our participants’ understandings of their racialized identities while acknowledging that those understandings are gendered as well. In this discussion, we consider the implications of our participants’ engagement with

racialized discourses as they relate to higher education's role in helping students engage race in their lives.

The first implication of this study relates to formal study abroad experiences. Students believed their time abroad was powerful in many ways. One such way was that studying abroad facilitated students' moving from their isolated campus environments to see a wider range of human experience. Studying abroad urged them to think about how to "live life differently" and accept what they saw as a responsibility to "give back." For some students, their study abroad experience was also a catalyst for self-reflection about their racial privilege.

Yet, it raised questions for us that study abroad was what students most often called on to discuss their racial identity. Why were students unable to see differences in privilege on their own campuses or in their own communities? Why are many still framing their most significant experiences related to race as being in a country outside of the United States? Will they be able to translate their knowledge from another country to their neighbors? And will they use their awareness of privilege to "help others" or to dismantle systems that established their privilege in the first place? It seems that several students did not internalize what they could learn about their own communities from the disparities they witnessed abroad. In many cases, they were motivated to want to help others from a distance. This desire did not entail a reflection of how systems of whiteness from which they benefited needed to be deconstructed and dismantled in order to challenge existing disparities. Additionally, it was not clear that students recognized how they could learn from, and be "helped" by, their relationships with others. In this sense, then, students continued to rely on hierarchical understandings of their relationships with those who they characterize as "different" from them. These characterizations—and their exceptions—suggest that further reflection upon completion of study abroad experiences and integration of learning gained from such experiences into situations in home communities would be worth scholarly consideration.

Second, we learned that students have significantly different experiences prior to college that affect how they are able to understand and engage race and, in particular, whiteness. For example, for Riya, race was simply not a consideration in her years prior to college. For Jane, both concepts and lived experiences related to race, inequity, power, privilege, and difference structured her family's life. By the time she arrived at college, she had already actively engaged questions to which Riya had not yet been introduced. As such, Jane and Riya engaged with and made meaning of what the college provided them in very different ways. Just as institutions consciously respond to the needs of students



with different levels of mathematical knowledge or those who face different developmental challenges, institutions would benefit from being more thoughtful about the types of experiences they facilitate for students to think about their own racial identities. Students are not identical in their racial understandings, and they need different types of conversations, programming, and interactions to facilitate their racial identity development.

Third, it is clear to us that students' understandings of whiteness affected their visions of their futures. For some, mostly those drawing on what we term as discourses of insignificance or nominal difference, whiteness was simply not a consideration in thinking about their futures. For others, mostly those drawing on discourses of responsibility and transformation, their future plans were largely shaped by their relations with others who were culturally or racially different than them. As institutions think about how they help students prepare to make thoughtful decisions related to choice of major and career, community involvement, and how they want to craft their lives, they should consider how students think about their holistic identities, including race. Further, they should explore with students what it means to find a primary aspect of one's identity insignificant, a nominal difference, a motivator to take responsibility, or a source of transformation.

In order to truly explore the various discourses related to race and other identities that are manifestations of social power, campus staff and faculty members will have to engage in this difficult work as well. In her individual interview, Meredith, a student at Regina, was particularly troubled by a lack of reflection about the different possible ways of being and thinking about identity. She observed that there were not role models among faculty, staff, or students who examined how they were positioned in relation to race and class identities. As she described:

I have been a little bit disappointed. . . . I mean there are incredibly smart people [here]. There are people who do amazing things. . . . What I really want is people who are willing to just look at themselves intensely. I mean we can talk about racism and class issues. We can understand and we can study them in depth and be like "This is so wrong, this is so horrible. I want to make a change." . . . The only way to fix this thing is intensely look inside yourself. And I haven't seen that, really. . . . We don't have to push ourselves to think differently because there is nobody up in our face telling us to think something else, because we all kind of agree. We all agree with this ideology to some extent. I see that as not a good thing . . . because once you see that everyone agrees . . . [you think], "I can stop thinking about this even though I feel like there is something more."

Given our findings and students' observations about the lack of diversity at Regina and Aurora, Meredith's last comment is especially perplexing. Her sense that once "everyone" agrees and then dialogue stops, begs the question: Who is "everyone"? Who is present and has access to the knowledge to make decisions about what is right and wrong, or simply has a place, in the dialogue? If those participating are largely White, how are the voices of those of color incorporated into the core knowledge bases of these White students? Troubling is not only the absence of knowledge, but also, as Meredith points out, the sense that it is acceptable to stop seeking knowledge. If whiteness and the discourses that support its varied performances are to be explored and interrogated on college campuses, faculty, staff, and students must engage these perplexing questions on an ongoing basis.

### **Implications for Higher Education Institutions**

The students in our study called upon multiple discourses related to whiteness, including discourses of insignificance, nominal difference, responsibility, and transformation. We urge readers to consider the ways in which these and other discourses are present on their campuses and how they affect students' abilities to work toward social justice in diverse communities. Specifically, we invite readers to think about the following questions: What practices in higher education explicitly or implicitly promote discourses that position whiteness as insignificant? What practices promote an awareness of whiteness and racial difference without highlighting power relations among and within constructions of race? What do higher education institutions do to promote understandings of power and responsibility that seek to engage students in helping others? Do those same practices also convey the expectation to students that they examine their own identities in relation to the communities they are serving (and, hopefully, learning from)? What experiences promote growth and transformation among White students, especially in the context of anti-racism and social justice? And which discourses undergird "normal" engagement in higher education? (How) do those discourses serve the public good? Can or should they be supported, transformed, or ruptured? We recommend that campuses consider these questions to facilitate dialogue about how they foster students' engagement or disengagement with race and, specifically, whiteness. In order to further a dialogue in relation to these questions, we posit the following recommendations and reflections.

### ***Diversity Statements***

We recommend campuses consider the content and enactment of their diversity statements. What are the multiple meanings associated with campus diversity statements? For whom and in what ways are they salient? How is a statement developed, reflected upon, and animated in educational experiences on a particular campus? Who is invested in that statement, and how is its success evaluated? It is important to consider how the diversity statement represents discursive choices for students such that they develop understandings of whiteness and its implications for working toward social justice.

### ***Multicultural Centers and Diversity Programming***

We recommend that campuses consider whether they focus on the experiences of students of color without prompting White students to think about their identities and how they are positioned in relation to people of color. Further, we urge campuses to consider how this framing affects how White students prepare to work, learn, and live in local contexts situated within the broader global community. If whiteness is denormalized, and therefore acknowledged as having cultural elements, how do/can multicultural centers play a role in prompting students to explore whiteness? We recommend that campuses consider acknowledging and foregrounding whiteness as constructed but that they be careful to do so without re-establishing whiteness as the center of analysis and action. It is important to engage the complexities involved in asking multicultural centers to help White students explore discourses of whiteness that have the possibility to transform campus cultures.

### ***Study Abroad***

We recommend that campuses consider how study abroad experiences can and do prompt students to explore whiteness. What additional experiences are needed to assist students in integrating their understandings of “others” in different parts of the world to their understandings of themselves and their own positions in terms of power and privilege in their own communities, both currently and into their future lives? What discourses do campuses intend to facilitate through study abroad? We recommend that in the curricular and co-curricular elements of study abroad programs, faculty and staff prompt an examination of the rhetorics and realities that animate certain discourses of whiteness in study abroad among U.S. students.

### ***Curriculum and Common Practices***

It is critical to consider the discourses supported by the broader cur-

riculum, “common practices” of the student affairs division, and informal and formal interactions between and among students, faculty, and staff. These common practices are often at the center of the established discourses on a given campus, discourses that establish what is normal and recognizable as whiteness. Iverson’s (2010) policy discourse analysis of campus diversity plans is one example of examining the ways in which policies promote discourses through “normal” functioning that perpetuate concepts and roles that are often unintended.

## Conclusion

Diversity is understood in multiple ways on college campuses, and students have markedly different experiences with diverse people and perspectives. Yet, perhaps due to the unique nature of the colleges we included in our study, most of our participants made it clear that they had been exposed to non-majority perspectives through their classes, on-campus interactions, or study abroad experiences. However, as Aguilar-San Juan (2003) has asserted, “Incorporating a marginalized perspective in a larger work that does not ask *why certain perspectives are marginalized to begin with* is not sufficient” (p. 272). In our study, most students had not engaged with this second level of analysis, which is the kind of reflection that is necessary to changing social systems of power and privilege. We urge colleges and universities of all types to examine the ways in which they might use this more integrative approach to engage their students in preparing for local, national, and global citizenship. The interrogation of whiteness is an essential part of diversifying higher education.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All names of institutions and participants are pseudonyms.

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