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# Of heart, mind & belonging: Reflections on anti-racist white identity development

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**Of Heart, Mind & Belonging:**  
*Reflections on Anti-Racist White Identity*  
*Development*

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts

June 2012

By

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## ABSTRACT

Anti-racist white activists have actively participated within movements for racial justice in the United States, in both the pre-and post-civil rights era. Inspired by the voices, work and leadership of people of color, as well as through multiracial coalition building, anti-racist white activism has taken many forms over the years. In some instances, this activism has involved educating and engaging with other white people in examining their white privilege and strategies for accountability, as a means for incorporating an awareness of whiteness and privilege into their multiracial social justice organizing. This thesis examines the stories of present-day white anti-racists in Chicago and explores the myriad ways that they have come to develop an anti-racist consciousness and what personal work is required to bring their full selves to the fight for racial justice. Using an anti-racist feminist framework, I weave together theoretical scholarship with the narratives and dialogue from participants of two focus groups I conducted with white anti-racist activists in their 20s and 30s here in Chicago. I argue that while whites growing up in homogenous white communities may be able to develop a progressive political analysis from their parents or other community influences, an in-depth consciousness around racial justice can only be fostered through a multiracial “geography” of locations, relationships and belonging. Additionally, developing an anti-racist consciousness as a white person requires attending to the emotional wounds caused by an awareness of their complicity in white supremacy. These emotional wounds can be attended to through conversations with other white anti-racist people, re-connecting with their cultural roots and coming to understand themselves as complex beings with multiple identities. Through the sharing and analysis of these narratives, I wish to better understand how white people develop an anti-racist consciousness and then offer a more holistic approach to the personal work required to nurture that consciousness and deep love of self.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Each conversation is compelled by a yearning; each yearning arises from the author’s desire to constitute her humanity, to decolonize her imagination” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 57).

In 2012, the systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity and capitalism continue to thrive in the United States. However, important activism and scholarship continue to push back against these mainstream oppressive systems in multiple ways, from research to theoretical analysis to community organizing. In the fight for racial justice, a fight that sadly remains one of the most pressing of our time, white activists play a crucial role. Since whites unfairly “benefit” from a white supremacist system and have the most to gain from its continuation, challenges to such a system that are to be sustainable must include them. Under what conditions do white people develop a consciousness around race that would encourage them to contest such a system that benefits them? What combination of processes and influences is necessary for the development of an anti-racist consciousness? Although theoretical scholarship has considered these questions, anti-racist white activism and identity development deserve further exploration.

Upon entering graduate school, my interest in white identity and critical whiteness studies quickly became a theme in my written work. As a white anti-racist feminist, I was interested in looking at the ways that other white anti-racist activists were processing their identity as white people and how they had come to develop a racial justice lens. I had always had a deep commitment to building community with people of color, but as I began to study anti-racist feminist scholarship, my focus shifted to a more intense interrogation of my own whiteness and my relationship to other white people. Several important questions arose during that process. In what ways is my life affected by white privilege and how do I use that privilege (or reject it) in socially just ways? How

do I combat the self-loathing that accompanies acknowledgement of the oppression caused by white supremacy and the race of people with whom I am associated? How do I develop a cultural identity that is authentic, anti-racist and spiritually grounded? These initial self-reflexive questions prompted my interest in researching anti-racist white identity development in the larger activist community of Chicago.

I am approaching this research with an *anti-racist feminist* lens, a lens born out of the scholarship of anti-racist feminist theorists Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Ann Russo, bell hooks, Ruth Frankenberg, Gloria Anzaldúa, Becky Thompson, Mab Segrest, Audre Lorde and Tema Okun to name a few. There were numerous other feminist theorists who have inspired me over the past two years, but these theorists have especially helped me connect the critical dots between feminism and racial justice and introduced me to the world of white anti-racism. I have also situated my research within Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) scholarship which helped to contextualize my work within a larger field of research on cultural studies, whiteness and white identity.

While race is at the forefront of my research, I define the framework of my research to be both anti-racist and feminist for three reasons. First, I use an intersectional approach to looking at race that includes an understanding of gendered oppression and patriarchy. I attribute this intersectional approach to feminist scholarship. Second, storytelling and holistic approaches to understanding anti-racist white identity are feminist responses to traditional, patriarchal knowledge production and activism. And lastly, it is the scholarship of anti-racist feminists that I seek to continue through my research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS)

While scholars have independently written on whiteness for years, including work by Ralph Ellison and W.E.B. Dubois, the field of critical whiteness studies did not fully emerge until the 1990's when a significant body of literature was dedicated to an analysis of U.S. culture, including analysis that examined and deconstructed notions of whiteness (Fisher Fishkin 1995, 431; Hurtado 1997, 297). However, before the 90's, often "studies on race first began with studying prejudice about Blacks or People of Color. They then moved on to a systematic analysis of racism, but it continued to "obscure 'whiteness,' because social scientists explored the impact of institutional racism on those who 'had' race in the sense that their race was marked, noted, taken as 'other' in U.S. society" (Hurtado 1997, 298). Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) attempts to counter the invisibility of whiteness by making it visible and an area open to critique and deconstruction. According to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Toni Morrison's groundbreaking book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, paved the way for the "renaissance" of critical whiteness scholarship. In her book, Morrison sheds light on the racist assumptions with blackness and darkness that she calls *Africanism*, that have become so embedded in white U.S. literature. Morrison uses a plethora of examples from canonical U.S. novels to illustrate the ways in which darkness is always used to define whiteness, and black identity exists only to aid in the definition of white identity. Through her critique of U.S. literature, Morrison illustrates the ways that hegemonic whiteness plays out in our constructions of "otherness".

In the field of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), the majority of scholarship focuses on media studies, whiteness from a historical lens, whiteness and classroom pedagogy, critical/qualitative and

anti-racist feminisms. For my research, I will rely heavily on critical/qualitative CWS scholarship and anti-racist feminist scholarship. Across the field, there is a recurring concern that studying whiteness will re-center whiteness on the stage and therefore re-inscribe white supremacy. Many authors speak to this concern as part of the contextualization of their research. For Michelle Fine, in her preface to the anthology, *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*, she expresses the common concern in studies of whiteness “that whiteness and white people will become re-centered on the page and in our imaginations; that the focus on working for racial justice will be displaced by funding for White studies or white anti-racist speakers at the expense of people of color doing the same work or work in cultural studies, etc”(Fine 1997: *Preface*). In order to combat these problematic aspects of CWS work, attention must always be paid to the end goal of combating white supremacy and, for white scholars of CWS, always being accountable to, and in dialogue with, scholars of color. Scholar George Yancy in his introduction to the reader, *What Whites Look Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, believes that “critical whiteness studies is an important site for anti-racist white activity. It should be seen as an important site of liberatory discourse, but it must remain open to those nonwhite voices that continue to reveal the extent to which they actually suffer and feel terrorized by whiteness” (Yancy 2004, 17). Feminist scholars Aída Hurtado and Abigail Stewart support Yancy’s caution to CWS and advise that “when exploring hegemonic experiences like whiteness, the trick is to retain a critical counter-hegemonic presence in the research” (Hurtado 1997, 310).

Across the CWS scholarship, language is used in very different ways, depending on the angle of the scholar, and deserves attention before proceeding. To begin with, *whiteness* is a theoretical term that refers to a discourse, and not one used in popular culture. According to Ruth Frankenberg, “whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a standpoint, a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, whiteness refers to a set

of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (Frankenberg 1993, 1). Discussing *whiteness*, as opposed to only discussing *white people*, opens up the discussion to see it as a systemic issue, as well as the ways in which many non-white people are socialized within, and uphold, the oppressive system of white supremacy as well. For scholars like bell hooks, Mab Segrest and others, the choice to use *white supremacy* to verbalize the issue, rather than *racism*, removes racism from its frequent reduction to individual acts of prejudice and instead, frames it as a systematic issue whose abolition is the primary responsibility of white people, rather than people of color. Regardless, there are still scholars who use the term *racism* to encompass the same meaning as *white supremacy*. Professor and scholar Bill Ayers believes that “racism, again, is more than bias or prejudice, more than a few bad ideas floating around aimlessly- it includes the structures of privilege and oppression linked to race and backed up by force, powerful structures that are at the roots of prejudice” (Ayers 1997, 133). The other issue of language is the debate whether the term *privilege*, used within the context of “white privilege”, is an appropriate term for the issue.

According to Peggy McIntosh, white privilege is “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in on each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (McIntosh 1997, 291). The *concept* of “white privilege” will be explored in the next section, but the terminology itself continues to be salient for many scholars and activists. Lewis Gordon and Peggy McIntosh both assert that using the term “white privilege” when referring to aspects of white existence should more appropriately be described as “human rights” that all should enjoy.

For my research, I will reference all of the above terms, although some terms will be used more frequently than others. As I am using an anti-racist feminist framework, I will often reference patriarchy in relationship to white supremacy. I define patriarchy as a system in which men systematically hold power over women, including the ways that masculinity is valued over femininity. I will also be using the term anti-racist, anti-racism and racial justice interchangeably

throughout this paper. The term “anti-racist” is often used as a self-identifier by white people who have a critical consciousness about white supremacy and racial justice and who are actively working to end white supremacy through their work. For my purposes, I will be using “anti-racist” as it relates to a level of consciousness about white supremacy, racial justice and accountability as white people, regardless of the amount of *anti-racist-specific* activism in their lives.

As evidenced in this section, the field of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) encompasses a wide-range of scholarship. CWS continues the legacy of cultural studies scholarship on American culture, with a specific emphasis on making visible the ways that whiteness and white supremacy shape our cultural, social and political identities and institutions. For my research questions, CWS scholarship on white identity development is of particular relevance because it grounds the focus group data in current research on white identity formation. In the sections that follow, I will present an overview of the scholarship on white identity development, with a focus on the work by anti-racist feminist theorist Ruth Frankenberg and psychologist Janet Helms.

### **White Identity Development & Consciousness**

The invisibility of being white for many white people is always coupled with a visibility of blackness or non-white “Others”. This sense of visibility and invisibility relates to whites development of their self-identity. In my work, I use *identity* and *consciousness* interchangeably to reference levels of understanding one’s self in relation to others. In regards to how whites view people of color or people whose race was distinct from their own, Frankenberg divided white women’s responses into three discourses of race difference that exist in society: essentialist racism, color-blindness/sameness and race cognizance. These discourses are referenced by other CWS research and continue to be effective ways to analyze white perceptions of race. Listed below are Frankenberg’s definitions of each term, outlined in her book, *White Women, Race Matters*:

*“Essentialist racism:* Emphasizes essential, biological attributes of different races that would result in natural hierarchies. (Articulated by white dominant culture)

*Color-blindness/ Same-ness/ Color Evasiveness/Power Evasiveness:* We are all the same, we all have the same chances at survival and success, categories of difference are problematic and should be erased (gender, different races/ethnicities/etc)

*Race cognizance:* Difference signals autonomy of culture, values, aesthetic standards and inequality in this third movement refers not to ascribed characteristics, but to the social structure” (Frankenberg 1993, 14).

Using these definitions, most research on white identity finds that the majority of whites still approach race with the color-blind/ sameness/color evasiveness approach. A color-blind approach is a form of denial of not only difference, but of the power that difference holds in determining who has a right to, and is deserving of, their full humanity and who does not.

Alongside this hyper-visibility of color for whites, there is a deep fear of people of color that surfaces in interviews with white people on race and identity. On this point, Frankenberg states,

Commonplace as is white people’s fear of people of color, and especially of Black people, it is important to step back from it and realize that it is socially constructed and in need of analysis...Most importantly, it must be understood as an element of racist discourse crucially linked to essentialist racism, or the idea that people of color are fundamentally Other than white people: different, inferior, less civilized, less human, more animal, than whites (Frankenberg 1993, 54-61).

Much of this fear that whites have is attributed to their lack of intimacy with, in the most general sense, and their social distance from people of color. As Martha Mahoney illustrates in her research, racial segregation does not happen naturally, but rather it was “systematically promoted during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s by federal programs” (Mahoney 1997, 273) as a material aspect of whiteness. This segregation systematically maintains distance and is both a product and producer of white fear of people of color. In Frankenberg’s research, the white women who did not express ingrained fear of people of color in their testimonies had deep ties to communities of color which negated the racial stereotypes perpetuated by distance and connected them to the realities of racial

oppression (Frankenberg 1993, 111). This theme of social distance and geography will be further explored in the chapter entitled, “Geography and Belonging”.

One of the most important components of whiteness and white identity development is what Peggy McIntosh identifies as “white privilege”. McIntosh’s *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, is heavily referenced throughout CWS literature, as well as employed as an anti-racist training tool for examining white privilege. Discussing white privilege helps to make visible the racist constructs of whiteness which for example, might see the ease by which white people move in the world, find jobs and succeed at standardized tests as exemplar of natural abilities, rather than as part of a system of privileges that supports the success of white people over people of color (Mahoney 1997, 331). McIntosh states that “obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all” (McIntosh 1997, 298). Recognizing and problematizing white privilege is an integral element in developing an “anti-racist” white identity and consciousness.

Moving from an overview of identity development for whites in general, we turn to anti-racist identity construction. How do whites with a complete lack of racial consciousness and analysis move across the spectrum to an identity that is grounded in anti-racism? Once whites attain a certain level of anti-racist competency, what next? In the following section, psychologist Janet Helms attempts to map out those stages of development that lead to an anti-racist white identity. Then, we look at the myriad of ways anti-racist activism has taken shape here in the United States and the debates over strategy and the constructs of whiteness.

### **Anti-racist white identity formation & challenges to whiteness**

Reflecting on the social constructions of whiteness from the field of psychology, Janet Helms theorizes a list of development stages that white people undergo in their conceptions of racial identity and difference that she called, *The White Racial Identity Development Model*, written in 1995. This model is interesting because it bridges the six development stages between, using Ruth Frankenberg's terminology, on one extreme, essentialist racist identity and on the other, race cognizance. According to Robert T. Carter who explores Helms' model, "it is important to emphasize that each level of White racial identity...are intimately intertwined with individual, institutional, and cultural racism" (Carter 1997, 200).

The first three levels of Helm's model- Contact, Disintegration, and Reintegration- deal with the slow movement away from an essentialist racist identity, to a color-blind approach. This color-blind approach can then lead to a profound awareness of racial difference that often results in a sense of inner turmoil and often anger or denial towards people of color. The Reintegration stage is when white people may choose to return to work with people of color, but they still maintain a subconscious belief in the superiority of white or European ways of living (Carter 1997, 203). The second three levels of Helm's model- Pseudo-Independence, Immersion-Emmersion, and Autonomy- "represent more complex and sophisticated ego identity statuses characterized by the eventual formation of a nonracist White racial identity" (Carter 1997, 200). During these three stages, white people may distance themselves from other white people and see racism as their responsibility to end, but they also harbor much guilt and shame (Carter 1997, 205). In the final stage, *Autonomy*, the white person is fully aware of racial differences and of themselves as a white person. "One has through a process of self and group discovery, learned to value one's self in a non-comparative and non-oppressive way...he or she is able to benefit from racial-cultural exchanges and sharing between members of various races" (Carter 1997, 206).

While it is clear that not all white people go through all of these stages in the exact way that Helms and Carter have laid out, and some never go through most of them, this model provides a lens for analyzing research data on whiteness, white identity and white privilege as they relate to white people raised within homogenous white communities. It is also helpful in thinking through the development of an anti-racist identity for white people and all of the steps involved in shifting one's consciousness about themselves as white people and about the racist system of which they are a part. What are the exact processes that many whites go through to evolve from racist essentialism to racial cognizance? Given such a model of white identity development, what does white anti-racism look like for those whites who have developed a consciousness around race?

From online blogs to research, from peace circles to community coalitions and non-profit organizations, white anti-racist organizing encompasses a myriad of approaches to analyzing, reflecting on and challenging racism and white supremacy. Across the nation, there are many groups that sponsor workshops that focus on dismantling racism or examining white privilege. Some workshops may concentrate their effort on the individual self and actions, while others may focus on making connections to larger systems of oppression and ways to challenge them. Certain groups may focus entirely on reflecting and processing white people's identity and cultural self with other white people, while others may focus on interracial reflections on power and privilege. In order to understand the ways that anti-racist white identity is being handled in the field, we need to understand the different conceptualizations of race and white identity that are being used amongst racial justice advocates.

Within most anti-racist scholarship, the idea that race is a social construction, not a biological one, is unanimously stated. Even so, many anti-racist and critical whiteness scholars continue to emphasize the salience of the cultural/social relationship to race that therefore makes it "real". According to Ruth Frankenberg in *White Women, Race Matters*, "race does shape meaning and

experience, although for social, political, historical, and cultural reasons, rather than as a result of essential racial difference” (Frankenberg 1993, 148). For other activists, such as Noel Ignatiev and the New Abolitionists, race is a social construction and is therefore fictional. They believe that the white race, in its modern form, should be abolished and that the essence of whiteness is synonymous with oppression and domination and therefore cannot be reformed or re-imagined, but must be abolished instead. While CWS generally recognizes that whiteness (and race) is a social construction, it informs and is real in lived experience. Scholars such as Mab Segrest, Becky Thompson and Lucius Outlaw argue that rather than abolition, white people, or whiteness, can be (and must be) re-imagined outside of the bounds of white supremacy. For these scholars, spending significant time on developing a positive anti-racist identity is worthwhile work.

One of the many camps of scholarship and activism on anti-racist identity for white people is the New Abolitionists. One of its most vocal advocates is researcher Noel Ignatiev and his magazine *Race Traitor*. Ignatiev states that the intention of the magazine, *Race Traitor*, is to focus on “whiteness and the struggle to abolish the white race...when we speak of new abolitionism, we mean something other than the stances normally taken under the banner of ‘anti-racism.’ We mean a challenge to the institutions that reproduce race as a social category- a challenge that disrupts their normal operation”(Ignatiev 1996, 3). For Ignatiev and the New Abolitionists, they disagree with the whole premise of “white anti-racist” identity and believe that the most-powerful “anti-racist” work that white people can do is to disconnect from their white identity. Through his book and the *Race Traitor* online magazine, it is clear that their main focus is on abolition of whiteness and not that of an intersectional approach. However it is not clear in their work how they think white people should go about creating positive anti-racist identities outside of whiteness.

Philosopher Lucius T. Outlaw sees abolition as both “unlikely and unnecessary” (Outlaw 2004, 162). Outlaw is confident that whiteness can be reworked because of the ways that the work

“black”, during the Black Consciousness Movement of 60’s and 70’s was transformed from “the vehicle for debased ‘zero’ images and conceptions of folks of African descent into a unifying, mobilizing vehicle for positive images, conceptions, projections, and political and cultural work of black folks’ own best makings... Symbol-reversal work on notions of whiteness, then, I take to be the socially necessary complement to the reversal work on notions of blackness” (Outlaw 2004, 162). Just as Outlaw argues, there are many other activists and scholars who believe that white people must spend time developing a critical and anti-racist cultural/racial identity as a way to connect with their own humanity.

Two anti-racist scholars, Becky Thompson and Mark Warren, have both focused their work on documenting and analyzing this critical anti-racist white identity through the stories of whites working for racial justice. Anti-racist feminist Becky Thompson’s 2001 book, *A Promise and a Way of Life*, documents the stories of white anti-racists and highlights their successes and failures, attempting to paint a picture of white anti-racist activism. Almost ten years later, Mark Warren continues Thompson’s work through his book, *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice*. Warren’s work looks at the processes by which white activists came to develop their anti-racist consciousness and activism. Interestingly, there are many parallels between Warren’s work and my own as we both argue for personal interrogation of self and emotions, storytelling, relationships with people of color and understanding ourselves as having multiple identities. While Warren focuses much of his time on documenting the actual activist work of his participants, my work, much like Thompson’s work, is heavily focused on consciousness raising and personal identity development through an anti-racist feminist lens.

## **PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODOLOGY**

This work focuses on answering two central questions of analysis:

- Under what conditions have white activists in their 20s and 30s in Chicago developed an anti-racist consciousness?
- What emotional and self-reflexive work is necessary for nurturing this consciousness?

Through personal reflections, conversations with others and studying anti-racist feminisms, I have had the opportunity to better understand myself as an anti-racist white person. This road to self-discovery and healing has included learning more about the *systemic* nature of white supremacy and patriarchy, connecting with the European cultural roots of my family and learning how to transform my shame of being white into a more forgiving and nuanced sense of self. I believe that this kind of self-actualizing personal work enables me to become a stronger advocate for social justice, rooted in a more asset-based, rather than deficit-based, concept of self. For my research, I was interested in speaking with other white activists in Chicago about their process of coming to identity as anti-racist white people and their reflections on what that identity means in their social justice work. I was specifically interested in how younger adults, those who came of age post-civil rights, feminist and anti-racism movements of 60s-90s, were conceptualizing of themselves as anti-racist white activists in the absence of a unified anti-racist movement. I use the term “activists” to loosely reference those individuals whose life work, paid or unpaid, is motivated by a commitment

to social justice. These individuals included educators, union organizers, prison workers and social-justice-oriented graduate students.

I chose to use a focus group methodology because focus groups provide a space for *collective* reflection and conversation, rather than individual, and they allow participants to determine the direction that the conversation takes (Iowa State 2004). Rather than serve as a social-scientific “experiment” to test a particular hypothesis, I wanted to use the data from the focus groups to *inform* the direction of my thesis. I began the focus group process with specific questions around identity that I was interested in, but I allowed the themes that arose in the focus group conversations to shape the focus of this thesis. I wanted to better understand how other anti-racist white people were thinking and speaking about their identity and the focus groups provided the space to collectively reflect on what it means to be white and anti-racist. Within the sessions, focus group participants often responded to each other’s stories with additional stories, and participant’s comments often sparked thoughts and memories for other participants. At the onset of my research, I considered conducting individual interviews with participants as a way to complement the data from the focus groups. However, as I went through the data from the focus groups, it was apparent that the power of collective reflection through the focus groups provided sufficient material for my analysis and that individual interviews were unnecessary.

In the literature on focus group methodology, they cite that one of the major limitations in using a focus group methodology is that participant’s responses are influenced by the other group participants and they therefore, do not provide a one-on-one anonymous setting where participants might be inclined to share more personal information or to be more honest about their viewpoints (Iowa State 2004). While this may be true for certain focus group topics and themes, in the focus groups on anti-racist white identity that I conducted, participants repeatedly commented on how powerful and necessary it was to share and listen to each other’s stories. Observing their remarks,

participants appeared to share *more* openly, rather than less, after listening to one another's stories and analysis.

Participants were initially selected based on my network of community activists in Chicago. I was specifically interested in participants who self-identified as white anti-racist activists, educators and progressives in their 20s and 30s living in Chicago. Participants included two public school teachers, two union organizers, two community and interfaith organizers, several prison workers, and graduate students. I wanted to keep my research centered in Chicago for a number of reasons. First, Chicago has a long history of activism and particularly the activism of working people and people of color. Second, I have witnessed the ways that racism, patriarchy and segregation manifest themselves within organizing and movement building in Chicago. I was interested in the ways that other white activists saw their roles within the context of Chicago. And third, Chicago is my home and has helped raise me to be the multifaceted multicultural person that I am. My commitment to holistic communal justice in this city is foundational to this research.

Using a snowball method, participants recommended additional people they knew who also fit the participant description. There were 14 participants total, not including myself, but I divided them into two distinct focus groups, each of which met for one 3-hour session in my living room. While I did not ask participants to disclose specific demographic information, other than self-identifying as white, many participants volunteered such information through their stories during the focus groups. I was able to look through the data and compiled a short demographic overview of the focus group participants.

- Almost 50% of the participants identified with masculine pronouns and 50% with female pronouns
- Almost 50% of the participants identified as queer
- Participants spoke of diverse economic/class backgrounds
- Most participants had not grown up in the city of Chicago, with the exception of four participants and myself

- Most participants did not actively use the term “anti-racist” as a personal descriptor in their everyday lives, even though they identify with racial justice and anti-racism politics

The focus groups began with a writing prompt asking participants to reflect on their upbringing or particular influential moments/people in their lives that helped to politicize them and/or raise their political consciousness. After participants shared their stories, the remainder of the time was focused on discussing a short series of questions. Since we ran out of time, we were not able to discuss everything I had intended, but we did cover the following questions:

1. What are your feelings around your racial and/or ethnic identity?
2. How does your gendered and/or queer identity complicate or inform your whiteness and vice versa?
3. Is the term “anti-racist” a term you use, is it salient for you, how else do you name your self in regards to a consciousness about whiteness, white supremacy, racism, etc?

Over the course of three hours, participants discussed with one another their responses to these questions as I listened, took notes and audio-recorded. I did participate in several of the discussions and shared some of my reflections on white anti-racist identity, but I was concerned about controlling the direction of the conversation in my position as the facilitator. Since my voice and politics are woven throughout this work and I was interested in analyzing how *other* anti-racist white people were thinking about their identity, I chose not to include myself in the quoted excerpts from focus group participants. For this paper, all participant’s names have been omitted and were replaced with a letter-number coding system for organizing their stories. All focus group participants will be referenced henceforth by this system: Participant A1, B1, etc.

## **LOCATING MYSELF IN THE RESEARCH**

I grew up as a mixed-class protestant white girl on the Southside of Chicago within the predominantly Black, Latino and multi-racial neighborhoods of South Shore, South Chicago and

Hyde Park. During my childhood my mother was a labor and delivery nurse, and my dad an owner of a small business that was often more successful at fostering community than it was at making money. My parent's deep commitment to social justice as part of their Christian identity was foundational to my worldview and political consciousness. It was in discussions with my parents and at church where I learned the values of justice, compassion and living simply. Our neighborhood, South Chicago, was among other things, an eclectic combination of Mexican corner stores, ice cream trucks, gang graffiti, kids laughter playing outside and street violence. My neighborhood friends were Tawanda, a Black girl, Elizabeth, a Polish girl, and Ingrid and Sarina, the two Guatemalan girls who lived downstairs from us. I attended high-performing Chicago public schools from grammar school through high school, which were made up of varying mixtures of Black, White and Latino students. My high school, Kenwood Academy, was 92% Black, the majority from working and middle class families. Juxtaposed with my neighborhood and school socialization process both within communities of color, I grew up in a white household and tended to gravitate toward the other few white kids in the "cafeteria". Since my high school was a predominantly Black high school, I often ended up socializing with the other racial minorities at the school- the white and Asian kids. I identified with them on many levels, but always felt a slight disconnect with the other white kids because I yearned to be accepted by the other black students, be the first white girl on the pom pom dance team, or go to the school dances- things that nerdy white kids just did not do. I never grew up thinking I was popular or pretty, but, like all teenagers developmentally, I wanted to have group belonging that felt good. I never broke out of this box and I yearned for the freedom I thought college and adulthood might bring.

It was not until I left for college and was surrounded by predominantly middle-upper class and wealthy white students at Earlham College did I see myself as having had a vastly different upbringing and worldview than the other students around me. For the most part, the white students

came from very white and very privileged communities and the black students were mostly working class athletes from smaller towns in Indiana. After one semester, I took a leave of absence because I had an identity crisis- I had subconsciously assumed that attending a mostly-white school with progressive politics for the first time in my life would provide some sense of belonging, but instead I felt alone and very “not white”, and yet could not relate with the other students of color either. My 20s then entailed a constant process of reconciling my white skin, and all of the assumptions that I and the world had about that skin, with my sense of self that was a mixture of cultural references and code switching and constantly shifting sites of belonging. I often identified with bi-racial and multicultural people’s experiences because I always felt like I had one foot in white culture/communities and the other foot in Latino and Black cultures/communities, never feeling exclusive membership in or belonging to either one. I distanced myself from most white people, especially those who might say ignorant things or just exuded whiteness- a whiteness from which I was constantly striving to disown. I blamed them and their whiteness for the lack of acceptance I felt in communities of color. I was often uncomfortable publicly socializing in groups that were mostly white, or if I was at a racially diverse gathering, I would make sure to not get stuck talking with the few other white people and avoid making an effort to get to know them better. Often, my closest friends have been white, but I would feel difficulty owning our friendship while we were around my friends of color. That outsider disconnect that I felt from white communities was coupled with the insider connection I felt to Black and Latino cultures, even though I was often perceived as an outsider in those communities. I yearned for solid relationships with women of color, but often felt rejected when they were not interested in being my friend or, if we had a friendship, I doubted that our friendship mattered to them as much as their friendships with other women of color. The feeling reminds me of the unpopular, poor kid at my elementary school, David, who just kept hanging around but no one really wanted to be associated with him, so the

other kids, including myself, were always on a constant search for someone better to play with or sit next to- anything to distance themselves from him. I so yearned to be seen for the multi-faceted, multicultural being that I felt I embodied inside and instead, felt like I represented something ugly and unworthy in my whiteness.

Coming into adulthood, those feelings remained, but they were unresolved and suppressed as I continued to move within multiracial spaces. The many relationships I have had and continue to have with conscious people of color as friends, lovers, colleagues, and co-conspirators in the movement helps keep me grounded in conversations on race, power and privilege. In the multiracial communities I am a part of, talking about white people, or experiences of racism and sexism are not taboo subjects, even though both men and white people are members of those communities. But somehow the language to process my own identity evaded me. At 32, I have spent almost 30 years of my life harboring a form of self-hatred based on a lack of engagement with the “white side” of my self and a deep shame for living in white skin. This self-hatred was also coupled with an over-essentialization of people of color where I uncritically accepted the opinions of people of color, over those of any white person, and often silenced my own voice because I did not see it as worthy.

The shame I carried about my extended white family is related to their commitment to right-wing Christian evangelism and fundamentalism. For many years I could not see any commonalities between us and avoided most contact beyond superficial, bi-yearly holiday gatherings. In my opinion, white folks were the problem with why our society was so conservative and racist, and my extended family was a part of that culture, if not its leaders! I defined myself as clearly urban, the least “white” person I knew and was always careful to distance myself from other white people in the room. It was clear in my mind that I was cultured, but cultured through my intimate relationship to communities of color, rather than through any white identity or identity as a European - American. It was only recently that I recognized the deep longing for some connection to my

cultural roots- a sense of cultural pride rooted in my family history, but the distance felt too great to span. In the past three years, I have been able to span some of that distance, savoring joyful moments with my extended family, visiting my mother's familial motherland in Scandinavia, conversing about family history with my paternal grandfather, reading feminist narratives and writing poetry. Through this healing, I have been able to reflect on and begin to verbalize that which has been silent for most of my life such as the ways that whiteness has impacted my own life negatively, including the subconscious ways I have been socialized to be racist, the ever-expanding ways to imagine and re-construct one's identity without reliance on binary definitions and hegemonic belongings, and understanding more profoundly how being a white-raced woman, regardless of politics or belonging, has positioned me within the social order. I see all of these processes as steps towards developing a more humane and holistic sense of self, a necessary attribute for those wishing to manifest a more equitable and loving world. In this spirit of healing, I offer my story as well as the stories of the focus group participants to this research. I am interested to know how other anti-racist white people conceive of themselves. I am interested in how white people can bring their full (and often messy) selves to the work of racial justice and building bridges and relationships with people of color in order to create a more cohesive and communal movement for social change.

## **GEOGRAPHY & BELONGING**

*“We must understand whiteness as a mode of belonging in order to dismantle the force of its privileging and marginalizing tendencies...I wish to make the point that belongings in which we become accountable to power can produce a space of alterity, a space of resistance, and spaces that disrupt these hegemonic forms of belonging. Belonging, then, is ultimately tied to power. It is an affective force that can be used to reproduce and/or challenge whiteness as a hegemonic form”* (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 38).

According to the magazine *Teaching Tolerance*, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, “whites are the most segregated group in the nation's public schools. Only 14% of white students attend multiracial schools (where three or more racial groups are present)” (Segregation Today, 2003). From this statistic, we can infer that the majority of white people in the United States grow up within predominantly homogeneous white communities, communities that shape their development of self and perception of others. It is also true that a small minority of whites grow up in multiracial and people-of-color-majority communities. Geography, both as location and as a set of relationships, plays a powerful force in shaping our definition of what is culturally acceptable and deemed “normal”, and what is not. In white communities across class in the United States, whiteness is often left unmarked and normalized. Aimee Carrillo Rowe states “whiteness defines the norm within racial registers against which the other is defined, and thus always secures power through its unmarked positioning within the field of race” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 37). In such communities, the physical and social distance between white people and people of color often

allows whites to live within socially segregated communities with a clear absence of relationships with people of color. Within a white supremacist culture, this social distance enables racial fear to grow unchecked and undisturbed, as it simultaneously produces a physically, and culturally distant, racialized “other”. Within this vacuum of white belonging, how then can any white person develop an anti-racist consciousness, reaching what Helms describes as the “Autonomy” phase of white identity? (Carter 1997, 206) Additionally, for those whites raised in multiracial communities, how do their relationships with people and communities of color affect their development of an anti-racist consciousness differently? I argue that while whites growing up in homogenous white communities may be able to access a progressive or radical political analysis from their parents or their church, among other places, an *in-depth* consciousness around racial justice can only be developed by white folks through a *multiracial* “geography” of locations, relationships and belonging.

Feminist communications theorist Aimee Carrillo Rowe focuses on this concept of relationships and *belonging* in her study of twenty-eight academic feminist’s reflections on identity, privilege and transracial alliances. In our lives, relationships to others cultivate our sense of belonging to and with them in community. In analyzing their stories, Carrillo Rowe was interested in the ways that privileged white feminist’s sense of *belonging* affected the success or failure of transracial alliances with feminists of color. She was especially concerned with how white feminist often found belonging in all-white spaces, where women of color’s presence was not necessarily missed or seen as crucial to their sense of community. What responsibility did the white women have in forging those alliances across difference and seeing women of color’s success in the academy as also one of *their* commitments and concerns? In her analysis, Carrillo Rowe asks the questions, “Whose well-being is essential to our own? And whose survival must we overlook in order to connect to power in the ways that we do? Because questions of whom we love are

inseparable from the politics of subject formation, *belonging* is political. The sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are becoming” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 3). Carrillo Rowe then challenges us to think about the ways that privileged women might shift our sites of belonging. Through our belonging to, and relationships with, women of color arises the possibility for transracial feminist alliances.

Returning to this chapter on geography and belonging, I will use Carrillo Rowe’s framework of belonging and its relationship to transracial alliances to analyze the stories of the focus group participants. Within both focus groups, the theme of geography and relationships with people of color surfaced as a common thread across all fourteen participant’s stories of their journey towards an anti-racist consciousness. I am using the term geography in a more expansive sense that, while it still applies to specific cartographic locations, it also encompasses “the ways in which many of the meanings through which places are made are bound into social identities and struggles” (Rose 1997, 8). I am interested in how different places and spaces create distinct identities, and especially the ways that they produce white identities in the United States. I have divided geography into three different sections of this chapter: “Childhood Cartographies of Belonging”, “Race Consciousness in Chicago” and “People We Love”.

In each of these sections, I will use Carrillo Rowe’s notion of belonging to frame the stories of anti-racist white activists and the ways such “geography”, and the belonging that it produces, informed their sense of self. In the first section, “Childhood Cartographies of Belonging”, I will look at the stories of participants, both those who were raised in homogeneous white communities and those who were raised in people-of-color majority and multiracial communities, and how distinct geographies of home impacted their formation of an anti-racist identity differently. Participants referenced the city of Chicago as a location that was particularly influential in their racial justice development, both those who had moved from other places as well as those who had

grown up here. In the second section, “Race Consciousness in Chicago,” I will examine the ways that Chicago as a location has been formative in the participant’s development of their racial consciousness. Additionally, participants spoke of the impact that relationships with people of color in their lives had made on their racial justice consciousness. The final section, “People We Love”, looks at the geography of social relationships with people of color and how those relationships deepened their racial consciousness and sense of accountability as white people in the struggle against white supremacy.

## **I. Childhood Cartographies of Belonging**

*“Because one of the roles of culture is to teach us, condition us, socialize us into our understanding of what’s normal, what’s valuable, what to believe and what to question, as we act out of our conditioned understanding, we reinforce the cultural dynamics that keep white supremacy in place” (Ogun 2010, 7).*

This section explores the ways that the geographic context of childhood, both in location and belonging, impacted the consciousness and identity formation of the fourteen anti-racist white activists who participated in the focus groups. The racial composition of the communities where participants were raised, in addition to the politics of their families, fundamentally influenced their access to an anti-racist consciousness. Additionally, participants spoke of the influence their faith community, college experience and early queer identity had on the development of their political consciousness.

Geographically, focus group participants grew up in a diverse range of locations across the United States. Participants also represented multiple class identities from working class to middle class to wealthy. Even taking into account such diversity, focus group participants, for the most part, fell into the following three categories of community origin:

- Raised in homogeneous white communities with conservative or politically neutral parents
- Raised in homogeneous white communities with liberal/ progressive/ radical parents

-Raised in heterogeneous multi-racial or people-of-color-majority communities by liberal/progressive/radical parents

By grouping participants in this way, I noticed a pattern of racial identity formation that corresponded with their geographical location and familial political influence. I noted that there were no participants who represented being raised in heterogeneous multi-racial majority communities by *conservative* parents. This absence is either due to the limited size of the focus groups, or to the possibility that conservative white people choose to live in predominantly white areas or at least have a *desire* to do so by continuing to move away from neighborhoods that are becoming more racially integrated.

Since I could not include all of the stories of every participant, I attempted to include excerpts that felt representative of multiple stories and recurring themes. For those participants who were raised in homogenous white communities, with a clear absence of regular intimate connection with people of color, they described their initial process of learning about themselves as white people, about people of color and/or about larger systems of oppression through a combination of the following avenues:

- Parent's liberal beliefs
- Progressive church/ religious community
- Early identity as a queer person
- College education

One of the participants who is actively involved in anti-racism work in Chicago, describes her experience growing up in a progressive home in Montana.

“So I grew up in Bozeman, Montana which is a really wealthy, really white town. I come from a solidly middle-class family and grew up thinking that we were kinda poor because my parents didn't buy me my own car when I turned 15. It was crazy! And growing up, always considered myself very leftist and very radical and thought that I was awesome at everything- just really a freedom fighter and everything. My dad followed around the Grateful Dead all throughout my childhood and I thought that that was so cool and that we were just this cool lefty family and awesome. And I think that had you at that moment asked me if I was anti-racist, I probably would have said that I was because I didn't have any humility and I thought that I was, but there was no substance to that claim. I almost never interacted with people of color ever. So it's pretty meaningless to say you're anti-

racist in that context.” –*Participant D1*

While she identified with social justice politics from a young age, it was a politics void of both relationships with people of color and intimate knowledge of systemic oppression. For her, anti-racism and her understanding about the world did not fully actualize until she moved to Chicago and saw the ways that structural inequity played out across racial lines on the Southside of the city. While her family’s liberal politics laid the seeds for developing an anti-racist identity, the physical geography and social belonging of homogenous white communities meant that full access to an anti-racist consciousness was postponed until early adulthood.

Another participant (C2) talks about the profound impact her religious community had on her development as an anti-racist white person. Even though there were very few people of color in her town, her religious community incorporated anti-racist white identity development into its curriculum and mission.

“I grew up in Lafayette, Indiana- Battleground, Indiana. Mostly white...In high school, I first got involved through the Unitarian Universalist youth movement doing really specific white identity development, like intentional caucusing with other white people. We would take our time at our national conferences to really discuss what is whiteness, what is white privilege, how does that affect our lives and how does that influence our call to do justice work as people of faith.” –*Participant C2*

For several participants, the religious community of their childhood was instrumental in the development of their moral compass. For this participant, religion and religious community played a key role in their development of a social justice-based worldview. For both of my parents, their radical Christian theology provided the foundation for their social justice beliefs, which they passed on to my sister and I. For many, these beliefs set the groundwork for future activism and anti-racist identity development, even if they continued to be grounded in a geography of white belonging. As belonging shifts to become more multi-racial, as evidenced in the last section of this chapter, a deepening of anti-racist consciousness rooted in lived experience can take place.

The relationship between queer identity and anti-racist white identity was extremely salient for many participants. Not only in terms of the ways that those identities informed or inspired one another, but also in terms of reconciling their complicated relationships to power, privilege and oppression. *Participant A1* describes how her experience of going to college and learning about anti-racism and queer identity were formative in her development:

“I went to Oberlin College in Ohio and chose to go there because it’s a progressive social justice school. I came from a really small white working class town, no diversity at all...Basically, I took a white anti-racist class, there is this class that’s taught by activist students at Oberlin for white activists to process their privilege and the way that works out in their activism...I also, as a queer person, I learned about the term queer in that class. We read Cathy Cohen’s piece- *Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens*- and I had this you know, sobbing breakthrough about the difference between queer identity as being an intersectional identity and being gay, just who you sleep with. The work I ended up doing in school was a lot around doing anti-oppression work.” -*Participant A1*

For several participants who identified as lesbian/gay/not-straight from childhood, they spoke of an “othering” that they felt growing up, often manifested in a sense of feeling “weird” or “different” from others. One of these participants speaks about this experience:

“Ok, so I moved out of my moms house when I was 15. I went to a really big almost all-white high school- 4,000 kids, football state champions- so being smart and geeky and queer, pretty early queer-identified, and arty I automatically formed an identity around being against whatever everyone else was doing around me...So I think that part of my desire to be involved in social justice work came out of ostracization, but also a tenderness to injustice and curiosity about the world” -*Participant C1*

This sense of difference interrupts homogeneous belonging in some ways, even if it does not directly lead to an anti-racist identity. For many this sense of social distance and disconnect from their communities of origin often propelled them to go in search of other communities and ways of being in the world. It was this search that often brought them to working in the social justice field and shifting their geography of communal belonging.

The next four excerpts all tell similar, yet divergent, stories of how their college education was the catalyst for their engagement with issues of race, identity and oppression. I find these excerpts particularly profound because they counter the false separation between the academy and

the real world/activism. They speak to the transformative power of passionate teachers and professors, intellectual discourse, and theory.

“When I got into college and I started taking African American history classes and wound up double-majoring in Philosophy and African/Black Diaspora Studies and just learning to open up a door that’s been cracked and start uncovering these truths and re-define what truth is. I think as I entered college I started to develop my identity as a queer man and that was something that I think was really pivotal for me, understanding the relationship between sexuality and race...” –*Participant E2*

“I grew up northwest in a suburb of Seattle...(and I’m) just reflecting on how much can go unnoticed, especially if you’re in a predominantly white community...It was in college when I started to get more politicized, getting involved, becoming an activist, doing organizing.” –*Participant D2*

“I grew up with white middle class, upper-crusty middle class as people say, fairly conservative family, nuclear and extended. A really Polly Ann mom- like nice girls don’t do that stuff- and a very conservative father who worked for the government. There was only ONE narrative I guess you could say; there was only one way of being...and it was certain teachers, it wasn’t until college, who helped me see that there were other ways. The first people in my life to question capitalism and once I started questioning that, I was like it’s all over, now it all kinda makes sense...So mine was not until I was 21 that I had any inkling that anything could be any different.” –*Participant A2*

For many who had grown up in homogenous white communities with more conservative parents, college was one of the first eye-opening experiences that nurtured a racial justice lens.

For those participants who were raised in multiracial and people-of-color-majority communities, it is interesting to note that most identified their parent’s politics as liberal/progressive/radical and their familial influence should not be overlooked. For these participants, their notion of themselves as white people, however basic that notion might have been as a young person, was developed at an extremely young age because their racial difference within their communities of origin *was* marked and not necessarily normalized. The following excerpts represent those participants whose family politics influenced the way they navigated growing up in majority-people-of-color and multiracial communities.

“So the growing up in a very political household and going into a very diverse high school and I wasn’t in the minority but it was still one of more diverse high schools in the city. But having white friends say, why do you hate white people?! I’m like, I don’t hate white people

I'm just trying to say that there are all these horrible things that white people do and we gotta talk about it. And then going to college that was a predominantly white school and just being freaked out about it. But I'm able because I'm white to just kind of blend in even though I feel foreign, I feel like I don't belong. But this is a good education, I have financial aid and I should go here because this is a good education. Through studying about racism and white privilege I was able to get the language to talk about a lot of my experiences and talking about inequalities and oppressions I had witnessed in my life." -*Participant F2*

"So for me, I grew up in Chicago. My parents were both anti-Vietnam war activists and part of the Radical Left, so I grew up in a milieu of lots of different protests. They were people's attorneys so I had a lot of exposure to, workers were being completely mistreated at their jobs, you know people falling off ladders and being denied workman's comp, black steel workers whose own unions were selling them out and just meeting lots of wonderful people who had these tremendous stories. I think through osmosis it really influenced me a lot. Being in a lot of Palestinian right circles, talking about Bosnia with my dad cause he was involved in that issue- all those things mattered a lot. But I think the moment I decided I wanted to be an activist was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I think I decided that I wanted to be a Black Muslim Nationalist- that didn't quite work out." – *Participant G2*

"I grew up in Chicago for the most part, but my parents met in the South in the Freedom Movement. They were organizers for the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, building the white northern student movement in solidarity with the voter registration drives happening in Mississippi in particular... But I think for me a lot of my sisters and my life and our values and our choices since then have been shaped by the values and politics of that particular struggle." –*Participant F1*

For many, their sense of political responsibility came from their homes and communities rather than from an "a-ha" moment during a college course or program. The familial influence on their politics was a context similar to some of the participants who had grown up in progressive homes and churches within homogenous white communities.

Included below are several more excerpts from those participants who were raised in people-of-color-majority communities. It is noteworthy the places where their stories converge with and diverge from those participants raised in homogenous white communities. College played a significant role for *all* participants in their development of a more structural, and linguistically advanced, analysis of systems of power. The most obvious divergence between the two groups of people was the way that race and multiracial belonging figured so *prominently* in this second

group's childhood and how that sense of self, in relation to difference, provided a major stepping-stone to developing a racial justice lens at a young age.

“I felt like I was fortunate because not only was I raised in a neighborhood that was diverse, but I was in schools that were also diverse. My friends growing up were other children of color and other white children and I identified with both groups... When I left Cincinnati for college, that was what was the most important for me was going to an institution that was diverse, not only race but gender-wise and economic backgrounds as well.” -*Participant B2*

“But I think my very first interaction with privilege was when I was in first grade and we lived in a predominantly Hispanic area and I was the only person in my class who spoke English and because of that my school was trying to bump me up a grade which I wound up not doing for whatever reason- I think I didn't want to be away from my friends or something. But I wound up getting taken out of class anyways and going into these special classes where I was being nurtured and tended to one-on-one...” -*Participant E2*

“I was born in the Bay area and I lived there for the first 8 years of my life in a school with majority Latino Latina students. And then moved to San Diego where there's also a large Latino /Latina population, so about 20 minutes from the border. So just an early exposure to other races was sort of a formative thing in my life.” -*Participant B1*

Looking at these testimonies in relationship to Helm's white identity model, I would argue that the three early white identity development stages she outlines are based on a model of whites who are raised in white communities and therefore do not accurately reflect the early racial development of whites growing up in multiracial and communities of color. For this group of white people, a normalized, unmarked sense of whiteness or white belonging never existed. Their whiteness was always marked and visible, and made race a very real aspect of their identity and the identity of those in their community. This racial awareness as children, an awareness often possessed exclusively by children of color, allowed these white people to navigate different cultural and racial scenarios with ease. While an anti-racist consciousness is neither natural nor implicit to this particular geography of origin, such multiracial belonging provides a different lens of the world and sense of self as a white person. This racial identity development and the complication of Helm's identity model deserves further attention and research beyond what I can theorize in this paper.

I entitled this section “Childhood Cartographies of Belonging” because it makes geographic and social location a living, breathing, and complicated place; it reminds us that these stories of our childhood and development are places filled with history, power and intense emotions. For many of the activists who had grown up in homogenous white communities, they had different levels of early engagement with anti-racism and progressive political thought. For some, their parent’s politics and religious community paved the road to activism and the evolution of their anti-racist identity. For others, their emerging identity as a queer person taught them early on about difference and identity. For most however, it was not until college that they had the opportunity to be challenged about their notions of the world and their place in it. For those activists who had grown up in people-of-color majority and multiracial communities, they had a racialized sense of self from a young age, in addition to progressive parents, and the multiracial belonging that was nurtured allowed for the development of an anti-racist identity very early in life.

## **II. Race Consciousness in Chicago**

In addition to their upbringing and experiences in college, many participants spoke of the profound ways that Chicago, as a location in particular, shaped their consciousness around race, white identity and activism. Chicago’s history of racism, racial segregation and displacement affects the way race plays out differently here than other locations. Given this history, there remains a social distance between different racial and cultural groups in Chicago. This history and persistent social segregation informs the experiences and consciousness of being an anti-racist white activist in Chicago.

Many participants spoke of the ways that race played out very differently here in Chicago than they had experienced in other places. As a born and raised Chicagoan, I can attest to having similar feelings around the ways that race manifests in Chicago as opposed to other places I have

visited. The history of racial segregation in Chicago continues to plague the present moment, with many working class communities of color struggling to access adequate resources, jobs, transportation and educational opportunities. According to the Manhattan Institute's 2012 report, "The End of the Segregated Century", racial segregation has been on a decline in metro areas across the United States, yet Chicago continues to rank as the *most* segregated city in America- a rank we have held for decades (Glaeser and Vigdor 2012, 1). This kind of racial segregation affects, not only the inequitable access different communities have to social services, but it also plays out in social justice activism within the city.

My personal experience has been that the average Chicagoan socializes in mono-racial/cultural spaces, an experience supported by the segregation data from the Manhattan Institute's report. This social distance manifests itself in the world of organizing and activism, where interracial organizing can be problematic because of a combination of white activist entitlement and a lack of personal social relationships across difference. Bell hooks supports this observation in her statement that "anti-racist interactions between women are difficult in a society that remains racially segregated. Despite diverse work settings a vast majority of folks still socialize with people of their own group. Racism and sexism combined create harmful barriers between women" (hooks 2000, 59). While racial segregation exists in many places in the United States, Chicago's long history of racial segregation within a very multiracial and multicultural city can easily result in polarizing politics that feels distinctly *Chicago*. Distrust and fear have room to grow between different groups of people because there is a geographic distance, both physical and social. These Chicago-specific dynamics are both caused and complicated by the oppressive forces under which we live: white supremacy, patriarchy, classism, homophobia, etc.

Many participants who had moved to Chicago for college or as adults, had been previously active in social justice work before they moved here, with a few having worked specifically in the

area of anti-racist organizing or education. As I was putting together my thesis proposal and designing these focus groups, I knew I wanted to include the specificity of Chicago as a particular kind of political environment to be speaking of race, but I was not prepared for the many ways it surfaced in the stories of the participants. I have pulled some excerpts from participant's narratives on the role that moving to Chicago played in their relationship to anti-racism and activism.

“And obviously in a city like Chicago, class-based organizing is majority folks of color but I thought this would be the right decision and I thought I would be able to work with other white folks on racism. But since I've moved here I've *just* been organizing and my world has turned completely upside down in terms of no discussion- there's been no room for that in meetings, there's so much to do, so much organizing to do. And all of the discussions are around class. So I've felt this complete hole and I haven't been able to merge those two worlds at all- except for personally. So that's a lot of why I'm here- I want to figure out how to do that. I identify with white anti-racism but I work with a lot of white activists who have never heard of that and a lot of activists of color who have never heard of that. That's not a central part of the labor movement- or at least that language is not used.” –*Participant A1*

“I think moving to Chicago was also really crucial in my continued identity development and work as a white ally. I was also doing work in and around prisons during college...Then, something about being in Chicago and getting involved in some of the work that's going on in Chicago really made things click for me in terms of anti-racism work and prison work and understanding that white supremacy fuels the prison industrial complex. Really seeing that connection, seeing how necessary prison abolition work is as a continuation of my anti-racism work and work around white privilege.” –*Participant H2*

For those participants who had moved from other places, the concept of “white anti-racism” was not as salient in Chicago as it had been for them in other places, particularly the West Coast. Social justice work in Chicago often center around basic needs issues like worker's rights, education, incarceration and healthcare that affect predominantly urban communities of color. This political and racial context profoundly influenced participant's consciousness around their activism and social justice work.

Throughout our discussions in both focus groups, the concern over *where* to live in Chicago was a common one. The role that race plays in the continued gentrification and dislocation of poor communities by wealthier, often whiter, communities in Chicago was extremely salient for most participants. Below is an excerpt of one participant responding to another participant, describing the

conundrum of being an anti-racist white person in search of a neighborhood to live. The second participant describes his long-term relationship with the Humboldt Park community and his conflict about moving there even though his connection to Chicago is through that community.

“When you said I hated being a white person in that neighborhood, I feel like, one, that is such a Chicago experience. I think that I’ve often framed my right to exist in terms of how active I was in fighting racial injustice in the neighborhood that I was living. So, and most always living in these neighborhoods in Chicago at the end point of the tenure process of gentrification. I don’t know if there’s any place that it’s okay to be a white person. Cause if you’re living in a white area, that’s fucked. If you’re living in an area that’s transitioning to being white and high income, that’s fucked. And I think if you’re living in the ghetto and you’re not from the ghetto, that’s kinda fucked too.” –*Participant C1*

“I realized that a lot of what I’m grappling with regarding whiteness within my own life, it has to do with moving to Chicago and both the geography and the relationships that change as a result of moving somewhere... I moved here 2.5 year ago, but I did some traveling so I’ve only really been in Chicago for a year and half... I live in the Humboldt Park neighborhood and I’ve been coming to Chicago for about ten years- there’s an organization that has their offices in Humboldt Park and so whenever I come to Chicago, that’s the neighborhood that I feel the most comfortable in and that I know the best. So when I moved here, that’s where it made sense for me to move. So now, kind of negotiating what that means to be a white person to be living in a predominantly Puerto Rican and Black neighborhood. I also hoping to open a business, to have a café, and have it be an activist, community space. But what does that mean? Being very intentionally conscious about who I am and my place within the neighborhood but also grappling with on one hand, I think it’s a great idea, but on the other hand how do this project and not be gentrifying?” –*Participant D2*

These excerpts speak to the conflict of living in Chicago as a conscious anti-racist white person and reconciling the fact that sometimes the communities where we feel most drawn to and feel the most belonging with are communities that are struggling with gentrification and an influx of wealthier people, many of who are also white. Regardless of our politics, often our white-raced bodies help perpetuate gentrification through making the neighborhood more “attractive” to developers wishing to appeal to higher income and white people. Participant C1 had decided that the only way to make peace with living in different neighborhoods was holding themselves accountable to contributing to and participating in those communities.

The city and communities of Chicago played a significant role in the racial justice development of all fourteen focus group participants. The influence that Chicago’s history of racial

segregation had on all aspects of life, including social justice organizing, provided a more nuanced understanding of race and racism. Moving away from physical spaces and places, we transition to social spaces and the transformative power of multiracial belonging in anti-racist white identity development.

### **III. People We Love**

Aimee Carrillo Rowe's profound question reverberates in my head, "whose well being is essential to our own?" (Carrillo Rowe, 3) How does our sense of communal belonging *shift* based on the relationships we have with people, particularly with people who are different than us? What does it mean for white people to move from white homogenous belonging to a more multi-racial heterogeneous belonging and what transformation occurs? Employing these questions around belonging, I return to the focus groups to analyze the role that relationships and partnerships with people of color has informed and transformed the anti-racist consciousness of the participants.

Focus group participants repeatedly cited their relationships with people of color in their lives as having a profound influence on their understanding of racism and white privilege, especially romantic and familial relationships. Using Carrillo Rowe's notion of belonging, it becomes clear that through their love for that person(s), their notion of belonging shifted and with that, their notion of self. Since many of the participants grew up in majority white communities, their commentary on specific relationships they had with people of color was notable. For those participants who had grown up in people-of-color majority communities, *all* of their stories included relationships with people and communities of color. These relationships included their children, present and past romantic partners, family members and friends. Through these relationships, many participants developed a new awareness around race and accountability to racial justice that had not been possible when such knowledge about racism and systemic oppression was

un-embodied, based solely on information they had learned at home, church or in college within predominantly white spaces.

Many participants spoke of the complexities of being a white person in both romantic and familial relationships with people of color. The following two excerpts relate to parenting mixed race and children of color and how that has influenced their intimate understanding of race.

“I think about my racial and ethnic identity especially when I’m thinking about parenting. My partner is a woman of color and we’re talking about our life together and thinking about wanting to become parents together at some point. I think because we’re queer women we have to think a little bit harder about how to do that. So we talk about adoption, we talk about other ways of becoming parents and I think that’s an important piece to that is thinking ok, as a white woman and a woman of color, what will our kids look like and what will that mean for us to be parents to children of color or white children?” –*Participant H2*

“I have two daughters and my step-daughter is half Haitian, her mom is Haitian, and my other daughter is blond hair blue eyed. So we have three white people in the house and my step-daughter, who is half Haitian and has very different features and it doesn’t come up a lot ... but anyway my three-year-old loves this book, a fictional story, a Rosa Parks story, but she’s really thinking about this stuff now, like she has white skin, who does and who doesn’t, and she just kinda realized that her sister has darker skin and different hair. And they had no different identity before that, so just this weekend I know things are gonna start coming up and I think that’s really cool and I think that our family is really good about having open discussions about this stuff.” –*Participant A2*

The topic of parenting mixed race children surfaced at different points in the dialogue, interwoven with conversations on what it means to be in romantic partnerships with people of color and thinking about building a family. They also talked about the ways that those relationships brought the “realness” of race and power into their homes and daily lives, rather than something they could choose to ignore or not as white people. Here is an excerpt from one such conversation between three of the participants:

***Participant C1:*** I think that before I moved to the city, and when I lived in more white areas I think that a lot of my partners were white and then when I moved to the city a lot of my partners were people of color. I think that a lot of times I got caught up in spending a lot of energy making sure I was being accountable (to them) and sometimes that was the only person I was accountable to on a level of racial justice. And when we got around to you (another participant), I was like, oh, I didn’t talk at all about the process of politicization through the lovers I’ve had and the child that I have with a person of color.

**Participant A1:** Yes!

**Participant F1:** Maybe because it's the hardest part, the most intimate.

**Participant C1:** It is so close to home and it's tied up to your ideas of motherhood and parenting and adulthood and healing... I think a privileged position is to be able to keep politics at an arms length. And that's about as intimate as you can get and to live with that... to live with your daily decisions and to be conscious and awake. It takes a lot of energy.

For those participants who had grown up in people-of-color majority and mixed-race communities and schools, relationships with people of color had always been a part of their lives and therefore, had always informed their sense of self and community. Here is one excerpt of a participant talking about the influence that her high school friends played in her social justice path.

“I think the idea of access to opportunities became most evident in high school when a lot of my friends were also undocumented. So its not only an issue of color, but its an issue of citizenship and so I think that propelled me into working for immigrant rights issues but then propelled me to where I am now working for immigrant rights issues working within privileged white communities.” -*Participant F2*

Since many of these participants had never had a sense of “belonging” within any larger white community, several spoke about the difficulties of anti-racist methodology that called white people to work within “your own community”. Their sense of belonging and community had been, more often than not, within multiracial groups of people with similar politics, therefore all-white spaces did not feel like safe or comfortable spaces for them. Here is one excerpt that aptly represents the sentiments of several participants about working in the white community.

“I keep hearing a little bit on the edges of our conversation that we have to deal with our own community, white people as our community... And I think it's problematic for me because I don't really have a white community. I mostly live in one now in terms of neighborhood more than I ever have before in my life but I've lived there on and off for the last 30 years and it didn't used to be a white neighborhood. I live in Logan Square. So in terms of community and what white people have in common, which we've all kind of said what we have in common is privilege, and maybe we have more than that in common, or maybe we don't have more than that in common but if we do you might be part of my community and if you don't, you might not. You know what I mean? I don't see people that are white and go, you're my brethren or something like that. So in terms of identity, that's really important for me.” -*Participant F1*

Several participants responded to this statement by arguing that rarely do many of us ever feel belonging or comfort in the white communities that need the most help, but that doesn't mean the work doesn't need to be done. Participants expressed a wide range of opinions on how and why to work with white communities.

For all participants, multiracial belonging required a deepened sense of accountability to combating racism and white supremacy because the hearts and minds of people they loved were at stake. For some, this belonging was a shift away from the more homogenous white belonging of their childhood and place of origin. For others, multiracial belonging was a part of their socialization as children, embedded in the fabric of their identity. For me, this section is perhaps the most powerful of this chapter because it acknowledges the transformative nature of love and relationship building across difference.

## **Conclusion**

“Framing subject formation as a function of belonging- as opposed to a self-knowing individual or subject constituted through fixed identities- allows for such “repositionings” to arise” (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 6).

In the focus groups, geography was a powerful political influence in each of the participant's lives, both the physicality of those places and the relationships that constituted their belonging. As the geography of people's lives shifted, so too did their consciousness. Chicago as a specific geographic location was integral to the anti-racist identity development of all participants, including those who had grown up here. For those participants who grew up in predominantly white communities, they located the birth of their social justice politics and lens in a variety of places: their parent's politics, religious communities, early queer identity and their college education. These were people, places and events that helped prepare them for their future work as social justice advocates. However, it was not until they developed personal relationships with people of color that

a different sense of belonging and accountability took place. For those participants who were raised in majority-people-of-color and multiracial communities, their social justice lens came out of both the politics of their parents and the multiracial/multicultural belonging of their home community. Their sense of belonging had always included relationships with people of color as family members, friends and lovers. Even though it played out differently in their lives, both groups of participants spoke about the transformative role that these relationships had for them in their development of an anti-racist consciousness. I would argue, based on the focus group narratives as well as on theoretical scholarship, that even if some anti-racism work is better done within all-white spaces, that white people *can not* expand their consciousness around racial justice in isolation from people of color. It is here, in the geography of our closest relationships, where our politics and consciousness are embodied and tested.

## ATTENDING TO OUR SPIRITS

“For people committed to liberation to claim descent from the perpetrators is a renewal of faith in human beings. If slavers, invaders, committers of genocide, inquisitors can beget abolitionists, resistance fighters, healers, community builders, then anyone can transform an inheritance of privilege or of victimization into something more fertile than either” (Levins Morales 1998, 77).

While geography and relationships have a profound impact on anti-racist white identity development, so too do negative feelings of self. For many white folks in the United States, the process of coming to understand their whiteness within the context of white supremacy, and the anti-racist identity that emerges, opens up varying degrees of shame, guilt and loss. For some, the feelings of shame and guilt arise from an awareness of white supremacy and their feelings of complicity in that system. A sudden association of all things “white” with “bad”, themselves and other white people included, may accompany these feelings. For others, feelings of loss may be related to the ways in which “home” and the places that once constituted their belonging are no longer comfortable nor comforting. Anti-racist feminist theorist Becky Thompson reminds us that “doing antiracism work requires struggling against the self-hatred that exposure to and complicity in racism engenders” (Thompson 2001, xix). While these feelings are a natural aspect of anti-racist identity formation, if left unaddressed, they can become stifling, debilitating and excuses for non-action. In this chapter, I argue that attending to these emotional and psychic wounds is integral to white anti-racist identity development and activism. We can address these emotional wounds through conversations with other white anti-racist folks, connecting to our cultural roots and coming to understand ourselves as complex beings with multiple identities.

From W.E.B. DuBois and James Baldwin to more contemporary theorists like Toni Morrison, Mab Segrest and Aurora Levins Morales, these theorists assert that white supremacy causes psychic and emotional trauma to all involved, perpetrators included. In my research, I am interested in anti-racist feminist Mab Segrest's approach to the trauma of the perpetrators, specifically white people. I am using the term "perpetrators" very loosely here to encompass those who actually perpetrate racism, as well as those who silently witness and benefit from it. In the chapter "Souls of White Folks" from her book *Born to Belonging*, Segrest reminds us that "necessary to the slave system was the masters' blocked sensation of pain, an aesthetic that left him insensible not only to the fellow human beings he enslaved, but to the testimony of his senses that might have contradicted ideologies of slavery" (Segrest 2002, 165). The violence and brutality perpetrated and witnessed by whites during slavery necessitated a certain level of emotional numbness and "anesthesia", a process that she calls the *anesthetic aesthetic* of racism. For if slave owners would have allowed themselves to humanize and empathize with the slave's pain, the system of slavery would have collapsed. Segrest links slavery to the modern manifestations of racism, arguing that white supremacist culture requires the maintenance of this *anesthetic aesthetic* for its survival.

"I had come to believe that only dealing with white people on giving up privilege was counterintuitive. There must also be some fuller range of loss and gain, some deeper calculus to invoke...What we miss when we only calculate our privilege is insight into the profound damage racism has done to us, as if we as a people could participate in such an inhuman set of practices and beliefs over five centuries of European hegemony and not be, in our own ways, devastated emotionally and spiritually" (Segrest 2002, 158).

Segrest points to the levels of addiction, abuse, depression and need for counseling in white communities as evidence of this emotional and spiritual devastation (Segrest 2002, 168). It is the numbing effect of the *anesthetic aesthetic* that continues to "eat at white people souls", to use DuBois and Segrest's framing, and requires our attention. Therefore, awakening our spirits from

this *anesthetic aesthetic* is integral to the development of white people's anti-racist consciousness and dismantling white supremacy.

Activist and social justice cultures are not exempt from the *anesthetic aesthetic* of white supremacy. Often this *anesthetic aesthetic* appears in organizing as a form of workaholism, where a constant focus on "the work" ensures emotions and processing are kept at a distance. This common mantra to "just do the work", rather than addressing the emotional and psychological pain in our multiple communities, is an example of how both white supremacy and patriarchy insert themselves into our paradigms of social justice activism. This argument was captured by the words of one focus group participant:

"I'll be a little more Marxist about it I guess. I think a therapy-driven model of talking about racism is good but it's not the central work of how white people interface with movements today." –*Participant G2*

Where rationality and action reign all-powerful, the importance of relationship building, healing, dialogue, and shared space is diminished. Anti-racist educator Tema Okun identifies fifteen characteristics of white supremacist culture that appear in social justice organizing. Of those fifteen characteristics, the following characteristics directly pertain to the focus of this paper: "a sense of urgency, defensiveness and/or denial, quantity over quality, either/or binary thinking, fear of open conflict, individualism, and objectivity" (Okun 2010, 4). These characteristics are evident within social justice work and they often trump approaches that are more process-oriented, take into account our psychic selves, and see relationship building as fundamental. Communal sharing and healing, while they may occur informally and in isolation, are not often explicitly referenced as *essential* components of social justice work.

White supremacist culture is tied directly to patriarchal culture, which also manifests in our social justice work. Within a patriarchal system like the United States, values that are associated with masculinity- reason, ambition, emotional neutrality- are given worth and priority, whereas

those values associated with femininity-intuition, nurturing, emotions- are seen as weak, secondary and expendable. Bell hooks calls this concept, *psychological patriarchy*.

“Psychological patriarchy is the dynamic between those qualities deemed "masculine" and "feminine" in which half of our human- traits are exalted while the other half is devalued. Both men and women participate in this tortured value system. Psychological patriarchy is a "dance of contempt," a perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy with complex, covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation” Hooks 2004, 33).

Rather than continue to relegate the emotional and psychic aspects of our selves to secondary status, what if we normalized healing holistic discussions around race and identity? This traditional model of organizing, one that prioritizes product over process, is an example of how white supremacy and patriarchy continue to adversely influence our paradigms of activism and community organizing. I believe that communal sharing and healing are *essential* to social justice work, and specifically anti-racist white activism.

This chapter is divided into three sections entitled respectively: “The Power of Storytelling”, “In Search of Our Motherlands” and “Embracing Our Multiple Selves”. All three sections connect to the idea of healing our spirits from the *anesthetic aesthetic* of racism and white supremacy. Attending to our spirits is not only a necessary part of dismantling white supremacy, it is also part of dismantling patriarchy in that it valorizes and nurtures human qualities defined as “feminine”, qualities often devalued in U.S. culture. The first section, “The Power of Storytelling”, argues that communal storytelling provides a space for anti-racist white activists to reflect on feelings of loss, guilt and shame, and where the possibility of healing and transformation exists for both storyteller and audience. In the second section, “In Search of Our Motherlands”, I will examine the ways that participant’s ethnic heritage, or lack of a meaningful one, related to their sense of self as a white person. To conclude, the section “Embracing Our Multiple Selves” addresses the intersectionality of participant’s identities and a call to embrace a more nuanced sense of self.

## I. The Power of Storytelling

Embedded in the daily lives of ordinary and extraordinary people, storytelling flourishes. People make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversations through storytelling. Narrative is performed everywhere” (Langellier 2004, 1).

Through my involvement in facilitating both focus groups, it became evident that participants had a deep desire to tell their stories. Before we dove into conversations around specific questions, each focus group would open with a writing prompt. Participants were asked to reflect on specific people, places and events in their life that had been foundational in the evolution of their political consciousness. As participants began to share their stories, I was not prepared for the amount of detail they included in their stories, often beginning in first grade and spanning their entire life up to the present. Every so often I would be aware that we were running behind schedule in the session, but then I would be pulled back into the life of their stories. I too found myself nodding my head and relating to certain participant’s experiences, as well as noting where our stories diverged from one another. Those moments of laughter, of sadness, and of common experience were healing moments for me, serving as helpful reminders of my connection to others. Part of responding to the *anesthetic aesthetic* of racism is in acknowledging, and then moving through, negative feelings of self. Storytelling provides an opportunity to validate feelings of guilt and self-loathing, as well as support one another in moving *through* those feelings to a more loving and healthy self-identity.

In the field of communication studies, several theorists have written about the ways that performance, narratives and storytelling are processes that are co-constructed by both performer/speaker and audience. In Langellier and Peterson’s article, “A Communication Approach to Storytelling,” they argue “storytelling can work to legitimate and to critique relations of power” (Langellier 2004, 25). Storytelling also allows for communal knowledge production, with both the

storyteller and the audience being changed through the process of sharing and listening. In this way, the stories of anti-racist white folks can serve as a critique to the stories produced by mainstream white America, oppressive myths whose purpose is to maintain knowledge, and hence power, in the hands of the few. Anti-racist feminist Becky Thompson asks us, “what it means that the story of racism in this country, the story of white dominant culture, is told more often than is the story of white antiracist activism” (Thompson 2001, xv). In this section, I will look at the ways that sharing stories and conversation amongst anti-racist white activists is a powerful element of anti-racist identity development.

Throughout both focus group sessions, there was a common agreement that conversations like “these”- intentional anti-racist white spaces- were not happening in Chicago outside of informal discussions with friends. One participant summarizes this sentiment:

“So I think that we don’t talk about it in Chicago, that there aren’t those spaces to talk about how we are people of privilege working for justice, for racial justice, for economic justice, for immigrant justice, for educational justice. So I think having conversations that are also connected to the responsibility of action and I go back and forth whether it should be all people of color spaces, all-white spaces but how to not have us working within vacuums of that and making sure there’s cross-pollination and cross-communication and cross-collaboration.” –*Participant F2*

Even though these focus groups were specifically structured to support my thesis, most participants at different moments in the process expressed gratitude for having the space to dialogue with one another. Additionally many participants spoke of the ways that their social justice work did not include explicit conversations or actions around anti-racist white identity. Often the energy required for their daily direct service work- as teachers, organizers, etc- left little energy at the end of the day for anything else. A number of participants felt isolated from other white anti-racist activists and desired structured spaces for dialogue and reflection. Given this reality of social justice work, how do we find the time for additional processing and more holistic ways of living our lives? I do not believe there is one prescribed way to answer this question, but it is an important one to ponder.

Within our focus groups, we spent time talking about how different participants had dealt with feelings of guilt, shame and self-loathing associated with their whiteness. These feelings were not felt equally by all participants, with some participants strongly identifying with feelings of guilt or self-loathing, and others who could not relate with such feelings. Here are a few excerpts around feelings of guilt.

“And so I think for me guilt comes from a very familial place in terms of wanting to undo all of that hateful bigotry that he’s (participant’s uncle) legislated for. And I don’t think that’s necessarily a negative thing because I think that when we, as white people, talk about guilt, we want to get away from it as quickly as possible because we’re told we shouldn’t have white guilt or at least I feel like I’m told that. And so I’ve just kind of come to a place where I accept that I feel really guilty on a very deeply personal family level, not on this systemic level, but in my blood there are racist people doing that work.” –*Participant B1*

“But having to de-colonize my mind...I think my relationship to whiteness has been going back to these racist moments that have taken place where I’ve been a participant in that racism and having to kind of figure out what it meant.” –*Participant E2*

“I think for a long time I dealt with having guilt about being a white person or the desire to be a good white person by pretending that I didn’t like things that I connected with being white. (laughter) Even though I grew up in Montana and listened to bluegrass music and snowboarded I’m going to pretend that I don’t like bluegrass music cause that’s like the whitest thing in the world. It’s like that blog the stuff white people like- I’m going to pretend that I don’t like any of those things even though I like ALL of those things! I was like, oh my god, I do like hip-hop music that black people don’t listen to anymore! And then I was like, oh my god I eat ALL of these things!” –*Participant D1*

For many participants, these were not necessarily new or current feelings, and several spoke of the ways that they were able, at different points in their life, to *move through* these feelings of guilt and shame to a space of accountability.

“And I’ve definitely had a journey around guilt and around self-loathing and I’ve just come to realize that the more I take responsibility for my practice and for my consciousness, the less anxiety I feel. Doing the work and doing the thinking is very freeing for me at an intra-personal level.” –*Participant E1*

“I felt proud when I was being successful at doing good white anti-racist work and I felt really guilty and bad when I wasn’t doing that work.” –*Participant A1*

These excerpts all came out during the focus group conversations; as one person would begin to share their story, it would trigger a memory, thought or feeling for another participant. Even those

participants who claimed not to have ever felt any self-loathing or guilt around their white identity were actively involved in these conversations, sometimes sharing their advice with others in the circle. While the content of their stories offers important insight, equally significant is the dynamic of storytelling; how being present in *that* room, at *that* time, with *that* particular group of people provided a space of communal knowledge production and healing.

A few participants had a difficult time relating with negative feelings of self, but they did relate with the negative feeling that they were always seeking affirmation from people of color for their thoughts, actions and work. I would argue that these two feelings are connected and that white people's constant need for affirmation from people of color is related to a subconscious negative self-image of themselves and their whiteness.

“But I realized that even if I don't identify with self-loathing I realized that I'm constantly seeking affirmation from people – that if I'm with a person of color that they're the authority on racism and I'm a good white person if I make the cut, ya know. It's obviously not a conscious decision that I make when I enter relationships with people but it's definitely something there and I haven't figured out how to make myself okay about being white.” –  
*Participant C1*

“I think another thing that I had to realize within myself was that there were people of color that I would constantly go to for affirmation and for approval and that was also maybe taking up their time, (laughter) and maybe slowing me down too, right... if I can bring that approval and affirmation to myself while maintaining my real consciousness then I'm just going to move through the world in a much more efficient and loving way and then I can see people for who they are and what they need rather than what needs they can fulfill for me.”  
–*Participant E1*

I believe that this seeking out of affirmation from people of color is something white people have to constantly negotiate as people who believe in racial justice. This need for affirmation speaks to not only negative feelings of self, but also of a desire to see ourselves as exceptional; this notion that all white people are problematic, except *us*. Regardless, there is a need for white folks to stop and listen to the experiences and analysis of people of color, and to follow their leadership in the movement for racial justice. But what are we saying about people of color if we are not willing to listen to them *critically* and challenge ideas we may disagree with? What are we saying about

ourselves if we continue to see our experiences and analysis as unworthy? Again, how can we bring our full selves to this work as people in relationships and community with people of color? These are the kinds of powerful questions that arise in reflecting back on the focus group conversations, particularly around negative feelings of self.

I continue to argue that there is power and possibility in the sharing of our stories. Bearing witness to our individual and collective struggles is part of an anti-racist feminist model of developing our anti-racist identities as white people. In the focus groups, participants frequently responded directly to another participant, referencing something they had said that they related to, or even disagreed with. In that instant, participants were making meaning of other's stories while simultaneously processing their own. Here we can witness how storytelling serves as a form of healing and knowledge production for both the storyteller and others in the audience. In addition to storytelling and conversations with other white anti-racists, the (dis)connection to ethnic roots and European motherlands was a theme that surfaced in participant's sense of self. The next section explores those stories.

## **II. In Search of Our Motherlands**

The title of this section references the ethnic roots of our existence, our physical and spiritual motherlands, and implies that we are searching for that which has been lost. Historically, it is more accurate to say that such motherlands have been intentionally *forgotten* as white people assimilated into a society shaped by white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy. During the ante-bellum era in the U.S., poor Irish indentured servants often had more in common with Blacks and Natives Americans, than they did with British colonialists and plantation owners. A tool then, for maintaining the capitalist venture of slavery and indentured servitude that benefited the colonial elites, was creating divisions amongst the poor that would prevent their unity across ethnic lines.

This was accomplished through strategic deployment of “white” as a racial category that trumped European ethnic divisions and convinced poor whites of their superiority over people of darker races. This new paradigm of “whiteness”, rather than ethnicity, set the stage for future generations of European immigrants who quickly realized that there was power and privilege to be found in their assimilation to whiteness and in the forgetting of their roots (Tochluk 2008, 81).

The search for our motherlands is the search for a cultural identity and history outside of the oppressive confines of whiteness, a confine dependent on the oppression of others. Exploring these roots is a way to reclaim our cultural selves, reminding us that we *too*, as white people, are ethnic and not void of cultural roots. For those white people who develop a basic consciousness around race and racism, there is a common perception that white people have no culture and that it is people of color who have a type of monopoly on culture and history. Left unchecked, these kinds of perceptions lead white folks to harbor not only negative feelings of self, but to exotification and over simplification of those communities deemed to be more “cultural” or “ethnic” than their own. As a way to respond to this psychic pain, we can connect to our personal family histories and stories of migration. This section explores this argument through the stories of the focus group participants.

Before I unpack the participant’s narratives, I would like to share my own motherlands narrative and how that connection continues to be transformational. About five years ago, I cannot pinpoint the exact catalyst, I began to yearn for knowledge about, and connection to, my ethnic ancestors, especially my mother’s side since my maternal grandparents died when I was young. This yearning eventually inspired a trip with the women in my family- my mom, my sister and I- to Scandinavia. My mother’s family had emigrated from Stavanger, Norway at the turn of the twentieth century, but, as with many ethnic white families, very few of those Scandinavian traditions have survived the passage of time and generations of white assimilation. For me, that trip, as superficial of a connection as it may have been, was the beginning of my education about my

family roots. There was something very mystical and unexplainably beautiful about standing in the same place my ancestors had stood, with a copy of the emigration papers in hand that documented which boat they had boarded to America. This trip opened the door to further exploration of my family roots, this time through interviews with my paternal grandparents in McPherson, Kansas. Through our interviews, I learned that my grandmother's Mennonite family had migrated over many generations, first from Germany to Russia, and then to the Great Plains of the United States- a legacy of farmers and furniture builders. My grandfather's history is much murkier, with two different generations of orphans complicating the accuracy of our ethnic lineage. My great great grandfather, listed on the back of his only shirt as Polish and Catholic, rode on the orphan trains from New York to South Dakota, where he was finally adopted. My grandfather himself grew up in an orphanage, after his mother died in childbirth and his father could no longer care for and feed his three children. I am fascinated by the details of his childhood and family stories, yet the look on his face and the way his voice quivers at moments speaks of an underlying pain and loss of that history.

For me these stories have begun to fill a cultural void I have struggled with much of my life. Growing up in multiracial communities, I was surrounded by people with explicit cultural practices and identities, people who had a profound influence on me. Over time, I came to associate people of color and immigrants with embodying culture, but not me, not my white family. I associated my white extended family with everything that was wrong with this country: conservative, Republican, fundamental Christian, right wing, and xenophobic. But with each new piece of information I learn about my family's past, the more I understand how and why they are who they are and I can attempt to access a deeper sense of empathy with their experiences. Connecting with my roots has also helped me connect with positive aspects of my family history and culture, aspects which have taken me my entire life to see and acknowledge. With each new root I uncover, my knowledge of self expands.

Focus group participant's relationships to *their* cultural roots varied greatly within the groups. Some participants who were born into more politically progressive and radical families were raised with a strong emphasis on knowing about their European cultural roots. Other participants referenced their Jewish and Italian backgrounds as significant aspects of their cultural identity and daily life. Still other participants expressed a complete disconnect from their cultural heritage, often due to their family's lack of knowledge around where they came from. Even though participants identified with their cultural heritage in different ways, there was an unspoken consensus around its relevance in their lives as it was brought up repeatedly throughout the sessions.

For those participants who were raised in political households, regardless of the racial composition of the communities, their parents were intentional about teaching them about their cultural heritage. The following two excerpts touch on this experience.

"I feel very luck that my parents helped me break down the ethnic-cultural side of my identity where, okay, our family is from Norway and then they migrated to North Dakota, so we're going to do a family road trip to North Dakota ...so how can I understand my identity as, oh my ancestors came from somewhere, they ate some type of food and so at cultural potlucks, I want to be able to figure out what food I'm gonna bring that's not McDonalds. So on that end, wanting to celebrate, not only the negatives of being part of the history of oppression of our country and the world" *-Participant F2*

"I think my family, kind of similar to (another participant), grew up telling us a lot of stories about where our ancestors came from and so I think I knew a lot about that and I really appreciate growing up with that and having a sense of that culture and being free in my family to think about what that means and then also knowing the ways in which my grandparents tried to assimilate and become white and American and try to not have their particular ethnicities be recognized by people and just try to fit in." *-Participant H2*

From what these participants shared, this cultural knowledge was not necessarily based on daily life – language, food, customs, and etc- but rather on intentional education by their parents about their cultural history. This experience was not a common one amongst those in the group, but it was important enough for these participants to mention. The following excerpts are from participants

who had a strong cultural identity that was part of everyday life, and therefore embedded in their sense of self.

“Italian to me is where my identity lies because that is where my culture is informed by and that’s actually something that gives me pleasure, it gives me joy in embracing that but it gives me joy in recognizing it holistically. So recognizing the complicated history there, recognizing the history of Italians in America as it relates to race and kind of crossing over into whiteness, recognizing the relationship Italy has with African countries and colonization, so looking at it wholly and saying these are the complications and these are the challenges of it, but just because there are contradictions in it doesn’t mean that I have to feel...(bad? disconnected?)” –*Participant E2*

“So, my Jewish heritage...ya know, my grandparents are lovely human beings in a lot of ways, yes, they’re fucking racist. Do I challenge them on that stuff? Sure. Am I going to change them? Probably not. There’s transhistorical things beyond their control that are just gonna be with us. A lot of our families were immigrants who struggled with all kinds of things in their lives that I think are worth recognizing and celebrating, so this is a complicated global scene that I just don’t think its worth being too general about it- its not helpful. Being nuanced and comprehensive is the only way you can really get any kind of peace and move forward in the right direction.” –*Participant G2*

In these two excerpts, it is interesting to note the ways that they both accept and critique their cultural roots. As discussed in the previous chapter, developing an anti-racist consciousness complicates our understanding of belonging. For these participants, their sense of cultural belonging was strong enough that they could not separate themselves from it. Instead, they had to make peace with both the beautiful and shameful aspects of their ethnic lineage.

The stories that I most personally related with were those where participants lacked connection to their cultural roots. While I personally feel immense pride connected to my parents and nuclear family, growing up I often felt completely disconnected from my cultural roots. In the participant’s stories, it wasn’t just that they lacked connection to those roots, but they carried deep feelings of loss. The following excerpt is from one participant who was an experienced anti-racist activist:

“I’ve had a lot of feelings of loss over the past ten years around my racial identity. At first it was like, I couldn’t quite put a name to it- this longing for culture and tradition and stuff that didn’t exist in my family, minus Christmas which is not what I mean when I say culture and tradition. Then through learning history of white identity development in the United States

being like, oh, it's because of white supremacy and I lost all cultural heritage to wherever my family comes from. My family doesn't really know where our ancestors are from. They guess, ya know. Oh I think like Poland or maybe Ireland." –*Participant C2*

In this case, information and memories have been buried away, perhaps permanently. This excerpt so poignantly speaks to the loss many white people feel as they begin to develop a racial consciousness and explore the heritage that has been erased by whiteness. When I reflect on the sense of loss expressed by anti-racist whites, I wonder if the average white person in this country feels such loss. Perhaps, that unconscious loss of culture is what causes white Arizonans, for example, to cling so strongly to their twisted sense of Americanness and the American Dream- a dream meant only for them in the absence of anything else. Using Mab Segrest's analogy, they are perhaps under the anesthesia of whiteness, numb to the suffering they cause in others, numb to the pain of their dislocated roots.

It is this numbness and anesthesia of whiteness that we seek to overcome in the search for our motherlands. This search, including the feelings of loss and sadness, is part of reawakening our selves and evolving in our anti-racist consciousness. As feminist poet Audre Lorde reminds us, "*I feel therefore I can be free*" (Lorde 1984, 39). For those participants who felt connected to their roots, they expressed the importance that connection had for their personal development and anti-racist identity. This search for our ethnic history and roots combats the intentional forgetting and erasure of European motherlands that white assimilation required. Our motherlands are important sources of information for our activism and inspiration for our souls.

### **III. Embracing Our Multiples Selves**

"I think part of being human is dealing with your anxiety. And so, if you are a politicized white person then that's gonna get flavored with your politics- the anxiety you feel as a human." –*Participant E1*

This section calls us to reckon with a more complicated understanding of our identities that cannot be encapsulated in our “whiteness” alone. Understanding and loving ourselves as complex and complicated beings is integral to the work of attending to our spirits and working for racial justice. This involves wrestling with the intersectionality of our identities and the ways we may experience both privilege and marginalization in our lives. It also calls into the question the salience of any *one* identity category as representative of anyone’s full self- whether we are talking about race, class, sexuality etc. As anti-racist white people, we must learn to juggle the material reality of our white skin privilege and the racism we are socialized to maintain, alongside a deep love of ourselves as multiple, complicated and nuanced human beings who cannot fit into any prescribed box- just like everyone else. Embracing our multiple selves does not replace our accountability as white people in the movement for racial justice; rather it allows us to bring our full selves to the conversation.

As one part of the focus group dialogue, participants were asked to reflect on the ways that their gender and/or queer identity impacted their white identity. I combined those two categories because I felt it would open up the conversation for multiple responses, rather than wanting to conflate their meanings. Individuals chose to respond in very different ways, from talking about being cis-gendered or trans, their relationship to masculinity or femininity, to their identity as a queer person. As a white woman, I was hoping to understand how other white folks in the circle balanced their gender identity with their whiteness or how gender played out in their sense of self. I was surprised at the diversity of responses around this question of gender. The following two excerpts are from two women in the focus group talking about the lack of salience that their female gender had for them as an identity category:

“I’m 24 and when I think about gender I’m thinking about being a cis-gendered person foremost. I don’t really identify very strongly with being a woman. That doesn’t feel like politicized very much just because the generation I’m a part of... So for me it’s about

identifying as a white privileged person, but also about being a cis-privileged person. Thinking about that- those feel connected.” -*Participant A1*

“Especially because of where I work and that I’m asked frequently as work to talk about whiteness and to help other people think about whiteness and I’m never really asked to talk about femaleness. Because there are a lot of women around and that’s just not the position I’m in this place in my work. My job is just such a part of my life and in that place and I’m always “the white person” and I’m never the female.” -*Participant D1*

Two things come to mind in readings these excerpts. The first is the way that both participants focus on where they are privileged, rather than where they are marginalized in their lives. In more mainstream conversations with white people around race, discussing white privilege is often avoided at all costs. Throughout both focus groups, *not one* participant used one of their marginalized identities to circumvent the discussion of their white identity and privilege. Ensuring that race is at the forefront of the discussion is an attribute of anti-racist consciousness.

The second observation, however, is about the ways that particular frameworks of social justice shape our understandings of what is relevant and what is not in the movement for change. In my work within social justice movements, I find that the majority of people, myself included until recently, have a very clearly articulated, historical-based analysis of race and class issues. However, as I myself have developed a feminist lens over the past two years, it has become apparent how feminist histories and frameworks for social justice often remain on the *borders* of our systemic analysis and our movements. These two excerpts echo what I observe within social justice movement organizing where gender and feminist frameworks remain absent.

For other participants, their gendered identity was extremely salient. It is interesting to note, however, that *overall*, gendered identity appeared to be more salient for the women in the group than the men. Almost everyone participated in this conversation, with the exception of a few men in the groups. The following four participants discuss the ways that masculinity, femininity and gendered identity are integral to their sense of self and social justice work.

“...I still fall into it and I find myself asking for permission or something, just bizarre things as a woman and being so clear on working on un-doing racism when I feel like me as a woman and the interactions I have with men in the world, especially in organizing in Chicago, just like white-male dominated and wanting to gain approval of these white men in power who are organizers... Just things in terms of my identity I’m really finding myself struggling with- that it’s complex and nuanced and it’s constantly a work in progress, right? I feel like I have to bring in gender into my identity and the way I live my life in a more conscious way.” –*Participant F2*

“And identifying as trans masculine, but being read as female sometimes- I just get read really differently in different spaces but sort of grappling with the male privileges that come with that is a really disgusting thing that I have to deal with. I’ve struggled my whole life with feeling more male and now it’s like, here’s this whole other set of obstacles for you now...So I guess gender is always hard. So I don’t know, really trying to resist that male privilege while also embracing it in myself internally. It’s just really hard to strike a balance between those two. My whole point is that my whiteness will always inform my other categories of identity for me because white supremacy is so big and so central.” –*Participant B1*

“As a white woman I have certain privileges in this way too but instead of shutting down and saying, well I’m straight, I’m in a relationship with a man, I’ve never been a trans person, and I’ve never been a black person- I feel bad about myself. Instead, the way that my work has happened and has given it strength is to connect... with who I really am. I have experiences of victimization as a woman that I have had and are real and knowing that I carry that into my work everyday that that experience is part of what gives me empathy and connection and capacity to imagine change and growth in other people and also to identify with their pain and suffering.” –*Participant F1*

“So I think that whether someone is becoming a man or someone who is born a man, whenever I’m talking to folks, whether its an African American youth or a white cop or a trans male I’m always just like, what kind of a man are you gonna be? To the extent that masculinity enters my practice and my exchanges with people and because with all of those examples there are really beautiful men and really ugly men.” –*Participant E1*

All four of these excerpts speak to the varying ways that participants interface with gender in their daily lives and social justice work. The first two excerpts represent participants grappling with the complicatedness of gender in their political consciousness. In the second two excerpts, participants shared concepts that have *worked* for them in regards to reconciling their gendered identity with other aspects of themselves. I was especially moved by the third participant’s story and how she used her experiences of victimization as a woman as a source of strength and empathy in her work with young incarcerated women. The idea of using our feelings of victimization and marginalization

as tools for empathy is an important one, for it is distinct from equating our pain with someone else's and seeking to erase difference. Rather, it is a tool for empathy that acknowledges difference of experiences, while drawing on feelings we may have in common as a way to connect with one another. Similarly inspiring was the participant who spoke about the conversations he was having with other men about what positive masculinity might look like. Unfortunately, it is rare to hear men, particularly white men, collectively engaging with one another around positive masculinity. In attempting to bring our full selves to this work and counter mainstream ideologies and myths, these stories of our lives need to be told.

Connecting back to the first section on storytelling, it is interesting to note the ways that trans identity surfaced several times in various participant's comments during the *only* focus group where someone self-identified as transgender. Within the storytelling process, people seemed to subconsciously incorporate "trans" references into their narratives in a way that was not present in the other focus group. These references did not seem contrived in any way, but they definitely felt related to the awareness of one of the group member's vocalized trans identity and a desire to use inclusive vocabulary. For me, this speaks to the power of storytelling yet again and the ways we can positively influence others through the particular language we use in our storytelling.

Almost half of the focus group participants referenced their queer identity in relation to their anti-racist politics. Numerous participants spoke of the racism they witnessed in many queer communities and how that impacted their shifting sites of belonging. The following is a representative excerpt:

"I think also in college, continuing to develop my identity as a queer person, as a queer cis-gendered woman- that was also crucial to think about. To find a community of queer people or to just learn about the queer movement and thinking about the lack of antiracism going on in sections of that movement, especially in the mainstream gay and lesbian movement. That was really crucial to find that and feel like that was important to me but also to be let down by that community and that movement. But then to find movements of radical queer people since then have been much more uplifting." –*Participant H2*

As noted in this excerpt, for many participants their belonging continued to shift as they searched for queer communities that were also anti-racist. In addition to the racism they had seen in certain queer communities, participants also spoke about not conflating their experience as a queer person with for example, a Black person's experience with racism. It seemed clear for many participants that their white identity always informed their queerness and that their marginalization as a queer person could never "trump" their privilege as a white person.

In addition to gender and sexuality, several participants spoke more generally about the complexities of their multiple identities. For one participant who had grown up in people-of-color majority communities both in the United States and in Central America, she shared that she was "just continuing to wrestle with what it means to have a multicultural transnational identity." – *Participant F2*. For this participant, she identified with a more multicultural, transnational identity in regards to culture and belonging, bridging several cultural communities and national identities. Her story of belonging, much like other white folks raised in community-of-color-majority and multiracial communities like myself, is not a story that appears to be represented *anywhere*, outside of a few books on white anti-racist activists. Reconciling multiple identities for white people like her often includes processing the ways that the term "white" feels insufficient as a category of identity. This multicultural transnational belonging did not replace her understanding of being read in the world as white, and being afforded skin privileges, but it did inform the core of her identity as being nuanced and multi-layered, an integral element to her anti-racist consciousness.

Several participant's advice and stories provided the inspiration for this section on embracing our multiple identities. These participants appeared to have arrived at a place of relative peace and acceptance of themselves and shared their journey and advice with the group. These stories helped to balance the conversations when they became overly theoretical and disembodied. Here are two examples of their advice:

“When we want to think about moving forward as a society we want to think about all of us—the collective people and that includes poor people, poor white people, working people, and so, yeah, if you have a vision of shared power of society than that isn’t based in just feeling shitty about yourself. So I just feel little but of grief when I’m listening to some of the stuff because I want people to feel also in touch with their own divinity, because I think that is ultimately what connects you to other people.” –Participant F1

“And I think that fighting oppression is making it possible for people to exist in the world as fully human and I realized that I had to let my whole self in the door. So I was like, okay, yeah I’m Italian- that’s fifty percent, and there’s .. it took a while to let my mother’s family in the door, the poor farmers, and I realized that the more I could represent that whole self that it was freeing to people who I mistakenly thought would never be able to identify with those other parts of myself. That enabled other people to also let their whole selves in the door.” –Participant C1

Their excerpts provided examples to the group of how different individuals were grappling with their multiple identities in a forgiving and loving way. They were helpful for me in thinking through my own complex identity as an anti-racist white person and how I need to bring my full self to my social justice work.

This section explored the ways that focus group participants navigated their multiple and intersecting identities. Participants were asked to specifically share around their gendered and queer identities, and they responded in diverse ways. For many, their white identity *always* informed all other aspects of themselves. For a few, they had not given in-depth thought to their multiple identities. For others, their identities were complicated by their multi-racial/cultural belonging, without always being sure of how to articulate that belonging within the rigid category of “white”. Other participants brought the conversation full circle, reminding each other of our humanity and divinity, and as one participant (F1) phrased it, the need to let our “whole selves in the door”. =

## **Conclusion**

Developing and nurturing an anti-racist consciousness requires more than education about systems of injustice and activism in the streets. It requires more than having friends of color and

using the right vocabulary. Nurturing an anti-racist consciousness requires that white people embark on a spiritual journey in search of their full selves. White supremacy has numbed us to our own pain and the pain of others through the maintenance of an *anesthetic aesthetic*. As we learn about white supremacy and how our identities are implicated in that system, we can begin to wrestle with the negative feelings of self that emerge. Once we begin to see that our dislocated roots are not accidental, but a result of a systematic forgetting forged by white supremacy, then we can begin to remember. This remembering is part of developing an anti-racist consciousness. In this chapter, I argue that storytelling, connecting with our motherlands, and embracing our multiple identities are concrete steps of attending to our spiritual selves. Storytelling is powerful not only because we can bare witness to one another's stories, but because in that process of sharing and witnessing, we ourselves are changed. For most white people in the United States, their European American ancestors exchanged their history and culture in return for the privilege of a powerful and invisible whiteness. Part of the healing process for white people that creates possibility for full engagement in racial justice is reconnecting with those lost roots. These roots may be complicated, and include our family's stories of struggle and hope, as well as stories that mark their complicity in oppressive systems. This evolution entails processing our negative feelings of self and the multiple identities that shape us. It is also a process that counters racist patriarchal ways of being in the world, ways that are often mimicked in social justice organizing. The work of attending to our spirits is as urgent as the social justice work we are called to do in the world.

## CONCLUSION

The role that white anti-racist activists play in the movement for racial justice, as well as in broader movements for social change, should not be overlooked. Their role in racial justice is parallel to the role men play in advocating for gender justice, U.S. citizens for immigrant justice or financially privileged people for economic justice. How do we convince those who benefit most from systems of injustice that such privileges are worth challenging? What can we learn from activists privileged by these systems about the ways in which they came to develop such a differential consciousness? What is the emotional and spiritual work required to nurture such a consciousness in a world deeply divided and psychologically wounded from centuries of injustice? How can an anti-racist feminist framework be instrumental in our social justice work? While my research on anti-racist white identity development is much smaller in scope, these are the larger societal questions it seeks to address.

My research began with more than a year of immersing myself in anti-racist feminist and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) scholarship. Before I dove into critical whiteness and anti-racism scholarship, I was initially drawn to the framework of the intersections of race and gender through the work of feminists of color Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Gloria Anzaldúa. Their work brought attention to the intersectionality of identities and oppressions, as well as to the lack of reflexivity by many white feminists. Anti-racist feminist theorist bell hooks makes these arguments within the context of a desire for community building across difference. In her book, *Killing Rage, Ending Racism*, hooks argues “a major barrier [to multi-racial female friendships] has

consistently been the fact that individual white women tend to be more unaware than their black female counterparts of the way the history of racism in the United States has institutionalized structures of racial apartheid that were meant to keep these two groups apart” (hooks 1995, 218). hooks’ work propelled me into a further interrogation of myself as a white anti-racist feminist, which then instigated my research interest in anti-racist white identity development.

Through the focus groups on anti-racist identity with Chicago activists emerged the thematic foci of the two main chapters of this research. The first chapter considers the theme of physical geography as it surfaced in participant’s stories; the ways that different physical locations- home communities, church and college- shaped their development of a political and anti-racist consciousness. For most participants who were raised in more homogenous white communities, they developed an initial political consciousness through various avenues including the influence of their parent’s politics, church, college and/or an early queer identity. For those participants who were raised in people-of-color-majority and multiracial communities, their racial and political consciousness was nurtured through political households and an early awareness of their racial identity. As I began to reflect on their stories, it occurred to me that the theme of geography in their stories encompassed much more than just physical location; it included a geography of relationships and communal belonging.

Throughout all of their stories, relationships with people and communities of color had a significant influence on their understanding of race and racism. Depending on the racial composition of their childhood belonging, some participants developed a deeper racial consciousness as children growing up in multiracial settings, while for others it was not until college and adulthood where they developed relationships with people of color and hence, a deeper understanding of race and racism. Through their excerpts it became apparent that these trans-racial relationships demanded of them a deeper, more embodied engagement with race and racism as it

played out in the intimate geography of their homes. Analyzing participant's stories through Carrillo Rowe's lens of *belonging*, I argue that only through a *multiracial* geography of locations, relationships, and belonging can white people develop an in-depth consciousness around racial justice. This does not discount the political consciousness present in many white families and communities; rather it claims that multiracial belonging is a part of the *evolution* of such a consciousness necessary to the work of racial justice.

The second chapter of my research centered on anti-racist feminist approaches to healing and expanding the definition of "the work" of anti-racism activism. For many whites, developing an anti-racist consciousness and understanding their complicity in white supremacy often produces varying degrees of guilt, loss and shame. Even though these negative feelings of self exist for many anti-racist whites, within the world of activism processing feelings and creating healing spaces is not always considered to be part of the real, pressing work of social justice. Employing Tema Okun's descriptions of white supremacist culture and bell hooks' notion of psychological patriarchy, it becomes clear that elements of both patriarchy and white supremacy exist within our social movements and help determine what constitutes the most urgent activist work. I have come to strongly believe that processing the invisible wounds of oppressive systems like white supremacy is *equally* important as dealing with the more visible wounds. For my research, I was interested in knowing how Chicago-area white anti-racist activists were making sense of themselves as white people and dealing with the negative feelings that arose as part of that identity.

In my analysis, I paired participant's stories with Mab Segrest's notion of the *anesthetic aesthetic* of racism in order to identify concrete ways of attending to our spirits and healing the negative feelings of self engendered by white supremacy. In that chapter, I offered three avenues to processing and healing these feelings of self for white anti-racist people: conversations and storytelling with other white anti-racist people, learning about and connecting to their ancestral

roots, and accepting and loving themselves as complex beings with multiple identities. This process of healing is more than just an activity of self-reflective navel-gazing; it is a process of self-actualization that can only make us stronger advocates for social justice, motivated by love rather than insecurity and shame.

This research, while I believe it offers concrete suggestions for forward movement, was also limited in scope and raises additional questions for future research. Reflecting back on the focus group structure, it would have been advantageous to host a *series* of sessions with participants, rather than just one, in order to have more in-depth discussions of each question. I specifically would have liked additional time to dialogue around issues of gender identity and its relationship to whiteness. Many fruitful conversations were cut short due to time constraints and were omitted from the analysis because they did not provide any information beyond a surface level. In regards to future research, multiple questions arose that went beyond the scope of this study. Even though I attempted to address this topic in the second chapter, I think more research should examine the presence of white supremacy and patriarchy in our social movements, and then identify strategies to undermine those systems in the structures of our activism. I also believe that more CWS research is needed to examine white identity development in white people raised in multi-racial and people-of-color-majority communities. How does the identity formation process of these white individuals complicate Helm's White Identity Model? In what ways does this type of community belonging both assist in racial identity formation as well as blur the lines of culture and identity, creating identity confusion? In what ways do multiracial people's process of identity formation converge with and diverge from this group of whites?

Psychologist Abraham Maslov ranks self-actualization at the top of his pyramid of human needs, a human process often accessible once basic needs of survival, such as food, water, shelter and security, are met. To re-frame Maslov's terminology of "self-actualization" into more feminist

language, I argue that this human process includes finding our higher purpose in life, moving through past trauma, building on our experiences to gain wisdom, and learning to love ourselves and others in healthier ways. I often think of Maslov in relationship to social justice movements and organizing. While I fully support the struggles for equal access to quality healthcare, education and jobs, I know that mere survival is not the essence of the human experience. I hope that my work may contribute to the struggle for equal access to other vital aspects of human existence such as healthy psyches, quality relationships, agency to make choices about our lives, and happiness. Additionally, these are qualities that will make our social justice struggles more sustainable so we don't have to make a false choice between personal happiness and health, and "the movement". While this work is needed in all communities, my focus for this research is on white communities and their development as anti-racists; a focus that responds to hooks' call for an interrogation of whiteness by white people. Examining these issues will allow us, as conscious white people, to more fully participate in relationships with other people, relationships that are the backbone of our social justice movements.

In order to conclude, I must circle back to the beginning. Aimee Carrillo Rowe says "each conversation is compelled by a yearning; each yearning arises from the author's desire to constitute her humanity, to decolonize her imagination" (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 57). I connect this quote to my research and argue that storytelling, relationships and multiracial belonging are part of this process of decolonizing our imaginations as conscious white people. This decolonization is a way of moving through old ways of being that no longer serve us, or our multiple communities, towards a healthier and more fulfilling sense of self, community and purpose. As our human consciousness evolves, so too does our capacity to affect social change. The future of racial justice work must include attending to our hearts, minds, *and* communal belonging.

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