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The Whiteness of the Elephant in the Room: How White Guilt, White Fragility, and Colorblind Racial Ideology Shape Environmental and Social Justice Activism in Santa Cruz County

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THE WHITENESS OF THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM:
HOW WHITE GUILT, WHITE FRAGILITY, AND COLORBLIND RACIAL
IDEOLOGY SHAPE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM
IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Environmental Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Robert Michael Foran

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

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ABSTRACT

THE WHITENESS OF THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: HOW WHITE GUILT, WHITE FRAGILITY, AND COLORBLIND RACIAL IDEOLOGY IMPACT ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

by Robert Michael Foran

Using frameworks from critical race theory, social movement theory, and community-based activism, this thesis explores the phenomena of white fragility, white guilt, and colorblind racial ideology and how they impact the ways predominantly white-identified social and environmental justice organizations approach, build, and maintain solidarity with communities of color in Santa Cruz County, California. A qualitative approach was employed to investigate the experiences of white-identified activists and how they attempt to engage in this constantly challenging process. Using twenty-two semi-structured interviews and eight group observations, I explored how white-identified individuals negotiate the transformation from ‘moral passivity’ to meaningful, personal relationships with people of color (POC). The research shows remarkable differences in responses by white-identified individuals in public space (implicit bias/overtly racialized comments) versus private space (self-reflection, drive toward self-education, willingness to forge authentic relationships with POC). The research also uncovers possible implications for how the intrapersonal dismantling of racialized thought systems on an individual basis may impact group coalition-building processes. More research is warranted, however, in the exploration of how these implications may translate to concrete strategies in the toolkits of predominantly white-identified environmental and social justice organizations.

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Glossary

POC (person/people of color): In this thesis, this acronym refers to individual(s) from communities of color/non-white identity.

White Passing: Used for individuals who phenotypically appear white to others in public spaces. In the context of this research, it can refer to those who self-identify as white due to their ethnocultural heritage; it can also refer to those who self-identify as a POC, but who are considered by others to be white-appearing due to their skin tone. Also refers to the ability of certain individuals, regardless of how they identify, to access certain degrees of privilege due to their light/white-appearing skin color.

White-identified: In the context of this research, I refer to this term for any individual who phenotypically self-identifies as white, is identified as white by others, and/or is considered white-passing in a public space.

White Guilt (WG): Refers to the remorse/shame that white-identified individuals experience when discussing/witnessing racialized events; WG is often a motivating force for white-identified individuals in social/environmental justice activism.

White Fragility (WF): Refers to a white-identified individual's discomfort or inability to address issues of race; this can be exhibited through over-explaining one's viewpoint when confronted or called out by others concerning a racialized event, and/or over-defending a political or personalized stance on racialized issues.

Colorblind Racial Ideology (CBRI): Denotes a white-identified individual's seeming inability to see color; the term is invoked most often when white-identified

individuals explain the position that everyone is equal in their eyes and color doesn't matter.

Positionality: Used to denote an intersectional locus of identity, privilege, influence, economic status, degree of access, and power; positionality is determined and exercised through one's ethnocultural origin, status of citizenship, and skin phenotype (black, brown, white in color). For white-identified individuals, this positionality comes with social/institutional advantages in government policies, educational access, media portrayal, corporate decision-making power, and judicial systems.

Whiteness: Refers to the social performance or practice of white privilege that is at once invisible, institutionally enforced, and socially produced/reproduced. Due to our racialized history in the United States, it's considered to be the default/normal. This default is often utilized to delineate those who are "other than" white: those who are considered to be *ethnic*. Ethnicity doesn't always apply to white-identified people; our culture rarely uses terms like Caucasian American or European American to refer to white people, whereas we do treat/label non-white individuals as *ethnic*, African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, etc.

DACA/Dreamer(s): The acronym refers to Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals program (initiated during the Obama administration in 2012). The term "Dreamers," taken from the proposed DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors); DACA recipients have claimed this term to indicate their hope/ability to dream a better future for themselves and their families.

Introduction

In the field of social and environmental justice, the ways in which white-identified individuals engage with, understand, support, and lend their voices to issues and concerns faced by vulnerable communities and communities of color vary widely. These efforts are influenced greatly by assorted socio-cultural problems that stem from the social construction of whiteness (Becker & Paul, 2015; Brady, 2014; Brown, 2004; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; R. Crowley, 2016; Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016; Diem, Ali, & Carpenter, 2013; Dutta et al., 2016; Galman, Pica-Smith, & Rosenberger, 2010; T. L. Green & Dantley, 2013; Gunew, 2007; Manglitz, 2003; McDonald, 2005; Mintz, 2013; North, 2006; Pennington, Brock, & Ndura, 2012; Perry & Shotwell, 2009; Pulido, 2015). These socio-cultural components—white guilt (WG), white fragility (WF) and colorblind racial ideology (CBRI)—are problematic and can evoke strong feelings of anger, fear, shame, apathy, and aggression. These three socio-cultural phenomena often can create polarization between groups and organizations; common ties or goals once held by the involved parties are subject to split and fracture the very collective nature of what brought them together to work in community effort in the first place (J. E. Crowley, 2009; Mayer, 2009; Nagle, 2008; Nicholls, 2013; Paerregaard, 2014; Stolle-McAllister, 2007; Yanay & Lifshitz-Oron, 2008). Inherent in this breaking apart of coalition are the intersectional elements of incongruent generational experience, differing ideological approaches, ethno-cultural identity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and other seemingly discordant strands that lead to conflict and splintering between and within group dynamics (J. E. Crowley, 2009; Mayer, 2009; Nagle, 2008; Nicholls, 2013;

Paerregaard, 2014; Stolle-McAllister, 2007; Yanay & Lifshitz-Oron, 2008). This nexus of experience within inter- and intra-personal group conflict is complex and constantly in motion.

The purpose of this thesis is to develop a nuanced understanding of white-identified experience amidst the critical discourses of coalition building with POC individuals and organizations in Santa Cruz County, California. I will explore the social construction of whiteness, its relationship to power structures, and its constituent parts. I will examine the relationships between predominantly white-identified environmental and social justice groups and groups of POC/non-white identity, while looking at the phenomena of WG, WF, and CBRI in the coalition-building context. These three phenomena—WG, WF, and CBRI—are recognized as having significant influence in coalition building, most notably due to being embedded within the foundational history of the United States, through the practice of slavery, the colonization of Indigenous peoples, and the import of low-cost agricultural and service-industry labor from Mexico (Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2005; Corlett, 2016; Edwards, 2011; Field, 1999; Kozol, 2005; Schwartz, 2017).

My decision to investigate such phenomena arose from my own experiences, and from the difficulties that emerged during my engagement with various environmental and social justice organizations in Santa Cruz County over a four-year timeframe. I am a self-identified white male; due to the phenotype of my skin, my biological male appearance, and my cis-gender expression, I recognize that I am the recipient of an enormous amount of privilege and facility in context of the locus of my positionality. I acknowledge that this privilege and ease have allowed me to access information and resources; they have

also allowed me to move through society fairly unscathed by the scrutinizing eye of those who would have otherwise assessed my character and integrity to be “less than,” if I appeared other than white.

It is for this purpose that I have chosen to position myself within the research by drawing attention to these entry points of privilege and access, both physically salient and culturally hidden. While being an individual who identifies as a gay man—and married to another man who is at once a POC, an immigrant, and LGBTQIA-identified—may afford me some insight into the lives of POC, it by no means qualifies me to speak *for* POC or claim any professional or fuller understanding of what my partner or other POC experience. What is *does* give me, is a responsibility to own my role in the perpetuation of the structures that give rise to institutionalized racism through my own unconscious praxis of whiteness and the accountability to do something about it.

Literature Review

Positionality and the Construction of Whiteness

Positionality, particularly in sociological terms, is talked about in the context of the inherent power structures that are embedded within our social, political, economic, and ideological systems in relation to others with whom we human beings share this world (Anthias, 2002; Martin & Gunten, 2002; Milner, 2007; Muhammad et al., 2015; Relles, 2016; Soni-Sinha, 2008). Specifically, the power structures referred to in this study are central to white-identified individuals and their experiences within the context of self-identifying as white, as opposed to individuals who identify as POC (Anthias, 2002; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Martin & Gunten, 2002; Milner, 2007; Muhammad et al., 2015; Relles, 2016; Soni-Sinha, 2008; Tillery, 2009). These imbalanced systemic power relations are evident in networks of crime and punishment, educational (in)equity, healthcare accessibility, and good, viable jobs—and the ways that societal advantages are allocated to white-identified communities as opposed to those of POC identity (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016; T. L. Green & Dantley, 2013; Manglitz, 2003; McConnell & Todd, 2015; Staurowsky, 2007; Todd, Suffrin, McConnell, Odahl-Ruan, 2015; & van Gorder, 2007).

In addition to studies concerning white-identified individuals' challenges to understanding their whiteness, research has attempted to identify power structures inherent in educational environments, as well as political and economic systems. Each of these power structures appropriate labor and/or knowledge from Black and Brown bodies, while eventually leading to incarceration in an increasingly punitive system that

is specifically aimed toward POC (Alexander, 2004; Becker & Paul, 2015; Boatright-Horowitz, Marraccini, & Harps-Logan, 2012; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Chubbuck, 2004; Dutta et al., 2016; Eversman, 2014; Galman, Pica-Smith, & Rosenberger, 2010; T. L. Green & Dantley, 2013; Heiner, 2016; Larson, 2016; Manglitz, 2003; Milner, 2007; Mintz, 2013; Muhammad et al., 2015; Relles, 2016; Robinson & Culver, 2016; Soni-Sinha, 2008; Zufferey, 2013).

This construction of whiteness, rooted in extant power structures, is intrinsically linked to WG, WF, and CBRI, which are part and parcel of problematic issues that find their origin in the multi-layered forms of institutionalized racism and white privilege. These symptomatic components— WG, WF, and CBRI—perpetuate an inability, particularly for white-identified individuals, to move past a deconstructive discourse of systemic inequities (that is, the constant rehashing and deconstructing of “whiteness”) and towards a more reparative and invested mode of concrete action (Mallett & Swim, 2007; Nordstrom, 2015; O’Brien et al., 2009; Perry & Shotwell, 2009; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000; Spanierman et al., 2008; Swim & Miller, 1999).

WG and WF are similar in some respects as they are necessary companions in this process that incapacitates white-identified individuals when talking about, in any real way, the tangible needs and concerns that communities of color have due to inherent structural inequities in education, economic security, healthcare, housing, etc. WG can be exhibited as the culpability that white-identified individuals may feel surrounding the historical underpinnings and the roles they play in the production of systemic inequities (Mallett & Swim, 2007; Nordstrom, 2015; O’Brien et al., 2009; Perry & Shotwell, 2009;

A. A. Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000; Spanierman et al., 2008; Swim & Miller, 1999). Similarly, WF is realized through the consequential incapacity of a white-identified individual to discuss such topics and issues altogether. This most often is experienced as defensiveness, argumentative rebuttals, over-explaining one's position on the matter, and/or ignoring the conversation altogether (Mallett & Swim, 2007; A. A. Powell et al., 2005; Swim & Miller, 1999). The overall effects can be seen as white-identified groups hold on tight to this construction of whiteness in tandem with the obstacles that WG and WF create in the attempt to move towards constructive action.

CBRI on the other hand, operates as a two-fold mechanism. It is supported by the assumptions that communities of color have about themselves as perpetrators of racialized issues. The circumstance under which this mechanism is most often seen is through the lens of self-supported perceptions, along with external institutionally enforced obstacles, that inhibit POC communities from succeeding in a system that is clearly not made for them to succeed in. This is marked by an internalization of negative feelings with respect to one's psychological well-being in conjunction with one's racial/ethnocultural identity. Studies have shown that this phenomenon has strong adverse impact on mental and psychological health in communities of color, particularly among youth (Barr & Neville, 2014; Lewis, 2001). CBRI negatively impacts self-esteem, confidence levels, and inhibits healthy choices (Barr & Neville, 2014; Bloch, 2014; Neville, Coleman, Falconer, & Holmes, 2005). Simultaneously, CBRI can have formidable influence on supporting the undercurrent of racialized perceptions amidst

seeming indifference of white-identified individuals concerning issues traditionally tied to racial inequity, thus perpetuating the very issues those individuals apparently do not see. If white-identified individuals are not willing to ‘see color,’ they are certainly not going to examine the roles that they themselves fulfill in systemic racialized structures (Hughey, 2014; Lewis, 2001). With that said, due to the highly racialized history of the United States, from slavery to the civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, to Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers Union, up to the present movement of Black Lives Matter, the idea that white-identified individuals can ignore race and get beyond it in this country without reflecting on the roles of white-identified individuals in the perpetuation of institutionalized racism, is contentious at best.

This has been an area of study for social movement theorists and other researchers in social justice research and action (Álvarez, Gutierrez, Kim, Petit, & Reese, 2008; DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, & Post, 2011; Donnelly, Cook, Ausdale, & Foley, 2005; M. J. Green, Sonn, & Matsebula, 2007). Exploration of the social construction of whiteness and the constituent variables involved, WG, WF, and CBRI, have centralized around many domains mentioned before such as education, incarceration practices, and crime and punishment; there are other emergent sectors that are being examined, spanning anywhere from access to public services across to the various disciplines of the arts (Cheatwood & Petersen, 2007; Donnelly et al., 2005; Hancock, 2005; Kinney, 2015). Because the effects of institutionalized racism are so deep and broad in the United States, and because they are aided in their praxis by embedded (conscious and unconscious) behaviors on individual (interpersonal) and collective (systemic/institutional) levels, the

attempts to extricate these profoundly damaging beliefs can be extremely difficult. In the U.S. context, historical support for such practices are rooted within the first encounters of Indigenous peoples of the North American continent by European settlers as well as the inhumane experiences of African slavery. In the current context, the exponential rise of incarcerated populations consisting mainly of Black and Brown bodies in the United States has been labeled the New Jim Crow Era by some, illustrating a continuing praxis of slavery masked by contemporary power structures (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Ewert, Sykes, & Pettit, 2014). Regardless of whether we are speaking of what effects incarceration, the war on drugs, or unequal education has had on marginalized communities of color, all of these obstacles are ingrained within the systematic deterioration experienced by those whose lives bear the weight of this inequity. The influence that these elements—CBRI, WG, and WF—have had in maintaining the construct of whiteness as an expression of racism, is evident in many areas of our socio-cultural landscape, none more so than in our educational institutions (Ewert et al., 2014; Kilgore, 2015).

Whiteness, Racism, and Education

The lens in academia, which has been used as a standard of how many, particularly those from marginalized communities of color, are viewed, has been calibrated through this filter of whiteness (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012; Dutta et al., 2016; Manglitz, 2003). The need for a more critical praxis has made itself salient through education's inability to address these issues. This filter, by way of institutional standards, disguises the normative lens of whiteness and carries with it a bevy of advantages, greater access to

resources, and easy facilitation of social capital that many white-identified individuals enjoy, whether or not they are aware of its effects (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Dutta et al., 2016; T. L. Green & Dantley, 2013; Manglitz, 2003). Yet, this much-needed critical approach has its own obstacles and can be highly problematic as white-identified educators become aware of such inequities. Their own efforts to transform the ways that students of color either view or express themselves in the world can, and most often do, perpetuate the very social injustices they are attempting to ameliorate due to an educator's own experience and expression of whiteness (T. L. Green & Dantley, 2013; Pennington, Brock, & Ndura, 2012). Because of these concerns, the critical lens must be turned inward and the praxis deepened if they, as white-identified individuals in the field of education, are to make any real contributions without extending the hand of racist, white-centric educational dominance (Diem & Carpenter, 2013; Lazar & Offenber, 2011; Manglitz, 2003). Crucial in this are the frameworks of critical pedagogy and its ability to liberate through education. Political action in the world, as a way of educational praxis, gives strong support for the emancipation of oppressed communities to find pathways towards empowerment and resiliency (Arnett, 2002; McLaren, 2001).

Self-Educating the “White-identified” Self

Self-driven education via social justice activism learning has made its mark in educational institutions through student grassroots efforts and the gathering of collectives dedicated to the engagement of a deconstructive discourse and social justice action (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Smith & Lau, 2013). Critical pedagogies and theoretical frameworks concerning class, gender, and environmental justice, in addition

to anti-racist curriculum, have been making their way slowly into the classrooms of middle schools, high schools, and universities (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012; Brown, 2004; Brunsmma, Brown, & Placier, 2013; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Diem & Carpenter, 2013; Dutta et al., 2016; Lazar & Offenber, 2011; Nordstrom, 2015; Singer, 2016; Strmic-Pawl, 2015). Although many individuals learn about social and environmental justice issues through activism and formal educational institutions, social and environmental justice education—for white-identified individuals by white-identified individuals—is a relatively new phenomenon. Thus, only a scant body of literature has explored white-identified experience within the context of primarily white social and environmental justice organizations. A pointed example of this includes Mark R. Warren’s (2010) study of ‘stages’ that white-identified activists may experience when they move from the passivity of moral conviction to building authentic relationships with POC that can eventually lead to more solidified collaborations that serve both POC and white-identified individuals as a mutually cohesive community. Therefore, in an attempt to explicate implicit and macro-level biases embedded in racialized landscapes, I seek to contribute to a discourse originating from community forums in social and environmental justice action, where white-identified individuals have chosen not only to confront their own biases of race, but their own experience of whiteness, and how this informs their actions as rational agents making conscious choices against a backdrop of social and environmental justice action.

The Forging of Personal Relations with POC

In Warren's aforementioned study (2010), entitled *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice*, he outlines several stages that white-identified activists experience when they move from the passivity of moral impulse, to moral conviction, and on to building intimate relationships with POC, that can eventually lead to more solidified collaborations that serve both POC and white-identified individuals as a mutually cohesive community. How white-identified individuals create strong investments with those of POC identity depends on the multidimensional and intersecting experiences they have with POC on an individual and group basis (Warren, 2010).

With that said, it is not just the forging of personal relationships with POC alone that create change in the world, but the synthesis of deeply felt relationships combined with community action in order to initiate transformation in the institutions and structures that are rife with oppressive and racialized systems (Warren, 2010). Added to this is what Warren (2010) calls the "want to" (p. 81). This "want to" or desire is not necessarily fueled by a moral imperative on the part of white-identified individuals to do good for POC but is rather a commitment to self-driven education coupled with the intense desire to educate other white-identified people (Warren, 2010). This is what separates the initial 'moral impulse' of engaging in environmental and social justice activism and pushes white-identified individuals to invest in the process and the outcome (Warren, 2010).

Problem Statement

Building effective coalitions between environmental and social justice action groups that work toward similar outcomes can be challenging and fraught with differing

opinions, ideologies, strategies, constructed identities, and motivations (Carney, 2016; J. E. Crowley, 2009; Florini, 2015; Mayer, 2009; Nagle, 2008; Nicholls, 2013; Paerregaard, 2014; K. J. Powell, 2016; Rickford, 2016; Stolle-McAllister, 2007; Yanay & Lifshitz-Oron, 2008). In particular, the success of relationships between predominantly white-identified groups and those of POC identity depends on the willingness of white-identified individuals to educate themselves on the issues and concerns experienced daily by communities of color, which are vulnerable to racialized policies and practices, both interpersonal and institutional (Blaagaard, 2011; Campbell, 2016; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Cross-Denny et al., 2015; R. Crowley, 2016; Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Schmitz, 2010). Unless white-identified individuals start reflecting on and understanding, through educating themselves, the ways in which they participate in and perpetuate institutional racism, they will be destined to repeat the very processes that support defunct structures, such as institutionalized white supremacy and other edifices of racism (Blaagaard, 2011; Campbell, 2016; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Cross-Denny et al., 2015; Dyce & Owusu-Ansah, 2016; Schmitz, 2010).

In light of these issues—building efficacious coalitions within environmental and social justice organizations between predominantly white-identified individuals and POC, while forging authentic relationships and pursuing self-education—I explore, through group observations and one-on-one semi-structured interviews, the processes by which white-identified individuals attempt the building of solidarity with POC and how these attempts are impacted by the three components of WG, WF, and CBRI.

Research Questions

1. How do WG, WF, and CBRI influence individual understanding of systemic racism for white-identified individuals participating in environmental/social justice activism?
2. How does awareness of systemic racism inform white-identified individuals' choices when interacting with communities of color in the field of environmental/social justice action?
3. How does individual involvement in environmental/social justice activism promote personal investment in the issues faced by historically underrepresented communities?
4. How are coalition-building relationships created between primarily white-identified organizations and those of POC identity in Santa Cruz County?

Methods

Research Context

The jurisdiction of Santa Cruz County, according to the 2017 United States Census and the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce, is 58.4% White, 33.4% Hispanic/Latino, 4.8% Asian, 1.8% American Native/Alaskan Native, 1.4% African-American, and 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Asian Pacific Islander (U.S. Census, 2017, as cited by the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce). Criteria for participating in interviews were as follows: participants must 1) self-identify as white, 2) consider themselves to be involved in social/racial/environmental justice activism/advocacy within Santa Cruz County for at least six months, and 3) be over 18 years of age. Given that Santa Cruz County is more than 50% white-identified/white, finding a sufficient number of participants who met these criteria was achievable. All individuals who participated in this study were either long-term members, or considered themselves members in some capacity, of various social, racial, and environmental justice organizations in Santa Cruz County. Not all participants lived full-time in Santa Cruz proper, but expressed a sense of connection and loyalty to the organization or group with which they identified.

White identity at the individual level. All individuals who participated in this study primarily self-identify as white, although a few participants did identify concurrently with other ethno-cultural markers such as Jewish, Celtic, Indigenous, etc. With that said, all individuals who took part in the interviews were ‘white passing’ or otherwise phenotypically looked white.

White identity at the organizational level. All of the individuals who participated in the interview process reported that the organizations to which they belonged were run and inhabited primarily by individuals of white identity. All of these groups focused on issues of social justice (climatic justice, environmental justice, housing justice, immigrant rights, DACA/Dreamers rights, etc.) and accomplished their goals through political platforms that desired to create change through activism. Although there are various Santa Cruz County organizations with some POC presence, interview participants reported that only very few of the participating organizations had POC in places of decision-making power or leadership; the mainstay of participation and decision-making strategies fell to primarily white-identified individuals. While this fact does make sense relative to Santa Cruz County demographics—with more than half of population identifying as white—the reality of predominantly white-identified leadership/membership has had significant impact on how these organizations build coalitions with communities of color in Santa Cruz County.

White identity at the regional level. It bears mentioning that there is a significant difference in demographic percentages between the North County (Santa Cruz city proper, Aptos, Capitola, Felton, Boulder Creek, etc.—primarily white-identified) and the South County (Watsonville/Pajaro Valley—primarily Latinx-identified, with a preponderance of agricultural workers, service industry workers, and immigrants). This demographic disparity within the county was a point of contention within Santa Cruz County activist circles, as many were struggling with how to integrate these two disparate communities into a more cohesive and effective social and political force.

Positionality of Researcher

Since the inquiry was centered on potentially emotionally charged behaviors when white-identified individuals are in the midst of building relationships with POC in the activism context, it was important to acknowledge my own positionality as a white-identified male conducting research within a community that was also predominantly white-identified. My own challenges as a white-identified individual—trying to advocate for and build coalition with communities of color—brought with it a desire to investigate other white-identified individuals' experiences within the realm of solidifying bonds of solidarity with POC. As a community-based researcher, educator, organizer, and social/environmental justice activist, my own struggles with positionality in activism provided me both with a portal into the activist community in Santa Cruz, California and a rich framework for the research itself.

Study Design

This study was purely exploratory in nature. A qualitative approach (interviews and observations) was used to explore the effectiveness of coalition-building between predominantly white-identified and POC-identified groups. The research took place over a seven-month period, from May 2017 through November 2017.

Group observations. In tandem with the interview process, I gathered field notes from observations of eight different group/coalition meetings and ended up using only six of them to triangulate with—and give context to—the data gathered from the interviews. Group field observations were conducted during small gatherings or working groups—workshops, board meetings, etc.; all group observations lasted approximately one hour.

Semi-structured interviews. The purpose of conducting semi-structured interview sessions was to extract personal narratives that would reveal individual histories, activist engagement experiences, personal obstacles, and problematic issues encountered by white-identified individuals when attempting to advocate for communities of color. The data from the semi-structured interviews were used to more fully understand the contextual nuances and current motivations for white-identified individuals who were not only seeking avenues to educate themselves as to their participation within institutionalized racism, but who were also dedicated to the building of coalitions with groups of POC identity. The interviews provided a lens to explore the components of WG, WF, and CBRI. Interviews took place in neutral spaces such as conference rooms or library study rooms. 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted over a seven-month period from May 2017 to November 2017, with each interview lasting from 45 to 90 minutes.

Participant Recruitment & Privacy Measures

Group observations. Group observation field notes were recorded from June 2017 to September 2017 during meetings, workshops, and lectures. All attendees, including leaders and members, gave verbal consent for observations. Observational field notes were only recorded upon general consensus of all individuals present at the group meeting, workshop, or lecture after I described the purpose for the research project. If consensus was not reached, then no notes were recorded.

Observational field notes did not include any personal identifying information (PII): that is, no names, personal characteristics or organization names were written down.

Field notes were used only as a means to investigate overall behavioral patterns, modes of interaction, and emergent themes indicative of the ways that white-identified individuals approach coalition-building with POC. No one person was attributed to a given observation field note. Only general observations indicative of behavior, remarkable interactions, or communication styles were recorded.

Semi-structured interviews. Potential interviewees were initially contacted through postings on a social media site created for this research project. Snowball sampling was also used, and later became the main approach in obtaining individuals for participation in interviews. Snowball sampling (sometimes referred to as chain sampling, chain-referral sampling, or simply referral sampling) is a method that uses word-of-mouth or recommendations of existing participants as a recruiting mechanism for future interviewees.

Those who chose to participate in the interview process were given a consent form that was reviewed together with the researcher before being signed. Potential participants were also informed that the consent form was not a contract and that they were by no means obligated to continue in the interview process. If participants so chose, they could stop the interview at any time, and any information that was garnered by that point would not be included in the final thesis.

Pseudonyms were used in the final published research data in order to ensure the confidentiality of the individual being interviewed.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Group field observations. Group observation field notes were transcribed by hand. These field notes were then coded for emergent themes using thematic analysis techniques; the notes provided contextualization and a framework to better understand the depth and breadth of the interviewed individuals' motivations, intentions, and ability to form coalitions with groups of POC identity.

All notes (including the notes taken during interviews) once transcribed and organized, were then transferred onto the researcher's dual password protected computer and arranged into files which were also password-protected. All hard-copy notes, written notes from interviews, field observations, transcribed interviews, and voice files were then destroyed/erased/deleted after all data were analyzed and completed at the end of the finalized research project.

The analysis of the group observations and emergent thematic coding followed a similar approach to the one-on-one interviews but relied more on the ways that group participants communicated their understanding, or lack thereof, concerning the issues that POC face in the midst of their own day-to-day lives, activism, and coalition-building. Sometimes it was what was said or the way it was received by others present in the public space, particularly POC. Other times, it was what was *not* said, that was the most revealing. General observations were gathered that noted communication styles, body language, and various subtle verbal and non-verbal cues.

Interviews. All interviews were recorded on a SONY MP3 voice recorder and transcribed by me, the primary researcher. All recorded interviews were downloaded onto

a dual password computer and all files of interviews were also password protected to ensure that any identifying information collected during the interview process would be secure. After download was completed, all recorded interviews were erased from the SONY MP3 recorder to further ensure privacy of sensitive identifying material.

Interviews were coded for emergent themes using thematic analysis techniques. The interviews were delineated into three sections that centered on the subject's experience concerning communities and organizations of color, both on a personal level and through their encounters in the field of activism. Interview questions were categorized as follows:

1. Earlier life experiences: the personal, familial, world events that shaped one's views; initial encounters with POC; close and intimate relations with POC; how this informed one's experiences, etc.
2. Present life experiences: demographics of and relationship to/within social circle; social interactions that center around contemporaneous topics such as Black Lives Matter; immigration, the post-2016 presidential election, etc.; the difference in dynamics in these situations with white-identified friends as opposed to POC, etc.
3. Present life experiences relative to social justice action work: challenges experienced while engaged in activism; personal experiences that center directly on the dynamics between white-identified individuals and POC; personal experiences that focus on one's goals in relation to organizational goals and how that may inform how one's participation; overlapping individual and group experiences when encountering or personally experiencing WF/G, etc.

Results

I include an interpretation section following each observation session (instead of deferring it for the discussion section). I did this with the intent of communicating the immediate feelings and responses that I had as a participant researcher during the observational sessions and wanted that to be reflected in the data. I felt this approach was necessary to maintain the integrity of the research itself.

Group Observations

Working in coalition with immigrant and undocumented communities or POC communities has its own challenges within today's political and social climate. The research revealed, however, that being a white-identified individual wanting to engage with or advocate for POC communities in a meaningful way can bring its own set of obstacles. Language barriers and assumptions about what POC might need based on limited information can be problematic; fear and mistrust that immigrant and undocumented POC can have for those not from their own social network can pose fairly difficult, if not impossible, odds (Abrego, 2018; Bejarano & Shepherd, 2018; Cebulko, 2018; Gonzales & Burciaga, 2018; Martinez & Salazar, 2018; Mendez & Schmalzbauer, 2018; Silver, 2018; Terriquez, Brenes, & Lopez, 2018).

The following data were gathered from meetings, forums, and other smaller group-related activities, such as workshops, activist planning meetings, smaller public social justice forums, etc. The gathered data focus on communication styles and level of (or lack of) receptivity among participants. Recorded elements include: conversations that transpired, body language, reactions/responses, demographics of attendees, themes/focus

of the meeting itself, and various other prompts and signals that transpired during these observations. All types of responses were noted, both overt responses and those perceived by the researcher to be subverted. Themes were then extracted from the field observations: some themes fell under the auspices of WG, WF, and/or CBRI; other themes stood on their own.

The demographic distribution of the group participants for the various observations varied slightly from session to session, but for larger group settings, all were within an approximate ratio of 70%/30% or 80%/20%, with the greater proportion consisting of white-identified individuals and the lesser consisting of POC. In smaller group settings, the numbers were even lower when it came to the presence of POC in a particular meeting. This was reflective of the predominant white demographic in Santa Cruz County, but also could be attributed to the emerging themes from both the group observations as well as the group-related experiences reported by the white-identified participants in the one-on-one interviews.

Session #1 (workshop). This group consisted of sixteen participants total including the presenters—twelve white-identified individuals (9 female, 3 male) and four of POC identity (2 female, 2 male). The group's focus was a presentation made by a Bay Area activist/advocacy organization on the issues of policing and how certain problematic and violent events, both historically and in our current political climate, have led to the mass incarceration of primarily Black and Brown males.

POC were clustered on one end of a semi-circle and the white-identified individuals were seated opposite to the POC, including the POC-identified presenter. This seating

arrangement was maintained, throughout the entire presentation/workshop. Also noted was who responded to which question(s). Most often, when questions were geared toward an individual's experience with the police, POC were the primary responders, with the exception of one white-identified male. His experience was drug-related, but not relayed in such a traumatic way as were the POC experiences.

In addition to experiences of police-related issues, were the concerns that POC expressed regarding undocumented community members and DACA recipients whose permits were about to expire. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was a major concern for POC participants, if not for themselves, for their friends and family members. One Latino participant commented on the fears that surface when young high school students come home only to find their parents gone. The abduction of family members perpetrated by ICE has traumatized many Latinx/Chicanx community members in Santa Cruz County. "I can't tell you how many stories that I have heard about... the ripping apart of families and kids left without any family to hold onto..."

White-identified responses, for the most part, expressed concern. However, none of the white-identified individuals present, except one, could relate this to their own experience nor could they speak about it in such a way that they could communicate the experience of someone that they knew who might be a victim of such discriminatory police actions. White-identified individuals also did not pursue any line of questioning, when asked to do so, that might lead to a better understanding of such fearful encounters which were talked about as daily concerns by many POC, immigrant, and DACA recipient community members.

Session #1 interpretation. A white-identified individual's lack of personal experience or knowledge of someone within his or her social circle, who may be experiencing these particular issues with police, can be interpreted as insular and restrictive. In addition to this, white-identified individual's reluctance to press forward with questions to better understand the experiences of POC, immigrant, and DACA recipients could be understood as indicative of the guilt and/or fear of not asking the correct question or appearing naïve in the face of such discriminatory practices in policing. If this is so, it plays into the WG and WF components that are part of the white-identified experience around these concerns when voiced by POC, immigrant, and/or DACA recipients in public spaces.

Session #2 (workshop). This group observation session took place at a forum that had at its core a panel of six people—five POC and one white-identified individual—who were engaging the attendees in a conversation about what it was like to be a POC living in Santa Cruz County. The purpose of the event was to introduce and explore some difficult concepts around issues of racism and how the practice of whiteness contributes to systems of oppression that POC experience on a daily basis in Santa Cruz, California. The majority of attendees were white passing/white-identified; in addition, there were various attendees who fell within the demographics of POC: twelve (12) Black/African American, thirteen (13) Latinx, six (6) Middle Eastern, and four (4) Asian/Asian American.

Although it was difficult to gauge individual's facial expressions and frontal body language due to my placement in the room, one remarkable instance stood out. At the

conclusion of the forum, which opened the event for that evening's program, one of the Black/African American male panel speakers expressed a concern to the attendees. He was troubled by the thought that after the forum section of the program had concluded, that most, if not all, of the white-identified attendees would leave the event prior to the second half of the evening, which was dedicated to networking and engaging with POC activists and artists. He requested that they not leave before the event was over, as it would only reaffirm his personal experience of a neoliberal and predominantly white demographic of Santa Cruz, which he felt was responsible for the lack of investment and support of POC communities during this time of political and social upheaval. Many of the white passing/white-identified individuals in the room appeared uncomfortable, disturbed, or caught off guard by this particular comment. The Black/African American male speaker noticed their discomfort and encouraged white-identified attendees to stay and interact with the POC activists and artists in order to ask questions/build solidarity.

Session #2 interpretation. Indeed, regardless of the Black/African American panelist's exhortations, the majority of white passing/white-identified individuals exited the event upon the conclusion of the forum section of the program, leaving a majority of POC behind to mill about in the vestiges of what could have been an authentic opportunity for white-identified individuals to engage with POC activists, artists, and community members thus initiating mutually cohesive bonds of solidarity. This incident spoke volumes to the overall issues that all the POC panel members had mentioned during the forum, in conveying their experiences of a highly racialized Santa Cruz County.

Session #3 (film screening/workshop). The next set of observations were made during a viewing of a film/documentary that was addressing issues surrounding the inherent racialized nature of our national historic narrative of African slavery, Indigenous genocide, and forcible land appropriation of the Mexican people that has given rise to the present level of systemic racism in our political, economic, educational, and social institutions in the United States.

Again, the demographic that attended the event was predominantly white-identified; although many POC were present as well, more so than in other group observations that I had conducted. Twenty-one (21) Black/African American, fifteen (15) Asian/Asian American, twelve (12) Latinx, and four (4) Middle Eastern community members were in attendance. There were some noticeable connections and/or possible relationships between some of the white-identified individuals at the event and POC that were observable by certain brief conversations or vocal/tactile exchanges, but these were far and few in-between. Most of the POC present sat together, either in twos or alone.

During the social documentary part of the event, especially when racially charged images or exchanges transpired on the screen, I noted visceral reactions by many white-identified individuals—even disgust or surprise, whereas with the POC who were witnessing the same images, no one flinched, moved in their seat uncomfortably, turned away in disgust, or had any noticeable reaction.

Session #3 interpretation. I found that this difference in reactions between white-identified and POC attendees could be directly attributed to the responses in the Q&A section of the program where many of the questions and comments from white-identified

individuals were laced with embarrassment, saddened guilt, and utter surprise that systemic racism is so deeply rooted, not only in our historical narratives, but also in our present-day institutions. Perhaps most refreshingly, some white-identified individuals openly expressed anger at what they were seeing.

All POC who spoke were voicing their own experiences, both in the past and present, in a matter-of-fact tone that belied, at least to me, the daily offenses that POC encounter—where one needs to grow a thick skin over the years so as not to let it obstruct one’s life entirely. Some white-identified individuals present responded verbally with surprise or disbelief that a POC’s reaction could be anything other than total anger, but as one POC in the room verbalized, “... living with this reality on a daily basis either builds fortitude or contempt. And sometimes... a little bit of both.”

Session #4 (group meeting). This observation session was by invitation through a local, all POC-led group (Latinx, Chicanx, and Indigenous) that advocates for their community through facilitating events, providing safety and security for protests and rallies, and teaching youth of color strategies in self-empowerment. One of the issues that dominated the evening was the confrontational attitude of a primarily white-identified activist group in Santa Cruz who wanted to lead the charge in protesting a local construction company that was bidding on the project for building the wall between Mexico and the United States.

The POC-led group respectfully requested that they be able to take up the mantle for the protest, since the issues and concerns were the most impactful to their community members (rather than the predominately white-identified community). This led to a

politically charged split between not only the white-identified group and the POC-led group, but within the ranks of both groups as well, as criticism was leveled from members within each group as to how collaboration, if any, would or could be achieved.

Session #4 interpretation. This type of politically-charged split was a common thread in many encounters between North County (predominantly white) and South County (predominantly Latinx/Chicanx and immigrant agricultural and service industry workers). POC-led groups desired to be the primary advocate for their own communities, while white-identified groups would either want to facilitate, take charge, or be intricately involved in the process and outcome of a protest or rally that addressed the issues and concerns of a POC community. Frustration seemed prevalent throughout the meeting regarding this rift, but also noticeable was the nonchalant nature of POC and how the rift was received as a commonplace occurrence between POC-led activism and predominantly white-identified-led activist groups.

Session #5 (orientation/group meeting). This session took place with a gathering of predominantly white-identified individuals during an orientation for community outreach and education in response to the ICE raids that had occurred within the immigrant and undocumented community in Santa Cruz. The meeting was held at a local community center; there were fourteen (14) individuals present: thirteen (13) white-identified women and one (1) Latina/Chicana woman. During the meeting, there were concerns that came to light regarding how much contact each of the attendees had with individuals from the Latinx/Chicanx community overall. This was met with confusion, as no one, other than the Latina/Chicana woman and the two facilitators, had any contact with any members

from the community in question. One individual did have a Latino gardener/landscaper who worked on her yard; what brought this particular attendee to the meeting was that her gardener had not showed up since the recent ICE raid.

Session #5 interpretation. What was most troubling with this particular scenario, outside of the lack of personal contact or engagement between white-identified attendees and any members from the immigrant/undocumented community was the noticeable dependency of the white-identified attendees at the orientation on the knowledge base and personal experience of the one Latina/Chicana woman in the room. Unfortunately, this tends to be a common theme in much of the activism in Santa Cruz County where a few POC find themselves as placeholders in facilitating communication between white-identified community members and POC communities, fielding a multitude questions from white-identified individuals, and more often than not, perceived as a monolith (e.g. one person's experience speaks for the whole) to their communities, both by white-community members and by members in their own community.

Session #6 (group meeting). This group field observation session took place at a community-meeting center where the focus of the gathering centered on immigrant and undocumented rights and fears when encountering ICE infiltration in Santa Cruz and within their communities. The purpose of the meeting was to inform affected community members (immigrant/undocumented) on recommended strategies when encountering ICE; the legal recourse, the rights, and community support that is available; and how to access those resources when the need is felt. The meeting was held primarily in Spanish for Spanish-speaking attendees. This was the intent of the meeting from the very start;

individuals from the activist community and those wanting to advocate for the communities impacted by the ICE incursions were welcome but were also informed prior to the meeting (through social media and other avenues of communication) that the main core of the meeting was for the impacted communities, not necessarily to facilitate white-identified inclusion.

The attendees consisted of a primarily white-identified demographic with about a third of the total overall gathering representing those from the immigrant/undocumented community. During the event—which took the form of social documentaries, Power Point presentations, and interactive discussions—noticeable resistance was expressed by white-identified individuals in the room concerning their discomfort at having Spanish as the primary language used in communicating to the attendees. In addition to this issue raised by the white-identified attendees, concern was expressed regarding the apparent lack of immigrant and undocumented individuals present at the event.

Session #6 interpretation. Again, here is another example showing the repercussions of the lack of personal connection to the POC communities for which white-identified individuals wish to advocate; this lack of connection/understanding can hinder the full comprehension of why immigrant/undocumented community members might not be present on a weekday evening (immigrant farmworkers often work fifteen-hour days during the week). The observation also revealed how some white-identified attendees might want to centralize themselves as the focal point of the event, even when it was clearly intended for a Spanish-speaking audience from the outset.

Semi-Structured One-on-One Interviews

Figure 1 arranges the spectrum of emergent themes that manifested throughout the interviewing process. Even though they follow an ordinal representation of one (1) through eighteen (18), they also start to weave a narrative. This narrative makes itself evident in the stories that each participant recounts and is a testament to the deeply felt and oftentimes difficult negotiation of their own whiteness.

Emergent Themes (Research Question 1)	Emergent Themes (Research Question 1 cont.)
1. Lacking Social Network Empathy/Support	11. Predominance of White-Identified Individuals in Power
2. Social Network Lacks Understanding of the Perpetuation of Racism	12. Making Room for POC
3. Social Network Lacks Understanding of Intersectional Racial Issues	13. Listening to the Experiences of POC
4. The Triggering of WF	
5. CBRI	Emergent Themes (Research Question 2)
6. Encounters/Realizations that Initiated Self-Driven Education	14. Checking of One's Privilege/Positionality
7. WG/Shame	15. Challenges to One's Activism/Personal Life
8. Awareness of Positionality	16. Decentralizing 'Whiteness'
9. The Institutionalized Nature of Racism	Emergent Themes (Research Questions 3 and 4)
10. Performance of 'Whiteness'	17. The Forging of Relationships with POC
	18. Immersion in POC Communities

Figure 1. Emergent themes from semi-structured interviews.

Research Q1. How do WG, WF, and CBRI influence the understanding of systemic racism for white-identified individuals participating in environmental/social justice activism?

A great number of the emergent themes in Figure 1 came to light in the first research question. Interesting were the ways that all of the participants interpreted their own experiences in social and environmental justice activism and compared them to the ways that others experienced them, particularly in public space. The participants also expressed feelings of disconnection or frustration from their immediate social networks (friends and

family) and tended to glean support through their relationships built within activism, both from other like-minded white-identified activists and POC. Their pursuit in educating themselves with regard to issues of racism and the growing awareness of their own positionality of whiteness fueled much of their own engagement in the education of others, especially other white-identified individuals.

Situations that triggered the constituent elements of WF, WG, and CBRI, in themselves and others, were reflected upon both through personal histories and present experiences in their activism. This led to conversations regarding frustration and disappointment over the proliferation of white-identified individuals in social and environmental justice activism in Santa Cruz, along with the minimal involvement of POC. Most of this concern grew out of many of the participants' desire and need to include more POC and troubleshooting strategies on how that was to be achieved.

Most provocative were the recollections, both in personal histories and in present experiences of activism, of the listening to the experiences and narratives of POC. This was vitally important in the forging of authentic relationships that participants used on a deeply personal level in their activism. This was key in the building of solidarity between themselves and POC in context of the group, organization, or coalition with which they considered themselves to be affiliated.

Themes 1-5: Lacking social empathy/support (1); social network lacks understanding of perpetuation of racism (2); social network lacks understanding of intersectional racial issues (3); triggering of WF (4); CBRI (5). Many participants in the one-on-one interviews expressed a sense of disappointment and disconnection when it came to attempts at communicating their activism, and what it meant to them and to their

immediate social networks, including their families. ‘Arthur’ expressed a sense of feeling “split” as if he was living two separate lives, in a way.

[My immediate social circle] is mostly white-identified. They are not too eager to find out what it is I’m doing in [organization], which is an organization to overcome racism. ...the response that I feel is split. Part of me, a whole part of my energy, is dedicated to this course [in my life]. You see... and yet it’s something that I really cannot share with a lot of enthusiasm because there is not a lot of interest in it, so I feel split. (Arthur, personal communication, 2017).

‘Alan,’ a young graduate student new to the activist scene in Santa Cruz County, along with ‘Milton,’ a lifelong activist in his sixties, both felt that their families were less than understanding not only of their engagement in activism, but also of the roles that white-identified individuals fulfill in the perpetuation of racialized structural inequities. “I would say [that with white-identified people] there’s more sense that things will be fine” (Alan, personal communication, 2017). ‘Alan’ also expressed a strong discomfort when sharing space with what he termed “right-leaning” members of his family. “... but I felt like other family members who are much more right-leaning, or just right-wing, I didn’t feel like I wanted to be in the same room as them...” (Alan, personal communication, 2017). Milton says:

My sister prides herself as being someone who doesn’t see race. You know, the type of person who thinks that the problem is all about some bad people, bad cops, and people who have to learn to be like her and just not notice race. Somehow *Black Lives Matter* came up. We [our organization and family] had been to, actually, a really big rally in San Francisco a few weeks before and I don’t think we mentioned it... but *Black Lives Matter* came up and she was very dismissive. I mean, dismissive face and dismissive attitude about the whole thing. We both got very angry, but my wife exploded. Exploded... (Milton, personal communication, 2017).

‘Valerie,’ a mother in her fifties, had strong feelings when it came to obstacles encountered when trying to talk to other white-identified people in her social network and family.

Often, the response from this particular individual [about racism] is, “this is the way people are, people are not going to change. This [racism] is not going to change.” When we’re talking about structural racism and interpersonal racism, their view is that’s kind of like human nature and people aren’t going to change! (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

‘Natalie,’ a late thirties-something activist involved in the local agricultural movement and food justice movement states that others in her circle “lack a sense of responsibility around racism...” (Natalie, personal communication, 2017). and that they have little or no reflexivity around the issues concerning racism. She continues by expressing the discontent that her transgendered white-identified partner feels when she tries to engage him about certain issues of racism and the activism that she is involved in.

I do feel within some of my community that they lack a sense of responsibility around racism. If they don’t believe they’re racist, then they don’t need to do any work around movements to shift individual racist actions or systemic racism in our country... or even with their children... be educating their children about its existence. ... It’s interesting... all the layers of prejudice and oppression and how it comes out. My partner is white, so he’s gotten upset feeling like there’s so much attention paid to racism by me and by the world at large or his community at large or his peers and not as much as being trans [gendered]. He said, “There’s no scholarship for me at Cabrillo.” Sometimes I can be supportive to him in that place, but I’ve also really... My response “Our parents were your scholarship.” He’s had a lot of privilege. It’s interesting the intersection of being a part of a stigmatized group, but having advantages and monetary advantages and passing advantages and all kinds of things” (Natalie, personal communication, 2017).

‘Alan’ does mention that although he had difficulty in discussing with his mother-in-law issues pertaining to the *Black Lives Matter* movement, that she has managed to now

understand, if only in a small way, the intricacies of why the *Black Lives Matter* movement exists.

There is one conversation I should bring up, which is a conversation about *Black Lives Matter* with my mother-in-law. Apparently, she's swung 100% toward super pro-*Black Lives Matter*, and she didn't get it at all [at first]. And she's liberal... member of a Unitarian church and all that... and it was just kind of a matter of well... talking to her very calmly, I think. That's what I try... that's how a lot of those conversations have gone that I've tried to do... not to condescend or just say facts... (Alan, personal communication, 2017).

Although 'Alan' still experiences obstacles in conversation with his other white-identified friends, especially when it comes to sharing his political and ideological views, he also feels guilty or shamed if during these conversations with POC friends if he feels that he has misspoken or said something he shouldn't have.

If they don't go so well, it's really frustrating. Yeah, especially with the white-identified friends... it's extremely frustrating. If they don't go so well with non-white identified friends, I often feel like it's my fault or like I do something stupid (Alan, personal communication, 2017).

'Martha,' a single mom in her thirties, talks about the WF and racialized comments that she encounters when engaging other parents about the reasons why she decided to send her daughter to a more diverse school district. The defensiveness that she comes up against when she questions other parents about their choices of why they feel they'd rather send their children to a predominantly white-identified school is also disturbing for her.

You know, it's like they just get really defensive about 'what does it mean that you're saying that you don't want your kids in the schools with kids who are brown?' Like, that's what you're saying. You know? Then they get defensive about parents should have a choice where they want their kids to go. Then we get stuck there, you know? ... We never really get to actually talk about the reality in those schools, because there's like a stuck

point. ... Rather than, what are those schools actually like and what was your student actually getting... or what would your kid actually get from going there? Like, what are the positives? Because they don't want to look beyond their biases... I guess about race" (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

Theme 6: Encounters/realizations that initiated self-driven education. Self-driven education is a powerful emergent theme that seems to underscore the continuing process of discovering how a participant's positionality has great impact on their activism, sometimes to their advantage and other times to their detriment. But the need to self-educate always drives them forward in their need to understand themselves on a deeper level and how their performance of 'whiteness' has contributed to the edifice of racism, both historically and presently.

'Arthur' was moved so much by listening to Michelle Alexander's audiobook, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-Blindness*, that it awakened him to the immensity and complexity of the problem of racism. It moved him towards taking action and eventually into social and racial justice activism.

Well, one of the things that motivated me was listening to [the] Michelle Alexander lecture on *The New Jim Crow* ... This has been really my awakening because I must admit that I was not really aware before I listened to her and the size of the problem. So that was an event that triggered a change in me" ... That was an opportunity for me to kind of step outside of being a majority person, a person of some white privilege, whether I realized it or not... into somebody who was significantly not of that influence or power, decision-making structure. So it was an eye-opener for me, even at that age (Arthur, personal communication, 2017).

'Timothy,' a seasoned activist in his seventies who worked with Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in the past, expressed what prompted him to enter the field of activism when he was leaving for his first year of college. Being in community with a

demographic made up of predominantly POC, he would hear all sorts of stories and experiences from his friends and college classmates that motivated him towards being more involved in issues of racism, ranging from economic justice to migrant farmworker rights.

And I remember in my room one day saying, “I will never find out who I truly am until I really work with and understand poor people and people who aren’t my skin color” ... Talking to individuals and especially people of color... spending enough time with people of color, where eventually it’s going to come up in one way or another... like something is going to happen... something’s going to be in the news or whatever. And you hear this terrible story from someone you know, and then it’s like... “Oh yeah... this is really terrible.” That’s for the most part what prompts it [informing oneself]. I think... or what prompted it for me (Timothy, personal communication, 2017).

For ‘Alan,’ the stories heard by him from POC friends and acquaintances were overwhelming as they expressed their need for white-identified awareness and support in the ongoing struggle for equity. In particular, following on the heels of the police killings of Black men and women such as Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Sarah Bland, and Trayvon Martin, “It was just general fear coupled with [POC] saying... ‘It doesn’t feel safe for us to be out, continuing to work in the streets. We need our white friends to also be out there’” (Alan, personal communication, 2017).

‘Laura,’ a racial justice activist in her sixties, contextualizes her activism history with the present-day experiences of POC. She found these particularly frustrating, expressing anger and disappointment that “It’s 2017 and we are still going through it...” (Laura, personal communication, 2017). This anxiety drove her in the past, and still does to this day, in the journey of educating herself on the ways in which her positionality and ‘whiteness’ informs her activism.

... and so I was just exposed to an understanding that racial discrimination was a fact. Some of the real emotional impacts were... I was born in 1957... so when you saw it on the news that people were being hosed in the Civil Rights movement, I saw that at a young age ... I think it was the *Black Lives Matter* movement... it must have been that was already going on. I can't remember when [exactly] Ferguson happened, but I just know I wanted to get educated and I wasn't (Laura, personal communication, 2017).

'Valerie' recounts an event in school when she was younger, in the 1970's, when racialized slurs and comments created hostile and uncomfortable environments.

"I remember in sixth grade, someone said the 'N' word in class. And a teacher, who I thought was the nicest teacher... she got so mad... she was so angry. I didn't think I'd ever seen an adult that angry.... at least not in school. [She was] angry in a controlled way" (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

This was her first experience that signaled to her that racism was a very real and dangerous issue, not only in the ways that it created discord in her school, but also for the POC who were on the receiving end of such vitriol.

As 'Valerie' got more involved with community work as she grew older, she realized that the racism that she bore witness to was extremely pervasive in many communities. This was catalytic for her and forced her to become more involved in community-based organizations that worked toward racial, social, and economic justice.

...And the staff, there were a lot of African Americans on staff too. So, just the whole... there was this resentment against "why we were bringing people [Bosnian Muslims] from other countries here when we have all these problems?" And then there would be, specifically Eastern Europeans, a lot of times would be, "Why did you put me in an apartment in this Black neighborhood? It's a ghetto. You are mistreating me. I deserve better." ... The whole trying to make sense of everything [refugees, government pressure, racialized perceptions, etc.]. Why was this happening? Why are parents afraid to let their kids out to play? Why does this happen? Why are schools so bad? Why is there so much injustice, really? How did it all happen? And what can you do when

injustice and suffering doesn't always make people more noble? (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

Also disturbing for Valerie are the ways in which Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) infiltrates immigrant communities in her neighborhood and tears families apart, many of whom she knows in some capacity.

So, one time, anyway... [a female neighbor's male] friend was in the hospital and then he didn't come around for a while. And when she said, "I haven't seen him in a while. I'm a really worried," it was right after the ICE raid. So it was like "wow" ... It's kind of just... like this is real. This affects real people that I know. So I feel like I don't... I mean, it's just like... have you seen it? It's not a lot of political theory that I... You know? We just talk about it going on, just like the minutiae of life and her kids (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

Theme 7: WG/shame. Guilt and shame played a large part in past and present experiences for white-identified participants. For many, it signaled a time for re-evaluating their role or positionality regarding what might have seemed a harmless or unintentional comment to a POC friend or co-worker. This brought up feelings of remorse and the need to understand their unconscious motivations underlying their seemingly innocuous comment(s).

For 'Cynthia,' it was the stories she talked about when she was growing up, first with a babysitter who was a friend of the family, then in her college years. She seemed remarkably saddened and 'far away' when she recounted these stories, as if she was reliving them. It seemed particularly embarrassing and difficult for her.

I remember when I was being babysat by my mom's friend next door, I remember that there was a smell in their house. I think it was some kind of powder or something like that... some sort of cosmetic smell. Now I know that that's probably what it was, or maybe some hair product. I remember saying something like "there's a weird smell, a bad smell," some kind of complaint about the way it smelled, and the family seemed really

uncomfortable, and [I remember] me feeling like I'd said something wrong (Cynthia, personal communication, 2017).

I was the only white person in this group [of college students]. My [friends] are taking pennies... and they're so hot that they're sticky because it's a hot night in Southern California... and they're sticking this money to their foreheads ... I said, kind of like in the tone of [the movie we saw], something like, 'You mean Black people's skin is sticky?' or something like that. Again, it was another one of those moments, like when I was three years old... "uh oh... I am in a social disaster. I've said something wrong" (Cynthia, personal communication, 2017).

'Paula,' a woman in her seventies who is a Buddhist practitioner, tells a story about an African American/Black college roommate. Paula now regrets not talking to her friend about the tremendous pressure that Paula witnessed her going through during the "racial unrest" of the sixties. Recounting this brought up feelings of guilt and remorse for not having been more supportive in those times.

I've been able to talk to [a different African American friend later in life] about racial issues in ways that I could never talk to my college roommate because I had no idea. It was in the late 60's. We were the class of 1970, the year of the Kent State shootings... [there was] lots of racial unrest in those years. My freshman roommate ended up being student body president at our school. She was an amazing person. Until senior year, I never learned how to [broach the subject] ... I was so afraid of offending [her]. And I never spoke to her about racial issues at all. (Paula, personal communication, 2017).

Themes 8-10: Awareness of positionality (8), the institutionalized nature of racism (9), performance of 'whiteness' (10). In these interviews, the most prominent themes were: 1) awareness of one's positionality as a white-identified person, 2) how this plays into the perpetuation of racialized systems in our country, and 3) how exactly 'whiteness' is performed and reproduced socially.

'Natalie' comments on the pervasiveness of racism in what one would think to be a progressive industry, the local agricultural food movement in Santa Cruz County:

I guess a chronic situation that I think [is] pretty interesting and that not a lot of people have exposure to is in Santa Cruz, or maybe not a lot of white people, is the small agricultural industry that I'm in and how it's really thick with racism and doesn't acknowledge it a lot (Natalie, personal communication, 2017).

'Timothy' is very clear on the roots of racism in our country's history and our present-day issues of racial inequity. He describes this blind spot as being outside of the white-identified experience. "It's structural... it's structural racism. [White] people don't understand that certain ways of thinking [and feeling] are being excluded because it's just not in their experience" (Timothy, personal communication, 2017).

'Sam,' a housing justice activist who works extensively with the houseless community as well as the homeless community, explains why this blind spot is also associated with colorblindness:

Well, the first rule is not to be colorblind... because colorblind is a misnomer as you know, and we all know. But... to have a deeper understanding of what it means to be, in a white privileged society, a person of color... you can never truly know that [as a white person], but you can have an understanding of it... and I think everybody should take a training (Sam, personal communication, 2017).

'Daniel,' an activist who advocates for the immigrant/Dreamer community in Santa Cruz County, explains to me the nuances of activist vocabulary, and how it is used in white spaces and POC spaces. Grappling with power and privilege, and understanding how they impact being a white-identified activist who works with POC and other oppressed community members, can be a sensitive and delicate process.

Oh... virtue signaling is the phenomenon by which... if you're dealing with [someone on] a spectrum of oppression and you are more in the spectrum of privilege than oppression... It's a straight person talking to a queer person, or a white person talking to a Black person, or a man talking to a woman... the person on the more privileged side saying things that

demonstrate... “Look how great an ally I am to this group of people.” You can do it in the context of just members of the privileged group or in a mixed setting. I try to avoid it because I experience it as an indirect way of seeking approval... (Daniel, personal communication, 2017).

‘Milton’ comments on the differences in philosophy and approach in activism between organizations with which he has worked in coalition. He centers on the issues in and around race that seem to be the boiling undercurrent that fuels much of his activism as well as that of the individuals he works with in other activist circles.

So [other white-identified individuals in other organizations] agree on the problem of how political spaces tend to be white in Santa Cruz ... They might disagree about how to do something about that ... or on the seriousness of the problem. But there haven’t really been arguments that I’ve seen about the fact that there is one race [that] divides us in Santa Cruz... and that it’s part of the system, it’s part of the way that the system works here... and that it’s a problem... that it’s related to privilege, and that it’s related to immigrant versus non-immigrant to a large extent in Santa Cruz. Other things as well... it’s about race and culture (Milton, personal communication, 2017).

‘Alice,’ a journalist, activist, and adjunct professor at a local college, talks about the conversations she has had with POC friends and colleagues regarding race, class, and economics as they relate to access for white-identified students. She comments on white-identified parents’ social capital and positionality that place their children in a space to be able to gain access to alternative education, in particular, after-school programs.

So all [the] after school programs are, mostly, going to end up being people who can afford it. So you’re, without being intentionally racist, you’re being racist. So I was explaining this to someone who was a person of color and they were like, ‘Well maybe they don’t understand that. Like, you need to explain that.’ I’m like, ‘Well yeah, I will explain it.’ But [...] we still need to do better (Alice, personal communication, 2017).

‘Arthur’ ruminates on the reasons that many POC have difficulty in gaining access to decent healthcare, viable jobs, and positions of influence in local government. This is also

a problem he explains in maintaining or recruiting many POC for local activist groups. The daily oppressive circumstances for POC tend to create what he calls a “wounding.” (Arthur, personal communication, 2017). He continues by saying that because of the social mobility of white-identified people, they are freed up to be more present in positions of influence and power. He understands this ‘performance of whiteness’ to be perpetuated through the creation of structural circumstances that ensure that white-identified individuals maintain this power.

Because sometimes I feel like if the world had an insight that I had recently... is the level of functionality that is [not] present and that I realized that some of the folks are non-white, either Black or Latino, specifically, those people [who] are struggling in their own life as a result of racism. And that struggle is laced with wounding... and in a way [they] not able to function very well ... It’s leading me a little bit in a corner maybe because part of the white superiority is this scene like... “we can take control, we can organize, we can get things done. And in a way... it’s gonna hurt” ... One of the features is the ... internalized white superiority. And I realized that the reality of that is that I’m working with people in a way [who] are being wounded. Wounded through this overall system of oppression. So, in a way... part of me wants [POC] to be more taking on leadership roles and being more active and to follow their lead in terms of ending oppression. Because in a way by [white-identified individuals] being more in a leadership capacity that we perpetuate this thing of white superiority (Arthur, personal communication, 2017).

‘Arthur’ goes on to tell the story of a fellow POC activist who is struggling with his health and his economic circumstances. This makes it very difficult for him to show up to meetings and other events. “I feel that this fellow is... I think he’s leaving on disability. Very minimal amount of money to deal with and his rent increased. It’s one of those houses where the landlord is taking advantage of the situation” (Arthur, personal communication, 2017).

‘Valerie’ recounts the story of an immigrant neighbor who is accosted by police without provocation. Later, she talks about another neighbor who has a Latino friend who occasionally stores his belongings in her shed and also visits her. She responds angrily about her white-identified neighbor who surveils all the activity with cameras and videotapes everything, which makes everyone uncomfortable with such an invasion of privacy.

“And the way policing happens... like one neighbor, one day he was outside with this kid and cops came up on either side of the house with their guns drawn, with no warning whatsoever. He had to grab his kid and run inside and just... you know?” (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

“Well, I guess a neighbor, one of my immediate neighbors, she has a [Latino] friend who comes around and stays with her. I think he kind of really doesn’t have a place to stay so much. And he leaves things in her storage shed [in the yard], and it annoys my other [white] neighbor that takes the pictures and surveils everything to no end. This one neighbor who has the cameras pointed at our property and catalogues every time a Latino-looking person comes to visit my [other] neighbor” (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

‘Daniel’ tells a story about his POC friends and the discomfort they felt when they walked into a coffee shop in a predominantly white-identified town.

He was talking about how we just had [an internal] map where you could be in Oakland and you could take [one friend] out to Pittsburg, but don’t get off between Pittsburg and Oakland, because if you get off in Walnut Creek, I had [POC] friends that would walk into a coffee shop, order a tea, and the whole place turns around and looks at him... it’s all white faces (Daniel, personal communication, 2017).

‘Valerie’ also recounts an event that transpired at a local activist meeting that was centering on advocacy for immigrant community members. She recalls reacting with astonishment to the comment made by a woman that held such racialized undercurrents.

I can't remember how it came up, but somebody [at a meeting] was talking how we need to have more cooperation between South County and North County [Santa Cruz proper and Watsonville] ... and there needs to be more organizing that isn't split in this way. And a woman who I never seen before said, "Well, they [Latinx/Chicanx community members] can come here if they want to. It's up to them... if they can't see what we're doing for them!" (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

'Daniel' explains how white-identified individuals can seemingly take up entire spaces at meetings and gatherings while centering themselves in the conversation. This centralization of 'whiteness' he says, 'reinforces' the narrative that POC experiences aren't even central to the very reason that a racial or social organization or meeting exists in the first place. This also perpetuates the power and privilege of 'whiteness.'

Yeah, [there are] just so many white people who are happy to take up all the oxygen in the room even if there's only two white people and 10 Latinx. We're talking about an issue that impacts the Latinx community. There's an infinite amount of micro-aggressions we could list I'm sure. But it's just the taking up all the space in the room and then also comments that are reinforcing to the [POC] in the room [that] your experience is not primary; your experience is not real. This is sort of like gas-lighting... it's gas-lighting [POC] instead of women, and sometimes both (Daniel, personal communication, 2017).

'Nancy,' a female activist in her late sixties-early seventies, has strong feelings when it comes to the dismantling of white power. She feels that WF plays an important role in the obstruction of even talking about it, especially in public spaces with POC present.

I think that's part of it... is giving up white power. I think often, the... I think also the fragility might be having the fear of talking about it in a mixed audience, if there [are] Black people there. [I] think that has to happen, but a lot of white people have to do a lot of work before that can happen. But then, like in [organization], we had these... the framing was there so that... the tapes were laid down. The grooves were laid down in our family of origin. Let's look at them and shed them. We all had something. Let's talk about it. That's framing. I think it's important in dealing with that white fragility (Nancy, personal communication, 2017).

‘Paula’ talks about her own white privilege and how she feels her ‘whiteness’ perpetuates certain structural inequities, both economically and politically. It feels as though when she is explaining this, it’s sort of a confession of the guilt she feels when engaging with other POC.

If I’m with a predominantly POC group, I watch myself very carefully. I try. So many of our service people, the people that... We have a couple that cleans our house. That’s white privilege for you. They’re Hispanic. ... They’re both ‘illegal’ actually. One of them had a work permit that was renewed every year. Then a couple of years ago, she said that when she went to renew it, they wouldn’t renew it. ... Now they’re both still living here and they’re being pretty careful (Paula, personal communication, 2017).

‘Alan’ recalls the organization around the predominantly white-identified student gathering of the General Strike protest and rally on January 20, 2017 in downtown Santa Cruz. He also explains the difficulty or ‘burden’ of the POC who were present to speak to the press. This was particularly problematic in the sense that many of them were of undocumented status, and in the process of standing up for themselves in a public protest could run the risk of being discovered, detained, and then deported.

Even the student group around the General Strike on January 20th was pretty white... and I was trying to find people at the meeting to talk to the press in one capacity or another... to give interviews about why they were doing what they were doing and all that. The general group consensus was that it shouldn’t only [be] white men talking. Then it felt like it was falling on ten people or something... ten non-white individuals who maybe did not want to talk to the press” (Alan, personal communication, 2017).

‘Sam’ explains the reality behind Santa Cruz as a white-identified community and the privilege that comes along with that. He also points out that POC community members are lacking access to certain rights and positions of influence, which is supported and maintained by the lack of a “level of concern” by white-identified people.

There is so much difference between what Santa Cruz is, which is basically a white community. It's a white privileged community and I would be hesitant to say that people tolerate, in Santa Cruz, people of color, because I don't think that is the right term to use... but there isn't that level of concern about the fact that POC may be underserved in some way, may not have as much of a voice in city government or as much of a voice in city services or opportunity in employment or opportunity in education, which certainly they don't (Sam, personal communication, 2017).

“I am [the] past president of [a Latino political organization]” (Sam, personal communication, 2017). This particular comment from ‘Sam’ is reflective of the predominance of white-identified individuals in leadership of POC organizations. It begs the question of how a white-identified man becomes the president of a Latinx organization.

Themes 11-12: Predominance of white-identified individuals in positions of power (11), making room for POC (12). One of the many themes that bubbled to the surface in the interviews dealt with the concern that POC presence was lacking in positions of power, especially in activist organizations and groups. Accompanying these issues were ways in which white-identified activists are attempting to step back and make room for POC participants.

For ‘Laura,’ the lack of POC presence in the organizations that she works in coalition with is restrictive to the potential of what she feels that organization could actually accomplish if POC were actively engaged.

“But, sometimes, one of the groups that I’m in... the capacity for numbers of the [POC] there is pretty low. Ultimately, it’s a limitation... and these people can have skills and gifts to offer, but... do you know what I’m getting at?” (Laura, personal communication, 2017).

‘Valerie’ expresses the need for the most impacted community members to be the ones who give voice to their needs. As she says here, when the report back from the community is given in English and then is translated to Spanish, something gets lost, whether it is urgency, a feeling that does not get conveyed, or a deeper sense of understanding. This also speaks to the community-based participatory research process and the prevalence of white-identified researchers interpreting what they see or experience, which may be totally different from what is truly needed by the impacted community.

I think we should reverse the language order [used in these instances] here. I just think that the language that is interpreted from, like the primary language [English to Spanish-Spanish to English], a lot of the interaction back and forth happens in that language, you know? And then it gets translated. Some sets of that discussion gets translated, always. Even with the best efforts of everyone involved. So, I think that it should be in the language of the people who have the most to say about it and have really the information on the ground probably more (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

‘Valerie’ then speaks again to the obstacles in predominantly white-identified activist organizations and information gathering that inhibits true understanding. Resistance and racialized perceptions are still prevalent, even among those who supposedly are advocating for the very communities that they oppress through the social reproduction of their ‘whiteness.’

We got them to have her interpret and somebody in the audience said... ‘I can’t hear what’s going on with all this gibberish.’ So you get that attitude a lot. Why are we accommodating “these people”? They should learn English, dammit! So, in official types of meetings, you sometimes encounter that attitude of people who are... they have no qualms about saying it. Where they maybe wouldn’t have said anything openly racist, but they would say, “These people should learn English in their field with us.” You know? (Valerie, personal communication, 2017).

‘Milton’ speaks to the difficulty of creating space for POC, or the disagreement in how to do that, in order for these community members to have a voice. He expresses his belief that the “underlying” issue is always about race and how predominantly white-identified activist organizations make room or do not make room for POC in their ranks.

That group... also suffered from the fact that it wasn’t attracting POC to it. [Group name]. People mentioned it and noted it. And some people who complained about the space as unwelcoming to were mostly talking about it being unwelcoming to young women... but they also at the same time said that the spaces were unwelcoming for POC. In other words, for anybody that sort of felt a little marginalized, whatever, or trans people ... Maybe that’s sort of minor, but it’s a symptom of this larger problem of an inability of groups to somehow interact and work together. And race somehow seems to be the underlying that (Milton, personal communication, 2017).

‘Milton’ expresses the need for “older white men” to step back and allow the space for future leaders of color to take up the reins.

And I don’t believe... I don’t take [the] extreme view that older white men can never have good ideas. I think they can. I don’t think they should be completely silenced and so on. But I hope that the leaders of tomorrow are mainly not those people. I don’t want to be one of them. That’s sort of where I am now (Milton, personal communication, 2017).

‘Milton’ gives voice to the difficulties and oppressive circumstances in the Beach Flats Community in Santa Cruz, a mostly “Spanish-speaking immigrant community.” These are attributed to both conservative and predominantly (male) white-identified interests and the lack of time on the part of the impacted community members who are out working multiple jobs just to keep their families’ heads above water.

Then look at the racial dynamic there. There’s the Beach Flats, a mostly Spanish-speaking immigrant community... right on the edge of the Boardwalk, which is run by this company, which is very conservative. They donated to most of the conservative candidates for the city council, and they were known to be *quite* conservative. And look at the employees

on the Boardwalk. Overwhelmingly Latinx employees who are now in the role of, in a sense, enemies of the community they border on because of the garden ... I mean, sometimes we would suggest, “Well look, you guys actually need a committee of your own here among the gardeners.” But that’s very hard for them to do, because the garden is recreation and food for them. That’s something they do in the little time that they have off of their jobs, multiple jobs in some cases that they have to survive. And how can they take additional time to actually organize politically to... whereas again, privilege gives us... obviously way more opportunities to spend time organizing (Milton, personal communication, 2017).

Theme 13: Listening to the experiences of POC. In order to be effective activists, white-identified individuals need to listen to the counsel of their POC community members. This theme emerged several times in different forms, whether it was through actual advice, the conveying of stories and experiences, or attending lectures and public forums where POC spoke.

‘Alice’ explains the ways in which reading Anne Moody’s book, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, and the relationship with her surrogate dad, “my stand-in dad who is Black” (Alice, personal communication, 2017), helped shape her understanding of the historical realities that inform the present-day struggles that POC face. These types of personal relationships and investments aided many white-identified participants in their need to more fully comprehend the daily oppressive circumstances that POC experience. It also served as a way of creating closer relationships for many of the interviewees.

So I started making connections. [My surrogate dad] came to visit me here [in college] one day. I just remember sitting... I was a college-age student. I remember sitting up there with him and asking... you know, just telling him about ... reading [“Coming of Age in Mississippi”], just being like, ‘What happened? What was it like growing up in Mississippi?’ He just told me this, like amazing, [...] crazy stories. Basically, the same thing I was reading (Alice, personal communication, 2017).

‘Wilma,’ an activist who works in coalition with organizations that address racialized problems in the prison industrial complex and who is homebound a good part of the time due to health issues, has daily conversations with her healthcare aides to whom she has grown close over the years. Their exchanges include exploring the heavily charged political and social issues faced by POC and those of immigrant status, most notably since the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States in November of 2016.

So, for example, [my health care providers are] both from Mexico. [They are] super, super conscious and freaked out about what’s happening with Trump, and detentions, and [the] deportations. They’re seeing a lot of their friends having to leave and some of their family might have to leave. You know, so... I’m really happy, lucky, blessed, that I have providers who I can talk with politically. Because I’ve had providers who were... who were super conservative too. So I’m really happy that now, my providers and I, have a lot in common politically, that we can talk about. They’re not activists, but they certainly hate Trump, and capitalism, the racism [and] white supremacy here (Wilma, personal communication, 2017).

‘Nancy’ talks about an encounter with a young POC man that she knows through her activism in a local group that addresses the dismantling of racism in Santa Cruz County. It was important to her for me to understand just how afraid this young man was when stepping into a room that was dominated by white-identified individuals. Also important were her feelings about how white-identified community members should listen intently to POC life experiences when they have an opportunity to do so. To Nancy, this is vital in her activism.

[A young African American man at a local activist meeting] was there. He was one of the Black people there. I talked to him, because I knew him. I went over and talked to him afterwards and I said I was glad that he was there and what did he think? He was totally honest with me saying, “I was a little scared when I got here, so many white people... I wasn’t sure what

to think and I was gonna leave” ... I think it’s important [to listen to POC]. I haven’t been to a meeting where there’s been a presentation by an African American. I missed the one about the Muslim [community], though I did get one of the speakers. I think the precept makes a lot of sense. [When] something happens in the community... we need to check with the community of color [to see] what kind of action makes sense. We’re thinking X, does that make sense? Or we’re thinking not Y, does that make sense? I think that’s really good (Nancy, personal communication, 2017).

Research Q2. How does awareness of systemic racism inform white-identified individual’s choices when interacting with communities of color in environmental/social justice activism?

All interview participants’ growing awareness and understanding of their positionality of whiteness brought feelings of sensitivity toward POC and the oppression that POC face, both historically and presently, through the challenging of white-identified privilege. This threat to one’s privilege presents real obstacles and issues for many white-identified individuals in their daily lives and in their activism, especially when the situation presents itself as an opportunity for learning. These opportunities were not always comfortable, but participants expressed the commitment to being comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Also important were the ways in which participants learned to take a back seat, provide space for, and create avenues that decentralized their own whiteness in activism. While participants were not always feeling successful, they continued in their pursuit of reducing the roles of the white saviorism and eliminating the need to put the focus on themselves when advocating for communities of color.

Themes 14-16: Checking of one’s privilege/positionality (14), challenges to one’s activism/personal life (15), decentralizing ‘whiteness’ (16). For white-identified

activists, it can be daunting to look at their privilege in a critical way, and then to undertake the actual work of unpacking and dismantling that privilege and positionality regarding ‘whiteness.’ Historically speaking, as a nation, we have over four-hundred-plus years of systemic and structural oppression deeply embedded in not only our institutions, but also woven into the fabric of how white-identified individuals socially produce and reproduce their ‘whiteness’ over generations.

‘Laura’ comments on the difficulties and challenges that arise for her when trying to address her own positionality of ‘whiteness.’ For Laura, it is a constant checking in and analysis of her own actions, speech, and emotional states that could, at any time, put her into a position of needing to apologize or explain herself to the other POC who are present.

You know, feeling sometimes cautious. Wanting to be thoughtful and cautious is a good way to say it. Knowing that I can blunder into stuff. That’s almost a step before... and then there was an incident where a [POC] called me out for being disrespectful in a situation that involved a bigger group ... That if I am criticized [by a POC], I’m either going to react defensively [as a white-identified person] ... or experience shame, like I’ve done something wrong ... My unconscious white privilege and white belief in my superiority as a white person that’s unconscious, is the biggest challenge, really. To be specific, it could be anything from how I take over a room and take up space, it could be totally thinking that I have a great idea... my way is the right way, that kind of thing. How do you dismantle your own [white-centric] view? It’s not easy (Laura, personal communication, 2017).

‘Alan’ as a graduate student, through the choices of language he uses, speaks to the obstacles of academia and how they inhibit the political transformation and education of white-identified “liberals.” Simplifying language and using less jargon can help decentralize ‘whiteness’ and allow a ‘stepping back’ to dismantle white privilege.

Well, a couple of things. One, it feels like a lot of stuff is tied really deep to the university and to academic language. I think in order to have an expectation of diversity, you have to be ready to make [that commitment]. You either need to put in the work to find the right person, or you need to help create people, or help train [white] people better [to work with POC] ... I still think that in order to really make a difference in Santa Cruz, we have to sway predominantly white, liberal people to kind of take up some of these issues really seriously. And I don't think that academic language helps that. I don't think that really... I don't think that jargon helps out at all. One of the things I try and do is break stuff down and not assume things ... I think that [organization name] has shown me that there are a lot of [POC] who've been working on this stuff for a long time and it's not like "Oh, we [white-identified individuals] should step up and take charge all of a sudden." Like... "No, maybe we should just see what happens" ... ask how to help, but don't necessarily put yourself forward (Alan, personal communication, 2017).

'Milton' comments on the transformation taking place among white-identified activists in Santa Cruz County, but is still frustrated over the lack of skill in building coalition with POC community members and organizations.

I mean, what I have noticed is that I think there are a lot of people that are beginning to care about racism and racial discrimination... a lot of white people. But I think they don't... they have no idea how to be activists and be in coalition with people of color (Milton, personal communication, 2017).

'Arthur' recounts a program that an environmental justice organization held in a predominantly Latinx/Chicanx immigrant community that dealt with Indigenous spiritual knowledge regarding environmental stewardship practices.

Maybe seven people there [at the meeting]. And there were three white folks presenting this [lecture on environmental stewardship]. And I was aware that the presentation... maybe [it] might be interpreted as white folks trying to show a program to Latino folks of what they could do with regards to taking care of the planet. Because I feel like, 'Oh my God, this looks...' Usually people have a very positive reaction. Their version was positive, but subdued. So I was left with a feeling like maybe if we had one of the presenters be a Latino person that would have been different they would've spoken their language or... So that's one incident where I

realized that POC are not necessarily eager [in getting] a lecture on anything [from white folks] (Arthur, personal communication, 2017).

Arthur notices that because of his positionality, in addition to that of the other white-identified presenters, they were not well-received by the migrant farmworkers and Indigenous community members at the event. This led him to reevaluate his “expertise” as a white-identified individual appearing as a ‘white savior’ or contributing to elements of ‘white saviorism,’ and the (de)centralization of his own ‘whiteness’ (Arthur, personal communication, 2017).

‘Wilma’ calls out the political and social class status of white-identified individuals that obstructs the ability of social justice activist organizations to gain ground when it comes to initiating change.

Well, I think there’s a lot of white privilege here [in Santa Cruz], and economic privilege. So partly, I think it’s because there’s a lot of middle-class liberals... or progressives who are happy to maintain their economic privilege (Wilma, personal communication, 2017).

She then details an experience that juxtaposes the issue of how POC are treated in detainment in local prisons:

Well, one thing that bothered the shit out of me was that there was... okay, so [local jail facility] has a restraint chair and they put a Black man in that restraint chair for about 8 hours. [They] didn’t let him pee, didn’t let him make a phone call, couldn’t call a lawyer, or family, or anything. And they had nothing on him. So he wound up calling [local organization] and told them about this. People really haven’t organized about it. I mean... I was talking about it to a lot of people for a long time. I remember... oh, [names local candidate running for local office] and I asked him, “What would he do about this?” And “Did he know that they had a restraint chair and they have solitary confinement and that they did it to people of color?” (Wilma, personal communication, 2017).

For Wilma, this calls to mind the torture practices of African slaves that to this day, are still deeply embedded in our present institutions of incarceration.

‘Nancy’ calls forth a memory from her involvement in the Student Non-Violence Community Coalition (SNCC) back in the late 1960’s, when the Black Panthers philosophy demanded the retraction or decentralization of ‘whiteness’ and a more Black-centric approach in achieving the reclamation of social and political power during the Civil Rights movement era:

One thing I do remember... I don’t remember it in depth because I don’t have that kind of memory anymore... but when I was in college and I was part of SNCC and there were white students and Black students and male and female. We were all really good friends as well as activists. Then there was this thing that came down... who knows, the leadership... that white people weren’t allowed anymore (Nancy, personal communication, 2017).

This was a sad time for Nancy, as she had made several friends within the Black community. It also heralded a time of ideological change, for both white-identified and POC activists, that transformed and created multiple schisms in the ways that activists built coalition and maintained solidarity with each other.

‘Martha’ speaks to the past challenges, both personal and in her activism, which were realized by being involved in an intimate way with a POC:

Yeah, I think where the problem lies, is when white women are fetishizing, or like, ‘I only date Black men.’ Or Black men are like, ‘I only date white women.’ Like, those are problematic dating tropes, right? They are rooted in racism and I’m not about that. Neither were my partner and I. But, I was still really conscious of those things being out there. That like, walking down the street, he and I were going to bring those stereotypes or those concerns up in other people. Like, you know... just needing to be aware that we were going face those concerns from other people (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

These challenges, which erupted in a public space, were carried over for her on an internal level, as she grappled with what other people thought of her relationship at the time and the realities of those difficulties within the relationship as well.

‘Delilah’ is a woman in her late thirties, a mother of two young female children, and an activist within the racial and social justice community. She voices her discontent and frustration when struggling with the ways in which to approach her activism, which up until then was restricted to only online engagement through social media websites:

I had gotten involved in online groups in August 2014. I was reading articles, like 10 articles or more a day. I’d read a lot and would bookmark them and save them and I was just having tons of conversations with people online and trying to understand what was going on. Then Sandra Bland died and a lot of Black women that I had been talking to online... I got tired of saying... “‘Oh, I’m really sorry’ because it’s just going to be this perpetual ‘I’m sorry’ for all these horrible things that are happening to people who look like you” ... In that case it was people like other Black women who were in the same social position as the people that I know... I shut down a little bit because I felt like there’s nothing I can say ... and they’re feeling such hurt that I’m probably going to get attacked if I say anything and I didn’t want to have that experience. Then this one guy, who’s married to a Black woman who started the Ferguson Network, which was a way for Black activists to connect with each other and find out when actions are happening in different places, he put out, ‘Look, we really need you guys to move into actual real action, stop talking on the Internet and get out into your communities and do something (Delilah, personal communication, 2017).

Being called out by another activist online gave her the impetus that she needed to actually create a physical group that is now dedicated to educating other primarily white-identified would-be activists in the unpacking and dismantling of their own ‘whiteness.’

‘Martha’ talks about the potential for hurting other POC that she engages with on a political/activist level and also in a more personal way, through the virtue of her ‘whiteness.’

I don't necessarily introduce myself that way, but you know like, 'Hi, I'm a white person. I could hurt you at some point.' I don't do that, but like, you know, at some point, race comes up in conversation with people of color that I'm meeting or whatever. That conversation will happen you know? That allows my friend(s) of color to understand that I understand myself the way they understand me. You know, that I understand the dangers of being white, in the way that they understand the dangers of being white (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

This deep reflection on one's white identity and its implications on multiple levels is an earmark of what self-driven education combined with critical analysis can accomplish and also denotes the two elements of an ongoing process for white-identified activists.

'Delilah' uses an analogy to explain how she navigates the challenges of her own positionality of being a white-identified activist. It is a constant renegotiation in her activism and a crucial point of entry into conversations that include POC input.

A lot of that language [the conversation of white-identified individuals centralizing themselves] is just not present in Santa Cruz. You have somebody like [names local activist group facilitator] who [names group] saying "we want to invite everybody in and you can come to our meetings" and it's like I don't feel comfortable because I'm not part of the community and I don't want to invade the space. My role is to help you in your community... my role is to get the white community to stop doing things that you need to [address]. It's like if I found out that my neighbors had all these health problems and the kids were doing poorly in school and I was like, "What's wrong with those people?" And then I found out that my sewage is dumping into their property; I don't need to go over and take them to health appointments, I need to fix the leak and maybe pay some reparations... (Delilah, personal communication, 2017).

'Cynthia' reiterates what other participants have said in regard to this continuing process of addressing and dismantling their positionality of 'whiteness.' Diligence, combined with education and close relationships with POC, seem to lead these activists toward more engaged forms of activism.

I think maybe one of the most important things that I have to learn over and over and over again, is my relationship to [the] responsibility for racism. In other words, I think that it's very difficult for white people to figure out how to take responsibility for racism without taking responsibility in the wrong direction. For example, I think it's really important for white people to know that we did not go out looking to become racists. We didn't. Like my friend ... says, "we didn't go out shopping and pick out racism and buy it." At the same time, while we got it, we [have] to figure out how to dismantle it. Another thing is history. It's very painful, I think, to study history and then see your people did all this shit. It's easy to feel like this is my fault. This is my people's fault and this is kind of my fault. I think that's a huge obstacle that the feelings of guilt and confusion and what to do with this weight of history (Cynthia, personal communication, 2017).

Most interesting here is what she refers to as "this weight of history" and how this can contribute to the 'oppressive' and obstructive circumstances that white-identified individuals experience when trying to face their roles in perpetuating systemic racism (Cynthia, personal communication, 2017).

Research questions Q3 and Q4. Q3: How does individual involvement in environmental/social justice activism promote personal investment in organizational and community-based solidarity? Q4: How are coalition-building relationships developed between primarily white-identified organizations and those of POC identity in Santa Cruz County?

Emergent themes that were sparked by the two-part question three and four were the most inspirational. These themes were the ones that dealt with deep and heartfelt connections that developed between white-identified participants and POC, both of whom were mobilizing their own communities. Embedded within the context of social and environmental justice activism were the ways in which participants approached their strategies of being a white-identified activist. Immersing themselves with, working with,

and taking their cues from other POC family, friends, and activists were all crucial in the forging of authentic relationships, while simultaneously educating themselves and other white-identified individuals. Added to this thematic formula, was the component of investment created through the profound connections that white-identified activists fostered with POC.

Themes 17 & 18: The forging of relationships with POC (17), immersion in POC communities (18). The most important of the emergent themes that surfaced from the research was the criticality of building personal relationships with POC. This was accomplished in many ways, such as the forging of intimate connections, engaging in community-based work, collaborating with colleagues in the workplace, building friendships, familial connections, etc.

For ‘Timothy,’ his past involvement with POC as romantic partners was most transformative. It not only educated him on the issues faced by POC, but also informed much of his activism.

Yeah... [I had] more than one [relationship with POC]. I had a 10-year marriage, with two boys [from that relationship], a 20-year marriage, with a daughter [from that relationship], then I had 10 years single, before I met [my current significant other]. So, I had maybe 14 interim relationships in that time [of being single] and about 4 or 5 of them were non-white (Timothy, personal communication, 2017).

‘Raina,’ a bisexual woman in her fifties, mother of a mixed ethno-cultural child, social documentary filmmaker, and professor, recounts the lineage of her family on her former husband’s side:

When I met [son’s name’s] father, who is African-American, his family’s from Texas and he is also Cherokee. I think... [his] great-grandmother was full Cherokee. I had [son’s name] ... and my mom ... tried to convince me to get an abortion. She said, “you can’t raise a multiracial

child. The whites will never accept you and the Blacks will never accept you, because your child isn't fully Black." I'm just listening to this and I'm thinking, it's a step beyond what I dealt with [my] Black girlfriend. This is her saying, "You should abort your child." For the sole reason of him being multiracial ... I would say that [son's name's] father I would consider a close, dear friend. But, we probably may see each other once a year. I would say my son's girlfriend... her mother and father are from South Africa... they fled apartheid... she's a dear friend of mine. She introduced me to three other women. One is an Africa-American woman who was born in the United States, the two other women, one born in Zimbabwe and the other born in South Africa. (Raina, personal communication, 2017).

For her, this story calls up feelings of anger, regret, and determination to meet head on the dismantling of racism through her activism, filmmaking, and teaching. She is quite devoted to her students and speaks highly of them, in particular her students of color. Also important for her are the connections with other POC community members through these avenues of engagement. She fondly refers to these relationships as "extended family members" or "family of choice" (Raina, personal communication, 2017).

'Milton' speaks about his relationships with POC, both in a romantic and community-based context. For him there is no other way to be engaged with the human race other than the ways in which he conducts his personal life through activism.

Well, I've spent a significant amount of my time surrounded by groups of people where I was the only white person and never spent too much time thinking about that fact. I was in Ethiopia for four years in the Peace Corps, and part of that time I would not see another foreigner, let alone a white person, for days or weeks at a time. When I came back to the United States, I was in a cultural gap with my Ethiopian girlfriend, associating socially with Ethiopians entirely for the next five years in LA, while I went to graduate school where everyone was basically white ... Then, my wife... my first wife, was Japanese and so I spent a huge amount of time in Japan, again surrounded by people who weren't American or white and so on (Milton, personal communication, 2017).

It wasn't until Milton moved back to the states that he started to feel the pressures of racism:

Being a biracial couple in LA in the 70's [with my Ethiopian girlfriend], also occasionally, but not often, experienced instances that made it clear that there was stuff going on (Milton, personal communication, 2017).

'Alice' strongly believes that there is no other way to do the work she does through her activism other than to have deep, heart-felt connections with POC. This informs much of her activism and personal relationships with POC, as does her long-term same-sex/same-gender relationship with her Black female partner.

Unfortunately, I do [think that direct ties w/ POC is necessary]. I think that we, to make it real for most for us, we have to have some direct tie. I think that's a challenge that my family is facing right now. I just want to scream in their face, "you have a Black person in your family right now. It's not enough to just say that you love her and give her a present on Christmas and her birthday!" That's not "loving her." Loving her means reflecting on your role, what you say, how you have... learning. It involves learning. I can see how my brother and my mom have gone through their entire lives without ever having to do that, because they don't have a person in their life [who] requires them to do it. That's the 'gift of whiteness'... is that we can exist without having to step into someone else's shoes, without having to hear from anyone about how we are contributing to their oppression. I think education matters (Alice, personal communication, 2017).

'Martha' talks about the inspiration she gleans from the diverse student community with which she works. For her, the support she receives from the students, in addition to the work she does on the behalf of the students, is a mutual relationship that she speaks about with fondness and pride.

Yeah, here at [names college], where I work, the population itself is very politically active and it's also the most diverse on campus. There is about 14% or 15% white students, it's about 40% Latino students, roughly 40% Asian students, [and] about 10%... or [lower], African American. I'm not sure if this is adding up to 100%, but I am not checking the numbers

here... The point is that it's a majority minority, here in population, and the students are super politically activist-oriented here (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

For 'Alice,' the relationship she developed with her 'surrogate' dad when she was younger was the most influential in her life and, later, in her activism.

Well, ... I'd say the most significant thing that happened was when I was in high school. I grew up in a single-mom family, so I didn't really have a father figure. In high school, I had a mentor who was a Black man. He was a police officer and he was the advisor for a club... a high school club that I was in. He and I just clicked, like personally. Then we went on a few trips [with the other students] to conferences, youth conferences, across the state ... Then, there was just some moment when he was... I don't even remember what happened, but he... I was like, "Well, I don't have a dad." And he was like, "I'll stand in for your dad." I was like, "Really?" I didn't even know what [the conversation] was about. He was like, "Yeah." Then... and so he just, for me and a couple of other kids who really didn't have dads... he was like our stand-in dad (Alice, personal communication, 2017).

Relationships, past as well as present, were the most salient in the research. 'Wilma' remembers her early activism days regarding a romantic relationship with a Puerto Rican man that for her was a catalytic point in her life.

Then, I was 18 and I was engaged to a guy who grew up in Puerto Rico. I went to Puerto Rico for two weeks, to meet his family, so that was a real education about colonialism, because I was anti-Vietnam War at the time, but hadn't really seen a colony of the U.S. that way. I was really... I was really appalled by the poverty and the racism, and the conditions from colonialism. I got turned on to the movement for Puerto Rican independence and socialism and support for the armed struggle for Puerto Rican independence and socialism. So that was when I was 18 and it was a huge turning point in my life (Wilma, personal communication, 2017).

'Martha' talks about building "authentic relationships" with POC without patting oneself on the back for doing so (Martha, personal communication, 2017). This is another way that white-identified individuals can avoid the trap of their 'whiteness.'

Instead of me being like, “I’m a good white person. I’m not racist.” That for most [POC] is like, “I can’t trust this person.” You know? So I’m not trying to say I’m a good white person. That’s what it sounds like, but I’m just thinking of ways white people can begin to build authentic relationships, you know? (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

‘Nancy’ again recounts her history as an activist in the 1960’s, and as a person invested in a community-based effort to advocate for POC communities.

The poor communities in Philadelphia at that time [late 1960’s] were communities of color. And going there ... when I was younger, I had the sense that there was that separation. There’s that thing that you’re taught when you are an inner-city kid. There’s some neighborhoods you don’t go into because they’re dangerous ... that whole thing. But we went into them and we worked and we were welcome. I think that ... and going to the churches. We went to Black churches quite a bit during that period. That was a way of connecting on a very different level, was to see the community in their worship and social life... and it was spectacular and fun and musical and joyous (Nancy, personal communication, 2017).

‘Martha’ speaks about her past relationships with POC and the work she does in coalition with POC students whose activism is very much a part of their daily lives.

You know [being in a relationship with a POC], things like that. So yeah, I think... I just, you know, being conscious of those things, definitely made me motivated to be in the fight. I think, also... not just educating myself more, which I definitely did. (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

Again, she speaks about it in terms of inspiration and what fuels much her own activism.

Let’s see, in Santa Cruz. A lot of it has happened here in my work, to be honest. So, just the work I do with students of color, day-in and day-out, constantly keeps me humble. Just the stories they share and what they go through. I’d be remiss not to mention that. It’s such a big part of why I stay committed, because I want a better world for them. I want them not to have to experience the things they do. So yeah... so yeah... I’d have to say that’s a big part of it (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

For ‘Wilma,’ the relationships that she fosters and conversations that she has with her home healthcare aides are crucial in her need to feel connected, in light of her minimal

ability to get out and “pound the streets” in protest like she used to. (Wilma, personal communication, 2017).

So, for example, [my health care providers are] both from Mexico. [They are] super, super conscious and freaked out about what’s happening with Trump, and [the] detentions, and [the] deportations. They’re seeing a lot of their friends having to leave and some of their family might have to leave. (Wilma, personal communication, 2017).

‘Martha’ gives voice to the shedding of ‘whiteness’, investment in our communities of color, and that the liberation of white-identified community members is tied to the liberation of POC.

“So there’s like... [In order for white people] to change their positionality, they have to be more rooted in [their] investment in communities of color... or [develop] more investment in relationships with people of color, than they do in their beliefs or in their old ways of thinking. You know, like, if they get scared off by the words ‘white supremacy’, we’re never going to get anywhere ... I think it’s hard. Because my investment came about through personal relationships, so I can’t be like... go make a friend. Like, that’s not great advice, right? But like, that’s what I did. You know, you have to give a shit. Like, you actually have to care. You have to see that your happiness and your success are intertwined with the success of people of color. You know, it’s literally because I love people of color and I care about people of color that I do this work. But like, but it certainly helps. That’s my connection to it, so it’s hard for me to say like, how someone else can get invested. You know, you can care... but like, if you don’t have a personal connection, a personal investment, your [other] attachments are always going to be more important (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

‘Martha’ recalls a workshop that she facilitated at a local educational institution that dealt with the overcoming of WF through the reaching out to create connections and nurture genuine relationships with POC. Following on the heels of this, are some important differences in the ways that white-identified individuals perpetuate their roles in the struggle of racism and the structures that support such problematic obstacles. The

difference in being a racist and the implicit nature of being racist, are subtle but vital in the ways white-identified individuals approach their activism and the act of educating other white-identified community members.

One of the things this summer that we worked on [in our school] was just like what can white people can do to overcome white fragility. One of the Black students, who we were working with, was like... “You know, you can create authentic relationships with people of color.” Somebody was like, “Well, how do we do that?” She was like, “I’m not an alien. Ask me how my day was. Have dinner with me and talk to me like a person.” You know, it’s like we forget that were just... Yeah, we have different experiences, but we’re also people. Do you know what I mean? ... A racist versus being racist? I mean, I guess you could make an argument that being a racist means overtly racist and just being racist could mean that you’re just racist by default, because you are raised in a society and you are taught racism from the time that you are born... (Martha, personal communication, 2017).

Discussion

Based on both methods of approach in collecting data—eight group field observations and twenty-two one-on-one interviews—there were many themes that emerged from the public sphere (group observations), as well as from the personal narratives of the interviewees (one-on-one settings). As mentioned in the literature, many white-identified individuals expressed their capacity for understanding the existence of systemic racism differently, whether this is through the means of their WG (Mallett & Swim, 2007; Nordstrom, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2009; Perry & Shotwell, 2009; A. A. Powell et al., 2005; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000; Spanierman et al., 2008; Swim & Miller, 1999); their WF (Mallett & Swim, 2007; A. A. Powell et al., 2005; Swim & Miller, 1999); or their CBRI (which includes inability to talk about it, over-defending viewpoints, reasoning it away, or not seeing race or color as important or an issue altogether) (Barr & Neville, 2014; Becker & Paul, 2015; Bloch, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, 2015; Donnelly et al., 2005; Hughey, 2014; Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014; Lewis, 2001; Neville et al., 2005). The phenomenon of WG often translates into a primary motivation that may spurn them towards activism (Warren, 2010). Through the course of the study, there were remarkable differences in the observed behaviors and responses of white-identified individuals when comparing between the public/semi-public space (group observations) and private space (one-on-one interviews).

Throughout the group field observations, the themes that were the most salient were often contradictory, and many times gave way to implicit bias-oriented comments and behaviors enacted by white-identified individuals. Most importantly, these highly

problematic situations transpired in public or semi-public spaces where there were a predominant number of white-identified individuals present. This phenomenon of white solidarity brings to mind a more focused manifestation in the mechanics of a Durkheimian call to ‘psychic unity’ that somehow infiltrates primarily white-identified spaces inducing the use of a more racialized lens. This might be explained through the strength in numbers view: the more white-identified individuals present, the more comfortable or confident each individual feels to express his or her implicit bias or explicit racism. There could also be a need to unconsciously give voice to deeply buried emotions that are tied to WG, WF, or CBRI while in the company of other white-identified individuals—that somehow the presence of others who supposedly share the same ethno-cultural experience will somehow understand, or that it will go unnoticed, simply because a group of white-identified individuals are all thinking similar thoughts, feelings or concepts.

In the one-on-one interviews, on the other hand, there seems to be exhibited a more mindful and reflective nature, influenced by interviewees’ history, their continually developing relationship(s) with POC, and more importantly, a willingness on their part to address and explore the socio-cultural missteps and adaptations that guided them through embarrassing and difficult situations. This difference between the tenor of the group observations and one-on-one conversations could be explained by the ‘safety’ of the private space in which the interviews were conducted, allowing a vulnerability during the process of telling their stories to another white-identified person, or it could be attributed to the stronger foundations of the relationships that have been built over time with POC

through their activism, both on a personal day-to-day basis and/or on an organizational level. This awareness of one's relationship to one's own activism in contrast to that of one's immediate social circle—how they as white-identified individuals 'perform' whiteness—gave way to a deeper contextual understanding of their positionality. For some participants, the realization of their own positionality of whiteness led them towards efforts in educating themselves and other white-identified individuals concerning the issues that POC communities face on a daily basis. These 'life lessons' may have been sparked by a chance encounter with POC, through family members, partners, friends, college communities, or simply through the historical context of the times.

As stated above, positionality, and with it, the practice of whiteness and its relation to power structures institutionally and socially (Alexander, 2004; Anthias, 2002; Chubbuck, 2004; R. Crowley, 2016; Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016; Diem, Ali, & Carpenter, 2013; Diem & Carpenter, 2013; Galman et al., 2010; Garner, 2006; Hunt, 2000; Kim, 2004; Lalik & Hinchman, 2001; Manglitz, 2003; Martin & Gunten, 2002; Milner, 2007; Muhammad et al., 2015; Nishi, Matias, & Montoya, 2015; Relles, 2016; Soni-Sinha, 2008; Tillery, 2009), were key in how participants navigated difficult conversations with close ties in their social networks and in their activism. Positionality was also paramount in the ways that participants negotiated inner conflicts due to their own conditioned racialized lens of the white experience. This was achieved through the experience of compromising situations, the openness to being corrected, and also to seeking counsel from POC friends and collaborators.

In addition, for those white-identified individuals involved in environmental/social justice activism, these particular expressions of their positionality or whiteness and what that means can be expressed differently, can be more complex, and have an influence on how they engage in or talk about such activism. For many of the participants, their immediate social circle's (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) lack of interest, unwillingness, or inability to discuss systemic racism was seen as problematic, even to the point of being non-supportive, obstructive, and hurtful.

Including pushing forward in their own self-education, white-identified participants started to more fully comprehend the day-to-day challenges that POC communities face which inhibit their ability to function due to lack of stable emotional, physical, and psychological environmental conditions. These obstacles manifest in POC as health issues compounded by inadequate healthcare, the predominance of white-identified presence in activist organizations, heightened suspicion bolstered by racialized attitudes, language barriers, micro aggressions, etc. (Blanchett, 2006; Boyd, 2008; Breunig & Ernst, 2011; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Carney, 2016; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Eversman, 2014; Ewert et al., 2014; Florini, 2015; Grills, Aird, & Rowe, 2016; Hallett, 2002; Heiner, 2016; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; Hwang & Sampson, 2014; Larson, 2016; Mallett & Swim, 2007; Manglitz, 2003; Mcara & Mcvie, 2005; Nishi et al., 2015; Nordstrom, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2009; Persuad & Lusane, 2000; A. A. Powell et al., 2005; K. J. Powell, 2016; Rickford, 2016; Singer, 2016; Strmic-Pawl, 2015; Trujillo-Pagán, 2014; Weitzer, Tuch, & Skogan, 2008; Zukin, Lindeman, & Hurson, 2015). All of these obstructions combined can inhibit the participation of POC in political and social

activism, especially in leadership roles; it can breed fear within the community that keeps individuals and families from seeking help for various reasons; and it can also be experienced as explicit racism that threatens physical and psychological well-being.

Through the synthesis of the interview and group observation findings, and the overwhelming challenges faced by POC, I have come to understand a phenomenon that I have termed the *ethno-cultural burden* on POC. The ethno-cultural burden can be understood as the ways that white-identified individuals rely on or expect POC community members to inform or educate them on the issues that need to be addressed and the way they put the sole responsibility on POC to move information back and forth between white-identified community members and POC communities. It can, and does, most often inhibit honest, transparent, on-the-ground communication between predominantly white-identified organizations and those very communities they wish to advocate for. This ethno-cultural burden on POC can inadvertently arise from the white-identified individual's need to understand the complex and intricate issues acting within systemic racism that impact POC and can perpetuate the appropriation of labor on the bodies, minds, and spirits of Black and Brown communities, a phenomenon that is supported by the literature (Breunig & Ernst, 2011; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Chang & Thompkins, 2002; Edwards, 2011; Hallett, 2002; Persuad & Lusane, 2000; Rao, Quandt, Doran, Snively, & Arcury, 2007; Salazar, Napolitano, Scherer, & McCauley, 2004; Tessier, 2007; Trujillo-Pagán, 2014). However, in the one-on-one interview setting, there were findings that gave cause for a hopeful reversal of this ethno-cultural burden. In the process of forging relationships with POC, participants did exhibit tendencies toward

addressing and navigating, if not dismantling, on an intrapersonal level, the very systems that perpetuate such racialized ideologies.

During this study, I noticed that once white-identified individuals became more aware of the scope and nuances involved with certain constituent parts of systemic racism, such as WF, WG, and CBRI expressions within and outside of themselves, their (re)actions and/or responses as rational agents of change became more specific and self-aware, a phenomenon that was in concert with previous research (Warren, 2010). All of these particular components—WF, WG and CBRI—are indicative of a white individual's behavioral response to the overall systemic problem of whiteness and how it is practiced. Researchers have pointed out, however, that how far individuals go in order to sacrifice or 'give up' their privilege can come in degrees (Boatright-Horowitz et al., 2012; DiTomaso et al., 2011; Nenga, 2011; Perry & Shotwell, 2009; Swim & Miller, 1999). With that said, there were many times during the interviews when white-identified individuals allowed themselves to be emotionally shaken and/or took cues from very compromising or embarrassing situations that involved encounters with POC that led to admitting to themselves their implicit bias and their need to continue the work.

In his study, *Fire in The Heart, How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice* Warren (2010) states, "Relationships do more than teach whites about racism. They create the bonds with people of color that help whites feel that the issue of racism is personal to them" (p. 72). I found the same to be true in the one-on-one interviews, and to coincide with the literature: entering into relationships, whether intimate/romantic, collegial, familial, etc., with POC is vitally important for white-identified individuals, not only to

more fully and successfully enter the field of environmental and social justice, but also to more fully comprehend cultural processes outside of their own white experience (Botein, 2016; Braunstein, Fulton, & Wood, 2014; Essenburg, 2015; Fairfax, 2016; Plummer, Stone, Powell, & Allison, 2016, Warren, 2010). It's not that white-identified people should not attempt to do the work of advocacy and activism on the behalf of POC communities without pursuing these connections, but rather that, in order to engage in environmental/social justice activism more deeply and to discover one's potential in becoming a more effective activist, the forging of these bonds based on common values and emotional solidarity between white-identified individuals and POC is crucial (Botein, 2016; Braunstein et al., 2014; Essenburg, 2015; Fairfax, 2016; Plummer et al., 2016, Warren, 2010).

In this research, many of the white-identified individuals involved in activist organizations have forged such connections, whether early on in their lives, over time, or for some, more recently. For white-identified community members, these relationships have proven to be key in facilitating their understanding of the historical and daily oppressive forces that impact POC; developing personal experiential knowledge of what POC endure through systemic racism; and just as importantly, aiding in the ways that white-identified individuals can ask what POC need in various advocacy situations, even if that's simply to step back and stay 'in their own lane.'

Overall, the differences noted in the mindfulness of behavior for white-identified individuals between public/semi-public space and private space were remarkable. What's more, it is worth noting that those individuals who did exhibit reactionary behaviors and

racialized tendencies in public spaces, and were invited for participation in this research, declined my requests to be interviewed. This begs the question that if these individuals *did* accept my invitation to be interviewed, would they too have exhibited in private a more 'progressive' attitude towards issues of a racial nature (as opposed to their publicly displayed tendency to voice their discontent through microaggressive behavior)? On the other hand, this also raises the converse question about the actual participants in the one-on-one interviews who were not observed in a group setting: might they have also displayed racialized behaviors in public space? Further research would be required to delve more deeply into this phenomenon as it could reveal certain details concerning the inner workings and triggers that force white-identified individuals' WG, WF, and CBRI to be asserted in the public sphere.

It was also clear that the forging of genuine bonds of friendship and other close relationships with POC were very much a part of the larger equation when it came to solidifying coalitions between white-identified individuals within organizational activism and POC communities on a personal level. When it comes to relationships between primarily white identified organizations and POC and their communities and what they look like, the research suggests that these relationships take on broader dimensions that are reflective of the micro-level manifestations of friendship and family stretching to a more expansive one of organizational and community-based solidarity and/or common values (Mayer, 2009; Nagle, 2008; Stolle-McAllister, 2007; Warren, 2010; Yanay & Lifshitz-Oron, 2008). In the one-on-one interviews, participants revealed relationships that were transparent, honest, and are rooted in deep, emotional ties that bond. Simply

put, through these processes the issues that POC communities face for white-identified individuals become personal to the participants, and because of this, white-identified individuals become invested in the outcomes of their POC friends, neighbors, family, students, loved ones, etc.

Limitations of Study

In terms of study participants, the limitations in this study are subject to the oftentimes emotionally raw experiences and unconscious personal biases of the individuals interviewed. An additional factor that may limit this study's findings is the difficulty in recalling events described by participants, their comfort level in speaking of such experiences, and the possibility of missing details, especially when covering issues that could be described or interpreted as being of a sensitive or 'embarrassing' nature. A third limitation relative to participants is the sample itself; given that there was a regional focus on Santa Cruz County and the unique demographic and cultural attributes of that region, the sample may not be representative of the larger national context.

A known limitation of the primary researcher can be attributed to his own unconscious biases when conducting interviews, as well as the restrictions of time and availability during the research process.

The research revealed much about white-identified relationship with POC, although, admittedly, the research did not necessarily reveal in a concrete way the broader implications of these relationship for activist organizations and their strategies for maintaining stronger ties of solidarity with POC communities. It was also not clear whether these strong bonds of relationship as a whole somehow made it into the coalition-building strategy 'toolkit' of these organizations. As the research was focused on white-identified individuals' personal experiences, narratives and contextual history, how this may directly translate into organizational activism was not necessarily evident. This begs the question: if building genuine relationships with POC are crucial for white-

identified individuals to develop a meaningful level of personal investment in order to more effectively engage in organizational activism, are these sorts of relationship-building strategies or tools being built into social movements and activist organizations? And if not, why not?

When conducting this kind of study, especially against the backdrop of the first year of the administration of the newly appointed 45th President of the United States, the process of exploring these issues raised anger, sadness, regret, and in some cases, despair, which are ultimately the province of the human mosaic of emotional experience. No longer having the luxury of personal biases being subverted by the blanket of political correctness, many are now becoming tragically aware of the overt racism and discrimination that has always been present (but hidden) in our institutions, that negatively affect the daily lives of POC, immigrants (the undocumented, the Dreamers), women, the poor and disenfranchised, the LGBTQIA community (including transgendered individuals), and the disabled. At a time when few are safe from legislation that targets these populations, the predominant cultural hegemony of white, heterosexual men in key positions of power continues to create an upheaval of detrimental policy that threatens to uncover the darkest aspects of our human nature.

Conclusion

In summary, the differences in attitude and behavior, along with ideological promptings, seemed most contrasted between white individuals in the public sphere and private spaces. More mindful and self-aware attitudes were exhibited by the participants in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The differences between these two spaces are marked by the encounters, experiences, and relationships forged by white-identified participants with POC through past and present friendships, intimate relationships, familial connections, and personalized activist engagement. This also initiated a critical analysis on behalf of white individuals who questioned their own privilege, positionality, how pervasive ‘whiteness’ is in our institutions and how it is performed, especially in context of their activism. This motivated many of the white-identified activists towards a self-driven education that took the form of attending public forums, social documentary screenings, weekend trainings on dismantling racism, and the reading of and listening to POC narratives and experiences.

The observations in the realm of public space, however, revealed a sense of frustration and disturbance that challenged individual WG, WF, and CBRI along with many aspects of their privilege and performance of whiteness. This manifested through microaggressive comments and behaviors as well as outward expressions of a racialized nature. This also was the case with many of the participants in the one-on-one interviews through the encounters and difficult conversations they had with less-than-supportive social networks, including family members.

Within the context of activism for individuals who participated in the one-on-one interviews, participants' solidarity with POC organizations and communities was achieved through the forming of deeply personal connections made on an individual basis in conjunction with those individuals' self examination of their positionality and whiteness. This served as a strong foundational support in their activist engagement and aided in their own personal ties of solidarity with POC.

The question remains of how these findings may impact organizational activism overall. The implications that were mentioned earlier may take various forms and are restricted only by the capacity for white-identified individual's willingness in forming strong, heartfelt, and sustainable relationships with POC, which are based on reflexive analysis of their own positionality and the ways that they, on an individual basis, contribute to the social performance of 'whiteness.' This can only contribute over time to the resiliency of environmental and social justice movements, in addition to the communities for whom they advocate.

How this may translate into the strategies and tools in building solidarity in a broader context for organizational activism could be realized through public educational venues such as community forums, centralizing on the experiences and needs of historically marginalized communities; intensive trainings that have at their core the intent of transforming the perceptions of individuals whose implicit bias and whiteness is subject to their own need to truly understand cultural realities other than their own; and perhaps even intensive retreats that have a anti-racist curriculum as their guiding lodestar.

However, it still calls into question those whose bias and explicit racialized ideologies are in direct opposition to even being willing to explore such alternative attitudes and beliefs and may block access to such avenues of self-driven education and opportunities for building relationships with POC. Members of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-confederate organizations, and other such racist groups are certainly not lining up to better understand the present and historic oppression experienced by POC. Indeed, they are actively working to ensure the success of such structural and systematic oppressive circumstances to protect their whiteness and privilege.

These sorts of adaptive strategies are meant to transform the attitudes and beliefs of those individuals whose whiteness and privilege—and how they are socially performed both privately and publicly—form an unspoken agreement between themselves and the other white-identified individuals with whom they share community space. It is through the discerning and committed interrogation of whiteness that white-identified community members can eradicate implicit bias and enter more fully into the practice of environmental and social justice activism.

Without a doubt, more research is required into the investigation of whiteness (and how it is performed) through a critical lens to better understand the triggers and socio-cultural reproduction that underlie such practices. Perhaps the key is in understanding the evolution of such activism. Many young people, such as the white-identified students from Parkland, Florida, are speaking up, taking their cues from youth of color, and stepping back to provide space for youth of color to tell their stories and share their experiences. Bringing this method of self-driven education or curriculum into the

classrooms of middle schools and high schools, instead of waiting for youth to access it in higher education, could turn the tide and provide space for the reflexive analysis that is crucial for the dismantling of whiteness.

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