MARCUS BELL

WHITENESS INTERRUPTED

White Teachers and Racial Identity in Predominantly Black Schools

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

> Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, and kill your black brothers and sisters . . . when you are forever a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.
> —MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

> White ignorance is the axis around which white Americans construct our political identity. . . . The white eye is socialized to see lynchings and racialized torture as entertainment worthy of picnics and postcard reproductions.—ALISON BAILEY, *Strategic Ignorance*

> I can't breathe.
> —GEORGE FLOYD JR.

Everything felt different. From all outward appearances, something about the country had changed. While any commitment to greater racial justice in America requires measured optimism, the spring and early summer of 2020 offered the most visible opportunity for change in modern American history. Looking back, was it a moment of fundamental change, or was it a temporary fad that soon faded from memory? Was it a moment of honesty, courage, and moral clarity, or was it an opening for career opportunism, media grandstanding, and hashtag activism? Was the year 2020, a year full of pain,

suffering, and rage, the moment when America—despite what it meant for individual Americans—acknowledged and confronted institutional racism on a national scale, or was it destined to become a political football, yet another weapon in our never-ending culture war? Though time has dampened the optimism shared by many in the spring of last year, it remains unquestionably true that in real time, the march toward racial equality, literally and symbolically, felt real.

On May 25, 2020, George Perry Floyd Jr. was killed by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was forty-six years old. Accused of passing a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, Floyd was confronted by several police officers, arrested, and physically restrained. One of the officers, Derek Chauvin, who is white, was filmed kneeling on the back of Floyd's neck. Several other officers were also present. Two of them helped Chauvin restrain Floyd, while another stood around nonchalantly, appearing to be unbothered by Floyd or the numerous bystanders pleading on his behalf. On the video, Floyd can be heard begging for his life, calling for his late mother, and, through fear and clear physical distress, forcing out the words, "I can't breathe."[1] After six minutes, Floyd, handcuffed and lying face down in the street, went motionless. After nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, he was dead.

Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, John Crawford, Freddy Gray, Mike Brown, LaQuan McDonald, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Breonna Taylor, and now George Floyd, together constitute but a fraction of the African American men, women, and children who have been killed by police officers in recent years.[2] Now a common occurrence, extrajudicial killings of African Americans are the most extreme example of a criminal justice system that, from drugs to death row, disproportionately—and negatively—affects black communities all across the United States. Each death, controversial in its own way, engendered a public backlash: those of Brown and Gray caused weeks of sometimes violent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, respectively. Though not the only death to be captured on film, Floyd's murder, virtually overnight, set off a wave of protests unlike anything we have seen since the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. over fifty years ago.[3]

In the immediate aftermath of Floyd's murder, hundreds of thousands of Americans marched in protest.[4] From big cities to small cities, suburbs to farm towns, protestors took to the streets in all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and multiple countries abroad.[5] Public support for Black Lives Matter increased significantly among white Americans, and police practices, from choke holds to no-knock warrants, came under increased scrutiny.[6]

Politicians from both major parties participated in protests, and the parties themselves each initiated police reform packages in Congress.[7] Corporations ranging from Microsoft to Ben and Jerry's released statements condemning racism and white supremacy, and professional sports leagues, including the NBA and the NFL, initiated difficult conversations about police brutality and America's ugly history of antiblack racism.[8] Celebrities and professional athletes used their considerable influence to call attention to racial inequality and white privilege, and many of them pledged millions of dollars in donations to black communities and black businesses.[9] Books about antiracism soared to the top of the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. Netflix and Amazon Prime offered free programming centered around African American history.[10] NASCAR banned Confederate flags from all of its events, and the Pentagon proposed renaming any military base named after a Confederate general.[11] Also, multiple memorial services to George Floyd were carried live on local news, cable news, and social media networks.[12] Having taken place in the span of three weeks, these and a host of other responses combined to make the spring of 2020 feel, in a word, different.

A BOOK ABOUT WHITENESS

Why start here? Why start a book about whiteness with the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing aftermath? Why start a book about white teachers in urban education with yet another deadly example of the criminalization of blackness? Finally, why start a book about white racial identity with a discussion of black pain, black suffering, and national resistance? After all, this is not a book about African Americans or social movement activism. This is not a book about criminal justice or mass incarceration, and this is not a book about policing. So, once more, why start here? The answer is simple. What made the spring of last year seem so remarkable, what made it simultaneously a reason for hope and a cause for concern, what made it so difficult to understand or envision what it meant for the future, was not marches or protests, not rioting or looting, not social media posts by celebrities or outspoken professional athletes. What made that particular moment seem different was white America.

Though by no means universal, the response of white Americans to the murder of George Floyd, at the time, seemed nothing short of astonishing. Old and young, suburban and urban, rich, poor, and everything in between, they joined African Americans and other people of color on the front lines, standing up for racial equality and against police brutality. To be clear, going

all the way back to the movement to abolish slavery, some white Americans have been willing to fight, kill, and die in the battle against white supremacy. Comparatively, however, in very few moments in American history has white public opinion—and white public action—shifted so far and so fast in the direction of *greater* racial equality. Given that policing was at the center of the George Floyd tragedy, and given the traditional standing that police officers hold within the broader white community, it was all the more surprising that the budding movement to rethink and reform policing, at least initially, garnered so much white support.

With the luxury of time, I can now state that our national moment of hope and optimism for a more just, racially egalitarian society was just that: a moment. Over the course of the summer and then into the fall and winter of 2020, the unity displayed earlier in the year dissipated, rendering the possibility of meaningful and lasting change all but moot. Yes, the marches were real. The protests were widespread, they were genuinely multiracial, and, in real time, they were meaningful. What they were not, however, was lasting. They were not without resistance, they were not without violence, and, like so many other aspects of our society, they were not immune to broader social and political forces. Contextualized by a deadly pandemic and a contentious presidential election, over time, the multiracial marches waned and public support for Black Lives Matter declined. By the time a record number of Americans headed to the voting booth to cast their ballot in the 2020 presidential election, peaceful protests against police brutality were deliberately—and often inaccurately—associated with rioting, looting, and the contemporaneous rise in violence in many American cities. Tellingly, the biggest decline in support for Black Lives Matter and the broader movement for racial justice was among white Americans.[13]

So what should we make of all this? How should we process it? Beyond the spring of 2020, and as I detail in this book, America has been through a decade of racial progress *and* racial tumult. We have seen the election and reelection of an African American president, as well as the election and defeat of a man who, for years, led a racist conspiracy that questioned his citizenship. We have seen a renewed call for racial reparations. We have seen a rise in racially motivated hate crimes. We have seen political polarization dovetail with racial polarization. And we have also seen the reemergence and rebranding of white nationalism. Perhaps most salient, or at least most germane to this book, is that the past ten years have offered multiple concrete examples of a darkening country. That is, contextualizing everything—the

good, the bad, and the deadly—are rapid cultural and demographic changes that are now being felt by much of white America.

In this book I tell a story. I tell a story about the malleability of racial identity, as well as the durability of racial ideology. I also tell a story about local environments and the importance of racialized space. Boiled down to its essence, stripped of all academic jargon, I tell a story about a group of white teachers who work in schools where the majority of students are black. These teachers, most of whom are from middle-class and affluent backgrounds, spend their days in spaces that are racially and economically segregated and around people who, demographically, look nothing like them. Their training, including college courses on whiteness and white privilege, student teaching in inner-city schools, and professional development seminars focused on diversity and cultural sensitivity, did not fully prepare them for life in an environment where race and racial identity could not be escaped. While experience within these spaces did show the possibility of satiation, at no time could white teachers become complacent, as race—particularly the racial disparity between teachers and students—*always* had to be navigated.

This book would not have been possible without teachers. Contacted by a stranger asking to talk with them about whiteness, they opened up and shared their lives with me in illuminating ways. Our interviews—humorous, emotional, gut-wrenching, and heart-warming—both intrigued and challenged me, and they form the basis for a much-needed course correction in the study of white racial identity. While I do not know what you think of me or how you will react to this book, I am grateful to each and every one of you. I thank you for your dedication to your profession and your commitment to your students. Teaching in doubly segregated, inner-city schools can be a difficult and thankless job, so please know that I appreciate and respect all of the hard work you put in as educators and as professionals. Again, thank you for making this project possible.

I would also like to thank a number of people who supported me throughout the entirety of this process. To Lisa LaMontagne, Tristan Teater, Amy Lutz, Arthur Paris, Barbara Applebaum, Mario Rios Perez, Prema Kurien, and Marjorie DeVault, thank you for your guidance, your support, and your patience as this project went from idea to study to actual book. White racial awareness and white racial identity are not easy topics to study, and through it all—the frustration, the confusion, and long nights of writing—you made finishing this project possible by providing a welcoming and understanding support system. Also, to my daughters, Maliah Pearl and Viola Rose, thank

you for lighting up my life. The two of you are my world, and I am lucky to call myself your father. I only hope to make you proud. Finally, I would like to thank the numerous scholars of racial identity and racial inequality who came before me. Without your tireless scholarship, my own simply would not be possible. From methods to theory, from reflexivity to ethics, I put my all into this book; it is my sincere hope that it makes a substantive contribution to our national conversation on race.

INTRODUCTION: WHITENESS IN AMERICA

Whiteness, as a set of cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it.
—RUTH FRANKENBERG, *White Women, Race Matters*

One of the privileges of whiteness is to be able to remain invisible, unnamed. As in a child's "peek-a-boo" game, as white people we are able to cover *our* eyes to consciousness of "race."
—KARYN D. MCKINNEY, *Being White*

The study of white racial identity in the United States can greatly benefit from moving away from simply naming whiteness as an overlooked, privileged identity.—MONICA MCDERMOTT AND FRANK SAMSON, *White Racial and Ethnic Identity*

MARCH 2011

"You're so lucky you're not white." Mrs. Wilkes, then a twenty-nine-year-old English teacher and colleague of mine at Capitol Heights Public School, angrily walked into my classroom during our lunch break.[1] She was visibly upset and on the verge of tears. At the time, Mrs. Wilkes and I were two of the

few Capitol Heights staff members under the age of thirty, so in some ways we felt drawn to each other through the shared experience of being of the same generation. On this day, she was upset because she had just come from a meeting with the mother of one of her students, the actual student, and the school principal. According to Mrs. Wilkes, she was made to sit through twenty-five minutes of being told how racist she was and how she didn't like black people; how due to, at best, a racial disconnect, and at worst, racial prejudice, she mistreated the student in question and unfairly stigmatized him because of his race. As a proud liberal who had purposely chosen to teach in an urban, predominantly black school, Mrs. Wilkes—who is white—was hurt that anyone would accuse her of being a racist, and as a teacher, she was outraged by the suggestion that her pedagogical practices were discriminatory against students of color. After insisting that she was raised not to see color, Mrs. Wilkes surprised me when she looked me straight in the eyes and flatly said, "I'm telling you, Mr. Bell, you're so lucky you're not white."

These words, hanging in the air like a thick fog, left me dumbfounded. "Lucky," then and now, is not the first word that comes to mind when I think about life as a black man in America. For my entire life, I have recognized my race. As far back as childhood, I knew that I was black and I knew that it meant something. Although I could not always say what that something was, I did know that being black was relevant in some way and that it was both meaningful and consequential. Perhaps it was the fact that for most of my life, the neighborhoods I lived in and the schools I attended were overwhelmingly black. Perhaps it was the fact that employees, white and black alike, would follow me around grocery stores, apparently waiting for me to shoplift or otherwise do something illegal. Perhaps it was the fact that when I was growing up, black people told me that I "talked like a white boy," and as I got older, white people told me I was "articulate for a black guy." Or perhaps it was the explicit racialized warnings about police officers and other authority figures—commonly referred to as "the talk"—that I regularly received from my parents throughout my teenage years. Any one of a thousand people or a thousand experiences may have helped to shape my racial identity, and at no point during this process of racial socialization did I think of myself as lucky.

Although I was initially confused and taken aback, very quickly my confusion turned into curiosity. I asked Mrs. Wilkes to elaborate, and she did so by telling me that she and many of the other white teachers in the school felt that they were often mistreated and disrespected by the predominantly black student body, by black parents or guardians, and at times even by black

members of the faculty and staff. What's more, according to Mrs. Wilkes, the reason for this mistreatment and disrespect had nothing to do with them as individual teachers, but everything to do with the fact that they were white. That is, for many white teachers Capitol Heights was more than just a school with a predominantly poor, predominantly black student body; it also served as a physical space where being white was a disadvantage, a space where whiteness itself was unnecessarily and unfairly stigmatized.

Conversely, according to Mrs. Wilkes, within this same space, being black was an advantage, one she regarded as a relevant factor in the overwhelmingly positive relationship I had with black students and their families. While she, a white teacher, experienced racial discrimination at Capitol Heights, I, a black teacher, enjoyed racial privilege. In her mind, simply not being white provided me with a leg up in building meaningful relationships with black students, parents, and primary caregivers. To be clear, Mrs. Wilkes was *not* making general claims about racial advantage and disadvantage in the American stratification system; rather, she was specifically referencing the local environment of Capitol Heights. Somewhat skeptical, I asked Mrs. Wilkes, who was now sitting across from my desk with her head down, if she sincerely believed that she was a victim of racial discrimination or that her job as an educator would be easier if she were black. After a brief pause, she snapped her head up and pointedly replied, "In this school, absolutely."

As a white teacher at Capitol Heights, an urban school with a predominantly black student body, Mrs. Wilkes did not see whiteness as the raceless norm; instead she thought of it as a stigma, the mark of the racial other. Her status as a racial minority was constantly on her mind: being white became a social reality that she could not escape. According to Mrs. Wilkes, her students saw her as white, her students' families saw her as white, and even many of her nonwhite coworkers saw her as white, all leading to a surprising and somewhat disturbing development; she started to see herself as white. Over time, through this more local form of socialization, Mrs. Wilkes came to adopt a specific and *situated* racial identity.[2] She found herself trying to make sense of a new and, at times, emotionally challenging racial classification system. She struggled with it individually; she openly discussed it with other white teachers; and eventually she came into my classroom and voiced her concern about antiwhite discrimination. For her, our school represented a space where whiteness was neither a meaningless demographic marker nor an invisible or privileged identity. Instead, for Mrs. Wilkes, as well as other white teachers at Capitol Heights, whiteness was interrupted.

LOCALIZING WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY

What does it mean to be white? How do white Americans see (or not see) themselves racially, and how do they make sense of an interpersonal, institutional, and seemingly entrenched racial stratification system? These are empirical questions that legal scholars, historians, sociologists, and other social scientists have spent decades trying to answer.[3] Among the numerous findings put forth, scholars have shown that whiteness is largely constructed as the raceless norm, that whiteness is a form of structural privilege, and that whiteness emanates from a particular standpoint, "a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society."[4] Scholars have also shown that today white racial identity is socially constructed from a pantheon of European ethnic identities and that whiteness—akin to private property—has been granted the legal right to exclude.[5] American institutions, from education to criminal justice, from the labor market to the law, privilege and protect whiteness, and American culture, from discourse to ideology, and from styles of dress to standards of beauty, reflects and reifies the preferences of white people.[6]

Although insightful and highly influential to the overall study of race in America, the literature on whiteness and white racial identity suffers from several limitations.[7] First, even across different disciplines, theoretical models, and research methodologies, few empirical studies focus on the racial dimensions and racializing effects of physical space. Far too often, race scholars speak of racial categories and racial experiences in broad, spatially generalized terms. For example, one of the most robust and consistent findings—white racial invisibility[8]—presupposes a static, unchanging racial environment. To the extent that variation in racialized experience is examined at all, it is typically examined along other prominent demographic classifications, such as class, gender, and, increasingly, age, ability, and sexual orientation.[9] In this sense, within the existing literature, racialized experience may vary by class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on, but it is assumed to be lived within a static, racially monolithic physical space.

In addition to overlooking the importance of physical space, scholars have largely failed to systematically examine the awareness and experiential nature of white racial identity *after* it has been made visibly meaningful to actual white people. Put differently, what happens to white racial identity once the veneer of normalcy is stripped away and its racialized dimensions are laid bare? How do white people in America respond to being seen, being addressed, and, from their perspective, being treated as white? Though

adept at detailing the way white Americans conceptualize white racial identity generally, scholars have been far less successful in examining how white Americans conceptualize white racial identity locally.[10] Given the inherent heterogeneity within any racial group, it seems theoretically flawed and empirically limiting to assume that spatial variation has no meaningful bearing on how white people experience, understand, and make sense of their own lives in racial terms. Even with the rise of critical whiteness studies, relatively little is known about the localized experiential dynamics of white racialization.[11]

In this book I seek to address these and other limitations by explicitly making physical space the center of my analysis. Moving beyond the general question *What does it mean to be white?*, I ask more specifically, *What does it mean to be white in nonwhite racialized spaces?* I use in-depth interviews to study the daily experiences and discursive practices of white teachers who currently work in urban, predominantly black schools. Focusing on the "localness of race," I empirically examine a subset of white Americans who have experienced, and continue to experience, what Charles Gallagher terms a *momentary minority status*.[12] As white teachers who often found themselves surrounded by nonwhite students, my interview respondents were able to speak comprehensively, if clumsily, to the significance of physical space and localized racial identities.

Over the course of nineteen months, I interviewed thirty-two white teachers from the Brick City School District, a poor, inner-city, racially segregated district in Upstate New York. Identified and recruited through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling, all teachers came from schools with predominantly black student populations. Although preceded by detailed email and telephone conversations, the face-to-face interviews afforded me the opportunity to examine white racial identity and the effects of socialization on a deeper and more intimate level. In the interviews I asked teachers about their racial identities in a general or more abstract sense, as well as how they experienced white racial identity within predominantly black schools. We talked about their childhoods, their decisions to become educators, their teacher preparatory programs, and the multitude of paths that led them to urban, racially segregated schools. More than anything else, though, we talked about race: the race of the teachers, the race of the students, and, indeed, the race of the schools themselves. After just a handful of interviews, it was clear that the complexities of white identity construction required considerably more empirical and theoretical scrutiny. I attempt to offer such scrutiny in the pages and chapters to come.

THE BRICK CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

In 2014, for the first time in American history, the majority of public school students were nonwhite.[13] Although non-Hispanic whites still constituted the single largest bloc of public school students, collectively, the percentage of nonwhite students surpassed that of white students. As a whole, slightly more than 50 percent of all public school students are now students of color.[14] This new majority-minority status of public school students is not congruent with the racial (and gender) homogeneity of public school teachers. While a slight majority of all public school students are nonwhite, over 80 percent of all public school teachers are white.[15] In fact, in twenty-four states, the percentage of white public school teachers exceeds 90 percent; in fourteen of those states, it surpasses 95 percent.[16] As we move further into the twenty-first century, neither the trend of an increasingly nonwhite student body nor that of a predominantly white teaching staff shows any signs of slowing down, let alone reversing.[17]

In tandem with the rapid resegregation of public schools, the racial disparity between teachers and students has led to a number of schools in which the teaching staff is predominantly white, while the student body is predominantly nonwhite.[18] The demographic gap between teachers and students in many public schools all but ensures that a number of white teachers will spend a significant amount of time in nonwhite racialized spaces. While scholars have consistently shown that such racial disparities can often lead to negative outcomes for students of color, comparatively little is known about how this pattern affects white racial identity.[19] Of particular concern in this book is how white teachers negotiate and navigate race and racial identity within physical spaces that are themselves demographically and discursively racialized. One such space is the Brick City School District (BCSD), the site of this study.

The Brick City School District is a severely impoverished, underperforming, and hypersegregated school, primarily serving students of color. To be more precise, the BCSD has a student body that is over 70 percent nonwhite; 53 percent of its students identify as African American. Also, the pattern of housing segregation in Upstate New York has resulted in a number of BCSD schools becoming predominantly black, predominantly Hispanic, or predominantly white. For example, there are several BCSD schools in which African Americans compose more than 90 percent of the student population. At other schools in the district too, the student bodies are more than 60, 70, and 80 percent African American. While predominantly black student bod-

ies are quite common, there are exactly zero BCSD schools where the majority of the faculty and staff are nonwhite. It is from these schools, schools with an African American student population of 60 percent or greater, that *all* of my interview respondents were selected.

In their respective schools, as well as their individual classrooms, the teachers I interviewed consistently found themselves interacting with people who did not talk, act, or look like them. On almost a daily basis, they were confronted with the reality of race, and unlike in their lives outside work—which took place in overwhelmingly white spaces—they were not afforded the luxury, or privilege, to pretend otherwise. Whether addressing behavioral misconduct, calling parents at home, or even planning a lesson, white Brick City teachers came to see race as an explicit and inevitable feature of their professional lives. Within Brick City schools, there was no ambiguity or vacillation, no disinclination or pretense; black students, as well as their parents and primary caregivers, named whiteness directly, leaving white teachers with little ideological space to obfuscate what quickly became a social fact;[20] white racial identity was salient, it was substantive, and it was also scary.

As white teachers immersed within an explicitly racialized environment, the women and men I spoke to were forced to grapple with their own racial identity in real and meaningful ways.[21] For most of them, this was the first time in their lives that they had had to take their own racial identity seriously, as their daily interactions within Brick City schools made it impossible for them to construct it as raceless or simply "normal." Teachers who thought of themselves as both believers and practitioners of colorblindness became enveloped by race, and over time being white took on a more prominent meaning. Similar to Mrs. Wilkes, who began this chapter, white teachers found their occupational status as racial minorities to be highly significant, and it altered, at least temporarily, the way they experienced and made sense of white racial identity. As the following pages will show, this new form of racial socialization, engendered in part by a heightened sense of white racial awareness and a weakened sense of white racial autonomy, is connected to, and has important lessons for, race throughout the broader United States.

THE INTERVIEWS: MEETING FACE TO FACE

I completed all of my interviews during a nineteen-month period from October 2014 to May 2016. While conducting fieldwork, I met with teachers in a variety of locations, including coffee shops, cafés, public libraries, school

classrooms, their homes, and, on one occasion, a public park. Interviews ranged from ninety minutes to over two hours. Even though I had spoken to each teacher on the phone before meeting them face to face, the interviews themselves had a surreal quality to them. In a way, despite having recruited these teachers specifically because of their race and occupation, I was often surprised by the overwhelming whiteness of teachers in public education.[22] It is one thing to read about the demographic gap between white teachers and nonwhite students,[23] but it is something else entirely to give it a name, a face, and a voice. Thus, interviewing white teachers about their various constructions of white racial identity, at least initially, proved to be a bit of a culture shock for me and, on several occasions, for the teachers as well.

My first interview was with Leah Thompson, thirty-three, a middle school art teacher of nine years. Leah, a single mom, has worked at two different schools throughout her career, both of which had majority-black student populations. Leah invited me to her home on a weekday evening after she had put her son to bed. As I prepared for the interview, I could see that Leah appeared to be nervous. I double-checked to see whether she wanted to go through with the interview, and she reassured me that not only did she want to go through with it but she was also "kind of excited" to speak with me. When I remarked about her apparent nervousness, she explained that she was more excited than nervous and that she had been looking forward to the interview for quite some time. As I turned on my recorder and began to ask my first question, Leah blurted out, unsolicited, "Please don't make me sound racist."

With these words—"Please don't make me sound racist"—Leah voiced a concern that would cast a shadow over the entire data collection process. As ensuing chapters will show, with great specificity, teacher after teacher expressed thoughts and feelings about black students and black families that can be considered, at best, racially insensitive, and at worst, blatantly racist. A common concern that spanned multiple interviews was the idea that, as white teachers speaking openly about black students, their words would not only be seen as racist but could also be used against them and could endanger their careers. This feeling on the part of multiple teachers caused me to begin each of my interviews, whether solicited or not, with an emphasis on confidentiality. I started every interview with an intentional effort to reassure interviewees that nothing they said could be traced back to them. Thus, despite a great deal of initial concern on the part of my research participants, I was ultimately successful in gaining their trust and conducting meaningful and thematically rich interviews.[24]

For the most part, the tenor and tone of my interviews followed a familiar pattern. First, teachers would express an excited trepidation about speaking openly about race, urban education, and white racial identity. Next, I would reassure them that the interview was 100 percent confidential and that nothing they said could be traced back to them. Then, slowly but surely, their comfort levels with me and the subject material would grow, causing them to open up about their experiences in the BCSD. Finally, the words, stories, and experiences would come in bunches, providing me with an in-depth and intimate portrait of how they socially construct whiteness in nonwhite racialized spaces. Not only did teachers go into detail about a whole range of experiences, but they also, with the help of me probing, expressed and examined their interpretations of those experiences. As these teachers spoke, I listened carefully and paid close attention to their words. I made note of their facial expressions, discursive patterns, and general body language, and I followed each interview with a detailed summary memo. In the end, this process led to the collection of rich, sophisticated, and illuminating interview data.

WHITENESS, WHITE PEOPLE, AND RACIALIZED SPACE: A BRIEF NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this book, I refer to "whiteness" and "white people" on a regular basis, therefore it is necessary to flesh out how they are conceptualized within this study. While the terms "white people" and "whiteness" are inextricably linked, I do not think of them as interchangeable.[25] At their most basic levels, one term refers to individuals, while the other refers to a system. Those individuals who fall under the racial classification of white are, in the eyes of most, deemed white people. This, in itself, is significant, because for most of American history—including today—being racially designated as white was, and is, admission into the dominant racial group. To be racially classified as white is to be a member of the racial majority, which in turn imbues one with a set of racial privileges, including the privilege of just being "normal."[26]

On the other hand, whiteness is a system, one built on the historical foundation of white racial domination and maintained through institutional racism and a racialized social system.[27] Systems are bigger, more expansive, and in many ways more consequential than individual people. For example, while individual white people can be racially prejudiced and even act in racially discriminatory ways, whiteness, as a system, "*is racial domination normalized*."[28] That is, within a white-identified and white supremacist society, the systematic domination of people of color seems normal, as opposed to

being the result of unequal power relations.[29] As a result, institutional efforts to promote racial equality, such as affirmative action, are widely considered to be overt examples of reverse discrimination, ostensibly because they violate the ideological norms of colorblindness and meritocracy.[30]

Also, as a system, whiteness represents more than a collection of white citizens. Looking at the historical arc of race and racial identity in the United States, whiteness has been the archetype of what it means to be American.[31] Many social and political battles have been fought to protect whiteness from outside incursions, and, like private property, whiteness has been granted the legal authority to exclude.[32] Numerous immigrant groups, including those who are racially classified as white today, had to effectively work toward whiteness, enduring vitriol and discrimination from the dominant group along the way.[33] With this in mind, whiteness should not and, indeed, *cannot* be conceptualized in the same way as blackness, brownness, and so on. As the normative system of racial classification, whiteness represents the default American and it is deeply invested in the maintenance and reproduction of racial inequality.[34]

Finally, racialized space also needs to be deconstructed. Even though all space is racialized space, the very term "racialized space" can unwittingly reinforce whiteness as the raceless norm. If space is only racialized once it becomes occupied by people of color, then, by definition, whiteness, white people, and white space are not racialized. In order to avoid the reification of white racelessness, in this book I use the term "nonwhite racialized spaces" when describing Brick City schools and the neighborhoods that house them. Nonwhite racialized spaces are physical and social environments where white racial consciousness cannot be escaped. Within these spaces, whiteness is denormalized, or interrupted, by the cultural practices and people within them, and even by the physical spaces themselves. Whereas segregated white neighborhoods and schools are indeed racialized spaces, they are often interpreted by white people as simply neighborhoods and schools, respectively. Within nonwhite racialized spaces, however, white visibility and white racial awareness are heightened by the physical dimensions, racial demographics, cultural mores, and interactional practices *of those* particular spaces. Although there is often a distinction between the way Americans construct white versus nonwhite racialized space, it is important to me that I do not reinforce the process of white normalization.

PLAN FOR THE BOOK

Before I outline the plan for the book, I think it is important for me to be clear about what I did, *and did not*, write. I did not write a book about education. While sites of great importance, schools, *as schools*, are not the primary focus of this study. To the extent that schools are my focal point, it is due to their historical construction—and contemporary existence—as race-making spaces, including in the minds of white teachers.[35] Furthermore, I did not write a book about education policy. Institutionalized disinvestment in public schools, the decimation of teacher protections, high-stakes testing, the proliferation of charter schools, and other features of neoliberal education policy—though instrumental to the very existence of the BCSD—do not receive extensive attention in this book.[36] Finally, this is not a book about inequality. A lot has been and will be written about education as a site of racial and economic inequality, and a lot has been and will be written about the impact that inequality has on student outcomes.[37] Topics such as the achievement gap, inequitable funding and access to technology, racialized tracking, and the school-to-prison pipeline, to name but a few, have been, and will remain, of great interest to educational scholars.[38] Again, though, despite their importance to education specifically, and to the country as a whole, these and other examples of inequality *are not* the primary focus of this study.

This book is about identity. More specifically, this book is about white racial identity.[39] My primary objective in writing this book is to demonstrate, empirically, that white racial identity is constructed, and often reconstructed, based on localized interactions.[40] This book is also about socialization. Socialization, not biology, is what leads so many white Americans to construct raceless identities for themselves,[41] and as I will cover in great detail, local resocialization processes have the power to interrupt this normative construction. This book is about physical space. Space does not exist in a vacuum, and it is not immune to the social, political, and discursive processes of racialization.[42] The same controlling images that have constructed African American women as "mammies" or "jezebels," and African American men as "thugs" or "gang members," have also constructed "urban schools" as "black schools."[43] One of my chief objectives in this book, then, is to examine the racial construction of space and the impact this process has on white racial identity. Finally, this book is about ideology. How does local space, and the resocialization it engenders, affect the racial ideologies of colorblindness and postracialism, both of which are normative in much of white America?[44]

That is, does a heightened racial awareness reinforce or challenge white racial ideology?[45] These are the questions I attempt to answer in writing this book.

Chapter 1, "White Racelessness," begins where a great deal of the research literature ends, with a discussion about, and analysis of, the so-called invisibility of whiteness and normalness of white racial identity. After briefly reviewing the literature on white racelessness, I show how, consistent with this literature, white teachers constructed whiteness as the invisible, raceless norm. As long as my questions were framed in an abstract fashion—"What does it mean to be white?"—teachers, with few exceptions, struggled to discuss or describe white racial identity in a meaningful way. The data presented in this chapter lend empirical support for the long-held belief that, owing to their social positioning, many white Americans do not see themselves as racial beings or see their lives in racialized terms. Two thematic concepts, rhetorical incoherence and white deflection, are introduced and discussed at length.

Chapter 2, "The Color Line and the Classroom," highlights the concept of racialized space, as well as the interactive processes that help to engender racial identities among white Brick City Teachers. Focusing on historical, political, and legal changes, I detail the racialization of urban schools in the public imagination. I also show how Brick City teachers, without exception, *all* conceptualized their schools as black schools. Due to a variety of factors, namely the physical nature of the school, the predominantly black student body, and the presence and consistency of explicit racialized discourse, white teachers distinctly thought of their respective workplaces as racialized spaces. Compounding this process was the culture that purportedly engulfed Brick City schools. From styles of dress and modes of talk to so-called pathological or oppositional behavior, *black culture*—as represented by black students and black families—all but cemented the racialization of these particular spaces.

Chapter 3, "Becoming White Teachers," explores how white teachers are locally socialized regarding race, whiteness, and white racial identity. More specifically, I detail how nonwhite racialized space interrupts the normality of whiteness. Contrary to whiteness as an invisible identity, this chapter shows how, within certain local environments, white teachers are resocialized to constantly see and think about what it means to be white. For these teachers, their sense of whiteness as the raceless norm was eroded by the explicitly racialized dimensions of Brick City schools. From their position as the numerical, social, and cultural minority, white teachers in the BCSD saw themselves not as the raceless norm but as the racial other. Such a process is

incongruous with their past life experiences, as well as their current realities outside of work.

Chapter 4, "The White Race Card," examines the specific type of racial identity developed by white teachers in predominantly black schools, namely their construction of whiteness as the marked and maligned racial other. This chapter uses interview data to show how the racial dimensions of Brick City schools caused white teachers to develop a heightened sense of racial victimization. Within these schools, not only did whiteness become visible; it also became a liability. To varying degrees, the teachers I interviewed expressed a spatially situated racial identity, one fueled by what they considered antiwhite prejudice and reverse discrimination. From getting called a racist for punishing students to being distrusted and mistreated by black parents who "just can't stand white people," teacher after teacher constructed whiteness in the BCSD as a disadvantage. In this chapter I also discuss the spatial construction of "black privilege."

In chapter 5, "Colorblind," I compare the racial discourse of white teachers when talking about race and racism in general with how they describe their personal experiences within predominantly black schools. In the former, with little exception, white teachers professed a strict belief in colorblindness. As long as they were speaking in broad or general terms, nearly every teacher in this study downplayed the significance of racial inequality in the contemporary United States. In the latter, again, with little exception, these same teachers were highly cognizant of race, as it was pronounced throughout their descriptions and depictions of being the racialized other within Brick City schools. In a stark departure from their general belief in colorblindness and postracialism, when referencing their schools, white teachers were not only color-conscious but also went into detail about the realness and relevance of racial discrimination. When I pointed this out to them, the juxtaposition led to a discursive negotiation in which white teachers tried to rationalize and make sense of their spatially contingent, ideological contradictions.

Finally, in the conclusion, "White Identity Politics and the Coming Crisis of Place," I end the book with a discussion that goes beyond the Brick City School District. Specifically, I discuss what this study suggests about race, white racial identity, and race relations throughout society as a whole. To do so, I situate my findings within the larger context of a rapidly changing—and rapidly darkening—United States. Following the trajectory of public schools, America is moving closer to becoming a majority-minority country. Experientially, this will lead to fewer and fewer predominantly white spaces, with

still fewer exclusively white spaces. What this means for white racial identity remains to be seen, but there are several indications that such demographic shifts, along with the economic and cultural changes that are perceived to accompany them, have ignited a white backlash, one that includes the rise of white nationalism and the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States. Limitations and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

THINKING DEEPER: RESEARCH AND REFLEXIVITY

Whiteness interrupted is a process, one that challenges assumptions about white socialization and disrupts the development of normative white racial identities. As this book demonstrates, the institutional, ideological, and interactive processes that cast doubt on white racialization can be ruptured, leaving whiteness exposed and causing individual white people to experience life as racial actors. What's more, whiteness interrupted is ongoing; it does not result from solitary encounters. Although they recalled individual experiences that could be dramatic, for most teachers it was the iterative nature of it all that, over time, shattered the illusion of white invisibility. Finally, whiteness interrupted is spatial. It stems from localized dimensions of space, not simplistic generalities or essentialist notions of distinct racial categories. In order to better understand this process, I had to first step outside myself, challenging my own constructions of whiteness and white racial identity.

It is not lost on me that, as an African American, my speaking empirically about the racial experiences of white Americans may come across as somewhat peculiar. Neither is it lost on me that, as a man, my speaking empirically about the lived experiences of women might come across as somewhat paternalistic. Finally, as a black man, it is not lost on me that there is a complex and, quite frankly, tortured history between African American men and white women in the United States.[46] No matter how conscientious and reflexive one claims to be, there is no surefire methodological way for researchers to completely shield their own experiences and perspectives from the study of race, class, gender, or any other form of identity.[47] For this study, all of my interview respondents were white, and the vast majority of them were women. I, an African American man, am neither. The racial and gender incongruity between myself and my interview respondents was more than noticeable to me, and on more than one occasion it was verbally recognized by the interviewees themselves. This, I believe, speaks to both the salience of racial identity and the necessity for self-reflection and reflexivity.[48]

When I was interviewing white teachers for this project, there were times when their words made me cringe. Permeated with racial stereotypes at best, and racial vitriol at worst, many of the statements made by these teachers were hostile to black people and what they perceived to be black culture. For some, this hostility seemed to bubble just beneath the surface of their words, while for others, the prefixes "This might sound bad, but . . ." or "I have nothing against black people, but . . ." served as ominous precursors to a litany of racially insensitive, or downright racist, commentaries about black students and black families. As someone who has experienced overt racial discrimination firsthand, on several occasions I found myself thinking, "This person should not be teaching black children." The separation of my personal thoughts and feelings from my role as a researcher, while not always easy, was something I focused on and took great pains to maintain. Still, even as I write these words, I cannot be sure that I was completely successful in this endeavor.

As my interviews proceeded, something unexpected happened. The complexities of race, racial identity, and racial discourse began to stand out in ways that were hard to make sense of, particularly given the antiblack sentiment that was expressed earlier in my respective interviews. Many of the teachers who made disparaging remarks about black students and black families would later speak of them with great fondness, empathy, and compassion. The same teachers who early in the interview made me cringe, later in the same interview made me smile with their genuine concern and encouraging remarks. Though not always in the same order, or in response to the same questions, racial stereotypes *and* racial compassion could be found in nearly every one of my interviews. In a very real sense, the teachers who participated in this study seemed conflicted, and at times even confused, about their own feelings toward and their relationships with the black students who were entrusted to their care. Still, in the end, they opened up to me, choosing to tell their stories and share their experiences in their own words.

In the following pages, many of the statements and opinions that you will read can, and likely will, come across as racist. Some cases will speak for themselves, as they undoubtedly reflect racist hostilities toward African Americans. In most cases, though, these seemingly racist statements reflect real people grappling with the day-to-day logistics of a difficult job, all while trying to make sense of a racial identity that is experientially unfamiliar to them. To put it differently, these words exemplify members of the dominant racial group desperately trying to restore and get back to what sociologist Margaret Hagerman refers to as "the existing racial order."[49] As with the

meeting that caused Mrs. Wilkes to burst into my classroom back at Capitol Heights, white teachers were often forced to confront their racial identity as a defense against charges of racism. Lashing out was just one of the many defense mechanisms they used to shield themselves against racialized stress. This is not to make excuses for teachers who hold on to or express racial stereotypes, and it is certainly not meant to rationalize racism, but as you read this book, it is important to remember—just as I had to—that context matters. More specifically, racial context matters.

NOTES

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1. Floyd has not been the only African American man to speak these words while being killed by police officers. In the summer of 2014, Eric Garner, accused of selling loose cigarettes, was choked to death by a police officer, Daniel Pantaleo, in Staten Island, New York. Garner's death was also captured on film, and in the video he can be heard saying, "I can't breathe" a total of eleven times before eventually succumbing to his injuries.

2. This list is by no means exhaustive. Also, it should be noted that several other high-profile cases, such as Trayvon Martin, Jordan David, and Ahmaud Arbery, also involved the murder of unarmed African Americans. In these three cases, however, the accused assailants were not working as police officers.

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