EXPERIENCES OF WHITE WOMEN GRADUATE STUDENTS IN A DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION BADGE PROGRAM AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION IN A TIME OF WHITESTREAM RACIAL RECKONING

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IN A TIME OF WHITESTREAM RACIAL RECKONING

BY

STEFANIE ARGUS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how white women engaged with interrogating whiteness, race, and racism after completing a multi-session diversity program designed for graduate students. This qualitative research project tends to the following research question: What are the lived experiences of white women who complete a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students?

For this research project, white women who are graduate students participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Using critical whiteness theory, a feminist research framework, and interpretive phenomenological analysis, this study identified commonalities in experiences among participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2014). As is common in phenomenology and feminist research, participant narratives illustrated the parts constituting the whole picture of the phenomenon. The five elements describing the essence of the white women graduate students’ experiences in the diversity and inclusion program were: motivation, participation, racial literacy, agreement, and reflection. Each of these superordinate themes had component subthemes. Research results were represented in prose and also in the form of two composite poems. Finally, I present study limitations and synthesize recommendations on how institutions of higher learning can intentionally structure (un)learning spaces for white students to further their anti-racism work.

Keywords: whiteness, interpretive phenomenological analysis, feminism, anti-racism
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Preface

This dissertation is presented in manuscript format, in a traditional five-chapter text. Supplemental materials that were not included in the body of the manuscript are included in the appendices section of this document.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose and Rationale

Racial, class, and gender oppressions are historical and contemporary realities in the United States (Christensen, 1997; deMarrais & LeCompte, 1998; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Hankivsky, 2014; Hoskin, 2013; Omi & Winant, 1994; Spring, 2004). These realities were heightened by a national racial reckoning within the last several years as (white) people increasingly confronted the issues of race, racism, and white supremacy (Hammonds, 2021). According to Hammonds (2021), the unprecedented combination of a global pandemic disease, national political upheaval favoring the extreme right in U.S. politics, and a national racial reckoning resonated with the tumultuous period just after Reconstruction in the late 1870s. Importantly, this inflection point was for the dominant white culture of the United States (Bradley, 2021).

This so-called national racial reckoning was marked by events including the August 2019 publication of The New York Times Magazine’s “1619 Project” on the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery (Hannah-Jones, 2019), and by the 2020 murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor (Hammonds, 2021). The police killings of these individuals (in addition to the murders of countless other Black Americans) prompted a “thunderous rise of the Black Lives Matter movement” that perhaps served as an “inflection point” in the United States (Hammonds, 2021, p. 12).

In this dissertation, I deliberately capitalize Black and Brown when referring to people or communities, in order to affirm the significance of being Black or Brown in the United States of America (Apperson, 2020; Coleman, 2020; Glover, 2020; Laws, 2020). I do not capitalize white as an intentional rebuke of white supremacy (Apperson, 2020; Glover, 2020; Okun, 1999).
In September 2020, the Executive Office of the President (2020) issued a memorandum that referred to diversity, equity, and inclusion training as “divisive, anti-American propaganda” (para. 1). Later that month, an executive order titled, *Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping* (The White House, 2020), issued a federal directive from the President of the United States. According to this document, “divisive concepts” referred to notions that:

(1) one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex; (2) the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist; (3) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously; (4) an individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex; (5) members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex; (6) an individual’s moral character is necessarily determined by his or her race or sex; (7) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex; (8) any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex; or (9) meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist, or were created by a particular race to oppress another race. The term “divisive concepts” also includes any other form of race or sex stereotyping or any other form of race or sex scapegoating. (The White House, 2020, para. 16)

The federal directive pointedly noted that “such ideas may be fashionable in the academy, but they have no place in programs and activities supported by Federal

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) further inflamed existing ethno-nationalism and xenophobia in the United States, exacerbating patterns of discrimination and inequity (Elias et al., 2021). Anti-Asian, and particularly anti-Chinese, racism surged (Alpert & Nguyen-Feng, 2020; Croucher et al., 2020; Gover et al., 2020; He, 2020; McCoy, 2020). In the last several years, hate crimes rooted in anti-Blackness (Banks, 2020) and anti-Semitism (Himmelstein, 2020) also significantly increased.

While Trump’s federal 2020 executive order was revoked by President Biden, conservative lawmakers across the United States have continued to propose and pass state-level legislation that bans diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. As of 2023, 44 states have introduced bills or taken other measures to restrict the teaching of “divisive concepts,” which are frequently and erroneously referred to as “critical race theory” (Schwartz, 2023, para. 1). Eighteen states have implemented these bans (Schwartz, 2023).

As recently as March 2023, two particular bills target institutions of higher education. The Florida House of Representatives approved a bill which bans state colleges and universities from financially supporting any programs or campus activities related to critical race theory, and from expending state or federal funds on DEI programs (Brown, 2023). The bill would ban individual courses and academic program majors or minors related to any critical theory (Brown, 2023). In Texas, a recently-filed bill would
prohibit colleges and universities from considering DEI when hiring new faculty and staff, in addition to banning DEI-related offices on campus (McKee, 2023). My doctoral research study and the crafting of this dissertation took place during this time of racial reckoning and its associated backlash.

Many organizations and institutions across the United States have recently made efforts to infuse DEI work into their organizational cultures. Currently, almost every higher education institution in the United States addresses diversity and inclusion policies and offers initiatives for students of minoritized backgrounds on their campuses, with a majority of these policies created in the last ten years (Patton et al., 2019). However, the landscape of DEI in education is ever-shifting due to policy changes at the state level, and there is conflicting literature on the success of these initiatives for organizations and their constituents (Martin, 2014; Patton & Haynes, 2020). Additionally, the literature typically focuses on the experiences of undergraduates in DEI programming (Perez et al., 2020; Pugh, 2014), creating a gap in our understanding of graduate students’ experiences in DEI initiatives (Willis & Schram, 2022).

Structural, systemic racism is an entrenched problem in the United States (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005; Harper, 2012; Mirza, 2018) and is rooted in whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy (Allen, 2012; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; Okun, 1999). Without addressing and interrogating whiteness, systemic racism will remain uninterrupted. This problem is worthy of study because racism perpetuates real inequities. The purpose of this doctoral study was to explore how white women graduate students at a Predominantly White Institution engaged with interrogating the system of racism (from which they benefit) as emerging social justice activists and anti-racists.
As a feminist committed to anti-racism, I was especially interested in the experiences of white women who engage in DEI programming. As such, I used a feminist theoretical framework and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to answer the following research question: What are the lived experiences of white women in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students? My research sub-question was, How, if at all, do white women graduate students’ meaning making in the diversity and inclusion program inform the way that they understand themselves as white women?

The study was conducted with eight white women who completed a diversity and inclusion workshop series at a mid-sized public university. Using feminist IPA and the hermeneutic circle, this dissertation documented the contextualized parts and whole of the essence of the lived experiences – or Beauvoir’s (1949) experience vécu – of white women graduate students who completed a diversity and inclusion program. The university’s diversity and inclusion program offered graduate-level, professional development workshops on a variety of topics, including race, racism, and anti-racism. Workshops were facilitated by graduate students, university faculty, and university staff, and were open to any graduate student in a Master’s or Doctoral program. The program launched in 2017.

Leonardo (2004) asked, “If whites do not assume responsibility for white supremacy, then who can?” (p. 145). White folks are often in powerful positions to dismantle legacies of dominance and introduce structural changes (Boutte & Jackson, 2014). White women’s lives in particular are sites for the reproduction of racism, and/or sites that actively challenge racism (Frankenberg, 1997). The rationale for this study was
that knowing more about how white women reproduce racism and/or actively challenge racism is critical.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

The joint theoretical frameworks for this paper were critical whiteness theory (Frankenberg, 1997; Gillborn, 2007; Leonardo, 2002) and intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Critical whiteness theory is linked critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), which I discuss first.

**Critical Race Theory**

Within the context of the United States, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) affirmed that: (1) Race unabatedly is a determinant of inequity, (2) Society is organized based on property rights, and (3) The intersection of race and property can support understandings of social and educational inequity. These tenets are also representative of critical race theory (CRT). CRT is concerned with “studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 3). Parker and Lynn (2002) argued that CRT has three main goals: (1) To present stories (or counter-narratives) about discrimination from the perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); (2) to push for the elimination of racism while also recognizing that race is a social construct; (3) and to address other marginalized identities and inequities. CRT aims to be an “iterative project of scholarship” (Tate, 1997, p. 234-235) and can also be used in conjunction with other interpretive frameworks, such as feminist theory (Chepp, 2015). As noted, one of the research paradigm for this doctoral research project was critical whiteness studies (CWS). I chose this theory in order to explicitly address the inquiry topic of white supremacy as experienced by white women.
CRT is also an undeniably politicized term. This is evidenced by the example of a recent federal memorandum which instructed U.S. agencies to cease training on “critical race theory,’ ‘white privilege,’ or any other training or propaganda effort that teaches or suggests [...] that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country” (Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, 2020, para. 4).

**Critical Whiteness Studies**

Matias et al. (2014) specifically recommended the complementary use of critical whiteness studies (CWS), in conjunction with CRT, to deconstruct unexplored dimensions of “the white imagination” (p. 289). Both CRT and CWS utilize interdisciplinary approaches. White identity development and racial awareness training perhaps first became popular for white folks in the United States in the 1970s (Earick, 2018), largely in response to a report published by the Kerner Commission (1968). This document introduced the myth of reverse racism as responsible for various race riots that occurred between World War II and 1967. Troublesomely, white people’s exploration of racial attitudes and beliefs (rather than behaviors) thus became the hallmark of white identity work. CWS emphasizes that white folks are not outside of race (Cabrera, 2019; Leonardo, 2013; Lipsitz, 2006; Matias et al., 2014; Thandeka, 2009), and that their awareness of and voices and perspectives on racism and antiracism are critical in both destabilizing and deconstructing whiteness (Frankenberg, 1997).

CWS emphasizes the need to study whiteness and white privilege not as individual, passive experiences but through the broad lens of white supremacy (Leonardo, 2002). CWS has been shaped by CRT in legal studies (Crenshaw et al., 1993).
and actively encourages action for liberation and larger transformation of systems (Earick, 2018; Matias & Allen, 2013).

Foste and Irwin (2020) documented several useful methodological implications of CWS; these can be realized because CWS locates white students “within the social, historical, and cultural contexts of whiteness, which opens up a host of theoretical possibilities in the study of student development” (p. 449). Strengths and limitations of CWS are discussed in the next section.

**Strengths of CWS: Three Constructs.** Unlike CRT, CWS does not consist of a set of defined principles; CWS can instead be thought of as an umbrella term for several constructs (Foste & Irwin, 2020). Three specific constructs that Foste and Irwin (2020) found to be helpful in theorizing whiteness are white complicity (Applebaum, 2010), epistemologies of ignorance (Mills, 1997), and white normativity (Yancy, 2018). I next introduce these three applicable constructs.

**White Complicity.** Applebaum (2010) stated, “white complicity is grounded in the belief that one cannot transcend the social system that frames how one makes meaning of oneself and the social world in which one is embedded” (p. 14). White people frequently understand racism as an interpersonal event (Foste & Irwin, 2020; McIntosh, 1989) rather than a cultural, structural, and institutional force. Importantly, racism is not individual, conscious, and intentional acts of meanness; racism is the collective impact of invisible systems conferring dominance on white people (McIntosh, 1989). The racist = bad / not racist = good binary (Thompson, 2003) has resulted in harmful white inaction and dissociation, in addition to complicity.
The CWS construct of white complicity supported Foste and Irwin’s (2020) study, which worked from the premise that “even the most progressive and anti-racist whites still benefit from and perpetuate white supremacy” (p. 446). The authors identified two major affordances of theories of complicity (Foste & Irwin, 2020). First, white complicity recognizes that while a white person might demonstrate attentiveness and awareness in thinking about race, by virtue to simply being (Applebaum, 2010), white people benefit from whiteness, cannot relinquish whiteness, and cannot possibly disentangle themselves from white supremacy (Okun, 1999). Secondly, white complicity opposes staged models of racial identity development in which white people become increasingly educated (Foste & Irwin, 2020) as they strive for supposed positive white identities (Applebaum, 2010).

**Epistemologies of Ignorance.** White ignorance refers to a refusal to understand the lived experiences of BIPOC (Mills, 1997; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). White racial ignorance is a deliberate, committed position to “misinterpret the world,” knowing that those “mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority” (Mills, 1997, p. 446). Mills (1997) introduced the term *white amnesia* to refer to white peoples’ selective memory, minimization, and erasure in relationship to historical and systemic white supremacy. An understanding of white ignorance clarifies the dedicated, intentional, and cultivated investment white college people often have in their own obliviousness (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Mills, 1997; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007).

**White Normativity.** Whiteness is invisible, unmarked, typical, naturalized, and normalized in U.S. society (Frankenberg, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Yancy, 2012; Yancy, 2018). Foste and Irwin (2020) contended:
The normative nature of whiteness encourages white people to believe themselves to be representative of humanity and to understand their feelings, beliefs, and actions as moral and normal. […] People of color are framed as deviant and deficient because of their departures from whiteness. (p. 448)

Relatedly, white normativity negatively impacts identity construction for people of color and determines which knowledge is considered to be illegitimate versus legitimate (Foste & Irwin, 2020).

**Challenges of CWS.** A primary risk of CWS is the perpetuation of white supremacy, in which whiteness is continually normalized and centered (Gillborn, 2007). Bailey (2007) noted that “white ignorance is [already] the axis around which white Americans construct our political identity” (p. 80), and Ahmed (2006) cautioned that critical whiteness studies might extend the insidious narcissism of whiteness by encouraging white people to move beyond avoidance or guilt and to learn to love their own white selves. Whiteness is thus preserved and not disrupted (Thompson, 2003). Leonardo (2013) added that scholarship focusing only on white people conceals the systemic, historical, and violent nature of whiteness. Moreover, CWS may reproduce and recycle dominant discourses focused on understanding white privilege and moving through staged models of white identity development theory, which further empowers white folks and disempowers people of color (Earick, 2013; 2018).

Tatum (1994) affirmed that white people are often uncomfortable in conversations about race and racism, and often experience resistance, anger, feigned ignorance, or misunderstandings. These common white experiences may overshadow critical learning, especially about their white selves. Cabrera (2019) and Earick (2009,
stated that white people use communicative patterns to distance themselves from whiteness: They evade responsibility for racism to “protect their white egos” (Foste & Irwin, 2020, p. 442). To respond to this challenge, CWS recommends that critical analysis be particularly aware of three deleterious phenomena in research: (1) White Talk, or coded language used by white people to avoid self-reflection (McIntyre, 1997); (2) Safe White Words, or terms that serve as a safe entry point to examining racial hegemony (Earick, 2009), and (3) In-group Messaging, or socially-mediated messages that privilege normalized groups and further marginalize minoritized groups (Marx et al., 2005).

**Feminist Theory**

It is not possible to neatly define feminism in all its plurality and duality (Jones et al., 2014; Kohli & Burbules, 2013). Just as there are “many feminisms,” there are “many feminist theories” (Frye, 2000, p. 195). However, Weiner (1995) noted three consistent dimensions of feminist educational research: It is political, it is critical, and it is praxis-oriented. Creswell and Poth (2018) viewed feminist research approaches as those that address forms of gender domination within patriarchal societal structures.

Lather (1991) remarked that the aim of feminist research is to “correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (p. 71). Feminist perspectives interrogate women’s diverse situations and the institutional framings of those situations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Stewart (1994) urged feminist researchers to uncover “how a woman understands her gender, acknowledging that gender is a social construct that differs for each individual” (as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 28).
Code (1998) commented on the exclusionary tendencies of androcentric philosophy, stating, “Mainstream Anglo-American epistemology had defined itself around a conviction that its principal task was to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for objectively, uniformly valid ‘knowledge in general’” (p. 173). In this case, knowledge in general about the human experience was largely derived “by men, about men, and from male experiences” (Kohli & Burbules, 2013, p. 40). French (2016) agreed that gender bias may determine what and how science investigates, in addition to the content of scientific beliefs.

Feminist researchers suggest that nearly all methods can be made feminist (Deem, 2002; Moss, 2007; Kohli & Burbules, 2013), including research examining critical trends that strive for transformation (Olesen, 2011). It then follows that feminist approaches to CRT and CWS are conceivable and viable. Indeed, feminist inquiry is an “ally” to the tradition of critical theory (Kohli & Burbules, 2013, p. 73).

Intersectionality has its roots in political movements by women of color—most of them lesbian-identified (Carastathis, 2014)—and can be used to study social phenomena on the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Collins, 1990). Intersectionality is a metaphor referring to “the various way[s] in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s […] experiences” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Intersectional feminism acknowledges that multiple interacting factors and identities affect one’s experiences and behaviors, rather than focusing solely on gender as the determinant (Hankivsky, 2014). For example, in addition to gender, various relevant social locations or identities could include race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, citizenship status, dis/ability, religion, education level, or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) status.
(Hankivsky, 2014). As Russon et al. (2022) recognized, intersectional feminist theory is under the umbrella of critical research, and prioritizes bringing about real, material changes for subordinated groups (Russon et al., 2022). Critical perspectives “interrogate the social embeddedness and authority of western intellectual traditions fomented by political, cultural, and social norms that valorize androcentricity, heteronormativity, cisgenderism, and whiteness over other identities and forms of social order” (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020, p. 328). The specific application of antiracism in intersectional feminism promotes social change and justice for Black and Brown women (Russon et al., 2022).

**Putting Theories Together**

I chose to combine the frameworks of critical whiteness theory (Frankenberg, 1997; Gillborn, 2007; Leonardo, 2002) and intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989), as informed by my view of reality (ontology), knowledge of reality (epistemology), value-stance (axiology), and the procedures used in the research project (methodology). My specific positionality as a white woman researcher was paramount. Lareau (2011) acknowledged:

“[…] There are those who believe that as a white woman, I should not have studied Black families. […] They assert that it is more desirable, or even necessary, for gays to study gays or for women to study women. Some worry that outsiders may get it wrong. Others assert that having white researchers in Black families is not a legitimate undertaking” (p. 10).

Prompted by Lareau’s (2011) musings, I wrote the following journal entry in spring 2020:
“What do I think about those with privileged identities studying those with minoritized identities? In what present-day circumstances might this be useful, (un)acceptable, harmful, important, (un)ethical? (I don't think I personally feel comfortable researching a minoritized group of which I do not hold membership.)”

This articulated belief held firm and shaped the eventual formulation of my research question. As a white woman holding membership in the dominant race in the United States, I purposefully decided that my doctoral research should not involve studying a group of which I am not a member. Consequently, I also determined that critical whiteness studies (rather than only the paradigm of critical race theory) was the most appropriate framework choice.

CRT and CWS both recognize the permanent and “endemic nature of race in American education” (Gildersleeve et al., 2011, p. 96). However, unlike CRT, CWS “focuses on problematizing the normality of hegemonic whiteness, arguing that in doing so whites deflect, ignore, or dismiss their role, racialization, and privilege in race dynamics” (Matias et al., 2014, p. 291). CWS is not explicitly about white people, however, recentering whiteness in this manner colonizes and deradicalizes the theoretical approach (Leonardo, 2013; Sheets, 2005).

Earick (2018) explained why white scholars simply cannot be critical race theorists: It was during our first faculty meeting in the fall of 2007 when I witnessed Karen, a white woman, identify herself as a Critical Race Theory (CRT) Scholar as she introduced herself to me. I responded, ‘You cannot be,” she turned red, interrupted me, and laughed. She then began naming her lineage of
social justice mentors, most well established in the Multicultural Education field.

When she was done, I finished, ‘You cannot be a CRT scholar because you are white, or did you mean a critical whiteness scholar?’ She rolled her eyes, told me I was quite misinformed, turned abruptly, and left at a quick pace. (p. 800)

When white researchers claim to utilize CRT, they actively engage in coopting and appropriating CRT (Earick, 2018). In these instances, white researchers often prioritize “[saving] others rather than themselves” (Earick, 2018, p. 801). Furthermore, white scholars cannot employ CRT because doing conflicts with the first identified goal of CRT: To present counter-stories about discrimination from the perspectives of BIPOC (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Therefore, CWS (rather than CRT) is the appropriate theoretical approach for white scholars who are interested in critically examining whiteness while locating themselves within a race-based hierarchy. Finally, I posit that CWS could be considered a feminist approach in and of itself, given that feminism and CWS share joint commitments to transforming social constructions (i.e., gender, race) and their various intersections (Kohli & Burbules, 2013).

There are challenges, too, to CWS that must be acknowledged. A primary risk of CWS is the perpetuation of white supremacy, in which whiteness is continually normalized and centered (Gillborn, 2007). Bailey (2007) noted that “white ignorance is [already] the axis around which white Americans construct our political identity” (p. 80), and Ahmed (2006) cautioned that critical whiteness studies might extend the insidious narcissism of whiteness by encouraging white people to move beyond avoidance or guilt and to learn to love their own white selves. Whiteness is thus preserved and not disrupted (Thompson, 2003). Leonardo (2013) added that scholarship focusing only on white
people conceals the systemic, historical, and violent nature of whiteness. Moreover, CWS may reproduce and recycle dominant discourses focused on understanding white privilege and moving through staged models of white identity development theory, which further empowers white folks and disempowers BIPOC (Earick, 2013; 2018). Despite these challenges, a makes the normalcy of whiteness abnormal (Matias, 2022). Thus, “a truer CWS” provides a “viable avenue to problematize how seemingly natural it is to treat people of color as subhuman” (Matias, 2022, p. 7). CWS takes on the materiality of white privilege within the context of the research (attending to participants, research question, and topic) and also in how that study is written and presented (Matias, 2022).

**Writing Myself In: My Positionality**

Positionality refers to the relationship between researcher and the topic, in addition to the relationship between researcher and participants (Jones et al., 2014). My positionality as a white queer woman and feminist academic living in the United States directly informed the development of my dissertation question. At the start of my doctoral program, I knew that I already considered myself an emerging researcher drawn to transformative interpretive frameworks (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that call for “social justice, equity, nonviolence, peace, and universal human rights” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11).

Some examples of a researcher’s positioning include characteristics such as age, gender identity, race, sexual identity, personal experiences, beliefs and biases, theoretical, political, or ideological stances, and emotional responses to participants (Berger, 2013; Finlay, 2000; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010; Kosygina, 2005; Padgett, 2008). Such positions
inform the researcher’s usage of language, phrasing of questions, meaning-making, and the conclusions of the study (Berger, 2013).

A researcher always brings certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to their work, which in turn inform their choice of theories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2012). These philosophical assumptions related to views about “the types of problems that we need to study, what research questions to ask, or how we go about gathering data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 15). Researchers make four philosophical assumptions when they undertake qualitative projects: Ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Creswell and Poth (2018) noted the importance of “actively writing in” one’s philosophical assumptions (p. 16). Given this clear recommendation, in Table 1, I provide a concise table with comments on my view of reality (ontology), knowledge of reality (epistemology), value-stance (axiology), and the procedures used in the research project (methodology).
Table 1

*My Philosophical Assumptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>My Beliefs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontological</td>
<td>What is the nature of reality?</td>
<td>There are multiple, socially-constructed realities (interpretivist perspective). Reality is historically constituted and social (critical perspective).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What counts as knowledge?</td>
<td>Knowledge is the subjective meanings that people assign (interpretivist perspective).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How are knowledge claims justified?</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>What is the relationship between the researcher and that being researched?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological</td>
<td></td>
<td>Conflicts in contemporary society, such as those surrounding racism and anti-racism, are of importance for study (critical perspective).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiological</td>
<td>What is the role of values?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological</td>
<td>What is the process of research? What is the language of research?</td>
<td>Action research is an important method (critical perspective).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Creswell and Poth’s (2018), Philosophical Assumptions With Implications for Practice (p. 20).

My assumptions and beliefs about knowledge are directly informed by how my identities interact with one another (Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014). I am a white, queer, middle-class ciswoman. I grew up and currently live in the whitestream (Grande, 2007) Western culture of the United States. White, westernized views on racism and anti-racism shape my positionality. I presently live in a predominantly white, gentrified, urban neighborhood. While there is some racial diversity in my neighborhood, it remains largely residentially segregated and majority-white. Moreover, I mainly live in a white social world.
Femmephobia is a type of prejudice directed at an individual who is perceived to identify as, embody, or express femininely (Blair & Hoskin, 2014). Femmephobia targets people who fail to uphold patriarchal or essentialized femininity, such as lesbians (Blair & Hoskin, 2014). As a femme, queer woman, I experience structural or covert femmephobia through language and gendering (Blair & Hoskin, 2014), such as when receiving the pronouncement, “You don’t look gay.” While my femaleness and queerness have societal disadvantages due to femmephobia, sexism, and heterosexism, my white privilege results in the absence of any racial struggle while contending with these disadvantages.

In summer 2020, during my first full year in this doctoral program, I encountered critical whiteness studies (Frankenberg, 1997; Gillborn, 2007; Leonardo, 2002) for the first time in Dr. Jeremy Benson’s course, *Critical and Emancipatory Social Theory*. I began thinking more about the importance of white folks engaging in learning about race and racism without placing an undue burden of racial and cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994) on BIPOC in the same space. (In a written reflection from July 2020, I questioned: “Can mixed-group racial justice training happen without mining BIPOC’s pain for white folks’ edification?”). I decided that it was first necessary for white folks to discuss our own racial identities and culture in an intragroup setting in order to more purposefully embrace a commitment to anti-racism. As Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll (2019) noted, “The new work on whiteness explores how white attitudes and understandings—not about racial others but about themselves and their own status in the society—factor into the perpetuation and legitimation of racial inequalities” (p. 403-404).
During that same summer 2020 term, I took Dr. Annemarie Vaccaro’s course, 
*Research in Higher Education Settings*. On June 14, 2020, I posted the following in a 
class message forum:

The notion of aligning my research with political aims while "honor[ing] the 
people" (Davis et al., 2019, p. 88) who collaborate with me as co-constructors 
of knowledge really resonates. I want to be committed to having co-researchers 
review and alter the text I produce. I'm thinking, too, about answerability: How 
and for what purposes will I pursue this work? How am I situating my work 
within the specific educational location that I intend to change? How will I co-
produce knowledge that "explicitly confronts, challenges, and critiques 
hegemonic epistemologies, practices, research paradigms, and worldview" 
(Davis et al., 2019, p. 92)?

Both Dr. Benson’s and Dr. Vaccaro’s courses during that summer 2020 term 
pressed me to consider activist scholarship and critical research, and guided me to 
arrive at my selected dissertation topic. Indeed, my final paper for Dr. Vaccaro’s class 
(entitled, “You’re a very racist woman:” Co-conspiring in white supremacy at a non-
profit organization) was my first effort in utilizing critical whiteness studies as an 
author and an exploration of my own white fragility. During that same summer, I 
marched for Black lives in the capitol city and read about the disproportionate impact 
of the COVID-19 virus on communities of color.

*Looking Back Further*

As a child, I grew up in a white, segregated, racially-homogenous town in the 
northeastern United States. My family was a lower-income household (Fry & Kocchar,
I qualified for reduced-lunch throughout much of my schooling. However, my parents owned their two-story home on three acres of land. This was made possible by their inherited generational wealth.

The homogeneity of my hometown community and the surrounding towns led to a racially homogenous student body throughout my primary and secondary school experiences (Rothstein, 2017). Brunsma et al. (2013) described the formation of majority white homogenous racial groups as *spatial whiteness*. Indeed, with a few rare exceptions, my teachers, administrators, and school support staff were all white. I continuously saw my racial group represented. I personally maintained an unracialized identity of white individualism until I took Dr. Sandra Lawrence’s course, *Whiteness, Racism, and Inequality in Schools and Society*, as an undergraduate student.

This undergraduate class was required for all education majors at my alma mater. Prior to declaring an education major, though, I dropped the course in my sophomore year. I was not ready to accept the definition of racism utilized in that very first class meeting. I then re-enrolled in the course my junior year. The class impelled me to interrogate and deconstruct my own identity within the context of the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1994, p. 47) of the United States. It was absolutely difficult and challenging at the time. I participated in deep re-learning whilst dealing with my own white fragility. Since the completion of that undergraduate course, while engaging in anti-racist and anti-oppressive learning, blundering, and advocacy, I have found the truth in Freire’s (1970/2013) dictum: “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” (p. 60).
During elementary school, middle school, and high school, I participated in gifted programs and high-track Advanced Placement classes, thereby occupying the top echelon of the social caste system (re-)produced in public schools (Mansfield, 2015). I qualified for the “Gifted and Talented Program” due to my scores on the Intelligence Quotient test, a decidedly racist instrument (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1998; Mansfield, 2015). Mansfield (2015) attested that giftedness is an “example of whiteness as property” (p. 3), and indeed, whiteness supported my academic achievement.

Another especially powerful institutional influence in my childhood was that of religion. In the United States, Christianity is the religion of power: The country is more than two-thirds Christian, with the Catholic Church serving as the largest individual denomination (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). In my youth, I attended a nearly all-white Roman Catholic church every Sunday. Roman Catholic ideology informed my earliest convictions about social issues, and I did not reverse some of my ultra-conservative original positions until years later.

In my professional work within the last decade, I have sought out opportunities to be involved with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. For example, in 2019, I co-created a global curricula on DEI for youth ages five to eighteen. Since 2020, I have served on a non-profit’s internal DEI committee. In this role, I co-created a multi-part educational video series for adults. These videos are presently utilized as foundational training resources for a group of approximately 100 national-level volunteers across the United States. Over the last decade, I have also exemplified many (problematic) common behaviors of white feminists. For example, I misunderstood racism as an attitudinal or interactional problem (Christensen, 1997) rather than the collective impact of invisible
systems conferring dominance on white people (Omi & Winant, 1994). Other examples include me making generalizations about “women’s experiences” (Christensen, 1997); not consistently studying works by people of color to form a liberatory knowledge about racism (Carastathis, 2014; Christensen, 1997); excessively focusing on my own feelings about whiteness (Christensen, 1997); failing to engage in antiracist action due to my own guilt, shame, or fear (Linder, 2015); and/or succumbing to burnout or fatigue (Arnett, 2022).

Prior to commencing research for this dissertation project, I also served as a participant, facilitator, and staff member for this university’s graduate school program on diversity and inclusion. My involvement began in fall 2019 as a participant and I became a facilitator in fall 2020. I co-designed and co-facilitated classes such as, “White Accountability Conversations,” “From Becky to Karen: (De-) Weaponizing White Womxnhood,” and “Working Through Layla Saad’s Me and White Supremacy.” Due to my proximity to the program, it was especially necessary to contemplate power differentials between myself and participants throughout the dissertation research project. This is a feminist inquiry approach, given that I made my own identity and biographical experiences explicit. My own identity can, in a way, “become a criterion for evaluating the quality and reliability of the research results” (Kohli & Burbules, 2013, p. 79).

To somewhat mitigate the influence of myself as the subjective researcher, I used the reflexive method of bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing has interchangeably been known as phenomenological reduction or epoché (Husserl, 1931; Tufford & Newman, 2010). Gearing (2004) described bracketing as the “scientific process in which a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases,
assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon” (p. 1430). Starks and Trinidad (2007) asserted that the researcher “must be honest and vigilant about her own perspective, pre-existing thoughts and beliefs, and developing hypotheses” to engage in the self-reflective process of bracketing (p. 1376). In bracketing, researchers “recognize and set aside (but do not abandon) their a priori knowledge and assumptions, with the analytic goal of attending to the participants’ accounts with an open mind” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376). Bracketing may additionally encompass researcher values, emotions, and preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010). It connotes an ongoing process of self-discovery (Ahern, 1999; Drew, 2004; Rolls & Relf, 2006). A newer definition of bracketing might be that the researcher suspends their understandings in a reflective move that nurtures curiosity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; LeVasseur, 2003).

I engaged in reflexive bracketing in this research project through the regular usage of a reflexive journal. Reflexive bracketing through journaling allowed me to clarify my personal value systems, identify areas of potential role conflict, recognize my own feelings and reactions, and consider what I reported my findings (Ahern, 1999).

A list of relevant terms and operational definitions, including racism and anti-racism, follows in the next section.

Key Constructs and Definitions

Anti-racism

Anti-racism refers to the conscious, action-oriented rejection of racism (Aptheker, 1993).

Equity
Equity describes recognizing, responding to, and redressing societal imbalances (at their root causes) that disadvantage persons of systematically marginalized groups (Equity Literacy Institute, n.d.; Harper et al., 2009). In higher education, equity refers to policy shifts that intend to close gaps for minoritized students (Equity Literacy Institute, n.d.; Harper et al., 2009). Equity also refers to assessing the distribution of different groups of students at colleges and universities (Berg, 2020). Equity is often confused with the word equality (Archer, 2007; Caldwell et al., 2007; Perez et al., 2020).

**Gender**

Gender typically refers to a binary of “women” and “men” and the socially constructed relationships between genders (Podems, 2011). Stereotypes and norms are associated with specific genders (Fletcher, 2015) in gender binarism. An expansive understanding of gender acknowledges that multiple genders exist and may consider gender to be a spectrum or kaleidoscope.

**Inclusion**

Inclusion means that institutional strategies, structures, policies, and policies support an environment in which all students receive meaningful social and academic interactions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Tienda, 2013. According to Perez et al. (2020), inclusion is frequently conceptualized through relationships and signals that all community members are welcomed.

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a metaphor coined by Crenshaw (1989) to describe “the various way[s] in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences” (p. 139) and overlapping systems of
oppression. This operational definition is a critical understanding reflective of the term’s origins, rather than a sanitized or depoliticized version of the term that invisibilizes Black feminism (Collins, 1990).

**Minoritized**

This term is used instead of *minority* in order to “signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social milieu […]. Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of whiteness” (Harper, 2013, p. 211).

**Misogynoir**

This term describes the anti-Black, racist misogyny that Black women experience (Bailey, 2013; Bailey & Trudy, 2018).

**Predominantly White Institution**

As an oversimplification, the term Predominantly White Institution (PWI) refers to colleges and universities in which white people account for fifty percent or greater of the overall student enrollment (Lomotey, 2009). From a critical race theory perspective, PWIs were built on and continue to operate on the foundations of race and racism (Bourke, 2018).

**Race**

Omi and Winant (1994) asserted that race is neither a biological fact nor an illusion. Instead, race is a system of social classification with cultural consequences, producing a distinct social hierarchy (Omi & Winant, 1994).
**Racism**

Gilmore (2002) explained racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies” (p. 261). Omi and Winant (1994) stated that racism has no fixed psychological or transhistorical meaning; instead, racist projects are those that create or reproduce hierarchical social structures based on essentializing and subordinating racial categories.

**White Privilege**

McIntosh (1989) described white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks” (para. 3).

**White Supremacy**

White supremacy is the overarching, global system of white western racial domination (Allen, 2002; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; Okun, 1999). White supremacy is an unnamed political system that is most often rendered invisible (Mills, 1997; Okun, 1999). White supremacy is historical, institutional, and ideological; it is woven into the fabric of the United States and results in systemic white privilege for white and white-passing folks (Allen, 2002). Mills (2007) stated that white supremacy demands “white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race” (p. 18).

Farnia (2008) stated that justice and progress for communities of color only occurs when those interests converge with the interests of white, middle-class people
living in the United States. Since white supremacy refers to the intertwined political, economic, and cultural systems in which white people control power and resources (Farnia, 2008), white supremacy easily allows for blatantly racist practices to be deceivingly “coded as economic decisions” (Rogers & Mosley, 2006, p. 484).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Guided by my positionality, race (specifically whiteness) and gender (specifically women) were two early research themes that interested me, particularly within higher education settings. Yet neither race nor gender can be discussed in isolation, since racism, plutocracy, and patriarchy interlocking systems of domination (Foste & Irwin, 2020; Hankivsky, 2014). As such, this literature review begins by first discussing race, class, and patriarchy as pervasive systems of domination in the United States (which extend to colleges and universities). I next identify two aspects specifically related to white womanhood: White feminism (Cargle, 2018; Hobson, 2016; Khan, 2021; Zakaria, 2021) and white women as anti-racist activists. Lastly, given that my research interest was graduate students, I examined the landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work taking place at institutions of higher learning.

Interlocking Systems of Domination

Race: White Supremacy Means White Advantage

The construction of race in the United States was deliberate. Through the racialization of identity and the legally-ratified subordination of people of color, whiteness functioned (and continues to function) as property, or unearned white privilege (Harris, 1993; Mansfield, 2015; McIntosh, 1989). Christensen (1997) remarked, “[From] the beginning, ‘whiteness’ was defined in opposition to Native Americans, Africans, and other colonized and enslaved people of color” (p. 623).

The presiding “Protestant ethic” (Spring, 2004, p. 9) in the colonial period of the United States continues to underpin present-day society. Enduring emphases are the importance of hard work, the accumulation of wealth and property, and the acquisition of
status. To support these aims, colonizers pursued an education of Native Americans that was focused on total cultural transformation. European Americans forcibly implemented a new social life buttressed by “child terrorization, male dominance, and submission of women to male authority” (Spring, 2004, p. 11). Later, the exploitation and the expropriation of labor necessitated the denial of education for Native, Black, and Latine individuals, for a major goal of the United States was to develop a successful agricultural industry (Jones, 2012; Lowman, 2017; Spring, 2004). Racism and Christian evangelism catalyzed education as a project with the objectives of “civilization” and assimilation for indigenous youth (Bollinger, 2012, p. 70).

There is an enduring conspiracy in the United States to dehumanize Black citizens (Baldwin, 1963/1985; Rothstein, 2017). Federal, state, and local governments denied rights to Black Americans via *de jure* residential segregation, and despite the abolishment of the Thirteenth Amendment, “badges or incidents of slavery” persisted (Rothstein, 2017, p. ix). In the United States, structural racism (public policy discrimination and societal discrimination) results in “many if not most institutions in the country operat[ing] to the disadvantage of African Americans” (Rothstein, 2017, p. xv). The nation’s caste system has kept Black Americans “exploited and geographically separate” (Rothstein, 2017, p. xvii). The sustained impact of racist policies indicates that the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* segregation is artificial and inconsequential (Rothstein, 2017). Nonetheless, it is notable that the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights has formally monitored multiple states due to demonstrated *de jure* segregation in their statewide higher education institutions (Palmer, Davis, & Gasman, 2011). When white students, faculty, and staff continue to be over-represented in higher education,
white-centered traditions at colleges and universities are preserved and kept intact (Hikido & Murray, 2016).

There is a specificity of how violence against Black folks manifests in the United States (Dumas, 2016; Wun, 2016). The United States has witnessed a "centuries-long struggle of Black parents" (Jones, 2012, p. 67) for quality education in the United States, from the periods of slavery to Black Reconstruction, segregation, Jim Crow laws, community control, and resegregation (Jones, 2012; Rothstein, 2017). As Black children in particular enter school, they further "discover the shape of [their] oppression" (Baldwin, 1963/1985, p. 2). For example, widespread cultural myths about heroic white men and subordinate Black bodies define the United States’ cultural and educational landscapes. Dumas (2016) added that there is a continued cultural aversion to Blackness that is infrequently interrogated within the domain of education. Without dismantling whiteness within institutions of higher learning, colleges and universities continue to sustain systemic racism and educate students within oppressive structures (Castagno, 2008; Hurd, 2008). There cannot be "excellence without equity" in the nation’s educational sector (Jones, 2012, p. 68).

Class: Plutocracy Means Wealth Advantage

Notions of aristocracy and genetic hierarchies informed modern conceptualizations of social class (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1998). Class status was traditionally considered to be innate, immutable, and hereditary, rather than viewed as the combined influences of wealth, power, and prestige (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1998). There has been confusion of a “hierarchy of social class with a hierarchy of moral virtue and intelligence” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1998, p. 197), which has impacted both social
and educational policies. Negative eugenics policies fueled by the construction of the “aristogenic caste system” included anti-immigration policies, anti-miscegenation laws, and forced sterilization (Mansfield, 2015). The often-overlooked corollary of such policies are positive eugenics policies, such as educational privileges and tax preferences.

In the United States, white upper-class power has been preserved (Mansfield, 2015). Wealth also closely aligns with racial oppression in the United States (Mansfield, 2015). For example, the federal government prevented banks from lending to Black Americans after World War II (Rothstein, 2017). Black Americans did not benefit from inherited wealth linked to home equity appreciation, unlike white Americans (Rothstein, 2017). Students’ life courses are thus charted by social class, and in the United States, wealth means whiteness (Mansfield, 2015).

**Gender: Patriarchy Means Male Advantage**

In the United States, the most powerful system for organizing gender is a binary (Hoskin, 2013). The gender binary entails two supposedly opposing categories: Women and men. A biological determinist view of gender attributes femaleness or maleness based on an individual’s nataly-assigned sex (Hoskin, 2013; Wolff, Kay, Himes, & Alquijay, 2017). Additionally, the ideology of separate spheres has long defined the public and political sphere as a man’s space and the private, domestic sphere as a woman’s space (Hickey, 2013). Therefore, the very participation of women in social movement is a transgression. It must be noted, of course, that the public sphere in the United States is a white public sphere (Richardson, 2019).
Rousseau (1762/1979) identified several inherent traits of women as "established by nature" (p. 363), such as passivity, weakness, timidity, modesty, vanity, coquettishness, and an obsession with adornment and being seen as pretty. Rousseau (1762/1979) contended, "Once it is demonstrated that man and woman are not and ought not to be constituted in the same way in either character or temperament, it follows that they ought not to have the same education" (p. 363). The embedded misogyny of Rousseau’s educational theories has had long standing effects in the United States. There is a clear societal favoring of traits possessed by and enacted by males in the United States (Roland Martin, 1985). Furthermore, in comparison to their white counterparts, Black women were hypersexualized and particularly portrayed as uncivilized and inferior (Newman, 1999). The term misogynoir describes where racism and sexism meet; misogynoir refers to the targeted anti-Black, racist misogyny that Black women encounter (Bailey, 2013; Bailey & Trudy, 2018).

Feminists challenging the status quo notably face societal pressures to conform to gender conventions and behave in so-deemed respectable ways in order to have access to the public sphere (Hickey, 2013). As women contend with the politics of respectability (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 187), they must choose to subscribe to or reject cultural normative values about how women should live, dress, speak, and behave (Hickey, 2013). Black women activists especially regularly contend with highly scripted cultural codes in the public sphere (Richardson, 2019). Richardson (2019) noted that respectability politics has exerted pressure on Black feminist leaders as far back as the 1890s, during the post-Reconstruction period. Since the experiences of white women and
women of color in the United States markedly differ, it is necessary to next explicitly consider white womanhood.

**On White Women**

In the United States, white women hold privileged racial statuses and subordinated gender statuses (Accapadi, 2007), distinguishing their experiences of (anti-)racism from white men’s experiences (Fine et al., 2000). Feminism in the United States has traditionally centered white women’s experiences, failing to address the concerns of women of color, actively erasing power differences between women and thereby rendering BIPOC women invisible (Collins, 1990; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Zakaria, 2021). This next section addresses two central tensions within white womanhood: White feminism and white women as antiracist activists.

**White Feminism**

Between 1870 and 1920, the women’s rights movement in the United States was largely segregated (Newman, 1999). In dismissing concerns of Black women such as miscegenation, rape, and lynchings, white activists disregarded the unique forms of oppression that Black women experienced as a result of race, gender, and class. White leaders leveraged Christian evangelism and evolutionist discourses to further codify existing racial hierarchies that propped up white, middle-class Protestants (Newman, 1999).

The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, passed in 1919 and ratified in 1920, promised women that their right to vote would “not be denied or abridged […] on account of sex” (U.S. Const. Amend. XIX, §1). However, as Block (2020) acknowledged, “[…] even after that milestone, millions of people — women and men
alike — were still excluded from the vote, as many barriers to suffrage remained. The fight over the amendment was not just about sex; it was also deeply entwined with race” (Block, 2020, para. 3-4). Although the U.S. women’s rights movement initially grew from abolitionism, “in the face of racist opposition, white suffragists betrayed the Black women who had also long fought for the right to vote” (Block, 2020, para. 12). In fact, while urging a member of Congress to vote in favor of the 19th Amendment, white suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt (1918) quite plainly stated, “If you want white supremacy, why not have it constitutionally, honorably? The Federal Amendment offers the way” (para. 5). White women’s advancement was made possible by patriarchy, and this debt to white men often silenced white women’s critiques of racism and sexism within our culture (Newman, 1999).

Feminists of color have long been involved with foundational women’s liberation work (Hobson, 2016). Conversely, white feminists’ accomplishments and advancements have often explicitly been at the expense of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) (Aniagolu, 2011; Christensen, 1997; Crenshaw, 1989; Roth, 2004; Ulus, 2018). As a result of white women’s frequent exclusion of BIPOC women from whitestream feminism, distinct movements such as Black feminism and Chicana feminism emerged (Roth, 2004). White feminism is “any feminism which comes from a white perspective, and universalizes it” (Aziz, 1992, p. 296). Furthermore, white feminism represents an identification with the historical power of white systems, in turn reinforcing such systems (Ulus, 2018). White feminism does not exist outside of white supremacy. Fittingly, Cargle (2018) remarked that mainstream feminism is just “white supremacy in heels” (para. 2), and Lorde (1981) called upon white women to be cognizant of their own
“heelprints upon another woman’s face” (p. 9) as they work against their perceived oppression.

Whitestream feminism in the United States best serves cisgender, heterosexual, thin, and able-bodied women who hold American citizenship (Ulus, 2018). White feminism takes only “a single-axis approach to gender-based oppression, ignoring the intersections of sexist oppression with racism, classism, ableism, cissexism, transphobia, heterosexism, homophobia, and national context” (Berenstain, 2020, p. 736). White feminism thus undermines the needs of most women (Ulus, 2018). White feminism also co-opts the work of women of color (Signorella, 2020). Some recent examples include intersectionality entering the general lexicon yet erasing Crenshaw (1989), the term misogynoir going viral yet failing to cite Bailey and Trudy (2018), or #MeToo being embraced as a social movement to support survivors of sexual violence yet not acknowledging founder Tarana Burke (Signorella, 2020). Alexander-Floyd (2012) called this the “re-subjugating of Black women’s knowledge” (p. 1). In addition to invisibilizing women of color creators, these disappearing acts (Alexander-Floyd, 2012) obfuscate the creators’ intentions to address social problems occurring specifically at the juncture of both racism and sexism. A problematic universalizing tendency is at play when “an issue first identified as a crisis for Black women is relabeled as impacting all women […] therefore] decentering the person for whom the concern was originally identified” (Signorella, 2020, p. 259). White women (supposedly leading racial justice work while masquerading as activists of color) have even been exposed for their fraudulent appropriation of Black and Brown identities (Pettit, 2020). These white women performed racial passing as minstrelsy for their own gains.
The political goals of white feminists actively harm women of color (Hobson, 2016). Intersectional feminists, in contrast, fight for the rights of all women and recognize the lived struggles of women from minoritized and marginalized groups (Ulus, 2018). Unlike white feminists, Black feminists and feminists of color have been (and continue to be) “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people […]” (Walker, 2004, p. xii).

In Accapadi’s (2007) case study, a white woman working in a university student affairs department denied personal and departmental accountability for racism as the institution. When the white woman began to cry, “she received consolation, absolution of guilt, and ultimately, validation of her position, without a critical inquiry of the situation” (p. 213). Using Watt’s (2007) Privileged Identity Exploration model, Accapadi (2007) sorted the white woman’s defensive moves and manifestations of privilege into one of four categories: Denial, rationalization, false envy, and benevolence. Perhaps most relevant to the line of inquiry of this doctoral research study is Accapadi (2007) advocating for white people to “also actively talk about white racism in safe, separate, spaces to challenge themselves, their peers, and/or their staffs” (p. 214), with a focus on empowerment rather than guilt, blame, or shame. Robbins (2016) concurred with other researchers (Padilla, 1994; Patton & Haynes, 2020; Reddick et al., 2020; Tatum, 2001) that white folks should participate in intragroup dialogue about race and racism prior to engaging in intergroup discussions.

There is a persistent and dangerous cultural postulation that white women are less likely to be racist than white men (Junn, 2017; Signorella, 2020). This is patently false. In 2016, an estimated majority of 52 percent of white women voters backed Donald
Trump’s presidential campaign (Junn, 2017). This trend was not new, of course; white women in the United States have either tacitly agreed to or openly advocated for racist, sexist, and/or xenophobic policies for a long time. Given my own identities as a white woman, I was especially interested in how white women do (or do not) engage with social justice work during this period of whitestream racial reckoning in the United States.

**White Women as Anti-Racists**

Racism “empowers white women to act as exploiters and oppressors” (hooks, 1990, p. 187). White women must then committedly, intentionally, and actively work against racism to “use our race privilege to help change the material conditions, institutions, and cultural traditions” that oppress women of color (Christensen, 1997, p. 621). In doing the work of dismantling institutionalized racism in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997), white women demonstrate anti-racism.

Anti-racism refers to the conscious, action-oriented rejection of racism (Aptheker, 1993). Tatum (1994) stated that “the role of the ally is to speak up against systems of oppression, and to challenge other whites to do the same” (p. 474). The notion of anti-racism as a form of engaged activism is an extension of Tatum’s (1994) white allyship. Ohito (2019) referred to antiracist teaching itself as enacting Kinloch’s (2018) necessary disruptions. Antiracism and feminism are complementary and both based upon convictions in and action toward social change (Bourne, 1983; Chisholm, 1970), but since mainstream feminism frequently invisibilizes women of color, anti-racism and feminism are often competing discourses of resistance (Harris & Patton, 2019; Jonsson, 2014, 2016).
There may be some examples of white women authentically engaging in sustained anti-racist activism, but white women are ubiquitous in the “canon of feminist heroines” (Khan, 2021, para. 6). White women already control images of and dominate mythologies of feminism. It is crucial to examine and challenge these depictions, and to not engage in heroification. That said, I note that I draw some inspiration particularly from Frankenberg (1990, 1997), a white feminist anti-racist researcher. Beginning in 1989, Frankenberg developed and taught a course entitled, “White women, racism, and anti-racism” in the Women's Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This class may be one of the earliest critical whiteness studies course at the university level (Frankenberg, 1990).

In their study of eleven white women graduate students, Robbins and Jones (2016) found that participants exhibited three main responses as they balanced their racial identity development with emerging antiracism activism. White women graduate students responded in the following manners: (1) Denial or rejection, (2) interest in learning more, and (3) interest in becoming involved (Robbins & Jones, 2016). The most common response was participants expressing a desire to learn more, which of course is distinct from participants taking action against racism (Robbins & Jones, 2016). In another paper analyzing the responses of these same participants, Robbins (2016) identified two primary types of learnings that supported the white women’s engagement in antiracism: (1) Eye-opening academic and pre-professional experiences, and (2) experiences catalyzing a “hunger for more knowledge” (p. 258).

In a study of 17 white women, Case (2012) interviewed a mix of students, faculty, and staff from two university campuses who were members of a critical discussion group
called White Women Against Racism (WWAR). A goal of WWAR was to promote the development of anti-racist consciousness and specific strategies for countering racism. White women participants stated that acknowledgement of responsibility for racism was a necessary first step in antiracist action (Case, 2012). When members of WWAR did not engage in antiracism, they indicated that their inaction was spurred by reasons including “avoiding disapproval, avoiding conflict, power differences, perceived ineffectiveness, and feeling exhausted” (Case, 2012, p. 88).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts in U.S. Higher Education

Contextualizing Institutions of Higher Learning

Colleges and universities are regularly identified by their racial demographics, which generally differentiates between Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) (Bourke, 2018). Bourke (2018) explained:

While PWI is not an official designation for any college or university in the United States, six categories of MSIs are classified by the Higher Education Act: Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Alaska Native Serving Institutions (ANSIs), Native Hawaiian Serving Institutions (NHSIs), and a general category of Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). (p. 13)

As an oversimplification, the term PWIs are colleges and universities in which white people account for fifty percent or greater of the overall student enrollment (Lomotey, 2009). However, in looking beyond patterns of representation and notions of compositional diversity, whiteness is embedded in the practices of PWIs in admissions procedures and policies, day-to-day practices, and curricula (Bourke, 2018). The term
PWI (as opposed to traditionally white institution or other substitutes) intentionally refers to the historical and contemporary relationship between white dominance and the subjugation of non-whites. Bourke (2018) cautioned, “It can be easy to view the label ‘predominantly white institution’ as simply a reflection of enrollment numbers, but the significance of the PWI label goes much farther” (p. 18). PWIs are often over-resourced compared to their MSI counterparts (Kim, 2002; Palmer & Gassman, 2008). In contrast, MSIs generally remain underfunded (Kim, 2002; Palmer & Gassman, 2008).

Overwhelmingly, higher education in the United States is segregated by racial and ethnic lines (Palmer et al., 2011), and PWIs frequently fail to take strategic administrative actions to protect minoritized students, faculty, and staff (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011; Delpit, 2006).

Indeed, colleges and universities in the United States have historically been sites of racism, misogyny, classism, religious discrimination, and global capitalism (Bartel, 2018; Harris, 2015; Wilder, 2013). Furthermore, public education can act as a coercive arm of the state, with “the education system itself actively involved in maintaining and extending the grip that white people have on the major sources of power in ‘western’ capitalist societies” (Gillborn, 2007, p. 491). Western epistemologies have long devalued Indigenous ways of knowing, utilizing a “myopic lens” that creates a “systemic monopolization of knowledge and communication” (Louie et al., 2017, p. 2). Starting with the opening of Harvard University in 1636, institutions for higher learning in the United States actively prevented BIPOC, poor people, women, and/or non-Protestant religious minorities from matriculating (Harris, 2015; Wilder, 2013). Wilder (2013) explained, “The first five colleges in the British American colonies – Harvard…William
and Mary…Yale…Codrington…and New Jersey—were instruments of Christian expansionism, weapons for the conquest of indigenous peoples, and major beneficiaries of the African slave trade and slavery” (p. 17).

Tertiary education was (and presently is) predominantly controlled by white, male educators and administrators with existing social, political, and cultural capital (Arnett, 2022; Bartel, 2018). Institutions of higher learning were not designed for minoritized students from underrepresented groups, and many institutions still fail to welcome and support these students (Aguilar, 2017; Beattie, Cohen, & McGuire, 2013). Minoritized students then become part of campus ecosystems in which they are “increasingly disparaged as flawed consumers […] and are considered disposable” (Giroux, 2014, p. 158).

Large-scale desegregation efforts at colleges and universities did not begin until after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and nationality (Brown, 2001; Freemark, 2015; Palmer et al., 2011; Stefkovich & Leas, 1994). Of course, even when people of color could matriculate, “institutionalized racism was a matter of social practice and not a matter of law” at colleges and universities (Anderson, 2002, p. 6). Amidst the heightened racial, generational, and gender awareness of the 1960s, activists in the United States began to push for the “institutionalization of alternative, radical, and nontraditional curricula in the colleges through the struggle for Black studies, Chicano studies, American Indian studies, Asian studies, and women's studies courses, programs, and departments” (Lowy, 1995, p. 714). The influential short-term cultural, political, and social movements that impacted activism during this period included movements for civil rights, anti-war efforts, Black
Power, Black Nationalism, Red Power, and feminism (Sleeter, 2005; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015).

**Overview of DEI Initiatives**

AAC&U formally introduced diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to higher education beginning in 1971 (AAC&U, 2017). Many institutions of higher education in the U.S., particularly PWI, recognize diversity, equity, and inclusion in their missions, curricula, or programming (Barnett, 2020). Often, these DEI maneuvers are for colleges and universities symbolically position themselves (Ballard et al., 2020). The original social justice roots of DEI research efforts in the academy are thus frequently eclipsed by economic motives linked to financial performance or productivity (Ballard et al., 2020; Lotz, 2020; Patton, 2016).

Currently, almost every higher education institution in the United States has put forth some effort towards DEI policies and initiatives for students of minoritized backgrounds on their campuses, with a majority of these policies created in the last ten years (Patton et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2005). Pushed by overwhelming public support for DEI and facing elevated pressures from industry to produce a global workforce, universities began to create policies to address the continued lack of minoritized individuals in academia (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000). DEI efforts at colleges and universities are often grouped into three categories: Structural diversity, interactional diversity, and curricular diversity (Gurin et al., 2002; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Shaw, 2005; Terenzini et al., 2001; Umbach & Kuh, 2002). In the following sections, I utilize these same three categories to present distinct DEI initiatives in higher education, sharing several recent illustrative case studies related to each category. While I do define and
present these three components of diversity, it must be noted that these elements are inter-related and inter-dependent. Inclusive excellence\(^2\) at colleges and universities cannot be achieved without coordination across the structural, interactional, and curricular domains of DEI work (Milem et al., 2005; del Carmen Salazar et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2005). Colleges and universities dedicated to DEI must utilize a comprehensive rather than “piecemeal” approach (Milem et al., 2005, p. 11). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2015) urged institutions to engage in the “critical deconstruction of structures, policies, norms, and values assumed to be race neutral” (p. 4).

**Structural Diversity.** Structural diversity refers to compositional diversity of the student body (Bowman, 2012; Jayakumar, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2008). Said differently, this term refers to the racial heterogeneity of the student body, or the percentage of students of color (Park & Kim, 2013). The presence of diverse students on-campus may provide opportunities for cross-racial student interaction and can possibly lead to the cultivation of cultural responsiveness (Gurin et al., 2002; Jayakumar, 2008; Lyon & Guppy, 2016). However, Milem et al. (2005) warned that DEI efforts need to move beyond numbers of students or numbers of programs as end goals. Jayakumar (2008) agreed, stating that the notion that the benefits that numerical diversity educational benefits are inadequate and largely aesthetic. Importantly, structural diversity alone will not lead to educational gains for all students (Jayakumar, 2008). Diversity alone is not enough to solve issues of discrimination (Casillas Arellano et al., 2009; Nguyen et al.,

\(^2\) Maher and Tetreault (2011) suggested that the term *excellence* itself was a coded word for privilege.
Even as colleges and universities diversify their campuses to a greater extent than previous eras, historically minoritized and underserved students will not be set up for success unless there is a more multilayered institutional approach to DEI (Milem et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2005). When increasing racial/ethnic diversity of the student body is an isolated initiative, such an effort does not address issues such as compositional diversity of faculty/staff/administrators, differences between PWIs and MSIs, campus climate, and teaching and learning (Williams et al., 2005).

Nonetheless, “it’s difficult to deploy inclusive practices without having some level of compositional diversity” (Chun & Evans, 2018, p. 51). Compositional diversity may maximize undergraduate students’ cross-racial interactions (Pike & Kuh, 2008). This is valued because students may learn from peers “who know about different roles, define the world differently, or come from different backgrounds” (Lyon & Guppy, 2016, p. 107). To this point, Chang et al. (2004) suggested that students’ interpersonal relationships with peers is “one of the most powerful educational resources in higher education” (p. 530). It is crucial that such interactions are structured and do not lead to re-marginalization of minoritized students (Lyon & Guppy, 2016). Furthermore, data sets must be disaggregated by race and ethnicity (amongst other factors) to draw any conclusions related to minoritized students’ academic successes, senses of belonging, and levels of satisfaction at their institutions (Nguyen et al., 2018).

Lyon and Guppy’s (2016) quantitative study looked at enhancing compositional diversity in sociology classrooms at the University of British Columbia. The researchers found that course structure (i.e., scheduling and delivery) significantly enhanced classroom heterogeneity amongst variables including students’ national of origin and
domestic/international status, which related to the dimensions of student nationality and ethnicity (Lyon & Guppy, 2016). Asynchronous courses, online courses, evening courses, and summer- or winter-term courses were supportive of part-time students and/or students who had commitments outside of academia (Lyon & Guppy, 2016). The authors summarized:

In essence, organizational features of a course affect compositional diversity because students, especially students from nontraditional backgrounds, make decisions based on an array of competing demands, including paid employment, extracurricular activities, volunteer commitments, family care responsibilities, commuting requirements, and the like (Lyon & Guppy, 2016, p. 109).

Learnings related to compositional diversity also can signal important shifts and trends amongst matriculated college students. For example, between 2010 to 2020, the number of federally recognized Hispanic-Serving Institutions in the United States increased by approximately 58 percent (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2022). In 2010, there were a total of 311 HSIs (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2022). By 2020, there were a total of 559 HSIs and 393 emerging HSIs, totaling 952 undergraduate with an enrollment rate of at least 15 percent Hispanic students (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2022). The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (2022) noted that Hispanic enrollment in higher education is expected to exceed 4.18 million students by 2026, which surpasses the growth rate of any other racial/ethnic group in the United States. When institutional researchers and leaders in higher education are attentive to such trends, complementary and appropriate DEI efforts can be implemented (Franco & Hernández, 2018). In the case of MSIs, that may include focusing on metrics such as six-year graduation rates, graduate school enrollment, post-graduation employment rates, the use of
culturally relevant curricula, and tailored support programs (Garcia, 2017; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015).

**Interactional Diversity.** Interactional diversity refers to informal engagement with peers that takes place in less structured campus environments and contexts (Bialka & Morro, 2018; Jayakumar, 2008). This can include discussions that students have “on the way to classes, in residence halls, in classrooms before or after class, during social activities, or at campus work sites” (Casillas Arellano et al., 2009, p. 284). Many studies on interactional diversity are often framed by Allport’s (1954) contact theory, which suggests that “prejudicial attitudes are reduced when individuals work together to achieve a common goal and are consistently exposed to members of out-groups who differ with respect to race, ethnicity, or culture” (Upton, 2012, p. 4). Faculty may or may not intentionally design their course activities and assignments to promote interactional diversity (Casillas Arellano et al., 2009).

Hurtado (2007) found that when students had positive interactions with peers from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, they demonstrated leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, social awareness, and an orientation toward pluralism. Several other researchers (Bowman, 2010; Chang et al., 2004; Chang et al., 2006; Engberg et al., 2003; Gurin et al., 2003; Jayakumar, 2008; Newman et al., 2004; Pascarella et al., 2001) have drawn similar conclusions about the skills-related affordances of interactional diversity. However, diversity researchers have frequently over-utilized samples of predominantly white college students (Strayhorn, 2010), which increases the risk of generalizing results across racial groups and failing to distinguish nuances. For instance, while Black students attending PWIs had high levels of interactional diversity (with white peers), they also reported
significant racial discrimination (Allen, 1992; Allen & Solórzano, 2001; Forbes, 1997). Low belongingness, interpersonal microaggressions, and high distress are major barriers facing students of color in higher education settings (Clark et al., 2012). Additionally, examples of environmental microaggressions are often found on campuses (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017), such as racist mascots or buildings bearing the names of enslavers (Cabrera et al., 2016).

Antonio (2001, 2004) investigated interactional diversity amongst and across friendship groups at the University of California, Los Angeles. Antonio (2001) found that racial diversity in a student’s friend group increased racial understanding, boosted cross-racial interaction outside the friendship group, and promoted racial understanding and cultural awareness. In a second study, Antonio (2004) also determined that cross-racial relationships had an impact on cognitive skills.

Hu and Kuh (2003) examined student outcomes related to interactional diversity with a large data set. Between 1998 and 2001, 53,756 full-time undergraduate students from a total of 124 U.S. four-year institutions completed the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (Hu & Kuh, 2003). While students across all racial and ethnic groups experienced academic gains from interactional diversity, white students generally had less cross-racial interactions (Hu & Kuh, 2003).

In a study of Michigan State University students, Mills (2009) found that perceptions and levels of interactional diversity differed significantly between racial groups. Among students of color, Black students were the least likely to engage in interactional diversity, while multiracial students were the most likely to participate in interactional diversity (Mills, 2009). The racial/ethnic backgrounds of students was
significantly related to their perceptions of racial tension on-campus: Black students were the most likely to perceive racial tensions, while white students were the least likely to perceive racial tensions (Mills, 2009). Additionally, Mills (2009) found that the variable of gender was statistically significant: Male students were more likely to view the campus racial climate favorably. In this study, students also rarely engaged in meaningful conversations about race and ethnicity with peers from other backgrounds, with white students being the least likely to participate in such dialogue (Mills, 2009). However, students living in residence halls with greater compositional diversity were more likely to participate in interactional diversity (Mills, 2009).

**Curricular Diversity.** Denson (2021) described curricular diversity as “institutionally structured and purposeful programmatic efforts to help students engage in diversity in the form of both ideas and people. Students encounter this type of diversity through coursework and curriculum or through participation in activities such as racial/cultural awareness workshops” (p. 534). Important instructional practices supportive of curricular diversity include presenting the works of, and perspectives of, a range of social identities (Littleford & Nolan, 2013; Saunders & Kardia, 1997; Tuitt, 2012), and choosing examples and resources from a range of cultural domains (Gair & Mullins, 2001). A 2015 survey of more than 300 Chief Academic Officers at AAC&U institutions found that 87% of responding institutions offered diversity studies and experiences to their undergraduate students (Hart Research Associates, 2016).

Several indicators of curricular diversity include courses related to intercultural, international, and multicultural topics and instruction (Smith et al., 1997; Williams et al., 2005). Other examples include the availability of DEI-related articles and lectures,
general education diversity requirements, and the “number of courses and majors that
explore issues of power, social justice, equity, multiculturalism, and diversity” (Williams
et al., 2005, p. 24). Chepp (2017), Olesen (2021), and Zilvinskiis (2019) advocated for
high-impact practices related to DEI such as seminars for undergraduate research,
internships, first-year student seminars, writing-intensive courses, service-learning
initiatives, and capstone projects. Rather than selected courses, majors, or departments
focused on DEI, individual scholars (del Carmen Salazar et al., 2009; Denson et al, 2021;
Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013; Milem et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2005) and equity-
focused organizations (such as the AAC&U, the UCLA Center for Urban Education, and
the Higher Education Research Institute) recommended that DEI work be infused
throughout post-secondary curriculum. Generally, curricular diversity has been positively
associated with increased interracial understanding (Antony, 1993) and decreased racial
prejudices (Chang, 2002).

As previously noted, many institutions have created diversity requirements in
which all students are required to take a course on a topic concerning racial/ethnic
diversity, culture, and/or gender and sexual identity. However, this can be problematic for
several reasons. Often faculty who teach these courses hold minoritized identities, further
solidifying in white students’ minds the expected spaces these identities are allowed to
occupy (Camargo, 2017; McKinley Jones Brayboy, 2003). Furthermore, because all
students are required to take these courses, students who hold marginalized identities are
often forced into uncomfortable situations where their white classmates demand them to
represent their community (Patton & Haynes, 2020). With regard to outcomes, Martin
(2014) found that only white college students benefited from taking a multicultural course.

In their recent review of 73 publications over a 25-year timespan (representing 116,092 total undergraduate students), Denson et al. (2021) did find a somewhat small positive association between diversity coursework and student outcomes. The most statistically significant finding was that the integration of diversity content throughout students’ coursework was more positively related to student outcomes than taking one or more diversity courses (Denson et al., 2021). This finding complements Vaccaro’s (2013) commentary on the benefits of longer-term educational experiences and adds weight to Milem et al.’s (2005) conclusion that one-off DEI initiatives resulted in students having disconnected and inconsistent engagement. Students in undergraduate majors associated with the humanities or social sciences generally had more access to curricular diversity than students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (Denson et al., 2021). Hurtado et al. (2013) urged that in order to yield the strongest benefits of curricular diversity, it is necessary to consider “who we teach (student identities), who teaches (instructor identities), what is taught (content), and how it is taught (pedagogies/teaching methods)” (p. 49).

There has been considerably more research on undergraduate students’ experiences with curricular diversity than on graduate students’ experiences (Pugh, 2014). Perez et al. (2020) remarked that while DEI conversations were “welcome in the graduate college and at times at the university level […] it was not a focus within most academic departments” (p. 9). These researchers recommended that DEI work in graduate education required further study, particularly at large research-intensive
institutions (Perez et al., 2020). Willis and Schram (2022) also found that graduate-level programs rarely provide students with DEI training. However, there has been some research on DEI initiatives specifically for graduate students (Ando, 2017; Gómez, 2021; Perez et al., 2020; Willis & Schram, 2022). Three specific examples follow.

Ando (2017) described elements of a diversity event at Widener University for graduate-level social work students. Components of the event included a cultural fair with table stations, a lecture on African American culture, a collaborative group timeline of rituals across the human lifespan, a film viewing, a panel discussion with featured speakers, and small group discussions amongst event attendees. Ando (2017) suggested that the one-day diversity event “can be as educationally useful as a series of class activities” (p. 77).

Gómez (2021) created a new, required departmental course on DEI for graduate students in psychology at Wayne State University. The course syllabus included DEI topics such as structural intersectionality, standpoint theory, critical race theory, and queer theory (Gómez, 2021). This course was a full three-credit class (Gómez, 2021). Prior to the origination of this DEI course, the department only offered a one-credit, pass/fail DEI seminar for graduate students.

In a mixed methods study, Willis and Schram (2022) evaluated the impact of a DEI professional development certificate at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Program requirements totaled approximately 30 hours and included attending a series of DEI trainings, submitting several written reflections, and conducting an interview with a DEI practitioner (Willis & Schram, 2022). The program was designed to be completed in one year, with participants having a maximum of two years to complete the certificate.
The researchers found that the DEI certificate program created meaningful and significant learning experiences for doctoral students, in addition to enhancing individual student self-awareness (Willis & Schram, 2022).

**Summary of the Issues.** As articulated, the major literature gaps are lack of DEI programs for and research on graduate students (Willis & Schram, 2022). Increases in DEI policies and initiatives have led to lukewarm results, with many minoritized identities still missing from certain campus spaces (McFarland et al., 2018). While the proliferation of diversity and inclusion efforts has the potential to liberate minoritized individuals in academia, these policies often create counterproductive results or are inauthentic (Barnett, 2020). As noted, some higher education inclusion efforts often wind up benefiting white students at the expense of students who hold minoritized identities (Padilla, 1994; Patton & Haynes, 2020; Reddick et al., 2020; Tatum, 2019).

In order to counter the troubling trend of creating academic policy that addresses privilege and oppression at the expense of minoritized students, universities need to create spaces in which those who hold identities of privilege can engage in the unlearning of forms of oppressions without enacting further harm (Robbins, 2016). Without anti-oppression training directed specifically for those who hold identities of power, policies relating to diversity and inclusion will continue to yield few results and reinforce existing institutional power dynamics (Barnett, 2020; Verjee, 2012). Institutions may be able to foster social justice education through institutionalizing equity-focused faculty development, infusing equity considerations across curricula, and measuring student learning and campus climate (Argus et al., 2022).

**Research Question Informed by the Literature Review**
To address the gaps in the literature, this study explored if and how white women graduate students at a PWI grappled with topics of oppression and power. My research question was, *What are the lived experiences of white women in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students?* My research sub-question was, *How, if at all, do white women graduate students’ meaning making in the diversity and inclusion program inform the way that they understand themselves as white women?* Given that my research questions referred to a structured university program, my line of inquiry addressed curricular diversity.

**Summary**

This chapter overviewed three major themes: Interlocking systems of dominations based on race, class, and gender; manifestations of white womanhood; and DEI initiatives at colleges and universities in relationship to the dimensions of compositional diversity, interactional diversity, and curricular diversity. I concluded Chapter 2 by linking my research question to the articulated gaps in the existing body of literature. The next chapter presents my research design and methods.
Chapter 3: Method

This study used qualitative methodology and specifically the methodological framework of feminist interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how white women who are graduate students make meaning of their experiences participating in a diversity and inclusion program. Importantly, as discussed earlier, in qualitative research projects, the researcher’s own life experiences influence “choice of study, research questions, selection of participants, [...] interpretations, and subsequent theories” (Yeh & Inman, 2007, p. 371). The dual theoretical frameworks for this study were critical whiteness theory (Frankenberg, 1997; Gillborn, 2007; Leonardo, 2002) and intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989).

Context of Study

This was a phenomenological research study, utilizing feminist Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the chosen approach. Generally, a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a certain concept or a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim of phenomenology is to “grasp [...] the very nature of the thing” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177) by developing a composite description from all individuals of what was experienced and how (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I determined that the research problem was best suited for this form of qualitative research, as I wished to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon (white women’s reckoning with race and gender upon completion of a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students).
Interviews with participants are a defining aspect of qualitative and also phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Seidman, 2006). Figure 1 displays how phenomenological researchers describe the essence of lived experience.

**Figure 1**

*How Phenomenological Researchers Describe the Essence of Lived Experiences*


Creswell and Poth (2018) acknowledged, “Phenomenology is not only a description, but it is also an interpretive process in which the researcher makes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences” (p. 76).

Serial interviewing, or interviewing across multiple sessions, may entail costs related to time, expense, and opportunity (forgoing a larger pool of interviewees) (Read,
2018). For this reason, I therefore used a one-session interview format, with follow-up interviews and emails as needed during the interpretive process.

IPA began in the field of psychology and entails a psychological-oriented approach combined with a systematic examination of the experiential (Smith et al., 2009) and specific, structured methods of analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). IPA allows for multiple participants who experience similar phenomena to tell their stories. The central strength of IPA as a participant-oriented, qualitative research approach is its ability to examine and interpret the detailed, lived experiences of research participants. Smith et al. (2009) contended that IPA “posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it” (p. 34). Therefore, in IPA, the “researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of X” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). I hoped to learn of participants’ lived experiences after participating in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students, yet also accessed their personal accounts through my own assumptions and prior conceptions (Smith et al., 2009). Given this understanding, IPA seemed to especially fit my research question.

Feminist inquiry also informed the design, implementation, methods, and analysis of this study. Stoller (2017) and van Leeuwen (2012) discussed feminist phenomenology, and I suggest that this study is not only an IPA research project, but a feminist IPA study. In the context of this research, the feminist approach began with the lived experiences of white graduate students and centered the inquiry on those experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Feminist research calls for the examination of the researcher’s biography, characteristics, and relationships to research participants (Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004; Olesen, 2011). I regularly assessed and considered my own relationships to participants
in this study. Feminist research additionally acknowledges the multiplicity of researcher and participant perspectives and promotes multivocality (Naples, 2007). The writing style in this dissertation is representative of feminist inquiry, as I “playfully or ironically [turned] dominant research conventions on their heads” (Kohli & Burbules, 2013, p. 95) by troubling common language (Jones et al., 2014) and actively supporting polyvocality. Two specific examples of my feminist approach in this dissertation were my usage of feminist adaptation to the American Psychological Association style and a point-in-time audit of my references section.

The current seventh edition APA style requires the following format: Author last name or family name, comma, initials of author given name or names. Previously, iterations of APA styles in 1944 and 1952 indicated that male authors’ first names should be initialized while female authors’ names should be spelled out (Signorella, 2020), as if women were to be considered suspect. However, the present APA style usage of initials for all authors rather than full names has the effect of obscuring individuals’ contributions (Bohan, 1992) and failing to recognize the presence of diversity (or lack thereof) in publications (Signorella, 2020). In this dissertation, feminist adaptation to the APA style included my intentional usage of all authors’ first names in addition to their surnames in the references section. I used feminist adaptation to the APA in order to recognize the identities, subjectivities, and contributions of authors (Hauk, 2014). Ahmed (2017) reminded us that “feminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge” (p. 14) and that citation itself is “feminist memory [...] how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before” (p. 15-16).
Another example of feminist inquiry in action was my point-in-time audit of my dissertation’s list of references. I undertook this audit to examine my own possible citation bias. Individuals tend to cite the work they already know (Chakravartty et al., 2018) and women are less likely to be cited than men (Key & Sumner, 2019). I also knew that it would be inadequate and inappropriate for me to merely “sprinkle a few well-known classics by women of color” into my work (Signorella, 2020, p. 262). In order to address possible citational disparities, I excavated and recorded demographic information of authors in my references section, with the intent to improve representation from minoritized identities (Signorella, 2020). A more detailed description of my process and the audit results can be found in Appendix D.

Participants

The sample for this study was white graduate students at a four-year, public university in the northeastern United States who voluntarily chose to participate in a diversity and inclusion program. I used a purposive homogeneous sample (Fraenkel et al., 2012) with an initial goal of six to eight participants. Participant selection reflected and represented the homogeneity of the sample pool of participants. This study only looked at the experiences of students who self-identified with white racial identities and as women; these were inclusion criteria. All participants were given a pseudonym to support confidentiality; each participant was able to choose their own pseudonym, if desired. A total of eight white women graduate students participated in this research project.

As Alase (2017) stated, “The essence of conducting an IPA research study with homogenous participants is to get a better gauge and a ‘better understanding’ of the overall perceptions among the participants’ ‘lived experiences’” (p. 13). Furthermore, it
is not appropriate to use a large sample size when utilizing IPA, given that the research aim is to conduct an in-depth exploration of certain phenomena rather than seeking generalizability to the larger population. While there is no specific rule regarding the desired number of participants for an IPA study, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) indicated that between six to eight participants is recommended in order to allow comparing and contrasting between individuals.

Participant demographics for this study are represented in Table 2. When I emailed participants to request demographics information, I indicated that the following categories were open response: Pronouns, race/ethnicity, language, and program. Since participants’ exact responses to the open field questions were recorded, there are some differences in response structure for the pronouns and race/ethnicity categories. For both the categories veteran status and degree level, I asked participants to choose between two options: Yes or no for veteran status, and Master’s or Doctorate for degree level.
### Table 2

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Veteran Status</th>
<th>Degree Level</th>
<th>Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexandra</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>white (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Behavioral Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>white (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Marine Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Cell and Molecular Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>unspecified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>she/her/</td>
<td>white (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>white (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Behavioral Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinn</td>
<td>she/they</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>white/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Environmental Science and Management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Setting**

According to the 2019 to 2020 common data set compiled by the university’s Institutional Research Office, there were a total of 2931 enrolled graduate students (Research Institution Common Data Set, 2020). By gender (binary), there were 1157 male graduate students (40 percent of the graduate student body) and 1774 female graduate students (60 percent of the graduate student body).
This university in the northeastern United States was a PWI. Approximately 62 percent of the university’s graduate students were white. Approximately 13 percent of graduate students were international students, five percent identified as Asian, three percent identified as Hispanic, three percent identified as Black or African American, one percent identified as multi-ethnic, and less than one percent identified as Indigenous. Race/ethnicity was reported as unknown for approximately 12 percent of graduate students. Table 3 shows the university’s racial and ethnic diversity breakdown by number and percentage.

**Table 3**

*The University’s Graduate Student Racial/Ethnic Diversity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1,122</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Ethnic</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The university’s diversity and inclusion program offered graduate-level, professional development workshops that emphasize the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for cultural competence in multiple environments. Workshops were facilitated by graduate students, university faculty, and university staff, and were open to any graduate student in a Masters or Doctoral program. The program launched in 2017.
To fully complete the program and earn the micro-credential, graduate students needed to attend a minimum of six workshop sessions, totaling approximately 12 hours.

The specific program objectives were that graduate students would engage with:

1. Analyzing both the concept of the social construction of difference as well as manifestations of this concept within the U.S.

2. Analyzing some aspects of identity development, explicit and implicit prejudice, inequality, privilege, and oppression as they relate to the U.S.

3. Analyzing some aspects of the impact of discrimination and inequalities in the U.S.

4. Applying knowledge of effective problem solving or conflict resolution skills related to diversity and inclusion in order to respond to real-life situations.

5. Analyzing how and why the perspective of people from marginalized groups in the U.S. are different from that of other groups of people.

6. Choosing and using appropriate communication styles to engage in difficult dialogues related to diversity and inclusion.

Between spring 2017 and summer 2021, a total of 296 graduate students attended at least one workshop with the university’s diversity and inclusion program. Of these participants, 232 students (79 percent) identified as women, 52 students (18 percent) identified as men, 4 students (one percent) identified as gender-expansive or non-binary, and eight students (two percent) did not indicate a gender.

Of the 296 graduate students attending the university’s diversity and inclusion program between spring 2017 and summer 2021, a total of 244 students (82 percent) identified as white, 22 students (seven percent) identified as two or more races, 15
students (five percent) identified as Hispanic or Latine, 7 students (three percent) identified as Black, and eight students (three percent) did not indicate a race.

Given that a considerable majority of participants in the university’s diversity and inclusion program for graduate students were white women, I selected this group for my research. This decision was made in tandem with the full-time staff member responsible for overseeing the program, as it was determined that having findings specific to this population of participants would be valuable. Of course, I also selected this topic due to being driven by feminist perspectives and caring about the issue of white women as anti-racist activists.

**Procedures**

I began recruitment of participants following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. All graduate students who fit the inclusion criteria (i.e., identified as white women and completed six workshops offered through the university’s diversity and inclusion program) received an email invitation to participate in the research project (see Appendix A).

Throughout the recruitment process, interested graduate students were able to contact me and have an initial informational conversation in the study, via phone, if desired.

Fifty-five total students fit the study inclusion criteria and received an email invitation to participate in this doctoral project. I received initial expressions of interest from twelve students, and eight students ultimately signed and returned their informed consent documents. All eight of these students participated in data collection.
Prior to beginning any data collection, I provided each potential participant the opportunity to read the informed consent document (see Appendix B), ask questions, and sign the form. The informed consent document clearly reviewed the purpose of the study and procedures, confidentiality and privacy measures, the associated risks and benefits of participation, any available compensation, withdrawal or termination from study, and researcher contact information.

**Data Sources**

This IPA study used pre-existing evaluative participant data and semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews to collect first-person accounts of the experiences and phenomena under investigation (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2009; van Manen, 2014). Interviewing aligns with interpretive phenomenological and feminist research because of the potential to elicit rich descriptions from participants (Reinharz, 1992; Smith, 2009; van Manen, 2014). Semi-structured conversations provided an opportunity to build rapport with participants (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Interview questions explored memories, thoughts, emotions, and individual interpretations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA interviews ranged in duration from approximately thirty minutes to one hour. During these conversations, I referred to an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions (see Appendix C).

**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred during a single focused, semi-structured interview. The interview topics included topics such as a focused life history to establish the context of participants’ experiences, the details of the experience with the phenomenon (diversity
and inclusion workshops for graduate students), and participants’ reflections on the meaning of their experiences. Interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

Conversations were held via video call at a convenient time chosen by each participant. I audio recorded each interview, video recorded the interviews of participants who provided consent, created digital files, and produced verbatim transcriptions, which is necessary in IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). I used the voice recognition software otter.ai to create real-time transcriptions of participant interviews. I then proofread, edited, and adjusted all transcriptions as needed. All digital files were stored on a locked, password-protected device.

I used feminist interviewing techniques during the data collection process, including reflexive memoing, active listening, attentiveness to non-verbal communication, paying attention to and preserving the language of participants, rapport-building, regarding the research as a project in co-construction of knowledge, and member-checking (Alase, 2017; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Saldaña, 2016).

A Note on Transcription. Johnson (2011) advised that researchers transcribe their data themselves in order to become more familiar with the data. During transcription, the transcriber decides which punctuation to use, how sentences are structured, and where emphases should be placed (Johnson, 2011). Although I did not transcribe, I spent significant time listening to and comparing recordings to the automatically generated transcribed. I adjusted punctuation and sentence structure to most closely match participants’ pacing and stress on particular words or phrases.

Data Analysis
To make meaning of the research question *(What are the lived experiences of white women who completed a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students?)*, the research proposition was to create a detailed description of the essence of the experience using composite descriptions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA often relies on the hermeneutic circle, created initially by Heidegger (1962), to explore the phenomenon under investigation (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Hermeneutic Circle*

![Hermeneutic Circle Diagram](image)

*Note.* Adapted from Bontekoe, 1996; Perrelli, 2019.

To explore the commonalities of an experience, I engaged in a circular process of in-depth analysis that included examining my interpretations of the phenomenon while simultaneously exploring new information. In the hermeneutic circle, participant accounts constitute the *parts* of the analysis process and the phenomenon of interest is the *whole*. Analysis of the qualitative material involved these three common stages of the IPA framework: (1) Multiple readings of transcripts and annotating, (2) transforming
notes into emergent themes, and (3) seeking relationships and clustering themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Based on prior research, while engaging with the hermeneutic circle, I anticipated that certain “parts” of the whole would become visible. My goal was to construct a composite description that represented the experience of white women graduate students confronting race and racism in diversity and inclusion training settings.

I began the data analysis process by working with individual transcriptions one at a time. I listened to a single participant interview several times while proofreading and editing the automatically generated transcriptions provided by otter.ai. I focused on performing a “close, line-by-line analysis” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). Bracketing was helpful, as I often noted my own thoughts and reactions to the participant’s commentary. For example, when I found myself thinking about sharing a certain experience with one of the participants, I added the note, “Me, too!” and then returned to the close reading activity.

Next, I reread the transcript with the goal of adding a “a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). During this stage of the process, my notes included descriptive, conceptual, and linguistic comments. Smith et al. (2009) defined descriptive comments as content-based notes, such as “relationships, processes, places, events, values, and principles” (p. 84), as well as the meaning of a topic to a participant. Linguistics comments are notes on the participant’s specific usage of speech, including tone, word choice, sentence syntax, semantics, use of metaphors, pauses, and other features of language (Smith et al., 2009). Conceptual note-making entailed an “interrogative” form of engagement with the data (Smith et al., 2009,
p. 88). In this stage, I identified questions or wonderings and made note of unsaid or implied comments.

Next, I developed emergent themes by “mapping the interrelationships, connections, and patterns between the exploratory notes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). I particularly was interested in the presence of any recurring words or phrases. After identifying emergent themes within an individual transcript, I followed Smith et al.’s (2009) recommendation and wrote each theme on an individual sticky note. I then physically moved, arranged, and organized these notes (by movement or section) on my living room wall, searching for convergences and divergences. Several themes interacted like “magnets, pulling other themes towards them” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 96) which allowed me to form clusters and constellations of related themes. Some themes appeared to have oppositional relationships, which Smith et al. (2009) described as “polarization” (p. 97). After completing analysis of the first interview transcription, I repeated the process described above with the next transcription. Lastly, I examined relationships of themes across all interviews. My objective was to distinguish if and how themes “shared higher order qualities” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 101). After distinguishing those primary or superordinate themes, subthemes emerged, as did several relevant categories. I then organized this information in a tabular format (see Table 4). I referred to Table 4 as I wrote the narrative account of my findings and results. I continued to refine my superordinate themes, subordinate themes, and categories while writing Chapter 4. As an example, I first termed a superordinate theme Exposure. After transcription reading and re-reading during the writing process, that theme seemed to take slightly different shapes whilst simultaneously becoming clearer to me. This superordinate theme evolved in the
following fashion: Exposure – Awareness – Recognition --- Racial Literacy, with the term “Racial Literacy” representing the meaning that I eventually arrived at. As another example, I initially had the following items as three distinct superordinate themes: Reflection, Impact, and Associated Actions. Following multiple (re)readings and contextualizations of the various “parts,” I determined that these superordinate themes were actually linked and could be described by the subthemes of “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action.”

**Another Round of Data Analysis**

Following the first round of data analysis, I noticed that I had recorded several phrases from each person’s interview on separate sticky notes. Butler-Kisber (2010) referred to this identification of salient words or phrases as “nuggeting” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 202). I then combined phrases from individual participants to create two composite poems. This poetic inquiry approach utilized the hermeneutic circle, as the “parts” (verbatim quotes from interviews with individual white women) were used to form the “whole” (the experiences of white women graduate students in a diversity and inclusion program).

The composite poems are found poetry, as I drew material from interview transcriptions. Composite poems “[take] the words of others and [transform] them into poetic form” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 233), recreating the lived experiences of white women graduate students in a diversity and inclusion program, and evoking emotional response (Richardson, 1994). Found poetry involves a sequence of actions, though it is not necessarily a linear procedure (Butler-Kisber, 2010).
My process was text-based. I spread all sticky notes across the floor, in columns, by interviewee. Gradually, I established a settled, general storyline for the emotions and experiences I believe I perceived. I chose to explore these specific individual themes in more detail, though other stories could have arisen in different contexts or for another researcher. I began playing with the number of words, the word sequence, line breaks, pauses, breath points and emphasis “to get at the essence of what is being recounted” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 97). I reordered and reconstructed the poems, one at a time. I made sure to have a textual contribution from all eight participants represented in each poem. Reading the poems aloud multiple times yielded more reshaping.

This was an emergent research design. Found poetry importantly made it possible for me to be present in sharing my own understandings and creatively, deeply engage with lived experiences. Simultaneously, I prioritized participants’ own voices. In creating found poetry, I traced aspects of my own personal journey and relationship with white womanhood. While the poems are collective narratives built from the words of study participants, the touches of meaning are inextricably both mine and theirs.

Poetic inquiry is reflective and reflexive, thereby resonating with understandings of feminism. Research has suggested that the more traditional, textual descriptions of qualitative findings do not always reflect the complexity of studying human behavior (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Therefore, the additional presentation of my research results in the format of found poetry (see Chapter 4) may allow readers to make new connections and form new insights and understandings.

*Trustworthiness*
In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in gathering data, and the researcher’s own perceptions, coupled with their chosen theoretical framework, impacts the trustworthiness of qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Yeh and Inman (2007) stated that in qualitative research, “investigators cannot be separated from the research process; they are inextricably linked […] understanding how selves shape, create, and construct evidence, interpretations, analysis and theory […] has been discussed in terms of self-awareness, subjectivity, and reflexivity” (p. 371). Berger (2013) described reflexivity as the “process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome” (p. 220).

**Benefits and Challenges to Reflexivity Based on My Positionality.** Kacen and Chaitin (2003) and Padgett (2008) identified several advantages for researchers sharing identities and/or experiences with study participants, including easier entrée, having a starting basis for knowledge and associations, and understanding participants’ responses and reactions. My racial and gender identities, in addition to possible shared experiences as a white woman, positioned me as an insider with study participants. Due to holding an insider position, I may have had the ability to understand implied comments from participants.

In addition to these benefits, an insider position includes the risks of blurring boundaries, imposing one’s own values, beliefs, and perceptions, and projecting one’s own biases (Drake, 2010). When researcher and participants share experiences, participants may withhold information they assume to be plain and apparent (Drake,
Similarities of experience may be taken for granted and differing experiences overlooked (Drake, 2010). As Finlay (2000) stated, “I had to guard against assuming that my participants and I shared the same language […] if I failed to do so, I might have missed the point” (p. 537).

During this study, I engaged in a member checking process (Saldaña, 2016) to ensure internal consistency. Following data collection, I shared interview transcriptions with each interviewee via email and invited them to share any additional commentary. I also noted the pseudonym I would use for each person, in case a participant wanted to use an alternate pseudonym. During transcription review, one participant requested that I remove any references to her employer. She marked specific sections in the interview text that she wanted me to strike from the transcription, which I did. I then used the final version of the text in my analysis of data. One participant replied “Thanks for sharing!” in response to my email. I did not receive additional responses from participants.

Following the first round of data analysis (prior to the creation of composite poems), I shared the full draft text of Chapter 4 with participants. I invited any participant feedback on my findings (e.g., superordinate themes, subordinate themes, and categories) and the narrative discussion. Two participants thanked me for sharing the information. Another participant succinctly replied via email, “This really made sense to me! I did not receive any other responses or comments from participants. While I would have liked to have completed a member check with additional participants, the one received response indicated that internally-consistent data confirmed the validity of the participant’s statements while making sense of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2009).
Limitations of IPA

Study transferability was supported by the use of participants’ narratives that illustrate findings, an approach common in both interpretative phenomenology (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and feminist research (Reinharz, 1992; Tong, 2009). However, the results of this study are not generalizable to people outside of this study. Each individual’s story was a unique contribution.

Giorgi (2010) acknowledged that IPA has been criticized for lacking standardization, while Brocki and Wearden (2006), Hefferon and Gill-Rodriguez (2011) and Larkin et al. (2006), suggested that IPA is mostly descriptive and not adequately interpretative. Overall, there are four major conceptual and practical limitations that have been associated with this methodology. In Figure 3, I organize and present these limitations and their rebuttals.
Figure 3

Limitations of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis and Corresponding Rebuttals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limitation</th>
<th>Rebuttal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IPA, like other phenomenological studies, does not address the important role of language (Willig, 2008).</td>
<td>Meaning making takes place in the context of narratives, discourse, metaphors, etc., While the primary purposes of IPA is to gain insight into lived experiences, IPA is always intertwined with language (Smith et al., 2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA might capture opinions of experiences rather than the meaning of experiences (Tuffour, 2017).</td>
<td>This criticism is inappropriately elitist, as it suggests that only those having access to the right level of fluency can adequately describe their experiences (Tuffour, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA, like other phenomenological research projects, is limited because it does not explain why lived experiences occur (Tuffour, 2017).</td>
<td>IPA uses hermeneutic, idiographic and contextual analysis to understand the cultural position of people’s lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA is concerned with cognition, yet some aspects of phenomenology are not compatible with cognition (Tuffour, 2017).</td>
<td>IPA requires sense-making and meaning-making; this formal reflection resonates with cognitive psychology (Smith et al., 2009).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An applicable threat to the study was variability of location. Participant interviews took place via a virtual platform, at a location of the participant’s choosing, due to physical distancing necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. An online meeting might have provided a different type of connection than an in-person, face-to-face meeting, and variables related to each participant’s interview location could have impacted their mindset or participation.

Summary
This chapter reported my research design and methods, as informed by my research question, *What are the lived experiences of white women in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students?* The chosen methodology was feminist IPA, and the data collection method was semi-structured participant interviews. Chapter 4 offers and discusses my research findings.
Chapter 4: Results

My research question was, *What are the lived experiences of white women in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students?* My research sub-question was, *How, if at all, do white women graduate students’ meaning making in the diversity and inclusion program inform the way that they understand themselves as white women?* In this chapter, I present research results from the qualitative study.

As noted in the previous chapter, IPA as a methodology intends to uncover new meanings the ways in which people experience and understand phenomena in the world around them. Using feminist IPA to analyze data from eight participant interviews, five total superordinate themes emerged: Motivation, participation, racial literacy, agreement, and reflection. In Table 4, I identify each of the final superordinate themes in addition to their relevant respective subthemes and any categories. Following this, I describe the findings in prose, weaving in examples directly from participant interviews.
Table 4

Superordinate Themes, Subordinate Themes, and Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
<th>Subordinate Theme</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Extrinsic</td>
<td>Making new connections, professional credential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
<td>Learning new information, personal values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Sitting quietly, listening or observing, not turning on camera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Asking questions, sharing own experiences, physical movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial Literacy</td>
<td>Unaware</td>
<td>People or individual level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aware</td>
<td>Systems level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>Dissonance</td>
<td>Had not thought about, different understanding(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>Had thought about, similar understanding(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Reflection-on-action</td>
<td>No decision, no action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection-in-action</td>
<td>Decision-making, private action, public action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Motivation**

This superordinate theme refers to the reasons that prompted a participant to join the diversity and inclusion program, session, and/or activity. Extrinsic motivation (subordinate theme) denotes participation for external rewards, whether abstract or concrete. Intrinsic motivation (subordinate theme) denotes participation prompted by an internal drive. A question I asked participants was, “How did you come to participate in this diversity and inclusion program?” This inquiry led to the generation of motivation as a key theme.
It should be noted that an inclusion criterion for participation in this research study was completion of the diversity and inclusion program, meaning that all interviewees had already earned and been issued a digital badge (which they could choose to display on a resume or online networking site, etc.). Additionally, anyone who completed the program had been invited to attend an online recognition ceremony, hosted by senior staff members at the institution’s graduate school. All study participants had thus already received some external reward or validation for program completion.

In reading individual transcriptions of participation interviews, I noted that both Quinn and Grace used the phrase “on my own” when referring to their motivations for joining the program. To me, this word choice indicated an internal, independent drive or interest. When comparing across interview transcriptions, I recognized the recurrence of this phrase. I then referred to this superordinate theme as motivation.

Participants identified a variety of reasons for joining the diversity and inclusion program. Sometimes, students had both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations (subthemes) for participating. Factors related to extrinsic motivation (categories) were building new connections with peers or the larger university community (Gwen, Quinn, or Serena) or “getting a new sticker for my CV” (Maria). Gwen summarized the appeal of extrinsic motivation: “You attend, you get the badge and it's like a package. You have the badge, you are certified, you're set.”

While Gwen, Quinn, and Serena all briefly identified a possible external reward, they each spoke at more length about their intrinsic motivations. For instance, Quinn succinctly recognized, “It was the first semester […] I was still relatively new to the
geographical space, new to the school, new to the community” (extrinsic motivation).

Quinn then reflected on her intrinsic motivation:

There were a lot of topics that I had the desire to learn more about, but I didn't necessarily know how to get started on my own or I wasn't seeming to find the time at that moment back then to dedicate time on my own. And so it was kind of a creating a self-created obligation to become more aware of some DEI type topics and work and equity.

In this statement, Quinn indicated a pre-existing interest in exploring (in)justice and (in)equity. The university’s diversity and inclusion program for graduate students provided an attractive entry point by offering a dedicated and supportive space, structure, and context to engage with one’s identities and specific social justice themes.

Participants Liz and Grace also made statements highlighting individual learning (category) as their intrinsic motivations (subordinate theme). Liz shared, “I just always felt like I didn't know enough, and I felt like my education has been more narrow […] so I felt like I needed to learn more.” Grace also emphasized personal values (category) as intrinsic motivation (subordinate theme), stating, “I wanted to take some classes and remind myself why this is important and why I need to like make an effort to engage with it on my own.”

With regard to new learning (category) as intrinsic motivation (subordinate theme), some participants either directly or indirectly compared their academic programs to other programs of study. For instance, Grace reflected on how her undergraduate exposure to DEI compared to her more recent graduate-level work in a cell and molecular biology program:
[...] I went to a liberal arts college and we had a lot of classes like that, that were very different, than, I say science. So, I did a lot of like women's studies classes, Africana studies classes, Hispanic studies, classes like diversity that kind of dealt with some of the same topics that the [...] program dealt with. And I went to grad school, it's like, you're only doing science or you're doing nothing else. [...] I missed that part of college .... where I'm thinking with a different part of my brain. [...] I wanted to take some classes and remind myself why this is important and why I need to make an effort to engage with [DEI] on my own.

In another example, Liz stated:

Because it's...there's, you know, so much that we just have to cover in nursing for tests, and that I don't think that we get as much of [an education on race and anti-racism] as other people.

Betty also intentionally pursued DEI exposure while in a marine sciences program, seeking out “a lot of opportunities to kind of learn about race and gender.” Grace, Liz, and Betty were graduate students in hard science disciplines and implied that their respective programs did not integrate DEI as much other graduate programs, such as programs in the social sciences or humanities (Denson et al., 2021). A desire to learn more and address an educational deficit was thus linked to their intrinsic motivation (subordinate theme).

**Participation**

This superordinate theme refers to how white women graduate students took part in the program, session, and/or activity. Subthemes were passive participation and active
participation. Participation could vary within a single activity, or from session to session. Comments from Maria, Grace, and Serena’s respective interviews helped me to first identify this superordinate theme and the component subthemes. Maria noted, “There were some workshops that I got really involved in. And there were some where I was just very content to hang back and listen.” Grace indicated that some sessions “just had better discussion.” She also speculated, “I don't know if I can really pinpoint that. I think maybe it was just smaller groups tending to be better. And then the nature of the question prompts […] I feel like the concrete examples tended to generate better discussions because people could talk about themselves […].” Serena even used the term “active participation” as a descriptor during the interview: “There was only like five or six people and it was, like, active participation. So they wanted you to participate and they wanted you to communicate.” Participants implied that conversation and intra-group dialogue were appropriate and positively coded ways of participating.

Categories related to passive participation (subtheme) were sitting quietly and observing/listening. Quinn spoke about exhibiting behaviors that generated these two categories: “I was quiet as a participant. And I'm kind of like that a lot of, especially in Zoom settings and meetings and stuff. But [I was] just feeling like, ‘Let me just be quiet and observe.’” Serena described another type of passive participation: “You didn't have to have your camera on, you could leave it off, which was nice.” Betty noted that online video meetings may have given rise to more passive behaviors, saying, “Normally everyone just looks really glazed over and, you know, it's hard just to be listening to someone in Zoom.” As illustrated by these diverging remarks, participants identified both affordances and shortcomings of passive participatory behaviors.
Active participation (subtheme) had the categories asking questions and verbally sharing one’s own experiences. Betty described asking a question (category) to the group: “We started talking about how we identify and we were all she/her. And I asked the question, "I know we all identify as she/her," but I was like, "But what do we actually mean when we say we feel like [...] a woman?" Similarly, Quinn commented on the importance of participants’ inquiries being viewed as “dumb questions”: “There was no problem asking anything.”

Liz referred to making verbal comments (category) about her own background, saying, “I think that’s how I participated in discussion. I think there's a lot of sharing our own experiences.” Maria and Gwen also valued verbal exchanges. Maria stated, “I think the most memorable times were the moments when we just got to meet and talk.” Gwen commented that the workshops were a “good starting base to conversation.” These statements indicated that participants’ speaking was associated with positive active participatory behaviors.

**Racial Literacy**

This superordinate theme refers to participants’ recognition of racism as a cultural, structural, and institutional force rather than as an interpersonal event (Foste & Irwin, 2020; McIntosh, 1989). I distinguished two subthemes: Unaware and aware. Aware refers to a participant’s viewpoint or expression of racism as a cultural, structural, and institutional force, while unaware refers to a participant’s viewpoint or expression of racism as an interpersonal event (McIntyre, 1997). People emerged as a category of unaware (subtheme). Systems emerged as a category of aware (subtheme). During the
interviews, racial literacy sometimes varied for participants even in their descriptions of a single event or story.

Participants matching with the subtheme of unaware would be more likely to view racism through the lens of the \textit{racist = bad / not racist = good} binary (Thompson, 2003). Four participants (Betty, Grace, Liz, and Serena) made comments that were coded as occurring at the people level (category). In the following response, Betty demonstrated this understanding of racism:

> When you realize you've been doing something that is racist, in a way, you know, you always got that like, kind of hot feeling and you're like, "Oh, I thought that I learned a lot." So that's the class when they were pointing out different images that you might be using. [...] Oprah, when she does like, "You get a car and you get a car," and Beyoncé and then a couple other things, so using Black women to express overly...to express emotions in like a big way. I realized that, “Yeah, I guess had been doing that.”

People (category) was evidenced in the above passage by Betty using the term “a racist” and referring to herself (e.g., “I guess I had been doing that”). In another instance, Betty mentioned an example of racism being her Black, female friends “telling [her] about how the police pull them over all the time.” This comment again suggests the perception of racism as an interpersonal event (committed by a “bad cop”). Had Betty instead critiqued the notion of white civil society marginalizing BIPOC through over surveillance (Calderon, 2016; Farnia, 2008; Wacquant, 2001; Wun, 2016), such as through policing, this would have been coded as systems (category).
A similar example of people (category) rather than systems (category) emerged as Liz relayed an interaction with a patient:

And we had to ask a patient to move to a different room because we needed a private room for somebody. And you know, she had agreed to move and then when she got to the new room and saw that the roommate was also Black, and this patient who had moved was Black, she decided it was all about race, and that we were racist.

While Liz’s follow-up remark (“we really should have listened to that”) indicated an important personal learning, her focus on the individual domain or level (category) aligned with the subtheme of unaware. Another example of a focus on the individual domain was the following comment made by Grace: “Everyone is touched by racism in this country as much as you don't want to call yourself a racist. Like, you have racist thoughts and it's ok, like, as long as you're working towards improving it.” This articulation of linear progress in the development of becoming a “not racist” person again called to mind the *racist = bad / not racist = good binary* (Thompson, 2003). Serena and Grace also made remarks indicating an individual interpretation of racism. For example, Serena said, “I'm not racist, but I'm also, like, if I'm not doing anything to support the Black community, then I'm not really helping either.” Grace offered the following manifestation of personal racism, thereby focusing on racism as an individual phenomenon:

Whenever, um, someone, who's Black speaks really well I noticed it and I'm like, “Oh, they're so eloquent.” And it's like, I don't say that or I don't think that
necessarily about a white person […]. I noticed it more when it's someone who's not my race.

Grace’s reflections indicated that racism was evidenced specifically in interpersonal interactions. She did not extend this understanding to the larger systems level.

In her own words, Quinn articulated the \textit{racist = bad / not racist = good} binary (Thompson, 2003), acknowledging that she had previously understood racism as individual beliefs and/or behaviors:

"Oh, I have a Black friend, so I'm not racist.” In fact, even growing up, I grew up in a very conservative, southern, racist society. I thought I was the more progressive, you know, liberal, I'm not… I couldn't possibly be a racist. […] I also thought that I was good person. I'm not saying I was a bad person. But I thought I was not the racist in my family group. And now I might define that differently.

Since Quinn indicated a divergence from this viewpoint ("and now I might define that differently") and later said, “that’s a construct that was created and is very, like, racist and settler colonial,” I coded her response as aware (subordinate theme) and noted that she spoke of systems (category) such as settler colonialism.\textsuperscript{3} Two other participants also exemplified thought at the systems level by using terms such as “institutional” or “institutionalized” (Serena) and “systemic exploitation all of the failings of America’s health system and justice system” (Maria).

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Settler colonialism} views land as property and privileges land ownership by the select few. Patel (2014) identified the following three concepts as key elements of settler colonialism: (1) the seizure of land, resources, and cultural practices of a desired land, (2) erasure and genocide of Indigenous people facilitated through state violence, and (3) the enslavement of people, or the rendering of humans as property, which produces societal hierarchies based on ownership and status.
Agreement

This superordinate theme refers to the level of compatibility (or the fit) of a participant’s prior preconceived beliefs with the themes and tenets of the diversity and inclusion program. The two subthemes were dissonance and harmony. Dissonance denotes a clashing of beliefs, or prior beliefs that are inconsistent with the program’s objectives and/or session themes. Harmony indicates complementary beliefs that are consistent with the program’s objectives and/or session themes. Dissonance (subtheme) is associated with low agreement while harmony (subtheme) is associated with high agreement. The period of time immediately prior to each participant beginning the diversity and inclusion program was the timeframe for consideration. Topics of race and/or gender were examples of content related to participants’ levels of agreement. Low agreement (or dissonance) was not inherently negative and high agreement (or harmony) was not inherently positive, as these subthemes were simply descriptive of compatibility.

Participants may have demonstrated varying levels of harmony and dissonance across various topics or subjects. For example, with regard to topics of race and racism, dissonance (subtheme) was evident when an individual’s schema for making meaning of racial interactions no longer makes sense (Foste & Jones, 2020; Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1995, 2008). Helm’s (1995) model of white identity development suggested that individual growth occurs as a result of dissonance – when new information contradicts or challenges prior ways of knowing. Hardiman’s (1982) model of white identity development also emphasized the role of dissonance in prodding white people to rethink race-based (and racist) assumptions and beliefs. With regard to topics of gender,
dissonance was apparent when a participant’s conception of gender operates outside of the traditional binary model (Haskins, 2013; Podems, 2011).

Maria, Gwen, Grace, and Quinn indicated that some of their preconceived beliefs and understandings did not closely match with the program. Maria directly addressed the question of racial dissonance, stating, “Before the program, I considered myself to have no culture.” She elaborated:

I realized how this lack of culture that I perceive…is my culture, because it's the dominant culture. Because everyone around me has the same things that they do that…that is the culture. I would say before the program, race, to my awareness didn't impact anything really, in my life. Obviously, I knew that it impacted others, you know. I had an understanding about racial disparities and things like that. But I never considered myself to even really have a race, which looking back is very funny.

Maria’s comments here align with white people’s general inability to acknowledge and recognize our collective racial experience, as we tend to view ourselves as unique individuals outside the forces of race (Helms, 2008). Maria also indicated moving from unawareness to recognizing white normativity, which affirms that whiteness that is invisible, unmarked, typical, naturalized, and normalized in U.S. society (Frankenberg, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Yancy, 2012; Yancy, 2018). Grace, too, indicated prior beliefs that aligned with white normativity (Yancy, 2018):

Very rarely was I the minority in a room. That was like the only time I really thought about my own race, or if I was like participating in something where I
was trying to be an ally. So, like, going to marches after Michael Brown was shot.

I thought about my race in the context of like, “I am a white ally.”

In this example, Grace spoke about striving for a positive white identity (Foste & Jones, 2020), specifically that of a white ally, yet also admitted that she had not viewed herself as a racialized being. Applebaum (2010) remarked on this common issue, stating, “Positive white identity is at least partially defined as a nonracist identity and this assumes that whites can move themselves outside of racist systems just by a willingness to do so” (p. 182).

Like Maria and Grace, Gwen also pointed to participation in the diversity and inclusion program for graduate students as an important turning point:

Well, before starting the program, race didn't impact my personal life. I'm from [state], and it's a predominantly white community. It's very sheltered in its own way. And there's not really a lot of discussion about, like, outside of our, like, social class, race bubble...things like that.

Due to maintaining such beliefs prior to starting the program, Gwen had a high level of dissonance (subtheme). Gwen entered the diversity and inclusion program needing to unlearn cultural racist conditioning (Hardiman, 1982).

In discussing personal beliefs prior to the diversity and inclusion program, Quinn also demonstrated a degree of incompatibility or dissonance (subtheme) with race:

It wasn't until I was having a conversation right after one of the workshops I'd taken [...] I said to a friend of mine, “Do you know that since that workshop, is when I stopped saying the word ‘colored’?” I mean, this was just a few years ago, and that was so embarrassing in that moment. I just [...] I didn't know what I
didn't know. And I had never been confronted with some of those linguistic issues.

In this example, Quinn explained that she had not viewed the phrase “colored person” as offensive and had not differentiated this term from the phrase “person of color.” It was helpful to Quinn that a white facilitator elucidated how the former term was harmful and unacceptable in contemporary discourses. Quinn also commented on prior understandings of gender and feminism before entering the program, again demonstrating some dissonance (subtheme):

Still operating very much by default in a binary sense of gender. [...] I think before the program, I was just very much a feminist who was like, “Men suck.” And since then, and during my time in some of the sessions, especially understanding some of the intersectional issues with gender and race, I would still say that I align with feminist beliefs, but it's just so much more complex and nuanced than that.

On the other hand, several participants (Betty, Alexandra, Liz) indicated some harmony, or compatibility, of preconceived beliefs or understandings with the program. Betty described how her parents had openly discussed topics such as racist police brutality and white privilege as she was growing up:

I guess I have some pretty radical parents, which I've always really liked, and they always had me examine those sorts of things. I think from a young age, they were talking to me about that sort of thing, which I definitely appreciate.

Alexandra found that her undergraduate program had focused on addressing implicit biases and “race talk in general.” Alexandra stated, “So I was always very aware of my
race as well as the race of others and how that can differ our experiences.” This compatibility of beliefs indicates a high degree of harmony.

Liz’s commentary suggested harmony to a certain degree, in addition to the development of personal new insights. She said, “Race was something that I definitely did think about since elementary school. The school that I went to […] was Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School, and so Black history was a big deal there.” However, Liz also indicated that the diversity and inclusion program made her “think about previous experiences in a different way.” Liz’s vacillations thus demonstrated how both harmony and dissonance can occur for white participants when engaging in learning on race, racism, and anti-racism.

**Reflection**

Reflection generally refers to one’s level of thought or consideration. The operational definition used here extends upon this understanding by distinguishing two subthemes: Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Clarà (2015) described reflection-in-action as leading to a clarified situation that involves a decision or action by the individual. Categories within reflection-in-action (subtheme) were decision-making, private action, and/or public action. In contrast, reflection-on-action leads to a clarified situation that does not involve any decision or action by the individual (Clarà, 2015). Categories within reflection-on-action (subtheme) were no decision and/or no action.

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4 It should be noted that all study participants demonstrated a foundational level of reflection by the very nature of participating in an interview that prompted them to think about their experiences in the diversity and inclusion program.
Two participants (Grace, Liz) demonstrated reflection-on-action (subtheme) by not indicating or articulating any specific decision-making or action-taking (i.e., categories of no decision-making, no action-taking) as a result of the diversity and inclusion program. However, Grace and Liz alluded to their clarified or more multi-layered understandings of DEI topics. For example, Grace said, “I guess something that I struggled with and I feel a little bit like after the workshops, I feel a little bit like I have a better grasp on it. […] I always felt like because I'm like a woman and I'm Jewish that I like understood, like the struggle that people of color face in this country and I really don't.” Liz described a similar clarified situation, stating, “And I think that my participation has made me you know, think more about, you know, having privilege to not always think about race, and, you know, made me think about that a little bit as a privilege.” While Liz had not actioned her new understandings by exhibiting new behaviors, her learnings represent new contemplations that are aligned with reflection-on-action.

The subtheme of reflection-in-action was exemplified by new decision-making (category) or taking actions on either the private or public levels (category). Six of the eight study participants (Gwen, Alexandra, Betty, Quinn, Serena, and Maria) spoke about reflection-in-action as a result of their participation in the university’s diversity and inclusion program. Gwen gave an example of how she now approaches conversations that involve claiming her white identity, saying, “Hey, I am privileged. I have had these experiences and I would like to hear more about yours. And let's have a conversation about it.” This is an example of new decision-making (category) and new public action (category).
Alexandra, Quinn, Betty, Serena, and Maria tied their learnings from the program to new decisions and/or actions related to their graduate-level studies and/or professional ventures. For example, Serena noted that her experiences prompted her to join her workplace’s Equal Opportunity Council, a public action (category). Alexandra shared, “I've definitely taken on a like, multicultural aspect in my research now, which I did not have before.” She explicated:

We do work with refugees, it is one of our research points, and we implemented an evidence based practice with them. And after the first implementation, we realized that this evidence based practice was not as culturally competent as we had originally thought it was. So we had to go back, we tried to rework things to just make it a little more sensitive to the incoming beliefs that these individuals may already hold.

Alexandra’s experience was an example of a public action (category) since the action extended beyond her own thinking or decision-making.

Quinn acknowledged that while she is not a completely different person as a result of the program, she now has a different mindset, which impacts her decision-making (category) and public interactions (category). Quinn shared:

It’s just this, like, kind of really late but beautiful awakening in my personal life of all of these lived experiences that I did not reach for […]. I became much more involved in […] always bringing forward the conversation about marginalized identities and oppression and privilege. And I am now that annoying person in the room that is always like, "Yes, but have you considered this?" You know, and
speaking up in the spaces of privileged people where I can and when I have that emotional capacity to do so.

As another example of new decision-making (category) and private action (category), Quinn acknowledged that due to learnings in the program, her current media consumption emphasizes “stories and representations that I didn't lean towards before [...]. I am on an Octavia Butler kick right now, by the way. I did not know about that. I did not know that existed before.”

For Betty, the diversity and inclusion program redefined what types of employment opportunities she feels are appropriate for her to pursue, which relate to her decision-making (category). Betty explained:

And I think that there's a lot of new positions that are being created in the offshore wind industry, which is where I hope to go, that are related to, you know, diversity specialists, something like that. And in terms of how I think about it, I...as a white woman, I just don't know if I am the right person to be taking those kinds of jobs. And I think about that a lot. You know, what is my place? And I think, "What is my place in the job community, or the diversity community?"

As a result of involvement in the university’s program on diversity and inclusion for graduate students, Betty (re)assessed how she wished to show up and take up space as a white woman.

For Maria, her experiences in the program resulted in both new decision-making (category) and private action (category) within the world of academia. Maria stated:

I went from writing about what I learned in the readings, to how the readings don't apply. I went from being this person who could report very easily back, you
know, “I learned this, this, and this” to then being like, “I don't know if I learned anything, because this doesn't apply to those, those and these.” So, it really changed the way that I approached all information, the kind of filter that I used. And then as I have gone on to do my program of study, and even to my dissertation, I feel like there is no option for me to do a dissertation that I feel I'm okay with unless I use mixed methods. But I need to hear from the voices and I want to amplify them. And that's all I want to do with my career really. So, the [program] has, […] it's completely changed, how I approach everything and what I want to do with my entire life.

Maria identified the ability to critically assess texts used in her classes as a new form of decision-making (category). Her new knowledge and new ways of thinking also informed her selection of research methodology for her to-be-published dissertation, thereby associating a private action (category) that will become a publicly-witnessed action (category). These various examples are evidence of the subtheme reflection-in-action.

**Composite Poems: Parts Making the Whole**

The hermeneutic circle utilizes “parts” (data from participant interviews) to illuminate the “whole,” or the common essence of the phenomenon of white women’s experiences in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students. As noted in Chapter 3, I additionally created two composite poems as artistic representations of my research results. This was an emergent research design aligned with my methodological choices. Each line in each poem is verbatim text (“parts”) from a different research participant’s interview. The five superordinate themes (motivation, participation, racial literacy, agreement, and reflection), in addition to their corresponding subthemes, are
again present in each of these two poems. Each individual poem embodies the essence of the phenomenon (white women graduate students’ experiences in a diversity and inclusion program).
Poem 1

I wasn’t really educated on race as a child [Gwen]
Race just wasn’t…it wasn’t really talked about, no one really discussed it [Alexandra]
I was just starting to learn about what institutional racism was [Serena]
and the systems of oppression that exist in our government, our schools
And I sort of started paying more attention [Betty]
It did this kind of conflict within myself [Maria]
You start to feel a little bit defensive, or at least I do [Grace]
How do I talk about this? How do I reframe this [Quinn]
in my own deep understanding of my role and my identity?
It did really make me think about previous experiences in a different way [Liz]

This poem begins with Gwen and Alexandra referring to the persistent problem of white normativity, or the issue of white people experiencing whiteness as invisible, unmarked, typical and naturalized in U.S. society (Frankenberg, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Yancy, 2012; Yancy, 2018). Given that both Gwen and Alexandra indicated that conversations on race and racism were not part of their early educational experiences or nuclear family discussions, this is evidence of the superordinate theme of agreement and specifically the subtheme of dissonance. Due to primary socialization experiences, white normativity characterized Gwen and Alexandra’s *habitus*, or deeply-rooted ideas “about how the world operates, what is to be valued, what one’s own place in society is, and which actions are correct or proper” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 2015, p. 208). A white woman’s *trajectory*, or the development of successive decision-making and experiences based on evolving beliefs (deMarrais & LeCompte, 2015), may indicate increasing
harmony (subtheme). Serena’s emergent understandings of racism as an institutionalized force and her growing recognition of systemic, interlocking oppressions across various domains of U.S. society suggested that racial literacy (superordinate theme) could move from unaware (subtheme) to more aware (subtheme). Serena also referred to a budding harmony (subtheme) as she developed similar understandings (category) that aligned with the tenets of the diversity and inclusion program. Betty suggested that her growing awareness (subtheme) impacted her racial literacy (superordinate theme). Serena and Betty’s comments also demonstrated how the learning of new information (category) connects to white women’s intrinsic (subtheme) motivation (superordinate theme) to engage in learning on race, racism, and anti-racism. Maria’s implied increasing racial literacy (superordinate theme) caused an internal conflict, or dissonance (subtheme) rather than harmony (subtheme). This was also the case for Quinn, who struggled to “reframe” her perspectives. As shown by Quinn’s contribution, during their anti-racist journeys, white women may show active (subtheme) participation (superordinate theme) by asking questions (category) and verbally sharing experiences (category). Liz’s acknowledgment that the diversity and inclusion program prompted her to reassess and re-evaluate past experiences is an example of how white women demonstrate the superordinate theme of reflection, and particularly the subtheme of reflection-on-action. Reflection-on-action (subtheme) seemed to be most common for white women in this study, as their thinking more frequently changed than did they demonstrate private or public actions (category) that changed material conditions for minoritized peoples.
Poem 2

Everyone is touched by racism in this country, [Grace]
as much as you don’t want to call yourself a racist
I definitely came up against some ideas or concepts that I didn’t know [Quinn]
It taught me how to think about them, [Maria]
in a way that is easy to continue expanding
I sometimes struggle in social situations where I feel singled out by race [Gwen]
It’s almost as if it evens out sometimes, like, [Alexandra]
“Oh, I’m a female! But I’m white!”
And it did bother me a lot, [Liz]
but I didn’t know how to say anything about it or do anything about it
Like, you’re acknowledging it and that’s great, [Serena]
but are you actively trying to do something about it?
And I think that if we weren’t all white women,
that wouldn’t have happened [Betty]

The first lines of this poem recognize that racism is deeply embedded in the United States, which alludes to racial literacy (superordinate theme) awareness (subtheme) on the systems level (category). Grace’s subsequent binary notion of one being “racist or not racist” conversely suggested that racial literacy (superordinate theme) is characterized by understandings on the individual level (category). This viewpoint differed from the program’s fundamental understandings (category) of race and racism, exemplifying how common it is for white women to experience dissonance (subtheme) as part of their learning processes. Quinn and Gwen’s contributions likewise referred to
dissonance (subtheme). Additionally, Gwen indicated that white women may demonstrate fearful or passive behaviors (subtheme) when needing to engage with or participate in (superordinate theme) realities of DEI. Nonetheless, as white women develop new understandings or new information (category), this may intrinsically (subtheme) motivate (superordinate theme) them to continue learning (category), thereby building racial literacy (superordinate theme). Alexandra’s recognition of her own whiteness and womanhood is also evidence of racial literacy (superordinate theme), as white women can be described as having a “one up/one down” identity (Accapadi, 2007, p. 210).

How white women move toward action? Liz’s uncertainty about how to act (category) matches with white women beginning to think differently (category) but not necessarily manifesting novel anti-racist behaviors, which would instead suggest evidence of reflection-in-action (subtheme theme). Serena indicated that mere awareness (subtheme) of racial literacy (superordinate theme) was not adequate, and that white women needed to commit themselves to transformative actions (category) to disrupt systems of oppression. In the closing line of the poem, Betty associated white feminism with no committed anti-racist actions (category), suggesting that white women’s reflections (superordinate theme) remains cognitive, or takes the form of reflection-on-action (subtheme).

Summary

In this chapter, I presented research results by detailing each of the five evidenced superordinate themes: Motivation, participation, racial literacy, agreement, and reflection. Results are presented in prose and also in the form of two composite poems. Chapter 5
closes this dissertation by providing a synopsis of the study and making connections between the findings and the literature. Additionally, Chapter 5 reviews study (de)limitations and addresses possible implications for DEI initiatives at colleges and universities in the United States.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Summary

In response to critiques of inequities, institutions of higher learning have increasingly incorporated written commitments to DEI in their mission statements (Barnett, 2020; Garcia et al., 2021). Wilson et al. (2012) found in their study of eighty U.S. colleges and universities that seventy-five percent of institutions included the term “diversity” in their mission statements. Additionally, according to Berg’s (2020) review of several hundred peer-reviewed journal articles between the years 1980 and 2019, published literature with the search terms “diversity” and “equity” has steadily increased since the year 2000 (see Figure 4). As previously noted, DEI initiatives as examples of curricular diversity require more scrutiny (Denson, 2021; Martin, 2014). Further, there is a lack of empirical evidence particularly for DEI initiatives for students at the graduate level (Willis & Schram, 2022).

Figure 4

Prevalence of DEI Terms in Journal Articles
Institutions of higher learning in the United States remain sites at which interlocking systems of domination (such as white supremacy, plutocracy, and patriarchy) are enacted and (re)produced. In the United States, white women hold privileged racial statuses and subordinated gender statuses (Accapadi, 2007). As such, there is an enduring cultural myth that white women are less likely to be racist than their white male counterparts (Junn, 2017; Signorella, 2020). However, distinguishing their experiences of (anti-)racism from white men’s experiences is necessary to understand the nuances of these issues (Fine et al., 2000). Furthermore, given the ongoing crusade by conservative legislators to ban discussions on racism, sexism, and system inequalities within education, DEI topics at colleges and universities are a pressing matter.

In light of the above problem, the purpose of this study was to provide insights on the lived experiences of white women who reflected on and interrogated racism as emerging social justice activists and anti-racists. The rationale for this research project was that knowing more about how white women in particular reproduce racism and/or actively challenge racism is critical in identifying and dismantling white supremacy (as it is enacted by white women).

This research took place during a period of whitestream racial reckoning in the United States. Whitestream is a discourse that centers the experiences of white people, and as, such serves their cultural, political and economic interests (Grande, 2007). Importantly, to conduct DEI research or initiatives in the midst of this whitestream context therefore presupposes that these social justice activities are marked by white complicity – these initiatives are inescapably permeated by and reinforce the whitestream. Applebaum (2010) explained this in another manner, stating, “white
complicity is grounded in the belief that one cannot transcend the social system that frames how one makes meaning of oneself and the social world in which one is embedded” (p. 14).

Considering the problem and purpose described in the preceding paragraphs, this feminist interpretive phenomenological analysis aimed to answer the following research question: *What are the lived experiences of white women in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students?* The research sub-question was, *How, if at all, do white women graduate students’ meaning making in the diversity and inclusion program inform the way that they understand themselves as white women?*

This qualitative research project utilized a phenomenological approach, and specifically feminist IPA. Generally, a phenomenological study describes the common meaning of people’s lived experience of a certain concept or a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). Furthermore, one of the most important characteristics of feminist phenomenology is the application of phenomenological theory to feminist issues (Stoller, 2017), such as white supremacy and patriarchy. The complementary theoretical frames of critical whiteness studies (Applebaum, 2010; Cabrera, 2019; Frankenberg, 1997; Gillborn, 2007; Leonardo, 2013; Lipsitz, 2006; Matias et al., 2014; Thandeka, 2009; Yancy, 2018) and intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989) provided the framework for this study.

To make meaning of how white women experienced a PWI’s diversity and inclusion program, I used purposive homogeneous sampling (Fraenkel et al., 2012), identifying a total of eight participants. In semi-structured interviews, each participant was invited to reflect on topics related to race and gender at three stages or defined time
periods: Prior to the participation in the diversity and inclusion program, during the program, and following completion of the program. Having participants reflect back upon their experiences allows for the deep analysis of the phenomenon at hand (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews ranged in duration, with a duration of approximately of thirty minutes to one hour. To fully appreciate the phenomenon and participants’ experiences of the phenomenon, I utilized feminist interviewing techniques during the data collection process, including reflexive memoing, active listening, attentiveness to non-verbal communication, paying attention to and preserving the language of participants, rapport-building, regarding the research as a project in co-construction of knowledge, and member-checking (Alase, 2017; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Saldaña, 2016).

Following data collection, I revised automatically-generated recorded transcripts and began analyzing data in the recursive stages of the hermeneutic circle (Bontekoe, 1996). To illuminate the “whole,” or the common essence of the phenomenon, I mined the “parts,” which included data from interviews and my research memos. Each part was (re)read and (re)examined multiple times, which led to a clearer picture of the phenomenon. I detailed the elements of this process in Chapter 3.

Five major superordinate themes emerged from the data: Motivation, participation, racial literacy, agreement, and reflection. Each of these themes described how white women participants approached any given moment of learning or experience in the program. There were a total of ten subthemes, as each superordinate theme had two subthemes that represented different points on a continuum. A total of 17 categories surfaced. Utilizing the richness of exact words and phrases from participant interviews,
research findings were represented in traditional narrative text and in two composite poems, an emergent research design. Following this brief synopsis of the study, the remainder of this chapter will next respond to the guiding research questions, identify research strengths and (de)limitations, suggest areas for future research, and make recommendations for colleges and universities offering DEI initiatives to white women college students.

**Addressing the Research Questions**

The primary research question was, *What are the lived experiences of white women in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students?* A related sub-question was, *How, if at all, do white women graduate students’ meaning making in the diversity and inclusion program inform the way that they understand themselves as white women?*

The lived experiences of participants were similar in a variety of ways. In the following sections, I organize these commonalities by the core characteristics that shaped participants’ meaning making at any given moment in the program: Motivation, participation, racial literacy, agreement, and reflection. These five characteristics are also referred to as superordinate themes. I propose that the enactment of these superordinate themes correspond with what Foste and Jones (2020) termed “emergent constructions of whiteness” (p. 180).

All study participants exhibited motivation to attend and complete the required six minimum sessions to earn the microcredential associated with the diversity and inclusion program. While extrinsic motivators such enhancing one’s resume or networking with peers, faculty, or staff did influence participants, each of the eight women spoke in more detail about the intrinsic motivation that led them to register, attend, and complete the
program. Personal values seemed especially consequential. The relevance and importance of one’s personal values arose early on, during the registration process for the diversity and inclusion program. All participants needed to complete a DEI survey as part of the registration process. One required question item indicated, “Please share with us your prior experience pertaining to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice related topics such as workshops, trainings, work experience, or service.” Registrants also needed to complete a required Statement of Intent with the following prompts: “Describe (a) the knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions you hope to gain from participating in the workshops and (b) how you plan to contribute to an active learning community in the workshop(s) you selected.” In addition to these items, registrants also ranked their perceived levels of confidence in relationship to a total of six DEI-related program outcomes. Study participants therefore demonstrated initiative and motivation even in submitting the required registration information for this particular program. Another way in which personal values as intrinsic motivation appeared was participants’ direct commentary on how the United States’ “moment of reckoning as a country with our racial history and racial practices” (Quinn) spurred them to address matters of race, racism, and white supremacy. Maria and Betty named the Black Lives Matter movement. Grace and Serena referred to the racist murder of George Floyd, and Betty and Serena spoke about the racist murder of Breonna Taylor. These issues marked a notable inflection point (Hammonds, 2021) for white folks across the United States (Bradley, 2021).

Participation was another superordinate theme in this research study. Sue et al. (2009) described behaviors such as a “lack of verbal participation, blank looks, silence,
and non-challenging/passive dialogue” (p. 1100) as withdrawal actions that challenged participants’ effective engagement in difficult dialogues on race and racism. On the other hand, active engagement demonstrated by individuals included “listen[ing], observ[ing], and reflect[ing] with one another” (Sue et al., 2009, p. 1110) was supportive in difficult dialogues. In their reflections, participants in this research study indicated a likelihood to engage in active participation rather than passive participation. As examples of active participation, Liz commented on the importance of “sharing our own experiences” during program sessions, while Betty and Quinn mentioned asking follow-up questions.

Emerging anti-racists recognize their own structural advantages as white people and can point to some specific manifestations of their white privilege (Foste & Jones, 2020). Emerging anti-racists also begin to understand racism as not merely individual, but systemic (Foste & Jones, 2020). These characteristics relate to the superordinate theme of racial literacy. Participants’ abilities to identify and articulate racism as the systemic level often wavered throughout their conversations with me. At times, a participant showed an inability to locate themselves as part of the problem of white supremacy (Foste & Jones, 2020). For example, Liz identified a multi-week session on white supremacy as the most memorable part of her experience in the program. This program directly discussed the embedded, structural nature of white supremacy in the United States (Allen, 2012; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013; Okun, 1999). However, when providing an example in the next sentence, Liz focused on instances of specific people “acting in a racist way.” Foste and Jones (2020) recognized this problem, cautioning, “whiteness cannot and should not be reduced to the daily activities of individual white people” (p. 171-172). White people must examine not just their racial attitudes and
beliefs but also their behaviors and actions (Cabrera, 2019). Indeed, “second-order multicultural changes” that “create new patterns of behavior and assumptions governing organizational life” (Williams, 2013, p. 397) are necessary to activate change and transformation within higher education and the whitestream society at large.

A related racial literacy consideration is that white people do not need to engage in hateful, overtly racist behaviors or actions in order to remain complicit in white supremacy. Applebaum (2010) explained, “White complicity is not exclusively a matter of ‘doing’ or ‘not doing’ but often a matter of just ‘being’” (p. 15-16). The participants in this study were thus implicated in perpetuating racial domination on college campuses simply by the virtue of existing (and thereby benefitting from systemic racism and their white privilege). However, participants with emergent constructions of whiteness do demonstrate a growing awareness of systemic racism and white privilege (Foste & Jones, 2020).

Helm’s (1995) model of white identity development proposed that most significant individual growth was linked to the superordinate theme of (dis)agreement and subtheme of dissonance – when new information about race, racism, and whiteness collides with a person’s prior understandings. In Robbins’ (2016) study of white women in higher education settings, following participants “opening their eyes” racism and encountering racial dissonance, that dissonance fostered a “hunger for more knowledge” (p. 258), leading to more conversations. In both Robbins’ (2016) research and the current research study, (dis)agreement thus shared linkages with (active) participation, memorable discussions, and possible anti-racist actions. For example, in one session, Betty learned about misappropriations of Black culture in social media. Until that
workshop, she had not previously viewed “a couple of things, like saying, ‘YASSS’” as problematic. However, the racial dissonance that arose in that learning experience led Betty to stop using certain language. Quinn, too, encountered linguistic issues for the first time in an anti-racism workshop within the program. As a result of her learnings in those moments of racial dissonance, she stopped using the term “colored” to describe Black folks.

It is a common phenomenon that white activists often get stuck in the learning stage and fail to engage in the action-oriented stage of justice work (Christensen, 1997; Lindner, 2015). Serena identified this same issue, remarking, “There's a difference between knowing and not doing anything and then knowing and doing something.” Christensen (1997) indicated that this failure is linked to white people not knowing how to use their privilege and/or fear of social consequences upon taking anti-racist action. In this study, reflection, the fifth superordinate theme, took the form of either reflection-in-action or reflection-on-action. Six of eight research participants demonstrated a commitment to reflection-in-action, or a clarified situation that involves a decision-making and/or action-taking (Clarà, 2015). In fact, Alexandra pointed to a workshop that provided key action items and additional resources as one of the most impactful experiences in the program. Multiple participants also spoke about their interests in action-oriented justice work. Serena reflected on the palpable tensions between the learning stage and the action stage of justice work, stating:

Yeah, I really want to get up there. I want to do that. I want to make these changes. At the same time. I'm like, I'm just one person. And I'm not a legislator,
and I'm not a politician. I can't single handedly change the world overnight. I
would if I could. 100%. But I can't.

However, as Foste and Jones (2020) indicated, white folks with an emerging
understanding of the dynamics of racism and white privilege contend with an “obligation
to act” (p. 181). All eight participants in this study spoke about the importance of
disrupting racism, even as they struggled with some individualistic understandings of
racism. In some cases, white postsecondary students experienced “guilt and shame fueled
their fear of appearing racist, resulting in inaction related to antiracist work” (Lindner,
2015, p. 544). It is also important to note here that participants’ understandings of
whiteness and racism was not strictly linear or progressive, which supports criticisms
shared by LaFleur et al. (2002), Leach et al. (2002), and Rowe et al. (1995) of white
identity theory.

**Strengths and (De)Limitations of the Study**

The timing and relevancy of this research is a unique strength. This study was
conducted during a period of racial reckoning for the whitestream United States
(Hammonds, 2021). While systems of dominations such as white supremacy and
patriarchy have always defined this country, this doctoral project emerged during a
period when more white people were engaging with difficult dialogues about how they
manifested whiteness. Furthermore, white feminism has been a problematized topic of
inquiry (for the whitestream) especially within the last five years (Cargle, 2018; Hobson,
2016; Khan, 2021; Zakaria, 2021). I hope that this study contributes to an ongoing call
that challenges white women to take up positions as anti-racist activists.
In comparing and contrasting the five common qualitative approaches (narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study), the foundational considerations associated with each approach led me to conclude that phenomenology was the most appropriate choice of research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My research question aimed to arrive at the essence of the experience of a phenomenon; I do not seek to only tell stories of individual experiences (narrative research), develop a theory (grounded theory), or look only at a culture-sharing group (ethnography). The use of feminist IPA in particular as a method was therefore another strength of this study. Feminist IPA resulted in collecting detail that may not have been generated with a different methodology that did not center the participants’ firsthand experiences or the meanings they were able to make of them. The recommended sample size for IPA research is from as few as three participants to as many as eight participants (Smith et al., 2009). With a total of eight participants, this research met the criteria to yield a robust amount of data.

Research limitations refer to potential weaknesses of the study that are closely associated with the chosen research design, while delimitations refer to choices made by the researcher. In this section, I identify both the delimitations and limitations of this research project. I begin with addressing delimitations. Most qualitative methodologies cannot be replicated, and representativeness and generalizability are not objectives of qualitative research (Jones et al., 2006). This study does not claim to represent all white women, or all white women graduate students. Rather than research results being considered as universal, these findings should be considered a trustworthy (Charmaz, 2006; Jones et al., 2006) account of the experiences of eight particular white women in a diversity and inclusion program for graduate students at a particular point in time. This is only a part of each
participant’s ongoing journey with (anti-)racism. Finally, transferability is supported by the use of narratives from participants that illustrate findings, which is a common approach in both interpretative phenomenology (Smith & Osborne, 2008) and feminist inquiry (Reinharz, 2002; Tong, 2009).

I next address several limitations of the study, adding to earlier commentary about the challenges of critical whiteness studies (see Chapter 1) and the limitations of IPA (see Chapter 3). A possible research project limitation is that the integration of feminist phenomenology and intersectionality in data collection and data analysis is a complex research goal (Shabot & Landry, 2018; Shields, 2008). Unsurprisingly, there is no outline or clear process for applying intersectionality in research (Nath, 2009) or in feminist phenomenological research (Shabot & Landry, 2018). Such research is diverse, dynamic, and sometimes discordant. However, there is agreement that both forms of research are committed to action in the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Researcher bias may be considered another limitation of this work, in which subjectivity may threaten whether the voices of research participants were faithfully represented. To balance this concern, I acknowledged my own positionality and engaged with reflexivity throughout the duration of this doctoral project (including during the writing and (re)writing stages). I regularly contemplated my own motivations and reactions. Bracketing activities were essential in my research and analysis process. The member check process was also utilized as a strategy to avoid my authorship overwriting participants’ experiences.

Additionally, the very concept (and results) of this research project could be considered clear manifestations of whiteness and white privilege. I, a white woman and a researcher, was able to access (white women) participants’ stories and experiences in a
manner that may not have been possible for a researcher of color. Due to my racial positioning, I was able to conduct my doctoral research without experiencing the fatigue that some BIPOC researchers must contend with in their critical study of whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2016). My racial positioning cannot be understood outside of the ideological conditioning of whiteness and its subsequent effects on marginalized BIPOC in the United States. Even in these scholarly efforts to disrupt and dispel white supremacy, I benefitted from and perpetuated whiteness (Applebaum, 2010).

**Areas for Future Research**

Some DEI educational interventions in higher education have found to be successful, with white college student participants making strides toward anti-racism (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Chang, 2002; Foste & Jones, 2020; Neville et al., 2014; Soble et al., 2011). There have been some studies that look specifically at white feminists in higher education settings (Bosco, 2019; Lindner, 2015; Robbins, 2012, 2016), and this doctoral research project adds to that literature. In the present study’s exploration of how white women graduate students construct and give meaning to their experiences in a diversity and inclusion program at a PWI, this dissertation contributes to the growing body of scholarship within critical whiteness studies (Leonardo, 2014). Research that examines how white women students’ increased racial awareness does or does not translate into sustained anti-racist action is a necessary area of further research (Christensen, 1997; Linder, 2015).

**Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Learning**

As noted, white students may remain focused on personal learning or self-education on anti-racism rather than taking actions that change material conditions for
minoritized individuals and groups (Christensen, 1997; Linder, 2015). Additionally, longer-term educational experiences (rather than one-off workshops, for instance) are most beneficial for college students’ continued and consistent engagement (Milem et al., 2005; Vaccaro, 2013). Institutions of higher learning can perhaps address both of these themes (a focus on action and a prioritization of longer-term initiatives) by integrating an action project component to their existing curricular diversity initiatives. In planning and designing these DEI initiatives, it is important not to assume a linear or sequential process of white identity theory development in which white people become progressively more anti-racist (LaFleur et al., 2002; Leach et al., 2002; Rowe et al., 1995). DEI initiatives must consistently remind white people of central tenets and examples of anti-racism, since white people’s harmful attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors can be repeated, recycled, and recapitulated at any point.

It is apparent that educational curricula overwhelmingly center the experiences of white, heterosexual, Protestant, and middle-class men (Applebee, 1989; de los Ríos, 2020; Lowy, 1995; Pinar, 1991; Sleeter, 2005; Wynter, 2003). Furthermore, whitestream education promises a false sense of neutrality in curriculum design (Dee & Penner, 2017; Orozco, 2011). de los Ríos (2020) referred to this as curricular hegemony. The Eurocentric and westernized production of knowledge in the United States reinforces and perpetuates structures and institutions of the dominant society that are rooted in conquest, (neo)colonialism, and imperialism (Calderon, 2014; Lowy, 1995; Valdez, 2020). These forces, which are evident in curricular hegemony, continue to promote the contemporary disinvestment in, and disenfranchisement and disappreciation of, minoritized groups (de los Ríos, 2020; Lowy, 1995). The representation and visibilization of histories, realities,
and struggles of communities of color in the United States is a social justice issue of consequential ideological importance. DEI courses, trainings, workshops, and initiatives can serve as “a living and breathing critique of structural racism, colonialism, and oppression” (de los Ríos, 2020, p. 502).

Ethnic Studies (ES) curriculum that reflects the experiences of students of color has been found to have a positive impact on minoritized students’ academic engagement, achievement, attendance, empowerment, and persistence in school (Dee & Penner, 2017; Owens, 2018; Sleeter, 2011; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015; Valdez, 2020). Given the compelling academic and social outcomes of such programs, state-level decision-makers should sanction, fund, and mandate ethnic studies courses in primary school, secondary school, and post-secondary school contexts. Indeed, a variety of ES programs have been recently considered or adopted across the United States. Between 2012 and 2020, California, Connecticut, Indiana, Nevada, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and the District of Columbia all “passed laws or policies that establish[ed] standards, create[d] committees or authorize[d] courses for ethnic studies” (Au, 2020, para. 16). However, these ES initiatives are currently eclipsed by the number state-level actions introduced in opposition to educating about race, sexism, and other forms of inequity (Schwartz, 2023). There are only six states in which no state-level action or bill has been introduced: California, Delaware, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont (Schwartz, 2023).

While courses, trainings, and workshops do have an important role in providing foundational education, colleges and universities should more consistently emphasize transformation of material conditions, institutions, and cultural traditions as a key
element of anti-racism (Christensen, 1997). An emphasis on social change is indeed aligned with both antiracism and feminism (Bourne, 1983; Chisholm, 1970), and there is potential for colleges and universities to better leverage white women’s interests in becoming involved in justice work (Robbins & Jones, 2016), such as by developing and practicing specific strategies that destabilize racism (Case, 2012) and white feminism (Cargle, 2018; Hobson, 2016; Khan, 2021; Zakaria, 2021). Gwen’s final reflections and the closing lines of the second composite poem demonstrate how the white women participants in this study recognized this issue:

I do wish that there was something else after. Like I mentioned earlier, when you have the workshops and you complete them, it feels like it’s a package, tied up with a bow. "I have the badge, I can put it on my resume, I did this, done." [Gwen]

but I didn’t know how to say anything about it or do anything about it [Liz]

Like, you’re acknowledging it and that’s great, [Serena]

but are you actively trying to do something about it?

In closing, inaction itself is, of course, a problem of white feminism. As Betty commented, “And I think that if we weren’t all white women, that wouldn’t have happened.” Walker (2004) reminded us that unlike white feminists, Black feminists and feminists of color have been (and continue to be) “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (p. xii). We white women have a lot to learn…and then actually do.
Appendix A

Study Recruitment Email

Hello there,

You are specifically receiving this email because you self-identified as a white woman who participated in the URI Graduate School’s Diversity and Inclusion Badge Program (DIBP). I am pleased to invite you to participate in my doctoral research study to explore how white women graduate students make meaning of their DIBP experiences.

This study is being conducted by myself, Stefanie Argus, a doctoral student in the University of Rhode Island / Rhode Island College joint PhD in Education program, under the guidance of my dissertation advisor, Dr. Annemarie Vaccaro. Dr. Vaccaro can be reached via email at avaccaro@uri.edu. This research has been approved by the URI’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

I hope to recruit participants to participate in a single interview sometime between June 2022 and October 2022, with possible follow-up interviews and emails as needed. Participants’ pre-existing data collection during the DIBP registration process will also be utilized. Interviews are expected to last approximately 60-90 minutes. Participants can choose to stop at any point in time.

I am specifically looking for participants who:

- Self-identify as white,
- Self-identify as women,
- Completed the URI DIBP micro-credential by attending six minimum workshop sessions during their graduate school tenure

All participants who participate will receive a thank you gift for their time in the form of a gift card for $25. My study offers no direct benefits to participants, but you may benefit from this study through developing a deeper awareness of your commitment to racial justice and anti-racism.

Interested individuals may contact me directly at stefanie_argus@uri.edu for further details. If you agree to be a part of the study, we will work together to find an interview time that best fits your schedule. Prior to participating, a consent form will be emailed to you. This form will need to be returned before participating in the interview.

Thank you for your time and consideration,
Stefanie Argus
University of Rhode Island / Rhode Island College PhD in Education program
Appendix B

Informed Consent for Research

STUDY TITLE

Experiences of White Women Graduate Students in a Diversity and Inclusion Badge Program

You are being asked to be in a research study about the experiences of white women graduate students who complete the University of Rhode Island Graduate School’s Diversity and Inclusion Badge Program (DIBP). Please read this consent document and ask any questions that you have before choosing whether to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Stefanie Argus, a doctoral student in the University of Rhode Island / Rhode Island College joint PhD in Education program, under the guidance of dissertation advisor, Dr. Annemarie Vaccaro.

INVESTIGATORS

Principal Investigator: Dr. Annemarie Vaccaro, 401.874.2270, avaccaro@uri.edu
Student Investigator: Stefanie Argus, PhD candidate, 484.626.2215, stefanie_argus@uri.edu

KEY INFORMATION

Important information to know about this research study:

Why this Study is Being Done (Purpose/s)
The purpose of this study is to explore how white women engage with interrogating the system of racism as emerging social justice activists and anti-racists.

What You Will Have to Do (Procedures)
If you choose to be in the study, we will ask you to:

- First, you will talk with me (Stefanie Argus) during a one-session individual interview about your experiences prior to, during, and after DIBP. This will take about 60 to 90 minutes. This conversation can take place in person or virtually, depending on what you decide. This conversation will be audio recorded and transcribed. Note: A request for a follow-up interview and/or additional information may be sent via email.
- Second, you will be sent a transcript of our conversation for you to review to check if it is correct. Reading the transcription may take between 60 to 120 minutes. You can also choose to not read the transcript and/or to not provide any feedback.
- Third, I will email you or call you to share the composite themes that emerged during the study. Reading this text may take between 60 to 120 minutes. You can also choose to not read the research findings and/or to not provide any feedback.
COVID-19 and In-Person Research

If an in-person interview is scheduled to take place, we will be collecting your name and contact information for the purposes of contact tracing. Contact tracing is required by the Department of Health should someone whom you have been in contact with test positive for Covid-19. If someone whom you have been in contact with from the study does test positive, then someone from RI Health Department (or local health department if in another location) may contact you at the number provided. This information will be kept separate from the data you provided as part of the study.

Participants should contact Stefanie Argus at 484.626.2215 before attending any in-person interviews if they are experiencing any COVID-19 related symptoms as described by the Center for Disease Control. Participants will be screened by phone before any in-person interactions take place with the researchers and with other participants using up to date Center for Disease Control screening information.

Risks or Discomforts

There are minimal risks to participating in this study. This means that you may find that answering some questions can be upsetting or can be uplifting. We think that what you may experience would be similar to the kinds of things you might experience when you talk with family and friends. You can skip any questions you do not want to answer, and you can stop the interview at any time.

Benefits of Being in the Study

This study offers no direct benefits to participants, but you may benefit from this study through developing a deeper awareness of your commitment to racial justice and anti-racism.

You Will Be Paid (Compensation)

As a way to thank you for your time, you will receive a $25 gift card following your participation in the individual interview.

You will be provided a copy of this consent form.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You don’t have to participate and you can stop it any time.

You are invited to take part in this research study. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you self-identified as a white woman in the registration process for the University of Rhode Island Graduate School’s Diversity and Inclusion Badge Program. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate and
must have completed the badge by completing the required six sessions during your time as a graduate student at URI.

**What is the reason for doing this research study?**

Structural, systemic racism is an entrenched problem in the United States, particularly in higher education. Without addressing and interrogating whiteness, systemic racism will remain uninterrupted. This problem is worthy of study because racism perpetuates real inequities. The purpose of this doctoral study is to explore how white women engage with interrogating the system of racism as emerging social justice activists and anti-racists.

**What will be done during this research study?**

If you choose to be in the study, we will ask you to:

- First, you will talk with me (Stefanie Argus) during a one-session individual interview about your experiences prior to, during, and after DIBP. This will take about 60 to 90 minutes. This conversation can take place in person or virtually, depending on what you decide. This conversation will be audio recorded and transcribed. Note: A request for a follow-up interview and/or additional information may be sent via email.
- Second, you will be sent a transcript of our conversation for you to review to check if it is correct. Reading the transcription may take between 60 to 120 minutes. You can also choose to not read the transcript and/or to not provide any feedback.
- Third, I will email you or call you to share the composite themes that emerged during the study. Reading this text may take between 60 to 120 minutes. You can also choose to not read the research findings and/or to not provide any feedback.

**How will my data be used?**

Your data will not be sent to researchers outside of the University of Rhode Island.

**What are the possible risks of being in this research study?**

There are no known risks to you from being in this research study.

**What are the possible benefits to you?**

You are not expected to get any direct benefit from being in this study.

**What are the possible benefits to other people?**

This research may result in better understanding of how white women graduate students describe their experiences in the DIBP. Additionally, the research may provide recommendations on how institutions of higher learning can intentionally structure (un)learning spaces for white students to further their anti-racism work.

**What will being in this research study cost you?**

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.
Will you be compensated for being in this research study?
You will receive a $25 gift card for your participation in this study.

What should you do if you have a problem during this research study?
Your welfare is the major concern of every member of the research team. If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

Possible external resources that you may wish to access include:
URI Counseling Services, 222 Roosevelt Hall / 401.874.2288
URI Psychological Consultation Center, Chafee Building, 142 Flagg Road, Suite 100 / 401.874.4263

How will information about you be protected?
Reasonable steps will be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your study data.

The data will be stored electronically through a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and stored securely for 3 years after the study is complete.

The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. The information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as group or summarized data and your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

What are your rights as a research participant?
You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For study related questions, please contact the investigator(s) listed at the beginning of this form.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Vice President for Research and Economic Development:

- IRB: (401) 874-4328 / researchintegrity@etal.uri.edu
- Vice President for Research and Economic Development: at (401) 874-4576

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start?
You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study (‘withdraw’) at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with the University of Rhode Island (list others as applicable).

You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.
Documentation of informed consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to be in this research study. Signing this form means that (1) you have read and understood this consent form, (2) you have had the consent form explained to you, (3) you have had your questions answered and (4) you have decided to be in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Printed Name of Research Participant: _______________________________________

Signature of Research Participant: ____________________________________________

Date: __________

AUDIO ADDENDUM TO THE CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I give my permission for audio recording(s) of me to be used for the purposes listed above, and to be retained for a period of 3 years.

You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to be recorded.

Printed Name of Research Participant: _______________________________________

Signature of Research Participant: ____________________________________________

Date: __________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: ______________________________________

Date: __________

VIDEO ADDENDUM TO THE CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I give my permission for video recording(s) of me to be used for the purposes listed above, and to be retained for a period of 3 years.

You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to be recorded.

Printed Name of Research Participant: _______________________________________

Signature of Research Participant: ____________________________________________

Date: __________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: ______________________________________

Date: __________
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Given that this is a semi-structured interview, I may not ask each of the following questions. However, I will make sure to cover each of the topic areas and will ask clarifying questions when appropriate.

Say to participants: “The purpose of this interview is to explore how you make meaning of your experiences in the diversity and inclusion program for graduate students.”

Begin the interview with the following question: “How did you come to participate in this diversity and inclusion program? Can you describe what past experiences led you to the program?”

I will ask the following questions when appropriate, making sure to cover each major topic.

1. Prior to the Program
   - Prior to participating in the diversity and inclusion program, how has race impacted or not impacted your life? What kinds of things caused you to think about your race and the race of others?
   - How has gender impacted or not impacted your life? What kinds of things caused you to think about gender?

2. Participation in the Program
   - Reconstruct the details of your recent experience in the diversity and inclusion workshops.
   - What workshops did you attend?
   - What workshops were most memorable? Why?
• Describe a key learning experience from one of the workshops you attended.
• Describe your feelings and emotions during one of the workshops you attended.
  o How, if at all, did race come up in the session? How, if at all, did you personally engage with race, with regard to internal thoughts and/or participation in activities/discussions?
  o How, if at all, did gender come up in the session? How, if at all, did you personally engage with gender, with regard to internal thoughts and/or participation in activities/discussions?
• Describe your impressions of the workshop instructor and their involvement in the workshop
• Describe your impressions of graduate student peer attendees and their involvement in the workshop
• Describe your impressions about the climate/feel of the workshop session

3. Upon Completion of the Program
• Prior to beginning the program, you provided [insert response] on the intercultural competences pre-survey. How would you respond to that question item now? Why?
• Prior to beginning the program, you identified [insert response] as possible gains linked to your participation. What, if any, specific new information about DEI topics did you gain from the program?
• How, if at all, are you making meaning about DEI information and infusing this into your identity? Your life? Your career plans?
Given what you’ve shared about race in your life and about your experience in the workshops, how do you understand race and womanhood in your life? What sense does it make to you?

Are there any additional experiences in your life that you think have contributed to your knowledge, ideas, or beliefs about anti-racism?

Are there any struggles or unanswered questions you still have about how you view your race? How do you view your gender?
Appendix D

Audit of References Section

Rationale

Jupp et al. (2019) and Matias (2022) acknowledged that critical whiteness studies (CWS) primarily cites white scholars, although scholars of color were the first to conceptualize the field. Given this tendency, Matias (2022) urged that CWS must ‘center the core scholarship, approaches, methodologies, and ideologies in educational research made by scholars participants, and people of color’” (p. 3). Belkhir and Barnett (2001) suggested that identities such as race, class, or gender must be isolated so as to “to understand the intersectionality in the end’ (p. 164). Bowleg (2008) agreed that isolating each category and its impact on the subject’s experience is “an essential analytical step […] T]he researcher must analyze each structural inequality separately, as well as simultaneously” (p. 7). While performing an audit of one’s references requires additional steps in producing and sharing knowledge, Signorella (2020) contended that these actions are “necessary to reduce disparities and expand our perspectives” (p. 262).

Process

After consulting with Dr. Minsuk Shim on the topic of incorporating this quantitative data analysis, on December 6, 2022, I completed a point-in-time audit of a randomly selected page (page 2) of my references section. Per my consultation, I only looked at first authors for each individual entry. There were a total of 19 authors. I then performed Internet searches to confirm the gender and/or race of each individual author. The most common information source was biographical profiles on university or college websites. Of the 19 authors, I found both gender and race for 14 total authors. The
subsequent data analysis only included information for these 14 authors. Gender was indicated by binary categories, either woman or man; no authors were publicly identified as non-binary, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming. Race categories matched the five required fields on the current U.S. Census (white; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander). I was attentive to the possibility of a sixth descriptor, “multiple races,” but no authors were publicly identified as having a multiracial background. While this approach certainly had several limitations, Dr. Minsuk Shim indicated that audit results would likely still be educative.

**Results**

The following table presents demographics information for the 14 authors, with gender (column 2) and race (column 3) considered as distinctive categories. Column 4, intersectional identity, had four options: Woman of Color (WoC), white woman (WW), man of color (MoC), and white man (WM).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Intersectional Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Razia Aziz</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Woman of Color (WoC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawna Ballard</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>WoC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda Allen</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>WoC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Ashcroft</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White woman (WW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiv Ganesh</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Man of Color (MoC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poppy McLeod</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>WoC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moya Z. Bailey</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>WoC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora Berenstain</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>WW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roni Berger</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>WW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen L. Blair</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>WW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhea Ashley Hoskin</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>WW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I first considered gender and race as individual categories, looking at the second and third categories as discrete units. Using descriptive statistics, I found the following results: With regard to gender, 12 of 14 authors (approximately 86 percent) were women and 2 of 14 authors (approximately 14 percent) were men. When considering race, 2 of 14 authors (approximately 14 percent) were Asian, 4 of 14 authors (approximately 29 percent) were Black or African American, and 8 of 14 authors (approximately 57 percent) were white. These results indicate that I predominantly cited authors who were women and/or white. When considering gender and race in the larger umbrella category of intersectional identity (column 4), I arrived at related findings: 5 of 14 authors (approximately 36 percent) were women of color, 1 author (approximately 7 percent) was a man of color, 1 author (approximately 7 percent) was a white man, and 7 of 14 authors (approximately 50 percent) were white women. More than half of the authors I cited were white women.

Discussion

My point-in-time audit of a single page of my references section indicated that I primarily cited white scholars in a study utilizing critical whiteness studies as one of its theoretical frameworks. This corresponded with the tendency of CWS to reference the work of white authors (Jupp et al., 2019; Matias, 2022). This finding suggested to me that while I continued to work on the writing of this dissertation, I needed to actively locate more publications by people of color. Intersectional feminism was another theoretical framework for this research project. Based on the prevalence of white women authors, I
determined that I needed to be conscious of centering the voices of white women who wrote about social justice topics (i.e., white feminism).
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