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A Frayed Edge: A Qualitative and Poetic Inquiry Analysis of White Antiracist Protest in 2020

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by

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ABSTRACT

A Frayed Edge: A Qualitative and Poetic Inquiry Analysis of

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This multiphasic study explored the narratives of five first-time Black Lives Matter protesters

demonstrating during the historic confluence of conflicts in 2020 America. After positioning the

liminal 2020 circumstances within an antiracist research lens, the author analyzed, first through

grounded theory and then secondarily through poetic inquiry, how these five participants

described their protest experiences. The grounded theory phase yielded an overarching theory

that first-time protestors experienced a dual process of unsuturing and of calling-out, with three

subthemes categorized within each of these two processes. The author moved into analysis with

the poetic inquiry phase, crafting poems guided by six subthemes of empathy, silence,

permission-seeking, identity, story uncertainty, and direct action, and yielding six total poems

produced from participant words. The author concluded that poetic inquiry has promise as a tool

toward a functioning antiracist identity, while advising on reflexive antiracist future directions

for such work.

DEDICATION

I am in your debt.

Far more than support, you sent sunlight to my

green   houses

Far more than shearing, you shared visions of

gold   wholeness.

Thank you, Dr. K.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis represents a tough but incredibly fulfilling culmination of mixing Communications and Storytelling Studies in this Master of Arts degree. I first want to acknowledge, with respect, that the land I was born on, live and learn and work on today, is ancestral land of the Anikituwagi, more commonly known as the Cherokee. I recognize the Cherokee as the native people and original stewards of this land we both love. I am indebted to the many scholars, writers, activists, parents, laborers, and dreamers of color who came before— who have imagined and articulated and fought for true equity so that we all may help grow that promise.

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(even virtually) could fill epic storybooks themselves. I have truly been among rainbow unicorns.

  And dearest of all, I am grateful for my family—my artistic linguistic mom Vicki, my precise didactic dad Vincent, all my hilarious siblings and their kids, my amazing son Taro who sparks big discussions, my incredible daughter Mira who sparks big adventures, and MOST importantly my brilliant life and soul mate Charles—always the first to know…well, just everything in my head. Thank you, thank you for seeing this through with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction

When in the course of human events the sufferable becomes *un*sufferable, when the destructive invisible is rendered visible, when the unheard is being heard, then the people shall assume equal station, and declare in a countervoice of justice the causes that impel them—in short, to *protest*. As a White, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual woman, I have grown up socialized to believe liberty and justice could be accessible to all; I have been thoroughly socialized as a White American not to see the social construct and consequences of racial framing at all. For a long time, without really thinking about it too hard, I believed of course I could recognize inequality, and "true heroes" fighting for "true freedom."

It is well-founded that I felt so sure, for in America it is purposefully hard to "recognize how racism is part of the fabric of our society" (Badwall, 2016, p. 17). The "liberty-and-justice frame" (Feagin, 2013) of the United States' Declaration of Independence (1776) is one of the first, most comfortable blankets America puts on itself. In reality, though, operational systems in the U.S. function in a deliberate design, that "the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need," Lorde (2007) explained, so "there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior" (p. 114). This idea, "that the concept of Property was more important—more real—than the possibilities of the human being" originates from the "architects of the American State" (Baldwin, 1985, p. xix) to where whole classes of human beings are economically interchangeable and therefore subject to mercenary trials from birth: "a black person in this democracy is certain to endure the unspeakable and the unimaginable in nineteen years" (p. xvii). More recently, Powers (2016) confirmed the dark understory of an American childhood for a Black person: "when cops bully them, scare them, fuck with them, it's because

our children aren't seen as part of the future." Racism, then, is "the underlying contradiction of the United States" (Aal, 2001, p. 303), a foundational disease manifesting as an ongoing national pandemic, but one that functions in a mandatory veil. As McKay (1953/1971) wrote in "Tiger":

> The white man is a tiger at my throat,
>
> Drinking my blood as my life ebbs away,
>
> And muttering that his terrible striped coat
>
> Is Freedom's and portends the Light of Day. (p. 62)

Though extralegal and "legalized" killings of Black people in America have been performed for centuries (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021), through my White privilege I was allowed to remain unfamiliar with this unrelenting toll. It took the official coalescent birth of Black Lives Matter (BLM) in the Ferguson, MO protests against the killing of Michael Brown in 2013 to show me a glimpse of critical racial counterstory—BLM allowed White Americans like me to see a clearer vision of Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) resistance narrative and, through their protest counterstories, how fragile Black citizenship and personhood has been throughout the story of America. Further—the way the BLM protestors effectively disrupted the national narrative of we-have-justice-for-all even as they themselves were framed by the media as *dangerous* (Reid & Craig, 2021, p. 305)—only highlighted how stories of *heroic* American resistance seemed mostly restricted to mythologized White people like the Founding Fathers. Feagin (2013) confirmed that the respectable "liberty-and-justice" rhetoric of America's founding is treated by White supremacy as purely hypothetical for any serious threat to the ongoing legacy of systemic racism in the U.S. (Feagin, 2013, p. 20).

I began to learn more of the story that had been systematically kept from my White American consciousness—the colder unrelenting core story of an America built on a White

racial frame of legal segregation from "Others" (p.3)—a White supremacist story of "*you will get more because they exist to get less*" (Oluo, 2018, p. 12)*,* where human dignity and needs of Others, particularly Black people in America, are disposable (Powers, 2016). I began to realize, then empathize, with the tragic costs of systemic racial injustice—for both Black and White Americans—from the "seeming disposability of Black lives at the hands of law enforcement" (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021, p. 453) and the disorientation demanded of White supremacist assimilation. Hughes (1967/1971) gave a visceral image of this disorientation with "Justice:"

> That Justice is a blind goddess
>
> Is a thing to which we black are wise:
>
> Her bandage hides two festering sores
>
> That once perhaps were eyes. (p. 87)

Assimilation into white supremacy has a high price. Baldwin (1985) asserted that "the price of the black ticket is involved—fatally—with the dream of becoming white" while "the price of the white ticket is [for White people] to delude themselves into believing they are [White]" (p. xiv). In America, assimilation into White supremacy is the only hope for any potential "relief" for both Whites and racialized "Others" (Aal, 2001; Baldwin, 1985, p. xiv) for a hypothetical re-inclusion into the mythical "liberty-and-justice frame" (Feagin, 2013)—as long as surrender to assimilation holds. Randall (1968/1971) explained this cost, in part, in "A Different Image:"

> The age
>
> requires this task:
>
> create
>
> a different image;

re-animate

the mask. (p. 142)

Attempts to formally counter the White racial frame or reject assimilation, attempts to re/track America to egalitarian ideals, meet well-honed walls of State and systemic resistance. White supremacy ensures that the mythical normative American story does not cover objections by "surplus people." Resistance frames or protest action by people systematically dehumanized in America (including any marginalized or intersectional identities such as BIPOC and LGBTQIA+) will *not* be commended as heroic but condemned as criminal, put down with force by agents of White supremacy—those who profit from the labor, bodies, even the very breath of "disposable" human beings (DiAngelo, 2019, p. 95). "Criminalization," Houdek (2022) asserted, "is a violent conjuring that turns the racially marked body into an imminently containable subject—but only for the moment it takes to neutralize the threat and loot Black breath" (p. 58).

Containing "surplus" humans through State criminalization makes space for White bodies, power, and profit by containing the narrative. Because, as control of the story is power (Mumby, 1993), then to maintain power, systematized oppressive forces must cast out any narratives positively supporting any "surplus" people while as thoroughly as possible re-conjuring dominant and supremacist threads (p. 2) through systemic recasting such as criminalization. For expendable-to-the-system "surplus" people, Lorde (2007) explained, recognized humanity and therefore heroic resistance is indeed a myth; "within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive" (p. 39). Nor, time and again, has the White supremacist State meant for Black bodies to survive, a feeling Giovanni (1968/1971) captured well in "For Saundra:"

so I thought again

12

and it occurred to me

maybe i shouldn't write

at all

but clean my gun

and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic

times

at all (p. 322)

What happens, though, when systematized oppression cannot keep control of the

narrative for an historic moment, and the normative story unravels? What silences get broken?

What new voices can emerge and see a way to join the long-raging fray? What language can

multiple peoples, multiple identities use to call out for justice in a torn America?

With systemic racism and COVID-19 as the twin pandemics of 2020 "with the most

virulent of the two being racism" (Laurencin & Walker, 2020, p. 10), new dimensions to BLM

resistance narrative emerged to study and re/present, with the dissolving of previously closed

systems and the beginning of new counterstory voices. As a student of storytelling and poetry,

and as a White-identifying first-time racial injustice protester in 2020 myself, I felt a fraying to

the fabric of the America I had known and, as I gathered narratives from fellow protestors, I

wanted to explore how metaphor and poetic inquiry could itself disrupt racist framing, long after

the 2020 protests were history. Master poet Maya Angelou (1993/2008) called too for visible

resistance in "On the Pulse of Morning":

You, created only a little lower than

The angels, have crouched too long in

The bruising darkness,

Have lain too long

Facedown in ignorance.

Your mouths spelling words

Armed for slaughter.

The Rock cries out today,

You may stand on me,

But do not hide your face. (p. 124)

In the pages of Chapter 2 that follow, I position this study by reviewing several bodies of

literature that are relevant to this antiracist research project before, in Chapter 3, covering the

methodology of collecting the narratives of first-time protesters, and the process of analyzing

them through grounded theory and poetic inquiry. I connect the overarching theory gained from

analysis with the six poems constructed through poetic inquiry methods in Chapter 4. Each poem

is accompanied by further analysis and comparison across narratives, describing more of my

research process and artistic choices. I reflect on these poetic data and their implications in

Chapter 5, considering their potential for future antiracism work as well as examining my

process of reflexivity throughout.

But first, the literature that locates this study, where I aim, as Crooks et al. (2021) urged,

to centralize the contributions of BIPOC scholars and writers. In this upcoming chapter, I first

describe the literature of systemic racism and Whiteness studies in America, along with the

conflicts inherent in the White racial frame (or White supremacy) underpinning contemporary

reality in this country. Next, I briefly review the historic conjunction of general political unrest in 2020 America, the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and some of the legacy of past American racial injustice protest that BLM activists built upon in the wake of George Floyd's murder in May of 2020. Continuing further toward the "dendritic crystallization" Ellingson (2009) described, I outline some research into counterstory and arts-based resistance text which supports the usefulness of the culminating poetic inquiry methodology of this study.

Throughout this literature review, the following Methodology and Conclusion chapters, and at all points in between, my own positionality as a White scholar weighs heavily into my reflexivity, as I have become acutely aware of the constant potential—some race scholars such as Houdek (2021) have argued *inevitability*—of inadvertently recentralizing Whiteness (Hesford, 2021) and reproducing the very supremacist frames I am seeking to disrupt (Badwall, 2016). Still, I keenly feel the varied exhortations I have encountered, to not shy away from ethnographic work with White-identifying peoples as "those who benefit from racist structures and who play the biggest part in maintaining them" (Aal, 2001, p. 295). With the additional assurance from Oluo (2018) that I'm "going to screw this up royally. More than once" (p. 45), that with conversations addressing racial oppression "even with all of your practice, and with the best of your intentions, there will be times where this all goes to shit" (p. 48), Oluo still exhorted White people to keep having racial oppression conversations with fellow White people, to learn how to be wrong in a way that minimizes pain, and to allow in the pain of uncertainty that: "if you are white, and you don't want to feel any of that pain by having these conversations, then you are asking people of color to continue to bear the entire burden of racism alone" (Oluo, 2018, p. 51). Tretheway (2007/2018) alluded to this uncertain "unsettling" elegantly in "Theories of Time and Space:"

You can get there from here, though

there's no going home.

Everywhere you go will be somewhere

you've never been. (p. 55)

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

In 2020, the world saw significant disruption to long-existing global, national, and regional institutional systems. America experienced its own particular blend of disruption in 2020 in what Houdek (2022) termed a rupture in the "normative discourses of progress" (p.50) and "the flow of white time" (p. 62). The mix of raging biopolitics and COVID-19 pandemic panic punctured the scarred hide of worn American systemic racism, a tough covering stitched shut with the young male White Protestant Cis/Het "mythical norm" (Lorde, 2007, p. 116), as well as all the investments of general White supremacy, and created a pressured boil of unrest pressing to the surface. From there it took one more push of undisguised mocking injustice, the racist murder of George Floyd at the hands of officials who continue to answer petitions with repeated injury, for there to be an explosive moment in our national history. This moment was characterized by "inaction, delay, and obfuscation … met with their opposite—rage, immediacy, and the overwhelming realization that enough is enough" (Chan, 2020, p. 13.6). This was an exceptional juxtaposition of potential dissolving and altering.

The extensively broadcast cutting-off of George Floyd's life in a breathless pandemic rent an opening in closed-off systems and, with it, a potential recognition "that the current world is not sustainable and that, crucially, the cultivation of otherwise worlds and breathable futures is indeed possible" (Houdek, 2022, p. 62). Political process theory of social movements (from sociological scholarship) posited that a political opportunity for a movement such as BLM stems from foundational rupture of political systems; new political frameworks can be woven by a determined movement, from the old broken threads (Morris, 2021, sec. 4). The ensuing protests of May/June of 2020 were among the largest in US history (Buchanan et al., 2020; Kishi, 2021;

Shvili, 2021), where new voices overcame forces of silencing, to add to the "subversive" declaration (Richardson & Ragland, 2018, p. 29) that *Black Lives Matter.*

These new Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest voices, and their intersecting identities and descriptions of their resulting experiences, are uniquely positioned on a questioning cut edge in American consciousness—when the raw ends of human feelings and needs surface for breath, how can they patch in a new functioning antiracist story? What counterstorytelling re/presentation can emerge from these frayed threads?

The White Threads: White American Cohesive Forces

White racial framing in American storytelling in 2020 dominated the greater Appalachian region and the Southern U.S. just as it had in the entire United States nation. White racial framing is considered a narrative tradition that "privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28), and that, for most White people, "provides the language and interpretations that help structure, normalize, and make sense out of society" (Feagin, 2013, p. 11). White racial framing, a complex structure, is held together partially by White cohesive forces like silent White complicity, a kind of racial solidarity that would not weaken White advantage by exposing it (DiAngelo, 2019, p. 58), and fragile White denial, a "White innocence" born of deliberate, socially sanctioned ignorance for deflecting the racial project (Slater, 2020, p. 824).

This overall White racial storytelling has both physical, overt manifestations (punctuated with racially motivated violence, for instance) but also covert, unseen systemic expressions of "White rage" whose violence is more deliberately crafted, slower (Anderson, 2017, p. ix). Overt racist manifestations, overt violence, can be more easily identified, isolated, and fought against.

It is the covert, unseen White supremacist systemic expression, Lorde's (2007) "master's house"—the narrative structures built on oppression and Othering—that are more difficult to identify, track, and counter. This long term, systemic "master story," both pushing and pulling from racialized standpoints, results in cultural structures throughout the U.S. being stuck in a White-centric narrative framing. This often keeps racist ideas coded or unspoken and thereby more easily accepted by people benefitting from it. "Mainstream communication does not want women, particularly white women, responding to racism. It wants racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of your existence, like eveningtime or the common cold" (Lorde, 2007, p. 128). Even scholar of color Kendi (2017) described how his own perspective had in the past gotten tangled by these threads: "Fooled by racist ideas, I did not fully realize … that the only thing extraordinary about White people is that they think something is extraordinary about White people" (p. 11).

While many would have liked to believe we can be "color blind," that our social fabric has "evolved beyond racism," the blanketing effect of this minimizing narrative, part of what Plummer (2020) termed "underfunctioning anti-racism," means more aggressive racial narratives work the strings. Both national and regional socio-political artifacts show the cumulative invasiveness of individual White-centric American story dynamics:

> All it takes is the right kind of media to spark it. To spin it. At least, that's what history has shown us. Tell a story a certain way. Make a movie that paints you as the hero. Get enough people on your side to tell you you're right, and you're right. Even if you're wrong. And once you've been told you're right long enough, and once your being right has led you to a profitable and privileged life, you'd do anything not to be proved wrong. Even pretend human beings aren't human beings. (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020, p. 246)

When cumulative, collective prejudice of individuals, telling themselves just such stories, possesses power of legal authority and institutional control, individual racist ideas morph into an official, forceful, independently-functioning system of White supremacy no longer beholden to any particular individual's beliefs or actions (DiAngelo, 2019), despite any flowery lipservice to being "created equal." Picca and Feagin (2007) confirmed that usually "those people with greater power in society, principally White Americans, have the greatest control over the society-wide major institutional memories, including those generally recorded in most mass media and most library books" (p. 13). Institutions such as White-dominated media, then, further function as backing agents of this independently-functioning system (Reid & Craig, 2021), perpetuating racialized narrative frames that mirror back and influence everyday action of individuals, such as police or other citizen public servants (Heckler & Mackey, 2022).

White supremacy threads have historically woven better, in fact, when White-centric narrative was pervasive to the point of being common, a silent and therefore "unremarkable" fact of life. For, as DiAngelo (2019) reminded us, "much of white supremacy's power is drawn from its invisibility" (p. 29), while Oluo (2018) more frankly stated, "words matter . . . . we cannot understand race and racial oppression if we cannot talk about it" (p. 229). Francis & Wright-Rigueur (2021) detailed the historically consistent racial-based silencing that underlines U.S. political systems:

> For the most part, the incredible violence of slavery, the pogrom of lynchings after Reconstruction, and the extralegal killings during the Jim Crow era are treated as aberrational features of American political development. These were brief periods the United States had to get through—demons the country had to overcome. The traditional narrative largely assumes that these moments were not institutional and certainly not

enduring. Yet one need only look at the last decade of unarmed Black men and women killed at the hands of the police to understand the continued and historically consistent unmattering of Black Lives. (p. 451)

While desegregation and civil rights tactics changed some of the *expression* of racism, all those heavy foundations of western White supremacy storytelling are still maintained through many overt and covert social and communication actions, and in what Eliasoph (1999), borrowing from Goffman (1959), referred to as "front stage" (public) and "back stage" (private) realms. Still-expanding social media communication has further complicated the boundaries of these realms. As the Internet and social media are considered public spheres outside of any particular state or formal control (Carney, 2016), there is a shifting, thin line of what is sayable where, relying on the unseen cohesive force of the white racial frame to uphold covert White supremacist narrative even in digital (virtual) worlds. Owens et al. (2018) discussed how "social media have provided racist organizations with an opportunity to present different faces to different audiences" with "softer sides" more palatable to White majorities presented in the more publicly available digital spaces. Restricted-access sites or chat rooms, however, offer the privacy for racist groups like the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC) to "spew vitriolic rhetoric" (p. 562). For example, Dylan Roof, who went on to shoot nine Black churchgoers in a Charleston, SC hate crime in 2015, specifically named the online content and community of the CCC as part of his process of racist radicalization (Hyman et al., 2020, p. 188).

Picca and Feagin (2007) confirmed that "the safety of doing … blatantly racist actions is created by the privacy of the social space" (p. 6). White supremacy gets strengthened when openly addressing racial injustice is suppressed as a social "taboo" (Plummer, 2020), literally unspeakable (Eliasoph, 1999), or as an irrelevant abstraction, an erasable cost/consequence of

our global economy (Colebrook, 2020, para. 2). "Whiteness functions like amnesia," scholar/poets Zaino and Bell (2021) elaborated: "In other words, [Whites] learn about race by not talking about it. … The disease sleeps in some of us without our knowing" (pp. 10-11).

And so, even in the absence of overt White supremacist or nationalist actions, the covert White-centered racial storytelling and systemic measures of White supremacy go quietly unchallenged and too-often unconsciously perpetuated in America, in large scale city-level ways down to small scale family-circle ways, as forces of White supremacist solidarity (DiAngelo, 2019, p. 58). These forces, which I discuss further below, include passive, silent complicity and active White fragility with psychological denial (Helms, 2020, p. 21) which, in "usual times" already creates a potential for "ostracism and schism" (p. 21), a particularly high barrier to antiracist dissent, especially for potential White-identifying protest participants. Helms, with some sympathy, further related the process of exploring a nonracist White identity to be "like venturing out on a flimsy branch without being sure that you can come back to a more solid limb or that the branch you have chosen will support you" (p. 65)—for White people, a conscious decision to tear themselves out of the structure of the society that has held them.

Silent White Complicity

To be respected within the context of White racial framing "necessarily means collusion with and perpetuation of the historical privileging of Whiteness" (Juárez & Hayes, 2014, p. 336)—in other words, White racial assimilation. Opposing the supremacist story, speaking out against the White racial framing, or acting in any way in defiance of racist rhetoric, all comes with a high social cost, enough for silence and inertia to tightly govern especially the speech acts of White-identifying peoples, who are automatically granted the benefits of White privilege. Eliasoph (1999) observed of certain White social groups at the time that objecting to racist public

22

sphere "front stage" talk "would have required reference to a more solid ground of meaning than participants were willing to impose on the situation; it would have required 'getting on a high horse'" (p.488). She continued that "creating this seemingly unconstrained atmosphere actually took … a disciplined attitude that firmly excluded certain kinds of speech, including speech that could seriously object to the racist jokes" (p. 488). As a white person, objecting to racist talk has an insidious cost: the risk of being considered a "race-traitor" where, as DiAngelo (2019) noted, one "might be accused of being politically correct or might be perceived as angry, humorless, combative, and not suited to go far in an organization" (p. 58).

In addition to external social pressures for silence on racial issues, *internal* psychological pressure to refuse uncertainty help White silence exist, where not wanting to "screw up" provides a reifying excuse to keep engaging in White innocence/ignorance and therefore silence (Oluo, 2018). Sue et al. (2010) found, for example, that White students excused themselves from even civil-toned classroom discussion about race "because they believe one must be a victim of racism to 'have a valid voice to talk about race'" (p. 209). These students consistently demonstrated "apprehensions over their 'right' to participate" in racial dialogues, or unironically expressed how, "because they were raised in situations in which race was seldom discussed or they had limited experiences with persons of color," this privilege and advantage prevented them from *learning* about race (p.212). All of these responses function as ways to refuse publicly engaging with their role in racial framing, all ways to stay silent. Slater (2020) argued that this resistance against social uncertainty inflicts a high price, keeping White people "stuck, ignorant, unable to experiment with other forms of political responsibility" (p. 824).

The social costs for potential antiracists are insidious enough, but then there are also real punitive concerns for peoples speaking up against racial injustice. As an example of what Kendi

(2017) articulated as "racist progress" consistently following racial progress, 2020 BLM

protesters (as compared with BLM protesters in earlier years) expressed new concerns associated

with backlash: "the opposition to the movement from some white Americans, President Trump,

and police militarization and responses to BLM" (Bolsover, 2020, p. 8). Beyond physical danger

for antiracists in active protest events, there were new career and educational roadblocks being

introduced. By 2021, after the 2020 BLM protest wave, there was a legislative push in at least

fifteen states to prohibit and punish any educators employing Critical Race Theory (CRT), a line

of critical inquiry which investigates how policies, laws, and court decisions can preserve racism

at a systemic level (Kearse, 2021); as of this writing, forty-two total states have some anti-CRT

legislation introduced with seventeen (including Florida, Texas, Virginia, and Tennessee) having

enacted such rules either through legislation or other policy means (Schwartz, 2022, para. 5).

Also as of this writing, the state of Tennessee has officially fielded and dismissed one complaint

made under its new "prohibited concepts in instruction" law (Mitchell & Associated Press,

2022), which includes, among other "divisive concepts" it outlaws teaching, the idea that the

United States or the state of Tennessee is inherently racist or sexist, that "all Americans are not

created equal," or that "the rule of law does not exist but instead is a series of power

relationships and struggles among racial or other groups" (Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-1019, 2022).

Again, under the guise of "protecting everyone," the State ensures it is White racial comfort and

silence that is really reinforced, while speaking out against White supremacist history and

contemporary instantiations of White racial framing is to accept personal, professional, and

systemic risks.

If, however, one can stay assimilated and muted about racism, there are significant social,

professional, and systemic rewards. DiAngelo (2019) recalled, for example: "when I kept quiet

about racism, I was regarded with social capital such as being seen as fun, cooperative, and a team player" (p. 58). Gómez et al. (2022) agreed that, for those that *look* White, White racial assimilation does not require *strong* advocacy, only a fundamental loyalty, staying "cognizant of the fact that they are ultimately protected by their membership (p. 17). So, this tacit, built-in psychological incentive to remain silent against racism, at least in public or "front-stage" settings (Eliasoph, 1999), makes it especially hard for White-identifying folks or those with any upwardly mobile ambition in a White supremacist framework to demonstrate responsiveness to calls-to-action, even in the face of continuing injustice to BIPOC populations.

Fragile White Denial

White racial framing also depends on a complex psychological framework of denial, freedom from responsibility, and feelings of "innocence" culminating in a race-specific fragility where White people may defensively reject non-majoritarian frames and narratives—any story that doesn't center ideas of White supremacy—and prefer instead "White talk," conversational detours that "reinforce the essential core of well-meaning white identity by repeatedly redirecting our gaze to goodness" (Bailey, 2015, p. 46). If the psychological framework gets pushed more, however, a spectrum of White defensive behaviors may ensue; as Srivastava & Francis (2006) saw in their research, "despite demanding and/or getting personal accounts of racism from people of color, White participants framed their demands not only with gratitude and sorrow, but also with anger and denial" (p. 285). DiAngelo (2019) in particular named "fragility" as a specific way White people react when challenged on the unspoken mythical norms, the "truths" of our majoritarian storytelling: "White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness, all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism" (p. 112). Sue et al. (2010) noted evidence that some White people "have

several layers of identity that serve as buffers between them and the realities of racism by externalizing blame," a defensive position of absolution believing "they have no role in the creation and maintenance of racism" (p. 209).

The discomfort and emotional work of personally confronting the many systemic facets of White privilege often proves too much to sustain in the face of pleasure or convenience (Colebrook, 2020), resulting in "entrenched positioning" despite being confronted with new instances in the long-term, slow violence of racial oppression (Bolsover, 2020). In fact, McCoy (2020) argued that the repeated hearing and watching of racial injustices may create an even greater national numbness (p. 467). Add that numbness to the "innocence" and "freedom from responsibility" White people often attribute to themselves and there is, as Diangelo (2019) illustrated, an apathetic wall truly difficult to get over: "While I am aware that race has been used unfairly against people of color, I haven't been taught to see this problem as any responsibility of mine; as long as I personally haven't done anything I am aware of, racism is a nonissue" (p. 55). Why would one protest what isn't one's responsibility? And who can protest what is deliberately unheard or systemically unseen? The forces of White cohesion create individual conflicts and costs as well.

Looming Conflict: Inner Costs of White Supremacy

When Rank (2004) stated "the essence of citizenship is reciprocity," this idea might begin to express some of the concealed ways that racism and White supremacy burden White-identifying people too, although certainly not anywhere near the manner or magnitude of the documented legacy of Black suffering under White supremacy (Yancy, 2015, p. xxi). What remains to be articulated are the suppressed costs of maintaining White-centric narrative and systems, possibly as emotional turmoil, compromised civic engagement, or restricted human

empathy, not to mention the economic liability of, for example, misusing criminal justice systems (Anderson, 2017). Poteat and Spanierman (2008) observed over a decade ago that objective measurement tools for such costs of White supremacy were in infancy. In evidence that perhaps they still are, more recently Schooley et al. (2019) reissued the call for more scholarly psychological research and critical examination of measures of Whiteness to try to address the emerging sociopolitical environment.

Plummer and Fernbacher (2016) likened the continuing American racial dissonance to the story of a town where the people go shoeless while also housing the largest shoe factory in the world—when asked why they didn't get shoes to protect their feet, townspeople reacted "with great surprise at such a profound insight and enthusiastically responded, 'Yes, why don't we?'" before continuing on just as before, shoeless. Our persisting American racial "shoelessness" means White Americans persist in being "ethnocentrically and culturally myopic in our thinking" (p. 144). Lorde (2007) also described emotional conflict in the costs of racism even on those of White identities: "As long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt" (p. 118).

Emotionally, for White people, White supremacy comes with significant costs, where holding supremacist views seems to result in "distorting their sense of history and promoting irrational fear of others" (Grzanka et al., 2019, p. 495). And holding tightly to dominant White American ideologies of individualism and self-reliance "can result in feelings of hostility and insensitivity toward the plight of others, particularly the disadvantaged, which in turn works against the concept of shared responsibility" (Rank, 2004, p. 155). Helms (2020) said Whites paid the cost of "two faces of Whiteness"—having to choose between their socialized White self and their *moral* self, finding it "virtually impossible to function and compete in a multiracial

27

society except through domination, suppression, and massive denial of reality" (p. 21). Feagin (2013), however, noted that "those whites who do move to a substantial antiracist framing of society and into significant antiracist action often feel and accent the positive emotions of empathy, compassion, and hope for a better future" (p. 14).

Aside from inner turmoil, there are outward manifestations of White supremacist costs. Gómez et al. (2022) detailed the psychological states of rage or enacted terror that can be rooted in White identifying peoples as part of the dominant racial ideology (p. 17). while Van Dijk (1993) argued that White racial framing can, in fact, change the very nature of a person's storytelling:

> There is a systematic difference between stories told by prejudiced people and by those people who favor equality and actively oppose racism. The first stories are mostly negative and tell about events or experiences that confirm more general, negative attitudes. Such stories are as stereotypical as the attitudes that monitor the construction and retrieval of the mental models on which they are based. White people who have no or fewer problems with minorities spontaneously tend to tell more varied and more positive stories or will occasionally even tell negative stories about racist or intolerant whites. (p. 140)

In fact, the fears harbored by a White supremacist population can be far-ranging on a spectrum, spanning from that crippling fear of the "Other" to existential fear about taking on any measure of responsibility for ending racism, exquisitely "painful to come by for White folks because it demands … constant vigilance and action" (Sue, 2011, p. 419). No wonder, Sue (2011) continued, "it is just easier to not do anything and let race issues fade from [their]

consciousness"—a significant barrier to protesting when a group "other than your own" is enduring harm.

With "irrational fear of Others" and "psychological states of rage" already set up, along with negative, banal storytelling, the costs of America's White racial frame itself embodies a fragile, disconnected state that DiAngelo (2019) described in part as a form of bullying and a limited capacity to sustain challenges without lashing out (p. 112). In "normal" times, these costs may remain trivial enough to go unspoken; in the sustained challenges of 2020, however, these costs were paired with diminished benefits.

Afraid Edges: Disruptive Forces in 2020

The year 2020 saw a unique disjunction of slower systemic and fast medical crises slicing up systems simultaneously. Whereas the slow violence of understood American White racial framing was well established and already difficult to buck, rapidly emerging global trends veered toward a return of outspoken White nationalism (Burke, 2020) and populism (Hirschmann, 2021). The 2016 election of Donald Trump heralded and reflected such a trend, "the unmasking of administrative racism in the U.S." (Heckler & Mackey, 2022, p. 2) seemingly intended to reverse Civil rights gains, amongst others (Anderson, 2017, p. 79). The feelings of emergent crises for BIPOC and other dehumanized populations already existed as a "collective experience of story turbulence" (Dodds et al., 2021, p. 2) especially after the election of Trump; then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in America in early 2020 and profoundly altered the narrative makeup of the equation.

Colebrook (2020) posited that it takes a visible, unbearable "fast violence" spectacle to shift emotional/psychological acquiescence (p. 4). Such a "fast violence" features in the political process theory, which argues that "external windows of opportunity … must open for [social]

movements to succeed" (Morris, 2021, sec. 4). The unique confluence of crisis-level stories in 2020 provided just such an unbearable window—"the literal and figurative question of who can and cannot breathe (to echo Floyd's last words) resonates ironically with the fact that Black lives [were] also being disproportionally claimed by the pandemic in the United States" (Chan, 2020, p. 13.6).

Suddenly, the potential equalizing force of crises shuffled the plot and the narrative weaponization (Weinberg & Dawson, PhD, 2020); much of the dominant systemic narrative seemed in flux. Who was deemed a hero in 2020 pandemic America—the nurses working grueling, underpaid back-to-back shifts, or those who advocated "burn your mask?" Who was suddenly officially designated an "essential" worker, doing the jobs "indispensable to the functioning of our communities" but who were "less likely to have employment benefits, like paid sick leave or the option of teleworking, which means they are being forced into unsafe working conditions" (United States Congress House Committee on Oversight and Reform, 2020)? Who was deemed a villain, a criminal, as the BLM protesters were in 2020? Who was able to obey official recommendations to stay "safer at home?"

When the *current* systems of 2020—both social and economic—got disrupted enough to ask a question like: "Might this rupture open up a terrain of struggle that does not end in a typical post-crisis re-legitimation or restabilization?" (Bratich, 2021, p. 257), more substantial antiracist policy reforms seemed able to take shape, and a prime moment for racial justice realized. With crisis upon crisis upon murder shifting some Americans' historic minimizing of racial injustice and complicit White inertia, amplified calls from suffering BIPOC in both slow- and fast-violence helped trigger "underfunctioning anti-racists" (Plummer, 2020) to join BLM protest action following the murder of George Floyd and swell the numbers of supporters.

Cuts Across Lines: Emboldened White Supremacy & Historic Resistance

The invisible slow-violence flow of racial inequality is not unwavering—it has been disordered by spikes of fast-violence before. Well over 100 years ago, Ida B. Wells worked to officially document some of American racism's slow violence—she published the first media exposé of lynching in 1892 and influenced the founding of the NAACP in 1909 (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021). But it wasn't until the unique collision of the deadly influenza pandemic of 1918 and the near-simultaneous upspike in White mob lynchings in the South for there to be in 1919 an American Red Summer, a more widely organized African-American demonstration of counterstorytelling protests and power (Colebrook, 2020).

Comparatively, 2020 twisted in even more broad systemic disruption. McCoy (2020) likens the confluence of crises in mid-2020 to a jamming-together of the 1918 Flu Pandemic, the Red Summer of 1919, the Great Depression, *and* the Civil Rights movement of the '50s and '60s. Individually, McCoy stated, each crisis would be cause for distress, "but conflated into a few months, they have created overwhelming feelings of turmoil" (p.463).

For, even before the treacherous COVID-19 pandemic hit, there were heavy layers of racialized turbulence built up for America circa 2020—White-centric political, social, and economic backlash which had administratively elevated "*psychological rages of Whiteness* to a national ethos" (Gómez et al., 2022, p. 14)—where silent White complicity became more bluntly mandatory, and White denial morphed to a culture of active White steamrolling (McAuley, 2019). The administration of Donald Trump sharply contrasted with the preceding presidency of Barack Obama (first Black American president, famously dubbed "no-drama Obama"), reaching unprecedented levels of social media furor through Trump's Twitter-fueled narrative "story turbulence" (Dodds et al., 2021) which served to re-center dominant White storytelling and

White nationalism, as he explicitly reinstated tribalism and "abdicated civil and civic responsibility for the social effects of hate speech" (Holling & Moon, 2021, p. 437).

A significant swath of U.S. citizens, including BIPOC and White populations, reacted negatively as the new President and his administration both steadily emboldened White supremacist populism as well as eroded confidence in equitable legal matters and criminal justice (Hirschmann, 2021). Then-president Trump, whose "power as a lawbreaker relie[d] on the persistence of law" (Butler, 2019, para. 4), improbably branded himself as a "law and order" president while simultaneously shifting what laws themselves were considered "legitimate." In this way, President Trump deliberately cultivated a racially-based (and personally beneficial) accounting of who was considered criminal. Consider, for example his regard for the "fine people" of the violent 2017 Unite the Right White supremacist rally in Charlottesville, VA versus his tweet regarding largely peaceful protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's 2020 murder by police in Minneapolis, MO: "When the looting starts, the shooting starts" (Gómez et al., 2022, p. 15).

With frequent denunciations of populations (Blakely, 2017), then-President Trump further criminalized his enemies (Butler, 2019, para. 5) by linking them to undesirable stereotypes. For example, when he issued a ban on citizens travelling from seven majority-Muslin countries in January of 2017, Trump tweeted in his own defense: "Everybody is arguing whether or not it is a BAN. Call it what you want, it is about keeping bad people (with bad intentions) out of country!" (Oborne, 2017). Then, when a judge lifted that "Muslim ban" in 2017, Trump invoked the fears of "dangerous Muslim 'Others'" (Kreis, 2017) by tweeting: "Just cannot believe a judge would put our country in such peril. If something happens blame him and court system. People pouring in. Bad!" During the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd in

May of 2020, Trump tweeted: "These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen" (Wilson, 2020), a rhetorical tactic which, Smiley & Fakunle (2016) said, uses the word "thug" as a coded language "to describe Black males who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America" (p.2). This "coded language" communication style was a frequent maneuver for Trump—simultaneously criminalizing the protestors *to* his sympathetic followers, while mockingly denigrating the racial injustice *of* the murder itself to any of his detractors.

As with many autocratic leaders, Trump scapegoated groups even to the extent—as Coglianese (2020) explained—of shrewdly scapegoating the law itself. Well before the COVID pandemic struck, Trump had for years through Twitter and what some have referred to as the "bully pulpit" destabilized actual law and order (Rutledge, 2020) by also amplifying unfounded "deep state" conspiracy theories, disparaging federal administrative bodies, and calling for the disbanding of federal agencies. As Rutledge noted, "Donald Trump's hesitance to rely on or worse yet outright hostility toward bureaucratic expertise … began long before the pandemic itself had started" (p. 506).

By 2020, the last year of his term, the misdirection and dissonance of the Trump administration had been well honed, ordering increased law enforcement activity with, Gardner (2021) noted, "splashy anecdotes about minority crime and fabricated minority violent crime statistics" while simultaneously *undermining* strategic legislative structures and disregarding laws such as when Trump was caught "making a bald-faced effort to coerce Ukraine into launching a baseless investigation into former Vice President Joe Biden, Trump's likely opponent in the 2020 election" (Mettler & Lieberman, 2020, sec. 3). This particular legal abuse lead, by September of 2019, to the start of impeachment proceedings against Mr. Trump. This fearful

'security'-focused rhetoric coupled with seemingly strategic personal legal chaos can work to bolster perceived needs for further American centralization and top-down hierarchy, but reduce potential legal reforms for curbing authoritarianism (Rana, 2010, p. 344). Collectively, this served to formally weaken resistance and bolster dehumanizing systems. When impeachment proceedings against Trump ended in acquittal along mostly party lines in February 2020, with several Republican senators "reframing the President's comportment as a mistake" rather than a crime (Milford, 2021, sec. 4), the fabled notion that Trump himself "is above and outside the law" (Butler, 2019) was also reinforced for the American public. This was in line with the populist movement Trump embodied and endorsed which, unlike popular protest movements, was dedicated to claiming power for itself extra-governmentally. This is, borrowing from Hirschmann (2021), government could not "get the job done" so they did it themselves (p. 3).

Of course, just as throughout American history, the White-centric narrative efforts of early 2020 asserted a moral hierarchy to resistance efforts, too. "Legitimacy" of a given narrative depended on whether a dominant narrative stood to profit. Post-impeachment, President Trump accelerated his extra-legal political rhetoric esteeming and further emboldening his followers. Even as the COVID-19 virus began to sicken the nation, Trump helped manufacture "honorable rebellion" narratives against public health needs, especially in states led by Democrat governors—again celebrating a populist seizing of extra-governmental power. Rallying behind anti-mask symbolism, acquittal-emboldened Trump "began rousing his base … with tweet-commands such as, 'Liberate Virginia!' (then Michigan, then Minnesota)" (Bratich, 2021, p. 260). From there, Bratisch noted, individualism masqueraded as collectivist anti-mask grievance, and "anti-lockdown rallies proliferated across US state capitals, with 'pro-freedom' demonstrators apparently casting paralyzing spells on cops with their displays of armed

resistance and weaponized spittle. … Individual mobility and economic jump-starting were prioritized over public health" (p. 258).

In contrast, BIPOC organizing efforts by and large centered on changing the state, not overthrowing it, by reaching out to both individuals and communities, using intersectionality as a call to action for social justice (Grzanka et al., 2019, pp. 496–497). BLM's core activists have deliberately pushed to widen protest inclusion, taking a "broader approach to talking about their movement than just 'centering' the identities of the most marginal segments of the African American community" (Tillery, 2019, p. 318)—their emphasis on encouraging antiracist efforts from as many diverse people as possible, bringing in a multitude of new voices in 2020. Long-time Black activist organizing efforts on multiple fronts have and continue to lay egalitarian foundations for free and fair social justice systemic changes, implicitly acknowledging government as the agent of injustice *as well as* instrument of redress (Hirschmann, 2021, p. 2). Bratisch (2021) described the differences in political tactics between Trump and BLM activities as "competing and hostile abolitionist movements:"

> on the one hand, the nihilistic and eliminationist version enacted in . . . walls, borders, and chants of 'lock them all up!'; on the other, the life-affirming abolitions that seek decarceration, the defunding of police, and to 'free them all!' (p. 263)

BLM "exercises power in its peaceful marches" (Hirschmann, 2021) whereas some of the contemporaneous protests of 2020—especially the anti-COVID-lockdown protests—ended up rejecting the power of more peaceful counterstory and devolved into acts of force, like 13 men conspiring to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (Eggert, 2020).

Gardner (2021) pointed out, "BLM and the larger police-reform movement call for the veneration of basic rule-of-law principles. … precisely opposite that of the Trump presidency" and its selective focus on "law-and-order" political rhetoric regarding minority violent crime (sec. III). Owens et al. (2018) acknowledge BLM's organizing efforts often push uphill against a White majoritarian story that racism is a thing of the past and police killings are justifiable in spite of video evidence to the contrary, which produces "a context in which violent tactics could surely generate a backlash from the white population, providing government leaders with the cover needed to violently repress the movement" (p. 561). In addition, building on Ida B. Wells' tradition of White supremacy recordkeeping and push to hold the state accountable, BLM's sustained activities have included data collection from Twitter (Bolsover, 2020, p. 9) and other social media. BLM activities spurred national and international journalism organizations to begin to collect their own comprehensive records on police killings, overall "providing the political language for Black people to articulate the harm they endured and the government's responsibility to remedy it" (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021, pp. 445–446). The American narrative, in the media and through official channels, however, often framed 2020 BLM protests as dangerous and disorderly, serving "as a social control mechanism that invalidates this movement's political claims" while the anti-lockdown rallies of 2020, initiated by dominant racial groups, were portrayed as "patriotic, passionate, and dedicated to the cause" (Reid & Craig, 2021).

Split Front Lines: Who is 'Essential' to America?

With a backdrop of active extra-legal White supremacist advocacy issuing from the highest levels of American civic life, the dangerous unknowns of the COVID-19 virus swept in as a secondary infection for an alienated nation, triggering a National Emergency declaration on

March 13, 2020 and widespread state and municipal lockdowns (AJMC Staff, 2021). These lockdowns had immediate economic and social impacts where many workers were mandated to stay "safer at home" while other selected workers had to continue working; many businesses were shut down while other selected industries could stay active, and many large gatherings such as schools, churches, conferences, or even celebrations were suddenly forbidden. All of these mandates had varying levels of effectiveness and social tradeoffs (Haug et al., 2020).

When the 2020 COVID-19 viral pandemic hit the U.S., it scrambled the dominant narrative lines immediately, initiating hastily-concocted distraction narratives of "heroes" and "equal suffering" to emerge, as ubiquitous phrasing announced "we're all in this together!," phrasing which Bowleg (2020) termed "another hollow platitude of solidarity designed to placate the privileged and temporarily uncomfortable and inconvenienced (para. 6). This disruption elicited a wild mix of emotional reactions from various populations. When massive systemic disruption happens, the resulting turmoil can be both terrifying as well as telling of hidden systemic realities, as authorities push to maintain control and are no longer able to disguise some of the long-term systemic injustices that had gone unspoken. In just such a reveal, the uptick of martial law in 2020, the detaining of asylees and prisoners in deplorable conditions at the U.S,-Mexico border, and the rationing of medical care during the worst first-wave casualties of COVID-19 were, as Espina and Narruhn (2021) noted:

> enacted in an autocratic process, which is manifested in the deliberation of the worth of some people. … The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism revealed that not all communities have access to rights. (pp. 187–188)

For the impacts of COVID-19 were *not* "equally suffered." Certain populations were more impacted than others, as the intersections of racial identity, occupation, and class conspired to

put some Americans much more at risk than others. For example, Gay et al. (2020) laid out some of the racial dimensions of who became labeled during the early 2020 lockdowns as America's "essential workers":

> Black Americans make up only 12 percent of the workforce, but make up a disproportionate percentage of so-called essential jobs—such as 25 percent of food and courier delivery workers, 27 percent of postal workers, and 31 percent of transportation workers." (*Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity, 2019*, 2019)

These heavily BIPOC workers were excluded from accessing the safety of stay-at-home quarantine during the first pandemic surges (often not receiving any extra hazard pay compensation or health protections). Other significantly impacted occupations (impacted by both racism and the pandemic) included those working in schools (Fritzgerald, 2020) and in the medical field (Gay et al., 2020).

In 2020, those in the U.S. trying to maintain narrative control through the turmoil of the pandemic used multiple rhetorical strategies. Echoing the "false political narratives" the Trump administration in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic used to "distract the nation from the primary responsibility of ensuring public health" (Katner et al., 2020), talking points went from dismissing the virus as a "new hoax" or the "China flu" to playing up "individual freedom." But the individualism touted was not extended to "everyone," only the most familiar (familial), as when Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, a White Republican male, said in a Fox News interview in March 2020, "There are more important things than living, and that's saving this country for my children and my grandchildren and saving this country for all of us." Of Lt. Gov. Patrick's statement, Bratich (2021) noted the "nativist" rhetoric: "The 'us' here is an extension of 'my,' invoking blood (family) and soil (nation)" (p, 258).

Again in America, human need and feelings get considered a thing of waste in the face of profit and populism, especially for those people deemed "surplus." As if to illustrate this, Lt. Gov. Patrick doubled down in an April 2020 follow-up interview, saying the death toll "wasn't high enough" to warrant the "expense" of the precautionary shutdown measures (Samuels, 2020). Similarly, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on April 3, 2020, recommended the use of facial masks to reduce contagious droplet spread, President Trump countered that he would not personally be masking, again using a populist rhetoric even if it was at odds with his "law and order" language. Thereafter "anti-masking" nationally became a potent medical-political symbology, where "the anti-masker cries of 'individual freedom' are in fact passionate protections of the homogenous," a sign of, as Bratisch (2021) explained:

> a Whiteness that articulates itself through a disregard for the lives of Others, and indifference to those who are different. The eugenicist tones of the Tennessee anti-lockdown protest sign that said 'Sacrifice the Weak' thus announced a Whiteness that determines who is unworthy of care and security." (pp. 258–259)

There were also efforts to substitute actual safety measures with profitable storylines. When COVID-19 cases quickly spiked from "manageable" single digits to thousands of victims in America, and amid mounting criticism for the public health management effort from the U.S. government, "to save face [the Trump administration] saw that it is necessary to change the narrative" (Katner et al., 2020, para. 4). These narrative attempts included the "hollow platitudes" Bowleg (2020) described of the "we're ALL in this TOGETHER!" messaging, as well as health industry corporate forces using the term "heroes" for exhausted pandemic frontliners, stripping away human needs (of the disproportionally workers of color). While this could be seen on the surface as an uplifting narrative, "discourses of equality have a way of

being misleading" (Liz, 2020, para. 2). Hennekam et al. (2020) found that most nonphysician healthcare workers rejected these narratives as a more insidious manipulation, feeling objectified and used by the temporary status update which was, after all, only "an attempt by the public to feel better about themselves" (p. 1096).

In fact, Bonilla-Silva (2020) argued that, far from uplifting frontline workers, such "heroic" framing makes it harder for them to advocate for themselves as it makes the general public "less likely to empathize and support those who choose to strike, protest, or remain absent from work during the pandemic," a canny, dangerous story form that can marginalize individuals further by turning them into de-humanized caricatures. In a 2020 op-ed by Sanford E. Roberts M.D., a Black general surgery resident at a large urban US hospital, wrote, "I'm a hero, but also a second-class citizen. These are the 2 aspects of my identity in direct conflict" (Roberts, 2020). Such a conflict is doubly dangerous, as even heroes are expendable (Jasper et al., 2018, p. 115), for "when 'heroes' do not behave according to our archetypal notion of heroism, they become villains" (Bonilla-Silva, 2020, p. 3). Such "flowery rhetoric" and "pure fantasy" of oversimplified unity-storytelling deceptively "irons out the tremendous levels of inequality in our nation," into a whole-cloth fabrication of 'equal' suffering when vulnerable populations *always* do worse during disasters (p. 7). Espina and Narruhn (2021) agreed:

> Much like the refrain that 'white lives matter too' in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, the idea of COVID-19 'leveling the playing field' misses powerful structural factors that shape health outcomes. … People who benefit from existing systems (eg, education, financial, employment, housing) are more likely to be white. Their access to life-sustaining resources enables them with the choice to follow governmental mandates for safety such as social distancing and quarantine or isolation. (p. 186)

When some states moved hastily to lift quarantine and mask mandates, Heckler & Mackey (2022) described how the "essential workers" of the early pandemic, previously hailed as "heroes," were cast again as expendable BIPOC losses: "As states and companies opened up despite widespread COVID outbreaks, new sacrificial zones developed in grocery stores, nursing homes, restaurants" (p. 2).

These were, perhaps, the populations that experienced the 2020 disruption of dominant systems not with despair but with "a form of pessimism in which only the end of the world might generate a space for hope" (Colebrook, 2020, para. 6). The twin pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism both steal breath disproportionately from Black persons, something Houdek (2022) called out in "centering a respiratory lens" (p. 51). When further emotionally devastated by the highly mediated police brutality to and drawn-out murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, marginalized people rejected the acquiescence to systemic violence and continued bearing of suffering (para. 9), despite or perhaps because of the fact that American COVID deaths also passed the 100,000 mark (AJMC Staff, 2021) at that point. Beyond the inflamed rhetoric of social media and White-centric leaders, everyday people began to recognize the "technologies of suffocation" in White supremacist American systems (Houdek, 2022, p. 59), that "the differential impact of the coronavirus pandemic on minority communities across this nation illustrates WE ARE NOT ALL IN THIS TOGETHER in the same way" (Hesford, 2021, p. 240). As Zaino & Bell (2021) articulated similarly to Houdek's (2022) "respiratory lens":

> in the context of the pandemic and the heightened attention to precarity it produced, as the ways in which we are literally implicated in one another's lives and deaths become more pronounced (we breathe each other's air; we live and die by this breath), the pandemic highlights how we are vulnerable to each other. (pp. 2-3)

41

In the confluence of politics, pandemic, and police brutality, those first-time antiracist participants that rose, in anger and grief, to protest in the wake of George Floyd's murder, seemed to be responding to some of that mutual precarity and vulnerability. Though other historic protest narratives exist, this unique set of polarized circumstances seemed to be an important gap in the research to study, for listening to the first-person narratives of first-time BLM protesters and their historic positioning can serve as powerful primary sources (Edgar & Johnson, 2020) or antiracist lifelines to arts-based protest research for future generations working toward racial justice.

Drawing Lines: Historic Anti-Racist Forms

Though some would "domesticate" past civil rights protest to disparage current protest movement as somehow too-intense, and some in the 2020's BLM protests would distance themselves from misremembered too-pacifist 1960's struggles, both historical movements share significant commonalities (Edgar & Johnson, 2020). While the "non-respectability politics" trajectory of BLM marked a break with traditional Black politics "as it challenged the liberal civil rights reform project that dressing well, working hard, and disagreeing politely would entitle Black people to the full rights of citizenship," Francis & Wright-Rigueur (2021) explained that the fundamental purpose of protest traditions for Black lives remains strong—a purpose to expose "the failures of the state and the true nature of American democracy" (p. 452). Harnessing decentralized tactics and expressive versus strategic communication strategies (Tillery, 2019, p. 319), BLM activists proved powerfully able to illuminate the tragic narrative of American racial injustice, the true failure of American social justice, even more effectively in 2020.

DiAngelo (2019) echoed earlier statements by scholar of color Kendi (2017) with the critical point that "all systems of oppression are adaptive; they can withstand and adjust to challenges and still maintain inequality" (p. 40). However, in the unique set of historic disruptive circumstances in 2020 the normal "adjusting" capacities of systemic racial oppression, White fragility, and silent White complicity seemed outpaced and momentarily overcome, a transformational reaction to withdrawal that Napolin (2020) described as going "from hearing to listening, from the passive to the active" (p. 48). Where White denial or silent complicity could maintain its hold in other circumstances, in 2020 the various stress points seemed to trigger a sudden shift of "risk calculus" (Colebrook, 2020, para. 11), enough for much higher levels of participation of first-time anti-racist protest in 2020 than ever before (Francis & Wright-Rigueur, 2021).

The "stress points" became angry tangles with George Floyd's brutal, media-recorded murder in late May of 2020, following many well-documented, tragic murders of Black Americans. Breonna Taylor had been killed in Kentucky, shot in her bed by police two months prior to Floyd's death; the video documenting how Ahmaud Arbery was murderously ambushed in Georgia by three white vigilante men had leaked to media the month before. In addition to this overt racialized violence, came growing coverage of the constant threat and harassments (documented in the outrageous call by a White woman demanding police intervention against Black birdwatcher Christian Cooper *the same day* Floyd was killed). The culmination of tragedies meant widespread resistance against the dominant White supremacist story exploded. Multiple street protests, marches, vehicle protest caravans, responsive candlelight vigils, and racial justice education events all took place in mass efforts to negate majoritarian storytelling. Rejecting the White-centric liberty-and-justice frame that represents racial injustice as a

43

nonissue—something that does not exist, something "polite" White people do not need to discuss seriously or challenge, something Black people don't need to "overreact" to—protestors built on past justice efforts for Black lives and extended them into the issues and technologies of today.

Where White cohesive forces could maintain narrative hold in other circumstances, in 2020 "the virus that seemed to threaten the world became the occasion to demand the end of the police state" (Colebrook, 2020, para. 11). The suffering became unsufferable, and new voices felt able to join the social justice fray. As Rosa et al. (2016) articulated, "How do we honor our debt to the dead? Each new name we are forced to swallow … adds unbearable weight to the responsibility" of fighting systemic racism (p.122). The unprecedented numbers of protestors coupled by the unprecedented intersectionality of participation, the mixing of racial and other identities, showing up for BLM activities in the immediate aftermath of Floyd's death, demonstrated a dramatic surge in first-time protester participation. Suddenly in May 2020, a surge of diverse Americans recognized in that moment what scholars of color Reynolds & Kendi (2020) emphasized:

> Scrolling will never be enough. Reposting will never be enough. Hashtagging will never be enough. Because hatred has a way of convincing us that half love is whole. … we—all of us—have to fight against performance and lean into participation. (pp. 252–253)

The barriers to protest are both overt and insidious, some shifting with the times, some long-known—but new BLM protest activity in 2020 showed that crisis truly might bring people together.

Line Breaks: Creative Anti-Racism in 2020 and Beyond

"Racist power is not godly. Racist policies are not indestructible," Kendi (2019) affirmed. "Race and racism are power constructs of the modern world … not even six hundred years old. It's a cancer that we've caught early" (p. 238). So when crisis throws the cancerous White racist narrative in a shredder, and some previously assimilated people rise up together against the narrative for social justice, there is a kind of constructive/destructive narrative space that is opened. For White and White-identifying Americans that had remained complicit or in denial prior to 2020, this crisis-space proved one of liminal transformation, the "unsuturing" referred to by Yancy (2015) as an important part of "troubling" the active maintenance of White peoples "sealing themselves off," allowing their sense of self in the world to become more like an "open wound," ready to continually dismantle racist systems even within themselves. For the dominant American story, the "suturing" of normed White identity, Yancy elaborated:

> implies a state of being free from a certain kind of "infection." In other words, within the context of critically engaging whiteness, the concept of suture functions as a site of keeping pure, preserving what is unsullied. … The process of suturing, then, is reflective of another fable: the white self as a site of self-possession and in absolute control of its own meaning, where such meaning is taken to be grounded within a larger white narrative history underwritten by a natural/metaphysical teleology. (p. xv)

Protest can also function as a kind of "unsuturing," where White racial framings meet a "site of dispossession" (p. xxiii). As arts-based research *about* protest, further, this thesis seeks to open up control of this "narrative history," keeping open emotional places that a White racial framing, a disembodied intellectualism, or thought-occluding everyday soundbites work to shut down.

45

Value of Critical Poetic Inquiry

Echoing Crenshaw's (1989) notions of intersectionality as a paradigm addressing an individual's multiple intersecting dimensions of identity and social groups, hooks (2013) articulated the impacts of "domination culture" where people are trapped by binary language, "either/or options that will not let us claim all the bits and piece of ourselves" (p. 190). With a polyvocality of experience (Görlich, 2016, p. 532), critical poetic inquiry aims to open up that emotional seam sewn shut by domination culture, a closed-off "sutured Whiteness" which might otherwise relegate "to meaningless chatter that is said to lack epistemological, political or moral authority" (Yancy, 2015, p. xvii). Through narrative and emotional wordwork, critical poetic inquiry explores how "I" becomes "I," while at the same time "also unsettles this 'I' and asks us to confront the challenges of becoming 'we'" (Zaino & Bell, 2021, p. 19).

Reflecting on my own identity as both a White first-time BLM protester in 2020 and a White researcher in academia, this critical poetic inquiry approach is particularly "unsettling," where poems represent an intersectional source of knowledge and "powerful documents that possess the capacity to capture the contextual and psychological worlds of both poet and subject" (Furman et al., 2007, p. 302). Poetic inquiry methodology is especially important for 2020, Donovan (2021) agreed, "because the participant is in the middle of a critical event. The arts-based method of eliciting and facilitating experiential representations through poetry acknowledges the unprecedented circumstances of research during a global pandemic" (p. 4).

While some protest research has focused on media coverage of participants (Reid & Craig, 2021), effective policy messaging (Schenwar et al., 2016), or "protest aesthetics" (Korkut et al., 2020), the scholarship of White antiracist allies has only recently appeared in American literature (Grzanka et al., 2019, p. 500), with sparse literature regarding first-time protest participation or

more recent iterations of BLM protest activity of any kind. Of the 2020-protest-based projects, very few have focused in on actual interview transcripts of protest participants as a source of knowledge, preferring instead to focus on metrics from Twitter hashtags, for example, media framings (Reid & Craig, 2021), or even graffiti as a research site (Cappelli, 2020).

Thesis Focus and Research Questions

Responding to work by Cobbina et al. (2021), this thesis seeks to fill the gap of historic 2020 protest research with embodied, arts-based poetic inquiry, "revelatory distillation of experience" (Lorde, 2007, p. 37) based on protester interviews from predominantly White first-time BLM protesters who had newly learned to actively "unsuture" the majoritarian stories that favor Whites and disregard the social costs to amplifying Black counterstory—in order to hear how, in this unique 2020 moment, they hoped to shape their own version of counterstory formation, to "shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). So, with the voices of fresh 2020 BLM protest participants, I will be guiding this thesis by the following research questions:

1. What are ways predominantly White first-time BLM protest participants recalled and languaged their protest experience, and what might that tell us about antiracism efforts in 2020?

2. How can poetic inquiry methods be used to re/present individual emotional or psychological conflict in an historical protest setting?

Chapter 3. Methods and Measures

The stories woven and intertwined in a protest are necessarily tangled in a complex webwork; hard numbers and statistics may give a certain underpinning to the patterns, but it is the untangling effects of *qualitative* methodology that reveal individual narrative threads more clearly. In this chapter I discuss how my study participants were recruited, securely (and, in COVID times, noncontagiously) interviewed, along with how their narratives were carefully transcribed. I continue with descriptions of my coding and analysis process, where my beginning methods evolved into multiple methodologies. Initially, I employed strictly qualitative methodology to untangle protest participant threads, but as I continued on in this project I took additional steps to harness the experiential-stitching aims of poetic inquiry (PI), working toward an articulated tapestry of metaphoric data analysis by the project's conclusion. By using both grounded theory and PI, my goal was to most effectively contextualize and historicize the participant experience of young, predominantly White-identifying U.S. citizens protesting against racial injustice for the first time, in the ultimately liminal American socio-political circumstances during May-June of 2020. Throughout this chapter and summarized at the conclusion, I present some of the reflexive thought processes and studies in my aim to further antiracism work, modeling the qualitative research method pathways in studies such as Barton (2007) in her work examining boundary setting in exotic dancers, and Lawrence and Davis (2019) in their work comparing racial identities within sport-fandom culture, as well as extending the critical poetic inquiry methodology example from Davis (2021) in her work as a BIPOC scholar using research poetry sampled from minoritized protest voices to "democratize knowledge, present counter-stories, and rebel against Eurocentric norms in the academy" (p. 122).

Story Lines: Participant Voices From the 2020 BLM Protests

I began this project with eight classmates as a research team, recruiting participants through social media. We started with an initial research focus that took shape through team discussions where we felt, as Vanover (2016) feels of beginner teachers, that a unique share of the 2020 anti-racist protests' emotional energy and weight resided in the narratives of *beginner protesters.* "I saw the beginners as good people doing an important job," reports Vanover of his decision to interview *new* teachers for ethnodrama purposes, "who were faced with difficult challenges they would eventually have the skill to overcome" (p. 240). New racial-justice protesters, before they fully incorporated the social costs that can be associated with counternarrative action, were perhaps more likely to articulate these events freshly, offering unique perspectives without the weight and possible conflations of past protest emotions or experience.

I recruited my participants via a flyer on social media (see Appendix A) and word of mouth. No compensation was offered for participation in this study, only the idea that our research team would do justice to their words, to their story. Unfortunately, as hopeful as the research team started out, "bites" for potential participants turned out to be spotty and uneven, for undetermined reasons. Some team members had a plentiful response while some team members had none. Theories abounded, including the sensitive nature of racial protesting in general and of the fearful political climate in the U.S. in 2020, but no definitive answers presented themselves. Several of the research team members were able, however, to multiply their participants by snowball sampling recruitments, and some respondents were redirected to other research team members once their initial research team contact had enough participants to cover their own interview requirements.

I interviewed five participants whose ages ranged from late-20s to mid-50s, living in the Southern United States, one of them, Alana, identifying as Pacific Islander but as she clarified "passing as White." Three of them identified upfront as White—Kathy, Douglas, and Orca—while one of them, Kin, identified as a "human being" or a "universal being" when asked specifically about his racial identity, though later he detailed his personal family background of biracial experience and cited "being seen in the eyes of America as a Black man." All were newly active in racial injustice protesting in 2020, with one having protested in a very small Tennessee town, three having protested in a small-medium Tennessee city, and one having protested in a major North Carolina metropolis. Each had their own intersectional identity challenged by political turmoil and a range of conflict convergence and divergence accordingly.

My initial concerns pre-interviewing were of not being able to "do their voices justice, especially in only an hour" of interview and with the sometimes-unreliable Zoom video conference platform being a potential hinderance to adequate rapport and communication. Less than a month after these interviews were completed, however, the tumultuous presidential election of 2020 took place, resulting in days of no known presidential winner, no clear repudiation of racist systemic policies the BLM protesters had fought to repel. I harbored empathetic worry for my participants during this fraught time. My journal reflections expressed my heartbreak for "these hopeful protesters," feeling the weight of their words and experiences, agonizing over the stalemate I knew they had taken to the streets to fight against, even as I fought to be as reflexive as possible. I worked to maintain a sense of academic collaboration in my analysis and coding of the resulting emotional transcripts.

The challenges of recruiting *first-time* protest participants, then acquiring an interviewing pool of protesters during tense political times were compounded by the challenges presented by gathering data in a pandemic.

Collecting Lines: Managing Pandemic Communication Data

For all of the study interviews conducted during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 (one focus group of three individuals, and two one-on-one interviews), I used the Zoom platform as the chosen virtual meeting platform to maintain privacy and to keep a safe social distancing. The Zoom platform had quickly ascended to national utility during the early spring 2020 shutdown days of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the time of my interviewing in the fall of 2020, Zoom was the dominant trusted video conferencing platform—fairly well known, fairly user-friendly, and universally accepted by the study interviewees (even with known technological glitch possibilities). I additionally secured secondary, duplicate audio recording to my password-protected smartphone as a backup to the Zoom meetings and recordings so that all interviews were both audio and video recorded to help with later verbatim transcription.

I compiled my interview guide from a host of questions that were research-team sourced and IRB-approved, grouped by category to explore participant perceptions of intersectional identity, experiences toward race and protest generally, circumstances of individual protest involvement and motivations, and thoughts on future protest directions (see Appendices B & C). Knowing I had only an hour with the participants, I further narrowed the host of questions in my interview guide to stick to a preliminary focus of counterstory and historic contextualization. During interviewing, I attempted especially to be mindful of fostering rapport, checking my (White, cis/het, dominant-language) privilege, and mitigating threat as much as possible (Madison, 2012). Borrowing from Dey (1999), Charmaz (2014) cautioned against "smash-and-

grab" data collection of previous grounded theory research, which rushes past the establishment

of interview rapport; mindful of this, I worked on "entering research participants' worlds" (p.33).

The ethos of "narrative care" espoused by de Medeiros and Rubenstein (2015), additionally

directed me overall to practice active listening, to not exert power but to encourage deeper detail,

to be attentive for "shadow stories" of self-censorship or suppression (p. 164).

I transcribed each resulting interview verbatim. To ensure accuracy with the

transcriptions, I performed a line-by-line fine editing and secondary audio recording comparison,

to catch any mistranscriptions, misspellings, mispunctuations, and omissions (something said too

quietly for Zoom to pick up audibly, or in the case of the focus groups, when more than one

participant spoke on top of another). I thoroughly and carefully de-identified all transcriptions,

inventing appropriate new participant names and renaming places or other identifying data to

prevent a breach of confidentiality, as required by IRB standards and as communicated to all

participants before participation. As this process unfolded, I journaled my ethical deliberation

about my participant's new substitute names, trying to choose aliases that, while disguising their

identities, nevertheless tried to honor their expressed identities as faithfully as possible. The de-

identified transcriptions were held in password-protected University-sanctioned digital storage

where only the research team had access to the data.

Once study participants were recruited and small hourlong snippets of their compelling

narratives were secured, the frayed raw edges of these participants' experience in the U.S. started

to come in to more focus.

Connecting Lines: Untangling and Re/Presenting Narrative Threads

The crux and confluence of 2020 racial protest and pandemic crisis felt barely softened

by the time the interviews began. No longer in the immediate protest fervor (but not far out of it,

and with the deadly COVID-19 pandemic still raging), the study interviews held a potent sense of collective recent sensitivity and emotional memory. Recognizing this expressive metaphoric quality proved a turning point—a qualitative opportunity. Specifically, I used a multiphasic methodology to first analyze these narratives with grounded theory and then, extending my exploration of antiracist methodology, expand into a secondary performative- and arts-based research phase, specifically focusing in on poetic inquiry (PI) to consider the emotionally complex data.

Untangling: The Grounded Theory Phase

Once all of my own interview transcriptions had been finely combed through, I applied an eclectic mix of coding line-by-line to each transcription, which included a strong focus on *in vivo* coding. This yielded many colorful, "pithy" phrasings to focus on without expecting them to, as Charmaz (2014) warned, "stand on their own" (p.134). Much of this phrasing seemed to suggest clues to participants' inner social worlds (p. 134), contextualizing their articulated protest experiences as valuable and distinct from that of protest leaders (Edgar & Johnson, 2020).

I moved into more focused coding, which I modeled after Cannon (2012) and combined *in vivo* codes while pulling in the advantages of gerund coding and versus coding at multiple junctures. Saldaña (2016) also encouraged this switching, to "develop new or hybrid coding methods or adapt existing schemes, customized to suit the unique needs and disciplinary concerns of your study" (p.74). While I honed the transcript data into patterns through focused coding rounds and then memo-writing, I did find the coding, as Charmaz (2014) described, "not entirely a linear process" (p. 141). Charmaz, like Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), emphasized that working with the data, thinking and writing with it, is emergent, circular and cyclical, subject to, and welcoming of, unexpected ideas. Praising postmodernist research positioning,

Richardson (1992) asserted further that "a multitude of approaches to knowing and telling exist side by side" and, particularly relevant to my approach in this study, she has long advocated for experiments in creative analytical writing practices—especially experiments in research poetry—as additional methods of knowing (Richardson, 1992, p. 126).

As I combined and analyzed the initial codes (resulting in banks of coded phrases linked loosely together under headings), I also journaled and wrote memos concurrently. I found my own journaled thoughts taking shape away from strict prose, into in a semi-poetic form like this bit of raw emergent writing I crafted December 3, 2020, four months into the project:

Who is your Teller?

If story is power, who you trust to tell you

the story is critical.

The Teller,

The power to shape the world, the Word

who we trust,

who is "us"…

As well as this unrefined process-reflection from almost a year later, in September 19, 2021:

I have noted on my various

readings, from groups, memos.

Noting coded, noting

pull quoted. What am I getting to

the metaphor heart of?

While initially I had been trying to establish a traditional grounded theory of counterstorytelling in/as protest, writing memos in these poem-adjacent ways, and exploring arts-based research

methodologies further shaped my study. Where divergent ideas of emergent coding and emergent ways of knowing kept coming back around to my attention, I felt compelled toward a further step of analysis.

Inspired especially by the work of Wagaman et al. (2018) which investigated other ways "counterstorytelling uses the power of narrative as a form of resistance" (p. 9) and the forceful PI work of Davis (2021) which insisted arts-based qualitative research "can also participate in civic discourse *as protest* [emphasis added] and not serve only as tools to measure issues related to civic action and identity" (p. 122), I veered into the secondary component of this project. These inspirations led me into exploring PI as a critical processing tool of the qualitative data as well as exploring the capacity of PI *as its own form of resistance*. The evocative historicizing possibilities of poetic representation for non-traditional racial injustice protest participant voices seemed to hold great promise as critical arts-based research, exploring conflicted accounts even as I explored my own conflicted positioning as a first-time BLM protester myself.

Re/Presenting: The Poetic Inquiry Phase

With the transcribed, focus-coded voices of fresh 2020 protest participants, I shifted into the secondary phase: poetic inquiry. I re-engaged with my participants' coded transcripts, working carefully with participant narratives (and the banks of coded phrases from the grounded theory phase) to see differently how the power-shifting goals and counterstory actions of protest were being processed into powerful speech. From these streamlined groupings, I aimed to explore ways that, through arts-based research methodology (specifically PI practices), participants' authentic language could be re/presented, or re/positioned with poetic crafting to stimulate a different way of understanding and (secondhand) experiencing of racial injustice protest. As I demonstrate in Chapter 4, participants' expressions of experience, streamlined into

poetic inquiry renderings, reflected and articulated some of the complex emotions of the paradoxical protest experience in sometimes surprising ways.

Arts in research has a well-established academic history, with PI situated within it as a growing branch to explore qualitative data—a good match for emotionally detail-rich data such as from our first-time BLM protester interviews. Though "watertight-container answers" are neither its focus nor its strong suit, poetry- and arts-based research *is* particularly good at "generating questions or raising awareness of complex subtleties that matter" (Eisner, 2008, p. 7) while not falling into monolithic discourses (Moon & Flores, 2000, p. 111). Foster (2012) extended this recognition of poetry's complex subtlety as helping us "to challenge conventional wisdom and to understand the nuances of life in a sociologically engaged, rigorous, and enriching way" (p. 753) as well as pursuing an intersectional ideal of "honoring the whole person" (McCulliss, 2013). Leggo (2008) agreed: "Poetry is a way of knowing and living, a way of examining lived experiences by attending to issues of identity, relationship, and community" (p. 171). Even beyond challenge and nuance, Furman et al. (2007) state, using poetic forms is just good research technique, as it "allows researchers to achieve the compression that is valued in quantitative methods along with the in-depth nature of thick and dense qualitative data" (p. 304).

As it is a rapidly evolving branch of a qualitative research, though, PI has an unsettled recent scholarly history, with much debate over definitive criteria. For example, various alternative approaches or names for poetic inquiry include: poetic transcription/found poetry, narrative poetry, research poetry, data poems, lyric inquiry, poetic analysis, ethno-poems, collective poems, poetic portraits, map-poems, field poetry, and collage/hybrid texts (Faulkner, 2020; Prendergast, 2009; Vincent, 2018). Prendergrast (2009) also differentiated between

"literature-voiced" PI poems (written in response to literature or politics), "researcher-voiced" PI poems (written in research context with field notes and autoethnographic writing as a data source), and "participant-voiced" PI poems (written from interview transcripts or co-created with the researcher) (p. 545). These many subdivisions can keep PI from either being neatly categorized or suffocated in academic stagnation; as Vincent (2018) noted, "PI lacks linearity," yet is still "a unique and vital way to express and learn" (p. 64).

Still, though PI is an emerging arts research methodology, there is also emerging curation of the aesthetic values within it. Scholars such as Piirto (2002) cautioned against "use and abuse" in novice PI, while Prendergrast (2009) admitted PI as an overall concept continues to demand aesthetic questions such as: "Is research of this kind *art* or merely 'art-like'?" (p. 549). Though perhaps the best known PI form is that of poetic transcription, defined by Glesne (1997) as "the creation of poemlike compositions from the words of interviewees" (p. 202), it is a form that some more recent PI scholars like Faulker (2020) argued for skillfully crafting *beyond*, so as not to be "coldly encyclopedic" in the research (p. 104). As I worked with BLM participants' emotionally-charged, liminal narratives, navigating between complex identities, fleetingly unique historic moments, and sociopolitical tensions, I decided against pursuing any coldly utilitarian or encyclopedic PI forms.

Wishing to honor critical/aesthetic qualities as much as research integrity, I moved away from strict poetic transcription. Moving the poetic inquiry of this phase away from direct transcript lines, typed in a poem-like way, I pursued a more artistic craft-based inquiry (yet still firmly within the "participant-voiced" category). I grouped the transcripts' lines and phrases into banks of consolidated grounded theory focused codes like "silence," "permission," "direct action," "masking," "fake news," etc. From there I was able to sift "pithy" lines to the top, then

shift and edit the grouped lines in semi-linear but more interesting ways, pulling them together in a structured framework but with a more lyric, emotionally-weighted aesthetic (while still striving for integrity in the participant narrative and meaning). The participant narratives and emotionality thereby became more compressed, with some themes aligning that might not otherwise have become linked.

While certain codes stretched across participant interviews, several poems emerged from singular interviews which, in my aesthetic opinion, more strongly articulated a given theme. I crafted other poems with grounded theory codes that were well-represented in the language of multiple, or all, participants. Through my graduate poetry course, I even experimented with poetic forms, line breaks, and poetic crafting in-depth. The final content and form of these first-time protester narratives, in PI analysis, ended up forming a collective countervoice on its own, more like what Vincent (2018) said of narrative poetry: "a form of resistance to undermine power ... as opposed to providing a singular and absolute truth" (p. 59).

Reaching Toward Connection: The Reflexive Phase

I documented the process and wrote emergent journals as the study progressed, with major entries after each interview incident, through transcription editing, and during the politically charged events immediately surrounding the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. I wrote of my struggles with identifying too closely at times with these protest participants, attempting to manage both my empathy and assumptions by modeling Barton (2007) as she navigated the tricky lines between observer and observed.

Then, even while poetically inspired by the data, I recorded many, many feelings of inadequacy to the task. Journal entries in later phases leaned further into poetic inquiry themselves, using enjambment and short lines to highlight the tension in my thought processing

and data analysis. I struggled with both my own identity as a White woman and a new researcher, as well as my discomfort confronting my failings in my own racial justice awareness. When I encountered forceful pushback against one of these emerging research poems I shared during a graduate poetry class workshop, I struggled to work through my difficult-to-shake doubts about the acceptability of arts research, or about my efforts, as a White researcher fumbling (perhaps perpetuating harm?) even as I strove toward antiracist ends. In a February 22, 2022 journal entry, I wrote:

> Be quiet. This movement doesn't want to hear from you.
>
> I know a protest and it doesn't look like you.
>
> Silence. You shouldn't have written it
>
> Minimize your name to it
>
> what is proper
>
> what is artistic what is accepted
>
> what is too much.
>
> White silence, white mores
>
> clam me up as unhelpful
>
> How should anyone do it? Who speaks up?
>
> -who suffers whose optics whose help -
>
> can I fight racism in this way?

At this point, I furthered my research with Whiteness studies and deliberated concepts such as "White savior" (Cole, 2012), "White sprawl" (Cleveland, 2022, p. 217), and "centralizing Whiteness" (Badwall, 2016), wanting to work with and not against these concepts. In the end, I continued my work but remain plagued by doubts, even while consciously attempting to

maintain cultural humility and an attitude of continual learning, knowing I will be making many mistakes in my journey towards, as Plummer (2020) terms it, "functioning antiracism." Also, knowing the deep challenge of how PI work could be labeled and judged within the wider arts community, I found comfort in the words of Faulkner (2020) who cautions beginner Poetic Inquirers: "You will flounder around, unsure of what you're doing," before reassuring again: "the possibilities and praxis of poetry and Poetic Inquiry for qualitative researchers lie in our skills and motivations to further poetic craft as method and methodology" (p. 153).

In 2020, these first-time protesters embodied the voices of *paradox*—gathered bodily together in outrage even in the midst of a deadly global viral threat, taking a public personal stand while disengaging from White racial unity/silence and disregarding the White social costs to amplifying the grief and grievances of BIPOC. In what follows in Chapter 4, I show the work of the qualitative research and poetic inquiry processes and, through the re/presented words of protesters, process both our intersecting identities as well as the enormity of how unique and complex the 2020 BLM protest moments were. Using PI poems in this way, historicizing the voices of predominantly White first-time BLM protesters in 2020, can hopefully serve to "shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)—reaching toward Plummer's (2020) functioning antiracist goal of "getting to we". My intention through this multiphasic research has been for White counternarrative to speak for itself, to White dominant audiences and systems, in support of *human* relational care and breathable futures, starting with considering a poetic take of themselves. As Richardson (1992) proposed, "In writing the Other, we can (re)write the self" (p. 136).

Chapter 4. Findings

Since the very act of protesting is itself an act born from conflict, the collected interviews of this study reflected paradox and conflict. In contrast to the broad brush that protest activity is portrayed with in popular media, however, the ways predominantly White first-time BLM protest participants recalled and languaged their 2020 protest experience played out on a more nuanced scale than the depicted mass marches. In analyzing their expressed experiences, I explored aspects of individual emotional and psychological conflict. Many commonalities popped up across multiple interviewees, and sometimes blurred with other concepts. However, through the process of grounded theory's memo-writing and focused coding, two main actions seemed most clearly relevant. First-time BLM protest participants in 2020 made meaning of conflict by (to extend a phrase from Yancey, 2015) *unsuturing* some of their internalized White norms as well as *calling out* dominant cultural forces.

In the following pages I consider the two described actions, unsuturing and calling out, as guiding twin metaphors, illuminating some of the major inward- and outward-focused meaning-making processes for first-time BLM protest participants in 2020. In the section of this chapter focused on unsuturing, three separate subsections show where participants' internalized White norms like apathy, silence, and permission-asking got opened up or unsutured, each subsection culminating with a poetic inquiry poem crafted from participant words. In the section of this chapter focused on calling out, three separate subsections explore how external Whiteness trappings like identity masks, bad stories, and immoral estrangement from humanity had to get publicly challenged or called out, again culminating with a poetic inquiry poem crafted from participant words.

In employing the secondary PI analysis phase for re/presentation of these threads, I have stitched frayed phrases and languaged themes together from participant narratives in an effort, not to close something that needs to be open to heal, but to offer some thin framework gauze for preservation. I offer this mix of conflicted voices calling out from historical 2020, as opened to air and light as new antiracism efforts might need to be.

Unsuturing: Unsettling the "I"

The year 2020 was a time of universal uncertainty for many populations and many systems. What might have seemed immutably "settled" became suddenly unsettled. It was in that unsettled unsuturing, a "cleansing breaking of the heart" (Baldwin, 1985, p. xviii) triggered in some by the twin pandemics of racism and COVID-19, where a remaking could be envisioned and action could emerge from that new framing.

Unsuturing, as described by Yancey (2015) at once points to the medical necessity sometimes required of purposefully opening an infected wound, but also gestures toward other metaphoric possibilities. Metaphors of unsuturing might also suggest where one has made a mistake in sewing a seam and has to carefully unpick it, where one has to tear out one's own work, where one opens oneself to doubt and uncertainty about an outcome, and being open to course-correcting (Winderman, 2021). Remembering my own 2020 BLM protest experience, I re-immersed in some of that frayed, conflicted unsettledness through my poetic inquiry with the "apathy/empathy," "silence," and "permission-asking" themes in my participants' narratives.

Many of their words relayed an uncertainty that has potential to be a "cleansing break." Every participant I spoke with revealed strong emotions roiling their internal states, over a time scale of months to years. Aside from the more obvious worries about personal safety (everything from COVID-19 contagion to state retaliatory violence to White supremacist terrorism) other

themes of inner conflict played out in the stories participants told me. Each identified, for example, a sense of action-nullifying "apathy" that they saw in society at large. One of my participants, Alana, used at several points apathetic phrases like "no one cares" or "you don't get people out for anything, anymore, unless maybe it's like a football game." There was also regretful acknowledgement of their own previous inertia. One of the participants, Kin, seemed additionally conflicted about his previous nonparticipation, perhaps because of his biracial family background, and expressed, "racism is such a touchy subject because I wouldn't say I was practicing activism four years ago, after Trayvon Martin was murdered."

However, participants countered even regret or despair with an acute internal awareness of the power of their empathy in trying to combat it. In conjunction with the participants' sense that apathy needs to be fought against, there was multifaceted internal debate about silence—the value of staying silent as a White person, versus the critical importance of fighting silence. As Alana relayed, she wanted to be careful "not to be shouting over people" but also wanted to model active resistance to White supremacy for the next generation. Kids, Alana noted, "model what you do or don't do so you don't even have to actively teach hatred. … it's apathy that's led to this." Additionally, with the sense of "normalcy" being in flux in 2020, participants recalled internally wrestling with the idea of control and permission—who has it, who grants it, and who takes it for themselves?

As the following three unsuturing themes of apathy/empathy, silence, and permission-asking show, participants stayed in their discomfort and were opened by their experiences of psychological conflict.

"I Need it/to Change": Being Open To Empathy

Apathy was explicitly identified by participants as a force from "typical" White time—an emotional void that sucked away empathy and action, a kind of forceful emptiness they felt and wanted to fight in themselves. Kathy said, for example, that for many White people, even for herself in past times, many previous racialized police brutality acts had been seen as "horrible" but also "kind of like the Iran Contra affair" in that it's "kind of far away, not really close-impacting." That this apathetic, or perhaps hopeless, disregard in the face of injustice could be indistinguishable from White complicity was not lost on participants, who universally expressed seeking out education from BIPOC writers and scholars.

In an extension of apathy, participants also acknowledged exhaustion with the state of politics and the world. Orca said of the pandemic spiking alongside police brutality: "We're tired. We're tired. We were tired before and we didn't need this. We did not need another brick in the small of our back. … it's so so easy to want to give up or be scared in the wake of a deadly virus on top of everything else." Still, it seemed particularly painful to participants, in their unsutured sensitized state, to observe their society outright not caring.

Apathy's antidote, empathy, kept cutting through the stagnation, though. Empathy was a meaning-making theme I noted over and over again in the interviews alongside that of apathy—particularly with the shift in perspective found in 2020. Even while speaking about being so tired, Orca expressed emotional urgency too, an empathetic call to action: "It's absolutely tiring, but we don't have time to wait for people to get their, you know, their priorities right." They said that injustice "isn't going to wait for that to finish. So we can't either; we have to put ourselves in dangerous situations." Putting themselves in another's place was essential as they're "fighting

for all of us," Orca expressed, "I see now how easily the script could be flipped if my skin was just a little bit darker."

This sense of one's fate being tied up with that of others crossed into many of the participant narratives in some form or another, perhaps most powerfully in Alana's interview. Alana's empathetic articulations of imagining her asthmatic self, body and breath, anything like in the suffocating realty of George Floyd's final moments, embodied a deeply unsettled, unsutured moment for her. Alana's "unsettled" feeling is in keeping with Slater's (2020) argument for uncertainty as a decolonizing process—as well as with Applebaum's (2010) advocating for centering uncertainty and attempting to disrupt White certainty (p. 148).

In working with Alana's phrases through poetic inquiry I was reminded of the painful "respiratory philosophy" Houdek (2022) described where, through breath, "we are all bound up with one another in an onto-ethical relationship and shared atmosphere of being" (p.55). This respiratory lens informed the link between empathy themes and countering the White racial frame, resulting in the bridge of my poem "The Breathing." As I constructed the poem from the "empathy" themes in Alana's narrative, I attempted to realize the critical precarity expressed by a White-identifying, privilege-recognizing human who simultaneously hates the personal "as bad as it is" feeling while understanding whatever pain and uncertainty she experiences in this as essential to propelling the humility and changes needed—where "relearning to breathe … and breathe together" (p. 65) is the actual goal.

Inasmuch as centering "doubt and uncertainty … central to decolonization" leads to cultural humility, a key tenet of Plummer's (2020) functioning antiracist model—the question awaits of how a non-BIPOC-identifying person can best build differently from that uncertainty and resulting humility? To more fully enact cultural humility, hooks (2013) argued that love is

the key, finding "through conversation with folks who had decolonized their minds that they often began this shift because of deep feelings of love." Love, she said, "was the force that empowered folks to resist domination and create new ways of living and being in the world" (p. 195). I engaged poetic inquiry into this conversation with Alana, and created the follow poem, "The Breathing," to explore her empathy-related positioning. By re/presenting Alana's recollections, "The Breathing" reflects back her personally felt connection of empathy and love, which could in turn reflect that empathy into future readers to gain "a felt sense of the phenomenon and not merely a detached cognitive understanding" (Carroll et al., 2011, p. 629).

The Breathing

something about George Floyd
I don't know if it was
the breathing.

I have really bad asthma,
had it since I was a kid,
to not be able to

breathe is

the most terrifying

feeling

even when you know what's
happening, under no duress.
I have called out

many many times for my mother
when that's happened to me

then I found out
his mother
is dead.

I don't know if it was the breathing
but as bad as it is
I don't want

to forget that feeling
as bad as it is I need it
to change.

"How Should I Do It?": Unsealing Silence

Where "empathy" connected people, "silence" embodied a disconnection or detachment. "Silence" as a concept can certainly represent the humility and uncertainty inherent in unsuturing, but can also unfortunately act as an alternate way where White supremacy is concerned. To not speak up about racial injustice historically smacks of complicity and the abovementioned apathy—letting BIPOC do all the education and heavy lifting when some would argue it is "those who benefit from racist structures and who play the biggest part of maintaining them" who should be speaking up about change (Aal, 2001, p. 295). Yet to speak out about racial injustice, as a White person, risks rejection from multiple audiences. Speaking out can ineffectually turn off White audiences, or can be taken to mean one, as a White person, seemingly embraces White privilege to the point of performing alliance with the "White Savior Industrial Complex" (Cole, 2012) or that one "knows more" and feels empowered to speak over and above BIPOC (Aal, 2001, p. 297).

Such doubt and uncertainty was featured in participants' struggles over silence, where all kinds of "things we don't talk about" (Sheriff, 2000) were recollected with language clearly indicating discomfort. For the White-identifying protest participants, there seemed to be ongoing internal evaluations for how best to effectively perform antiracist actions. For example, despite their universal acknowledgement of White privilege during the interviews, this acknowledgement by White participants was more often accompanied with some uncertainty about how to push back against it. When asked about his racial identity, Douglas said, "now I realize that I am obviously a privileged white male," while following up a later question pre-protest mindset with: "I've done online interactions with racial equality and debating people online. I've read theory, have read tons of books on the civil rights movement … but this just

68

seemed like the first local opportunity where I could actually get up and just get involved." The push and pull of seeing privilege while feeling "stuck" seemed to hold at least two of the participants, Alana and Kathy, in more of a kind of silent limbo. Alana said, "I've never been a political person. I have always been that person who's like 'votes don't matter, it doesn't affect me,'" though witnessing the racist reactions of people "shocked me and I'm realizing more and more that's an extreme point of privilege." Kathy, thinking about future antiracist action, expressed, "I don't know exactly where, you know, where I fit in."

Along with the internal debate of one's own conscious or unconscious muteness, the silencing forces of the dominant White society—everything from family members denigrating their antiracism efforts to intense counterprotest pressure from strangers—came out in participants' stories. Orca recalled, "My father has told me multiple times that you don't need to be out there; their BLM stands for burn, loot, murder, and blah blah blah you need to keep yourself safe." Kathy recalled her indecision after her first mass-march type of racial injustice protest: "I'd read a lot about counter protests and how things got really ugly like in a nearby town." This "ugliness" served, in Kathy's case, as a social control, to which she responded by organizing a candlelit vigil in her town. She indicated that the vigil's "quietness" functioned as some nameless benefit. She was sure, she said, that town officials "don't love the little vigil, but because it's little, nobody cares."

The participant narratives reflected the internal conflict: should one stay vigilantly silent to stay safe, or stay silent to leave all available space for BIPOC voices? Should one use their White privilege to actively speak out against White supremacy, or does that *recenter* White supremacy? Alana, a White-passing participant in a major North Carolina metro area, expressed a repeated wish to learn "good history" and listen to firsthand racial injustice witnesses, but not

69

to put herself "in a space where I'm like, 'Well I'm really oppressed too and I understand what you're going through,' because I really don't."

I brought the "Breaking White Silence" poem together through poetic inquiry with Alana's narrative "silence" themes, juxtaposing her recollections of the jeering, silencing attempts of her family of origin with the militaristic enforcement of silence by police. This specific manifestation of White silencing, what Sheriff (2000) classified as "cultural censorship," is a compulsory collaboration of silence that functions to "obfuscate the machinations of power and is itself an index of power" (p. 127). Cultural censorship, however, is also classified as a discourse vulnerable to broader cultural forces like "critical historical conjunctures, which might involve the intervention of nonlocal narratives, the weakening or collapse of political monopoly, or social upheaval in apparently distant and unconnected arenas" even if "undermining silence is a monumental task" because of its pervasiveness and tendency toward self-perpetuation (p. 127). In the recollections of the participants, this censorship seemed at least partially vulnerable in the critical historical conjunctures found in 2020.

In "Breaking White Silence," I help document silencing efforts that Alana recalled (ranging from family's derisive comments and the show of State force, both in person and in televised depictions). These differing levels of White supremacist assimilation, what Plummer (2020) compassionately termed "underfunctioning" and "overfunctioning" antiracism, can all engage in differing manifestations of silencing techniques (Plummer, 2020) to someone who resists their dominant ideology. Underfunctioning antiracist behavior, for instance, could be found in "Breaking White Silence" as "That's stupid, why are you doing it? There's property damage" and "that man was a criminal" language—minimizing racism's contemporary and historic effects. I also, through poetic inquiry, document Alana's at-times defensive, at-times

determined for action, *refusal* to be "silenced": "You can only talk so much. We all have a part to play. I told my mom I'm going to the protest Saturday." By juxtaposing Alana's multiple reactions to silencing, this PI poem created a more streamlined voice of counterstory for Alana and perhaps a roadmap for future readers who might be navigating this multifaceted social force.

Breaking White Silence

Nothing in this world has come from sitting peacefully at a table.
There's hatred and there's apathy— you
can only talk so much.
We all have a part to play.
I told my mom I'm going to the protest Saturday.

Everyone likes to say *well you're just complaining,*
that's stupid, why are you doing it?
How should I do it?
How should anyone do it?

Aunts, uncles, cousins were dismissive: *why are you protesting*?
There's property damage and you know people are bringing guns and
you know these people are bad. That man
was a criminal.

Dad was skeptical.
He didn't try to stop me.
Oh, you're actually going?
Why?

Because it's not ok.
And there's all these people walking around like it's ok.
And I don't want to wait 48 hours for another hashtag.
And I'm not ok.

I'm like, Mom, you're not going
to want to come. She was freaked
out, how upset I was.
She came with me.

There were cops lined up the moment we stepped out.
Two helicopters above, drones, line of officers and SUVS;
it's full riot gear and
we were an 'authorized protest'.

There's a lot of people too,
that made me feel safe
because—worst case—
I can hide in the crowd.

"We ask that everyone be peaceful; don't give them any chance
to detract from the message."

Me and mom walked home;
creaky knees, bless her heart—
the official march was over.

Later I watch
on a live feed:

near where I work, a large group kept walking,
not blocking traffic just in
crosswalks, up the street.
So I guess they're 'disturbing
the peace'?

It's dark; you see
cops, coming from this side
saying "you guys need to leave,
this has been an unlawful gathering."

They start coming in, a whole line. They have shields

riot gear, they're saying "go this way."
Then there's another line of riot cops.
All these people—who didn't leave
quick enough

trapped in the middle:
we can't go this way.
Reporters. Medics.
Legal Aid.

Tear gas, smoke bombs, both sides of
riot cops throwing them—
cops sitting up on each parking garage—
firing down.

Two lines of riot cops shooting down
Everything they could throw, they did

Why are so many worried about
Target—
but not the people getting shot?

"Without a Special Permit": Slipping Outside Sanctions

Where 2020 unraveled the "normal story," the general sense for many American citizens seemed to be that of an unraveling of multiple systems, including those of traditional authority. During this tear in social fabric, when the definition of "essential worker" suddenly became very different than the month before, when health recommendations were sometimes simultaneously delayed, ignored, contradicted, retracted, and mandated, and when life itself became extra-precarious for everyone, the rules of the "normal story" seemed more flexible. Protest participants felt the break in this "fantasy of a stable and singular white time" (Houdek, 2022, p. 50), opening questions within themselves over who now had "control and permission." This authority-uncertainty manifested in Douglas' uncertain statement: "I thought I could be more useful for at least giving protesters a safe place to protest." Alana also demonstrated self-deprecation in her statement that "a protest by definition is not something to be regulated and controlled, at least I thought. But maybe that's something else I don't know?"

Because of this internal legal/illegal binary debate in these White-socialized participants, there appeared to be more to the unsuturing process described in the participant narratives than just resisting the apathetic or silencing forces of American culture. As multiple protest participants articulated, there was open uncertainty revealed in *asking permission* of either State forces or (White) community peers. Alana marveled at the law enforcement presence at the protest she attended, while recognizing and chafing at the "permission" the protest organizers were required to get: "I guess we were an 'authorized protest,' which is so ridiculous. So we had, I guess, the privilege of like not having to stand in the street necessarily, while cars were coming. … They got their parade permit or whatever stupid stuff the city requires." Orca described one protest incident where "we were just standing on the corners. And we get a plainclothes police

office coming up and walking through the group saying, 'there are some Nazi sympathizers that are on their way down here. Let's escort you to the police station.'" By allowing themselves to be "escorted," Orca's protest group essentially asked for and was granted implicit (very limited) permission by State forces, in response to a State-identified, State-communicated threat.

Kathy, a self-identified White participant whose later efforts involved organizing an independent vigil, recollected wanting "to do something peaceful that still says 'this is terrible' in a serious, serious way, but isn't chanting." In describing her reasoning for organizing a vigil as opposed to an official march or protest, Kathy languaged an unspoken, understood rejection of *chanting*, culturally imposed by the predominantly White, politically conservative population of the small town where she lived: "If somebody driving by, like—they would be alienated immediately by [hearing] chanting in front of the courthouse." Community permission, in Kathy's eyes, was denied for chanting specifically, an example of Sheriff's (2000) *cultural censorship* on it. Working with Kathy's dialogues exploring her unsuturing around power and permission, I created the PI poem "Asking Plea(se)," where the poetic inquiry process allowed me to see connections between Kathy's expressed hope for social permission with a quiet vigil scenario, even while grappling with the permission-denied narratives of Othering given to her by her daughter, a Hispanic teen adopted at birth into Kathy's otherwise White family.

Asking plea(se)

(I)
She was out running
the week George Floyd was killed
somebody pulled over in a pickup, called
her a spic or something, get out
of the road - What she feels
is penetrating eyeballs
She doesn't like to go in
anywhere by herself

My Hispanic daughter.

She's beautiful and
she's brown and
the rest of the family is
white

But I don't think she's in danger.
He was drunk in a beat up pickup,
felt the need to yell and harass.
(oh no no no you know
 I can't tell her it's not real
it happened right here)
Here I am, defending the guy
(not defending the guy)
It's still very wrong, it was un
acceptable

(II)
Hey, how about this?

Maybe if they see a candle lit,
a vigil-
sorrowful, mournful
maybe they might be more open?
it doesn't threaten
Me?
(somebody driving by would be alienated
by chanting in front of the courthouse)
Maybe?

And maybe we should give a heads up,
let the city know
this is happening
I feel it's only fair to the public

safety department.
I ended up talking
to the town attorney

No.

You can't do that
without a special permit
all this round and round and finally
got the blessing to just be
on the sidewalk, each month.
The guidelines they do make it hard but
they have to apply the standard
Uniformly

(III)
Meantime the red carpet
got rolled out for a church. The city allowed
them to do it, the big donation
a presentation to police, this whole splash
the speech on the courthouse
steps was about *those* people going
to burn down your churches,
march down Main Street—
the whole thing got a ton of support
(that's big money)

So far I've been ok to keep the vigil quiet
(it's little, nobody cares)
At some point, I'm ready -
announce it far and wide maybe
on the anniversary of George Floyd's death
we go Big then
go home
I don't have an answer but I want
absolution. I so want to do the right thing
but you know there's nothing

I want to keep
everybody happy.

Once a month, I send the city a little notice:
We appreciate you.
You are invited.
We would love to
have you.

Calling Out: The Power of Naming

Mainstream stories in 2020 took racialized approaches like in "usual times," but the weird disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with George Floyd's highly visible murder, ripped a conflicted seam in the nation where previously silent/complicit people could work on being *unsutured,* painfully open to recognizing destructive White supremacist socialization, though perhaps feeling alienated from their familiar structures and out on a flimsy limb (Helms, 2020). Once engaged in that frayed openness, they could enact more vocal, public challenges to oppressive systems they recognized, resulting in antiracist *calling-out* and protest participation, and inclusion to a new community and mutuality. Three themes I found within that outward-focused meaning-making of *calling out* were protest participants' words describing "identity masking," unlearning of "bad story," and recognition of a kind of estrangement from mutuality, remedied by "direct action."

The mutuality experience of protest proved moving to participants. The overall unsuturing and calling-out categories echo the Endres and Gould's (2009) notion of constructing socially-transforming mutuality. Sometimes, Endres and Gould observed, exposing White participants to Whiteness Theory resulted in them reinscribing White privilege, idealizing themselves as superiors "helping the Other" (p. 429). Socially-transforming mutuality, on the other hand, is a development through which White participants exposed to Whiteness theory end up changing their worldview, understanding themselves as co-learners in a shared experience, using the experience to "think about how to challenge Whiteness" itself (p. 432). Participants in the 2020 BLM protests used and described instances of calling-out as a real manifestation of challenging Whiteness, beginning with their own racial identities and positioning. This first step of self-identification was foundational, as DiAngelo (2019) clarified:

A critical component of cross-racial skill building is the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does). Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility … white people must face the first challenge: naming our race. (p. 1)

The naming of race and the mutuality each participant strove for was part of the overall resistance frame they expressed. Again, Whiteness endeavors to remain invisible (Finley et al., 2020), punishing "those who mark its appearance" (p. 12). The participants' expressions of how their identities were in relation to others were important signs of positional awareness—a budding kind of intersectionality. As Hill Collins & Bilge (2021) found, intersectional identity frames can be important for naming ways in which "public policies uphold social inequalities" (p. 155) and structural power dynamics like neoliberalism and state violence categorize the Other in order to "disenfranchise, dehumanize, and render them disposable" (pp. 157-8)

In addition to naming some identity intersections, each participant articulated weighing given storylines and the process of learning "truth." Some called out rampant disinformation as, in Orca's terminology, "garbage narratives" or hollow "we're all in this together" platitudes (Bowleg, 2020). Others extolled the mutuality of firsthand information, like Kin valuing "giving the knowledge," holding public spaces open for marginalized BIPOC stories to be told. Lastly, each participant described a deep, almost religious, sense of connection through the 2020 protests—the caring of direct action or "mutual aid."

These outward-focused calling-out effects offer a fuller sense of what antiracist efforts in 2020 produced and shifted in the world of the participants. Through poetic inquiry of "identity masking," "bad story," and "direct action" participant themes, I re-engaged with my own sense as a co-learner, thinking of how the narratives of White-socialized, White-identifying

participants could help further challenge Whiteness and systemic racism built by it with a "sociopoetic force we can wrap tightly round us" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 10).

"People Like You": Naming Identity Intersections

As part of every participant interview involved questions of identity, it is no surprise that there would be identity themes in the resulting narrative data, but even more so crucial in an antiracism study with the fact that "identity is a fluid construct that requires us to reevaluate constantly our relationship to the forces of power" (Alley-Young, 2008, p. 319). These themes of identity continued to weave inextricably throughout the interviews, becoming entangled in many other recollections. Alana, for example, named the effects of "passing" while her siblings had darker skin tones than her. Kathy struggled to understand the Othering her daughter, who is Hispanic, expressed, recalling, "She's like, 'I feel uncomfortable in there.' … she feels that people assume she's some kind of illegal immigrant or she just feels looked-down-upon." Orca and Douglas spoke of "straight calling [racism] out" yet also used the term "masking" as both a potent COVID-19-era political symbol and a "mask off" of racist identity.

White-identifying but with a native Hawaiian/Chinese father, Alana described experiencing numerous racial microaggressions, including from a teacher seemingly unable to pronounce Alana's name, and from classmates who said things like: "Oh, you're from Japan; you can do a project about pandas," "Do you eat dogs? I've heard you eat cats," and "Do you live on the beach or are there huts?" At the same time, Alana recognized her own skin color privilege as "enough White" that other Whites felt "comfortable saying some really weird things." Likewise, other White-identifying participants like Douglas expressed this as "mask off" racism they condemned:

It's emboldened a lot of people. If Trump wasn't in office, we wouldn't have so many

people try to come out and incite violence. They are out in the open. Some of them are

straight mask-off racist. They don't want to apologize about it.

Orca, however, expressed they could not call out the "mask off" racism if, for example, it

happened during a recorded phone call at the phone center where they worked. "I have to try to

steer the conversation back to their account," Orca recalled, "you know, I can't see their face and

they can say whatever. They don't even care anymore. These people have become completely

mask off in their racism."

Toyosaki (2016) stated ideal whiteness research and practice is about "coauthoring our

racial identities with others, laboring toward racial justice" (p. 255). Though narratives were

coming from different personal places, I felt some of the collection of these participants' external

identity expressions could work interestingly together, a compare and contrast, to try to articulate

the complexities of being and belonging in historic 2020 circumstances. In the following poem,

"Calling All/Different/Kind," I used poetic inquiry to juxtapose various identity statements of all

five of the study participants (Kin, Orca, Douglas, Kathy, and Alana). These identities, brought

together as one poem, seemed to exemplify the cherished sense of community each participant

individually noted about the protest experience in 2020. As Harney and Moten (2013) put it:

"Having looked for politics in order to avoid it, we move next to each other, so we can be beside

ourselves" (pp. 9-10).

Calling All/Different/Kind

I identify myself as a human being
I see myself as a universal being.

       I've seen it on the Black side,
       I've seen it on the White side.
       I am biracial. In the eyes
       of America: a Black man.
       I've dealt with police brutality.

I am not political
We were just told certain
people are different.

       People might have to hate me for
       being poor,
       being a woman,
       whatever
       I just loved everybody equally
       (that's what I wanted back)

I can't pass as black,
no matter what I do
I've had people ask me that too:
what
are you?

       I pass as White when I haven't seen the sun.
       My dad is native Hawaiian
       and Chinese; my mom's Appalachian
       No one could ever say my name:
       "Is there something else
       I can call you?"

I'm not ashamed of who I am but
it's not about me

       I identify as a guiltyWhite person.
       My daughter is Hispanic—until this year I didn't get
       how deep seated her feeling
       of Otherness is. She says:
       They're all looking at me.

Whatever my kids are,
whatever color.

I don't want them
to not be liked
for who they are.

       I'm a privileged White male. I come off as
       redneck workingclass
       redneck people. I've lost a lot
       of friends; I call them out
       they're mask off
       in the racism.

Remember my challenge:
come out be
active see
firsthand—

       we need people
       like you, all different
       kind of people

"Untrue History": En/Countering the Wrong Story

Many protest participants spoke of not trusting their prior cultural and racial knowledge, feeling as if they had been taught, in Alana's words, "not even the right story." From contemporary disinformation and misinformation to White-centric childhood "education"—most of the participants expressed feeling like they needed to relearn, or unlearn, their prior school lessons of history or the general racial narratives the culture had handed down to them. Once aware of the skewed "knowledge," they expressed repeated skepticism about the narratives they'd been surrounded by. Kathy related a sudden awareness of "privileged White person's" storytelling: "It's kind of like, 'Oh we're nice, we're kind, we don't feel anything ill toward Black people' … but obviously that's not what's going on." Orca referenced "made up stories" while Douglas decried "straight up disinformation," and Kin stated flatly he only trusted certain firsthand sources and "trusted people."

This sense of working overtime to call out the "wrong story" resonated throughout the interviews, as was the deliberate overarching goal of amplifying stories and experiences of marginalized populations. This has roots in other aspects of racial justice efforts; as Blake (2019) reported,

> Education was the Black Panther party's key strategy for self-defense. Educating Panther activists as well as the general public was central to the Panther program, for it enabled everyday people to engage intellectually, communally, and creatively in developing the visions of what society should and could look like. (p. 310)

Just as with the historic Panther education initiatives, some participants specifically stated goals of promulgating the voices of the Black community, what Kin named as the "trusted elders," and correcting the "untrue history" of the dominant culture. Kin, the only Black-identifying

participant, pointedly confirmed his commitment to telling stories from his firsthand family sources:

> I can only speak on Black education—and on Black culture—because that's my specialty. I can't speak on what everybody else is fighting for. So I've been trying to post little snippets and little, just topics that my father and my grandmother had told me about, growing up.

Kin protested to his elders he was hearing a different story from teachers: "But that's not what Mrs. da-da-da said!" Still, he said, his grandmother and father were just as firm with the truth of *their* oral histories: "They're like, 'Well, that's what happened, son.'"

By placing value on firsthand testimonies and storytelling by trusted voices in marginalized populations, protest participants echoed decolonizing methodologies outlined by Smith (2012), according space and protection to BIPOC ways of witnessing (p.144). This is also in keeping with Plummer's (2020) model, where "functioning antiracists work to expand their knowledge, check their patterns and habits, and examine where and from who they get advice." The White-identifying participants, however, reported a much harder time than Kin finding trusted antiracist sources to counter the colonial, White supremacist, or "color blind" stories they felt surrounded by, even while identifying their own role in stepping back from dominating the story. As Alana reiterated, "I don't want someone like *me* teaching me about Black history. I want to actually *learn* it."

In the poem that follows, "Whose Story?," I worked again in conversation with all five participants' narratives and the "bad story" skepticism expressed by each. I juxtaposed different versions of stories that they felt betrayed by, with phrases indicating a now-hyperawareness of White "spin," using poetic inquiry to explore the "unreliable narrative" concept.

<u>Whose Story?</u>

How did the story go now?

Everyone's listening to
something: a different version.

I just don't understand why can't you back
the blue AND the black
together
you know why
is it one
or the other?

I'm learning more about things.
These events, 5 percent of the story—
not even the right story

was always the same: we came
to America and Squanto said
Hey here's some corn; I
would like to help you.'
Then we all sat down, had dinner
went home happily
ever after. I believed it

even heard of Martin Luther King.
He was one of the bullets
of our vocabulary terms, Malcolm X and
Christopher Columbus and the Trail of Tears
they were literally a blurb—
relearn—that's a stupid word

Everything is going to be
switched: to fit a narrative.

Even if it's true you
can skew it
(see who is paid
by who)

Corporate media—they sell con-
troversy so much disin-
formation to decipher we've been div-
ided by design

All I'm prepared
to trust is seeing the live
streams, first-
hand account myself.

Even if it's necessary to see
the violence. This isn't a cute story
made up to invoke emotion: it's
happening, it's
harrowing, it's
enlightening.

How did the story go now?
My husband tells it better.

On my young son's team
there was one black kid—
all wore wristbands (so the kids
knew who they were guarding)
it was like: what's the name of the black kid?
But we didn't say that.

'He's the one with the orange
wristband'—the blackness
didn't factor in.

We always think wow
what a cool story
hold on—I'm
butchering the story

"You Can Only Talk So Much": Mutuality Through Direct Action

Along with naming their identity categories and calling out questionable narrative surrounding them, participants also described the meaning-making effects of participating in the protest physically—calling-out and performing direct action in defiance of pandemic, policing, and political pressures. Where White supremacy would ordinarily condition participants to silence, they felt compelled in 2020 to "unlearn politeness and civility" (Sowards, 2020) and to try learning how to "call people out for injustice while maintaining relationships" (p. 399). Douglas articulated his sense of disconnection, motivating him to direct action in the wake of racial injustice overrun by a pandemic: "We can't rely on the state to take care of us. Nobody is coming to save us. We have to … prepare for the future and the outcome." Kin concurred, describing the paralyzing effect of the dominant storylines and the pandemic (prior to protest participation): "When I was stuck inside my house and I was hearing all these things that happened, I cry, and I break down." Finding a way to translate that inertia to action, though, changed his view of his community and of his own future possibilities: "Standing up together is a power move; it becomes a way to empower the people."

The act of congregating physically together, with humanitarian purpose, proved inspirational for many participants. Alana described the powerful community-building impact she felt at the protest:

> There were a lot of people, of course. They were all genders. They were all races. They were all ages. I saw toddlers, all the way up to elderly. I just thought it was so amazing. Because you don't get people out for anything, anymore, unless maybe it's like a football game.

The empowerment inherent in anti-racist protest was a critical part to the pull these protesters felt. "Hey, I gotta stand for something," said Kathy of her participation, "like in the process of doing something, not just lamenting or comparing notes." Alana's description of her reaction reflects that call too:

> I felt that I had to show up. Because to be as affected as I was, but then to go back to my normal life was not okay for me. … If you don't see someone doing the work, go—you do the work. Start the work. Start anywhere. And just try to be better.

Congregating, calling out together is, pointed out Kin, "a way for people to grieve and let their grievances be known" but also a way of bringing "empowerment back to the people."

Though Finley et al. (2020) stated that "the best way to understand Whiteness … is as religion" (p.8), the majority of the participants related a sense of religious conviction to the calling-out involved with antiracist protest participation. Kin, Orca, and Douglas agreed on the church-like nature of being in the BLM protests after George Floyd was murdered. As Kin said: "Jesus wasn't in the church. He was out amongst the sick and the shut-in, he was out amongst, you know, all of the bad … he was healing people and helping people."

In the poem that follows, "this [protest] is church," I used poetic inquiry in conversation with Kin, Orca, and Douglas' narratives around this religious mutuality they felt in "direct action." I also, however, got experimental with form in this particular poem, aligning selected phrases carefully in columns and blocks to resemble either a stylized "two headed snake" or a representation of the city streets in which this form of "church" was enacted.

<u>"this [protest] is church"</u>

It's a two-headed snake…

without	standing
action	up
your	together
worship	is
is	a
meaning	power
less	move
are we	we
really	bring
gonna	the
sit here	church
over	to the
people	streets
getting	and
killed	we
in America?	congregate
if you're not	(we're
calling	all
out	one
to other	race
people	in
to save	my
them	eyes
you're	and
not	that
doing	is the
it	human
right	race)

…a way to get back in touch
with God

A Frayed Edge: Why Unsuturing and Calling Out Matters

White supremacy tries to stay invisible. As when studying other invisible forces, scholars have to study the effects (blatant or subtle) the invisible force bends its surroundings to. In the case of White supremacy, it is not *invisible and invincible like gravity* but, in the estimation of scholars like Matias (2013), more mutable and thereby more fragile, a sleight-of-hand "epistemology of ignorance" which *depends* on distorted belief and has to keep distracting to stay unseen, casting a "forgetting spell" on those whose belief it requires, to stay out of mind and thereby out of sight (p.295). When these tactics and effects are revealed, however, the unseen force can be more clearly perceived for what it is.

The blatant effects of White supremacy in the U.S. are the very stuff of documentation and protests, amplifying the first-hand BIPOC experiences and testimonials of state violence, police brutality, dehumanization, carceration, discrimination, and more. It is the invisible, internal beliefs—the subtle emotional workings of the invisible force of White supremacy— where the methods and findings of this thesis are located. By externalizing White supremacy as a force and looking for "unique outcomes" where it isn't as strong and where other narratives can emerge, as narrative therapists do with "problem behaviors" (Carey & Russell, 2002), this study's approach aims to make White supremacy more visible and therefore something that can be strategized against or transformed.

In reference to the first research question of this study: "What are ways predominantly White first-time protest participants recalled and languaged their protest experience, and what might that tell us about antiracism efforts in 2020?," I found high amounts of conflict and meaning-making within participants' narratives. Through the grounded theory coding and the PI creation process for the above six research poems, I found that participants experienced

significant meaning-making in their confliction, manifesting in inward-focusing *unsuturing* conditions, like fighting apathy, silence, and permission-seeking, as well as valuing outward-focused *calling-out* action, like "mask off" identity grappling, questioning "bad stories," and a religion-adjacent commitment to mutuality and "direct action," as they recognized White supremacy inside and outside of themselves. Some unseen effects of White supremacy were languged directly, such as apathy and fighting "bad story." In my participants' pained recognition of racist apathy, for example, the observational nature of their words relayed direct recognition of the problem. Alana recalled:

> As far as race goes, with the last two years, I've just seen, not only from our leaders in the White House, but I saw people around me… (Alana's words became halting, choked-up) their reactions to certain things and what they said or did not say really shocked me.

She went on to explicitly name apathy, and its antidote as empathy, multiple times in recounting her 2020 protest experiences. Similarly, many participants could readily identify some mis- and disinformation, naming specific instances of "the garbage narrative."

Other effects of White supremacy, like some of the permission-asking, silencing, or masking themes, may or may not even have been recognized by the participants themselves, as when Kathy unironically stated:

> I didn't want to stick my neck out too much. I wasn't going to organize a march on the courthouse, but I'll organize a candlelight vigil. I pulled a couple of friends to, to talk about it and say, what do you think about this? And how should we do it?

She did not explicitly name the conflict she felt in "sticking her neck out," nor the implicit permissions she was asking of her friends and of the community, but the evidence of an unseen, dominating White racial frame threads all through the way she languaged her recollection.

Overall, the emotional conflicts I found in my participants' protest narratives—apathy, silencing, permission-asking, identity issues, masking, and disconnection—arguably need to continue to be unsutured and collectively exposed. Like Yancy (2015) and Slater (2020) found, it is the sealed confident certainty of White supremacy that can allow its sleight of hand disappearance—slipping back into collective forgetting and invisibility. The *collective* calling out is important too, for as Aal (2001) found, the cost of U.S. individualism and Whiteness is a separation from community, a sense of independence marketed with pride but with an invisible, insidious cost of loneliness and alienation that coverage of the blatant effects of invisible White supremacy doesn't address. Through remembering the calling out of the blatant effects of White supremacy through the act of protest, I found that these White-identifying participants primarily narrated their own individual evidence of the subtle effects of White supremacy.

Kendi (2019) wanted to make clear—*racist policy change* needs to be the ultimate focus of antiracist efforts, but protests and the promulgation of them "help people find the antiracist power within …and can provide emotional support for ongoing protests" (p. 215). By narrating protest experience, by articulating resistance to the unseen suturing pressures White supremacy enacts, by externalizing White supremacy in the "unique outcome" of 2020, my participants gave testimony that could be useful to antiracism in future ways. Analysis through grounded theory, however, was not enough to "provide emotional support." These narratives needed to be preserved in a unique, more nuanced way to do that—a preservation through the emotionality of poetic form.

The intent through preservation of these protest voices is not to center White people *over* BIPOC. Instead, the intent in this study is to analyze and historicize this 2020 moment of unsuturing and calling out—a piece of battling White supremacy *with* BIPOC. In so doing, the

goal of this study is to *keep unsutured* (keep frayed open) the emotionally cracked individualism of those that, in participating in this thesis, didn't want to slip back into forgetting, who wanted to know through protest actions that they are not alone. The participants of this thesis were willing to extend the "as bad as it is" feelings, knowing they needed to re-experience them to try to change the invisible pulls of Whiteness within themselves, even while re-experiencing the sense of communal meaning of protest.

These participants' stories, their communicated themes of conflict, and their subsequent poetic inquiry re/presentation more fully fleshed out the results of this study's first research question, examining recollections of individual emotional and psychological conflict in the historical protest setting of 2020. Addressing the second research question: "How can poetic inquiry methods be used to re/present individual emotional or psychological conflict in an historical protest setting?," I found through using poetic representation, as did Carroll et al. (2011), that it allowed me to better accommodate paradox and "to see the specifics among the generalities, to maintain the integrity of the human subjects alongside the deconstruction of their narratives" (p. 629) as well as to preserve narrative in a unique way. In balancing paradox and integrity through poetic inquiry, I cultivated a creative research experience, one that married reporting of qualitative data with the lived-experience dexterity of poetry, for a "very different, direct, and distinct way of being in and understanding the world and ourselves within it" (Prendergast, 2015, p. 683). Davis (2021) also described the satisfying versatility of analyzing qualitative data through poetic inquiry processes, not limited to "any one type of researcher." She noted that, with critical poetic inquiry:

> We move away from the false dichotomy of them versus us toward a more rich culturally
> sustaining place in which constantly shifting notions of culture are realized. Likewise,

this method is not for any one type of researcher. Anyone who takes the care to build the

relationships with themselves and participants to critically and reflectively use cultural

competency to engage in writing through and building meaning with minoritized

populations can become equipped to do this necessary work. (p. 122)

As poetry isn't about *scientifically knowing*, but about feeling, it can better facilitate "emotional

support" and individual meaning-making, equally unseen forces that shift in the emotional

moments of protest (or the aftermath of remembering.) A problem with individual invisible

forces and shifting meaning making is that they are constantly moving targets, against a whole

American system (and with American individualism casting the dismantling of systemic racism

as an *individual* problem to tackle). This can make antiracism efforts a Sisyphean task of

individually re-inventing each mountain, each moment of meaning, trying independently to grasp

it before the irresistible forgetting and systemic forces snatch the meaning and impact of protest

away.

Poetry's strengths, however, lie in its ability to freeze part of a moment, crystallizing

emotional energy before it can slip away, recreating it afresh with every re-reading. Poetry

allows us to spy the "specifics among the generalities" (Carroll et al., 2011, p. 629), so important

with underrepresented viewpoints. I have learned, especially through the poetic inquiry phase of

this project, some of the deep insidious nature of White supremacy, its ability to protect and

cloak itself—and of the power of these unsutured protest moments and meaning to reveal some

of the invisible workings in White minds, over and over again, afresh. Therefore, a final finding

for this study is the antiracism impact of poetic inquiry on myself, as a White researcher. As in

social construction theory, where so much of our social interactions are "invisible" and, through

language, co-constructed between ourselves into a shared reality (Frunza, 2011), I found that

poetic inquiry helped me shape a different view of my own reality. Through the process of

analyzing the recollections of protest participants in poetry, I was better able to listen for my own

difficult knowledge but not be afraid to address it (Wiebe, 2015, p. 159), realize how knowledge

is *always* collaborative (Zaino & Bell, 2021, p. 18), and thereby to language my *own* first-time

protest experiences with a greater comfort in intimacy and sometimes ambiguity. Through the

poetic inquiry process and re/presenting shared themes in an emotional way, I articulated a

greater antiracism awareness for *myself.*

As Helms (2020), Plummer (2020), Kendi (2019), DiAngelo (2019), and Oluo (2018) all

reminded us, racial justice is continual work, getting to a functional antiracism, "getting to we."

The hallmarks of a functioning antiracist, as Plummer (2020) detailed, mean not just being an

effective disruptor, voting for antiracist reform, and holding local communities accountable for

fair practices, but committing to cultural humility, life-long self-evaluation, and continually

examining invisible systemic forces to "make sure everyone experiences a sense of belonging."

She envisioned a function antiracist as someone who will "treat associated tensions as challenges

to be mastered with education and learning, and work to stay updated on contemporary

scholarship"—self-work which never ends.

"Losing one's blindness" through active racial justice engagement, Matias (2013)

articulated, "allows Whites to share in the proprietary burden of race so forcibly placed upon

people of color" and is "ultimately a gain in the war against racism" (p. 311). In reaching toward

a functioning antiracist model (Plummer, 2020), poetic inquiry helped shift this study away from

such false dichotomy, working to effectively disrupt White narrative framing while working to

"turn us and them into we" (para. 1). This suggests a promising Whiteness theory avenue for

White researchers employing poetic inquiry for better antiracist reflexivity and a functioning antiracism.

For these participants, over two years on at this writing, may indeed have slipped back into the easy forgetting of White supremacist systems surrounding them. The power of these participants' words, and the research poetry as a vehicle for them, can hopefully serve as memory prompts to meaning making *beyond* my involvement or these participants' involvement, to future readers and antiracism scholars. For these crystallized 2020 moments, these participants had been invited in by BLM and Black leaders as protest partners, acting from an unsutured and emotionally unsettled, calling-out positionality—trying to grapple out from the metaphoric fabric of American White supremacy. In the following, final chapter, I discuss further implications for future researchers, limitations of this study as it stands, and further research reflections I experienced.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

When in the course of human events the unsufferable is pretended to be sufferable, when the destructive invisible is being kept invisible, when the untold is enforced as untold, it becomes necessary to be dissolved from accustomed forms and declare again (and again) that all humans are created equal. That Black lives matter. That nobody's free until everybody's free. So, with the knowledge that antiracism is a persistent process of fraying, of staying unsutured, and calling out for justice, I provide in this chapter a retrospective look at this project as a whole, as well as look ahead to illustrate the limitations and future recommendations for this work. I conclude with a more in-depth reflection of my experience as a researcher and an overall wish for antiracism action, in manifold forms, to continue—empowering us all to pursue life, true liberty, and secure happiness.

Implications

With the insidious, ever-changing nature of systemic racism, the ways in which antiracism work has to continue to adapt are therefore also various. This study makes an argument for developing further antiracist poetic inquiry, but these implications could also call for expanded counterstorytelling research avenues, as well as inclusive Whiteness theory praxis.

As racial justice groups often find themselves navigating a narrative/image crisis, they have to contend with framing; who considers them good or evil depends on the narrative framing, through media or through promulgated research, used to position the data. By crafting participant data into more audience-palatable narrative-language research poems, this study has implications for disseminating nuanced content sensitive with storytelling principles. As Slater (2020) stated "emotions are a site for ethical and political action" (p. 825). Critical poetry inquiry is an opportunity within the communication and storytelling disciplines to both harness emotions

and extend political/ethical advocacy—opening up communication to a different audience and a different methodology. As Zaino and Bell (2021) found, critical poetic inquiry has "power to counter individualist, ahistorical, and transparent notions of the subject … there is untapped potential in poetry and other methods to evoke and challenge other issues of subject, representation, power, and possibility" (p. 18).

Along with the framing concerns for social movement groups, this study has implications for activists and researchers as people continue to evaluate and re-evaluate perceived "validity" of information streams as it fills a need for direct, personal narrative when so much other information is distrusted. In an era of sophisticated disinformation campaigns via social or state media, the importance and relevance, the power of personal narrative will only continue to grow—through critical poetic inquiry these narratives can serve the purposes of counterstorytelling. That is to say, critical poetic inquiry can, as Baszile (2008) said of counterstorytelling, "reveal and disrupt," challenging the normative gaze by stressing "context, subjectivity, experience, emotionality, and the socially constructed nature of reality" (p. 261). By recognizing the increased applications for this type of qualitative research, this multiphasic study will hopefully extend the acceptance of work co-creating knowledge with subjectivity and multiple realities of lived experience.

Another implication of this study is that it extends the growing field of poetic inquiry into the field of Whiteness studies, uniquely initiating predominantly White-identifying voices in the "researched" subject's place of "insidious slippage into dependency" (Aal, 2001, p. 308), a position in which BIPOC are all too often cast. While some Whiteness theory critics contend that Whiteness research detrimentally recenters Whiteness, Aal argued that such positioning could act as its own capitalism and individualism disruption mechanism, citing Baldwin's (1985) assertion

that the "price of whiteness and membership in the privileged ranks is the loss of community" (p. 307). Critical poetic inquiry into Whiteness narratives could be a way to reinsert interdependency into Whiteness studies. By "foregrounding interdependency," Zaino and Bell (2021) agreed, critical poetic inquiry "highlights ethical questions about our responsibilities to one another" (p. 18). They elaborated that, in exploring how we form our own concepts, "critical poetic inquiry also unsettles this 'I' and asks us to confront the challenges of becoming 'we' (p.19), echoing Plummer's (2020) concept of functioning antiracism.

Limitations

There were a number of challenges in the course of this study, including temporal and geographical limitations on one hand, with social and communication limitations on the other. There was a very short time frame within which to gather participants, both because of the course this study was designed during and because the narratives for first-time protestors were only going to be "freshest" for a limited time. There were only one-hour interviews conducted (or, slightly over an hour). This made for a limited amount of information and narrative that could be conveyed and recorded.

There were also the limits of a small relative geographical boundary within the mid-Southern U.S. (Tennessee and North Carolina), which means this study can not necessarily be generalized to illustrate a broader representation for other areas of the country (or the corresponding regional flavor to the specific conflicts encountered there). There were multiple variations in the participants' identities and motivations that made comparison and coding somewhat difficult at times, including biracial identifying, some gender fluidity, "passing," and whether or not they were also parents. More participants, in a greater geographical region, might

100

enable some midway points in the spectrum of identities to be established and create a more understandable overall picture in that regard.

There were also social and communication limitations to this study. The limitations of an extremely polarized political and social climate in 2020 made for a perceived riskiness to communicating about race in general, much less in the formal, recorded structure of a study. The forces of White silencing, as a well-documented cultural force in the U.S., almost certainly played a role in reducing participant response numbers as well.

Along with the perceived social riskiness of speaking about racial matters, there was actual contagion risk to be mitigated in the methodology of the study. Conducting the interviews *during* the COVID-19 pandemic lent an immediate contemporary air to the study, however, the physical limitations of viral transmissibility meant that every interview had to be conducted via the Zoom platform which had drawbacks such as connectivity issues and, where the focus group was concerned, difficulty where multiple voices struggled to be heard.

Future Directions

While much research has been done on various aspects of American racial justice protest, much less has been done on actual participant narrative, especially in the wake of COVID-19 complications. As Edgar and Johnson (2020) noted, much of "previous literature on participant response to racial protests has been focused on historic overview or mass communication involvement" (loc. kindle 146). Future researchers can further explore this need for direct, personal narrative when so much other information is distrusted.

Now that the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted into an extended crisis and the U.S. sociopolitical landscape has only frayed further, the narratives collected here have taken on new

meanings. Future directions for this research could involve revisiting these participants'

experiences in a post-COVID, post-Trump-administration reality, which might yield further

dialogue and insight into this protest generation. I feel there would be value in reexamining how

the "unsutured" state, the "calling out self" proceeded post-2020.

Other future directions could ideally be to invite poetic inquiry *collaboration,* with the

participants themselves, and/or with scholars of color as an extension of the "civic discourse"

protest enacts, building a collaborative counterstory "to represent the extent to which reasoning

itself is a contextually dependent, personal, and political process" (Baszile, 2008, p. 259).This

would be illuminating, also, with researchers with different data to compare and contrast

between perhaps more wildly differing narratives. I could recommend, in a future extension of

this work, structuring the interview questions and the research study itself with a narrower and

more disciplined methodology, perhaps focusing solely on the poetic inquiry component, much

closer to the beginning.

Research Reflections

My ties to this scholarly work go beyond academic into emotional and ethical, which

could be a blessing or a curse. In my 2020 research reflections, especially very early in the

process, I wrote breathlessly of wanting to "do justice" to the words and experiences of these

participants, honorable enough but its own type of White arrogance: "I hope only that I can do

them justice, give them voice, contextualize them meaningfully." In the wake of such sustained,

terrible *in*justice to BIPOC communities, I realize now it is an insult to focus on "justice" for

these participants who, by and large, admitted to being mostly or entirely free from the worst

impacts of systemic racism.

Whatever power I imagined I had to "do justice"—I realized through the processing of the broad literature, the rich scholarship, deep inquiry with the narratives and perspectives—was an outgrowth of my privilege, my bias. In fact, as the work proceeded, I began to see at multiple points how ephemeral a thing this collection and connection was, as when I mused of an upcoming interview appointment: "I hardly dare breathe or think of it too closely for fear it will evaporate…"

Yet, as the research progressed, I found myself admiring and worrying for these participants, too, beyond the interview and the stages of analysis afterwards. This emotional bond I felt with participants made it even more difficult to try to gain analytical remove from their words. With the focus group, I reflected glowingly about their "beautiful language," "bold rhetoric," and "super respectful, joyous, powerful connection" together. With the other, one-on-one interviews, I realized as well I was struggling with my bias and with over-empathizing. During the painful tension of the 2020 election, widely seen as a nationwide referendum on just these kinds of racial injustices, I was closely analyzing and coding the words of these powerful individuals and felt intense remorse: "I feel this is a cruel extra twist of an already-cruel knife, I have a mad urge to call all of them sobbing and apologize that the U.S. is so set against empathy."

Though initially I focused tightly on counterstorytelling as a unifying theory (protest being a counterstory in and of itself, with these anti-majoritarian voices joining the counter-telling), the codes and analysis kept emerging for an inner/outer kind of dichotomy, which eventually resolved into the unsuturing and calling-out processes *as* the poetic analysis poems were being finalized from codes.

As much as my focus was shaped by DiAngelo (2019) and Oluo (2019) and Crenshaw's (1989) concepts of Intersectionality and Critical Race Theory, it took much longer for me to "discover" the field of Whiteness Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies. Through them, I eventually stumbled upon the work of antiracist psychologist Deborah Plummer, whose work reframing antiracism into over-, under-, and -functioning categories, became an important tool for articulating the spectrum of reactions to this study. As Plummer (2020) described, it wasn't just underfunctioning antiracists that might use silencing techniques—she described overfunctioning antiracists as trying to enforce silence too, through an intolerance to error. Overfunctioning antiracists, she explained, operate by being quick to performatively dismiss, fight, or condemn perceived racial wrongs which can break down communication and relationships nearly as effectively as White silence/complicity.

This came into play as I took my budding poetic inquiry process into my first poetry class, a foundational workshop-based class with a mix of graduate and undergraduate students. My attempt to productively workshop in class an early draft of "Breaking White Silence" elicited some forceful negative reactions from White participants ranging from "I'm not sure if it's really for a nonblack person to talk about this" to "It shouldn't have been written." These reactions, while difficult for me to navigate in the moment, are an extension of an ongoing debate, even in the broader field of Critical White Studies (or CWS), about "who should be doing the work". Some scholars want strict inclusion only on the wealth of strong BIPOC-conducted Whiteness Studies as "they are the experts on whiteness and its impact on themselves, 'white' people, and the United States as a whole" (Aal, 2001, p. 294), while others argue White scholars must engage in the significant self-critique work to do, to analyze where racism becomes problematic and rejected in an individual's sensemaking (Hook & Howarth, 2005, p. 12).

Through all this, the question comes up regularly: "Is there only one right way to employ Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS)?" (Matias, 2022, p. 700). DiAngelo (2019) herself addressed grappling with this crux:

> In speaking as a white person to a primarily white audience, I am yet again centering white people and the white voice. I have not found a way around this dilemma, for as an insider I can speak to the white experience in a way that may be harder to deny. So, though I am centering the white voice, I am also using my insider status to challenge racism. To not use my position this way is to uphold racism, and that is unacceptable; it is a 'both/and' that I must live with. I would never suggest that mine is the only voice that should be heard, only that it is one of the many pieces needed to solve the overall puzzle. (p. xv)

Along these tricky lines, Plummer's conception of a "functioning" antiracist came to help me as I dove back into CWS, looking to act at all times with "cultural humility" and proceed in the study only with as deep an ethical reflexivity as possible. For Plummer, a functioning antiracist is one who experiences full intersectional integration of the many dimensions of human difference, "neither dehumanizing or superhumanizing the other's humanity" while relationally interacting with another human's core identity. Oluo (2019) underscored the importance of relationally communicating, too:

> The truth is we all pull levers of this white supremacist system, every day. The way we vote, where we spend our money, what we do and do not call out—these are all pieces of the system. … We can talk our way into understanding, and we can then use that understanding to act. (p. 235)

105

By working to center scholars of color more effectively and staying reflexively mindful of the ever-present prospect of reifying White innocence and privilege, I hope as Degarrod (2013) did, that the poetry from these participants' words can allow protest feelings and the protest moment to live on.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer Used On Facebook

Anti-Racist Counterstorytelling: Protest and Processing in East TN

Focus Group Moderator Guide

Aims or Goals:

1. To historicize local citizen participation protesting racial inequality
2. To contextualize local citizen participation protesting racial inequality
3. To examine emotional and counterstorytelling efforts of participants in this time/place in American protest action

Guidelines:

1. **Anti Racist Effort focus**. We are focusing today primarily on new involvement in racial injustice protesting locally. I'll be asking you to share any information you can remember about your mindset, your focus leading up to and during the protest you participated in, and what experiences you took away afterward.
2. **Participation.** Thank you, so much, for participating—for taking the time and effort to bring your voice to the table. We will make every effort to involve everyone, as we think everyone has valuable voices to contribute. Our rules of engagement today are ones of respect, including:
   - Confidentiality: We will be sharing our names and personal experiences today. Please keep everything you hear here completely confidential. Please do not share anything said here with anyone outside this group.
   - Please wait to speak until there is an end to a thought. Interruptions can derail a train of thought.
   - Feel free to pass on any question you are not comfortable answering.
   - Please hold onto ideas coming to you when someone else is talking, or jot them down on provided paper to remember to add in later.
   - Please aim to talk to whole group, not just person next to you, as the goal is group dynamic.

3. **Non-evaluation.** I am here to listen thoughtfully and collect narrative, to help understand this moment better in time. I am not here to weigh the merits or relative value of anything shared today, again, only to listen.
4. **Time.** This is intended to last only 1 hour, though it is possible some slight time overrun may occur unintentionally. Every effort will be made to hold to the original time allotment.
5. **Bathroom/Food.** If at all possible, please use the restroom before or wait until after the group has finished meeting—only because we value your contribution so highly and our time together as a group is so limited.
6. **Cell phones.** Please put cell phones on silent and refrain from using them during our limited time together.
7. **Follow-up interviews.** If you may be willing to be contacted individually for potential follow up questions, please put your name and contact information on the sign up sheet. We appreciate your time and experience!

When We Write about Your Experiences:

1. For the upmost accuracy and detailed transcripts, we will be recording the focus group session with at least 2 separate methods.
2. Only myself and my professor will have access to these recordings and transcripts, and all utilized information will be de-personalized with pseudonyms and without identifiers.
3. We will be using these recordings and transcripts to attempt to discover how citizens conceive of their identity racially and community-wise, and how these identities shaped their motivations around the protests for racial injustice as well as their current understandings/experiences of identity categories.

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Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. **We are all members of different social groups, different identity categories, some related to age, or class, or gender, or other categories. These categories and identities affect how we feel about ourselves and how we act toward others. Thinking about racial identity, can you tell me about some of the earliest messages you received about yourself? The first time you were aware of your own race or the race of others?** [Specific Aim 1]

    Possible probes:
    a. Are there ways you have felt obligated to act within/against these messages in the past?
    b. Describe the family environment you grew up in, the spoken/unspoken "rules" about race, specifically black people?
        i.   Do you remember any "jokes" or stories being told with any kind of racial content?
        ii. How much interaction was there with people of other races? How much encouragement/discouragement?
    c. How has race impacted your daily life? How often are you aware of race or think about race?
    d. How would you describe race relations in America? In our area? In your current experience of racial identity? Has any of it changed in the last 6 months?

2. **Which brings us to current racial identities and relationships…How would you describe your relationships with people of color, specifically black people, in your immediate social or professional circle?** [Specific Aim 1]

    Possible probes:
    a. Can you tell me in what ways you experience racism in your everyday life?
    b. What kinds of black stories, historical or contemporary, do you know? (Examples are ideal!)
        i.   Who do you trust when talking about race and learning about race?
        ii. What are your news sources?
        iii. Do you typically view police as protector or aggressor?
        iv. Social media use and who you follow…?

128

      v.   When and where is it appropriate to talk about race?
  c. How do you feel the current social and political climate affects your relationships and interactions with people of color?
  d. Has your definition of racism changed in recent months? Can you share some examples today that you would not have been aware of 6 months ago?
  e. Can you describe racial inequality news/stories that have stuck with you most? Can you describe your feelings about it, or in what way you are identifying with the story? What stories make you feel more or less strongly about this?

3. **You were all invited here because you have taken some form of action, for the first time, in response to these injustices in 2020. We'd like to hear more about your motivations and mindsets, more about your emotional and counterstorytelling efforts through action. How do you make sense of all the protests around the country in 2020? How do you interpret protest? What do you believe the purpose of protesting is?** [Specific Aim 3]

<u>Possible probes:</u>
  a. How would you describe your activism in the past? Who else in your life protests/does not protest?
  b. Can you tell me a time in your past when you wanted to protest but did not end up joining?
  c. For something to take root, the conditions need to be just right…what do you think came together that made the conditions ripe for these protests?
      i.   At what moment did you feel a call to action, what was the tipping point?
     ii.   And why?
  d. Did you encounter any obstacles, internally or externally, to participating? Did you go by yourself, or with others?
  e. Describe the police presence—or counter protestors…
  f. How did you want to make a difference?
  g. What positive effects did you experience during/after the protest? What negative?
  h. How do you see your role in healing race relations?

4. **Of course these racial injustice protests are not happening in a vacuum. 2020 has been full of complicating issues and we'd like to gain more insight into context, as well as future wishes. How, in your view, did the political landscape or involvement of elected officials impact the last 10 months or so of racial conflict? How did it affect your participation in protesting injustice?** [Specific Aim 2]
  a. How did social media affect your participation in protesting?
  b. How did COVID-10 affect your participation in protesting?
  c. Was the protest you attended reported in the media? Did they capture the event? What did they miss? Do you disagree with any of their reporting or language?
  d. What are some of the key things you take away from being involved in a protest? How has your participation in the protests changed you?

5. **Some other thoughts about social justice protest that you want to say? Something we've talked about or something we haven't?**

Anti-Racist Counterstorytelling: Protest and Processing in East TN

Interview Guide

Aims or Goals:

1. To historicize local citizen participation protesting racial inequality
2. To contextualize local citizen participation protesting racial inequality
3. To examine emotional and counterstorytelling efforts of participants in this time/place in American protest action

Thank you for taking part in this interview! I am a Master's Candidate in ETSU's department of Communication and Storytelling.

1. **Anti Racist Effort focus**. We are focusing today primarily on new involvement in racial injustice protesting locally. I'll be asking you to share any information you can remember about your mindset, your focus leading up to and during the protest you participated in, and what experiences you took away afterward.
2. **Participation.** Thank you, so much, for participating—for taking the time and effort to bring your voice to the table. We will make every effort to involve everyone, as we think everyone has valuable voices to contribute. Our rules of engagement today are ones of respect, including:
3. Confidentiality: We will be sharing our names and personal experiences today. Please keep everything you hear here completely confidential. Please do not share anything said here with anyone outside this group.
4. Feel free to pass on any question you are not comfortable answering.
5. **Non-evaluation.** I am here to listen thoughtfully and collect narrative, to help understand this moment better in time. I am not here to weigh the merits or relative value of anything shared today, again, only to listen.
6. **Time.** This is intended to last only 1 hour, though it is possible some slight time overrun may occur unintentionally. Every effort will be made to hold to the original time allotment.
8. **Bathroom/Food.** If at all possible, please use the restroom before or wait until after the group has finished meeting—only because we value your contribution so highly and our time together as a group is so limited.
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When We Write about Your Experiences:

1. For the upmost accuracy and detailed transcripts, I will be recording the interview with at least 2 separate methods.
2. Only myself and my research team will have access to these recordings and transcripts, and all utilized information will be de-personalized with pseudonyms and without identifiers.
3. We will be using these recordings and transcripts to attempt to discover how citizens conceive of their identity racially and community-wise, and how these identities shaped their motivations around the protests for racial injustice as well as their current understandings/experiences of identity categories.

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Interview Discussion Questions

First, a few intro questions: Briefly tell me a little about yourself? What has brought joy this year? What has been a hard memory from this year?

We are all members of different social groups, different identity categories, some related to age, or class, or gender, or other categories. These categories and identities affect how we feel about ourselves and how we act toward others. Thinking about racial identity, and keeping in mind you don't have to answer any question you don't want to answer, how do you identify racially? Briefly, how about in other identity categories—gender, class, ability?? [Specific Aim 2]

Possible probes:
a. How would you describe your understanding of race and race relations in America? In our area? Has any of it changed in the last 6 months, since COVID-19?
b. How has race impacted your daily life? How often are you aware of race or think about race?
c. Can you give examples of some of the spoken messages, "rules", "jokes", or stories you received about race or racism when you were very young? What would you say were some of the *unspoken* messages about race/racism?
d. What do you believe are your responsibilities in dismantling racism and why?

e. What kind of places or sources do you currently learn about race relations, racism, and racial justice from?
   ii. Who do you trust when talking about racial issues and learning about racial issues?
   iii. What are your news sources?
   iv. Social media use and examples of who you follow…?

Let's fast forward to your recent/2020 protest experience. Can you describe or give me a "tour" of your experience of the protest(s) you attended? What was your

motivation? What did you do? What was it like? How did you feel then, how do you feel now? [Specific Aim 3]

<u>Possible probes:</u>
i. What is protest? What is the story it is trying to tell?
j. Who else in your life protests/does not protest?
k. What impact do you feel your version of protest had for the movement?
l. What are the factors that prompted your involvement in BLM protest? …what do you think came together that made the conditions ripe for these protests?
   i. How did you find out about the protests?
   ii. What did your family/friends think of your involvement?
   iii. Do you think the pandemic or anything else about 2020 played any part in the BLM protests? In your own protest? At what moment did you feel a call to action, what was the tipping point?
m. Did you go by yourself, or with others?
n. Did you connect with anyone new once you got there?
o. Was there a police presence—What did you think about that? Were there counter protestors…what did you think about that?
p. Protests are often emotionally charged, can you take me through what feelings you picked up on during the protest?
q. Some people say that protests are a lament, a ritual grieving; what do you think about that in regards to the 2020 BLM protests?
r. Did you see/hear/read any coverage/stories by media or social media about the protest you attended?
s. Did they capture the event? What did they miss, what do you disagree with?

What do you think the next steps for anti-racism will be, or should be, for you personally? What should the next steps be for the United States? [Specific Aim 2]
<u>Possible Probes:</u>
b. What racial stories do you wish would be told more? In what way? Any stories/message we are missing out on?
c. What do you think would be effective change/actions that would translate to positive, lasting change in the US?
d. In 20 to 30 years what do you think history books will say about the BLM movement and the protests of 2020?
e. Dr. Frank Leon Roberts, in a speech entitled *5 Ways to Understanding BLM*, said the BLM movement is a prayer—do you agree? What is the prayer?

6. **Some other thoughts about social justice protest that you want to say? Something we've talked about, or something we haven't?**

VITA

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	Katt, Emily. (2022). The Moon-Eyed People. *The Mockingbird, 49,* 107-115.
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