

***“I was ‘fortunate’ enough to have been born a white male”:  
Understanding a Cycle of White Consciousness in Intercultural  
Communication Education***

Yea-Wen CHEN

Ohio University, USA

Nathaniel SIMMONS

La Salle University, USA

**Abstract:** This study addresses a need to unpack white racial identities by examining the challenges and opportunities of teaching/learning cultural identities within a historically white institution in the Midwestern United States (Cabrera, 2012; Lensmire, 2010; Ringrose, 2007). We as researchers and pedagogues interrogate students’ discourses about their cultural identities as they relate to whiteness and white identity development. Guided by Potter and Wetherell’s (1987; 1992) interpretive repertoires, we identified four repertoires for making sense of whiteness — a socially constructed location, standpoint, or positionality of structural/racial privilege. The repertoires include: (a) (unmarked) white majority: exploration, stagnation or questioning; (b) unacknowledged white victimhood; (c) imagining abstract equality for all; and (d) feeling fortunate about being white. This study extends understanding of whiteness and proposes a cycle of white consciousness to capture the ambivalent, contested, and turbulent processes of white identity development. In particular, the cycle of white consciousness features reiterative, retractive, or regressive responses (e.g., questioning white privilege and feeling fortunate about being white) to whiteness, signifying dynamic negotiations in coming to terms with being white.

**Keywords:** Whiteness, cultural identities, intercultural communication pedagogy, interpretive repertoires

## 1. Introduction

In 2013, Professor Shannon Gibney was formally reprimanded by Minneapolis Community and Technical College administrators after three white students reported feeling “uncomfortable” after a lecture on structural racism in her introductory mass communication course (McMillan Cottom, 2013, December 3). Gibney’s story evidences persistent challenges of educating for social justice (e.g., Carrillo Rowe & Malhotra, 2007; Cooks & Simpson, 2007; Rich & Cargile, 2004; Simpson, Causey, & Williams, 2007; Sorrells & Nakagawa, 2008; Yep, 2007). Rich and Cargile (2004) argue that efforts to promote cultural pluralism “in the classroom are often pedestrian and ineffectual” (p. 351). These critiques raise questions about not just what we teach but how we teach courses such as intercultural communication (IC) to promote racial, social, and global justices. Thus, we explore in this study issues of whiteness and white identities in IC education. Specifically, we examine students’ cultural identity discourses to better understand challenges and/or opportunities of teaching IC for social justice. The

context of our study is a historically white institution (HWI) in the Midwestern United States. Our focus affirms the centrality of social identity development in social justice education (Adams, 2007) and responds to a need of further theorizing white identities in anti-racism pedagogy (Cabrera, 2012; Lensmire, 2010; Ringrose, 2007).

While agreement exists on the centrality of teaching/learning cultural identities in IC education (Driskill, Arjannikova & Schneider, 2010), there is scant attention to how teaching/learning cultural identities plays out, can be effectively accomplished, or become consequential. We use the phrase teaching/learning to reflect our understanding of an interdependent and reciprocal process of the two. In particular, (un)awareness of cultural identity positions poses challenges to IC pedagogy. DeVoss, Jasken, and Hayden (2002) identified most students' unawareness of their dominant, or privileged, group positions as the primary challenge in teaching IC. They explain many Americans view intercultural interactions through the lens of "white, Protestant, middle-class, male values," which constructs other cultures "as not only different but also deviant" (p. 76). Such positionality renders self-reflections difficult. Further, Chen, Simmons, and Kang (2015) unpacked under Obama's presidency shifting ideological barriers to teaching/learning cultural identities within IC education. Despite great efforts theorizing identity (e.g., Cultural Identity Theory, Identity Management Theory, and Communication Theory of Identity), conversations about identity-based IC pedagogy remain limited. One fruitful direction for promoting attention to identity-based IC pedagogy is to focus on how students, especially whites, experience, make sense of, or become aware of their cultural identities and identity positions.

Whiteness—a socially constructed location, standpoint, or positionality of structural/racial privilege—is another critical issue in IC pedagogy (Nakayama & Martin, 2007). Although IC scholarship rarely explicitly examines the white habitus, there has been "growing interest in incorporating whiteness studies scholarship into intercultural communication curriculum" (e.g., Cooks & Simpson, 2007; Martin & Davis, 2001, p. 298; Warren, 2003). Several scholars have offered critical pedagogical strategies (Martin & Davis, 2001; Nakayama & Martin, 2007); however, what is less discussed is if, and how, those strategies actually work amid the intersecting politics that are personal, political, and institutional (e.g., HWI contexts). Pedagogically, whiteness functions as a critical arena for advancing identity-based IC pedagogy. Martin and Davis (2001) stated that to study "intercultural communication within the United States and not focus on race/ethnicity of white Americans is to leave a picture unfinished" (p. 299). As Cabrera (2012) explains, whites maintain disproportionate levels of power and privilege that enable them the opportunity to recreate and/or challenge the existing racial paradigm.

Overall, the purpose of this study is two-fold. First, we attend to issues of identity, pedagogy, and whiteness in (re)considering (critical) IC pedagogy for social justice. We approach social justice as a goal and process of enabling equal participation, equitable distribution of resources, and affirmation of both self and others (Sorrells, 2013; Sorrells & Nakagawa, 2008). Second, we focus on students' reflective essays regarding their cultural identities as they relate to whiteness and white identity development. We concur with Ringrose (2007) that examining students' negotiations and discourses of whiteness "can teach us as researchers and pedagogues what is problematic in our theories of whiteness" (p. 323). Given that cultural identities are one of the vital constructs in IC studies, educators across research paradigms (e.g., functionalist, interpretive, and critical) would find merit in attending to white identity consciousness. In the following, we situate this study in IC pedagogy and whiteness studies, describe our research design employing student assignments, and approach to critical discourse analysis. We present our findings of interpretive repertoires employed to make sense of whiteness and propose a

cyclical process of coming to terms with and/or becoming conscious of being white.

## **2. Relevant Literature Review**

### **2.1. Teaching/Learning (Cultural) Identities**

Teaching/Learning cultural identities is cross-disciplinary (Cardenas, 2012). Kahl (2010) renders a lack of understanding of one's cultural identities as a diversity building block. Learning about identity enables historical and current representations of oppression, privilege, and power. Drabinski (2011) explains:

Identities are historical artifacts rather than static realities, so to teach identity-based programs is to risk further calcifying the very categories that operate to oppress those of us who live on the margins of them. At the same time, those categories are necessary to our understanding of very real material histories of oppression and resistance; to teach as if identity is mere figment would render invisible the very real legacies of domination that must be understood if they are to be undone (p. 10).

Calling for understanding before critiquing is easier said than done. Teaching in a HWI presents unique challenges around teaching/learning cultural identities and identity positions. Further, Cabrera (2012) argues that college campuses are “both a site of whiteness normalization and disruption” (p. 31). Therefore, it is necessary to examine the challenges and opportunities of teaching/learning cultural identities with IC education.

Within the intercultural classroom, it is important to not only teach relevant identity theories and concepts but also create spaces for students to examine and reflect on who they are, thus allowing the invisible (such as whiteness) to become visible. Meyer (2007) argues that “understanding foreign cultures requires awareness of one's own cultural roots and the role of culture[s] in one's own life” (p. 3). Similarly, Zhu (2011) has suggested the importance of examining the cultural basis of one's own belief systems. Zhu explained that it would not be possible to actualize intercultural empathy without first examining our own identities and to obtain a firm understanding of who we are within an intercultural interaction. Further, Dillon (2008) has found providing safe spaces early on within an IC course for students to discuss their experiences with culture, communication, and difference proves as “an effective tool for students to personalize issues” (p. 44). Such a move helps students to reflect on their cultural identities and understand ways their own identity-based choices (re)create dominant structures (Wolf, Milburn & Wilkins, 2008). We argue that teaching/learning cultural identities promotes awareness, because it prioritizes engaging students' identities and raising critical, reflective thinking regarding their practical everyday life worlds (e.g., Mendoza, 2005).

### **2.2. (Critical) Intercultural Communication (IC) Pedagogy**

IC pedagogy has been gaining traction especially around questions of cultural identity (Chen, Simmons & Kang, 2015). As many colleges and universities are faced with demands to internationalize their curriculum to meet global challenges, IC courses are becoming increasingly relevant. At the same time, the content of IC can pose certain pedagogical challenges. First, IC education often brings forth

contestations of cultural identities between and within instructors and students (Root, Hargrove, Ngampornchai & Petrunia, 2013; Chen, 2014). Second, the diversifications and ongoing shifts in IC scholarship (e.g., from functionalist approaches to critical turns) challenge the course's core objectives (DeVoss et al., 2011). Third, "the white problem" in IC underscores the delicate yet muddy tensions of needing to better understand race/ethnicity of white Americans without inevitably re-centering whiteness (Nakayama & Martin, 2007). Within these tensions in mind, this study considers identity-based IC pedagogy particularly around issues of white identity and consciousness.

Following Fasset and Warren's (2007) critical communication pedagogy and Bell's (2007) approach to social justice education, our pedagogical orientation centralizes social justice by engaging students in examining, exposing, and interrogating ways in which oppressions operate historically, institutionally, and individually. As Johnson (2004) points out, "communication classrooms are important sites for engaging the quest for social justice" (p. 146). Our efforts aim to call out a more complex, nuanced understanding of cultural identity as emerging from communication interactions and rooted in power, culture, and responsibility (Fasset & Warren, 2007) and also provide space for students to examine multi-faceted institutions and structures that enable and constrain the (in)visible. Instilling such pedagogy into IC classrooms invites space for deeper analysis of hegemonic factors that influence intercultural interactions. Zompetti (2006) affirms that critical pedagogy can promote social justice by eliciting ideas from all participatory parties based upon their lived experiences. Such pedagogy provides opportunities to enhance students' critical thinking skills such as calling into question regimented ways of thinking/seeing as well as normalized everyday assumptions about the world. It is within our research and analysis of the mundane communication practices that social structure emerges (Fasset & Warren, 2007). Further, Engstrom (2008, November) urges initiating a "dialogic critique of power in our critical classrooms should start with local issues and local everyday practices that can then be expanded to a critique of the macro and global" (p. 20). What better place to begin than at students' own personal cultural levels? We agree with DeVoss and colleagues (2002) that "students can begin to see the complicated nature of IC only if they begin to see themselves as part of a distinct culture as well" (p. 77). Thus, we hope this study ignites transformative dialogue for the IC classroom towards promoting social justice and de-centered whiteness.

### 2.3. Whiteness

Whiteness, in essence, is a socially constructed *location* (or *consciousness*) of structural/racial privilege, a standpoint from which whites experience themselves, others, and the social world, and "a set of *cultural practices* that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (Frankenburg, 1993, p. 1). In other words, such a location is historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced (Aveling, 2004). Historically, whiteness scholarship emerged from critical race studies and "white trash" studies (Kennedy, Middleton & Ratcliffe, 2005). The term *white trash* signifies poor rural white people living in poverty, names "a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms," and speaks to tensions around competing identity categories of race and class (Wray, 2006, p. 2). Whereas critical race studies, emerged in the mid-1970s in the area of critical legal studies, aim to critique and expose racial hierarchy and transform the relationships among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), "white trash" studies gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s as a lens to critique (mis)representations of poor white bodies/culture. Whiteness studies offer novel ways of conceptualizing and talking about

both privilege and inequity (Wray, 2006). However, IC scholars have just begun to link whiteness with IC and consider how whiteness studies offer new ways of researching.

Whiteness is a tricky problem for IC scholars. On one hand, not attending to the sociopolitical construction of race/ethnicity of whites risks leaving “a picture unfinished” (Martin & Davis, 2001, p. 299); on the other hand, focusing on it runs the epistemological danger of (re)centering whiteness as a normalizing position from which to view and build knowledge about IC (Nakayama & Martin, 2007). Nonetheless, de-centering, or displacing, whiteness is an ongoing challenge that plays out in IC classes (e.g., Carrillo Rowe & Malhotra, 2007; Martin & Davis, 2001; Mendoza, 2005; Warren, 2003). Martin and Davis (2001) proposes four whiteness topics for IC curriculum in the United States: the whitening of certain U.S. immigrant groups, white privilege, communication patterns of U.S. whites, and representation of whiteness in popular culture. Warren’s (2003) ethnographic investigation identifies four ways students performed whiteness inside and outside an IC class: (a) constructing sameness (i.e., “we are all the same”); (b) constructing contradictions that challenged the privilege of whiteness while protecting it; (c) relying on stereotypes; and (d) constructing whiteness as victimhood. Despite preliminary efforts, more systematic work is warranted. This study considers what it means to de-center white positionality and normativity in a HWI through the lens of intersecting cultural identities.

### 2.3.1. White Racial Identity Development

Originally located in the disciplines of education and counseling psychology, Hardiman and colleagues (Hardiman, 2003; Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012) first developed five stages/statuses, of white racial identity development process to describe the attributes common to white peoples’ views of their race and racial privilege. Research on white identity and white privilege has expanded in a variety of fields (e.g., Cultural Studies, Feminist Theory, etc.) to explore white subjectivities and the intersectionality of identities (Hardiman & Keehn, 2012). Hardiman’s model describes five stages of identity development beginning with no awareness of oneself as a racial being and gradually achieving an anti-racist white identity: (a) naïve or naïveté, (b) acceptance, (c) resistance, (d) redefinition, and (e) internalization. The naïve/naïveté stage features a lack of awareness and consciousness of race relations and racism. The acceptance stage—active or passive—is characterized by racist beliefs in the myth of meritocracy, white supremacy, and colorblindness to maintain the system in place. The resistance stage—active or passive—is the process of unlearning racism, which is accompanied by negative feelings (i.e., shame and guilt). The redefinition stage describes the process of examining one’s white privilege and ways of de-centering whiteness. The internalization stage features an integration of a new non-oppressive white identity into one’s sense of self, being, and living. Despite the existence of such model, scholars have paid inadequate attention to how whites experience, name, and understand their racial identity (Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; Jackson II, 1999; Martin, Krizek, Nakayama & Bradford, 1996). In fact, through interviews with college students, Hardiman and Keehn (2012) found whites were limited in their understanding of structural racism, white privilege, and “were ill-equipped to understand or fully participate in an increasingly multicultural society” (p. 135).

## 3. Methods

This research took place in a HWI in the Midwestern United States. According to its institutional research office, main campus students in fall 2011 were: Caucasians (80.6%), internationals (7.4%),

African Americans (4.7%), Hispanics (2.4%), two+ races (2.0%), and Asian Americans (1.0%). We conducted this study in a freshmen-level, introductory to IC course offered both as large- (100+ students) and small-lectures (~30 students). Most of our students were white, middle-class individuals between the ages of 18-24 from major cities in the state.

### 3.1. Data Collection

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission, and upon informed consent, we collected students' written assignments on cultural identities. We believe writing created an introspective space that encourages self-reflexivity and engagement with difficult topics such as whiteness (Ringrose 2007). The assignment asked each student to describe and reflect on three cultural identities that stood out within a particular context as meaningful to their sense of self. To ensure voluntary confidentiality, interested students placed their graded assignments in a box after we left the room. Between spring 2012-2013, we collected a total of 77 essays across three course sections. Of the 77 texts, 55 students self-identified as white and 13 as students of color.

The assignment asked students to examine how they experienced and understood three of their cultural identities within a specific context. Most students opted for current and/or historical contexts that involved race- and/or class-based conflicts such as: 9/11, the (Jewish) Holocaust, the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, the Occupy movement, and the election of Barack Obama as the first black president. Others chose personal events such as international travels, family bankruptcy, and parents' divorce. Some focused on contexts that addressed religion (e.g., the selection of Pope Benedict XVI) or sex and gender (e.g., the suicide of Rutgers' freshman, Tyler Clementi, and the invited LGBTQ panel).

The most named/discussed cultural identities were race/ethnicity, social economic status, nationality, and educational level as college students. Some students discussed sex and gender directly (e.g., identifying heterosexual privilege), whereas others wrote about them as embedded within race or other identities (e.g., "a white girl," "a girl from the ghetto," and "a young, Caucasian, female, born in the US, and in the upper-middle class sector"). When discussing salient cultural identities, students wrote about their experiences in intersectional terms (e.g., "a white American," "a middle-class American," "an African American in a primarily white Catholic high school"). Nonetheless, race/ethnicity was salient and consistently discussed.

### 3.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is widely utilized in studying culture, identity, and communication (e.g., Barker & Galasinski, 2001; Chen & Collier, 2012; van Dijk, Ting-Toomey, Smitherman & Troutman, 1997). In particular, Rogers (2004) demonstrates a growing need to ground CDA in examining issues of identity and culture in educational contexts. Across CDA approaches, discursive psychology informed analyses of everyday and institutional talk as well as written texts about race and group relations (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007; van Dijk, 1993). Following Potter and Wetherell's (1987, 1992) work, discourse in this study is understood as language use in context that constructs realities, narrates events, and accounts for actions as well as identities and identity positioning.

Informed by Potter and Wetherell's (1987, 1992) approach, we attended to identity positioning by examining ways in which students constructed themselves and others as cultural group members,

particularly racial groups, and how they described their interactions with those whom they considered (racial) others. Further, we examined interpretive repertoires by analyzing how students made use of discursive resources to make meanings and reproduce hegemonic social systems particularly around race. We define interpretive repertoires “broadly [as] discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images” (Wetherell & Potter 1992, p. 90).

#### 4. Analysis and Interpretations

We envisioned this assignment to be a project of (de-)centering whiteness in the classroom because it invited self-awareness, self-exploration, and self-reflexivity around one’s intersecting racial standpoint situated both inside and outside the whiteness system. Simultaneously, we were aware of the performativity associated with writing about one’s selves in the context of a graded assignment for a critically-oriented course where racism, privilege, and marginalization were openly discussed. For instance, one white, able-bodied, heterosexual female wrote, “It [economic disparity] truly put things into perspective for me and made me realize just how lucky I am to be the boring middle class XXX [state identity] that I am.” The word boring here appeared to be a slippage, or an identity relief, that suggested writing in a particular way to appease the reader. Overall, we identified four interpretive repertoires for making sense of whiteness: (a) (unmarked) white majority: exploration, stagnation or questioning; (b) unacknowledged white victimhood; (c) imagining abstract equality for all; and (d) feeling fortunate about being white.

##### 4.1. (Unmarked) White Majority: Exploration, Stagnation, or Questioning

The idea of a naturally unexamined, unquestioned, and unchallenged white majority identity was prevalent in discourses from white and non-white students in this study. In some instances, the white dominant position was unmarked as simply “the majority.” The interpretive repertoire of the (white) majority functioned to make sense of discursive (re)production associated with whiteness such as: racism, discrimination, unearned privilege, and invisibility of white identity particularly to whites themselves. Further, in processing the idea of the dominant white positionality, most white students’ discourses reflect oscillating between acceptance of and resistance to the status quo in moments of stagnating, exploring, and questioning the “white” identity label. The ambivalent responses are not surprising considering (a) the unclearly defined and enigmatic space that whites occupy (Jackson II, 1999), (b) the tendency among white Americans to resist self-labeling (Martin et al., 1996), and (c) the dramatic paradigm shift it demands to formulate new worldviews on both the self and others around structural oppressions (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

At one level, the logic of the white majority enabled both whites and students of color to normalize the dualities of white privilege and naturalize daily struggles against racism. The discourse from a black male below exemplifies this logic, which enabled him to exonerate his white counterparts for not recognizing his everyday struggles:

President Obama was the first black person to be elected as President of the United States of America. ...One who is not from the minority may not realize the everyday struggles that it took President Obama and others like myself to get there. The majority sees a black face and does not think that he or she can lead but one may think they

should follow in the footsteps of others. One also may not understand the ascribed, discrimination, and avowed identities I have experienced.

His usage of the modal verb *may* insists on an alternative that his struggles ought to be recognized. For white students, many of them relied on the white majority logic to justify their own oblivion as one “white, non-Hispanic, brown-haired, blue-eyes, heterosexual male” explained: “For a long time, little about my life caused me to examine my own identity. After all, demographically, I was pretty similar to all the other children who attend XXX school.” Similarly, a white female echoed: “I am of the dominant race and, therefore, find it hard to personally identify with people of a minority who are discriminated against because of it.”

At another level, other students went further and inspected what it meant to occupy the white dominant position. One Caucasian female wrote,

Being a part of the majority of Caucasian people, I never had the feeling of not fitting in or feeling uncomfortable around people because of my skin color. Now, I can see that so many people look at the way people look rather than the actions of others. When we see Muslims, we instantly associate them with the terrorists just because they look the same way.

This quote exemplifies an exploration of the ontology of the white identity, which is a critical step towards promoting racial justice. Another white female questioned base knowledge about racial others. When she first moved to the Midwest from Charlotte, North Carolina, she was shocked by how little her white peers knew about the lives of African Americans in the South. She stated, “The lack of knowledge about our nation’s history about African Americans, slaves, and segregation shocked me.” An African American student, based on her daily experience battling stereotypes and racism within a predominantly white institution, challenged if the problematic racial relations she experienced in college would exist in the workplace. She remarked, “It is shocking to know many of my classmates have sat in predominantly-white classrooms throughout their lives and then they will be expected to work in diverse workplace.” Overall, the (white) majority interpretive repertoire functioned for some to accept the status quo and for others to question racial domination and their own identity positioning.

The enigmatic white dominant position surfaced and was challenged in some discourses, but remained invisible in others. The differential responses to and feelings toward discussions of whiteness and race relations were evident and posed barriers for teaching/learning IC. In particular, analyzing how white students processed their racial positionality offers insights into demystifying the whiteness system, which can open up spaces for interruptions. Our analysis identifies three distinct responses that fall and oscillate between the early stages of Hardiman’s white identity development model (i.e., the acceptance and resistance stages): (a) exploration, (b) stagnation, and (c) questioning white privilege. Like the white college students in Hardiman and Keehn’s (2012) study, our students were in the early stages of white identity development and moved in and out of awareness of structural racism and systematic privilege. Such responses suggest the non-linear, circular, and regressive, or retractive, nature of identity development and also pedagogical challenges for fostering white identity development.

#### 4.1.1. Exploration

Students in dominant positions rarely have to name, label, or confront those identities (Martin et al.,

1996). We found this assignment especially challenging for white students who were used to thinking of themselves as “individuals” rather than group members and believed that they “had no culture.” For them, this assignment became a space of exploration where they began to acquire consciousness of what it meant to be a member of a group, to have multiple cultural identities, or to be afforded unearned privilege. This sense of exploration is exemplified in the words of one white, middle class, straight student who wrote after completing the assignment that it helped him to “look at the big picture and think about what makes me as an individual and what my very own cultural identities are.”

One white male student elaborated his explorations of his taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and values in our class. He stated:

At the start of this course I was asked what my views were on complex subject matters that raise concern in our society today...Throughout this semester I have gained information on topics and issues that I never have deeply thought about before. I've discovered many new concepts and ways of viewing things that I didn't know until taking this class because I grew up not asking questions or wondering why we believe in what we believe.

His comments indicate this assignment/course acted as a catalyst that moved him towards understanding social issues. Other students reflected on critical concepts such as “white privilege” to which they were exposed for the first time. One white, American, atheist, male commented: “This [white privilege] is a concept I have literally given no thought towards before I took this class.” Similarly, one white, male, athlete wrote: “Some of these privileges I have never even thought about until this class, like how bandages have color schemes that are more beneficial towards whites versus any other races.” Overall, student discourses of exploration embody willingness and initial effort to start examining what it means to be racialized as white and to be a member of the racially dominant group in society.

#### 4.1.2. Stagnation

When challenged to consider “who I am” in the face of structural injustices and oppressions, discourses, some white students reflect a deep sense of confusion, conflict, or emotional turmoil. Stagnation indicates mixed affective and cognitive responses to structural racism as white group members when dealing with sympathy, empathy, and/or apathy toward both the self and others. The following comments from one white male student exemplify stagnation:

Since I am both male and white, I am a part of two groups that have been traditionally seen as oppressors. As a result, I'm not quite sure if I'm proud of either of these identities. It creates a sort of inner turmoil; I like to think that I'm a morally upstanding individual, but the stigma of white men is so negative because of so many others' doings, it's sometimes hard to be fully proud of who I am...My cultural identities are fairly conflicting.

Cognitively, stagnation embodies the birth, or inception, of new perspectives on injustices and oppressions. When discussing his decision to choose which high school to attend, one white student wrote the reason he may have chosen the predominately white school was:

I could have unconsciously made my decision based on how I was raised. I had always felt safe and comfortable in my community... I possibly chose to go to my private school because it consisted of predominately all white males.

This excerpt reveals a student's reflective considerations of a point in time in which the racial system influenced his decision. His use of words such as "may," "could have," and "possibly" suggest cognitive uncertainty and/or hesitation to acknowledge how his decision-making was fueled by structural racism. We argue stagnation is a crucial lens, or consciousness level, as it propels instructors to create pedagogical ingenuities to help process mixed affective and cognitive responses.

#### 4.1.3. Questioning (White Privilege)

Questioning refers to instances where students actively question the assumption, reality, and materiality such as privilege associated with their dominant/marginalized position within society. One white, able-bodied student expressed:

On the surface my cultural identity is just as privileged as they come and as generic as a pair of jeans. While this all may seem to make it easy for me it is actually quite the opposite. Listing these broad, and very common, initial characteristics does very little to help me determine how I really am. Instead of helping me to discover myself they make me feel as if I fit inside some cookie cutter mold.

This student's comment exemplifies questioning the usefulness of understanding one's identity positions as systems of privilege and discrediting such exercise as a learning experience. The student's objection to being treated generically "as a pair of jeans" indicates refusal to accept the unequal racial system. Other students question the system of white privilege based on an assumption that racism is a thing of the past and all racial groups are now equal. One white, Christian, male wrote "I am not anti-celebration, but I feel that putting a label on a sole month for African-Americans is wrong. Why don't white people have a month?" This student questions the reasoning for having celebratory months for various minority groups within U.S. culture. Here, he questions why whites, although dominant, do not have such "privileges."

Still other students deny white privilege by questioning how it applies to "poor whites." One middle-class, white female asked:

Do Caucasian Americans who are of the lower class still benefit from their white privilege? Despite the fact that lower-class Caucasians are defacing society with their government dependency, white privilege ensures their acceptance. Members of my identity group can gain authority by class standing, but not racial privilege.

This student conflated racial and socio-economic privileges and argued the existence of poor whites should negate the whiteness system. Her comments reveal her belief that economic prosperity was something achievable for all races, despite structures that might prevent such from occurring. Overall, questioning features attempts to challenge, discredit, refuse, or deny being systematically afforded privilege by the system of whiteness.

#### 4.2. Unacknowledged White Victimhood

Warren (2003) identifies a careful construction of whiteness as victimhood when learning IC, where whites frame their own positions as at the risk of being subjugated to the power of another. Though constructions of white victimhood were less prevalent than the other three constructions in his study, Warren argues that “these performatives are perhaps the most powerful” (p. 112). We found a similar pattern. Unlike the repertoire of the white majority, whether marked or unmarked, a number of students in our study employed an interpretive repertoire of white victimhood to concentrate on instances of whites as numerical minority or as cultural outsiders, which in turn reproduced and kept whiteness intact. The white victimhood repertoire serves to deny historical and structural benefits accorded to the white subjects, to erase histories of colonization, and to discredit the colonial logic of the civilized whites vs. savage others. Thus, it became possible to render whites as victims in situations where they found themselves as minorities as one white male stated, “In places where you are a minority because of your being a different race people will bully you for that as well.”

The repertoire of unacknowledged white victimhood features descriptions of situations where students felt stereotyped, singled out, or disadvantaged as whites (for example, “there is not a scholarship for Caucasian people only” as one white, Christian male pointed out). One white, American, atheist, male wrote:

There obviously is a benefit in being Caucasian when the world still cannot let go of ridiculous stereotypes. What bothers me is that people tend to act like life is easy for Whites. I feel like people think that white people always get an advantage in pretty much all aspects of life, while this is not true.

This student acknowledged the existence of white privilege but challenged the extent to which it applied in real life. He believed whites were also victims and didn’t necessarily have an “easy life.” One female described a moment of racial awakening during a trip to Haiti. She mentioned her outrage at being ascribed names based on her race such as “blanc (‘white’ in Creole).” She said, “I was outraged at being identified solely in accordance with my race, and I felt strangely threatened by these school-girls.” A male student described being made fun of when working with Somali refugees, “While there I would go and play soccer with the boys and their friends. In these instances I would be subjected to every rich white kid joke imaginable.” Both examples fail to account for the macro social and structural conditions such as the colonial histories in Haiti and the geopolitical inequalities that Somalia faces.

Others depicted hypothetical scenarios where they could be subject to victimhood as whites. One male student imagined how he might be treated as a white American in the Middle East. He explained, “If I were a white person in the Middle East I may encounter the same disdain a racial minority receives here [in the United States].” The use of “I were” indicates an unlikely possibility for this student to find himself in the Middle East; yet his anxiety and insecurity were palpable. Still others argued for being disadvantaged as “women” in attempt to lessen the effect of white privilege. One white female wrote,

Although I have had more privileges because I am white, being a woman has not always been an advantage. I have my own personal experiences in dealing with sexism. I have been considered less educated, asked to make a man a sandwich on numerous accounts, and it is assumed that I am not as good of a driver as men are, all because I am a woman.

Similarly, one young, white, female wrote,

In a way being of Caucasian descent has created a broader spectrum of things that I am able to do and be, but it is still a struggle as a female to work past the assumptions and limitations already put on me.

Both students, although acknowledging white privilege, quickly shifted focus to their experiences with gender injustice and victimhood. Overall, the repertoire of white victimhood seems to be riddled with fear and vested interest in white subjectivity, which can remiss valuable opportunities for promoting intercultural transformation for the self and others.

While the repertoire of white victimhood can be interpreted as a minimization technique, taking seriously the issue of feeling unacknowledged calls for a close examination what it means for whites to work through white privilege. The students' plea raises several questions in this process: Whom did the students want acknowledgement from? What did they want acknowledgement of (e.g., their efforts)? What role might acknowledgement play in working through denouncing white privilege? What is the perceived reward for white students to fight against white supremacy? Though unacknowledged white victimhood sounds problematic, attending to it might open up new spaces for addressing whiteness in IC courses. Simpson et al. (2007) found students want to "feel safe and challenged" when addressing race in the classroom, and they urge teachers to "demonstrate clear and active support for diversity" (p. 45).

#### 4.3. Imagining Abstract Equality for All

Regardless of however many examples of structural racism they became aware, a number of white students in our study firmly believed in the myth of meritocracy in that liberal principles such as equality, fairness, and hard work were all that mattered. While some students were able to imagine the predicaments facing LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) group members after listening to guest speakers from the LGBT Center, very few were able to put themselves in the shoes of a racial minority; instead, they imagined racism as a thing of the distant past. For instance, writing as a future politician, one female student described a need for a presidential nominee to "say a few words in Spanish" when visiting towns with large Hispanic populations to "make the people feel at home." She stated, "This is exactly what should be done so everyone is seen as equal and no prejudice or any other negative approaches are taken." This interpretive repertoire functioned to render racism and racial inequalities as sporadic, unusual, and abnormal, and, thus, systematic attention to experiences with racism was unnecessary.

Under the logic of assumed, or imagined, equality for all, hard work, respect, and acceptance were key to a prosperous society. One white male, despite awareness of economic disparities, argued working hard to obtain economic success was more respectable than being given any differential treatments based on race. He situated his argument in the context of the Occupy Movement:

Protestors of the Occupy Movement included varieties of different raced people, since all people deserve economic equality and that race shouldn't hold Americans from having it. People work hard for any money they earn, and that's more respectable than being white, black, Asian, or Hispanic and knowing how much money one thinks that person has.

Here the repertoire of equality assumed a fictitious even playing field and ignored social structures that economically privileged some whites over others. Another white female also commented on the importance of hard work, “Although I am white, and part of mostly dominant cultural groups, I still have to work hard for everything that I have in life.” She ignored existing unequal social systems that benefit some over others. Others wrote about the importance of acceptance of all. “I was not used to that [discriminating against others] because I was raised to accept everyone,” said one white female. “Being judged for the color of my skins is not socially acceptable these days,” said another student. “I have always been very accepting of people of all cultures,” said another student.

Bonilla-Silva (2006) pinpoints “abstract liberalism” as one of the four central frames that constitute the dominant racial ideology today—color-blind racism. Abstract liberalism involves ideas associated with political and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters. In this study, equality was constructed similarly where liberal beliefs did not correspond with actual practices. For instance, a white male, believing in treating “everyone equally no matter what,” decided not to befriend his Chinese roommate. He explained, “I couldn’t be a friend with him because we did different things and couldn’t communicate unless he typed English on his computer.” Could abstract equality be an excuse not to be inconvenienced? One young, white, female wrote:

As a white female I learned my rights and resources are drastically different then [sic.] people of other decent [sic.] and gender. I have come to an understanding that race especially should not play any role in any sort of decision-making, but in reality most people do not see it that way

#### 4.4. Feeling Fortunate about Being White

A small number of white students in this study responded to racial prejudices, discriminations, and injustices with a fortunate feeling. Yep (2007) found the topic of whiteness can generate a myriad of emotions from anger, hostility, anxiety, guilt, embarrassment, uneasiness, to victimization, but fortune is not one of them. This repertoire of feeling fortunate of being, or born, white struck us as peculiar and warranted careful examination. Contrary to feeling guilty or ashamed that indicates vulnerability or ownership at the risk of re-centering whiteness or becoming a block (Yep, 2007), feeling fortunate suggests a lack of perceived participation or involvement in racial oppressions. In this way, the repertoire of feeling fortunate functioned to reinforce white superiority and ultimately elevate the students’ positionality as whites. One white male wrote, “I have never been the victim of a stereotype based on the color of my skin. I was fortunate to have not been born as a racial minority in my country.” Another commented, “This [acts of racism] was something I would never have to EVER go through in my life simply because I was ‘fortunate’ enough to have been born a white male.” Another female student wrote that she felt “lucky” to be a middle-class white individual. One white, lower-middle class female wrote,

Although I have suffered lower SES [socioeconomic status] than others, this does not mean that being Caucasian was the major cause for these negatives. In fact, whiteness has made me realize that I would not be where I am today without white privilege.

This student, although cognizant of the financial difficulties of being raised by a single mother, celebrates

her white privilege due to the belief that being white has protected her from further injustice. She said, “I have never once been insulted for being white or forced to lose basic human rights because of my whiteness.” This student celebrates her “fortune” and offers the notion that white privilege improved her life. She continued, “Being a Caucasian American has subjected me to the privileges of my own majority and I will forever be grateful for this.” This student is grateful for the privileges she has been awarded for being a member of the dominant group. Similarly, one young, female wrote:

Jean Twenge (2006) calls the current youth population “Generation Me” characterized by greater sense of assertion and entitlement than previous generations. Is “white fortune” part of this phenomenon? Does feeling fortunate relate to lack of empathy? Considering Derrick Bell’s (1992) argument that racism is a permanent, integral, and indestructible component of the U.S. society, it is understandable to some extent to feel fortunate about being white. However, to promote racial justice and equity, it is important to push these feelings further and challenge those white students to consider what they can or are willing to do about such feelings.

## 5. Conclusions and Discussions

In this study, we examine issues of identity, pedagogy, and whiteness in IC education for social justice within a HWI. Specifically, this research examines identity positioning and interpretive repertoires embedded in students’ discourses about one’s contextually-contingent cultural identities. We identify four interpretive repertoires for making sense of whiteness: (a) marked/unmarked white majority: exploration, stagnation, and questioning; (b) unacknowledged white victimhood; (c) imagining abstract equality for all; and (d) feeling fortunate about being white. All four interpretive repertoires indicate a budding awareness of white identity as a social location, standpoint, and position, and suggest the majority of our students are in the early stages of developing anti-racist white identities (Hardiman & Keehn, 2012). Underlying the interpretive repertoires also affirms a profound sense of ambivalence toward white racial identities (Lensmire, 2010). Despite such awareness, most of the interpretive repertoires reproduce, rather than challenge, white superiority. In particular, the repertoire of feeling fortunate about being white—a new addition to the literature—seems honest, but odd. Pedagogically, the findings highlight, on one hand, a need among white students to want, or need, to feel “safe or acknowledged” in working through white domination and privilege, and, on the other, a cyclical process of becoming conscious of being white. Overall, our findings underscore a need to further theorize white identities for social justice education (Cabrera, 2012; Lensmire, 2010; Ringrose, 2007).

### 5.1. Intersectionality and Whiteness

This study points to several theoretical and practical implications for linking cultural identities, whiteness, and IC pedagogy. Simpson et al. (2007) pointed out it is critical to understand how the cultural identities of students (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, etc.) impact what occurs in the classroom. This study seeks to understand potential implications of identity negotiations for identity-based IC pedagogy through examining students’ discourses about their own intersecting cultural identities. The assignment did not require students to write about their race, but almost every student wrote about their racial identities, which underscores the importance of race and whiteness for IC pedagogy. However, whiteness, in this study, is often discussed in intersectional terms (e.g., “I’m Hispanic, Spanish, and

Irish, but I'm white. I have white skin" said a student in class on April 4, 2012). In our study, applying intersectionality to write about white identities suggests a reluctance to fully acknowledge or confront white supremacy because it functions to lessen the permanence and determinacy of racism that Derrick Bell (1992) discussed. Another byproduct of intersectionality is that gender becomes secondary and less significant. These findings endorse the importance and challenge of linking whiteness and IC curriculum (e.g., Martin and Davis, 2001), affirm the centrality of identity-based learning objectives in IC education, and underscore the importance of continued (re)negotiations of cultural identities, privilege, and domination.

## 5.2. Cycle of White Consciousness

Theoretically, our study extends understanding of white racial identities. We propose a cycle of whiteness as levels of consciousness of which individuals move in and out. Our study suggests a cyclical nature of (early) white identity development that falls between Hardiman's second and third stages of acceptance and resistance. Ultimately, developing an anti-racist white identity is much more reiterative, complex, cyclical, and even turbulent, especially in early encounters. Similarly, Hardiman and Keehn (2012) found white college students moved in and out of awareness of race, racism, and white privilege. It is not necessarily a staircase model where one moves from one phase to another, but is rather cyclical and reiterative, including regressing identity moves. Thus, we propose the cycle of white consciousness to capture the ambivalent and contested process of white identity development that features reiterative responses (e.g., exploration, stagnation, etc.) and signifies dynamic negotiations in the process of coming to terms with being white. Our proposal affirms that we as researchers and pedagogues have limited approaches and skills to navigate discourses of whiteness (Ringrose 2007), especially when working with white students in racially homogeneous settings.

Our proposal of the "cycle of white consciousness" bears some pedagogical implications for teaching/learning cultural identities. First, this view underscores a need to provide a safe yet challenging environment to move students beyond stagnation and sustain student engagement over time. Additionally, knowing so many places of where a student may "go" along this cycle allows instructors to understand the challenge of teaching whiteness as students are likely to return to stagnation. Aveling (2004) claims the challenge for educators is to "work with students to become aware of white race privilege and at the same time to provide them with strategies and resources which enables them to move beyond feelings of guilt, fear and alienation" (p. 69). Second, Simpson, Causey, and Williams (2007) stress the importance of instructors serving as examples of individuals comfortable with discussing difficult topics such as race, and call for an instructor's ability to be self-reflexive in terms of ushering students into moments of engagement with diversity issues. Our study echoes and reinforces this call. This "cycle," or movement between phases of engagement and stagnation, reinforces and mandates the importance of critical, yet self-reflexive teaching within the IC course. Third, the cycle highlights influence of linguistic resources available to students not just inside but also outside of the classroom. Such pedagogy provides a deeper context of instruction as we (instructors) guide students along the cycle and into an engagement with issues of diversity.

## 5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study is that student assignments might be subjective to the "tension between

earning a grade and voicing one's opinion" (Simpson et al., 2007, p. 39); at the same time, our findings underscore the utility of attending to student discourses about their identities. Future research should further explore productive ways of utilizing student discourses to understand identity, power, context, and pedagogy. We urge for more systematic efforts to examine identity-based IC pedagogy as both theory and practice, especially in the context of HWI's. What ought to constitute the cores of (Identity-based) IC pedagogy? To what extent should issues of social justice, power relations, or structural racism be integral parts of IC education? To what extent should identity-based IC pedagogy be considered "critical" communication pedagogy, and what are the pros and cons? In brief, this study underscores the critical role of whiteness in identity-based IC teaching/learning especially within HWI's, advocates more attention to IC pedagogy for social justice, and offers an assignment that accomplishes contextually-specific engagement with and reflections on cultural identities.

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#### Author Note

Yea-Wen Chen (Ph.D., The University of New Mexico, 2010) is Assistant Professor within the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University. Her publications include: “My family isn’t racist however...”: Multiracial/Multicultural Obama-ism as an ideological barrier to teaching intercultural communication in a post-racial era (Chen, Simmons, & Kang, 2015); Using six-word memoirs to increase cultural identity awareness (Simmons & Chen, 2014); and “Are you an immigrant?”: Identity-based critical reflections of teaching intercultural communication (Chen, 2014).

Nathaniel Simmons (Ph.D., Ohio University, 2014) is Assistant Professor within the Department of Communication at La Salle University. His publications include: “My family isn’t racist however...”: Multiracial/Multicultural Obama-ism as an ideological barrier to teaching intercultural communication in a post-racial era. (Chen, Simmons, & Kang, 2015), Using six-word memoirs to increase cultural identity awareness (Simmons & Chen, 2014), and “We’re a culture, not a costume”: Ethical analysis of a college student-led organizations’ anti-racism campaign (Simmons, 2014).

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