

(In) Secure Times: Constructing White Working-Class Masculinities in the Late 20th Century

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# **(IN) SECURE TIMES**

## ***Constructing White Working-Class Masculinities in the Late 20th Century***

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*This article documents a moment in history when poor and working-class white boys and men are struggling in their schools, communities, and workplaces against the "Other" as a means of framing identities. Drawing on two independent qualitative studies, the authors investigate distinct locations where poor and working-class boys and men invent, relate to, and distance from marginalized groups in an effort to create self. First the authors look at an ethnography of "the Freeway boys," a community of urban white working-class high school boys who must deal with the economic ravagement of their neighborhood and their insecure place in a world different than that of their fathers. Next, the authors draw from a large-scale survey of young adults to hear how a combined sample of urban poor and working-class white men narrate identities that are carved explicitly out of territory bordered by white women and African American men. Across sites, the authors theorize how high schools and workplaces both, in part, create white masculinities and interrupt them, at a time when white working-class boys and men feel under siege.*

**I**n the late 1980s and early 1990s, the poor and working-class white boys and men whom we interviewed have narrated "personal identities" as if they were wholly independent of corroding economic and social relations. Drenched in a kind of postindustrial, late twentieth-century individualism, the discourse of "identity work" appears to be draped in teflon. The more profoundly that economic and social

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conditions invade their personal well-being, the more the damage and disruption is denied. Hegemony works in funny ways, especially for white working-class men who wish to think they have a continued edge on “Others”—people of color and white women.

Amid the pain and anger evident in the United States in the 1990s, we hear a desperate desire to target, to pin the tail of blame on these “Others” who have presumably taken away economic and social guarantees once secure in a nostalgic yesteryear. Our work in this article follows this pain and anger, as it is narrated by two groups of poor and working-class white boys in the Northeast, in high school and at their public sector jobs. Through pooled analyses of two independent qualitative studies, we look at the interiors and fragilities of white working-class male culture, focusing on the ways in which both whiteness and maleness are constructed through the setting up of “Others.” Specifically, the two populations in this study include white working-class boys in high school and poor and working-class white men in their communities and workplaces—including a group of firefighters—between the ages of 24 and 35. These two groups were purposefully selected to demonstrate how white working-class men construct identities at different stages of adulthood. Although some of the men in this study are poor, the analytic focus remains on the identity formation of white working-class men, as the poor men come from working-class backgrounds and, as their articulations indicate, they routinely fluctuate between poor and working-class status.

Through these narratives we cut three analytic slices, trying to hear how personal and collective identities are formed today by poor and working-class white men. The first slice alerts us to their wholesale *refusal to see themselves inside history*, drowning in economic and social relations, corroding the ever-fragile “privilege” of white working-class men. The second slice takes us to the *search for scapegoats* and the ways in which these men scour their “local worlds” for those who have robbed them of their presumed privilege—finding answers in historically likely suspects, Blacks and white women. The third slice, taken up in the conclusion, distressingly reveals the erosion of union culture in the lives of these boys and men and the *refusal to organize along lines of class or economic location*, with women and men across racial/ethnic groups, in a powerful voice of protest or resistance. These themes document the power of prevailing ideologies of individualism and meritocracy—as narrated by men who have, indeed, lost their edge but refuse to look up and fetishistically only look “down” to discover who stole their edge. These are men who belong to a tradition of men who think they “did it right,” worked hard and deserve a wife, a house, a union job, a safe community, and public schools. These are men who confront the troubled pastiche of the 1990s, their “unsettled times,” and lash out at pathetically available “Others.” By so doing, they aspire toward the beliefs, policies, and practices of a white elite for whom their troubles are as trivial as those of people of color. Yet, these boys and men hold on, desperate and vigilant, to identities of white race and male gender as though these could gain them credit in increasingly class-segregated worlds.

The poor and working-class white boys and men in this article belong to a continua of white working-class men who, up until recently in U.S. history, have been relatively privileged. These men, however, do not articulate a sense of themselves inside that history. In current economic and social relations that felt sense of privilege is tenuous at best. Since the 1970s, the U.S. steel industry has been in rapid decline as have other areas of manufacturing and production, followed by the downward spiral of businesses that sprung up around larger industry (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). In the span of a few decades, foreign investment, corporate flight, downsizing, and automation have suddenly left members of the working class without a steady family wage, which compounded with the dissipation of labor unions, has left many white working-class men feeling emasculated and angry (Weis, 1990; Weis, Proweller, and Centrie, 1996). It seems that overnight, the ability to work hard and provide disappeared. White working-class men, of course, are not more racist or sexist than middle-class and upper-class white men. In this analysis, however, we offer data that demonstrate how white working-class male anger takes on virulent forms as it is displaced in a climate of reaction against global economic change.

As they search for someone who has stolen their presumed privilege, we begin to understand ways in which white poor and working-class men in the 1980s and 1990s manage to maintain a sense of self in the midst of rising feminism, affirmative action, and gay/lesbian rights. We are given further insight into ways in which they sustain a belief in a system that has, at least for working- and middle-class white men, begun to crumble, "e-racing" their once relatively secure advantage over white women and women and men of color (Newman 1993). As scholars of the dominant culture begin to recognize that "white is a color" (Roman 1993; Wong 1994), our work makes visible the borders, strategies, and fragilities of white working-class male culture, in insecure times, at a moment in history when many feel that this identity is under siege.

Many, of course, have theorized broadly about the production of white working-class masculinity. Willis (1977), for example, focuses on how white working-class "lads" in the industrial English Midlands reject school and script their futures on the same shopfloor on which their fathers and older brothers labor. Because of the often tense and contradictory power dynamics inherent in any single cultural context, Connell (1995) draws attention to the multiplicity of masculinities among men. In the absence of concrete labor jobs in which poor and working-class white men partially construct a sense of manhood, Connell also explores how the realm of compulsory heterosexuality becomes a formidable context for the production of white working-class male subjectivities. Various strands within the literature on masculine identity formation consider the construction of the "Other." For instance, researchers who explore all-male spaces in schools for white working-class and middle-class boys indicate that they often become potent breeding grounds for negative attitudes toward white women and gay men, whether in college fraternities (Sanday 1990), high school and college sports teams (Messner and Sabo 1994), or

on an all-male college campus (Addelston and Stirratt forthcoming). The look at the formation of white working-class masculinity in this study draws on this significant literature, while bringing to the forefront of analysis the current effects that the deindustrializing economy has on the meaning-making processes among poor and working-class white boys and men, particularly as it translates to the construction of a racial "Other."

## ON WHITENESS

In the United States, the hierarchies of race, gender, and class are embodied in the contemporary "struggle" of working-class white men. As their stories reveal, these boys and men are trying to sustain a *place* within this hierarchy and secure the very *hierarchies* that assure their place. Among the varied demographic categories that spill out of this race/gender hierarchy, white men are the only ones who have a vested interest in maintaining both their position and their hierarchy—even, ironically, working-class boys and men who enjoy little of the privilege accrued to their gender/race status.

Scholars of colonial thought have highlighted the ways in which notions about non-Western "Others" are produced simultaneously with the production of discourse about the Western white "self," and these works become relevant to our analyses of race/gender domination. Analysts of West European expansion document the cultural disruptions that took place alongside economic appropriation, as well as the importance of the production of knowledge about groups of people that rendered colonization successful. As Frankenberg states,

The notion of "epistemic violence" captures the idea that associated with West European colonial expansion is the production of modes of knowing that enabled and rationalized colonial domination from the standpoint of the West, and produced ways of conceiving other societies and cultures whose legacies endure into the present. (1993, 16)

Central, then, to the colonial discourse is the idea of the colonized "Other" being wholly and hierarchically different from the "white self." In inventing discursively the colonial "Other," whites were parasitically producing an apparently stable Western white self out of a previously nonexistent self. Thus the Western (white) self and the colonial "Other" both were products of discursive construction. The work of Chakravorty Spivak (1985), which explores how Europe positioned itself as sovereign in defining racial "Others" for the purposes of administration and expanding markets, is useful on this point.

One continuing effect of colonial discourse is the production of an unnamed, unmarked white/Western self against which all others can be named and judged. It is the unmarked self that must be deconstructed, named, and marked (Frankenberg 1993). This article takes up this challenge. As we will argue here, white working-class male identity is parasitically coproduced as these men name and mark others,

largely African Americans and white women. Their identity would not exist in its present form (and perhaps not at all) if these simultaneous productions were not taking place. At a moment of economic crisis in which white working-class men are being squeezed, the disparaging constructions of others proliferate.

### RACISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE "OTHER"

The first study we focus on involves an ethnographic investigation conducted by Lois Weis in the mid-1980s. This is an exploration of white working-class high school students in a deindustrializing urban area called "Freeway." Data were collected in the classrooms, study halls, during extracurricular activities, and through in-depth interviews with over 60 juniors, most of their teachers, the vice-principal, social workers, guidance counselors, and others over the course of an academic year. Data collection centered on the junior class since this is the year when some students begin to plan for further schooling, and in the state where Freeway is located, college entrance exams are administered.

While there are several facets to the production of the boys' identity, we focus on the ways in which young white boys coproduce African American male identities and their own identities. For the most part, these young white boys narrate a sense of self grounded in the sphere of sexuality, in which they script themselves as the protectors of white women whom they feel are in danger of what they regard as a deviant African American male sexuality. Not only are these young working-class boys unable to see themselves as belonging to a tradition of privilege in their being white and male, their felt loss of that historic status in a restructuring economy leaves them searching in their school, their neighborhood, and surrounding communities for those responsible. Perhaps due, in part, to student peer culture contextualized within the lived culture of the school in which these interviews took place, this examination of white male working-class youths of high school age reveals meaning-making processes that are strikingly uniform, at least in relation to the construction of a racial "Other."

Freeway is a divided city and a small number of Arabs and Hispanics live among African Americans largely on one side of the "tracks," and whites on the other, although there are whites living in one section of Freeway just adjacent to the steel mill, which is in the area populated by people of color. Virtually no people of color live in the white area, unlike many large cities in the United States, where there are pockets of considerable mix. Most African Americans came up from the South during and after World War II, drawn by the lure of jobs in the steel industry. Having been relegated to the dirtiest and lowest paid jobs, most are now living in large public housing projects, never having been able to amass the necessary capital to live elsewhere. Although we have no evidence to this effect, we also assume that even had they been able to accumulate capital, mortgages would have been turned down if African Americans had wished to move into the white area. Also, there are no doubt informal agreements among those who rent, not to rent to African

Americans in the white areas, further contributing to the segregated nature of the town. Today, most of project residents receive welfare and have done so for a number of years.

Among these white adolescent men, people of color are used consistently as a foil against which acceptable moral, and particularly sexual, standards are established. The goodness of white is always contrasted with the badness of Black—Blacks are involved with drugs, Blacks are unacceptable sexually, Black men attempt to “invade” white sexual space by talking with white women, Black women are simply filthy. The binary translates in ways that complement white boys. As described by Jim, there is a virtual denial of anything at all good being identified with Blackness and of anything bad identified with whiteness:<sup>1</sup>

The minorities are really bad into drugs. You're talking everything. Anything you want, you get from them. A prime example, the \_\_\_\_ ward of Freeway; about 20 years ago, the \_\_\_\_ ward was predominantly white, my grandfather used to live there. Then Italians, Polish, the Irish people, everything was fine. The houses were maintained; there was a good standard of living. . . . The Blacks brought drugs. I'm not saying white people didn't have drugs; they had drugs, but to a certain extent. But drugs were like a social thing. But now you go down to the \_\_\_\_ ward; it's amazing; it's a ghetto. Some of the houses are okay. They try to keep them up. Most of the homes are really, really terrible. They throw garbage on the front lawn; it's sickening. You talk to people from [surrounding suburbs]. Anywhere you talk to people, they tend to think the majority of our school is Black. They think you hang with Black people, listen to Black music. . . . A few of them [Blacks] are starting to go into the \_\_\_\_ ward now [the white side], so they're moving around. My parents will be around there when that happens, but I'd like to be out of there.

Much expressed racism centers on white men's entitled access to white women, thus serving the dual purpose of fixing Blacks and white women on a ladder of social relations. Clint expresses these sentiments as he relays that the fighting between Blacks and Whites in the community is a result of white men protecting white women:

[The Blacks] live on the other side of town. . . . A lot of it [fights] starts with Blacks messing with white girls. That's how a lot of them start. Even if they [white guys] don't know the white girl, they don't like to see [it] . . . I don't like it. If I catch them [Blacks] near my sister, they'll get it. I don't like to see it like that. Most of them [my friends] see it that way [the same way he does] . . . I don't know many white kids that date Black girls.

This felt need to protect white girls also translates as a code of behavior for white male students inside school. Within school walls, white working-class male anger toward African American men is magnified. As Bill bitterly accounts, white male students are not seen as doing the right thing:

Like my brother, he's in ninth grade. He's in trouble all the time. Last year he got jumped in school . . . about his girlfriend. He don't like Blacks. They come up to her and go, “Nice ass,” and all that shit. My brother don't like that when they call her “nice ass” and stuff like that. He got suspended for saying “fucking nigger”; but it's all right for a Black guy to go up to whites and say stuff like that [“nice ass”]. . . .

Sometimes the principals aren't doing their job. Like when my brother told [the assistant principal] that something is going to happen, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ just said, "Leave it alone, just turn your head." . . . Like they [administrators] don't know when fights start in this school. Like there's this one guy's kid sister, a nigger [correction]—a Black guy—grabbed her ass. He hit him a couple of times. Did the principal know about it? No!

These young white men construct white women as if they were in need of their protection. The young men fight for these young women. Their complaints are communicated through a language of property rights, Black boys intruding onto *white property*. It is the fact that *Black men* are invading *white women*, the property of *white men*, that is at issue here. The discursive construction of Black men as oversexualized enables white men to elaborate their own "appropriate" heterosexuality. At a time of heightened concern with homosexuality, by virtue of their age, the collective nature of their lives, the fear of being labeled homosexual and the violence that often accompanies such labeling in high school, these boys assert virulently and publicly their concern with Black men, while expressing their own heterosexuality and their ability to "take care of their women."

There is a grotesqueness about this particular set of interactions, a grotesqueness that enables white men to write themselves as pure, straight, and superior, while authoring Black men as dirty, oversexualized, and almost animal-like. The white female can be put on a pedestal, in need of protection. The Black female disparaged; the Black male avenged. The elevation of white womanhood, in fact, has been irreducibly linked to the debasement of both Black women and men (Davis 1990). By this Davis asserts that in the historic positioning of Black females as unfeminine and Black males as predators, the notion of what is feminine has become an idealized version of white womanhood. It is most interesting that not one white female in this study ever discussed young Black men as a "problem." This is not to say that white women were not racist, but this discursive rendering of Black men was quite noticeably the terrain of white men.

The word *nigger* flows freely from the lips of white men and they treat Black women far worse than they say Black men treat white women. During a conversation at the lunch table, for example, Mike says that Yolanda [a Black female] should go to "Niggeria" [Nigeria]. In another conversation about Martin Luther King Day, Dave says, "I have a wet dream—about little white boys and little Black girls." On another occasion, when two African American women walk into the cafeteria, Pete comments that "Black people . . . they're yecch. They smell funny and they [got] hair under their arms." The white boys at this table follow up this sentiment by making noises to denote disgust.

Young white men spend a great deal of time expressing and exhibiting disgust for people of color. This is done at the same time they elaborate an uninvited protectionist stance toward white women. If white women are seen as the property of white men, it is all the more acceptable for them to say and do anything they like. This set of discursive renditions legitimates their own "cultural wanderings"



since they are, without question, “on the top.” For the moment, this symbolic dominance substitutes for the real material dominance won during the days of heavy industry. Most important, for present purposes, is the coproduction of the “white self,” white women, and the African American male “Other.”

### **YOUNG ADULTS: WHITE POOR AND WORKING-CLASS MEN IN AN ECONOMIC STRANGLEHOLD**

The second set of narratives stems from an ongoing study of poor and working-class young adults who grew up in the Reagan-Bush years, conducted by Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, and a group of graduate students, including Judi Addelston. In broad strokes we are investigating constructions of gender, race, ethnic, and class identities; participation in social and community-based movements for change; participation in self-help groups; participation in religious institutions; experiences within and outside the family; and experiences within and outside the new economy. We have adopted a quasi-life history approach in which a series of in-depth interviews are conducted with young people—poor and working-class—of varying racial backgrounds. Data were gathered in Buffalo, New York and Jersey City, New Jersey. Seventy-five to 80 adults were interviewed in each city. While the larger aspects of the project are as stated above, in this article we focus on the bordered constructions of whiteness as articulated by young white men—a combined sample of poor and working-class men, some of whom are firefighters.<sup>2</sup>

As with the Freeway boys, we hear from these somewhat older men a set of identities that are carved explicitly out of territory bordered by African Americans and white women. Similar to the Freeway study, these groups are targeted by the young white adult men as they search their communities, work sites, and even the local social service office for those who are responsible for stealing their presumed privilege. While most of these men narrate hostile comparisons with “Others,” some offer sympathetic, but still bordered, views. Like cartographers working with different tools on the same geopolitical space, all these men—from Western New York and Northern New Jersey—sculpt their identities as if they were discernibly framed by, and contrasted through, race, gender, and sexuality.

As with the teens, the critique by young adult white men declares the boundaries of acceptable behavior at themselves. The white male critique is, by and large, a critique of the actions/behaviors taken by African Americans, particularly men. This circles around three interrelated points: “not working,” welfare abuse or “cheats,” and affirmative action.

Because many, if not most, of the white men interviewed have themselves been out of work and/or received welfare benefits and food stamps, their critique serves to denigrate African Americans. It also draws the limits of what constitutes “deserving” circumstances for not working, receiving welfare, and relying on government-sponsored programs at themselves.

By young adulthood, the target site for this white male critique shifts from sexuality to work but remains grounded *against* men of color. When asked about the tensions in their neighborhood, Larry observes,

Probably not so much [tension] between them [Blacks and Hispanics]. But like for us. I mean, it gets me angry sometimes. I don't say I'm better than anybody else. But I work for the things that I have, and they [blacks and Hispanics] figure just because you're ahead, or you know more and you do more, [that's it] because you're white. And that's not really it. We're all equal, and I feel that what I've done, I've worked for myself to get to where I'm at. If they would just really try instead of just kind of hanging out on the street corners. That's something that really aggravates me, to see while I'm rushing to get to work, and everybody is just kind of milling around doing nothing.

In Larry's view, he is a hardworking man, trying to live honestly, while African Americans and Hispanics do nothing all day long. Larry talks about the anger he feels for those who are Black and Hispanic and in so doing sets up a binary opposition between whites and "Others," with whites as morally superior. From this flows an overt racial critique of affirmative action programs, as well as a more racially coded critique of welfare abusers and cheats.

We take up the issue of affirmative action first. Many of these white men focus on what they consider to be unfair hiring practices, which they see as favoring people of color and white women. Pete, for example, has a great deal to say about his experience at work and the Civil Rights movement more generally, and then how such movements have hurt him as a white man:

For the most part, it hasn't been bad. It's just that right now with these minority quotas, I think more or less, the white male has become the new minority. And that's not to point a finger at the Blacks, Hispanics, or the women. It's just that with all these quotas, instead of hiring the best for the job, you have to hire according to your quota system, which is still wrong . . . Civil rights, as far as I'm concerned, is being way out of proportion . . . granted, um, the Afro-Americans were slaves over 200 years ago. They were given their freedom. We as a country, I guess you could say, has tried to, well, I can't say all of us, but most of us, have tried to, like, make things a little more equal. Try to smooth over some of the rough spots. You have some of these militants who are now claiming that after all these years, we still owe them. I think the owing time is over for everybody. Because if we go into that, then the Poles are still owed [he is Polish]. The Germans are still owed. Jesus, the Jews are definitely still owed. I mean, you're, you're getting cremated, everybody wants to owe somebody. I think it's time to wipe that slate clean . . . it's all that, um, you have to hire a quota of minorities. And they don't take the best qualified, they take the quota number first. . . . So that kind of puts you behind the eight ball before you even start. . . . Well, I'm a minority according to some people now, because they consider the white male now a minority.

Larry focuses on what he interprets as a negative effect of the Civil Rights movement—government-sponsored civil service tests. For Larry, these exams favor white women and "minorities" and exclude qualified white men from employment:

I mean, in theory, a whole lot of it [Civil Rights movement] is good. I feel that is worthwhile, and there has to be some, not some, there has to be equality between

people. And just because of . . . I feel that the federal government sometimes makes these laws or thinks that there's laws that are bad, but they themselves break them. I mean, I look at it as where—this is something that has always irked me—taking civil service exams. I feel that, I mean, I should be given a job based on my abilities and my knowledge, my background, my schooling, everything as a whole, rather than sometimes a Black man has to have a job just because he's Black. And really you're saying, you're not basing it on being Black or whether you're a male or female, but that's exactly what they're doing . . . I really, I completely disagree with quotas. I don't feel it's, they're fair. I mean, me as a white male, I'm really being pushed, turned into a minority. I mean, it doesn't matter. We have to have so many Blacks working in the police department or in the fire department, or women. And even though, well, say, I'm not just saying this because I'm a white male, but white males, you know, will be pushed, you know, pushed away from the jobs or not given the jobs even though they might qualify more so for them, and have more of the capabilities to do the job. And they just won't get it because they're white males.

According to Tom, "color" is not an issue—there are lazy people all over and he even has friends who are Black. Tom, however, accuses African Americans and white women of unfairly playing up minority status to get jobs. From politicians to other lazy minorities, in Tom's view, Blacks in particular have a lock hold on all the good jobs:

I have nothing against Blacks. Whether you're Black, white, you know, yellow, whatever color, whatever race. But I don't like the Black movement where, I have Black friends. I talk to them and they agree. You know, they consider themselves, you know. There's white trash and there's white, and there's Black trash, and there's Blacks. And the same in any, you know, any race. But as soon as they don't get a job, they right away call, you know, they yell discrimination. That's where I think some of our, you know, politicians come in too. You have your [council members in Buffalo], and I think they do that. But I think maybe if you went out there, and educated yourself. And you know, there's a lot of educated Blacks, and you don't hear them yelling discrimination because they've got good jobs. Because they got the know-how behind them. But the ones that are really lazy, don't want it, they, they start yelling discrimination so they can just get the job and they're not even qualified for it. And then they might take it away from, whether it's a, you know, a woman or a guy.

The white male critique of affirmative action is that it is not "fair." It privileges Blacks, Hispanics, and at times white women, above white men. According to these men, white men are today being set up as the "new minority," which contradicts their notions of equal opportunity. Nowhere in these narratives is there any recognition that white men as a group have historically been privileged, irrespective of individual merit. The assertions about affirmative action offer white men a way of "Othering" African Americans, in particular. This theme is further elaborated in discussions of welfare abusers and cheats. Like talk of sexuality among the younger men, as exemplified by Pete, the primary function of discussions about welfare abusers is to draw the boundaries of acceptable welfare at their own feet:

[The Welfare system] is a joke. . . . They treat you like absolute garbage. They ask you everything except your sexual preference to be quite honest with you. They ask how many people are in the house. What time do you do this? What time do you do

that? Where do you live? Do you pay your gas? Do you pay your electric? Um, how come you couldn't move into a cheaper apartment? Regardless of how much you're paying to begin with. If you ask them for a menial item, I mean . . . like your stove and refrigerator. They give me a real hard time. . . . There's definitely some people who abuse the system, I can see that. But then there are people who, when you need it, you know, it's like they have something to fall on to. And they're [the case workers] basically shoving everybody into one category. They're all users. But these [case workers] are the same people that if the county closes them off, they won't have a job and they're going to be there next too.

Ron, a white working-class men who has been in and out of instances of stable employment, makes observations on welfare and social services that are based on his own varied experiences. Ron says that he has never applied for welfare and takes pride in this fact, and he compares himself with those who abuse the system—whom he believes are mostly Black. Later, Ron reveals that he has used social services:

You know, we [spouse] look at welfare as being something, um, less than admirable . . . I think for the most part, I think most people get out of life what they put into it. You know, because some people have more obstacles than others, there's no doubt about it. But I think a lot of people just expect things to come to them, and when it doesn't, you know, they've got the government to fall back on. . . . You know I think it [falling back on the government] is more common for black people. I mean social services, in general, I think, is certainly necessary, and Kelly and I have taken advantage of them. We've got food stamps several times. Um, one of the things about the home improvement [business he was in], when I first got into that, before I really developed my skills better and, and the first company, like I said, when they were doing some change over. And, just before they left [the city], we were at a point where business was starting to slack off and um, especially in the winter time. So, a lot of times in the winter when my income was quite low, we'd go on food stamps, and I think, I think that's the way it should be used. I mean, it's help there for people. But, you know, as soon as I was able to get off it, I did. And not for any noble reasons, but just, you know, I think I'd rather be able to support myself than have things handed to me.

Since most of the case workers are white, Ron is aligning himself with the hardworking white people who have just fallen on hard times, unlike the abusers, largely Black, who exploit the system. Along these same lines, Pete's criticism of the case workers is that they treat *all* welfare recipients as cheats. Many of the white men who have been out of work, or are now in a precarious economic state, speak with a strong disdain for African American men and, if less so, for white women as well. Others, however, narrate positions relative to white women and people of color within a discourse of concern and connection. This more liberal discourse is typically spoken by working-class men who occupy positions of relative economic security. But even here the borders of their identity nevertheless fall along the same fault lines of race and gender (Roediger, 1994).

The white working-class firefighters interviewed in our study narrate somewhat similar views. Joe, for instance, works in a fire department in Jersey City. He, like so many of our informants, insists that he is "not a racist," but he vehemently feels

that "Civil Rights has [*sic*] gone far enough." As we discovered, the fire and police departments in Jersey City have historically garnered a disproportionate share of the city's public sector investment and growth over the last decade, and they employ a disproportionate share of white men. We began to hear these departments as the last public sector spaces in which white working-class men could at once exercise identities as white, working, and men. Joe offers these words to describe his raced and gendered identity:

No, I'm not racist. I'm not prejudiced. There are definitely lowlives in this community where we live in. If you see somebody do something stupid, you call them stupid. You don't call them a stupid Black person because there's no need for those extra words. Just stupid. That's how I feel, I look at things. I'm not racist at all. If there is such a thing, racist towards a person. That's how I see it.

Although Joe makes the disclaimer that he is not racist, ironically, he specifically marks the Black person "who does something stupid." Later, in his interview, we hear greater clarity. Joe is tired of hearing about race and has come to some frightening conclusions about how such issues should be put to rest:

Civil rights, I think they're going overboard with it. Everything is a race issue now. Everything you see on TV, all of the talk shows. You have these Black Muslims talking, preaching hate against Whites, the Whites should be dead. And then you got these Nazi fanatics who say Blacks and Jews should be dead. That's fine, let them [Blacks and Jews] go in their own corner of the world.

In characterizing African Americans as "lowlives" and "stupid," Joe ostensibly creates a subclass used to buttress what he sees as the higher moral character of whites. Sick of the race "issue," Joe also critiques gains won during progressive movements for social change. On the streets of his community and on television, Joe maintains that he is bombarded with examples of irresponsible African Americans and others whom he feels are taking over and, therefore, should be pushed back into "their own corner of the world." Interestingly, Joe revises his otherwise critical look at affirmative action because it *positively* affected him:

I would say, what you call affirmative action, I would say that helped me to get this job. Because if it wasn't for minorities pressing the issue two or three years ago about the test being wrong, I would have scored a 368 on the test [and would have failed].

Joe passed the exam only after it had been modified to be more equitable. For Joe, public sector commitments to equity, including affirmative action and welfare, could be helpful if they help whites. But they are racist if they don't. In talking about his sister, Joe points out how she is being discriminated against because she is white. In Joe's logic, because so many Blacks and Asians are using and abusing the system, whites, unfairly, are the ones who are being cheated. Again, Joe places his sister in a position of superiority in relation to people of color. While his sister is a hard worker, "Others," who do not really need the assistance, are simply bilking the system:

She just had a baby. She works as a waitress. Not too much cash in there because they cut her hours, and she's getting welfare and from what I understand from her, there are people, Black or Asian people, that aren't having as much problems as she is. It seems that the system is trying to deter her from using it. The impression she gets is you're white, you can get a job. If it's true, and I think that's definitely not right. You could be Black, white, gold, or brown, if you need it, you should have it.

Mark is another white firefighter. Echoing much of what Joe has said, Mark portrays the firehouse as a relatively protected and defended space for whiteness. By extension, the firehouse represents the civic goodness of [white] public institutions. In both Joe's and Mark's interviews, there is a self-consciousness about "not sounding racist," yet both consistently link any mention of people of color and the mention of social problems—be it child neglect, violence, or vandalism. Whiteness preserves the collective good, whereas people of color periodically threaten the collective good:

I wouldn't say there is tension in the fire department but people are prejudiced. I guess I am to a certain degree. I don't think I'm that bad. I think there's good Blacks and bad Blacks, there's good Whites and bad Whites. I don't know what the percentage of minorities are, but Jersey City is linked with other cities and they have to have a certain percentage of minorities. Where I live right now, it's not too bad. I don't really hang out. . . . I have no problems with anybody. Just the vandalism. You just got to watch for that.

Mark doesn't describe how he got to be a firefighter, and he also does not know how Joe successfully landed the job. Although he is secure in his vocation, Joe is somehow certain that "minorities" have gained access unfairly. When asked what he might like to see changed about the job, Mark responds,

Have probably testing be more well-rounded. More straightforward and fair. It seems to be a court fight every time to take a test. Everybody takes the same test. I just don't understand why it's so difficult. I understand you have to have certain minorities in the job and that's only fair, but sometimes I think that's not fair. It's not the fire department, it's the people that fight it . . . I think everybody should take the same test and that's it. The way you score is the way you score.

Frank, on the other hand, embodies the white working-class "success" story. He has completed college and graduate school and speaks from an even greater distance about his community's sentiments about race, safety, and crime. Frank complicates talk of race/ethnicity by introducing social class as the social border that cannot easily be crossed. His narrative of growing up unravels as follows:

Well, because, you know, we were white, and these other places were, were much less white, and I think there was kind of that white fear of, minorities, um, particularly Blacks and Hispanics. And you know, I'm not proud of that, but I mean, that's just, that's part of the history of it. But it was also perceiving that things were changing, very radically, very dramatically. And what's happened over the years is that a lot of people who lived there for generations have moved away. But, you know, it was, I think, they just, a fear of, of the changes going on in the 60s and '70s, and seeing, you know, crime increase. . . . And wanting to keep, you know, this neighborhood as intact as possible. . . . I sense that there's a lot of apprehension [among Whites]. You

know, I think . . . I mean, a lot of it comes out of people talking about, um, their fear, you know, um, getting mugged, or getting their, you know their car stolen.

Seemingly embarrassed by racialized biases embedded in the community in which he was raised, Frank nevertheless shifts responsibility off of whites and onto “minorities” when he discusses solutions to racial problems:

Indian women have these . . . marks on their foreheads. And um, you know, they’re apparently just racists (referring to white youths who beat on these women). . . . You know, ignorant. Yeah, they’re, they’re young white, ignorant people who go around beating up Indians, in particular because the Indians tend to be passive. Um, it’s something they need to learn to do, which is to be more assertive, I think and to be, um, you know, to stand up for their, their basic human rights.

We hear, from these young white males, a set of identities carved inside, and against, demographic and political territories. The borders of gender, race/ethnicity, and, for Frank, class, mark the borders of self, as well as “Other.” While all of our interviewees are fluent in these comparisons, those who sit at the collapsing “bottom” of the economy or in sites of fragile employment rehearse identities splintered with despair, verbal violence, and hostile comparisons of self and “Other.” Those more economically secure also speak through these traditional contours of identity but insist that they have detached from the moorings of hostile attitudes and oppositional identities. Even this last group, however, has little social experience from which to invent novel constructions of self, as white, working-class, male, and positively engaged with others.

From men like Frank we hear the most stretch, the greatest desire to connect across borders. But even these men feel the pull of tradition, community, historic, and contemporary fears. They are simply one job away from the narrations of their more desperate and hostile or perhaps more honest white brothers. With few noticing that the economy has produced perverse relations of scarcity, along lines of race, class, and gender, these white men are the mouths that uphold, as if truth, the rhetoric of the ruling class. Elite white men have exploited these men’s fears and provided them with the language of hate and the ideology of the “Other.” To this end, many of the working-class men in this sample believe that there are still good jobs available for those who work hard, only “minorities” are blocking any chance for access to such employment. Refusing analyses of collapsing urban economies and related race relations, these young adult white men hold Black and Latino men accountable for their white misery and disappointments.

## CONCLUSION

The U.S. economy is rapidly changing, moving from an industrial to a postindustrial society. Jobs that once served to secure the lives and identities of many working-class people are swiftly becoming a thing of the past. The corrosion of white working-class male felt privilege—as experienced by the boys and men in

this analysis—has also been paralleled by the dissipation of labor unions, which are being washed away as quickly as industry. Even though capital has traditionally used fundamental cleavages such as racism and sexism as tools to fracture a working-class consciousness from forming, labor unions have typically played a strong role in U.S. history in creating a space for some workers to organize against capital for change (Roediger 1994). Historical ties to white working-class union activity is fading fast, particularly among young white working-class men, whose fathers, uncles, and older brothers no longer have a union tradition to pass on to the next generation. With the erosion of union culture and no formal space left to develop and refine meaningful critique, some white working-class men, instead, scramble to reassert their assumed place of privilege on a race/gender hierarchy in an economy that has ironically devalued all workers. Unorganized and angry, our data indicate that white working-class boys and men consistently displace their rage toward historically and locally available groups.

We have offered two scenes in which white men in various stages of adulthood, poor and working-class, are constructing identities on the backs of people of color and white women. Clearly this is not only the case for white working-class men, nor is it generalizable to *all* white working-class men, but these men are among the best narrators of virulent oppositional hostility. It is important that the boys and young adult men in both studies in different geographic locations exhibit similar sentiments. These white men are a race/class/gender group that has been dramatically squeezed relative to their prior positions. Meanwhile, the fantasies and stereotypes of "Others" continue to be promoted, and these delicate, oppositional identities constantly require "steroids" of denigration to be maintained. As the Freeway data suggest, white working-class men also virulently construct notions of identity around another historically available "Other"—gays. Many studies, such as that by Messner and Sabo (1994), evidence how homophobia is used as a profound foil around which to forge aggressive forms of heterosexuality. Heteromascularity, for the working class in the United States, may indeed be endangered.

As these white boys and men comment on their sense of mistreatment, we reflect, ironically, on their stone-faced fragility. The 1980s and 1990s have marked a time when the women they associate with got independent, their jobs got scarce, their unions got weak, and their privileged access to public institutions was compromised by the success of equal rights and affirmative action. Traditional bases of white male material power—head of the family, productive worker, and exclusive access to "good" public sector and/or unionized jobs—eroded rapidly. Sold out by elites, they are in panic and despair. Their reassertions of status reveal a profound fragility masked by the protection of "their women," their fight for "fairness" in the workplace, and their demand for "diversity" among (but not within) educational institutions. As they narrate a precarious white heteromascularity, perhaps they speak for a narrow slice of men sitting at the white working-class nexus. More likely, they speak for a gendered and raced group whose privilege has been rattled and whose wrath is boiling over. Their focus, almost fetishistically, is on themselves as victims and "Others" as perpetrators. Research conducted by Janoff-Bulman



(1979) documents that an exclusive focus on individual “perpetrators” of injustice [real or imagined] is the *least* likely strategy for transforming inequitable social conditions and the *most* likely strategy for creating poor mental health outcomes. Comforted by Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh, these men are on a treacherous course for self, “Others,” and the possibilities for broad-based social change.

The responsibility of educators, researchers, and citizens committed to democratic practice is not simply to watch passively or interrupt responsively when these boys/men get “out of hand.” We must embark on serious social change efforts aimed at both understanding and transforming what we uncover here. Spaces must be located in which men/boys are working together to affirm white masculinity that does not rest on the construction of the viral “other.” Such spaces must be imagined and uncovered, given the attention that they deserve. Schools, churches, and work sites all offer enormous potential for such transformative cultural activity. We need to make it our task to locate spaces in which white men and boys are reimagining what it means to be white and male in the 1990s. Activists and researchers can profitably work with such groups to chronicle new images of white masculinity that are not based on the aggressive “othering” that we find to be so prevalent.

## NOTES

1. We must point out that although we focus on only the white boys’ construction of Blacks, we do not mean to imply that they authored the race script in its entirety nor that they wrote the meaning of Black for the African American students. We are, for present purposes, simply focusing on the ways in which young white men discursively construct the “Other.”

2. We include men of different ages and statuses to represent an array of voices that are white, male, and working-class.

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