

# The End of an Idyllic World: Nostalgia Narratives, Race, and the Construction of White Powerlessness

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## Abstract

We examine the experiences of whites displaced by racial change by focusing on the ways in which nostalgia narratives are used to construct and maintain white racial identity in an era of color-blind discourse. Expanding on the analysis of nostalgia as a tool to create identity in response to a loss in one's place attachment, we explore how nostalgia is used in constructing and maintaining contemporary forms of whiteness. Based on data from in-depth qualitative interviews, we find that nostalgia narratives are useful in framing white racial identity along the themes of innocence and virtuousness as well as powerless and victimhood. In the shared storytelling of this nostalgic past, whites create a present that plays by color-blind rules, while reproducing, reiterating, and strengthening whiteness.

## Keywords

collective memory, color-blind ideology, neighborhoods, nostalgia, racial change, whiteness

## Introduction

Nostalgia is a special type of memory, one that elevates pleasurable experiences and screens out more painful ones. Scholars have noted how nostalgia often emerges after loss or displacement as individuals seek to claim identity through 'recognizing and redefining a shared past' (Milligan, 2003: 381). When individuals experience disruptions in their place attachment, nostalgia proves a useful tool to construct identities (Davis, 1979). The literature has specifically focused on how

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nostalgic narratives are used 'to defend territory, to create a sense of authenticity, and to give legitimacy to a way of life' (Kasinitz and Hillyard, 1995: 161). There is little literature, however, that examines how nostalgia narratives are specifically used in the constructing and maintaining racial identities. We explore the role of nostalgia in framing white racial identity in terms of innocence, virtuousness, and powerlessness or victimhood in the post-Civil Rights era.

Based on qualitative interviews with whites growing up in racially changing neighborhoods in Chicago between 1960 and 1980, this article reveals how whites employ nostalgia narratives to claim white racial identities, even when faced with social contradictions. Individuals in our study repeatedly spoke nostalgically of the old neighborhood and a time when life seemed good, that is, orderly, friendly, safe, and homogeneously white. The good life, couched in a specific geographic and historical space (segregated white neighborhoods in Chicago during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s), is viewed as having been disrupted, destroyed, and unrecoverable because of unavoidable racial change. Blame for the displacement is generally placed on the shoulders of those labeled the destroyers – blacks.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes through racially explicit language, most often through racially coded language of crime, housing upkeep, religion and culture, nostalgia narratives are consistently built around a segregated white world. The memories of the loss of the old *white* neighborhood converge with the nostalgia for a time when 'white culture' was the unquestioningly synonymous with American culture. In the shared storytelling of this nostalgic past, these whites are creating a present that plays by color-blind rules, while reproducing, reiterating, and strengthening whiteness by making explicit claims about what it means to be a good American and a good human being. In this sense, nostalgia serves as a culturally sanctioned strategy for shoring up white privilege. Prior to examining these data, it is important to review the scholarly literature around race and place, collective memory, and racial discourse, to provide the context for our research.

## Literature Review

Millions of us feared, fled, and hated. Today we look back on it all in hurt and wonder. How did this happen? Where did the good life go? When an accidental detour or missed expressway exit brings us into contact with the world we left behind, we can still place the blame firmly and squarely elsewhere. The shuttered factories and collapsing row houses, the vacant storefronts and rutted streets are regarded with the same awe reserved for the scenes of natural disasters. We look out on a world that somehow, in the American collective memory, destroyed itself. (Suarez, 1999: 16)

In the decades after World War II, existing patterns of racial residential segregation were remade and reinforced through the dynamics of neighborhood change. In the 1950s and 1960s numerous neighborhoods experienced rapid and extensive racial transition. Many neighborhoods experienced anywhere from 50 to 90 percent white flight in a decade or less (Duncan and Duncan, 1957; Goodwin, 1979; Soutner, 1980). These dramatic shifts resulted from a variety of social forces including tremendous black population growth in northern cities (Massey and Denton, 1993), inner-city overcrowding and black demand for housing (Hirsh 1983), discriminatory actions by speculating realtors (Levin and Harmon, 1991), redlining by banks (Jackson, 1985), and white opposition to integration (Ellen, 2000; Kruse, 2005; Seligman, 2005). The latter opposition was rooted in deep-seated racism against blacks, fear of living among blacks, or a fear that property values would decline precipitously when blacks moved in (Oser, 1994).

A rich literature exists illustrating the social dynamics of racial transition, including the processes involved and efforts of various actors to mitigate the negative effects of racial change in

neighborhoods (DeSenna, 1994; Keating, 1994; Maly, 2005; Molotch, 1972; Nyden et al., 1997; Taub et al., 1995). As racial change began occurring in northern cities many whites 'defended' their neighborhoods, employing various tools to 'stabilize' their communities and/or keep blacks from moving in. This ranged from physical attacks on blacks or black-owned property to the formation of civic or homeowner associations to attempting to implement policy to stop blockbusting and redlining (Seligman, 2005). These organizations saw themselves as guarding investments that whites made in their homes and upholding the values of self-government in effort to preserve segregated housing and communities (Sugrue, 1996). In a smaller number of communities, biracial coalitions attempted to intervene in the process of racial change in order to first stabilize their communities through 'pro-integrative' policies that took aim at the dual-housing market (Maly, 2005; Saltman, 1990). On the whole, the defensive stabilizing efforts did not hold; in the three decades following World War II millions of whites fled central city neighborhoods for the suburbs or neighborhoods on the periphery.

Racial transition generated varied emotions, with fear and anxiety about property value decline, anger against black Americans, and a sense of loss prominent among them. This is not a surprise as scholars have recognized the importance of whiteness as property (see Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 1995) and the construction of attachments to place is important to an individual's well-being and distress. According to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, what starts as undifferentiated 'space' becomes 'place' through the 'steady of accretion of sentiment' (1977, 1974: 33). This affective bond between people and places (usually residences and neighborhoods) is best known as 'place attachment' (Altman and Low, 1992; Manzo, 2003). Place attachment can take on social, material, and ideological aspects as individuals develop kinship and community ties, own or rent land, and get involved in public life (Altman and Low, 1992; Manzo and Perkins, 2006). The importance of place meaning to community members becomes quite clear when examining disruptions to place attachments. Studies of families forced to relocate due to urban renewal projects demonstrate a profound sense of grief and mourning for places that no longer physically exist as the physical and social fabric of their communities was destroyed (Fried, 1963; Gans, 1982; Marris, 1986). Studies of environmental disasters also illustrate how disruptions of place attachment can disturb a sense of continuity (Belgrave and Smith, 1994; Brown and Perkins, 1992; Erikson, 1976; Katovich and Hintz, 1997; Smith and Belgrave, 1995) and cause feelings of loss and alienation (Hummon, 1992). Finally, and most applicable to our research, Cummings's research on the effects of racial change on whites illustrates that racial change can generate similar emotions of loss for their neighborhood and the emotional security it provided, particularly for those unable (or unwilling) to leave as the neighborhood shifts (1998). In each case, change in the physical world, and thus to one's place attachments, leads to the loss of 'taken-for-granted realities' and the identities that come with them (Milligan, 2003: 383).

Nostalgia is an important way individuals react to such a disruption (Milligan, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Nostalgic memory is not regular memory, rather it is a function of present fears and anxieties, and involves an 'active selection of what to remember and how to remember it' (Wilson, 2005: 25). In this sense, then, nostalgia is 'one of the means ... we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities' (Davis, 1979: 31). Nostalgia narratives, then, are imagined stories of the past that select positive elements from one's personal history, while scrubbing away stories that are unpleasant and even shameful. Individuals compose nostalgia narratives when they feel their identities, status, and/or attachments to a place are threatened, and these narratives provide a means for constructing or framing identities that are positive. Like other tools (e.g. dress, talk, deviant acts), nostalgic narratives serve as a method of group-level identity work (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock, 1996).

Urban scholars, particularly those focusing on gentrification, have examined how nostalgia narratives are employed in dealing with social and cultural displacement. In their research on Red Hook, Kasinitz and Hillyard explored how old timers use nostalgic storytelling to highlight how their self-sufficient, morally decent and authentic community was destroyed and in contrasting the area's 'golden age' with the present era of decline, they make a claim for 'their own basic decency and assert ownership' (1995: 161). Patillo's study (2007) of a gentrifying black neighborhood in Chicago highlights how existing residents, threatened by residential, social, and cultural displacement, use nostalgia tales of community, shopping, and entertainment prior to gentrification in an effort to stake their claim for the future. Oejo's (2011) study of the Lower East Side examines how early gentrifiers use a nostalgia narrative to combat social and cultural change (i.e. commercial gentrification as highlighted by the increased presence of bars and nightlife). Threatened with displacement as social authorities in the neighborhood as well as displacing their attachment to its places, nostalgia allows early gentrifiers to claim an identity as the area's authentic and symbolic owners. These studies, focusing on battles over physical spaces, highlight the power of nostalgia to construct new identities that 'stands up to, defines, and counters change in the present' as well as serving as a basis for political action (Oejo, 2011: 306).

The literature on nostalgia narratives is important in understanding why and how people construct communities and identities. Since memory is not only personal but social and historic as well (Ferrarotti, 1990; Johnson and Dawson, 1982; Lowenthal, 1985), remembering is a communal act. Through storytelling (or 'mnemonic traditions' and 'mnemonic socialization'), we construct communities and our notions of ourselves (Bellah et al., 1985; Schwartz, 1996). This collective memory process defines in-group from out-group, and guides how we think about ourselves. In short, shared memories allow individuals to orient or situate a sense of identity (Hobsbawm, 1972; Hooker, 2009; Schwartz, 1996), and thus, 'memory is a central, if not the central, medium through which identities are constituted' (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 133). Recognizing that both identity and memory are ongoing processes rather than static properties, scholars have explored the various ways in which identities are fashioned and sustained. Memory propels and reaffirms identities, frames opposition, and helps make sense of individuals and larger groups (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Schwartz, 1996; Zerubavel, 1996). Yet, memory and the identities fashioned through collective memory are the 'reality of the past that is socially articulated and socially maintained' (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994: 54). Thus, memory is not fixed, as it has to be continually created and maintained, a process accomplished in a group context, and reflects the concerns and anxieties of the present (Halbwachs, 1992; Schwartz, 1997). The most basic method of accomplishing this socialization is through talk, particularly in small groups, where we ground and substantiate our reevaluations of our personal recollections and thus, do the work of constructing identity.

Less well understood is how nostalgia narratives and memory are used in the construction of racial identities. Scholars have been interested in ways collective memory and identity are constructed and maintained through recollection in small group settings (Casey, 1987; Fivush, 1994; Halbwachs, 1992; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Revill, 1993). Most pertinent is May's study of how collective memory is created through face-to-face interactions (2000). May focuses on micro communities (here a racially homogenous neighborhood tavern) to explore the way African-American men use race talk to provide individuals 'an opportunity to re-create themselves with positive racial self-identity' (2000: 202). He reveals how through storytelling individual young and older patrons construct memories that reveal the past and present state of race relations. Given that most Americans live in highly segregated neighborhoods and socialize in race-segregated groups, race talk in these settings is restricted and offers a limited vision of race relations. As others have pointed out, this limited vision is not specific to blacks (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004). Analysis of

collective memories and stories help us understand the legacy of the race-based battles and the ways whites create stories that highlight their virtuousness, authenticity, powerlessness, and victimization, while apologizing for racist structures (Hooker, 2009). Indeed, particular styles of 'race speak' work to reproduce segregation, white supremacy, and color-blindness and a sense of solidarity (see Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004; Gallagher, 1993, 2003b; Hooker, 2009).

Since memory is connected to the environment, it is important to attend to important shifts in the US racial landscape as a result of the social, political, and cultural struggles since the 1950s. While these struggles challenged legalized segregation and widely held beliefs about the innate biological inferiority of blacks, a new racial democracy failed to emerge (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Forman and Lewis, 2006; Forman, 2004; Omi and Winant, 1994). In its place, a new racial common sense (or sensibility) emerged that reproduces racial inequalities and protects white privilege through a new set of discursive strategies (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004). While the labels for this new racial common sense vary (e.g. 'symbolic racism', 'laissez-faire racism', etc.), the label that best fits is color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Carr, 1997). Color-blind racism suggests that racial parity has largely been achieved and that contemporary racial inequality is the product of nonracial dynamics or individual and/or group-level shortcomings rather than structural constraints (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004; Gallagher, 2003a; Lewis et al., 2000).

One element of color-blind discourse involves the way in which racial antipathy is expressed. Unlike previous periods where racial prejudice was more overt, today whites are more likely to express such sentiments in covert, contradictory, and subtle ways (Bobo et al., 1997; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Myers, 2005; Sears and Henry, 2003). These ways include white virtuousness and the interconnected themes of racial resentment and white victimhood. In a color-blind era, white stories often extol 'non-racial' positive virtues of white residents and neighborhoods with little acknowledgment of how institutions have supported whites, while ignoring and/or discriminating against others (Feagin, 2010). Related to tales of white virtue is the rise of racial resentment and the sense that whites are now victims in a post-Civil Rights era. From the late 1960s through the 1980s, the US experienced the rise of the 'new right movement', an authoritarian, resentment-fueled, and right wing populist movement that sought to curtail the progressive civil rights gains of the 1960s (Kazin, 1995). The new right 'rearticulated' such gains through a façade of racial neutrality while utilizing racial coding or 'phrases and symbols which refer indirectly to racial themes, but do not directly challenge popular and democratic or egalitarian ideals' (Omi and Winant, 1994: 123). Coded terms including busing, welfare or affirmative action suggest that blacks do not try hard enough to overcome difficulties, take what they have not earned, and that the playing field is tilting away from whites (Kinder and Sanders, 1996: 105–6; Wellman, 1997). By the early 1980s, at the national level, the Reagan administration borrowed from the new right, arguing that racial discrimination had been eliminated and as a result, civil rights remedies were now working against whites and group-based rights should be challenged (Omi and Winant, 1994). In the decades between, whites continued to move to suburbs and communities defined as synonymously white-controlled, safe, and good.

This particular articulation of race allowed whites to paint themselves as victims of institutions, laws, and a too powerful government that were creating an unfair playing field for whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Formisano, 1991; Gallagher, 1993; Hooker, 2009). This can be seen in whites' claims of being powerless against segregation and racial change, and unable to change things (Sokol, 2007). Similarly, Bonilla-Silva et al. reveal how whites rely on a 'naturalization frame' when interpreting racial segregation and isolation, failing to see it as a problem or something that whites have control over (2006: 111–16). And yet, while whites may profess to be powerless, they do act in

ways to protect white privilege. Scholars have demonstrated the numerous 'conscious and deliberate' actions that have institutionalized white group identity in the United States to create a 'possessive investment in whiteness' (Lipsitz, 1995). These efforts have included policies sanctioned by the state, but also involve cultural stories. Stories of powerlessness and white valor allow whites to not implicate themselves in a system of racial inequality and still maintain white privilege (Wellman, 1993). We assert that nostalgia narratives are similar efforts and represent 'culturally sanctioned' responses that 'defend the advantages that whites gain from the presence of blacks in America' (Wellman, 1993: 29). In this sense, racism does not dwell in the psychological (i.e. prejudice), but is best described as defense of racial privilege.

For residents of the Chicago's Southwest and West sides, racial change resulted in an 'involuntary disruption of place attachment' (Milligan, 2003: 385). This experience of loss is a form of displacement and given their age at the time, remained a formative experience. Related to this displacement are the changes rendered by the Civil Rights movement, leaving whites with a different context in which to understand race and racial identity. As we shall see, through nostalgia narratives and race talk, whites construct, maintain, and repair a positive white racial identity by calling on color-blind discourse. Recalling racial change through a nostalgic lens and calling on color-blind language, whites make claims of being victims of overwhelming circumstances (state-based changes) or 'others' (unruly blacks), rarely able to see other alternatives (e.g. integration). In the process, nostalgia narratives of the old neighborhood prove a useful culturally sanctioned strategy to regain white ownership and provide a common sense understanding of the way to achieve a good life and validate a social hierarchy of white as good and justifiably dominant.

## Methodology

This research project is a multi-year, multi-method effort that focuses on the experiences of whites raised in segregated Chicago neighborhoods that were undergoing racial change in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Our research design initially focused on several of Chicago's Southwest Side neighborhoods (i.e. Gage Park, Chicago Lawn, West Lawn, West Elsdon), an area historically known for racial change starting in the 1960s (Hirsch, 1983; Massey and Denton, 1993). We recruited respondents who grew up in these communities between 1955 and the late 1970s. This time period was selected to ensure a range of experiences with racial change and it reflects when racial change was happening in these neighborhoods. A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit a total of 52 respondents. In the end, 26 respondents came from this part of the Southwest Side. We expanded our reach by including residents who grew up in other Southwest Side communities that were undergoing or adjacent to communities undergoing racial change. Nine respondents were added from the Southwest side neighborhoods of East Beverly, Auburn Gresham, and West Englewood. Midway through the data collection phase, an informant led us to former residents of the West Side neighborhood of Humboldt Park. We focused exclusively on a community around the Catholic parish of Our Lady of Angels. This area was relatively close to Madison Street, the site of riots by blacks after Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated (Coates, 1968; Seligman, 2005). An additional 17 respondents came from this area. The design provided respondents representing varied experiences with racial change, specifically proximity to and pace of racial change and whether and when families moved. Approximately 23 respondents came from areas (Humboldt Park, West Englewood, Auburn Gresham, and East Beverly) where racial change was rapidly occurring and the parents of these children eventually moved them out of the neighborhood. The other respondents lived in areas where racial change occurred more slowly. Both set of respondents, however, shared experiences and memories that were strikingly similar.

Among the interviews with former residents, 31 were male and 21 were female. Respondents ranged from 35 to 58 years old. What all residents held in common was they were living in white, largely lower middle-class Catholic neighborhoods where connections and interactions were circumscribed in a church parish and narrow band of streets under the constant scrutiny of family, neighbors, and friends. Based on occupational prestige, a clear majority of respondents reported coming from working- to lower middle-class backgrounds. As such, our respondents were very aware of their parent's concern over property values. As we will see, their parent's class position undoubtedly informed their experiences. However, while all respondents grew up in neighborhoods best described as lower middle-class, the majority (70%) had college degrees and professional careers.

For this study we conducted in-depth, face-to-face individual interviews with 35 participants. An additional two interviews were conducted over the telephone. Four focus groups were also conducted, with groups ranging from three to six. Interviews were not conducted in a formal series of questions and answers. Instead, we opted for a semi-structured format to allow respondents to give voice to their experiences growing up in an area where racial transition was likely, without our asking them to analyze their experiences through a racial lens. The format also allowed for more unplanned conversation which best facilitated the unmasking of the subtleties of racial discourse. Interviews were loosely structured around two broad areas: (1) a description of the neighborhood in which they grew up; and (2) respondents' experiences as the area began to change. Each interview began with a request that interviewees tell us about the neighborhood they grew up in. We wanted to understand how participants remembered their experiences, rather than how they responded to a sequential telling of experiences structured by our questions. As respondents described their neighborhoods, we asked questions about their social networks and institutional affiliations. The goal of this format was to understand 'what was going on' or how whites growing up in neighborhoods before and during racial change make sense of their experiences and memories of that time.

Efforts were made to ensure not only the credibility of the data, but also our interpretation of it. The interviewers' race, gender, and background are important. Each author was roughly the same age and race as the respondents. All interviewers were raised Catholic, as were the majority of the respondents. Also, we attempted to match interviewees by gender. These parallels helped develop rapport with respondents and positively influenced the way respondents interpreted our questions. As whites are usually socialized to not see themselves as racial subjects, our shared status likely made respondents feel more comfortable expressing views that they might normally conceal from non-whites. To that end, we were careful to not bring up race, only asking for elaboration when they raised the issue. To bolster the credibility of our interpretation of the data and enhance trustworthiness, we debriefed each other after every interview. This allowed us to discuss the meaning of the data and emerging theory, as well as to have reflexive discussion of our role in the research process (Charmaz, 2003). Member checking would have allowed us to corroborate our findings with the respondent's experiences and perspectives. We did not employ member checking in this study, given the sensitive concept of race and out of fear that it would elicit defensive reactions (Bloor, 1997).

Interviews ranged from one hour to two hours in length, were tape recorded with participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim by the authors. All participants' names in this article are pseudonyms. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In concert with this approach, analytic induction was begun at the earliest phases of the data collection, coding fieldnotes, and interview transcripts for emerging themes, patterns, and processes. We followed Corbin and Strauss's (2008) approach of open coding, axial coding, and

selective coding in attempting to understand the role of collective memory in constructing physical, social, symbolic, and racialized spaces, reinforcing and framing white racial identities, and the ways whites think and speak about race and whiteness in a post-civil rights era.

Finally, it is important to review the assumptions we are making in regard to the concepts of race and racial identity. While popular discourse still maintains strands of biological race, since the late 1800s with anthropologists such as Franz Boas and later at the end of the Eugenics Movement (post-World War II), race scholars have made a strong case that race is a social construction, alternatively called a 'cultural construction' (see, for instance, Smedley and Smedley, 2011). In the late 20th century, debates raged in the academy about how scholars can walk that fine line between 'race as an illusion' and 'race and objective reality'. A few US scholars still demand that we stop using race terms so as to not reproduce racial categories (see, for instance, Webster, 1993) and now, in South Africa, with the introduction of democracy and a white minority (both numeric and politically), some race scholars are calling for the end of the use of race and racism (see Durrheim, 2011; Alexander, 2001). We take the position that race is a social construction and like all social constructions is embedded in the day-to-day workings of society and interactions. It does not exist in our biology (thus it is an illusion) and yet, it exists in the objective realities of society (social institutions, wealth, housing, education, etc.) (see Duster, 2001). Our analysis is situated precisely at this nexus of race as illusion (social construction through discourse and action) and race as objective reality (housing market, etc.). As such, we are able to examine how social structures and social relations shape and are shaped by racialized identities. Racial identities are shaped in the context of human interaction, and human interaction happens in an ever-shifting racialized context. By focusing on nostalgia narratives we are able to analyze the subtle and obvious ways identities shape and are shaped by social relations.

## Data Analysis

Stories are used to carry memories and connect us to a larger community in particular ways. Some memories are written; most, however, are carried in a nuanced manner through an oral tradition, embedded into the events of today (de Certeau, 1984). We explore through the use of interview data how these whites construct themselves – through nostalgic retelling – as powerless victims of a changing 'natural' racial order over which they had little or no control and yet, for which they felt they paid a steep price through the loss of community and property. Their stories portray an idyllic time when their world was both white and homogeneous, *and* protected by institutional practices that created and allowed segregation to exist. As the Civil Rights Movement pressed the state for change and the state responded, whites living in segregated working class communities felt themselves abandoned (Hirsch, 1983; Kefalas, 2003). Writing about this specific historical time, Diamond posits that 'many whites in the Bungalow Belt perceived' the building of public housing near white working-class neighborhoods 'as a state-driven integration initiative, [and] the *Brown* decision struck working-class whites as further proof that the government, federal or local, was clearly not looking out for their interests' (2009: 226). Once their white segregated neighborhoods were no longer 'protected' by the state (see also the Fair Housing Act of 1968), whites felt they had few choices if they wanted to continue their way of life. The stories are told in a way that makes white family and friend networks the key to an idyllic community; nostalgia for the idyllic time becomes nostalgia for institutionally protected whiteness.

While several storylines are present in the data, we explore three narratives that whites use to re-position whiteness in a color-blind era in which many whites feel themselves losing institutional support for their tight-knit communities. The first, a nostalgia narrative, depicts the idyllic world

as homogeneous, caring, and tight-knit. In this space, whiteness is expressed as virtuous and naturally good through the construction of blackness as naturally destructive to white communities and property. In other words, the tight-knit community and white goodness are only possible in the absence of blackness. The second narrative builds upon the nostalgia of the first narrative. Once blackness is constructed as a naturally destructive force, whites then position themselves as powerless victims of this natural disaster over which they had no control. In circular fashion then, the destruction of their idyllic world is framed as the result of the natural destructiveness of blackness. Finally, the third narrative explores the varied ways whites reconcile nostalgic renderings with the present. Here we examine the complexity of how whites reconcile their experiences of living through a racially explicit period with the color-blind rules of the present. In the end, our analysis makes sense of the ways whites use nostalgia narratives and storytelling to construct positive white racial identities as well as to normalize racial segregation, as many continue to live it today.

### **Narratives of Eden: White is Natural and Good Communities are Homogenous**

An important theme of the white nostalgia narrative and basis for their racial identity is their experience in their neighborhood prior to racial change. Whites constructed place attachments amid the city's tight-knit, largely Catholic neighborhoods on the city's Southwest and West sides. Life, especially for working class white women and young people growing up in the late 1950s through the late 1970s began and ended in the neighborhood (Ehrenhalt, 1996; Kefalas, 2003). Usually referred to as a 'different time', everything that mattered – education, church, socializing, and shopping – happened in the neighborhood. Residents report rarely leaving the neighborhood. As one resident of the West Side said, 'our whole life was there, our family, friends, everything we knew, all our safeguards were in that neighborhood'. And in the storytelling of that time, life was magical. Phillip, from the Southwest Side, remembers the magic:

You could stand out on the front porch and just yell, 'Baseball!' and boom, you had a baseball game. And, we used to play baseball in the streets. If I remember correctly, my mom used to say we had eighty-some kids on our block, because we had a double block. Everybody knew everybody, you know? Someone would call up my mom and say, 'Could you watch the baby for a couple hours?' 'Oh yeah, just bring him over.' She'd put the baby out in the backyard to sleep and our boxer would just lay at the foot of the crib ... it was just a fun place to grow up.

Fun, goodwill, and a source of shared obligation defined this tight-knit community. Barb, who grew up on the West Side conveys a sense of excitement and safety that came with being surrounded by friends and family:

It was like, because you had this close family there was always something going on. Somebody was always visiting. You had like three mothers. And if you left the house and went down Chicago Avenue, you were just always going to run into people you knew ... someone at the bakery, or friends, or your aunt and uncle. There was always something going on. It was that type of community where you didn't worry about anything happening to you, because you knew someone on every block, or several people on every block.

This image of the neighborhood's 'parochial autonomy', where everyone knew everyone else, is central to the narrative (Kasinitz and Hillyard, 1995: 155).

A second and interrelated theme of this part of the nostalgia narrative centers on the notion of shared parenting and close peer networks. Residents recall having their grandparents,

uncles, and aunts living within a three- to five-block radius of where they grew up. On the West Side, it was not uncommon for multiple generations to live in the same, modest home. This family-oriented and close-knit life fostered the image of a cheerful and congenial sense of community. Pete, a silver-haired man, who grew up on the West Side also illustrates this experience:

Not only did my grandparents have four children, all of their children's spouses' relatives lived within 12 houses. So every night was just my aunts, my uncles – you were in and out of any house on the block, it was all family. It was the greatest, greatest thing you can ever imagine.

Such friendship and extended familial bonds led to feelings of social solidarity, where people looked out for one another. Lee, a former West Side resident, reinforces this sense of community cohesiveness:

... [we] stayed by each other, it didn't matter where you were. You know what I mean? You go by anybody's house, wow, a call from your mom, 'Are you coming home?' Everybody knew everybody and they'd watch no matter where you went. I used to do things five blocks from my house, by the time I got home, my old man would be waiting on the porch. And I'd say, 'So what's up?' He'd say, 'You don't think I know people in this neighborhood?!' You know what I mean? He'd get a phone call that would beat me home.

Strong peer networks deepened feelings of solidarity and sense of 'specialness' of this idyllic time and place.

Residential blocks, usually with dozens of children, enhanced this sense of a serene childhood by offering camaraderie, social cohesion, and safety. Children knew each other quite well, from playing on the block, going to common schools, and from church. Joe recalls that on his Southwest Side block: 'There were a lot of kids around. All my friends were on the block and a lot of us went to the same high school together.' Shelia who grew up on the Southwest Side, remembers similarly:

We would gather at 63rd and Richmond at a place called Kings and it was like a hot dog stand and so all the different age groups from the neighborhood would hang out there and you would stand in your little packs, it's almost like a 50s movie, you know. We always viewed it as very, very safe and we didn't really think too much about what was going on in the outside world.

Similar to accounts of working-class neighborhoods in the US and Britain, themes of family, loyalty, and social cohesion punctuate this narrative, emphasizing residents' respectability (see Gans, 1982; Young and Willmott, 1957).

A third theme of the nostalgia narrative involves a tale of prosperity, particularly for those living in more working-class sections of these neighborhoods. This tale highlights the virtues of hard work and well-kept houses and 'gardens'. A majority of respondents recall parents working multiple jobs to keep the family on the rungs of the middle class. Also, although the houses were quite modest, the neighborhood prior to racial change is recalled as attractive and the kind of place one might still want to live in. Pete, from the West Side, recalls:

Not knowing much when I was growing up I thought Trumbull Avenue was the greatest street ever. The houses were immaculate ... we are talking 1960 [and] every man was out there with their house watering their lawn and had their lawns and every lawn was perfect.

This theme includes idealized memories of neighborhoods marked by beautiful streets, safety, close family and friends, strong commercial districts, and solid values, where the lives of the children began and ended in these idyllic places.

The final theme of this aspect of nostalgia narrative centers on virtuousness, where feelings of loss and displacement are attached to places and time periods, and highlights more favorable memories, while ignoring more painful ones (Boym, 2001; Wernick, 1997). Personal memories of the strain of doubling-up with extended family and the tenuous economic standing of many families drift from the mythical tale of the old neighborhood. Moreover, the nostalgia omits explicit acknowledgement that these bounded communities were possible because of institutional mechanisms that served to protect segregation and white property values (Diamond, 2009; Massey and Denton, 1993). While all of our respondents were children growing up in these neighborhoods and were not aware of the larger social forces, the narrative presents the idyllic world as the result of tight-knit, strong, and good families and communities (i.e. virtuous whiteness) rather than a racially skewed social order. It is through nostalgia that the positive aspects of their tight-knit communities are highlighted, while racist segregation is omitted. Once the borders of the neighborhood were threatened the idyllic period ended. That is, things were great 'until' blacks crossed the border and breached this idyllic world.

In short, this narrative presents 'evidence' of the idyllic world that is possible when whites are protected through institutional segregation. The accuracy of the memory is less important than uncovering the role of narrative to construct a virtuous white racial identity in a way that makes sense of the past and explains the continuation of segregation and whiteness today. It is reasonable to assume that respondents are not simply recalling their neighborhood and childhood; they are identifying and creating boundaries around what makes up a good neighborhood, community, and world. Here we see respondents explaining white reaction to racial change and hostility toward blacks, while they cast themselves as innocent, good, and ultimately morally superior. A central theme of their narrative involves presenting themselves as victims of a racialized order over which they had little to no control. They had been abandoned by social institutions and for most, if they were to save themselves from race and class descent, fleeing was the only option.<sup>3</sup>

## **Narratives of Losing Eden: Constructing Positive Racial Identities During Racialized Housing Battles**

Along with the story of the neighborhood's 'glory days', former residents also incorporate the impact of racial change in their nostalgia narrative. In our interviews, the nostalgia narrative turns on an *until* moment; everything was glorious and beautiful *until* blacks edged closer and moved into the neighborhood. Indeed, the nature of the narrative depends on the age of the respondent when racial change began and how close one's family was to the borders. For example, individuals living close to the borders of racial change and just beginning high school when racial change began expressed stronger emotions of loss and anger. In the end, however, the narrative was consistent. In recalling the experience of racial change and white flight individuals construct themselves both as pawns and agents, as innocents and aggressors, while trying to maintain their decent way of life. They weave stories of personal experiences with racial change, what was taken away, and who was to blame and in the process point to various contradictions.

As individuals spoke of their lives, two interrelated contradictory expressions emerged. First, they saw themselves as victims of blacks who destroyed their communities and yet, they articulate their own and others' individual and organized violence against blacks. Moreover, they were able to articulate institutional abuses against blacks and in white favor and yet, they

maintained the root cause of their loss was black destructiveness. Second, they saw themselves as powerless against racial change and the resulting demise of their way of life, yet they remember myriad individual and organized fight and flight responses that both addressed and anticipated racial change. The nostalgia narrative provides them a way to manage these contradictions by softening those elements that implicate them while highlighting those that implicate others.

A central theme of this part of the nostalgia narrative is loss and regret, particularly for those who lived very close to racial borders. As children or adolescents, respondents were not part of the decision making process. Gary, from the West Side, explains:

These people were scared to death, our parents. They didn't know where to go now, 'What do we do? This is our neighborhood. Where do we go?' They were freaked out, because they were freaked out, it just automatically rubbed off on the children. Whether you realize it or not, you hear the talk, you hear, you see things going on, you realize *your neighborhood is starting to go away and nobody wanted it to go away. People still wish they lived there.* [Emphasis added]

Regardless of their position in the process the regret over losing their special world remains strong. The language used is important. Gary states specifically the 'neighborhood is starting to go away' and that folks 'still wish they lived there'. In other words, they are remembering themselves as victims in a process they could not stop. Connie reflects on her experience before her family left the neighborhood for the (white) suburbs:

... when it came time to leave the neighborhood and I knew it would never be the same. I remember sitting on the grass in front of the house and just, just scanning. I can remember just saying everyone's gone. It's over. It's over. We might as well have moved to another state.

The emotion expressed here has to be understood in the context of how racial change is explained. Regret and loss, while palpable, hinge on feelings of anger, blame, and victimhood. They felt powerlessness over the forces that were altering their community. Given the understanding of tight-knit community as dependent on black absence, integration was never viewed as an option.

Regret turns into anger, with blacks prominently figured and institutions a bit farther behind. Pete, growing up on the West Side, recalls thinking: 'why did they have to come here, we didn't want their neighborhoods'. Respondents felt resentful of blacks for invading *their* community. Vince from the West Side explains:

I mean that was *my* neighborhood. It was like, not a betrayal but you felt like you were being invaded. I mean I moved to that neighborhood when I was five years old. And I learned how to walk to school, which was a mile away. I spent my whole grammar school, my whole high school years there. Now all of a sudden you are chased away.

Charlene also recalls her feelings of anger during this time:

It was like I couldn't go out at night, a lot of my friends had left, stores closed. There wasn't the same group of people hanging out at the church and the school. It was different. And it just, it killed me, it just killed me to see these other people living in these houses and I was mad and I hated those people for doing, causing that ... look at what you took away from us.

Lee, also from the West Side, echoes this sentiment:

[I'm] still mad about it, so I still say, 'If that never happened my kids might ... we might still be living on Trumbull Avenue down the block from all their cousins and everything else with that'. So, it's very unfair. On a personal level, which is where I live, it is a very unfair, [I feel] very cheated.

The experience of white flight left residents feeling re-victimized, first by black invasion and then by the broken solidarity with their white neighbors and friends whom they had considered part of the fabric of their interwoven good community. Imbedded in the nostalgia narrative is a sense that whites had little choice. These expressions of powerlessness, discussed by whites, help us make sense of the loss and anger over what was viewed as a very special place in terms of family and friends, lost *because of* blacks.

Woven into the narrative is a disjointed recognition of the institutions that supported their idyllic worlds prior to the change. The narrative contains detailed stories of the various external forces in place undermining the community. Previously city services, such as police, street and sanitation workers, parks clean-up, and construction of municipal buildings such as libraries had been delivered in a timely and efficient manner.<sup>4</sup> In the nostalgia narrative, integration and the withdrawal of institutional support happened simultaneously. Prior to this time, institutions, including business, police, and politics worked to support segregated white neighborhoods. By the time the 1968 Fair Housing Act passed, whites understood that the government or businesses would no longer protect their neighborhoods; rather their communities would be viewed as sites for predatory real estate practices. These predatory practices thrived in the context of white fear of racial integration.

Prior to racial change, whites in these neighborhoods viewed racial segregation as the natural order of things and expected that institutions could be expected to maintain racial boundaries. By the late 1960s, whites began to see that these institutions were no longer working to maintain racial boundaries in the city neighborhoods. The concerns of their parents became centered on property values, a particularly important issue given their class location. Frank, a long time resident on the West Side, describes the scene:

We had the one real estate guy, he'd come, he'd knocked on the door, now my grandmother lived next door, and he told us, 'I hate to be a burden or bring bad news, but you know the woman next door just sold to blacks. My mom was looking, he didn't know that was our grandmother, and she said, really? You know, and then it started from there. It was a company ... that did a lot of block busting. They did a lot of panic selling. And people started departing, you know, people started moving ... but at that time too, our houses were in it for a long time. This was their [my parents] neighborhood. They got married in the neighborhood. Their [wedding] reception was in the neighborhood. And as the blacks are buying ... property values declining, people were frightened, they were scared ... and the neighborhood went fast when it went.

Various institutional actors, with realtors prominently figured, are viewed as instigators that used the problem of race to make money and drive whites from their idyllic worlds. Notably, these actors were often white. Jimmy, from the West Side, recalls:

Our parents were influenced by people who had other motives ... the business motive. Yeah ... we want you to move out of here and sell your property. And their intent was only to make a buck on the transaction ... and they could give a shit about the fact that they were disrupting the community that we lived in.

Candice, from the Southwest Side, echoes Jimmy's sentiment:

We were a product of the white flight period and may as well be honest about that. Because we moved and a lot of that was fear generated by banks and real estate both in areas that were selling in the neighborhoods

that we lived in and surrounding areas so they encouraged this fear. You know as kids we just kind of had to go along with it.

For our respondents, their memories of innocence, safety, and social solidarity were interrupted either subtly or more overtly, as racial change edged closer to their neighborhoods. Their reflections center on anger, regret, loss, and a recognition that their parents' tenuous grasp on the lower rungs of the middle-class were threatened. Here one contradiction emerges. Respondents demonstrate the ability to think institutionally as they are not simply blaming blacks. Their powerlessness over racial change is partially attributed to institutions (e.g. banks) that turned against their neighborhoods. However, while institutions are identified as influential, they are not central figures in why their neighborhoods changed. A sense of whiteness stopped whites from seeing blacks as shared victims. Instead, institutional actors were seen as taking advantage of the 'natural' destruction brought on when the neighborhood is racially breached.

A similar contradiction emerges as respondents assert their powerlessness to stop racial change even while revealing efforts to prevent integration or the organized efforts to deal with racial change. Even as they express their powerlessness, respondents reveal a deeper story of racial solidarity. Whites living in racially segregated neighborhoods learned that they needed to stick together. Solidarity was the way to 'save' the neighborhood from 'invaders.' Whether it was through formal organizing, informal roving gangs, or carrying a baseball bat as a threat to those who dared to cross the line, sticking together was a form of power exercised to maintain segregation. Whites were learning the lessons long understood by blacks. When institutions do not support a group's ability to survive and thrive, the group must work together to do so. Through social networks, parishes, and outside community organizers, whites began to band together to 'save our neighborhood'. Informal and extralegal forms of white organizing also continued. Several individuals recall getting into fights with blacks along the borders of the community.<sup>5</sup> For example, as Pete explains:

There was a lot of violence. For people our age, not the adults that I remember being upset, but we sort of felt like it was our neighborhood to protect. There was a lot of [fistfights]. Don't come on our side or there will be a price to pay. That went on for several years.

A self-styled Nazi Party emerged in Marquette Park, and while those who grew up on the Southwest Side deride the Nazis in our interviews, Diamond has shown that 'White Power' was broadly embraced in the neighborhood. Following a Civil Rights March on Southwest Side, 'some fifteen hundred mostly young men gathered for a lively American Nazi Party rally in Marquette Park, Chicago got a glimpse of what white working-class subcultures oriented around racial exclusion had produced ... The actions of these youths must of course be understood both in the context of community-wide mobilizations as well as in the broader context of the anti-integration movement that took shape in the urban North ...' (2009: 302). The demand for racial solidarity in white communities was so strong that families deciding to sell their homes and move needed to do so in the middle of the night for fear of their neighbors' response. As Phil, who grew up near St Sabina on the Southwest Side in the mid 1960s, recalls:

I remember how the block, you know the block one day is totally white and then, because nobody could tell that they were moving. You know you always kept it to yourself. Then somebody would move and the people on either side of them ... well now there's a black person on the block, the people on either side would not want to live there 'cause their property values went down and just the prejudice of that time and so they would sell then. The people next to them had to sell then, there goes the neighborhood, everybody's selling.

This is the response of people who feel they are left without options and who have lost white institutional protection. They are not ‘fighting’ in a progressive way; instead they are moving toward reductionist self-protectionism.

While the nostalgia narrative helps maintain a racially virtuous identity, the choices whites made, in response to feelings of powerlessness steeped in white racism, worked to further hostility and undermine the possibility for stable and integrated communities. Consider the following poignant story retold in a Southwest Side focus group. When asked how the church approached integration and parishioners’ response, Don recalls:

[The priests] would say, be more tolerant and then they’d say, were going to help poor parishes in other parts of the city and then people would say, wait a minute, we’re giving money to black communities? So they’d color their money [in the donation basket] with black shoe polish.

Kristin added:

Most of those people that went to those parishes were not Catholic. They were sending their kids to get a Catholic education because they didn’t want to send them to public schools so most of these kids that went there were Baptist. And that’s what the resentment was: ‘Why are we paying for Baptist kids to go to a Catholic school when we have families here that have six, seven, eight kids and are struggling, why aren’t we helping them?’ That’s what the resentment was.

Similar to the stories of white-initiated violence, whites purported to feel powerlessness and yet, in reaction, they acted, rising up against the church hierarchy. It is important to note the discursive tactic used in the retelling of the story. Kristin notes that they painted the penny black, but then instead of saying that they did not want the money to go to blacks, she switches the complaint to the fact that the people are Baptist, as opposed to black.

In constructing this narrative, whites reveal the work of racial ideologies, failing to respond progressively to the institutional threat to the neighborhood or considering the possibility of integration. As such, blacks are vilified as the ‘natural disaster’. Whites, thus, are able to construct themselves as powerless victims, despite the evidence of their role as active victimizers. While our research shows that whites blame blacks for destroying their idyllic worlds, they also recognize in specific instances that whites were active in the process of destroying their communities. The nostalgia narrative is used by whites to recall the wonderful times and places, while blaming blacks and avoiding the racial complexity of what happened to their communities. They continue to ask themselves, ‘What happened to our idyllic world?’ Once they have constructed themselves as innocent victims, they are relieved from social responsibility and ‘allowed’ the space to reconstruct an idyllic world of their childhood: segregated and homogeneous.

## **Narratives of Reconciliation: The Legacy of Racial Change**

Respondents also used the nostalgia narrative and their virtuous white racial identity to reconcile the present with the past and define themselves against a stereotype of being racist. We ended our interviews by asking respondents to reflect on the present and how their racially explicit experiences impacted their lives. In particular, individuals were asked to discuss the stereotype that their neighborhoods were racist. Moving from a discussion of a racially explicit past to a present that plays by color-blind rules involves a delicate shift for respondents. In this case, the narrative whites use relates to reconciling the past by using varied color-blind codes to avoid discussing and

acknowledging the continued significance of race (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006). At the same time, the narrative presented here can be viewed as a way in which whites sidestep associating themselves as ‘complicators’ in a system of racial inequality (Wellman, 1993: 60).

A clear majority of respondents denied that they were racists when asked to assess the impact of growing up in racially changing neighborhoods. Given the pervasiveness of color-blind discourse, this is expected. After recapturing a valorous white identity through their nostalgic depictions, individuals use this identity to frame their current views on race. When asked about the stereotype of their communities as racist, Jim from the West Side argues:

I don’t know about my mom, but dad was a racist without a doubt. I guess I got some of that out of him. But I managed to change that. I am ... a fair guy now. When I hear about it [racism] now, about these things happening, it doesn’t bother me. It is almost ‘been there done that.’ It is over. You grow up and you get out.

While acknowledging racism in the past, individuals frame themselves as being impartial and taking people ‘as they come’, while relegating racism as something that occurred ‘back then’. Not bothered by this past, because time has passed, racism is relegated to the way things were back then. Phil, from the West Side, adds that some element of separation continues today:

It is just embedded in us! You know and then you get into the working force and you gotta deal with them [blacks] and work with them and then they become your friends and it’s not as bad as it was but you know there’s still always, not a tension but there’s still always that factor. It really is. It doesn’t just go away. You know that’s just a way of life.

Here, calling on a past where race was explicit, racial segregation and separation are naturalized by attributing racial views to upbringing or just the experience of living through the trauma of racial change. After denying racism, the narrative reasserts a sense of powerlessness over issues of race, due to larger forces. Personal responsibility for racial views is neutralized by forces beyond their control.

Related to this naturalizing element of the narrative is drawing on color-blind rules to discuss racial matters. For example, when asked if he would consider his current neighborhood or block racist, Steve from the West Side remarks and relays a story about a tavern in his neighborhood:

‘No. In my block? No. I mean I’m talking about this little tavern, you know that it certainly isn’t everybody. But if you were a fly on the wall and you heard some of the stuff that was said, you might be disappointed that these guys are ... and I have to repeat, I’m just like them except I choose to keep certain things to myself and I choose to watch my language.

Here Steve acknowledges that he is ‘just like them’ in terms of racial views, yet he has internalized the rules of color-blind discourse. Another case involves Phil from the West Side. In talking about using a racial epithet, Phil notes:

That is just the way we speak. You spoke like that for 25 years and that’s why sometimes when we are driving down the street and if I say, oh look at that nigger over there ... and I know you have to be politically correct now. You have to say the right things. I don’t say it out of hatred or to be mean. I mean I grew up saying that word there was nothing ever wrong with it. And now all of sudden well you can’t say that word. And then your kids will hear and say, ‘Oh dad, why do you say that, you are so old fashion. You shouldn’t be saying that word.’ Again, nobody lived through the times that we lived through. At least our kids didn’t.

In both cases, individuals acknowledge race and racial antipathy as continuing issues in their lives. However, they appear constrained, or acknowledge that they constrain themselves, by the rules of color-blind discourse. Race still matters; however, in this telling, they feel less able to discuss it. When they do attempt to express themselves on racial matters they feel that people cannot understand them because of their experience with race via racial change.

Another element of this narrative is to avoid the reality of race in their lives by referencing socioeconomic status. Individuals use class as a way to present themselves as fair-minded and neutral in regards to race. Individuals framed their parents' choices to move when racial change occurred as non-racial. Don, who grew up on the Southwest Side, comments:

Now looking back, I think it was economic. It wasn't so much this or that, but the people were afraid of losing value in their home, their property. Because it was interesting to me that east of a certain street, the home values were always a lot less. So think now looking back you knew what it was or not, but I think it was just economic worrying.

When the conversation moves to the present, individuals reconcile the past by again referencing economics over race. One way to do this is to note that they would not have a problem living next to blacks today (although few do) if blacks could afford the houses and 'maintain their lawns'. Another way this plays out is by differentiating between 'good' and 'bad' blacks. When asked how racial change shaped her life, Donna, from the Southwest Side, confides:

I think in the past I would have said as soon as someone black moved into the neighborhood I'd be out of here, but that's different now. This is, it's I wouldn't say it's a changing neighborhood, but there are blacks in our neighborhood. And as long as they're decent people I don't have a problem with it. He has a, you know, he's in the firehouse. He lives with a lot of really good black guys, they're middle class, they have values, they have families. You know, if that's the type of people moving in, I don't have a problem with it.

Clearly, race and class are inseparable in the process of racial change (Hirsch, 1983; Nicholaides, 2002; Sugrue, 1996). However, respondents privilege class in their explanations, seemingly afraid to bring race up as an issue. Since discussions of class appear race-neutral (Burnham, 2005), by claiming that class matters more than race individuals are able to maintain their sense of virtue by asserting that they are accepting of non-whites as long as they are 'decent' people. Scholars have noted that class-not-race is a common theme in white narratives supporting color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2009).

Finally, white racial identity is not monolithic. Indeed, racial identities, like other dominant group identities, are fluid and can change (McDermott and Samson, 2005). In reconciling an obvious racialized past, a few respondents did not attempt to minimize or neutralize the role race played in the neighborhood. They were able to see it and regretted the outcome, but in the end were unable to critically reflect on their own white racial identity. Individuals, largely from the Southwest Side (where racial change was slower), framed themselves in such a way as to acknowledge the role of their experience in racial change in shaping their location choices later on. Maria, who grew up on the Southwest side in an area that experienced rapid racial change, commented:

... what I hope is that what is not repeated is all the unfortunate things: the hatred and suspicion and anger. I don't want to go through that again. Living here where we are now it [racial diversity] isn't happening that way. And it makes me regret that it couldn't have happened that way then.

Articulating a sense of regret over the feelings that came with racial change, these individuals regret the role of racism in their lives and attempted to change things through their housing choices. Karen, who grew up in Marquette Park, related her decision to move to an integrated neighborhood:

I moved to East Beverly where it was already integrated and in my mind ... I didn't want to be part of white flight or anything like that ever again. So I moved into an integrated neighborhood. So when I moved into Beverly, I made a choice that East Beverly is already integrated, they've already gone through this, they're stronger than this. They know about the whole white flight thing. This is where I wanted to put down my roots. My parents didn't agree with this because the whole having to move really tainted how they felt about it ... and I just said look, I want to know who my neighbors are. I don't want that tension with everyone else with not knowing or not understanding or having the unknown about whose moving in next door and I want to get beyond it because in my mind ... you know what, it's people, they're people, just people, you know. I don't care. They can be jerks no matter what nationality or what the color of their skin.

Acknowledging the role of racism in their lives, several individuals tried to make more progressive decisions related to housing and race, including moving to areas already integrated.

Respondents generally struggled in their attempts to reconcile their formative racial experiences with the present. Minimizing or neutralizing race was a common strategy. In general, the narrative provided strategies to 'put distance' between themselves and blacks; they are fair-minded, a product of upbringing, misunderstood. While a few respondents were able to recognize race as a key factor in their lives and their neighborhoods, these efforts fell short of a critical reflection on their white racial identity and attendant white privilege. The narrative offers way of framing themselves as virtuous, even while talking about a period that was racially charged. Their responses can best be interpreted by focusing less on their personal prejudices, as few would oppose civil rights or demands for racial equality. Instead, they are employing strategies that defend their group advantage and refusing to challenge 'a system from which advantage is derived on the basis of race' (Wellman, 1993: 210).

## Discussion

Our research indicates the importance of looking at racialized nostalgia narratives that do the work of maintaining boundaries in an era of color-blindness, while allowing whites to speak about their own role in the racially explicit housing battles of the past. Through the specific historically and geographically bound time of racial change in Chicago's segregated neighborhoods, we are able to better understand how whites manage the duality of living racialized realities and yet, declare themselves color-blind. In other words, we have illustrated the ways racialized communities take shape through nostalgia narratives. This is a racial legacy that ties racially explicit experiences to color-blind discourse in ways that maintain boundaries to a white advantage.

The nature of nostalgia narrative is imbued with ideology and as such gives us insight into the ways in which domination and subordination are rationalized and justified (Brantlinger, 2003). Importantly, through these narratives, contradictions that question 'whiteness as goodness' are neutralized and whites are able to create and maintain a positive identity. As we have shown, the narratives neutralize contradictions in three primary ways: (1) whites portray themselves as innocent victims, even as they remember their own violence and aggression; (2) they blame blacks for the upheaval even as they remember institutional discrimination; and (3) they maintain that their idyllic world was a segregated white world (devoid of blackness) even as they maintain that

culture, not race, matters. The ability to manage the contradictions is, as we've shown, a central piece of hegemonic whiteness (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995).

Collective memories and collective forgetting at the intersection of racialized experiences are part of the process of maintaining boundaries around racialized communities (Hooker, 2009). The maintaining of boundaries is of central importance to the value of whiteness itself. That is to say, as long as whiteness holds value tied to housing, education, and income (Lipsitz, 1995), whites have reasons to work to maintain the boundaries of whiteness. Whites involve themselves in such boundary work because they benefit from an unjust system that continues to reward whiteness as 'property', that is, a system in which white racial identities are inextricably tied to property ownership (Harris, 1993). The investment in whiteness is so strong, in fact, that contemporary research in places such as South Africa, where whiteness no longer provides the kinds of returns it did under Apartheid, shows that whites are willing to leave their country in search of better returns on their whiteness in White dominated countries (Dolby, 2001; Griffiths and Prozesky, 2010; Steyn, 2001). In both the US and South Africa, color-blind discourses give whites a means to claim themselves as individuals, freed from racial legacies that continue to privilege their lives (Dalmage, 2004; Dolby, 2001; Lipsitz, 1995; Steyn, 2001). Moving forward, it is important to build on these studies by examining how whites maintain racial boundaries in other spaces and places in an era of color-blindness. In other words, as the settings shift what other strategies might whites employ? Also, it will be important to develop an understanding of how we can challenge contemporary collective memory constructions that (re)produce hegemony across various communities of difference.

## Notes

1. We use the term white to reference those generally considered or viewing themselves as European American and black for those generally considered or viewing themselves as African American. We use other racial labels only when an author or interviewee explicitly uses another term. These labels best capture how the interviewees viewed themselves and how they portrayed their social worlds. Indeed, these particular racial labels simplify a complex, contentious, and changing system of racial classification (Davis, 1991; Omi, 2001). It is clear that many (e.g. immigrants) work to distance themselves from these labels. Here we focused on how whites portray themselves and their interests in relation to an out-group, one they identify as black.
2. Scholars have referenced this by noting that loss creates 'identity discontinuity' or a 'disruption in identity' (Lofland, 1982, 1985; Marris, 1986). The tendency for identity is continuity over time. Loss interrupts identities and people attempt to create new ones or find a means for preserving their former identities in order to regain a sense of continuity (Milligan, 2003). Studies looking at the identity discontinuity focus on place-based identities (e.g. authentic members of a gentrified community, workers in a coffee house, etc.). Racial identity seems more complex than these identities, as it is reinforced among various spaces. Thus, we avoid the phrasing of identity discontinuity, although similar processes are work.
3. The claim of powerlessness is not meant to suggest that whites did not act to stop racial change from impacting their communities. Scholarly literature has documented the efforts of whites to defend their communities from racial change, involving everything from buying out blacks as they moved in (Kruse, 2005) to forming property associations to fight racial change (Hirsch, 1983; Seligman, 2005; Sugrue, 1996). In addition, scholars have detailed the various efforts by community groups to maintain integration in communities experiencing racial change (Maly, 2005; Saltman, 1990). Finally, on Chicago's Southwest Side there were organizations (e.g. Organization of Southwest Communities) that formed, with significant financial support of Catholic churches like St Sabina, to improve the neighborhood and induce whites to stay in the neighborhoods (McMahon, 1995: 149) and to stabilize the community as integrated. The role of the Catholic Church in laboring to keep whites in their parishes is also well documented (McGreevy, 1998).

4. Archival research reflects the maniac organization and activist efforts engaged in by some members of the community so that their neighborhood would continue to get services. Despite this acknowledged history, many still blame blacks as the destroyers.
5. In his excellent analysis of youth in the early to mid-20th century in Chicago, Andrew Diamond shows that much of the violence of the late 1950s was built around, in part, white anxiety – specifically, anxieties around the proving of white masculinities. For example, Diamond notes: ‘... a well-known Near West Side gang called the Dukes made the papers for two consecutive days in 1958 after being picked up by police for carrying around baseball bats and a length of tire chain, the new coverage failed to mention that the gang they were coming after was black and that such racial attacks were business as usual for this group’ (2009: 195).

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