



# “I don’t know what’s racist”: White Invisibility Among Explicitly Color-conscious Volunteers

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## Abstract

Americans are increasingly aware of structural racial disadvantages, and especially aware of Black disadvantage. In turn, this paper asks to what degree do whites interested in undermining systems of oppression and privilege understand their own place within those systems (if at all)? Based on participant observation of four grassroots organizations serving the unhoused and 30 semi-structured interviews with volunteers, *I show that even explicitly color-conscious white volunteers, many of whom spoke about structural inequality and systemic racism without prompting, struggled to see how their race was important in their day-to-day service interactions.* A general inability to speak about interracial interactions despite many interracial service experiences highlights the pervasive power and privilege embedded in the taken-for-granted nature of whiteness and provides empirical support to the idea that racialized social systems discourage racial self-awareness among whites. These findings have implications for social justice- and/or service-oriented whites who seek to undermine the systems they identify as problematic and emphasize that antiracism is a continuous process.

**Keywords** Whiteness · Antiracism · Volunteering · White Invisibility · Color-Consciousness · Homeless Outreach

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## “I don’t know what’s racist”<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly discussion of white antiracism has been growing in popularity since the 1990s (e.g., al-Gharbi 2019; Eichstedt 2001; Feagin and O’Brien 2004; Frankenberg 1993; Hagerman 2017; Hughey 2012; Kowal 2015; O’Brien 2001; Omi 2001; Warren 2010). Similarly, Americans are increasingly aware of structural racial disadvantages, especially Black disadvantage. For example, when asked which factors were important in explaining Black disadvantage, 80% of Americans identified prejudice and discrimination, 45% identified laws and institutions, and 85% identified schools and social connections. Among American whites, 77% indicated that prejudice and discrimination importantly contributed to Black disadvantage, and 82% indicated that lack of access to quality educational resources importantly contributed to Black disadvantage (Croll 2013).<sup>2</sup>

With antiracist discourse becoming more commonplace among American whites, it is important to consider how well-intentioned, explicitly color-conscious<sup>3</sup> whites understand racialized social problems, race itself, and especially their own whiteness. While a number of scholars have suggested that regular contact with racialized “others” is associated with heightened color-consciousness, improved racial attitudes, and/or antiracist ideologies among whites (Allport 1954; Gallagher 1995, 1997; Hartigan 1997; McDermott 2006; Schneider 2018; Warren 2010), this article showcases the limited depth of such consciousness through evidence from an ethnography of homeless service volunteers in St. Louis, MO. Specifically, I ask to what degree do whites interested in undermining systems of oppression and privilege understand their own place within those systems (if at all)? I find that among the sampled, openly color-conscious volunteers, homelessness and poverty were framed as symptoms of systemic racism while notions and consequences of their own whiteness remained underexplored. Conceptualization of Blackness was a useful ideological tool that could be used to understand a world rife with social and economic inequality. Their own whiteness, on the other hand, was less salient. Even if they were able to recognize whiteness as a form of privilege on an intellectual level, reflecting on how such privilege informed their motivations, practices, and interactions proved difficult for most volunteers. In fact, when directly asked how their race might inform their interactions with people of color experiencing homelessness, white, color-conscious volunteers were often quick to admit that it must, but also unable to say exactly how

<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from research that will appear in *Serving the Street: Charity, racial justice, and poverty tourism*, forthcoming from the University of Georgia Press.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that only 38% of whites indicated that Black disadvantage could be explained by “Laws and institutions work against Blacks more than other racial groups” (Croll 2013: 55).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the racial ideologies of those included in this study are *explicitly* color-conscious and antiracist. They openly acknowledged and grappled with the reality of racism, setting them apart from whites who *claim* to “not notice race” but, in fact, work to maintain systems of white supremacy through a *supposed* color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva 2010). In this article, I opt to use the word “color-conscious” to draw attention to the notable difference between the whites featured in this article and color-blind whites, but descriptors like “racism conscious” or “racial justice-oriented” would also be appropriate.

or provide examples. Others acknowledged their whiteness, often only in passing, as a characteristic to be suppressed or managed.

Thus, this article highlights enduring patterns of white invisibility, even among those who openly contemplate and (attempt to) address problems of racial inequality, racism, and white supremacy. This inability to speak about interracial interactions despite many interracial service experiences speaks to the pervasive power and privilege embedded in the taken-for-granted nature of whiteness (Doane 1997; Lipsitz 1998; McIntosh 2004) and provides empirical support to the idea that racialized social systems discourage racial self-awareness among whites (Lewis 2004). Although volunteers displayed strong knowledge of structural racism and/or antiracism literature, most understood their own whiteness as a personal trait that could be managed away or neutralized rather than a structural position. Despite their recognition of oppressive systems, they continue to hold privileged positions within those systems.

These findings ultimately prompt a larger question – one that I expect white racism scholars, like myself, struggle with regularly. If racial group position necessarily informs one’s view of the world, providing us with a particular vantage point that shapes (and obstructs) the way we see, interpret, and interact with the world around us, how can whites effectively participate in antiracist discourse, service, and social movements? While white “invisibility” certainly has its limits, lack of racial self-awareness among whites might pose a significant barrier to effective antiracist practice even as challenges to systems of white supremacy grow in strength. It is important that whiteness be understood as a system of dominance and to oppose it, whites likely need to reckon with their position/complicity within it, not as something that can be shed, but perhaps transformed.

## Review of Literature

### Whiteness and White “Invisibility”

Race, and therefore racial identity, is first and foremost a social construct. Race is the product of a long history of social, cultural, and political projects – maintained and revised over time through interpersonal interactions, cultural values, norms, and ideologies, and institutional policies and practices (Levine-Rasky 2002; Omi and Winant 1994; Roediger 1991; Rosino 2017). It is important that race be understood as a relational construct in which racial categories are defined by their relationship to each other. For example, whiteness’ position in the racial hierarchy exists in relation to Blackness and vice versa (Blumer 1958). Because of the socially constructed nature of race, it is important to note that experiences of whiteness are not monolithic but vary based on place, time, and intersecting identities (Bell 2021; Blair 2013; McDermott and Samson 2005; Sullivan 2014). Still, it is important that scholars are able to comment upon common patterns across the white group (Lewis 2004). Thus, this paper conceptualizes whiteness as a system that maintains the white group’s position atop the racial hierarchy and secures disproportionate access to social, political, and economic resources for people racialized as white (i.e., white privilege),

even if the mechanisms through which the dominance is maintained vary (Bebout 2016; Hughey 2012; Hughey et al. 2015; Ray 2019; Wellman 1993; Wingfield and Alston 2014; Wooten and Couloute 2017).

It is commonly argued that the white group benefits from a certain taken-for-grantedness because cultural and institutional investment in whiteness, white privileges, power, and social patterns are “hidden” – at least to the white “mainstream” (Doane 1997; Du Bois 2015; Lipsitz 1998; McIntosh 2004; Rodriguez and Villaverde 2000). Because whiteness has historically been (and remains) part and parcel of institutional and cultural power in the United States, patterned white practices, ideologies, beliefs, etc. are framed as normative. In contrast, cultural products and practices of nonwhite minority groups have been otherized and/or seen as deviant (Doane 1997). “As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (Lipsitz 1998, 1). In effect, whites often have low racial *self*-awareness, but may still have high or situational awareness of racial “others.”

Because whiteness is reproduced as default Americanness, institutional practices said to serve American or community interests are truly designed to serve white interests (e.g., federal Indian policy; mass incarceration) (Doane 1997; Hernández 2017; Lipsitz 1998). Furthermore, public space is better understood as “white space” in that people of color must learn to navigate physical and cultural geographies of white dominance (Ahmed 2007; Anderson 2015; Feagin 1991; Mapedzahama et al. 2012; Moore 2008) as “mainstream” media simultaneously reproduces unquestioned understandings of whiteness as socially and culturally superior (Vera and Gordon 2003). These social, cultural, and institutional investments help establish whiteness as the status quo and protect its position atop the racial hierarchy. All whites experience racial structures, even if their experience or perception of them varies. Lewis (2004) argues, “Race as a passive collectivity or series is a background identity rather than constitutive of identity... Particularly in regards to dominant racial groups, one does not have to consciously identify with being ‘white’ to benefit from a system in which being designated as a racial ‘other’ carries physical, psychological, and material penalties” (Lewis 2004, 627). Thus, one of the principal consequences of dominant racial group position is that whites often lack awareness of their own whiteness. Put differently, these investments help produce the phenomenon of “white invisibility” in which “white Americans generally consider their race to be irrelevant to their actions and perspectives on the world” (Doering 2016, 106) (See also Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 2004). White Americans are less likely to acknowledge the privileges afforded by these investments in whiteness and more likely to see the world through an individualistic, color-blind lens than people of color (Croll 2013; Hartmann et al. 2009; Lipsitz 1998).

However, race and racial awareness are not *only* reproduced through culture and institutional policy. Many have argued that whites are cognizant racial actors that negotiate and reproduce race and racism in everyday life (Ahmed 2007; Blumer 1958; Rosino 2017). Even if their socialization into American society is not framed in explicitly racial terms, whites are able to interpret social and cultural messages in a way that provides understanding of their advanced social position (Hagerman 2018). Black scholars (and laypeople) have long noted “the fact of whiteness,” as

Hartigan (1997) later terms it (Du Bois 1995, 2015; hooks 1997; see also Roediger 2010). The white invisibility thesis specifically has been consistently complicated, if not outright challenged, by scholars since the 1990s. Frankenberg, whose early work helped advance the white invisibility thesis (Frankenberg 1993), later points out that while the power and privileges of whiteness are selectively masked, American whites commonly place themselves in relation to African Americans and Latinos receiving, and in their opinions, unfairly benefiting from, “the ‘handouts’ of affirmative action” (Frankenberg 2001, 91). Other scholars draw attention to the importance of context. It’s well established that whites become more cognizant of their racial identity when interacting in predominantly nonwhite spaces (Gallagher 1995, 1997; Henry 2020; Schneider 2018), and in a time of demographic change and political mobilization, “white normality” is increasingly confronted at the local level (Bell 2021; Hughey 2021). In environments where whites are forced to confront their racial privilege, inequalities are commonly explained away through claims of individual achievement and cultural difference and/or by minimizing and naturalizing racial disparities (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Burke 2012; Croll 2013; DiTomaso et al. 2003). As Mueller’s work on racial ignorance emphasizes, whites are often quite innovative as they evade, mystify, and justify racial inequality (Mueller 2017, 2020; Mueller and Washington 2021).

But again, not all whites perceive and respond to racial structures in the same ways (Lewis 2004). As challenges to white privilege grow in strength and frequency in the United States, it would seem many whites are working against dominant cultural narratives and oppressive systems by participating in antiracist movements and discourse, suggesting at least some awareness of racial inequality and, therefore, white privilege (Bell 2021; Croll 2007; Doering 2016; Hughey 2007, 2021; Knowles et al. 2014; Reason and Evans 2007). Rather than deny the existence of racial privilege or distance themselves from privileged self-concepts, these whites acknowledge racial inequality and work to dismantle systems that produce racial inequality as a way of managing and/or negotiating one’s white identity and sense of self (Doering 2016; Hughey 2021; Knowles et al. 2014). Although whites remain more likely to “deny” or “distance” themselves from racist systems of oppression (Knowles et al. 2014) (see also Bonilla-Silva 2010; Mueller 2017; Mueller and Washington 2021), growing bodies of literature focus on these topics. Some are dedicated to learning “how to be an antiracist” (e.g., DiAngelo 2018; Kendi 2019; Oluo 2018; Saad 2020; Tochluk 2010). Other work focuses on practical skills or knowledge that will aid counselors, social workers, educators, and other practitioners in antiracist practice or intervention (e.g., Belew and Gutierrez 2021; Lerner 2022; Wagner 2005). Still others (this article included) attempt to situate those interested in “dismantling” racist systems within a larger structural context (e.g., al-Gharbi 2019; Appiah and Gutmann 1996; Doering 2016; Feagin and O’Brien 2004; Hughey 2007; O’Brien 2001; Warren 2010).

### **White Antiracism and Color-conscious Service**

Antiracism, broadly speaking, is any ideology or practice meant to challenge racism. Reason and Evans (2007) have noted that, for whites, being cognizant of one’s whiteness is a prerequisite to engaging in racial justice work. However, being “anti-

racist,” an “ally,” or “woke” looks vastly different depending upon one’s understanding of racism and antiracism (Hage 2016; O’Brien 2009; Paradies 2016). Because the United States remains racially segregated, both physically and socially (Crowder 2000; Crowder and South 2008; Hagerman 2018; May 2014), some scholars have suggested that the ability to adopt color-conscious, antiracist ideologies and practices may be limited for many whites (Brown 2017; Feagin and O’Brien 2004; Mueller and Washington 2021; Warren 2010). In turn, it is rather common for scholars to discuss white antiracism in terms of discovery (Case 2012; Helms 1997; O’Brien and Korgen 2007; Perry and Shotwell 2009; Thompson 2001; Warren 2010). In this view, “moral shock” to racial disadvantage leads whites to develop a more salient white identity as they question their own position and make connections with people of other racial groups. Such relationships are then credited with leading white antiracists to understanding of their relative privilege (Helms 1997; Warren 2010). Following the basic premise of Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, this theory credits interracial friendships as the “impetus” for antiracist advocacy, although some scholarship has suggested that (1) colorblind ideology prevents many whites from having meaningful interactions with people of color about racism and (2) many whites can be introduced to antiracism through white friends, environments that encourage reflection on questions of race, racism, and whiteness, or their social support systems (Feagin and O’Brien 2004; Fingerhut and Hardy 2020; O’Brien and Korgen 2007; Reason and Evans 2007; Thompson 2001).

Progressive interpretations of antiracism view race as a social construction and accept racism as real and as embedded into social systems and practices. As Dei (1996, 254) explains, “[Critical antiracism] moves beyond acknowledgement of the material conditions that structure societal inequality to question white power and privilege and its accompanying rationale for dominance.” Thus, in principle, antiracism serves a range of functions, including “reducing the incidence of racist practices,” “fostering a non-racist culture,” “supporting the victims of racism,” “empowering racialized subjects,” “transforming racist relations into better relations,” and “fostering an a-racist culture” (Hage 2016, 124).

Due to heavy structural and cultural investment in whiteness, however, whites identifying as antiracists are not equally prepared for antiracist praxis. By definition, antiracists must be willing to acknowledge the importance of race and persistence of racism/racial inequalities to some degree (Appiah and Gutmann 1996). However, the degree to which antiracists are color-conscious varies. Frankenberg (1993, 157), for example, details how “race cognizance” among white women in California was commonly associated with antiracist discourse and political action. Likewise, Omi’s (2001) inventory of antiracist organizations in the U.S. showed that institutionalized and intersectional understandings of racism and other systems of oppression are common.

Even so, scholars like Hughey (2007, 2010) and Bonnett (1996) show that white antiracists are prone to essentializing race, viewing “white” as fixed and monolithic. O’Brien (2001) and Sullivan (2014), respectively call attention to limitations of “selective race cognizance” and the classed moral distancing performed by “good” middle-class white people. Even among race cognizant, antiracist whites, there is a struggle to be reflexive. For whites confronted by such challenges, white privilege

can be understood in the abstract and as something reproduced by social institutions even as they struggle to recognize how social forces affect them as individuals – how they personally benefit from white privilege. At the same time, allyship efforts routinely propose individualized solutions to systemic inequality, rather than considering and approaching such problems from a structural vantage point (Sumerau et al. 2021). Thus, even as U.S. whites increasingly profess interest in antiracism and diversity, there is no guarantee the consequence will be greater racial equity or that whites will develop an effective antiracist praxis. For this to happen, according to Perry and Shotwell (2009), whites must develop a “relational understanding” of racism. Put differently, antiracist consciousness and practice necessitate propositional, tacit, *and* affective forms of knowledge. Whites must be able to recognize the that social and cultural systems convey privileges to those racialized as white, that they as individuals are situated within these systems, and that they are connected to others (often understood through emotions like empathy) (Perry and Shotwell 2009).

Considering that those participating in formal volunteer activities are more likely to be white than nonwhite (Bortree and Waters 2014; Foster-Bey 2008; Gonzales et al. 2016; Rotolo et al. 2010) and most likely to come from middle income homes (Foster-Bey 2008; Gonzales et al. 2016; Lee and Brudney 2009; Pho 2008), volunteers and other service providers present an important case for critical study. Although volunteering is commonly thought of in altruistic terms, best defined as helping activities engaged in without expectation of reward (Snyder and Omoto 2008), scholars of race and community engagement have begun to question the role and impact of volunteers. If whites are *only* rational actors interested in the preserving systems of oppression and privilege, it would seem strange that volunteer organizations are disproportionately comprised of people with privileged racial, class, and education statuses (Foster-Bey 2008). While emphasis on helping in definitions of volunteering may have more to do with framing than with the motivations or the actual impact of volunteering, juxtaposing volunteering and whiteness in this way seemingly presents a contradiction. In turn, some have pointed out the ways in which volunteering reifies difference and/or inequality.

In recent years, scholars have paid particularly close attention to the ways whiteness operates in volunteer, activist, and service learning settings (e.g., Droogendyk et al. 2016; Endres and Gould 2009; Germann Molz 2017; Henry 2020; Schneider 2018). Whiteness has been found to significantly inform volunteer goals, interactions, and perceptions (Germann Molz 2017; Henry 2020; Heron 2019; Kipp et al. 2021; Lough and Carter-Black 2015; Schneider 2018). Endres and Gould (2009, 429), for example, find that service learning students who have been exposed to critical whiteness studies routinely centered their own individual experiences and justified “white privilege as a way to provide charity.” Hagerman (2018, 140) shows that explicitly color-conscious white parents interested in teaching their children about privilege will sometimes expose their children to racial and economic inequality through local and international volunteer work. As she notes, “Without a doubt, the kids in this study learn a great deal from both volunteering and vacationing, including many positive lessons about community, ethical responsibility, and the reality of inequality. However, one of the lessons they also learn is that they can navigate the world fluidly and with ease without ever asking for permission, a hallmark of privilege.”

And while volunteering comes with numerous benefits for volunteers, including career related experience, life experience, social capital, and a chance to develop useful or marketable skills (Cann and McCloskey 2017; Clary and Snyder 1999; Eliasoph 2013; Germann Molz 2017; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 1997; 1999), volunteer programs may offer limited benefits or even negative outcomes for those being served (Blouin and Perry 2009; Cann and McCloskey 2017; Lasker 2016). In fact, it has been found that service-learning programs that place underprepared students in community organizations can act as a drain on the organization's time and resources. When volunteers lack necessary skills, organizations may shift focus away from the service population and toward training (often short-term) volunteers (Blouin and Perry 2009). Likewise, a case study by Cann and McCloskey (2017) examined a historically white college's tutoring outreach program that places white well-intentioned, but underprepared college students in a low-income, predominantly nonwhite middle school. While the university was able to leverage this program for significant grant money, and college tutors gained valuable experience, the benefit to the middle school and its students was questionable. As Cann and McCloskey (2017, 82) contend, such projects reproduce narratives of white saviorhood without undermining "issues of institutional and systemic racism that keep Schools of Color and their communities subordinated" (see also Droogendyk et al. 2016; Endres and Gould 2009; Hanchey 2018).

Despite the positive intentions of volunteers, the practice of volunteering does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, volunteering is practiced in a social world shaped by whiteness and in which whiteness "goes unnoticed" by whites because "they are not oriented 'towards' it" (Ahmed 2007, 156). Thus, it is important that volunteering operations be subject to critical examination, including how social and cultural investments in whiteness shape the ways whites frame inequality, service, and activism.

## Data and Methods

This paper focuses on data collected in a large ethnographic research project based in St. Louis, MO. Data featured here were collected through participant observation and through semi-structured interviews. The volunteer groups that participated in the project provided temporary or emergency shelter, transportation to shelter, and/or various supplies (e.g., food, blankets, propane, etc.) to people experiencing homelessness. All group members were volunteers, and most volunteered regularly. Consistent with the literature on volunteering, membership was predominantly white, middle-class, and college educated (Foster-Bey 2008; Gonzales et al. 2016; Musick and Wilson 2008; Wilson 2012). Preliminary research with "Service House" was conducted in the spring of 2016, but primary data collection with the five other groups occurred between August 2017 and August 2018. The larger project utilizes 45 semi-structured interviews with 43 volunteers and observational data from all six organizations and about 250 hours of observation. This paper focuses more acutely on the 30 interviewees who volunteered with the four groups that frequently and openly discussed

racism and economic inequality in systemic terms: “Citywide outreach,” “Fam in the Streets,” “Service House,” and “Mercy House.”<sup>4</sup>

All names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Locales, organizations, and volunteer group names have also been replaced by pseudonyms. Additionally, the problem of homelessness is one that is fraught with social and spatial tensions. In hopes of protecting one’s right to exist in public space, I speak of common gathering spots, encampments, places of stay, and other geographic locations in purposefully vague terms. However, because social and spatial boundaries are important to the context, I choose to include references to large areas of the city (e.g., the North Side), but not to specific neighborhoods.

Entering the field with a general understanding that race and racism are normal and ordinary parts of everyday life (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Burke 2012; Delgado and Stefancic 2012), this project sought to better understand the ways in which race and racism might inform volunteer practice. The St. Louis metropolitan region represented an attractive field site because its long history of white flight, systemic inequality, racial tension, and racial justice activism (Gordon 2008; Heathcott and Murphy 2016) often result in salient racial politics. Additionally, the large presence of grassroots homeless service groups made St. Louis ideal because these majority white groups would be coming into regular, interpersonal contact with a majority Black unhoused population. The four groups appearing in this study were chosen based upon their accessibility. Mercy House was found online and responded when I reached out. Citywide and Fam in the Streets were added to the study through mutual contacts established once in the field. Service House was made accessible through a personal friend, and the site for my preliminary fieldwork.

To emphasize local meanings and context, the project was approached with the grounded theory method (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Background research was conducted before entering the field, and it was expected that project findings would relate to race, whiteness, and urban space. Interview questions were, in turn, designed to explore such issues. Memos were written while in the field, but all interview transcription and data analysis were conducted after fieldwork had concluded. Data were first coded for general themes, then again line-by-line. Quotes and excerpts from fieldnotes presented in this paper represent common themes/patterns that emerged during this process (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Miles and Huberman 1984; Weiss 1994). Through this process, it became clear that before I could make sense of the connection between volunteer practices and racial ideology, a more specific question needed to be answered: to what degree do whites interested in undermining systems of oppression and privilege understand their own place within those systems (if at all)?

Of course, the case presented here is unique in a number of respects and required that I navigate localized social relations. For example, the social distance between a predominantly Black, unhoused service population and groups of predominantly white, middle-class, college educated, housed, volunteers is likely greater than will be observed in other cases of civic engagement. Still, the themes presented here likely resemble social patterns that can be observed elsewhere, as the participants of

<sup>4</sup> See appendix for demographic breakdown of interviewees.

this study exist in broader sets of social and cultural relations that extend beyond their volunteer experiences and St. Louis.

Throughout the data collection process, I tried to remain cognizant of my social statuses and how my status might be impacting the data gathered (Heyl 2001). This was a constant process, although I am certain that I am unable to account for all the ways my status as a white, male researcher impacted data collection (a belief that is in step with the findings of this paper). Acknowledging this is important. That said, there were many ways in which I did notice my statuses, as well as my performance, to affect my interactions and data collection. First, my entry into the field was through the volunteer groups themselves. In turn, people experiencing homelessness generally interacted with me as they would any other white, middle-class volunteer. Generally, they were friendly and open, but if I tried to press beyond small talk to ask about volunteer groups, I was met with skepticism. Although this was less than ideal (Goffman 2016), there was also great benefit to working side-by-side with the volunteers. Many of the groups treated me as a full participant, despite knowing that I was also conducting research on their group. In this case, I do not believe that my status negatively impacted the quality of data, at least not when interacting with groups of predominantly white, middle-class volunteers. Instead, my similarities to them and my regular participation in group activities seemed to grant me an “insider status,” trust, and rapport (Greene 2014). The many hours I spent traversing the city with them, listening to their ideas and opinions, and making polite conversation certainly cemented my position within the groups and provided them with a positive opinion of me. Likewise, I enjoyed my time with these four groups and regularly expressed my genuine appreciation for them. I believe this contributed to rich data collection, especially during interviews, as interviewees shared information with me under the impression that I would share similar or complimentary viewpoints, which, in the case of these four groups, was usually true (Goffman 2016; Greene 2014; Sherry 2008).

Of course, my relationship to these volunteers has also colored my opinion of them, and by extension, the way I have interpreted, analyzed, and framed the data presented in the coming pages. Again, throughout data collection and analysis, I have tried to simultaneously acknowledge the tangible impacts of the services they provide, appreciate their desire to respond to pressing community problems, *and* remain critical. In fact, as I pushed myself to accomplish this, I frequently found myself reflecting on the words of Katherine, a white Mercy House volunteer: “But that’s the thing, me being critical of it isn’t necessarily totally dismissing it or whatever. I just always want it to be better. You know what I mean, I want white people to be better.”

### **The Field Site: Race(ism), Homelessness, and Racial (In)Justice in St. Louis, Missouri**

St. Louis once stood out as a booming metropolis and America’s fourth largest city. In the Post-war period, however, St. Louis has experienced incredible population decline. In 1950, the population of St. Louis was about 850,000 people, and about half of the metropolitan area lived within the city limits. By the 2000 census, the pop-

ulation had dropped below 350,000 and could claim only 13% of the metropolitan area's population (Gordon 2008). Out migration has been normal for U.S. industrial cities since the 1950s, but St. Louis finds itself in rare company with only Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh as cities to have lost more than half of their population (Hollander et al. 2009). Sitting immediately across the Mississippi river, East St. Louis has experienced sustained economic and population decline as well, with Hollander and colleagues (2009, 230) calling the city “a poster child for shrinking cities” because of its crime record, large unemployed labor force, and struggling school system (see also Gordon 2008; Reardon 2000).

In addition to the economic strife, the city has experienced substantial racial strife and remains a heavily segregated city, with North and East St. Louis housing Black residents and the south and west suburbs housing mostly white residents. Of course, racial tension in St. Louis predates the end of WWII (e.g., *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the 1917 East St. Louis Race Riots, Bleeding Kansas), but the current demographic map was formed during the era of white flight (Gordon 2008; Heathcott and Murphy 2016). And while relative affluence is associated with some parts of the metropolitan area, Farley (1991, 1995, 2005) argues that the continued segregation is, first and foremost, an issue of race and not class. According to Farley (2005), socioeconomic status only explains a small percentage of Black-white housing segregation in the metropolitan area (15–35% by his measures). In his view, housing segregation is better explained by white preference for predominantly white communities, and by white and Black families being steered to view and buy houses in racially homogenous communities.

More recently, the St. Louis area has been pushed into the national spotlight for problems with racism and police violence. Most notably, in August 2014, weeks of protest followed the police shooting of an unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, MO, which lies just a few minutes north of the city. When it was announced that Darren Wilson, the white officer who killed Brown, would not be charged, further protest erupted (Lockhart 2019). While newspapers generally produced a narrative that was sympathetic to the protests, and many responded to Brown's death by calling for police reform (Elmasry and el-Nawawy 2017; Kochel 2015), others fixated on the protester disruption, crimes, looting, arson, and potential divisiveness (Kochel 2015).

Additionally, during my time in the field (September 2017), mass protest occurred after a white police officer, Jason Stockley, was acquitted of a 2011 first-degree murder charge after he shot and killed Anthony Lamar Smith, a Black man. Stockley and his partner, Brian Bianchi, reportedly suspected Smith of engaging in an illegal drug transaction (Dakin and Karimi 2017). It is important to note, though, that racial justice protests do not only occur following major events, and issues of race and racism remain salient in the minds of many St. Louis. In fact, many of this study's participants reported belonging to antiracist and activist organizations. Although not universal, many openly color-conscious volunteers cited racial injustice as the impetus for their homeless outreach or saw racial justice work as being intertwined with their volunteer work.

Looking at the data on Homelessness in St. Louis, it is not altogether surprising that volunteers began to associate homelessness with racial injustice. Despite the

limitations of the annual point-in-time count (Smith and Castañeda-Tinoco 2019; Stanley 2017), it can be useful for understanding the general demographics of the unhoused population. On the night of the count in 2017 in St. Louis City and St. Louis County,<sup>5</sup> 77% of those counted were Black (HUD 2017a; 2017b). In contrast, St. Louis City's Black population accounts for only 45.9% of the total population, and St. Louis County's Black population accounts for only 24.9% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2019a, 2019b). Borrowing data from the American Community Survey, the City of St. Louis's own website estimates that Black residents are nearly four times more likely to be homeless than white residents (St. Louis 2020).

It has been well established by the literature on homelessness that homeless services can be paternalistic and individualize structural problems (Gowan 2010; Lyon-Callo 2015; Stuart 2016; Wasserman and Clair 2010). The participants included in this sample, however, were much more likely to talk about systems that produced inequality and to engage in the rhetoric of social and racial justice, what Gowan (2010) calls "system talk." There was some variance in the way volunteers discussed social/racial justice and the intersection of race and homelessness. Often, volunteers fixated on the need for specific policy measures, such as the need for St. Louis to adopt a homeless bill of rights or to reestablish a day center. Other volunteers called for full-scale revolution. For example, a number of Catholic Workers were fond of saying that they were attempting to "build a new world in the shell of the old."<sup>6</sup> Others, like Thomas (white) and Cecilia (Black) talked at length about the need for a communist revolution, tying problems of homelessness and racism to the exploitive capitalist system. Joseph (white) even viewed his service work as a sort of penance for the role he played in gentrifying the Central West End neighborhood as a "developer" prior to retirement.

As will be seen in the pages ahead, volunteers often displayed strong understandings of institutionalized racism and overlapping systems of oppression. Although they may not have explained their work and ideologies using terms like "intersectionality," "critical race theory," or even "antiracist" (although many did use the latter), there was an expressed desire to spur systemic change. Yet, they also showcased limitations in understanding how their race (and class) located them within the oppressive structures they sought to undermine.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1876, the State of Missouri officially split the city of St. Louis from St. Louis County, meaning that St. Louis City and St. Louis County governments and land areas do not overlap (Gordon 2008).

<sup>6</sup> This is a rather common saying in Catholic Worker circles. The language is borrowed from a letter written by Catholic Worker and activist, Dorothy Day. In a letter published in *The Catholic Worker* in 1969, Day advocates for "teaching of revolution" by reading about Mahatma Ghandi, Che Guevera, and Ho Chi Minh, with the objective being to "begin now within the shell of the old to rebuild society" (Day and Meyer 1969).

## Findings

### Volunteer Understandings of Race, Racism, and Inequality in St. Louis

During the course of my fieldwork, it became clear early on that volunteers providing grassroots homeless services entered the field with two general understandings of homelessness. One view leaned heavily upon “common sense” notions of poverty. Homelessness was about individual choice or effort, and issues of race and racism were rarely, if ever, featured in dialogue. The second view, and the subject of this paper, was that homelessness was the product of institutional arrangements and was deeply intertwined with understandings of systemic racism. Rather than suggest that people experiencing homelessness “pull on their bootstraps,” they frequently advocated for the city government to protect the rights of citizens experiencing homelessness and build a social services infrastructure that would better provide opportunities for safety and social mobility (e.g., more temporary shelter beds, day centers, permanent shelter, rehabilitation services, etc.).

For many volunteers, advocating for systemic change was done through the language of “social justice,” and significant time and space was given to conversations about systemic racism. René, a white therapist/social worker who was in her first year of service with Citywide Outreach, provided a good example of volunteers’ understanding of racism and poverty. She explained that the United States, and St. Louis in particular, was in need of a “cultural shift” toward understanding poverty as a structural outcome rather than as a personal trouble (Mills 2000):

Yes. I think we need a major cultural shift, cuz I mean like other countries, other developed countries don’t have this kind of problem that we do... I think we have a very like – I think our society is very individualistic and I think that we see other people’s problems as not really our problems. And ‘that’s on them,’ and ‘I’m going to worry about me,’ and ‘I’ve worked hard for my shit,’ sorry. ‘I’ve worked hard for what I have and if you didn’t,’ cuz that’s the perception; ‘if you didn’t, that’s kind of on you,’ and ‘if I’m okay, I’m okay with that, that’s okay, that’s enough’... I feel like, society can all do better if everyone had their basic needs met. In terms of the economy and the health and happiness of our society.

René’s position was twofold. First, systems of (un)housing are upheld and justified by flawed cultural logics, ideologies, and practices. In this particular case, she points to a problem caused by abstracting the principles of liberalism (see Bonilla-Silva 2010) to frame homelessness and poverty as an individual problem that results from unwillingness to work. In relation, housing security and wealth are seen as individual achievements earned through “work[ing] hard for my shit.” Second, she asserts that this cultural ideology frames the world in a way that is detrimental to societal health, happiness, and economy. What is more, René would go on to explain that she understood systems of privilege and oppression, especially race, as important predictors of social and material outcomes:

A vast majority of the people I see who are homeless are Black, are people of color. I'd be like those are the people without, who have a lack of resources or access to resources. Our whole city is set up like that. The whole [predominantly Black] north part of this city is without a public hospital and very many grocery stores and a lot of nonprofit agencies like the one I work at that would help people with meeting their basic needs. There just aren't that many of them up there. [There isn't] Good public transportation...

I think [race] ties into the equation by, I think it might be like one of the biggest if not the contributing factor to someone being homeless. You're just more likely to be homeless if you're a person of color. You're just more likely to experience the things that lead to homelessness. Simple as that. I think it's the overarching factor that someone experiences. Yeah... By setting up all these barriers for people of color that we have in this city. Pushing them all to one side of the city and leaving that area without any resources. We're just asking for this epidemic here, you know?

Such understandings of poverty and homelessness were common among antiracist, social justice-oriented volunteers. Understanding homelessness and poverty meant understanding overlapping social institutions and systems of oppression. For these volunteers, understanding poverty meant also considering problems of race, social welfare, policing, and government policy. Homelessness and poverty, in their view, do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are reproduced and exacerbated through social policy, markets, and other social institutions. Thus, any remedy to homelessness needs to consider changes or alternatives to existing institutions and/or systems of oppression. "Pushing" Black people experiencing homelessness, specifically, and Black people experiencing poverty, more generally, "all to one side of the city and leaving them without any resources" did not just happen by coincidence. These volunteers viewed the world as the product of competing social forces that (re)produce inequality and protect privilege in accordance with existing systems of oppression. For them, anti-Black racism was a particularly important tool that allowed them to understand uneven access to social, economic, and political resources (Omi and Winant 1994).

To their credit, volunteers frequently considered the role of racism in structuring community relations and how they, as relatively privileged, predominantly white volunteers could respond to these problems. Justin, a white man who had committed a year of his life to living at and working through Service House, explained that his roommates, five of whom were white and one Black, were regularly having conversations about how to understand race in the contemporary:

I think it's great. Cuz when most people come into, like, a different area, they would look at it as like, 'Oh. We're these figures to, like, *help*.' Or like, 'This is a charity case. Yeah. We're about to do so much good.' They don't look at it like that, and that's what I love about my roommates: the humility that everyone displays here. There's like very little, if no, hubris at all. I don't sense this air of like, 'Oh. I'm elite. I'm helping out these underprivileged areas.' It's very much so, 'I want to be a part of this community.' That's assuring, knowing that like,

the events of Ferguson, etcetera, all of these things that were happening in St. Louis to re-spark national debate, it's like, 'Do we live in a post-racial society? Is gentrification really a thing? Is white flight really a thing? Is police brutality really a thing?' You know? They get it. And they're willing to have those difficult conversations, as well, and peeling back their own layers of blindness, and so am I. I realize so much more about my own blind spots. We're all aware that we have blind spots that we need to work on, and things that we need working on, internally, as well.

Although one might fairly argue that conversations among volunteers of similarly privileged social positions are likely to lack necessary perspectives, or that the lay volunteer is not always well-equipped to have a well-rounded and productive conversations about racism and poverty in North St. Louis, many volunteers showed themselves to be genuinely interested in understanding racial injustice. Many volunteers credited the murder of Michael Brown and the ensuing protests as a moment that spurred them to such conversations, as Justin did in passing. It is not totally clear how he came to understand racial justice as important in the first place, especially considering that many other whites view the world differently, although it does seem that for Justin, and a number of other volunteers, the murder of Michael Brown represented a moment of "moral shock," realizing then that police brutality (against Brown, but also against racial justice protesters) did not fit with their values systems (Warren 2010). Additionally, people like Justin may have been fortunate enough to have a network that exposed them to antiracist ideologies, and the regular conversations Justin was having through service house would have reinforced his understanding of racial and economic inequality (Feagin and O'Brien 2004; O'Brien and Korgen 2007). In fact, this was a staple across volunteer groups.

Volunteer groups did not only serve as a collection of people working together toward a common goal. They also provided volunteers with a support network that they could turn to as they worked through their understandings of inequality. Volunteers relied on their peers to continue the learning process. Some of these conversations were intentional and regular (e.g., Paul and Joan met weekly to "unpack their whiteness," many members of Fam in the Streets, Mercy House, and Citywide sought out and joined antiracist and racial justice activist organizations). Other times these conversations were coincidental. For example, Citywide volunteers would swap stories about interactions they had with the police, people experiencing homelessness, or shelter staff when they picked up or returned outreach supplies each night. In these conversations, they discussed politics, common or unique service experiences, and made references to antiracist literature. Through this process, volunteers taught each other how to view inequality, race relations, and social institutions like the police and "the city" (meaning the St. Louis City government).

Participating in this sort of group discourse, I would argue, was productive, especially when groups were making a conscious effort to critically engage with concepts like "intersectionality" and "social justice" alongside authors like Paulo Freire. But despite the interest in social justice and systemic inequality serving as the ideological grounding for these antiracist volunteer groups, it was rare for volunteers to have

reflected on how *their* statuses of privilege (especially their white middle-classness) might impact their day-to-day service interactions.

### Seeing White Privilege in Social Structure, not Everyday Power Relations

As previously discussed, “white” racial/ethnic identities have been commonly referred to as invisible because of whiteness’ ability to operate as normative or viewed as the default racial identity in the U.S. One’s whiteness is often unquestioned or viewed “as an unimportant *individual* attribute rather than a defining feature of a white *group* identity” (Underhill 2019, 493) (see also Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2004). And although the true “invisibility” of white racial identities has been rightfully questioned – whites, of course, can be aware racial actors (Frankenberg 2001; Hartigan 1999; Knowles et al. 2014; McDermott 2006; McDermott and Samson 2005) – volunteers showed time and again that even those capable of talking about whiteness and white privilege in the abstract were unlikely to think about the effects of whiteness on their everyday interactions. Although many volunteers, as demonstrated in the previous section, were capable of understanding the structural constraints and advantages endemic to white supremacist society, they neglected to consider how *they*, as members of the white racial *group*, were enmeshed in system of power relations informs and affects their interactions and relationships with people experiencing homelessness, both white and nonwhite.

Among openly color-conscious volunteers, many of whom identified as antiracist activists, it was common for them to express a sense of surprise when explicitly asked about the way race might affect interaction during the course of service. For example, when Gabriela, a white, retired social worker who regularly volunteered with City-wide was asked if she thought race “impacts the interactions between volunteers or service providers and the homeless,” she responded by saying:

Oh, that’s a good one! [Pause]. I don’t know. I want to say no, we’ve all got the great big liberal hearts. But you know what, I don’t know. I would hope that if it were, that I’d become aware of it and be able to address that. But I’ll tell you what, since Michael Brown, here in the St. Louis region, I have personally become so much more aware and educated about the racism that goes on in my life and in this community. God, I just hope that I can be aware if that’s an issue. I don’t feel like it is, but you know what, if somebody said, ‘Gabriela, you act differently here than you do here,’ I would want to know that. Because so often I just am reacting to stuff and doing stuff that I don’t see it, but I would hope that somebody – and I’ll tell you, some of those activist volunteers, especially with Fam in the Streets, they would be happy to point it out, I know they would... But you know what, what I’m aware of is how much I’m not aware of. You know, for real. For real.

Gabriela expresses that she has, in recent years, become more aware of the role racism plays in her “life and this community,” but her excited response of, “Oh, that’s a good one!” suggested she had not reflected on how race might inform service interactions before the question was posed. Furthermore, she was willing to admit that

she has likely entered into service interactions with implicit biases, but as she put it, “what I’m aware of is how much I’m not aware of.”

In this way, white, explicitly color-conscious volunteers walked a middle ground between understanding whiteness as a group position laden with structural advantages and whiteness as an individual characteristic. While they were willing to admit that their whiteness might (or even must) be important, it had not occurred to them to think of it as important to their everyday interactions. In a social world where racial inequality and racism is increasingly salient, particularly in a place like St. Louis, MO, where racial justice protest is commonplace, volunteers became aware and worked to educate themselves on race, racism, and racial inequality in the abstract. They were willing and able to point disparities in education, health, police surveillance, etc. In fact, identifying as antiracists interested in dismantling racist systems of oppression likely helped them manage their self-image in a time when white privilege is more frequently questioned (Knowles et al. 2014). However, the cultural, social, political, and institutional investment in whiteness (Doane 1997; Lipsitz 1998) prevented volunteers from applying that framework to their own lives. As Paul, a Mercy House volunteer succinctly put it, “I’m white and things like that don’t really stick out to me, because I don’t know what’s racist and what’s not. So, I’m sure that I’ve done many things that were problematic, but yeah, I don’t know.”

This is not to say that openly color-conscious volunteers were uninterested in trying to manage their whiteness. Rather, there were limitations on their ability to know what to manage. In the case of Paul and Joan, it was largely due to their relationship with Julia, a Pilipinx peer, that their whiteness began to take on meaning in their everyday lives. In an interview, Joan recounted the “impetus” for deeper reflection on her everyday interactions at Mercy House:

Yeah. There was a particular period, I mean it’s work that, like, continues. You know, like, Paul and I actually have, like, weekly meetings, now, to specifically talk about our own racism, and the racism in the house, and I’m really pleased that we’re doing that. So, this isn’t to say that it’s not still a focus, but there was a – the impetus for those meetings was a particular hot period with these issues about a month ago, where Julia got just kind of fed up with these two privileged young white kids oblivious to their racism in a lot of ways, and like her having to deal with the consequences of that was just exhausting.

What struck me the most about those conversations was just how much, how much rage Julia had and how much she had sheltered us from that. Cuz it’s not, and I don’t want to for a moment perpetuate the story of like the angry woman of color – her rage was justified. Like, the weariness and the exhaustion she must have been feeling, I would have been pissed, too. It was just, realizing in that moment, how difficult it was for her as a person of color in core community<sup>7</sup> and how difficult it must have been for every other person of color who’s been in core community. Like, that’s sort of what struck me the most, just how, how much weariness and how much justified anger the white people in this

<sup>7</sup> “Core community” refers to the Mercy House leadership.

community have been sheltered from. Like, because – in large part because – like, nobody wants to deal with the level of defensiveness and-or guilt that arises when white people, especially young, relatively sheltered white people, are called out on their racism like that. It just, it made me realize just how, like, omnipresent racism must feel to, at the very least, people of color in core community, but also probably to a lot of our guests, and just how invisible it can be to the white people in the house if you aren't making an effort to look for, and even when you are, that divide. It really surprised me, and like, having that happen within our core community made me wonder how old of a story that really is. For how many years have the white people here been protected from the worst of the outrage that they generate, of the pain that they cause?

Through her relationship with Julia, Joan was able to begin examining how her taken-for-granted white group position might be affecting (1) how she interacts with others and (2) how she is perceived by others. She explains that generations of Mercy House volunteers – who have been overwhelmingly white – have rarely considered how the power embedded in their whiteness reproduced an “omnipresent” racism. Their failure to consider their own whiteness was both the outcome of and tool for the reproduction of day-to-day power relations that, at least in Joan's estimation, have a profound effect on the emotions of those they encounter, as well as on white volunteers' ability to serve a majority Black population. And while this resulted in weekly meetings of self-reflection for Paul and Joan, it was only *after* Julia, a uniquely qualified volunteer of color with a background in antiracist activism and community organizing, confronted Paul and Joan over their implicitly racist behaviors.

Furthermore, although Paul and Joan seem to also recognize that antiracism is “work that, like, continues” they continue to view whiteness as something that could be unpacked in order to be shed (McIntosh 2004; Omi 2001). Yet, as Joan also notes, racism is “omnipresent.” It is a normal part of everyday life in the United States, it is embedded into both micro-level relations and our social institutions (Aviles de Bradley 2015; Christian 2019; Christian et al. 2019; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Ray 2019; Rosino 2017), and again, all people, whites included, are subject to racial structure (Lewis 2004). Thus, it is important that whites are able to situate themselves within broader systems of oppression and privilege, especially if they hope to undermine them (Perry and Shotwell 2009). Thus, the continued inability of many white volunteers to understand their day-to-day interactions as the product of unequal group positions may limit the effectiveness of supposedly color-conscious service.

### **Towards Volunteer Understandings of Privilege and Group Position**

A common critique of white antiracist efforts is that in their effort to unpack their privilege, predominantly white organizations and their members end up centering whiteness, and in turn, marginalizing issues of racism and the lived experiences of people of color (Hughey 2007, 2012; Kowal 2015; Mayorga-Gallo 2019; Omi 2001). Again, it is important that positions of privilege be understood in relation to positions of oppression. Whiteness is defined by its position relative to Blackness, Latinx-ness, etc. (Blumer 1958; Lipsitz 1998; Omi 2001; Winant 2004). Homelessness is defined

in relation to being housed (Willse 2015). Service provider/volunteer status is defined in relation to service recipient.

Similar to Joan and Paul, René suggested that her whiteness was something that could be managed when interacting with Black service recipients, either as a volunteer or through her position as a social worker. When asked if race ever informs her interactions, she responded by explaining:

It's something I'm really like, it's something I think about all the time in terms of just like kind of check my privilege and feeling like not walking into someone's space like I own the place. Always thinking about like being, I don't want to ever come across as like an authority or like a white savior or anything like that. It's something I'm thinking about a lot. I don't know if that, I hope it doesn't come across. It's something I'm always very cognizant of.

For René, there was an implicit acknowledgement that she occupies a position of power. As a white service provider, her privilege needs to be “checked” before “walking into someone’s space like [she] own[s] the place.” But even as she acknowledged the privileged statuses she occupies, she dismissed the idea that her structural position matters, suggesting instead that she can shed her position of authority by being cognizant of the way she enters space. She was white, yes. She was housed, yes. She understood that social institutions ranging from government to private business were integral to reproducing social inequality. Yet, when entering into interpersonal interactions, her statuses of privilege were dismissed as manageable, as an inconsequential personal trait, rather than as a position structured in dominance, 400 years in the making (Frankenberg 2001; Underhill 2019; Winant 2004).

In fact, a common theme across all groups was that there was a symbolic attempt flatten hierarchical power structures by situating people experiencing homelessness as equal status peers. Fam in the Streets referred to people experiencing homelessness as their “Fam,” “Family,” or “unhoused brothers and sisters.” Many other groups spoke about people experiencing homelessness as their unhoused or homeless “friends.” One Citywide volunteer, Tatiana, explained to me that she liked to collect stories from, as she called them, “sojourners” in order to find commonalities between herself and those she served. Often it was as simple as relating to them on the basis of age or health problems, but it was important to her that she felt they had something in common. Barbara, on the other hand, stood out as a counter example. In conversations and interviews I had with her, she poked holes in this kind of thinking. She spoke often of a “false sense of sameness.” After many years of service to Mercy House, she had begun to understand that while she can unpack her privilege, she cannot shed it.

On one occasion, Barbara explained to me how she had spent her 20s trying to achieve this false sense of sameness by living the “simplest” life possible:

I feel like, especially in my 20s, the way it was expressed in our community... it could look like a competition of who was simplest. And I feel like that's very much against the spirit of everything. We're trying to do collaboration here, and some kind of spitting contest about who can, you know, get more clothes

from the thrift store and who can – it feels like it’s a misplaced... It felt like a way to be OK. To make myself feel better about all the privilege I had, and in a way that wasn’t actually liberatory in some ways because I wasn’t gaining new skills in some ways. I don’t know that it most of the time created more connection...

And I feel like there’s a tremendous amount of white guilt and class, middle-class guilt, that I had and wasn’t super aware of, but I was trying to do this work as sort of reparations for it, and like ‘I have to do something with all this privilege.’ And I feel like the voluntary poverty, in some ways, in some ways it’s like just part of the fabric, and it’s communal living and sharing. But in some ways, it can fall into just a self-righteous distancing thing that creates barriers. So, like, me not having health insurance for the first few years. Like, [mocking herself] I was super radical, and like I’m all that about it. But the women [service recipients] here were like, ‘Why don’t you have—you could have health insurance. What is wrong with you?’

Which, to me, is right. Am I helping them? Am I helping them directly by not having health insurance? No. Am I changing any system by not having health insurance? No. I’m not participating, and that – this is a huge piece of voluntary poverty is like not participating in unjust structures – but I think I didn’t have a handle on every single structure in this country is built on slavery and capitalism and terrible. And, so, by walking down the street I’m participating, and there has to be a more sophisticated way to address it than to try to, on an individual level, be super pure and withdraw from everything.

Through her example, Barbara points out that she and the “guests” she serves at Mercy House never were and never could be in the same position, try as she might. Despite attempts to undermine her privilege, her class position meant that she would always have a safety net. Although she shifts to a largely class-based analysis in this excerpt, she recognized that her whiteness comes with privileges that most guests could not attain, that her status as a volunteer put her in a position of power, and that her class was intimately intertwined with these other status positions. She would go on to demonstrate the point further, recounting a time in which she, as a young white woman who “most things have been handed to,” was advising a 40-year-old Black mother on how to budget:

Like, I’m 25 and doing a budget with a 40-year-old mother, too. And suggesting, making any kind of suggestion, like, because the truth is I actually don’t have the skills that I think I have. I don’t have the resiliency that’s born out of struggle, because class-wise, most things have been handed to me. So, it’s an irony that I’m put in the position of being an authority with somebody who has had to work the system in a way that I am completely unaware of. So, it’s a really ugly interaction because then that person has to like – I have authority over their housing – so they have to modify their responses and their behavior knowing. I mean, they should tell me to fuck off, right? Like, you don’t know

what you're talking about. Have you raised – you know? And I do understand that it's not so simplistic that you have to have experienced every scenario in order to have insight into it, but I think when we have more fallen on the side of things of thinking that because we have privilege, we know better. So budgeting, how you should interact with your kids, what decisions you should make for your kids, so many things, so many things that I have thought that I should have known better.

Through her example, Barbara recognizes that some combination of her class, race, and volunteer status provide her not only with relative advantages, but also with a degree of power over the guests. By virtue of her position, she controlled guests' ability to access housing and was able to dictate the terms of their stay. Paired with the previous quote, Barbara demonstrates that she recognizes the power and privilege bound up in her race and class position. On an individual level, she could not successfully divest from capitalism or white supremacy.

In this way, Barbara had an understanding of race and class that other color-conscious, social justice-oriented volunteers usually lacked. She understood that racism, and social inequality more generally, is about group position, not just social boundaries that can be crossed when privilege is “checked.” As Barbara put it, volunteers in positions of privilege participate in systems of oppression by simply “walking down the street.” To be white is to hold power. To be middle-class is to hold power. To be a volunteer is to hold power. For her, and I would argue for all, it is more productive to reflect on one's social position and to critically interrogate what actions might work to undermine the unequal systems that placed her in a position of authority.

## Discussion and Conclusion

First, it should be stated that the objective of this paper is *not* to suggest that reflecting on personal privilege is unproductive or unimportant (Jason and Eppelen 2016). However, awareness of racial inequality and privilege does not necessarily translate into disruptive, antiracist praxis. As other research has shown, exposure to critical perspectives on race and whiteness does not preclude continued (and innovative) justification of white supremacist systems (Endres and Gould 2009; Mueller 2017; Mueller and Washington 2021), and there are clear limitations to white allyship (Droogendyk et al. 2016; Endres and Gould 2009; Hughey 2007; Sullivan 2014; Sumerau et al. 2021).

In this tradition, this paper extends the concept of white invisibility to account for color-conscious antiracist, ideologies, specifically highlighting continued, patterned limitations of white color-consciousness. Despite stated and sincere interest in social and racial justice, race and class were most meaningful in explaining disadvantage of others (Croll 2013; Lewis 2004). Meanwhile, most explicitly color-conscious volunteers neglected to consider how patterns of social, cultural, political, and/or economic privilege structured *their* everyday experiences and service interactions. Such limitations did not prevent volunteers from engaging with the world in a way they hoped

would address racial inequality even if they lacked the ability and tools to effectively see themselves as part of the larger picture.

White, well-intentioned volunteers walked a line between understanding whiteness as a personal trait (Lewis 2004; Underhill 2019) and understanding race as a meaningful group position (Blumer 1958; Frankenberg 2001; Omi and Winant 1994; Wellman 1993). Although they were willing to admit that white privilege and racism were built into social institutions, they also commonly reduced whiteness to a personal trait that could be dismissed or managed. They neglected to consider how *their* social position as a member of the white group might influence how they perceived their social surroundings, how they acted, or how they were perceived by service recipients. They overlooked the fact that systems of oppression and privilege were built to their benefit and that they may be contributing to the normal, everyday occurrence of racism (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Doane 1997; Harwood et al. 2012; O'Brien 2001; Ray 2019; Sue et al. 2007). Understanding one's identities (e.g., white, middle class, volunteer) as insignificant, individual characteristics that can be managed away suggests that even among whites with some degree of racial awareness (i.e., of racial "others"), patterns of white invisibility (i.e., lack of racial self-awareness) endure despite their antiracist ideologies. As Perry and Shotwell (2009) suggest, it is important that white antiracists are able to draw on interrelated forms of knowledge. In the case presented here, propositional and affective knowledge were apparent. Interviewees like René and Justin openly acknowledged and contemplated problems of systemic racism. Others, like Joan, showed an affective knowledge by expressing a level of empathy and perhaps even regret as she considered how generations of predominantly white Mercy House volunteers may have impacted other non-white volunteers and service recipients. With the exception of Barbara, volunteers lacked (or were still developing) the ability to situate themselves within racialized social systems (Lewis 2004).

Although there are limits to the "white invisibility" thesis (Frankenberg 2001; Hartmann et al. 2009; Croll 2007) lack of racial self-awareness may help make sense of continued white dominance in volunteer and anti-racist settings/organizations even as it is supposedly challenged (Cann and McCloskey 2017; Hanchey 2018; Hughey 2007; Kowal 2015; Mayorga-Gallo 2019; Sullivan 2014). Put succinctly, continued patterns of white invisibility might serve to protect white dominance by maintaining a gap between antiracist ideology and antiracist practice. Existing research makes clear that organizations and predominantly white institutions work to maintain existing racial hierarchies (Harwood et al. 2012; Hughey 2012; Ray 2019; Reiter and Reiter 2020; Wingfield and Alston 2014). Future ethnographic research should explore the relationship between well-meaning, predominantly white organizations, racial self-awareness among whites, and *observed service practices*.

For volunteers, service providers, and/or social justice advocates, understanding white invisibility in this way prompts practical questions. Again, if racial group position necessarily informs one's view of the world, providing us with a particular vantage point that informs (and obstructs) the way we see, interpret, and interact with the world around us (Ahmed 2007; Feagin 2013; Mueller 2020), how can whites effectively participate in antiracist discourse, service, and social movements? The production of whiteness as both the dominant and default racial group manifests as

invisibility – at least situationally – in many whites and may limit their ability to see *themselves* as active agents in a broader system of white supremacy. In turn and based on their understanding of the world around them, whites act back on the world in a way that reproduces whiteness as dominance (Rosino 2017).

Whites interested in social and racial justice must realize that inequality is a two-sided coin. It is important that whites understand that privilege exists in relation to oppression and that their everyday interactions may reify systems of oppression and privilege (Blumer 1958; Collins 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Omi and Winant 1994; Rosino 2017; Winant 2004). Race, and therefore whiteness, is also the result of ongoing and historical processes, whereby a person's racial identity and (inter) actions are both influenced by social structure *and make up* social structure (Omi and Winant 1994; Rosino 2017; Winant 2004). Although I would suggest that space for continued growth within service and activist organizations is necessary, simply dismissing one's whiteness as something that can be managed away, if acknowledged at all, undermines the goal of antiracist service: to undermine *structural* inequality (Sumerau et al. 2021).

To be sure, white volunteers and antiracist activists have a crucial role to play. In the case of this study, volunteers literally kept people from dying of exposure, dehydration, and perhaps even drug overdose. The harder question to answer is how do whites effectively participate in these efforts given that their subjectivities, including how they perceive themselves, are colored by their group position (as are everyone's)? Although the data presented in this paper suggests a need for greater reflexivity among antiracist whites, these interviews taken together, also suggest reason for optimism. Despite the social and cultural pressure to embrace white ignorance, these explicitly color-conscious volunteers have not and showed themselves to be grappling with white supremacy, albeit at different stages of understanding.

It is important to stress, then, that if the goal is to create a more racially or economically just world, privileged group members will need to recognize (1) the role that their privileged position plays in shaping their worldview, (2) one's group position cannot be shed nor the color line spoken out of existence, and (3) that their ideas and plans for addressing inequality, racial injustice, homelessness, etc. may be misguided by these perceptions. Ultimately, *antiracism needs to be understood as a continuous process*, and it should be accepted that a stage of enlightenment can never be fully achieved (Hanchey 2018; Ray 2020). In fact, for the volunteers highlighted, here, their service opportunities likely play an important role in their growth as openly color-conscious antiracists. Having the opportunity to network with others with similar racial ideologies and social justice values, as well as having the opportunity to make connections outside their racial and class group, will inform their sense of self, other, and society moving forward (Feagin and O'Brien 2004; Perry and Shotwell 2009).

To be clear, context matters and not all whites respond to the system of white supremacy in the same way (Bell 2021; Lewis 2004), and volunteers, activists, and service providers would do well to heed the lessons of studies that complicate the nexus of whiteness and volunteering (e.g., Cann and McCloskey 2017; Droogendyk et al. 2016; Endres and Gould 2009; Germann Molz 2017; Hagerman 2018; Henry 2020; Schneider 2018). Still, volunteering might present opportunities for shifts

toward antiracist praxis provided that volunteers accept that critical self-reflection and evaluation of their organization is a necessary part of the service.

Diversifying volunteer and other service organizations, placing people of color in positions of leadership, and facilitating open and honest dialog between volunteers and service recipients may also be helpful (Bortree and Waters 2014). Although more study of Black Americans' relationship to volunteering and other forms of civic engagement is needed (Robinson 2019), more space for Black volunteers and other volunteers of color in (currently) majority white organizations may help decenter white logics. There is evidence that service experiences or relationships with activists and/or people of color may move some whites further down the path of color-consciousness and social justice ideals (Allport 1954; Cress and Snow 1996, 2000; Fingerhut and Hardy 2020; Knecht and Martinez 2009; O'Brien and Korgen 2007; Reason and Evans 2007; Sigelman and Welch 1993; Warren 2010). There are, of course, challenges and barriers to this pathway. For example, defaulting to peers of color may place the responsibility of antiracist work at the feet of racial minorities if whites are not willing to accept and reflect upon the role they play in the reproduction of unequal systems (al-Gharbi 2019; Sumerau et al. 2021). Additionally, the theoretical lens used in this paper leans heavily upon investment in whiteness as a structural position. As an alternative, future research might ask how ignorance is produced as the "twin" of knowledge (Mueller 2020, 145) and highlight the agency of whites who evade critical racial learning in pursuit of "sustained white domination" (Mueller and Washington 2021, 3).

Whatever the case, pushing forward without some revision to the current model of service is not viable and likely to result in reproduction of unequal power relations due to continued limitations for white, middle-class volunteers to meaningfully interrogate their roles in that reproduction (Endres and Gould 2009; Hanchey 2018; Hughey 2007; Mayorga-Gallo 2019; Perry and Shotwell 2009). While the specific case presented here examines homeless service volunteers, the lessons should be extended to a larger audience of activists, social workers, volunteers, and other whites who have recognized the unjust distribution of social, political, and economic resources in the U.S. In particular, it should be noted that clinging to narratives of sameness and moral responsibility will not solve American problems of systemic oppression, racial and otherwise. This is especially true if whites are not critical of their everyday practices and the subjectivities tied to the social and cultural positioning of the white racial group.

## Appendix

### Interviewee Demographic Breakdown.

Interviewee Demographics						
Pseudonym	Group Affiliation	Race	Age	Religion	Place of Residence	Class (Self ID)
Justin	Service House	White	23	Episcopalian	North City	Upper-Middle

## Interviewee Demographics

Anthony	Service House	Black	25	Episcopalian	North City	.
Mary	Service House	White	.	.	North City	.
Adrian	Mercy House	Latino	21	Catholic	Central Corridor	Middle
Paul	Mercy House	White	23	None	North City	Middle
Ambrose	Mercy House	White	20	Catholic	Central Corridor	Upper-Middle
Barbara	Mercy House	White	41	Spiritual	North City	Upper-Middle
Rose	Mercy House	Black	36	Nondenominational Christian	Metro East	Middle
Catherine	Mercy House	White	23	“There’s something out there”	.	Lower-Middle
Joan	Mercy House	White	24	Catholic	North City	Middle
Christina	Mercy House (volunteer/former guest)	Black	.	.	North City	.
Sixtus	Mercy House	White	58	Catholic	North City	Lower
Cecilia	Fam in the Streets	Black	34	Christian	North Suburb	Lower
Thomas	Fam in the Streets	White	28	Catholic	North Suburb	Lower
Margaret	Fam in the Streets	White	58	Episcopalian	South City	Middle
Quentin	Fam in the Streets	White	55	None	South City	Lower-Middle
Germaine	Fam in the Streets	Black	57	“Child of God”	North Suburb	Middle
Regina	Fam in the Streets	White	49	Episcopalian	South City	Lower
Lucy	Citywide	White	.	.	.	.
Simon	Citywide	White	64	Atheist	Northwest Suburb	Middle
Martha	Citywide	White	63	Quaker	South City	Middle
Dorothea	Citywide	White-Asian	18	Christian “In part”	Central Corridor	Lower-Middle
René	Citywide	White	28	None	South City	Middle Class
Vincent	Citywide	White	41	Non-religious	West Suburb	Middle
Joseph	Citywide	White	76	None	.	Upper-Middle
Dominic	Citywide	Asian	23	None	Central Corridor	Upper-Middle
Gabriela	Citywide	White	65	None	South City	Middle

## Interviewee Demographics

Tatiana	Citywide	White	57	United Methodist	Southwest Suburb	Middle
Giles	Citywide	White	59	Methodist	Metro East	Lower-Working
Fran	Citywide	White	60	“Believer”/ Catholic	North City	Working/ Middle

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